

Problems in AMERICAN HISTORY

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The Christian's Duty to Resist Tyrannical Rulers

The views expressed by Christopher Goodman in 1558 were brought to America by the English Puritans and revived whenever the safety of the community seemed to be threatened by ungodly rulers. In 1689, for example, when New Englanders ejected Governor Edmund Andros, the ministers did not hesitate to call God's blessing upon them for doing so. In 1750, the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew spelled out the philosophy of revolt to Bostonians in a sermon from which the following excerpts are taken. It was preached on the 101st anniversary of the execution of Charles I. The reader may wish to ask whether Mayhew differs at all from Goodman in his notion of when God will approve rebellion.⁴

The apostle's doctrine, in the passage thus explained (Romans, chapter XIII, verses 1-8), concerning the office of civil rulers, and the duty of subjects, may be summed up in the following observations, viz.

That the end of magistracy is the good of civil society, as such.

That civil rulers, as such, are the ordinance and ministers of God; it being by his permission and providence that any bear rule, and agreeable to his will that there should be some persons vested with authority in society, for the well-being of it.

That which is here said concerning civil rulers extends to all of them in common: it relates indifferently to monarchical, republican, and aristocratical government, and to all other forms which truly answer the sole end of government, the happiness of society; and to all the different degrees of authority in any particular state; to inferior officers no less than to the supreme.

* That disobedience to civil rulers in the due exercise of their authority, is not merely a political sin, but a heinous offence against God and religion.

That the (true ground and reason) of our obligation to be subject to the higher powers, is the (usefulness of magistracy (when properly exercised) to human society, and its subserviency to the general welfare.)

That (obedience) to civil rulers is here equally (required) under all forms of government (which answer the sole end) of all government, the (good of society; and to every degree of authority, in any state, whether supreme or subordinate. From whence it follows:

That if unlimited (obedience) and non-resistance be here (required) as a (duty) under any one form of government, it is also required as a duty under all other forms, and as a duty to subordinate rulers as well as to the supreme.

And, lastly, that those civil rulers to whom the apostle enjoins subjection are the persons in possession; the powers that be; those who are actually vested with authority.

There is one very important and interesting point which remains to be inquired into, namely, the (extent of that subjection to the higher powers, which is here enjoined as a (duty upon all Christians.) Some have thought it warrantable and glorious to disobey the civil powers in certain circumstances, and in cases of very great and general oppression, when humble remonstrances fail of having any effect; and when the public welfare cannot be otherwise provided for and secured, to rise unanimously even against the sovereign himself, in order to redress their grievances; to vindicate their natural and legal rights; to break the yoke of tyranny, and free themselves and posterity from inglorious servitude and ruin. It is upon this principle that many royal oppressors have been driven from their thrones into banishment, and many slain by the hands of their subjects. It was upon this principle that Tarquin was expelled from Rome; and Julius Caesar, the conqueror of the world and the tyrant of his country, cut off in the senate-house. It was upon this principle, that King Charles I was (beheaded) before his own banqueting-house. It was upon this principle that King James II was made to (fly) that country which he aimed at enslaving; and upon this principle was that revolution brought about which has been so fruitful of happy consequences to Great Britain.

But, in opposition to this principle, it has often been asserted that the (scripture) in general (and the passage under consideration in particular) makes all resistance to princes a crime, in any case whatever. If they turn tyrants, and become the common oppressors of those whose welfare they ought to regard with a paternal affection, we must not pretend to right ourselves, unless it be by prayers and tears and humble entreaties. And if these methods fail of procuring redress, we must not have recourse to any other, but all suffer ourselves to be robbed and butchered at the pleasure of the Lord's anointed; lest we should incur the sin of rebellion and the punishment of damnation. For he has God's authority and commission to bear him out in the worst of crimes, so far that he may not be withstood or controlled. Now whether we are obliged to yield such an absolute submission to our prince; or whether disobedience and resistance may not be justifiable in some cases, notwithstanding anything in the passage before us, is an inquiry in which we are all concerned; and this is the inquiry which is the main design of the present discourse. . . .

I now add, further, that the (apostle's argument) is so far from proving it to be the duty of people to obey, and submit to, such rulers as (act) in contradiction to the public good,* and so to the design of their office, that it (proves the direct contrary). For, please to observe, that if the end of all civil government be the good of society; if this be the thing that is aimed at in constituting civil rulers; and if the motive and argument for submission to government, (be taken from the apparent usefulness of civil authority, it follows, that when no such good end can be answered by submission,) there remains (no argument) or motive to enforce it; if, instead of this good end's being brought about by submission, a (contrary end) is brought about, and the ruin and misery of society effected by it, here is a plain and positive reason against submission in all such cases, should they ever happen.

And therefore, in such cases, a regard to the public welfare ought to make us withhold from our rulers, that obedience and submission which it would otherwise be our duty to render to them. If it be our duty, for example, to obey our king merely for this reason, that he rules for the public welfare (which is the only argument the apostle makes use of), it follows, by a parity of reason, that when he turns tyrant, and makes his subjects his prey to devour and destroy, instead of his charge to defend and cherish, we are bound to throw off our allegiance to him, and to resist; and that according to the tenor of the apostle's argument in this passage. (Not to discontinue our allegiance, in this case, would be to join with the sovereign in promoting the slavery and misery of that society, the welfare of which we ourselves, as well as our sovereign, are indispensably obliged to secure and promote, as far as in us lies. It is true the apostle puts no case of such a tyrannical prince; but by his grounding his argument for submission wholly upon the good of civil society, it is plain he implicitly authorizes, and even requires us to make resistance, whenever this shall be necessary to the public safety and happiness.)

* This does not intend their acting so in a few particular instances, which the best of rulers may do through mistake, etc., but their acting so habitually; and in a manner which plainly shows that they aim at making themselves great by the ruin of their subjects [Mayhew's note].