

# Biblical Principles

PRIN'CIPIE, n [L. *principium*, beginning]; a truth; that which supports an assertion, an action, or a series of actions; a law comprehending many subordinate truths.

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## Property

prop'erty, n [formed directly from proper]. Latin is *proprietas*, Fr. *propriété*. A peculiar quality of any thing; that which is inherent in a subject, or naturally essential to it. The exclusive right of possessing, enjoying and disposing of a thing; ownership; that which a person owns or has legal title to. "In the beginning of the world, the Creator gave to man dominion over the earth . . . and every living thing. This is the foundation of man's property" Noah Webster, 1828. (See also expanded definition and development in this paper.)

### The Biblical Principle

All things (the earth and the fullness thereof) belong to God, the Creator, the original and everlasting Owner and Sovereign (to the Creator belongs the created). We are His property, the workmanship of His hands. "Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). God bestows property on whom He will; we gain "title" to it through the investment of our labors, our time and talents, and our resources (Genesis 3:17-19). We are not to steal or covet that which He has entrusted to others. He has appointed man (each of us) to be His steward, to have dominion over that which He has created; we are to employ that property, conserve and replenish it (cause it to multiply), in such a manner as to glorify and serve Him. (An unprofitable individual is one "bringing no glory to God: as an unprofitable servant"—Webster's 1865 *American Dictionary of the English Language*.) Each person has a property in his inalienable rights and in his self; property is an extension of self. That which violates an individual's property violates the individual. *Conscience is the most sacred of all forms of property.*

### Expanding the Definition

The popular tendency is to consider property to be those tangible, physical items which one possesses

—a house, car, furniture, clothes, etc. That is a lopsided view. It is purely materialistic—it ignores the spiritual and centers on the things of the world. What are the full dimensions, the "properties," of property?

John Locke, "philosopher of the American Revolution," defined property as "the individual's life, liberty and estate." (In June 1776, George Mason, in his original draft of the Virginia Bill of Rights wrote, "all men are born equally free and independent and have certain inherent natural rights . . . among which are enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." In his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson shortened Mason's words to read, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.")

James Madison, architect of the Constitution and fourth President of these United States, gave this definition of "property":

. . . a man's land, or merchandise, or money, is called his property . . . [but] a man has property in his opinions, and the free communication of them. He has a property of peculiar value in his religious opinions, and in the profession and practice dictated by them. . . . He has an equal property in the free use of his faculties, and free choice of the objects on which to employ them. In a word, as a man is said to

have a right to his property—he may be equally said to have a property in his rights.

Professor Tom Rose, Grove City College, defines “property,” in part, as “[the] individual’s ownership and effective control over his own self, his mind, his body, his labor power, and the physical wealth he has produced or accumulated through the expenditure of his own mental and physical efforts.”

### Internal and External Property

Both Madison and Professor Rose make it clear: there are two basic forms of property—*Internal* and *External*.

*Internal* property includes a person’s “heart” and mind and conscience; his ideas, opinions, religious

convictions, political philosophy, presuppositions, moral values, talents, and skills.

*External* property may be held in common (joint ownership, including citizen holdings such as government buildings, equipment, etc.). *Internal* property is strictly personal—belonging exclusively to the individual.

God’s Word tells us that “for as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7a); that we are to “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23); “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34b)—and, may we not rightly observe, in the heart our actions are born?

Which leads us to this important consideration of the *value and nature of property*:

### Some Key Scriptures

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).
- “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). (See also Psalm 33:6; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:10.)
- “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O LORD . . .” (1 Chronicles 29:11).
- “I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me” (Jeremiah 27:5).
- “Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him” (Isaiah 43:7). (See also Psalm 115:16; Isaiah 45:12; Daniel 4:17, 25.)
- “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15).
- “You shall not covet . . . anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17).
- “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark” (Deuteronomy 19:14a).
- “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me” (Leviticus 25:23).
- “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:2).
- “For you were bought at a price [you belong to Him]; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:20).
- “While it [property] remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?” (Acts 5:4a).
- “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).
- “His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord’” (Matthew 25:23).

The manner in which a person employs his or her internal property (heart, mind, conscience) determines the manner in which he or she will seek, acquire and employ external property. The Bible assures us that where a person's treasure is, there will his heart be also. It is also true that where a person's heart is, there will his (desire for) treasure be also. Thus, the Lord urges: "Set your affection [mind] on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). And "Seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

So it was that Madison was led to this conclusion: "Conscience is the most sacred of all property . . . the external exercise of that being a natural and unalienable right. . . ."

What is "conscience," this most sacred of all property? Noah Webster defined it: "Conscience—the principles within us which decide on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of our own actions and affections, and instantly approves or condemns them." "Lawfulness" suggests a law, a code of laws, by which man is to govern himself. And such a code exists: it is the law of God which, if we seek to be His, is writ on the fleshly tables of our heart (2 Corinthians 3:3b).

Acknowledging the concern over the increasing infringement upon personal property and "property rights," Rosalie J. Slater warns, "But, the first invasion of property rights occurs *internally*, when the individual consents to the disposal or use or misuse of his opinions, his religious convictions, and his faculties" (*Teaching & Learning America's Christian History*, p. 229).

As followers of Christ, we are to exercise our conscience according to His will and law-word, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:22).

"This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men" (Acts 24:16). "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

## Personal Property and Civil Government

God in His omniscience instituted personal property (private ownership) as an adjunct to His dominion mandate (Genesis 1:28). It is one of the facets of His perfect plan to have His creatures subdue the earth, replenish it (conserve it) and be fruitful.

In his "A Review of Blackstone's Commentaries," Dr. Marshall D. Ewell wrote: "It was clear that the earth would not produce her fruits in sufficient quantities without the assistance of tillage." (Which is what God placed on Adam as a result of his disobedience; if he did not work he would not eat.) But, as Dr. Ewell observed, man would not be inclined to

work hard and produce well if he knew that someone else was waiting to seize the fruits of his labors. "Had not, therefore, a separate property in lands as well as moveables been vested in some individuals, the world must have continued a forest, and man have been mere animals of prey.

"Necessity begat property; and in order to insure that property, recourse was had to civil society. . . ."

John Locke also stressed that God gives man dominion over that which he produces as a dynamic toward the total dominion mandate:

. . . [I]t cannot be supposed that God meant it (the earth) should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational (and Labour was to be his Title to it) not to the

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. God is the creator of all property ("all things were made by Him").
2. All property belongs to God; it is assigned and held in trust by man.
3. Each individual has "title" to that which he produces; it is his property.
4. Property is to be used to serve God and to advance His kingdom.
5. No man has a right to employ his property to injure another; no man or men have a right to take another man's property without his consent.

Fancy or Covetousness or the Quarrelsome and Contentious. . . . He that in obedience to this Command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it (the earth), thereby annexed to it something that was his Property, which another had not Title to, nor could without injury take from him.

Thus, we see the overriding purpose of civil government as ordained by the Lord God. Consider these words by John Locke ("Of Civil-Government," Chapter V, *Of Property*, 1689):

And, 'tis not without Reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to joyn in Society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their Lives, Liberties, and Estates, which I call by the general name, **Property**.

The "great and chief end" of civil government, then, is to protect and preserve the individual's "property"—his life, liberty, and estate. What Locke set forth was not new: it had been handed down centuries before his time—in Genesis 9:5, Romans 13:1–6, Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13–14, etc.

Two of God's Ten Commandments deal specifically with property (and property rights); in a very real sense, each of the ten Commandments deals in one way or another with property—God's and/or His creatures':

**"You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15).**

**"You shall not covet . . ." (Exodus 20:17).**

Implicit in those two commandments is God's recognition of and provision for personal (private) property. (If property does not "belong" to an individual, it cannot be stolen. If property does not "belong," there is no need to covet. Covetousness is the seed-bed of theft—the thought is parent to the act; the internal is causative to the external.)

God has another requirement regarding property, one that clearly underscores His ownership: the tithe (Leviticus 27:30-33; see also Deuteronomy 14:22-27, 28). The tithe is not a gift; it is a tax for the use of God's property and clearly reaffirms the fact that the "the earth is the Lord's [property] and the fullness thereof." To fail to render unto God His tithe is to rob God and to violate His commandments regarding property (Malachi 3:8).

## Applying the Principle

**Civil government**—the God-ordained purpose and function of civil government (at all levels and in affairs both domestic and foreign) is to preserve and protect the individual and his property, recognizing that each person has a right to his property and has a property in his rights.

When government functions in such a manner, it is in harmony with the laws and purposes set forth by God. When government fails to function in that manner, or when it becomes an agency which infringes upon or violates the individual's property rights, it goes counter to God's will. It becomes a god unto itself, as Samuel warned the people of Israel (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

**Self government**—as God's property, created by Him and bought with a price, we are to employ both our internal and external property to serve and glorify Him. The Christian who fails to do this, who does not employ his God-entrusted property so that it is profitable unto righteousness, fails the requirements of stewardship; he or she is robbing God.

Further, as citizens of this world seeking to obey Him, we should abide by the **Golden Rule** for overseeing and governing civil government:

1. Never permit government to do unto any individual that which you would not want done unto yourself or to your property.
2. Never ask government to do to any individual that which you would not want done unto yourself or to your property.

**"And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise."**

**—Luke 6:31**

NOTE: All Scripture is from the New King James Version.

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