Biblical Principles for Voting in American Elections

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Session 1

The Regular Challenge

It is rare in human history for the citizenry of a nation to have a direct role in the government of that nation such as we do in America. Many in our country, however, don't take this seriously and either fail to vote or vote frivolously. How might Christians consider their right to vote in elections? Is there a specifically "Christian" way to vote or position on issues of public debate or policy? These questions confront each Christian each election cycle.

Unfortunately, two things have been lost in the Christian approach to voting. First, staying away from extremes has been lost. Some believe we can incarnate the kingdom of God by virtue of the ballot box, "Take America Back for Christ!" While others see no need for the influence of the Bible on decisions of government, "Religion has no place in the public square." Secondly, a proper understanding of how to use the Bible in our voting has been lost. Much of what follows addresses that second issue.

Keeping the Covenants Straight

The thesis of this essay is that voting in America can be viewed as an application of God's universal covenant with Noah. And, in the text of that covenant, God provides voting principles for our use in our context.

As we will see below, guidance on for whom or on what to vote should not be drawn from the life of national Israel stipulated in the Mosaic covenant or the church under the New Covenant (e.g., Jeremiah 31:3-34). In other words, there are those moral and ethical promises and stipulations for life in this world under God's sovereignty as our Creator (i.e., in the Noahic covenant) and there are *separate* commandments and promises for life in the kingdom of God under Jesus Christ as our Redeemer and King (i.e., the New Covenant).[1]

While it is commonly thought guidance for how Christians should navigate their lives in this world can be found in the Mosaic or New Covenant stipulations, that guidance is so tied to the life of God's redeemed people that it cannot and should not be applied more broadly, e.g., voting or civil law. It is not needed as God has given guidance in the covenant text in Genesis 9.[2]

The Noahic Covenant and Its Enterprises

The text of that covenant is found in Genesis 9:1-7:

[1]And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. [2]The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. [3]Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. [4]But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. [5]And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. [6]"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God

[1] It is not the purpose of this essay to defend these statements which amount to a claim to follow the historic, Reformed Two-Kingdoms doctrine. For that defense, consider David VanDrunen, *Life in God's Two Kingdoms*.
[2] More guidance is found in, for example, Jeremiah 29:4-7, Romans 13:1-8 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

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made man in his own image. [7]And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."

What is written in Genesis 9, as a covenant of the earth's preservation and development, is for all men at all times (9:12, 15).[3] In these verses, the Lord speaks to Noah as the new fountainhead of humanity.[4] In sum, this text speaks to mankind's **civic responsibility**, that is, as specific people in specific times and places, we have developmental and maintenance obligations to those times and places.[5] As humans, ours is the role to build, reform, develop and maintain creation.

This is not to be minimized. In America, voting is one of the ways God has given us to heed these covenantal obligations. Not every citizen of every nation works out his covenantal obligations this way; some have no right to vote and must find other ways to obey the charge. To trivialize or fail to vote to shape our government is to reject or minimize our developmental and maintenance obligations to our country. It may be appropriate to call this neglect "sin."[6]

Dr. David VanDrunen explains these obligations can be captured using the language of "enterprises." In the covenant text there are three:

1. Verses 1 and 7: family enterprise.
2. Verses 2-4: sustenance enterprise.
3. Verses 5-7: judicial enterprise.[7]

An "enterprise" is the core obligation found in the covenant language plus all that is required to meet it. For example, to "be fruitful and multiply" necessarily requires marriage, home development, commerce, vocation, medicine and schools. In America, we have the constitutional right to directly participate in these society-developing enterprises in many ways that includes by voting. This isn't a uniquely Christian privilege. In fact, it isn't a Christian privilege at all—it is an American one.[8]

A Christian Approach to Civic Duty

Based on the Noahic covenant, we have civic responsibilities and in America that includes voting. I also asserted this is not a uniquely Christian obligation but belongs to all citizens of this country. Are there, however, Christian principles to guide our voting? Happily, the answer is "Yes." Importantly, the Bible is silent on whether a political party should be the choice of *every* Christian *every* time. However, with what the Noahic covenant outlines as our civic responsibilities, some parties may more closely allow us to fulfill those while others may not.[9]

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[3] Meredith G. Kline, *Genesis: A New Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen Publishers; 2016), 40-42.
[4] That is, he and his family are the "seeds" of humanity rescued from the deluge. It is for this reason we read similar commands given to Noah and his family as were given to Adam and Eve.
[5] The terms "developmental" and "maintenance" are terms I believe summarize what is directly commanded in the Noahic covenant as well as what is implicitly required.
[6] I am cautious about calling a failure to vote sin. Similarly, failure to "be fruitful and multiply" might be sin or it might have other causes. In America, voting is a means of the development and maintenance of our culture that is tied to what is revealed in the Noahic covenant and it is inconsistent to that covenant to fail to participate.
[7] David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing; 2020), 83-84. Much of what I write here are applications of what VanDrunen has written in *Politics* as well as *Life in God's Two Kingdoms, The Biblical Basis for Natural Law*, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* and *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*.
[8] Simply put, our Constitution authorizes us to do this.
[9] Because of the complexities in fulfilling our civic responsibilities in this fallen world, one party may allow us to do one while not another. For example, we are to marry and build families. Therefore a party whose platform makes that harder rather than easier will have a strike against it.

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Sojourners not citizens

"Who are we *in* this place?" While we have civic responsibilities in our local places, we do not stop being Christian when we do these responsibilities. Does the Bible tell us something specific about who we are as citizens of heaven *and* of America?

The apostle Peter writes this (1 Peter 2:11), "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." Peter's readers were Christians scattered all over the known world. He called them, "sojourners and exiles." However, he was not speaking in purely physical terms; spiritually speaking, while they lived in certain places, they did not belong to their local places as citizens.

As a result, he exhorts Christians to abstain from the passions of the flesh because those passions wage war against our souls. Why? The flesh and its passions are part of a "country" where his recipients were not citizens. In other words, Christians are citizens of the land of heaven and that land doesn't include the passions of the flesh.[10] Therefore, though we are legal citizens of America, spiritually (and eternally) we are only sojourners here. This informs how we must think about our presence in America.

Sojourner. A "sojourner" is one who is passing through but as a foreigner. He lodges in a place but that place is not his home.[11] He patronizes businesses in that place. A long term sojourner would marry and raise a family in that place. He would learn the language and the customs and seek to prosper there all the while as a foreigner.[12]

Exiles. Peter goes on to call the people of God "exiles." The meaning of this term is closely linked to the first one.[13] Whereas a sojourner is a foreigner, the exile is one who is only present in a place for a short time. The word is also translated as "stranger;" someone who is in one place so little a time that he never gets classified as anything other than a stranger to those who live there.

These two terms tell us something important about our physical presence in America. Our engagement in the affairs of America has to be as foreigners living here for only a short time. Our city is not here (Hebrews 13:14); we are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). This is how the people of God have always lived (Hebrews 11:13-14). That city holding our citizenship is not Raleigh, NC or Washington D.C. It is not to be found in America at all. Therefore, when we enter the voting booth, we do so as those who are temporary foreigners, even strangers, to this place.

Session 2

What are we here to do?

If we are citizens of heaven, then why invest any time at all in the affairs of America? Consider a hypothetical: if you were to go to Norway and live there for an extended time and then you were given the privilege of voting in an election for a local official there, what would you do? In

[10] Dan Doriani, *1 Peter* (Philipsburg, NJ; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2014), 79. Paul explains in Ephesians 2 we are raised with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenlies (2:6).
[11] The Greek word for "sojourner" Peter uses literally means "one who is outside / beside the house."
[12] The foremost biblical example is Abraham. Promised a land that did not yet belong to him, he wandered through the Middle East not belonging to the peoples among whom he settled. Likewise, the exiled Jews in Babylon were sojourners in Babylon.
[13] The Greek term for this includes even more separation as it describes one who is "out apart from the people."

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a very real sense, these aren't your people, this isn't your town and one day you'll go back to your homeland. Yet you are given the vote—what would you do? Noah would say, "Vote!" Would you say to a resident, "I know you have given me this privilege but I cannot since I am not from here"? Could they not say, "You live among us; your wife is one of our sisters; your children play in our market. How can you not participate in this privilege to seek the good of this place that you, too, enjoy?"

We are sojourners and exiles in America and our civic task is not building the kingdom of God but rather developing and maintaining our local place for the good of our local people.[14] If we are voting for a more just, ordered society then we are performing our role as both citizen of America and sojourner from heaven.[15] We don't go into the voting booth to turn America into ancient Israel or the New Jerusalem.[16]

This is where we must remember we have civic responsibilities as citizens of America that are quite apart from our responsibilities as citizens of heaven. It is part of our obedience to the Lord (of the covenant with Noah) that we engage in the work needed to develop and maintain this nation. For our duties that come from the Noahic covenant, the fact that we are sojourners and aliens is not relevant. What is relevant, however, is asking, "What enterprises need to be developed so that this place will flourish?" "How can I vote in such a way that the most people are helped?" Human flourishing—to the extent that it can be accomplished in this fallen world—should be the aim of every Christian *for* every person in this nation.

<u>What about our expectations?</u>

If we are not trying to turn America into the New Jerusalem, then how do we proceed? Let's turn to Jeremiah's letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (29:5-7).

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In the first few verses, God reminded them of their civic responsibilities that is, to develop and maintain the city of Babylon with their Babylonian neighbors.[17]

[14] Of course evangelism and apologetics are never off the table but they have no place in the voting booth!
[15] See David VanDrunen, *Politics After Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing; 2020), 150-176.
[16] Some might ask if it would be better to see life in America more representative of what is in the Bible? Of course the question is, "Where in the Bible?" Is the Mosaic theocracy our model? And from where in Scripture are we told that it is? Was not the theocracy ended at Calvary and finally in AD 70? Didn't Jesus explain to Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36)?
[17] It is very telling that the exiles are given no instructions to take back the city for Jehovah. In part because this isn't needed: it already belongs to Him as the Creator of all things—back to the Noahic covenant!

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But then—two verses later (Jeremiah 29:10)—he wrote them this:

For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

Here, God gave them appropriate expectations so that they didn't lose their sense of being sojourners and exiles there: after 70 years, He would return them to Israel. This should've given them a sense that their labors in Babylon were important but provisional. Before God, they had responsibilities to make lives in Babylon but with the understanding that they weren't permanent: they didn't give up their real citizenship in the Promised Land.[18] This set of instructions simply restates in a context appropriate way, the instructions God gave directly to Noah. Let's draw some expectations from them that we can apply to our own context.

1. Our earthly place is temporary.

That is to say, like the Jews in Babylon, our time in America will end and we will be taken to our Promised Land, the New Jerusalem. In Jeremiah 29:10, the people were informed to work diligently but provisionally, temporarily. So also this is how much zeal we put into our efforts to develop and maintain America. The Noahic covenant won't allow half-hearted efforts, to be sure, but as we pursue our vocation and culture development, we do it as those whose lives will shortly end and our efforts with it.

2. Our national or civic life is common to all of us.

Babylonian or Hebrew, Christian or non-Christian alike: no matter our religious belief and practice, we all live in America and we all share responsibility to develop and maintain it. The Noahic covenant does not make religious distinctions in giving its civic responsibilities.

3. All must work together to build and develop for all.

Each of us has to work in our local places for our family and all the other families around us. The enterprises that come in the covenant are communal—our human obligation transcends our "tribe." The Jews in Babylon were told:

> *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

They were to be seeking the welfare of Babylon for its own sake. They were even to pray to the Lord that He would bring benefit and prosperity to it. God is not disinterested in the affairs of our nation nor can we ignore its condition.

4. However involved we are in building America, as sojourners here we must remain detached.

Paul gives this instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31:

> *This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.*

Paul explains here that in the last days we must live as detached civic citizens. "Detached" simply means we are not consumed or over-interested in the things of our nation. We should

[18] As we see with Daniel and his three colleagues (and Esther), they didn't lose sight of their true citizenship acting as if they weren't truly Hebrews.

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strive to develop and maintain a culture in this country that is consistent with the principles found in the covenant with Noah—principles that will lead to human flourishing.[19] Yet, we cannot put too much hope in what we build; indeed, if what we build fails, we must not be undone but simply resolve to try something else.

5. All improvement will fall short because of sin.

We can only do so much in this fallen world. Sin will never be eradicated from our souls and from our culture. We may strive after fair taxation, solid education, creation stewardship, sanctity of life and protected marriages but in the end we can only do so much. Sin is present in each of us. Sinners have created systems that aren't perfect or worse are structurally imperfect and discriminatory. There is injustice that cannot be overcome. There are pro-death policies some strongly hold. Too often we give sanctuary to criminals. People are strongly committed to their own prosperity, health and happiness at the cost of others. These things will never *fully* change.

6. The good done here will be the only good an unbeliever will ever know.

In Genesis 17, Abraham struggles he will have a son so he entreats the Lord to make Ishmael the son of promise. God refuses but He does say this:

> *As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.*

This text states what we've seen in Jeremiah 29: God cares about the nations of the world. He cares so much that He blesses them with prosperity and happiness in this life. He gives them rain for their crops (Matthew 5:45). He allows them to develop culture so that it provides for them (e.g., iron-works; Genesis 4:22). He made a covenant with all of creation that the days would not end (Genesis 8:22) so all nations could be fruitful and multiply.

As Christians, we must develop and maintain culture, creating the environment for families to thrive, not simply for our own good but for the good of those who will never know the blessed home of Heaven. Have we ever considered that love for our neighbor means we vote for policies that will not make him a slave to heavy taxation or burdensome regulation or his children exposed to lewdness and confusion in schools? That we would vote for policies that didn't cause them to have to take out loans for groceries? This is not our city but it certainly is the only good a non-Christian will ever know—shall we not work to make it as good as we can for him?

7. Our allegiance is ultimately to the Lord.

As fellow humans with those outside the Christian faith, the Noahic covenant binds us to develop and maintain culture. Yet, the new covenant in Christ also binds us to build the kingdom of God. Indeed, this work takes priority over our developmental, culture-building work.[20]

Due to sin in this world, there will be times when those who live in this world but who are not of the next will attempt to require Christians to betray our allegiance to the Lord. An example of this is found in Acts 5. The religious authorities put the apostles in public prison for

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[19] These principles are those that any culture could embrace and appropriate based on their context: fruitfulness (9:1), just use of creation (9:2-4) and justice (9:5-6). See also Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing; 20010, 143-145; Meredith G. Kline, *Genesis,* 40-42.

[20] Priority in the sense that its impact and its scope is eternal. There are times in every Christian's life where he finds he must spend more time in vocation than in ministry. Yet, this should not be the norm.

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teaching publicly about Jesus. While their intent in doing this would seem to be a religious one, the authority's actual commitment was to hold on to their power and influence—a worldly concern. Freed by an angel, the apostles returned to teaching as they had been. They were called before the council and again told to refrain from teaching in the name of the Lord. Their response is instructive:

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men…."

The principle is simply this: if Christians are building the church through the means of grace and we are told we cannot by agents of the culture, we must refuse out of allegiance to the Lord. The religious leaders were asking the apostles to refrain from preaching because the leaders were concerned about its potential impact on their standing in the society of Jerusalem. Their fears included being confronted by the Roman authorities and potentially stripped of their freedom and their influence. What those in the world want to safeguard with others in the world is not our concern.[21]

8. We cannot violate our consciences.

As with approaches to abortion, for example, it is clear a similar kind of complexity is found in immigration policy, tax policy, environmental policy, etc. When Christians find themselves opposed to each other on these policies, how is that conflict to be adjudicated? Or, rather, is there a "Christian" way to vote? The Bible provides no explicit guidance in these matters.[22] However, God has given us a way to decide for ourselves how we must vote or act: conscience.

In Romans 14, the apostle Paul explains there are matters in life not addressed in God's word. In deciding how to act, one may appeal to his conscience. Indeed, one must follow conscience or risk committing sin against the Lord (Romans 14:23). In the realm of culture development and maintenance, the issues can be far more complex yet their adjudication can be as simple as petitioning one's conscience. If the issue is not a clear violation of biblical teaching, he should ask himself what decision is supported by conscience and will add to the development and maintenance of his local place?

Christians will disagree on issues of policy. Christians may not understand the reasons a brother or sister votes a certain way. In the absence of clear biblical teaching, a Christian's conscience—not the pressure from others—must be his guide for God will call each of us account for how we lived including how often we violated our consciences.[23]

Session 3

Principles to Guide Voting

[21] Acts 4 contains a similar example. The apostles healed a lame beggar and proceeded to use the opportunity for preaching for which they were detained by the religious leaders. They were enjoined to cease their preaching to which they said, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

[22] It does provide basic principles: murder is sin, the foreigner / widow / orphan should be cared for; we must steward creation, etc. However, the ways in which we obey these principles is not always laid out.

[23] A Christian's conscience—to accurately evaluate options in voting—must be informed by God's word. Certainly the stipulations of the Noahic covenant, but also places like Romans 13:1-7, James 1:26-27, Ecclesiastes, etc. The conscience uninformed by God's word will make decisions more in line with the dictates of the old man rather than the redeemed one.

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The basis of this instruction is God's covenant with Noah.[24] As we might have noticed from the text of Noah, the instructions are broad and few.[25] What follows are modest deductions from the Noahic covenant. Not all these principles are equal morally nor it is always clear how to pursue such policies. Again, at points, Christians will disagree and, while discussion is warranted, in the end a conscience informed by God's word and His church must be our guide.

<u>The Family Enterprise (Genesis 9:1, 7).</u>

The Goal: Family fruitfulness. This would include policies that:

1. Support marriage between men and women only (which is the basis of procreation).
2. Don't encourage or reward sexual activity outside of marriage (which creates spiritual and emotional trouble, hardships on single parents, encourages abortion or welfare).
3. Don't inhibit child-bearing / rearing through taxation, climate or welfare policies.
4. Protect the lives of children through all stages of life.
5. Promote public education that teaches for human flourishing (e.g., a classic liberal education).
6. Empower parental choice in education suitable to their circumstance.
7. Support welfare-to-work programs that don't promote long-term welfare receipt.
8. Inhibit government expansion into areas that would threaten the prosperity of the nuclear family (e.g., areas that demand exorbitant taxation or promote hyper-regulation).
9. Promote access to affordable health care.
10. Encourage care for disadvantaged children (e.g., efficient foster care and adoption).
11. Encourage home development (purchasing or leasing).
12. Encourage legal and efficient immigration.

[24] It is very important to remember these suggestions are not tied to the gospel but rather to God's dealings with all mankind through Noah's covenant. In other words, these principles would guide Christian and non-Christian alike into more fruitful flourishing in America.

[25] What might that mean? God is leaving the working out of our adherence to the covenant in ways specific to different times and places. That is, He has given broad instruction while allowing mankind to work it out how he sees fit in each age and place.

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The "Sustenance" Enterprise (Genesis 9:2-4).

The Goal: Creation stewardship. This would include policies that:

1. Don't inhibit the use of sea, land animals or crops for food.
2. Discourage manipulation or waste of land.
3. Don't punish or inhibit the development of land for family-supporting industry.
4. Make land ownership possible for more people.
5. Support ethical and moral scientific discovery.
6. Support ordered access to voting.
7. Discourage the use of eminent domain.
8. Encourage restricted taxation.
9. Discourage predatory lending.
10. Encourage balanced budgets in governments.
11. Support farm development and goods delivery to market.
12. Discourage monopolizing efforts of large companies.
13. Encourage entrepreneurship and business development.
14. Encourage life advancing technologies.
15. Inhibit the exploitation of workers (especially regarding keeping the family intact).
16. Punish greed or cronyism in industry and government.
17. Inhibit the exploitation of natural resources.
18. Provide for the common defense.
19. Promote appropriately regulated free enterprise.

The Judicial Enterprise (Genesis 9:5-6).

The Goal: Proportionate Retributive Justice. This would include policies that:

1. Promote protection versus perfection of the populace.[26]
2. Make affordable arbitration and mediation more accessible.
3. Don't reward criminal behavior (e.g., selective law enforcement, insanity defense).
4. Assist in the quick and proportionate punishment of criminal behavior.
5. Support qualified public representation.
6. Discourage plea bargaining for crimes that pose safety or health hazards to the public.
7. Discourage excessive litigation.
8. Seek to keep families intact.

[26] VanDrunen, *Politics*, 109. "Perfectionism claims that the 'task of the state is to promote virtue in its citizens,' while protectionism holds that the 'task of the state is to protect citizens from being wronged.'"

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9. Seek to punish the abuse of children and other resource-less people.
10. Empower law enforcement to pursue criminals.
11. Require the impartial application of law.
12. Allow local adjudication of issues through local laws.

As we can see, God's word gives clear but general guidance on how to order societies for the benefit of mankind. To pursue policies, laws and regulations that support the three great enterprises is work that can be done by Christian and non-Christian alike.

Yet, in many of these ways, there are different means of approaching the problems. Humility should be our attitude to others who have different ideas of what makes a flourishing nation. To be clear, however, policies that violate the ethic of the Noahic covenant[27] are not appropriate to pursue as they will not lead to human flourishing.[28]

[27] And, for the Christian, those that impinge upon building the kingdom of God by the means of God.
[28] One might ask how to rank these principles? It would seem to me that those that safeguard marriage and child-bearing would be more foundational than reforming plea bargaining procedures, for example. As the nuclear family is central in both Genesis 1 and the Noahic covenant, those principles that serve to threaten the family's existence and well-being seem to be more important than other considerations.

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