HUMAN-MADE THEOCRACIES

At twenty-eight, John Calvin moved from France to Geneva, Switzerland, where he found a robust community of people from across Europe who had fled the severe religious persecution in their countries. Geneva provided a place where the people could follow the Bible’s guidelines for study and worship, for the city had freed herself from Rome’s rule and was the perfect place for a new form of church and government. Rather unfortunately, however, this new order followed the same old spirit of religious control. Having gained political power, Calvin instituted another human-made theocracy in which every citizen was expected to publicly swear allegiance to Christianity. With Calvin becoming the leader of both church and state, there was very little distinction between civil and religious institutions. Calvin succeeded in passing many laws geared toward enforcing Christian practices.

Calvin's religious intolerance is especially exemplified in how he handled Michael Severtus, a man he deemed a heretic for denying the doctrines of the Trinity and infant baptism. Even though Severtus had narrowly escaped death at the hands of Roman Catholics in France and was therefore a fellow escapee from persecution, Calvin ordered that he be immediately arrested upon his arrival in Geneva. In 1553, a general council condemned Severtus and burned him at the stake on a pile of his own books. The persecuted had again become the persecutor. This week’s lesson examines why believers should reject the theocratic form of government and why God hasn’t appointed another theocracy since Israel.
Write out Ezekiel 21 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 24–27. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
Throughout history, God has implemented various kinds of human government that satisfied the needs of the time. God used His servant Moses to establish Israel as a theocracy, which can be defined as “a form of government in which all the affairs of men, whether temporal or spiritual, civil or religious, are united under the control of God” (A.G. Daniells, Liberty Magazine, vol. 12, [1917]). The theocracy became an extension of God’s kingdom in heaven where God’s laws and judgments are absolute. Under ancient Israel’s theocracy, Sabbath breaking, cursing parents, sexual sins, communicating with the dead, disregarding annual feast days, blasphemy, and idolatry were all punishable by death (Exod. 35:2; Lev. 20:9–16, 27; 23:30, 24:16; Deut. 13:6–10), penalties which foreshadowed God’s verdict against sin in the final judgment (Rev. 20:11–15). The laws in the books of Moses make no distinction between government and church. The Levitical priesthood exercised both religious and civil authority, enforcing both religious and civil laws.

Centuries later, when Israel begged for a king, God established the throne of David as an extension of His throne in heaven. 1 Chronicles 29:33 says, “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him” (emphasis added). The king of Israel sat on God’s earthly throne and enforced God’s laws. As in Moses’ time, David’s kingdom derived its power directly from God. However, the kings who followed David formed a long history that was largely characterized by disloyalty to God. In the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, prophets gave multiple severe warnings that God was terribly displeased with the abuse of power and lack of responsibility demonstrated by Israel’s leaders.

One such prophet, Ezekiel, was among the captives taken to Babylon in the days of Jehoiachin, the second-to-last king in Jerusalem. In Babylon, God gave Ezekiel visions and dreams that revealed the total disaster destined for Jerusalem and its inhabitants. The destruction of their nation served as a painful warning of how far the people had departed from their covenant with Him. As the leaders held the most responsibility for the people’s unfaithfulness, the judgments were first and foremost against them. The unfaithful king and princes in Jerusalem, who were direct descendants of David and represented God’s throne on earth, were conquered and taken captive to Babylon. The throne that belonged to David’s descendants was permanently overthrown never to be reestablished on earth.

Ezekiel 21:18–26 clearly identifies Babylon as the power that would take the crown from the king in Jerusalem. The prophecy then specifies that three powers would be overthrown following Babylon: “Overthrown, overthrown, I will make it overthrown!” (v. 27). Sure enough, Medo-Persia eventually overthrew Babylon, Greece overthrew Persia, and Rome overthrew Greece. Each of those powers, from Babylon to Rome, prevented the throne from being reestablished in Jerusalem. The prophetic chapter also says the royal family in Jerusalem would remain overthrown until the Messiah came: “It shall be no longer, until He comes whose right it is” (v. 27). The throne in Jerusalem would remain unoccupied until Messiah came. Humanity had corrupted the form of government used under the Old Covenant, necessitating that it be completely replaced under the New Covenant.
God promised David that his throne would be “established forever” three times in 2 Samuel 7:12–16, and Psalm 89:34–37 again promises that David’s descendants would continue to reign forever. However, in fulfillment of Ezekiel 21’s prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, ended the Davidic line of kings when he removed Zedekiah from the throne (Jer. 52). So what do we do with the many promises that David’s throne would continue forever?

Long before the earthly line of kings was broken, Isaiah foretold in the well-known prophecy about Christ’s birth that the Messiah would ultimately fulfill these promises: “Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever” (9:7). The angel Gabriel later assured Mary, Jesus’ mother, of the same thing: “The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32, 33).

At the end of Revelation, Jesus identified Himself as both the Father and Son of David. He said, “I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (22:16), showing that His throne in heaven fulfilled all the promises David received. Revelation 4 and 5 reveal that Jesus was crowned King in heaven after His resurrection and ascension. Only Jesus could be both David’s Father and his Son, for He was David’s Father before He came to earth (Luke 3:31–38) and his Son after (Matt. 22:41–46). No angel could fill that role.

When Jesus took David’s throne to heaven, He eliminated all legitimate forms of earthly government that claim to have been directly commissioned by God. The kingdom Jesus commissioned after His resurrection is a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly one, and it is from this heavenly kingdom that Christ delegated legal power to His disciples. Jesus told them this, saying, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). In fulfillment of Christ’s commission, the disciples were to go no further in building an earthly kingdom than Jesus went. Christ gave the disciples leave to build only one kingdom commission, not multiple: “And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29, 30). Therefore, any form of government that claims a direct commission from God directly affronts the government Jesus established when He moved David’s throne to heaven.
What relationship do the following verses have with Ezekiel 21?

Genesis 49:10
Jeremiah 22:1–5
Jeremiah 23:1–6
Lamentations 5:16–19
Ezekiel 19:1, 10–14
Revelation 5:5

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

Review your memorized verse from Ezekiel 21
Ezekiel 21 predicted the comprehensive changes the Messiah would bring, saying, “Nothing shall remain the same” (v. 26) before describing how Jesus would break down barriers and reverse social expectations: “Exalt the humble, and humble the exalted.” Jesus began exalting the humble with His own mother, who said these words after her cousin proclaimed her blessed among women: “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly” (Luke 1:52). He also pronounced trouble for proud elites who were exalting themselves, mirroring the language seen in Ezekiel 21: “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12). The kingdom that Jesus introduced operates on principles that appear backward to people, exemplified in the simple statement, “The last will be first, and the first last” (Matt. 20:16).

God has not established an earthly government under His direct control since Israel, and nothing is more tyrannical than humans granting themselves their own charter to build an artificial theocracy. It would have been unthinkable for Moses or David to institute a theocracy based on their own authority. The nation of Israel respected the theocracy because they saw how God truly appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is a total fraud for rulers today to claim theocratical kind of authority based on their own inventions or false revelations. Wherever this has happened it has resulted in the cruelest kind of religious tyranny. It’s important to note that God still appoints governments to punish evil and protect neighbor-to-neighbor relationships, but He does not appoint governments to enforce our allegiance to Him (Rom. 13:1–13).

The boundaries that should prevent governments from enforcing religious law can be found in the Old Testament as well. In Jeremiah 27:5–8, God explicitly commanded His people to submit to Babylon’s authority and Nebuchadnezzar’s rule. This submission was to be absolute, as long as Babylon did not interfere with their service to God. When Babylon’s laws conflicted with God’s laws, the people could no longer comply. This boundary is clearly illustrated in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who chose to remain faithful to God when Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to worship his idol of gold (Dan. 3:12). The Jews were eager to defend their independence, but God instructed His people to submit to the authority of Babylon so far that it did not violate God’s law, which is always supreme.

The prophecy in Ezekiel 21 said the Messiah would overthrow old forms of government and introduce new principles, and Christ did just that. In places where these principles have been cast aside, tyranny, oppression, and overwhelming misery have been the result. The principles of religious liberty and separation of church and state that He taught have protected humanity’s happiness and strengthened civilization wherever they have been embraced.
THE NATURE OF THE COMMISSION

“The commission that Christ gave to His disciples just before His ascension is the great missionary charter of His kingdom. In giving it to the disciples, the Saviour made them His ambassadors and gave them their credentials. If, afterward, they should be challenged and asked by what authority they, unlearned fishermen, went forth as teachers and healers, they could reply: ‘He whom the Jews crucified, but who rose from the dead, appointed us to the ministry of His word, declaring, “All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.”’” (Ellen White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 8 [1904], 14.)

“Just before leaving His disciples, Christ once more plainly stated the nature of His kingdom. He recalled to their remembrance things He had previously told them regarding it. He declared that it was not His purpose to establish in this world a temporal kingdom. He was not appointed to reign as an earthly monarch on David’s throne. When the disciples asked Him, ‘Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?’ He answered, ‘It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power.’ Acts 1:6, 7. It was not necessary for them to see farther into the future than the revelations He had made enabled them to see. Their work was to proclaim the gospel message.” (Ellen White, Acts of the Apostles [1911], 30.)

“During His ministry, Jesus had kept constantly before the disciples the fact that they were to be one with Him in His work for the recovery of the world from the slavery of sin. When He sent forth the Twelve and afterward the Seventy, to proclaim the kingdom of God, He was teaching them their duty to impart to others what He had made known to them. In all His work He was training them for individual labor, to be extended as their numbers increased, and eventually to reach to the uttermost parts of the earth. The last lesson He gave His followers was that they held in trust for the world the glad tidings of salvation.” (Ibid., 32.)

“When Christ was on this earth, He chose twelve disciples to be constantly with Him. These it was His purpose to train for His work. He did not call their attention to the purposes and laws of the kingdoms of the world, but to a higher, holier theme—the purposes and laws of the kingdom of God. He did not speak to them of politics, but of the subjects that concerned them as stewards of His grace. He gave them a general idea of the character of His kingdom, and of its working, as a kingdom of grace in this world and a kingdom of glory in the future world. He told them that it was not an earthy, temporal kingdom, but a kingdom that would endure forever. He revealed to them the covenant of peace, the great charter that declares the principles of His kingdom.” (Ellen White, Letter 65, 1902, para. 12.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How is a true theocracy where God’s in control supposed to function?

What’s the problem with people attempting to build their own theocracy without a commission from God?

Why should a theocratic form of government be rejected today?

In what ways has Jesus fulfilled His role as King?

What are some examples of how Jesus exalted the humble and humbled the exalted? What methods did He use, and how can we put them into practice in our own lives?

How can we guard against becoming too exalted?

What lessons can we learn from the stories in church history where people tried to build their own theocracies?

Are there still theocracies in the world today? What are some examples?