

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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3-4 October 2009

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

IS THE US GOVERNMENT TOO BIG?

This question is more relevant than ever. How big is the government? Does it dominate our lives? Edmund Andrews and David Sanger of the *New York Times* recently summarized the staggering role the US government now plays in our lives:

1. Between financial rescue missions and the economic stimulus program, government spending accounts for a bigger share of the nation's economy—26%—than at any time since World War II.
2. The government is financing 9 out of 10 new mortgages.
3. If you buy a car from GM, you are buying from a company that is 60% owned by the government.
4. If you take out a car loan or run up your credit card, the chances are good that the government is financing both your debt and that of your bank.
5. If you buy life insurance from the American International Group, you will be buying from a company that is 80% government owned.
6. Senior officials at the Treasury Department hold veto power over executive pay packages for the biggest recipients of government loans, like Citigroup and Bank of America.
7. President Obama wants to give the Federal Reserve new powers to supervise giant financial institutions whose failure could threaten the entire financial system.

The growth, power and influence of government over the economy of the US are nothing short of staggering. Without question, the financial meltdown of last fall and winter has produced this increased and phenomenal role for government; but at what cost? Several thoughts.

- First of all, this development represents a profound philosophical shift for America. It is an intentional reversal of the Reagan legacy. Reagan used to joke “That the nine most terrifying words in the English language were ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’” But consider the way the American people are responding to this undoing of the Reagan legacy. Are Americans manifesting a trust in their own government? Consider: The approval rating of Congress is at 30%! Daniel Henninger of the *Wall Street Journal* correctly concludes that “This is a remarkable vote of no confidence in the representative branch of the national government.” Also consider: In California and New York, the two most economically important of the 50 states, their respective legislatures are simply incompetent in managing the peoples’ money. Also consider: The three large entitlement programs of the US government—Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security—are in serious condition. Medicaid

is wreaking unprecedented havoc on state budgets. Medicare will be broke in 8 years and Social Security is not far behind. Further, the current president and Congress are about to approve some form of federal government oversight of the entire health care colossus of the US. If one wants to see where the US government and its increasingly huge control over so many dimensions of our lives is heading, look to California. Columnist George Will calls California the “recipe for decline.” In this state we see high taxes, heavy regulation, subservience to public employee unions and a rabid environmentalism. It is nearly impossible to be optimistic about this state of affairs.

- Second, when one is discussing the size of government, one must also think about its purpose. From Genesis 2:18-25, Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and Romans 13:1-7, for example, we see that the state is one of the three major institutions that God created. He created the family to procreate and raise children; He created the church to equip and train saints to fulfill the Great Commission; and He created the state to promote justice and thwart evil. I believe it is time to once again revisit God’s plan and purpose for each institution. It is paramount in this era of big government to think biblically about the state. The modern welfare state has created an entitlement mentality among its citizens that has resulted in a paternalistic government that sees its role as providing for its citizens, in one way or another, from cradle to grave. But what does this do? Does the paternalistic state produce virtuous citizens who care for one another? The political scientist, James Q. Wilson, has written: “At root, in almost every area of public concern, we are seeking to induce persons to act virtuously, whether as schoolchildren, applicants to public assistance, would-be lawbreakers, or voters and public officials.” But we are not doing that. Today, James C. Capretta argues, America’s leaders are in the same position that GM’s executives were in a decade or two ago. The nation has made a series of lavishly unaffordable promises. The legacy costs are piling up. By the end of 2019, the nation’s debt will soar to 82% of GDP—and that is without new programs (e.g., health care) and before the full fiscal impact of boomer retirement sets in. So, in this paternalistic state we have created, how do we control spending? Consider California again. Once the paternalistic state was created and the entitlement mentality was firmly entrenched, California turned to its citizens. The California Constitution gives voters relatively direct control over fiscal decisions. But as Troy Enik has argued in a most helpful essay, “The result is that Californians have voted to tax themselves like libertarians and subsidize themselves like socialists.” California is therefore in fiscal meltdown. Because of union power, the state cannot fire teachers, even when one is found with pornography, pot or cocaine in school. The paternalistic state (e.g., California in its maturity) has sown the seeds of its own destruction. Whether we are talking about Washington, D.C., California or Wall Street, we do not see virtue; we see self-indulgence, irresponsibility and imprudence. The problem with America is not political, financial or social; it is spiritual. America is not a collection of economic units or technological cogs in a machine. America is made up of people created in God’s image, who must be held accountable for their actions and who must kill the entitlement mentality currently cursing this nation. The hope for renewal will not come from Washington, or state capitals. The hope will come from a spiritual awakening in this nation. That should be the focus of the church, not the state.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (8 September 2009). Brooks summarizes several articles from a new publication, National Affairs, which includes articles by James Q. Wilson, James Capretta and Troy Senik. Also, see Daniel Henninger in the *Wall Street Journal* (20 August 2009); Edmund Andrews and David Sanger in the *New York Times* (14 September 2009); and George Will in the *Washington Post* (30 August 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

JERUSALEM FROM AN ARAB PERSPECTIVE

We have been told again and again that if we just get the Jews and the Palestinians to negotiate, all will be fine. We can negotiate the West Bank situation and we can negotiate the fate of Jerusalem. Or can we? Incredibly, Palestinian Arabs have consistently promoted the teaching that Jerusalem is not and has never been a Jewish city. Jews have no history in the city of Jerusalem; they never lived there; the Temple was never there; and they have no claim to it. Indeed, Sheik Tayseer Rajab Tamimi, chief Islamic Judge of the Palestinian Authority, has argued that Jerusalem is solely “an Arab and Islamic city and it has always been so.” Further, Shamekh Alawneh, lecturer in modern history at Al Quds University, has argued that the Jews invented their connection to Jerusalem. “It has no historical roots” and currently Jews are engaging “in an attack on history, theft of culture, falsification of facts, erasure of truth, and Judaization of the place.”

What are the facts? As Bari Weiss of the *Wall Street Journal* has shown, “Jerusalem is the holiest city of Judaism, mentioned more than 600 times in the Hebrew Bible. Three times a day, religious Jews face eastward toward the city when they pray. At Jewish weddings, the couple’s joy is diminished as they shatter a glass to acknowledge Jerusalem’s still unfulfilled redemption. It is a widespread custom then to recite the 137th Psalm: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my palate. . .” Jerusalem was the capital of David’s empire and his son Solomon built the magnificent Temple, north of the City of David. From the time of Herod’s Temple on Temple Mount, dozens of Jewish ritual baths have been found around Temple Mount and the retaining wall of the Temple, the Western Wall, still stands. Indeed, as Weiss demonstrates, both the Qur’an and early Islamic writings detail Temple Mount as the site of Solomon’s grand Temple. But current Palestinian Arab leaders seek to destroy all legitimacy of Israel’s claim to Jerusalem. They will not accept Jewish claims to Jerusalem and they seek to undo all that has occurred since 1948. However, since the 1967 war when Israel captured Jerusalem, the Jewish leadership in Israel has granted access and rights of Muslims to the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount. But Muslim and Palestinian Arab leaders refuse the same right to Jews. Jews, they say, are transplants to the region and have no legitimacy in Jerusalem. All of these sentiments and teachings summarized above are taught in Palestinian schools, can be read in Palestinian textbooks, are preached in mosques and printed continually in Arab newspapers.

So, given this horrific state of affairs, how can Israel ever hope to have meaningful negotiations with a people who deny their very right to the land? How can there be “peace talks?”

See Weiss’s helpful essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (25 September 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

IS THE ELCA STILL CHRISTIAN?

In early September, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) affirmed major policy recommendations to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions and the rostering of gay and lesbian pastors in partnered relationships. The ELCA also passed by one vote a Social Statement on Sexuality that offered no compelling biblical or theological reasons for its actions on homosexuality. The ELCA has now joined the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church in sanctioning to one degree or another homosexual practice in the church. Robert Benne, a voting member of the ELCA and Director of the Roanoke Center for Religion, has written of his church: “No one can dislodge the ELCA’s commitment to purge all masculine language about God from its speech and worship, to demur on the biblically normative status of the nuclear family, to refuse to put limits on abortion in its internal policies or to advocate publicly for pro-life policies, to press for left-wing public domestic and foreign policy, to replace evangelism abroad with dialog, to commit ‘full inclusion’ of gays and lesbians at the expense of church unity, and to buy in fully to the movement against global warming.”

What has occurred within the ELCA is the loss of an authentic and historic principle so central to the Lutheran tradition—the full and final authority of the Bible. In the 1920s, a Presbyterian theologian and exegete named J. Gresham Machen wrote an important book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism*. The central thesis of that book was that liberalism had abandoned the authority of Scripture and had no right to be called “Christian.” I believe that same argument should be applied to the ELCA today. It long ago gave up the commitment to the full authority of the Bible. *Sola Scriptura*, the battle cry of Martin Luther and the other reformers, is no longer relevant. A tectonic shift is occurring within mainline denominations such as the ELCA; it is a shift away from the historic and biblical commitment to Christianity. In its place is a social relativism that has no anchor, no foundation and is firmly planted in mid-air.

For that reason the ELCA no longer deserves to be called “Christian.” It has abandoned the Scriptures as the final authority for all matters of faith and of practice. Its highly selective quotation of some Scripture to the total exclusion of all others is an abuse of God’s Word. Martin Luther led a movement that restored the Bible to the church; the pulpit replaced the altar. Today moral ditties have replaced the teachings of Jesus Christ. Human opinions carry more weight in the ELCA than does the Word of God. When David lamented the death of Saul and Jonathan, he said, “How the mighty are fallen.” That same lament applies to the ELCA today. It is a tragic story of the loss of a denomination that was once worthy in the eyes of God. That is no longer true!

See Robert Benne, “How the ELCA Left the Great Tradition. . .” ChristianityToday.com (2 September 2009).