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Towards a Reformed-Evangelical
Social Renaissance

Saturday, January 21, 2006

Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God

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Several people have asked me on the nature of a Christian's duty to a social government when that government is in violation both of God's law and the law of the land. This is an attempt on my part to answer this question. Much more could be written. I will humbly entertain your questions and criticisms. Please note that I have, and I am not boasting, the entire Reformed political theory on my side. Since I know most Calvinists worship their ancestors, I figured this was a pretty good trump card. Seriously, these ideas are not new and were the driving motivation of our Reformed and American forefathers. We shun such thinking in our day because we have never known true freedom. There is much more I could have written.

When is a just revolution allowable?

This issue has often been in the forefront of Protestant Christianity. Beginning with Calvin, Protestants have maintained since God is sovereign, man is not. More precisely: Man's sovereignty is only that of a limited sort. Furthermore, since all men are sinful and totally depraved, no one man or institution can be trusted with absolute power. There should be, if you will, a system of checks and balances. As Americans we are familiar with this line of reasoning, but there is another method of checking a magistrate's power that often goes unsaid: constitutionalism. I will argue in this paper that there is a Law above the law. This Law (best summarized in God's written revelation to mankind) will function as the standard of right and wrong in judging civil policies and rulers. At the end of the essay I will attempt to answer objections to this line of reasoning.

Biblical Considerations

The verse most often cited in these passages is Romans 13. Since I, and others better than myself have debated this issue often, I will forego much of the debate, except to summarize it. The objector to the line of civil resistance including armed force says that unqualified obedience is due to the civil magistrate. He will also add that this passage, conveniently, does not apply to magistrates. This line of reasoning, I maintain, is problematic on several levels. The first level is that the apostles themselves defied the civil magistrates. In Acts

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5:29 Peter and others told them, "We must obey God rather than man." Of course, in this situation Peter did not use armed force nor political leverage (although Paul was not averse to the latter). Secondly, Romans 13 has stipulations for magistrates as well. Greg Bahnsen writes, "Paul's words have definite bearing on what governments ought to do and be, [and on what citizens ought to be and do], and his words can hardly be construed as offering unqualified acceptance of every political ruler" (Bahnsen, 370). If God allows I will unpack the force of this statement later.

I will go ahead and address one criticism now (and perhaps devote more attention to it on my section "Ethical Considerations," which will not be in this paper due to time and space limitations). People will point out, "Paul did not advocate armed resistance. We have no record of the persecuted New Testament church violently resisting pagan Rome." To be fair, on one level they are right. However, the nature of theology is that it progresses (the standard by which is how biblically faithful it is becoming) in its understanding of how to apply biblical principles to modern day circumstances. I will say it another way: Given the legal and socio-political conditions of the first-century, the Roman Christians could not have resisted via armed force. However, it is naive and anachronistic at best, irresponsible at worst, to suppose that we live in the first-century today and that these changing social conditions are normative for us.

A. Morality is absolute and never changes. However, our applications of moral systems do change. We are called to be good citizens. For the Roman Christians this meant obedience to Caesar. As American citizens we are called to be obedient to the civil magistrates as well. (And I will steal a little of my thunder and introduce my main argument).

B. The question then becomes: When Caesar's law requires me to break the Law of the land (while not necessarily exclusive of biblical law, it can be and often is distinct from it), to whom do I owe obedience? That will be the argument of the next section.

C. Grant me Premise B, then I can argue that resisting Caesar (and I will develop this below) is actually obeying Romans 13.

Lex Rex or Rex Lex?

Is the Law above the King or is the King above the Law? Is there a standard by which to determine whether a magistrate is right or wrong? John Knox taught that a civil government is covenantal, or federal, i.e., based on a series of covenants that define its authority, functions, powers, and limitations.

(1) The civil magistrate is in covenant with God promising to rule according to His revealed law and to oppose idolatry. 2 Kings 23:1-3.

(2) The civil Magistrate is in covenant with the people promising to rule over them righteously and for their protection. 2 Chronicles 15

(3) The people are in covenant with the civil magistrate that they will submit to his righteous government, 2 Chronicles 15.

(4) The people are in covenant with God promising to be his faithful people, Exodus 34.

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(While I like the above argument, I do not expect it to win the day. I am just throwing it out for consideration.)

A Law Above the Law

Samuel Rutherford, that great Puritan defender of liberty, argued that the King is held accountable to the people (Lex Rex).

"Rutherford believed that tyrannical princes were to be resisted by the people, who represented a higher authority than the King. Since Rutherford did not believe in democracy, by people he means the REPRESENTATIVE BODY of the people, i.e., the "three estates," of the magistrates, the nobles, and the Church leaders, all of whom represented the people and who elected and controlled kings" (Morecraft, 34).

Greg Bahnsen writes, "Moreover, when there exists a condition of warfare against a wicked state, or rebellion against it is being led by lesser magistrates, or there arises an unjust and murderous regime beyond any possibility of relief or legal redress, conscientious Christians have the right to side against the State" (Bahnsen, 'Christ and Civil Government,' p. 45). Kevin Clauson expounds, "Under ordinary circumstances, Christians are to use peaceable means of persuasion and education to bring about socio-political change. This requires civil obedience insofar as possible. However, there may arise a regime beyond political or judicial correction. A godless, anti-Christian regime may come to power, which denies (or even punishes) all peaceful means of redress" (Clauson, 142-143).

Now I will play my trump card. Despite the rulings of Federal Courts, the Constitution is still the objective law of the land (granted, it has no real meaning post 1865, but I will still employ it because it is our Magna Carta and does not lose objective meaning simply because Leftist judges don't like it). The Second Amendment, famously loved and famously hated, allows for citizens to keep and bear arms. Liberals dismiss this right as merely pertaining to the government, police force, army, etc. Conservatives uphold this right as arguing for private protection. Both sides are onto a half-truth. Liberals are correct (and only moderately so) in that this right is communal in nature. Conservatives are correct in that this right provides for defense. Historically, this right pertained to the militia to protect themselves from the tyrannical advances of the State. Thomas Jefferson writes, "The strongest reason for the people to retain the right to keep and bear arms is, as a last resort, to protect themselves from the tyranny of the government" (quoted in Walter Williams, "To Keep and Bear Arms," The Washington Times, April 1, 2000, p. A10). Therefore, the Law of the land allows for Christians in America--remember we must apply our ethical systems, insofar as they are biblically faithful, to our modern conditions--a means of redress against ungodly and law-breaking governments.

Back to the question: Is the King above the law? King Charles Stuart I of England was executed for treasonous acts and other crimes. What is the penalty for conspiring to murder? Charles I conspired to murder on a number of counts. Is he liable? Case

closed.

The Lesser Civil Magistrate

Not just anyone can lead a revolution, however. As Christians we seek the furthering of peace and justice in the realm. It is our duty as Christians to seek the well-being of the society in which we live. This determines the conditions of resistance on the larger scale. Whenever the aim of a people is to remove a lesser magistrate, it should only be done for the good of society, when the magistrate has proven himself (or herself--Hillary 2008) a terror to the people. Therefore, a lesser civil magistrate should arise, with the support of the people, to remove the tyrannical princes from office for the re-establishing of peace and justice to the realm. The fact that the counter-political movement is led by a magistrate, although lesser, gives it the legal ground and prevents it from merely being a revolution. It is, rather, a restoration of the social order. Romans 13 is not being disobeyed. The "governing authorities," in this case the lesser magistrate, are the ones who are calling the tyrannical and lawless princes into account.

Practical Applications

So what does all this look like in real life? It is hard for 21st century Americans to consider these issues because we have been brainwashed by left-ist textbooks. The functional god of modern America is the State. Most American Christians--even genuine and honest Christians--live in terms of the State's lordship. Therefore, to even consider calling the State to account for crimes is unthinkable. What do American Christians need to do, then?

(1) We need to beg God for mercy and repent of our sins. Our country is at its darkest hour. God, however, loves for his light to shine in the darkest and we have good reason that he will do great things in our midst when our country repents. God will not raise up our lesser civil magistrates unless we repent.

(2) Study Reformation political history and the political and social conditions surrounding our Wars for Independence in our country. I only summarized the tip of the ice-berg. There is so much more.

(3) Stop whining about how liberals are destroying our country. They are, true. They will be judged harshly by God for their systematic robbing and tyrannizing of the people. Take responsibility. If Congress were filled with Evangelical pastors tomorrow, we would move further to the Left. We lack, presently, the responsibility to take and see political change in our nation.

(4) Think on the local and county level. Our country in its birth lived and died on the local level. Human government, whether in church or state, functions more effeciently on the local level. I want to write an essay in the future on the primacy of county life and norms. More practically, how dare we think we can change things in Washington if we can't even manage our own household? If our neighborhood is in shambles, why do we think we can change this country?

Posted by Baroque Norseman at 1:49 PM

5 comments:

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Awesome stuff Jacob.

By the way, thanks for the help with my paper on capital punishment.

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Super color scheme, I like it! Good job. Go on.

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