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A SERMON FROM 1776

Introductory Comments

Before we hear part of a sermon from a Congregation minister in the 1700's, you will be comforted to know that the sermon will not be two to four hours long as was the custom in those days.

Also before the sermon itself, we need to remember these things about preaching in the 1700's and its influence on the American Revolution and what followed.

No church in America had so large an influence in the War for Independence and the form of government which followed as did the Congregational Churches. Its ministry was most influential in public affairs and in politics from the beginning.

As early as 1633, in Massachusetts and 1674 in Connecticut, the practice of preaching election sermons arose. These were delivered before the governor and assembly year by year. Frequently these sermons were printed at government expense and distributed among the town and the themes were discussed and re-discussed in the pulpits throughout New England.

These sermons and others had a most important bearing on the American Revolution. One study made of preaching in the 1700's shows that most of the political philosophy which formed the basis for the revolution and the foundation for the kind of government we now have came out of the preaching of that period. The Congregational ministers continually preached the doctrine of civil liberty as taught by Sidney, Locke and Milton. Civil government, the claimed, was of divine origin. Rulers were God's delegates and derived their power from God, but not directly, as in the doctrine of the "Divine Right of Kings," but from and through the people. Furthermore these ministers maintained, if a ruler or civil official became a tyrant or did not rule justly, his government should be overthrown.

At each crisis in the ten years from 1765, the passage of the Stamp Act, to 1775, the beginning of the war, the New England pulpits thundered and dwelt more and more on the right of resistance.

Often in their sermons of this period, the ministers would take passages like the one from our Bible reading this morning and apply it to the revolution. As you will see, ofthen the arguments are long and involved. Listen then to the Reverend Jonathon Mayhew, minister of the Congregational church in Boston ---

There is this point which needs to be inquired to; namely the extent of that subjection to the higher powers which is 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 Tarquin was expelled from Rome and Julius Caesar, the conqueror of the World and the tyrant of his country, was cut off in the senate-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 Scriptures make all resistance to princes a crime in any case whatever. If they turn tyrants and become 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 annointed, 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 words of crime 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, not withstanding 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.

There is indeed one passage in the New Testament where it would seem, at first fiew, that an unlimited submission to civil rulers is enjoined --"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution." To every human institution? But by every human institution is not meant every command of the civil magistrates without exception, but rather to every ordinance or command which is not inconsistent with the ordinances and commands of God, the supreme lawgiver, or with any higher and antecedent obligations.

It will not follow that because civil government is, in general, a good institution, and necessary to the peace and happiness of human society, that therefore there are no supposable cases in which resistance to it can be innocent. So that the duty of unlimited obedience, whether active or passive, can be argued neither from the manner of expression here used nor from the general scope and design of the passage.

And if we attend to the nature of the argument with which the apostel here enforces the duty of submission to the higher powers, we shall find it be such a one as concludes not in favor of submission to all who bear the title of rulers in common, but only to those who actually perform the duty of rulers of exercising a reasonable and just authority for the good of human society.

This is a point which it would be proper to enlarge upon, because the question before us turns very much upon the truth or falsehood of this position. It is obvious then, in general, that the civil rulers whom the apostle here speaks of, and obedience to whom he presses upon Christians as a duty, are good rulers, such as are in the exercise of their office and power benefactors to society. Such they are described to be throughout this passage. Thus it is said that they are not a terror to good works, but to the evil; that they are God's ministers for good, revengers to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil, and that they attend continually upon this very thing.

It is manifest that this character and description of rulers agrees only to such as are rulers in fact as well as in name, to such as govern well, and act agreeably to their office. And the Apostle's argument for submission is wholly built and grounded upon a presumption that they do in fact answer this character, as of no force at all upon supposition to the contrary.

If rulers are a terror to good works and not to the evil; if they are not ministers for good to society, but for evil and distress by violence and oppression; if they execute wrath upon sober, peaceable persons who do their duty as members of society, and suffer rich and honorable knaves to escape with impunity; if, instead of attending continually upon the good work of advancing the public welfare-- if this be the case, it is plain that the apostle's argument for submission does not reach them. They are not the same but different persons from those whom he characterizes, and who must be obeyed according to his reasoning.

If those who bear the title of civil rulers do not perform the duty of civil rulers, but act directly counter to the sole end and design of their office; if they injure and oppress their subjects instead of defending their rights and doing them good, they have not the least pretense to be honored, obeyed and rewarded, according to the apostle's argument.

Rulers have not authority from God to do mischief. They are not God's ordinances or God's ministers, in any other sense than as it is by his permission and providence that they are exalted to bear rule, and as magistracy duly exercised and authority rightly applied in the enacting and executing good laws -- laws tempered and accommodated to the common welfare of the subjects -- must be supposed to be agreeable to the will of the beneficent Author and Supreme Lord of the Universe, whose kingdom rules over all, and whose tender mercies are over all his works.

It is blasphemy to call tyrants and oppressors God's ministers. They are more properly the messengers of Satan. No rulers are properly God's ministers but such as are just, ruling in the fear of God. When once public officials of any kind act contrary to their office and end of their institution -- when they rob and ruin the public instead of being guardians of its peace and welfare -- they immediately case to be the ordinance and ministers of God and no more deserve that glorious character than common pirates and highwaymen.

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 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; and 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 affected by it, here is a plain and positive reason against submission in all such cases.

Thus when a ruler 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.

Not to discontinue 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 indespensably 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 this 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.

For a nation thus abused to rise and resist their ruler, even to the putting him out of office is not criminal, but a reasonable way of vindicating their liberties and just rights. It would be stupid tameness and unaccountable folly for whole nations to suffer one unreasonalbe, ambitious and cruel man to wanton and riot in their misery. And in such as case, it would, of the two, be more rational to suppose that they that did not resist, than they who did, would receive to themselves damnation.