CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT
Sunday Morning Adult Bible Study • Fall 2026 • SVCC

DAVID LIPSCOMB ON CHRISTIANS' RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

David Lipscomb lived 1831-1917 and was one of the most prominent leaders in the Churches of Christ in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was born in south-central Tennessee and lived most or all of his life in Tennessee. In 1866 he became editor of The Gospel Advocate, *and in that role he came to be one of the most influential voices in all the Churches of Christ. In 1891 he helped to found Nashville Bible School, later renamed David Lipscomb University in his honor.*

Early View

On July 4, 1855, young David Lipscomb, age 24, spoke to the Alumni Society of Franklin College. "He praised the American government as 'the first political fruit of Christianity,' and went on to argue that 'every patriot lover of liberty [should] accept, and jealously preserve inviolable, the franchises of freedom as the gifts of God. We would especially have every American freeman approach the ballot box of his country as the sacramental altar of his God—with bared feet and uncovered head, conscious that he treads upon holy ground.' And five years later, in 1860, Lipscomb did cast his vote for John Bell, the presidential candidate of the Constitutional Union Party. Yet, by the close of the Civil War, Lipscomb had returned to the tradition of his forebears and advised his people not to vote." Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith,* page 131

Summary of Lipscomb's Book, *On Civil Government: Its Origin, Mission, and Destiny, and the Christian's Relation to It* (1889)

The fundamental premise of Lipscomb's book—and of his life—was his conviction that the Christian belongs to a kingdom ruled by God, not to the kingdoms ruled by humankind. This conviction led him to advocate an active separation from the world and from its concerns with fashion, wealth, and power… Most important, separation from the world meant for Lipscomb, as it had for [Barton W.] Stone, reliance on the sovereign power of God. It was in this context that he found human institutions so objectionable… The very existence of human institutions and human governments represented for Lipscomb a departure from God's primordial design. In *Civil Government,* he argues that God from the beginning intended to be sovereign over all the earth… But 'the act [by Adam and Eve] of…disobedience culminated in the effort of man to organize a government of his own, so that he himself might permanently conduct the affairs of earth, free from the control of God, and independent of God's government.' Similarly, the Jews rejected God's sovereignty when they called for a king… — Hughes, pages 122-123

Highlights from *On Civil Government*

1) Where Human Governments Came from and What They Are For

pages 12-13: "The institution of human government was an act of rebellion and began among those in rebellion against God, with the purpose of superseding the Divine rule with the rule of man. Its founder was Nimrod, the grandson of Ham [Genesis 10:8]"*; and that government soon rebelled against God by building the Tower of Babel [Genesis 11:1-9].*

• *Lipscomb believed human government originated in rebellion against God, who instituted no higher form of government than the family.*

page 14: "The chief occupation of human governments from the beginning has been war. Nine-tenths of the taxes paid by the human family, have gone to preparing for, carrying on, or paying the expenses of war."

page 14: "…I believe that it [human government] is necessary, and that God has ordained it as a punishment to man for refusing to submit to the government of God…"

*page 24: Lipscomb takes **1 Samuel 8:10-18** to be typical of human governments: those with power always use that power for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the people they lead. He strengthens his argument with Jesus' words in **Matthew 20:25**.*

2) What God Will Do to All Human Governments

page 30: On the understanding that God's kingdom will one day destroy and overcome all earthly kingdoms [Daniel 2:35, 44; etc.]: "How could the individual citizens of the kingdom of God found, enter into, and become part and parcel of—upbuild, support, and defend, that which God's kingdom was especially commissioned to destroy?"

• *Lipscomb argued that Christians must not support or be involved with earthly governments, since all such governments will be destroyed by God's kingdom in due time.*

pages 40-44: God intends for his own guidance to govern all human beings and nations. All human legislation is rebellion against God's authority and governance. God does ordain human governments, but only for the purpose of punishing the wicked—and then he punishes those governments he ordained, for they too are rebellious toward him. [page 44] "So long as man rebels, these institutions [human governments] must continue. They are ordinances of God to punish this rebellion."

page 76: "Now God's kingdom is spiritual and universal. It can exist in and under any and all the kingdoms of the earth, but it is of none."

• *Lipscomb's point is that Christians, likewise, must live under earthly governments—but not be allied with them.*

page 85: "…if we serve these earthly kingdoms we shall be destroyed with them. We must share the destiny of the kingdom we serve. If a man identifies himself with an earthly kingdom, sustains and upholds it he must share its destiny."

3) Christians Need to Keep Themselves Apart from Involvement in Human Governments

pages 86-87: Lipscomb argues that the New Testament guides Christians in how to live as parents/children, wives/husbands, masters/servants, neighbors/strangers—but not as government officials or rulers. Why not? Because it is not lawful in God's eyes for a Christian to be a government ruler/official, for "earthly kingdoms are of the evil one" [page 87].

page 88: "The great weakness of the church to-day is that the children of God enter into the kingdoms of this world, imbibe the spirit of those kingdoms, bring that spirit into the church of God, defile the church and drive out the spirit of Christ."

page 90: "As things now go, every individual in the world might be converted to Christ and yet the earthly kingdoms would remain in all their present strength and vigor, and the spirit of the world would be cherished in the church of God. But if every man converted to Christ withdrew from the support of the earthly kingdoms, these kingdoms would weaken and fall to pieces, for lack of supporters; 'little by little' giving way before the increase and spread of the kingdom of God."

page 98: "All the wars and conflicts of earth, all the desolation, ruin and blood-shed, between separated nations, or distinct peoples, are the fruits of human government. The government of God breaks down divisions among those who accept it, and brings peace and complete union to all who submit to his rule. Whatever tends to wean men from this government of God, and to substitute other governments for it, brings confusion and strife."

pages 107-108: Lipscomb discusses the problem of, one on hand, some churches being supported by the state, and so allying themselves with the state; and, on the other hand, non-state-supported churches nevertheless supporting their national government and so allying themselves with the state in a different way.

4) Can Christians Serve in Government Offices?

pages 104-106: What about Joseph and Daniel, who served in high government positions? Lipscomb argues that they served only as slaves carrying out their duty to their master, the king. Daniel [page 105] "obeyed his master… He was no partizan [sic], friend, supporter or officer of either government [Babylonian or Persian]. As a slave he obeyed his master, and was faithful in all things, save when obedience to him involved disobedience to God—rather than obey then he was cast into the lions' den."

page 106: "No encouragement or authority can be found [in Scripture] for the voluntary holding of office in, or upholding the human government, now so common among servants of Christ."

pages 108-109: Lipscomb takes the fact that Matthew (tax collector) and Paul (rising in Jewish leadership) left their government offices when they followed Jesus as evidence that all other government officials who came to follow Christ did the same. The New Testament doesn't say they kept their government offices! So if we assume they left idolatry, dishonesty, etc., we should assume they also left affiliation with human government.

pages 116-120: Lipscomb gives several examples of Christian and non-Christian writers in the first 300 years of the church mentioning that Christians refused to serve in the Roman military or government, often because of the idolatrous oaths soldiers and officials had to take or because of ungodly actions they would be expected to take (war, participating in persecution of Christians, etc.) on behalf of the state. This situation changed rapidly beginning in the time of Constantine, when Christianity came into imperial favor and Christians readily took government offices or joined the military.

page 137-138: "Civil government rests on force as its foundation. The weapons of the Christian are not carnal, but spiritual. A ruler or an officer in civil government cannot carry into the execution of these laws, the principles of the religion of Christ. To forgive his brother seventy times seven, on repentance,, would destroy all authority in civil affairs… A man cannot be a follower of Christ and a ruler in the governments of earth."

5) How Should Christians Conduct Themselves in Relation to the State?

page 133: "Christians are to be supporters and partisans of none. They are to be active opponents of none. Quiet submission to the requirements in all things not contrary to the will of God and then a quiet submission but persistent refusal to do the thing commanded, is the part of the Christian. A Christian can engage in active rebellion against no government. Neither active support or participation, nor active opposition."

page 142: "It seems to me a Christian might teach a government school as an employe [sic] without compromising his position. As a rule he may work as an employe [sic] of the government but may not be an officer or supporter. As a rule the government exacts an oath of its officers, to support the government but it does not of its employes [sic]."

page 144: "Questions come up in the workings of society and before the voters of a country that involve moral good to the community. Such are the questions regarding the restriction of the sale of intoxicants, the licensing of race courses and gambling houses and places of licentiousness. It is strongly denied in such cases that the government that restricts and prohibits sin can be of the devil, and hence it is claimed a Christian should vote on all such questions of morality… [T]he devil has always been quite willing to compromise with Christians if he can induce them to divide their allegiance and to give the greater service to the upbuilding of his kingdom."

• *That is to say, if a Christian votes to prohibit sinful practices, the devil will accept the result of that vote and consider it a victory that he enticed the Christian to join in the support and action of the government.*

page 145: "To the claim that a Christian is bound to vote, when he has the privilege, for that which promotes morality, and to fail to vote for the restriction and suppression of evil is to vote for it, we have determined that, to vote or use the civil power is to use force and carnal weapons. Christians cannot use these. To do so is to do evil that good may come. This is specially forbidden to Christians… The effective way for Christians to promote morality in a community, is, to stand aloof from the political strifes and conflicts, and maintain a pure and true faith in God, which is the only basis of true morality, and is as a leaven in society, to keep alive an active sense of right. To go into political strife is to admit the leaven of evil into the church."

Reflection Questions

1) Are all governments rebellious toward God, or equally so?
2) Has God ordained governments only for punishing the wicked? (Romans 13:3-5)
3) One contribution Lipscomb's views on human governments bring to us today: he reminds us to make sure our final allegiance is not with any earthly kingdom, but with the kingdom of God. Are there any ways in which a Christian could serve as a government official and yet be faithful to God in that role? What spiritual risks might come with such a role?
4) If every human being were faithful to God, would there still be structures of human government?
5) Would it be better for the nation, or for the church, if no Christians served as government administrators, elections officers, judges, police chiefs, etc.?
6) What warnings does Lipscomb bring us that we ought to take seriously today, even if we perhaps do not agree with everything he taught on the topic of Christians' relationship to human governments?