Checks and Balances
Lesson One: Government and the Executive Branch

What is a government? Let’s take a look at the definition of government. Oh, not in today’s dictionary. Let’s travel back in history and use Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828:

**Government**, n. Direction; regulation. These precepts will serve for the government of our conduct.

1. Control; restraint . . .
2. The exercise of authority; direction, and restraint exercised over the actions of men in communities, societies, or states; the administration of public affairs, according to established constitution, laws, and usages . . .
3. The exercise of authority by a parent . . .
4. The system of polity in a state; that form of fundamental rules and principles by which a nation or state is governed, or by which individual members of a body politic are to regulate their social actions; a constitution, either written or unwritten, by which the rights and duties of citizens and public officers are prescribed and defined . . .

**Discussion**

Let’s discuss some of the great principles found in these definitions.

1. Where does government first start? That’s right—in the direction, regulation, control, and restraint in our own life.
2. Where should the precepts for our own self-government come from? Right again—God’s Word! Parents have the responsibility to teach and train their children in these precepts (Deut. 6:7) and govern their children well.

“The most perfect maxims and examples for regulating your social conduct and domestic economy, as well as the best rules of morality and religion, are to be found in the Bible . . . The moral principles and precepts found in the scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. These principles and precepts have truth, immutable truth, for their foundation . . . All the evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible . . . For instruction then in social, religious and civil duties resort to the Scriptures for the best precepts.”

Noah Webster

Christian self-government begins internally with our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and habits. Our self-government shows externally through our actions and words.
“He knows not how to rule a kingdome, that cannot manage a Province; nor can he wield a Province, that cannot order a City; nor he order a City, that knows not how to Regulate a Village; nor he a Village, that cannot guide a Family, nor can that man Govern well a Family that knows not how to Governe himself: neither can any Govern himself unless his reason be Lord, Will and Appetite her Vassals: nor can Reason rule unless her selfe be ruled by God, and (wholy) be obedient to Him.”

Hugo Grotius

Branches and Levels of Government

Federal Government

The federal government has three branches. These three branches are the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch.

The men who founded our nation had the foresight to realize that if one person has all of the control and authority, it could leave the door open for an abuse of power. They wanted to form a system that divided the power evenly between the three branches. They felt that this would provide a system of checks and balances; if one branch acted in a way that the other branches felt was against the Constitution, another branch could push for the decision to be amended.

Let’s take a look at each individual branch and discuss its responsibilities.

The Executive Branch

The executive branch is led by the President of the United States. The biggest of the three, this branch signs the laws that are passed in Congress, makes sure that the laws are enforced, is in charge of national defense, and more! Let’s take a look at who makes up this branch of the government.

President

Do you know how we decide who our next President will be? We have an election. The President of the United States is determined by the votes of the Electoral College. Sometimes it is hard to understand how the Electoral College works, but the simplified explanation is this: Each state is given a particular number of electoral votes, depending on the number of representatives the state has in Congress. Some states may have fifty or more electoral votes, while other states might have fewer than ten votes.

When we vote during a Presidential election, our votes are tallied with all of the other votes in our state. After the state determines who won the most votes in that state, its electoral votes are given to the nominee who won the majority of the votes. Once the electoral votes are all added up, we know who will be our President for the next four years. The President is allowed to serve two four-year terms in his lifetime.

There are certain qualifications that a Presidential candidate must have in order to run for office.
He or she must:
- Be at least 35 years old.
- Be a natural-born citizen of the United States.
- Have lived in the United States for at least 14 years.

The President of the United States has many responsibilities. One of his jobs is to sign bills into laws. When Congress passes a bill, the President can sign it to make it an official law. He can also decide to veto a bill if he does not believe that it is the best decision for the country. To veto a bill means to cancel it.

Signing and vetoing bills is not the only thing that the President does. He is also the Commander in Chief of the United States military. The President, as Commander in Chief, has the highest rank in the military. He can make decisions concerning the military, but he makes decisions primarily based on recommendations made by the Secretary of Defense. The Secretary of Defense is part of the President’s Cabinet. The Cabinet is made up of people who lead the various departments within the executive branch.

Pretend you have just been elected President of the United States. What do you think would be the best part about your job? What would be the hardest thing about your job? Write one-two paragraphs describing the highs and lows of being the President.

Vice President

The Vice President is the first person in line to become President if the sitting President cannot finish his term for any reason. Because of the possibility of him becoming President, a Vice Presidential candidate has the same eligibility requirements as a Presidential candidate:
- He must be at least 35 years old.
- He must be a natural-born citizen of the United States.
- He must have lived in the United States for at least 14 years.

The Vice President has another main task to perform. He is the President of the Senate. Because there are 100 Senate members, it is possible to have a tie vote. If this happens, the President of the Senate casts the tie-breaking vote.

Departments

There are many departments that fall under the executive branch of the government. You can click on the links below to learn about the individual departments:

- Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- Department of Commerce (DOC)
- Department of Defense (DOD)
- Department of Education (ED)
- Department of Energy (DOE)
- Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Questions and Activities

Why is Christian self-government important in one’s life?

Why should Christian self-government be important to the citizens of the United States?

*Of Plymouth Plantation*, Governor William Bradford’s journal, provides a first-hand account of the Pilgrim’s adventure. Discover how this small band of separatists lived out Biblical principles in their daily lives and trials, and how God used them to lay a firm foundation for self-government in America. It is a must-read and is available online.

2. Rosalie Slater, Teaching and Learning America’s Christian History (Chesapeake, VA: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1999), pg. 186
Lapbook Beginnings

Lapbooking is a fun way to ensure that your children are really learning the material they are studying. The lapbooking activities we include here are just meant to provide a “jumping-off point” for your family to start with. Be sure to visit the links below for more ideas and helps in building your lapbook.

http://www.homeschoolshare.com/lapbooking_resources.php
http://www.lapbooklessons.com
http://www.handsofachild.com

Presidential Qualifications

What are the qualifications that a person must have to run for President? Cut out the two circles below. From the top circle, cut out the “window.” Lay that piece on top of the other circle and fasten them together with a brass brad. In the window on the blank paper, write one qualification that a candidate must meet. Then, rotate the bottom circle until the window is empty again and repeat with another qualification. Continue to do this with each blank space until you have each qualification written in.

Cut out the pocket. Put a drop of glue on each tab, and glue the pocket to the lapbook. When the glue has dried, use it to hold your “Presidential Qualifications” wheel.
Presidential Qualifications