

Civil Government.

by the Reverend Professor C. F. W. Walther, D.D.

I.

Who ordained the Civil Government?

The common answer to this question is: Men ordained governments. People say: By nature every body is free, independent, his own sovereign. Only in consequence of an agreement it came about, that some rule, while others are ruled; that some have dominion, while others are subject unto them. To depose the rulers is consequently always in the power of the subjects. They claim the right of revolution as a sacred, inalienable right of all peoples. Every compulsion is styled tyranny. This they try to prove even from the Bible. The first tyrant mentioned in the Bible, they argue, was the wicked Nimrod, of whom we read Genesis 10: "He began to be a mighty one in the earth."

But this is a grave, pernicious error. God is not a God of disorder, but of order. God hath not created two complete equals. In the whole universe an infinite gradation has place. In the whole extent of creation one creature always ranks below another. The vast domain of God's world is not an incoherent mass of things and beings, but a regulated kingdom, divided into numberless provinces. At the head of all creatures we find God Himself as the King of all kings and Lord of all lords, and everywhere He has His deputies, who rule and govern clothed in His majesty. Even among the holy angels there are orders. According to the Scripture testimony there are not only angels, but also archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities and powers. Even if man had not fallen into sin, but remained in the state of innocence, yet there would have been among men leaders and led, rulers and ruled.

It is indeed true: All governments in the various commonwealths came into existence either by election, or by the given right of succession, or by conquest. *The act of investing* certain persons with governmental offices is therefore performed by men. Wherefore magistracy is called *an ordinance of man*, in the first epistle of St. Peter, chapter two, verse thirteen, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man." But what does the apostle add? He says: "*For the Lord's sake.... as the servants of God.*" What does the apostle mean to say thereby? Nothing but this:

They are men indeed, who govern you; they are also men, indeed, by whom they are placed into their offices; but the office itself, which they fill, is a divine office; the authority which they possess, is a divine authority; the name and commission, in which they rule and govern, is the name and commission of the great God; the Sovereign whose place they fill is the King of all kings, the God of all gods, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Ruler of all creatures.

That we do not deceive ourselves in this interpretation, we learn from other passages of Holy Writ, wherein this is expressed still clearer. For in the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans we read:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be, are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For he is the minister of God. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

How could the divine institution of civil government be attested more plainly? But similar expressions occur already in the Old Testament, too. Thus saith the Lord in the eighth chapter of Proverbs: "By Me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By Me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth." Thus, moreover, Daniel says in the second chapter of his prophecies, "God removeth kings, and setteth up kings."

But perhaps you will say, God did indeed set up some kings Himself, but when and where did God institute civil government as such on earth? Were they not men after all, who first introduced this order of governing powers? Where is the first person of whom God said, "This one shall be your king, this one your chief, this one your lord, this one your magistrate?" – My answer is: Who made the father a father and placed him over his son? Who made the son a son and subject to his father? Was it not the Lord God? Behold, in the paternal authority God at once gave and instituted civil government. In the divine power, which the head of a family possesses over his household, lies the root of the divine power of the fathers of a country. The commandment of God: "Thou shalt honor thy father and mother," comprises at the same time the injunction of the Lord: "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers." The first father was the

first king, the first prince, the first supreme ruler, the first magistrate within the limits of his family. In the hands of the father was originally vested the whole power wherewith magistrates are vested at any place. When Noah went out of the ark there was but one family-head, and yet God already then said, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed;" whereby God manifestly placed into the hands of the father the whole judicatory, even the very sword for the punishment of evil-doers. In agreement thereto we see that, several centuries after Noah, the family-head Abraham rules also as chief in his family, yea, carries on war with his sons and servants against an unjust and warlike king in defense of his kinsman Lot, and for this he is not reproved, but blessed by God. There is no doubt accordingly: paternal authority is the original authority of a king or chief. But when several families purpose to live together as one people, as one great society of families as it were, then the authority of a father over all members of the society must be placed in the hands of one person or of several persons. And whoever then is vested with this power, is thereby vested with divine authority; then God impresses His seal thereon, and consequently who resists this power, resists not a merely human, but God's ordinance.

True it is: God hath not ordained whether the families of a country should unite into a monarchy which means the rule of one person: or into an aristocracy which implies the rule of a privileged order; or into a republic wherein the people rule through the officers elected by themselves. But wherever any of these forms of government have been established, there it shall not be lawful to abolish the same again by violence; there they shall be held sacred; there God shall be honored in His deputies and they shall be most loyally obeyed as fathers are by their children. Therefore St. Peter exhorts us in these words:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well. As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the King. (1 Peter 2:13-17.)

Know therefore, as little as a Christian becomes free, by his Christian liberty, from obedience to

his parents, so little is he made free thereby from obedience towards his government, upon whom a part of the paternal authority is conveyed. The apostle places side by side those two admonitions. “Fear God. Honor the King.” Consequently [he] who fears God must also honor his government.

In our next [section] we shall learn that the ordinance of civil government must be held sacred also when it is in the hands of unholy and wicked persons.

II.

But here some will perhaps say in their hearts: “It is true, there must be civil governments in this world, and we owe them loyalty, too, in order that law and justice might be exercised on earth. But how? if the civil authority becomes unjust? How if the civil government uses its power not to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil and praise upon him that doeth good, but for those that do evil, and against them that do good? Must a Christian be subject also in this case?”

My answer is: If the civil government commands to do sin, to act against faith and good conscience, in such cases we must not obey; for in such cases it no longer commands in the name of Him whose minister it is; then that word of Peter obtains which he spoke to his government when it enjoined him not to teach in the name of Jesus: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” But if it does not command to sin, we always owe it obedience, [even] though [that government] itself [should] act unjustly; for God wills that His ordinance be held sacred also when it is in the hands of the unholy. This is clearly taught by St. Peter in his first epistle, chapter 2, [verses] 18-20, “Servants, be subject to your master with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward,” that is, according to the original, to the false and treacherous. – “For this is thank-worthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when, ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.” –

These words clearly state that Christians must needs be subject not only to a good and gentle government, but also to one that is froward, cunning and treacherous; not only to a pious, but also to a wicked government; not only to a just and fair, but also to an unjust and unfair government, and for conscience toward God endure without violent resistance all wrongs such a government may inflict.

For according to the Word of God the civil government does not become the civil government by its pious, just, gentle and good acts, but by the fact that it possesses, by God's ruling or permission, the power. The *power* which a government possesses, are its credentials of being ordained by God. In the thirteenth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, the holy Apostle Paul does not say (the bloody Nero being his emperor), "Be subject unto the magistrates which possess the right of authority over you," but "unto the higher powers;" and he adds, "For there is no power but of God; the powers that be," be they therefore just or unjust, "are ordained of God." As a good government is a blessing of God upon a people, thus a bad government is a divine punishment. Hence God saith to Israel in Hosea 13:11, "I gave thee a king in mine anger." Moreover God saith through Isaiah the prophet, 3:4, "And I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them." Now as we must suffer it when God punishes a country by pestilence, floods, hailstorms, failure of crops, scarcity and famine, thus we must also endure it when God afflicts a country with the rod of a tyrannical government. Also in such a government we must honor God's hand and sacred ordinance.

It is indeed true: God is no cause of sin; God cannot, therefore, either approve of the iniquities of tyrants, or demand of men, that *they* should judge the wrongs of tyrants to be right. But whilst God rejects the persons that exercise an unjust authority, he nevertheless confirms in them also His ordinance, their sacred office. When therefore the people of Israel, weary of their republican form of government, deposed their judges and desired a king, God indeed said unto Samuel the judge, "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me;" but when in consequence of this revolution Saul was to become king of the Jewish nation, God Himself confirmed unto him all royal rights and privileges, and said:

This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. And he will take your fields and your vineyards and your olive-yards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.

And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. And he will take your men-servants and your maid-servants and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants. (1 Samuel 8:11-17.)

When afterward, King Saul really became a blood-thirsty tyrant, God indeed rejected his person, but even David, whose blood and life he sought, dared not lay upon him, the anointed of God, his avenging hand. When, finally, the rebel Jeroboam, after Solomon's death, attained by rebellion to the throne of the ten tribes, God indeed proclaimed to him His judgment; but as he had attained the royal power, God Himself prohibited the tribe of Judah to dethrone him. Yea, Christ Himself said unto His judge, the most unjust that ever sat on the bench, "Thou couldest have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above" (John 19:11). If God permits anyone to attain to temporal power, it is His will that all those subjected, subject themselves to this power. The sins of tyrants God punishes in time and eternity; but their power and office He would have honored. The revolutions of peoples on earth God rejects as rebellions against heaven; but when, by revolution, a new power is created, He also confirms this and demands obedience for it.

And how could it be otherwise? Whither would we drift, if God had allowed [men] to resist every government which its subjects deem unjust? Eternal struggles, continual bloodshed, uninterrupted civil wars would rend and lacerate the nations. No one could any longer feel secure of his life, property and good name. Public peace and order, public service and public instruction, commerce and traffic, the cultivation of arts and sciences, in short every thing that is conducive to a nation's welfare, would soon come to an end. All these are indeed sometimes impeded also by a tyrannical government, but less frequently, because the most unjust government must for its own benefit have a care that its citizens and subjects be in a prosperous condition. We ask in conclusion: How could God have taken greater care for the welfare of the nations than by commanding us to be subject unto every government that has power over us?

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