

THE DIVINE INSTITUTIONS AND THE RESTRAINT ON SIN AND EVIL

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TH402 – Christian Framework I
January 16, 2025

Introduction

At the foundation of every society are systems like labor, marriage, family, and government that directly influence how a society is run. A major question needing answered is: “where do these systems come from?” Are they conventions that mankind developed over the course of time and are therefore subject to the changes of public opinion? When approaching this question from a biblical worldview it is clear that these systems and more are created by God and implemented in His creation and revealed to us by God Himself. It is therefore paramount that mankind is aware of and seek to follow these systems also called institutions. This paper will define and summarize the divine institutions as well as make an argument for how each of the institutions have a restraint on sin and evil that are utilized until God’s ultimate plan for evil is achieved.

I. Definitions:

There are at least seven components that lead towards a definition of a divine institution. The first is that a divine institution is divinely appointed. That is, that God directly installs the institution, and this implies God has intentions for His creation. The second component is that the institution is universal in scope. It is instituted for all people both individually and corporately. The third component is that the institution has a significant impact on society. Fourth, the institution is generationally transferable and by design passes to subsequent generations. Fifth, the institution is non-terminable and continues in perpetuity until God’s redemptive program is achieved. Sixth, there is an observable plan or purpose to the institution that directly preserves or promotes the survival of mankind. Finally, the divine institutions carry the expectation of consequential retribution. Retribution may be immediate in the case where the

institution is not followed or ultimate where God will judge all the living, and the dead based on their conducted living.

Putting all these components together a definition can be made. Therefore, a divine institution is a law, rule, principle, decree and or establishment that God installs into creation with specific purpose and function that is passed down generation to generation without cessation for the maintenance, preservation and prosperity of a society and which renders man responsible for their conduct.

Inherent to a divine institution's aspect of preservation and promotion of God's will, some teachers see some institutions expressly preserving, and others expressly promoting, God's will. But this author sees these aspects as woven together and developing God's redemptive program throughout history until the future glorious kingdom where God rules over creation directly through Jesus Christ the Messiah.

To summarize, there are traditionally five divine institutions observed in Scripture with slight nuance to their title and function which will be discussed below. They are 1- responsible labor, 2- marriage, 3- family, 4- human government, and 5- tribal diversity. Some have added two additional institutions in the nation of Israel, and the Church. However, based on the above definition, I would suggest these two additions, while meeting some of the components do not fully qualify and will not be covered in this paper.

Evil –

Another crucial concept to define as it relates to one of the intentions of a divine institution to restrain evil is “what is evil?” Historically, this concept has been treated theologically, and evil is made to be an independent force that is working against God's program

for creation. One of the serious errors with this understanding of evil is it creates a universal above God. That is, evil is thought to exist independently and opposed to God's will for creation. The unresolved issue that develops from this understanding is how did evil come into existence? Either God created it which calls into question His nature as righteous, holy and just, or He permitted it, which calls into question His nature as sovereign and loving.

It is better to see evil not as a universal abstract quality that exists outside of God but rather that which is opposed to God's character, nature, or will. To illustrate, it is not as though God was grocery shopping in the cosmos and was deciding what components would make up His nature, or His creation, as though he saw evil on the shelf existing by itself and he grabbed it and implemented it into His creation to create a dramatic unfolding of history. Rather, evil is anything that goes against God's character, nature and will and is the antithesis of who God is and what God is doing in creation. It originates in the fall of creation and not in or with God.

Additionally, there are two important truths to understand about evil from what the bible reveals about it. First, evil exists in the personal, corporate, national, and universal spheres. Evil has touched all aspects of society as a result of the fall (cf. Gen. 3:11-19; Rom. 8:19-22). The second important truth that the bible reveals is that evil is bracketed. That is, evil has a beginning and an end. Evil began with the fall of the angels in their rebellion against God (cf. Gen. 3:1; Is. 14:12-21; Ezek. 28:12-19; Rev. 12:3-4, 7-9). Evil has a terminal end beginning with the future kingdom and ending with the new heavens and the new earth where no evil is present (cf. Rev. 21).

The Kingdom of God –

A final concept that needs defined according to biblical revelation is the kingdom of God. Adhering to a literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic it is evident that God has a plan to restore creation to its original design. Following the flow of biblical revelation and human history, God incrementally reveals to mankind truths about this culminating plan.

There are at least four points that summarize God's culminating plan of redemption for His creation. First, is the concept of His indirect theocratic administration. God as creator has sovereignty over the entire universe. This sovereignty was passed in part to the first man Adam, and the dominion of the earthly sphere of God's creation was to be governed indirectly through mankind.

The second major point of revelation is the creation of Israel. With the fall of mankind and creation the indirect theocratic administration of the earth was changed because of the fall. Considering the issues arising from the fall God creates the nation of Israel to be a vehicle for God's indirect theocratic administration with a new necessity of redeeming what was lost in the fall. Through the nation of Israel God reveals that all the nations will be blessed through them (Abraham and the promises made to him are passed to His descendants through Isaac and Jacob. cf. Gen. 12:3). God also reveals the intended government structure of this kingdom in which the Davidic house will be especially relevant to God's indirect rule (cf. 2 Sam 7:1-17).

The third major point within God's culminating plan of redemption is the creation of the Church. Following the 1st century rejection of Jesus and His offered kingdom, God reveals an aspect of His plan from the beginning, that Jew and Gentile will be in the body of Christ known as the Church (cf. Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 3:1-7). The Church is revealed to have a significant role in

the ruling and reigning with Christ in the future kingdom, but also a major role in the restraint of sin during its dispensation.

The fourth major point within God's culminating plan of redemption is the kingdom itself. Jesus Christ as God's Son will occupy the physical throne of David therefore redeeming the indirect theocratic administration. But Jesus as God will therefore be the direct administrator ruling over Israel and the nations. His rule is the culmination of God's redemptive program and the fulfillment of the essential functions of the Divine institutions.

II. The Divine Institutions and Their Role in restraining Evil:

1) Responsible Labor –

There are many features to a divine institution that inherently contain features that promote or preserve a society as God intends. One of those features is the natural restraint on evil. Some of the institutions display this feature more obviously but below will be an argument for how each of them functionally restrains evil within a society and protects civilization from collapse.

The first divine institution revealed in Scripture is responsible labor. God made man in His image and dominion was delegated to him and shared with his progeny (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). The context of the creation of man is within the creation week where an important observation must be made. Following certain creative acts on each of the six days a reoccurring declaration is made: "And God saw that it was good" (cf. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Finally when God wraps up His creating he assesses everything and it is declared, "God saw everything that He had made,

and indeed it was very good.” (cf. 1:31). The implication is that everything within creation is subject to the scrutable judgment of the Creator.

The scrutable judgment is more explicitly revealed to apply to the conduct of man who is specially made in God’s image. The first man was given the responsibility to tend and keep the garden (Gen. 2:8, 15), not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (v. 17), and to name all living creatures (v. 19). Adam accomplished his responsibilities until he disobeyed the Lord and ate of the forbidden tree, consequently God judged Adam (Gen. 3:17-19) and banished him from the Garden (vv. 22-24).

Responsible labor is not just applicable for the first man but revealed in Scripture as applicable to all mankind. The wisest man Solomon communicates this truth at the end of Ecclesiastes where it is concisely stated, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.” (Ecc. 12:13-14). The theme of man’s judgment is universal and is developed throughout Scripture.

What becomes clear is that the conduct of mankind is before the Lord and liable for judgment. This judgment is seen at times to be within a person’s life as is the case with Cain (Gen. 4), The exodus Pharaoh (Ex. 7-10), and Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), as well as ultimate judgment (Mt. 11:22, 24). But how does this divine institution restrain sin? The first way sin is restrained by this institution is demonstrated in the accounts where God intervenes in His creation and issues judgment. This immediate judgment can be for the individual as seen above but also corporately as with the case of the flood generation (Gen. 6), Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), and the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1-3). These cases and those like them put an end to the wickedness that was jeopardizing civilization, and judgment was issued as a cessation

of wicked conduct as well as a warning to others. The warning of judgment is what restrains sin. Whether in the immediate cases above or as often declared in Scripture with reminders of standing before God in afterlife judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

2) Marriage –

The second divine institution revealed in scripture is marriage. God instituted marriage (Gen. 2:20-25), and the intended result of marriage is reproductive generation (Gen. 1:28). The institution of marriage is established as a man and a woman becoming one and independent from their parents. With the inherent function of the institutions to preserve and promote a thriving society, naturally, there will be resistance from those in rebellion to God's creative order. The adversary Satan and those angels that rebelled with him demonstrate this resistance in the flood narrative. They violate the marriage institution by taking human women for angelic wives.

There are at least two significant violations to marriage in this incident. First, angels violate their created order by engaging in marriage (cf. Mt. 22:30). But the violation is magnified in the fact that it was a cross-kind marriage that Jude calls "strange flesh." Jude 6-7 says, "And the angels who did not keep their proper domain but left their own abode... as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a SIMILAR manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh" [Emphasis mine]. The attack on the institution of marriage is conducted by the world (cf. Gen 6), the flesh (Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:17-19; 1 Cor. 6:18), and the Devil (Gen. 6; Jude 6-7). This attack undermines the intended preservation and promotion of society that God's institution safeguards.

Marriage is the only divinely prescribed sphere in which sexual union is to take place. The institution of marriage therefore guards against sexual immorality and is a resistance to sin

and evil. This is easily demonstrated by observing a couple sample verses from scripture. The first text is from the wisdom of Solomon to his son regarding the dangers of adultery. Solomon admonishes his son to be satisfied only in the sexual union with his wife and to not be ensnared by the deceitful pleasures of other lovers (Pr. 5:15-19). The second text is the admonition of Paul to the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor. 7). Paul lists a series of charges to the church that will safeguard against sexual immorality which was a particular struggle for that community and the center of the conversation is following the biblical manner of marriage.

In addition to the passages above demonstrating marriage as a restraint on sin and evil there are two corollaries that associate the concept of marriage with the divine desire for purity. The first correlation is the relationship of God, and the nation of Israel depicted as a marital union (Ezek. 16:1-14). This theme is further developed in the accusations against Israel of national harlotry (Is. 1:21; 57:8; Jer. 2:20; 3:2, 6, 20; Ezek. 16:15-30; 23:11-20; Hos. 1:2). The implication of Israel's sin is that if they would have observed the loyal love principle of marriage they would have resisted sin and evil. The second correlation is the sanctification of the Church directly associated with the concept of betrothal and marriage to Christ. (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-32). Marriage is the concept used as an example for Israel and the Church resisting sin and evil and promoting that which safeguard against these.

3) Family –

The third divine institution revealed in Scripture is family. This institution can be observed in the same passage instituting marriage as the married couple comprise the new family unit (Gen. 2:20-25). This leads some to combine these institutions into one. However, “similarity” does not equate to “sameness” and there are enough differences to justify treating

them separately. The intention of the institution of the family is developed in Deut. 6:5-9. Moses admonishes the newly formed nation to carefully observe the commands of God both personally, as well as to teach their children to do the same. Therefore the family is designed to be the vehicle of transference for God's righteous commands to succeeding generations.

There are at least three passages that demonstrate how the institution of family restrains evil. The first is the context of the charge Moses delivers to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6. Moses lists a series of charges to the Israelites to ensure God's commands transfer to succeeding generations. They are to be taught diligently (v. 7a). They are to be expressed throughout the day in the home and outside the home (v. 7b). Every activity and every decision are to be with careful regard to the commands (v.8), and they are to be readily accessible around the home (v. 9). The context of this passage is implied by the entire book itself following the structure of an ancient covenant known as a suzerain-vassal treaty. This was an arrangement between a superior person or nation and an inferior person or nation and provided conditions on the relationship. The covenant contained in Deuteronomy was for the purpose of maintaining national holiness in the midst of nations opposed to God (cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:21; 26:19).

The second passage demonstrating the institution of family as a restraint on evil is Proverbs 22:6. The entire collection of proverbs form exhortations for resisting sin and evil and 22:6 is an admonition for parents and their children. It says, "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." This truth is not given as a promise of developing godly children but as a principle for how to develop godly children. To produce children that follow the LORD they must be taught by the parents how to follow Him. Therefore, God's design for the family is to promote godly living in order to resist sin and evil in the world.

The third passage demonstrates the institution of family as a restraint on sin by way of illustration. The writer of the book of Hebrews is persuading Jewish believers to not forsake Christ by returning to the former pattern of Judaism. Towards the end of the book the theme of child training is introduced. Where the writer reminds his audience of the principle of parental discipline or chastening and likens it to God's divine parenting of His children. Child training whether it be by earthly parents or God the Father is not intended for destroying the child but for pruning wickedness and producing righteous fruit (Heb. 12:5-11).

4) Human Government –

Following God's divine reset of the earth's population after the judgment of the global flood He reveals a fourth institution to Noah and his sons. The institution is revealed in Genesis 9 where in verse 5 God reiterates the institution of responsible labor applying it on this occasion with a reckoning for lifeblood taken. Both man and animals will be held accountable for taking human life. Then God explicitly institutes in verse 6, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed." What is being installed into creation is the human responsibility to observe capital punishment and the authority to judge and execute someone guilty of taking human life.

Human government is introduced to the new world to protect and promote the sanctity of life and restrain evil. Another way of looking at human government is to see it as a stewardship of judgment on the earth. It is therefore an indirect governing of the earth. There are developments to this institution throughout Scripture and an important foreshadow of this institution's role is revealed in the angelic stewardship of judgment. After banishing the first couple from the garden, God placed Cherubim angels at its gate to guard man from entering but

also placed a flaming sword. This sword is a figure for the right and authority to judge anyone violating the particular area the sword is given to defend.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writing to the church at Rome develops the institution of human government in his exhortation to believers. His exhortation also develops the sword imagery but in relation to the human stewardship of judgment (cf. Rom. 13:1-7). In Romans 13 there are at least five important observations regarding the institution of human government. First, every soul is to be subject to governing authorities (v. 1a). Second, governing authorities are appointed by God (v. 1b). Third, rulers are a “terror” to evil and not to good works (v. 3). This means the natural function of rulers is to restrain evil by executing judgment on those who violate the laws of the land. Not to say that a ruler cannot become corrupt and themselves violate the laws of God but that is where the biblical concept of civil disobedience comes into play (cf. Acts 4:17-20). The fourth observation is that rulers are “God’s ministers and “bear the sword” (v. 4). The concept of the sword (the divinely given stewardship to judge) is given to governing authorities, and this is why they are God’s ministers. Finally, Paul summarizes the applicable areas that people within a society owe to their governments they reside. Taxes, dues, customs, fear, and honor are owed to governing authorities (v. 7).

5) Tribal Diversity –

The final institution revealed in scripture is tribal diversity. The installation of this institution is found in the backdrop of the sin of the tower of Babel project (cf. Gen. 11). As civilization grew and expanded in the aftermath of the flood, outward expansion was halted in the land of Shinar (v. 2). This is the first step to mankind not obeying the decree for man to be fruitful and multiply, and to fill the earth (cf. Gen. 9:1). Their disobedience is made more explicit

in the text revealing that their reason for building a city and a tower is “lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (v. 4). God states the concern with this global unity was that “nothing they propose to do will be withheld from them.” (v. 6). As a result of their disobedience God intervenes and confuses their language stopping the city and tower project (vv. 7-8).

There are at least three results of God confusing their language. First, the rebellious project was stopped. Second, the people were forced to scatter over the face of all the earth as God originally ordered. The third result is that this scattering would have caused people speaking the same language to go together and to depart from other peoples and languages. These tribes would go out and eventually form communities and nations that would be distinct from the rest. This national distinction restrains the possibility that a global effort arises again to rebel against the Creator.

There are two passages that reveal God’s detailed scattering of the nations. The first reveals the number of nations that came out of the tower of Babel and the reason for this number. In the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 Moses declares, “When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. This number is 70 according to Exodus 1:5 so 70 nations came out of Babel. The second passage is Acts 17:26 and reveals important truths about this scattering. First, every nation was made by God (v. 26a). Second, God has determined their pre-appointed time (v. 26b). This is the slot in history in which these nations would exist. Third, God has determined the boundaries of their dwelling (v. 26c). God sovereignly dictated where these nations would reside, and this furthers the component of restraining sin as their intermingling is controlled.

III. The Culmination of the Divine Institutions as a Resolution to Evil:

There are four areas that summarize the culminating aspect of the institutions until God's ultimate resolution to evil is achieved. The first area is the reason for the existence of the divine institutions. The ultimate reason is because of the introduction of sin into the world at the fall. God's original "very good" work was marred by the rebellion of angels and man, causing all creation to be subject to the penalty of sin which is death. The holiness and righteousness of God demanded this subjection but His mercy and love for mankind leads to His plan of redemption.

The second area is the function of their existence. The divine institutions function to preserve mankind and promote mankind's continued existence before God. One of the major areas covered by the function of the divine institutions is the restraint on sin and evil. The third area is the application of their existence. The divine institutions are designed to be followed both individually and collectively among mankind.

The final area is the duration of their existence. The divine institutions will function until all things are brought under God for the direct administration of the earth. There is a transitional phase to this culmination in which during the 1,000-year kingdom the institutions will serve a lesser role in the function of preserving and promoting God's plan, since God the Son will be directly involved in governing the earth. However, the institutions still exist for the portion of mankind that does not enter the kingdom in glorified bodies. But during the eternal state marriage will no longer be practiced as all will be in risen glorified bodies (cf. Mt. 22:30).

Conclusion:

The divine institutions outlined in Scripture serve as fundamental pillars for the preservation, promotion, and ultimate guardrails for the restoration of humanity. These institutions of responsible labor, marriage, family, human government, and tribal diversity, are divinely installed to restrain evil, promote righteousness, and guide mankind in fulfilling God's purposes. Though they operate in a fallen world, their ultimate aim is to align creation with God's redemptive plan, which will culminate in the direct reign of Jesus Christ. While these institutions will continue to play a role during the millennial kingdom, they will ultimately give way to God's perfect governance in the new heavens and new earth. By understanding these institutions and their purpose, believers can better appreciate their role in God's unfolding story of redemption, as well as the responsibility they bear to uphold His principles in their own lives and communities.