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THE
OBJECT AND PRINCIPLES
OF
CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

AND THE
DUTY OF CHRISTIANS THERETO

BEING
A DISCOURSE.

PREACHED BEFORE THE
WEST BAPTIST CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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THE AUTHOR'S NOTICE.

It is due to myself, perhaps, to say that I had no intention to publish the following discourse, until requested to do so by those who heard it; and then the great difficulty was, that it was delivered extemporaneously.—But I have written it out as nearly as it was delivered, as possible. The positions therein taken, are the same identically, and also the main arguments, though not carried out with that fulness of illustration which might be desirable. But with all its imperfections, I have consented to its being published, hoping that it may do some good in the cause of truth.

A. KENYON.

DISCOURSE.

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.—I PETER, ii. 13, 14.

IT may perhaps be thought that I owe you an apology for introducing before you at this time a subject involving the duty of Christians to civil government. In answer to this, permit me to say, that of late, it has become quite common, at least in this State, for clergymen to preach on the duty of christians to support civil government, even to the taking of human life; or in other words, that it is duty to break the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But this is not my apology or the reason of my action; a desire to discharge my duty to God and my fellow christians must constitute all the apology I am capable of making or offering.

That the subject is one of great importance and delicacy, no one, I think, can doubt; and there may be questions connected with it, or supposed to be connected with it, the intricacies of which I may not now be able to pry into, or the difficulties remove. But so far as the duty of Christ's disciples is or may be concerned, the way is perfectly clear. In the further developement and discussion of the subject, I shall call your attention to the two following positions.

1. The object and principles of civil government

II. The consequent duty of Christians.

And

1st. The professed object of civil government is to do good, by securing to each individual, all his personal rights from injury or destruction by any other person or persons — To secure rights which God has given to every human being whom he has clothed with reason and immortality. It is not, (as many suppose and argue) to make or grant rights, that civil governments are set up. Our rights as men originated not in the legal enactments of States or Nations, (being anterior to all civil compacts) but with God, who gave us existence in his own blessed image.— And these rights moreover, are “inalienable;” we cannot dispose of them ourselves, much less can others deprive us of them without our consent, and not commit injustice against humanity, and usurpation against God.

In my own mind there is no doubt about the necessity and propriety of human government, although it may be imperfect and wanting in a great variety of respects. I believe there should be some regulations for society, to which there is a general and mutual assent and obligation. For without the consent of the governed, all laws are either nugatory or oppressive, and sink into a system of mere brute force. To form and adopt such laws lies with each generation; to them it belongs to adopt old laws, or frame new ones congenial to their condition and feelings. One generation cannot, consistent with natural rights, form laws binding upon the succeeding generation without their consent, when arrived at the years of discretion, unless they assume what they ought not, their own infallibility, or without denying the right or competency of each generation to act for itself. Civil government, therefore, is, in my view, based upon the mutual

consent of its subjects, for their mutual profit and security, “deriving its authority, solely from the consent of the governed.”

But I am here met with the assertion, that civil government is a “divine institution,” as founded on the nature and fitness of things, or the Jewish Theocracy. On this point I would make the following observations:

1st, If Civil government were a “divine institution” it would have assumed some specific form as revealed in the Bible. It would either bear the character of a monarchy absolute or limited, an empire or republic, &c. But there is, I believe, no special form given it in the Bible, which is not true of any ordinance therein revealed.

Again were it a “divine institution” it would not prove alternately, a blessing and a curse to the world. When civil government has been administered upon just and equitable principles, it has been a blessing—the accused have had fair and honorable trials, the poor have been shielded from the oppressions of the rich, and the weak and defenceless from the power and caprice of the strong. But when on the other hand, civil power and official dignity have been prostituted for party purposes, or for the personal aggrandizement of the ambitious, it has proved as great a scourge to mankind, as any thing else under heaven. All which is not true of any religious ordinance. There are certain great and fundamental principles of action presented in the word of God binding upon us individually and collectively; so that in the organization and execution of civil government, we have true way marks to direct our steps and regulate our action. The first is to love God supremely, and the second to love our fellow-men as ourselves, being our equals—*“all men are equal,”* and endowed with the same inalien-

able rights," and well may we all say, "*rights are rights, GOD'S ARE NO MORE—MAN'S ARE NO LESS.*"

Again it will not answer to say that as civil government is permitted it is approved; we might say the same of the introduction of sin into the world. For wise and good reasons God permitted adultery, and regulated polygamy. But does all that prove that he any where approved of either? not at all. For equally wise and good reasons, God has *permitted* civil government in all possible forms, but he no where in all the volume of inspiration, says that he approves them, nor could he, without sanctioning the greatest injustice, or supporting the most cruel oppression and revolting depravity the sun ever shown upon.

Nor does God any where in the New Testament, call upon christians to *support* government, (as is common for it to be supported) If he did, it would be equivalent to a duty to break every law of the decalogue. And who does not know that the most zealous supporters of political affairs, are in very many instances, the most unprincipled of men, daily violating God's government, in all its claims and prohibition; and that no christian can act with such men in *their* measures without sacrificing his religion to *expediency*, fraud, or political knavery. But I will pass to consider the second division of my subject.

2d. The duty of christians to civil government. The text affords unequivocal evidence of what is our duty as christians, to "submit to *every* ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." Let every soul be *subject* to the higher powers. You will perceive in a moment, that the duty is clear, what God requires is *submission and not support*. In all the sermons of D. D's., and essays of politicians which I have seen of late, there has been an obvious effort to confound submission and support, making no differ-

ance: submission may be rendered in two ways, first by obeying the dictates of the law when it requires nothing wrong, or forbids nothing right; and secondly, by suffering the consequences when the statute law could not be obeyed without violating moral law.

As Christians, we are bound by every consideration of interest and duty, to obey magistrates, when they require nothing but what is right, but farther than this our duty does not and cannot oblige us. Universal obedience to civil laws, is not required either by the law or example of Jesus Christ. Refer, if you please, to the Apostles who were imprisoned, scourged and forbid to preach Christ. What is their testimony? "Whether it be right in the sight of God, to hearken unto you *more* than unto God, judge ye." So in all cases, when obedience to, or the execution of the civil law would, at all interfere with the spirit or letter of the gospel, we are bound to disobey that civil law, let what will be the consequence. Civil government ought not, and can not legally require men, and especially christians, to break the laws of Heaven, but I ask, does it not do so? does not government require the breach of every law of the decalogue, does it not require man to kill man, christians to kill christians and sinners, and sinners to kill and send each other up to the judgment, recking in their guilt and blood?

And can christians engage in the taking of life because government says so, when God has said "thou shalt not kill?" Now I ask which is right, civil government or God? For nearly two centuries after Christ, not a single christian is known to have acted on the principles of military warfare. (1) And by

(1) "TERTULLIAN, who may be mentioned next in order of time,

the way, this fact is a good commentary upon the following passages of scripture : “ *On earth, peace, good will to men ;*” “ *Love thy neighbor as thyself ;*” “ *Do good to all men ;*” “ *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you.*” Should two rival powers command us at the same time, in different directions, our duty is to obey that power which has the highest claims ; and of course, when our rulers require any thing wrong, we are to disregard them, and obey God, however strongly expediency might urge compliance. Should the civil law forbid the exercise of charity to man, or devotion to God, every christian is bound to repudiate and disobey such law, and suffer the consequences, even unto death. Now suppose for instance, we are by the statute law required to steal, can we do it? Or to com-

strongly condemned the practice of bearing arms. I shall give one or two extracts from him on this subject. In his dissertation on the Worship of Idols, he says, ‘ Though the soldiers came to John, and received a certain form to be observed, and though the centurion believed, yet Jesus Christ, by disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier afterward ; for custom never sanctions an unlawful act.’ And, in his Soldier’s Garland, he says, ‘ Can a soldier’s life be lawful, when Christ has pronounced that he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword ? Can one who professes the peaceable doctrines of the gospel, be a soldier, when it is his duty not so much as to go to law ? And shall he who is not to revenge his own wrongs, be instrumental in bringing others into chains, imprisonment, torment, death ?’

(2) “ And as the early Christians would not enter into the armies, so there is good ground to suppose that, when they became converted there, they relinquished their profession. We find from Tertullian, in his Soldier’s Garland, that many, in his time, immediately on their conversion to Christianity, quitted the military service. We are told, also, by Archelaus, who flourished under Probus, in the year 278, that many Roman soldiers, who had embraced Christianity, after having witnessed the piety and generosity of Marcellus, immediately forsook the profession of arms. We are told, also, by Eusebius, that, about the same time, ‘ numbers laid aside a military life, and became private persons, rather than abjure their religion.’

mit adultery, or to bear false witness, can we do either and not sin? I think not, but suppose we are commanded to do all this, and even to break the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” can we do it? I answer no. Or can a saint, a minister, in obedience to any human law, arm himself with the weapons of death, go out to the slaughter, and deliberately let out of its veins the current of life, covering the earth with blood, filling the air of heaven with the groans of the wounded and dying, carrying sadness to many hearts, and send a soul unbidden to the bar of judgement? can this be done without sin?

By these remarks, you will not understand me as repudiating all government, or to say that christians should have nothing to do with it, but I do say, that christians should never *support* any law or system of laws, which is wrong or even doubtful. Even the 13th of **Romans** *does not require support but submission*, nor does it imply, that God’s people are to lay down their consciences to gratify despots or crafty politicians, but obey God, and suffer the results, submit “for conscience sake,” resist not evil; religion forbids christians using questionable means to obtain what is in itself right.

Could I justify men, or think the bible justified them in doing violence, to obtain or preserve their rights, I could wish for one grand “insurrection among the slaves of the south, that they might cry out” with Patrick Henry, “*Give me liberty or give me death,*” throw off their shackles and obtain their freedom. But I think, rather “let the potsherd of the earth, strive with the potsherd of the earth, but let christians stand aloof from all that is at all doubtful,

yea, and more, let every man leave all his wants and oppressions with God, "vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord."

Rather suffer the fires of persecution to seize upon our bodies, or the horrors of the Spanish inquisition to be practiced upon us than sin against God, or stain our hands in our brothers blood; or let our churches, villages and cities be like those of the Waldenses, than tarnish our christian profession or violate the principles of our holy religion.

"Good will to all men," should be our motto, and "love without dissimulation," the controlling sentiment of our souls. I respect "a just and equitable government, carried into effect upon humane and christian principles. I would not disobey any government, or any of its laws, unless it interfere with my higher and heaven born obligations, either to worship God, or love man. Should any civil power forbid me to do a favor to any man, whether a slave or a freeman, I ought "to do to others as I would wish to be done by,"

My conscience and that of every other man, must be left perfectly free, not only upon religion and morals, but upon all subjects, even politics. There is no aristocracy of mind or conscience, all are of right and must be free, to be what God designed them. *I claim as a man the right to think, and express my thoughts in decorous language, and every other man ought to claim and exercise the same; to sacrifice this, would be to prove recreant to our duty to God and the world. But were I or others prevented the free exercise of this, physical violence could not, as I look at the subject, be justified in obtaining or securing such rights. We should be bound both from expediency and duty, to use*

peaceable means only, and if we suffer, suffer as christians, not "as evil doers." I would say to all christians and to all men, submit to the "powers that be," unless a change can be brought about by an appeal to reason and conscience. Bear all your afflictions with patience, resigning all into the hands of God. Let us each strive to be men and women, of peace loving righteousness and truth, and hating every form of violence, and all appeals to brute force, to settle disputes. One word more, I am happy to say that the church with which I have the honor of being connected, sympathises with me in this view of the subject, ever ready to do what is right, or refuse to do what is wrong. I make this remark because the report has gone out, that we are inimical to government, but it is not so. We may, and probably do differ radically in some respects from many of our fellow citizens, (which is certainly our right to do,) but by no means are guilty of doing any thing which the word of God will condemn.

And in conclusion, let me say to all my brethren, of all parties and opinions, lay aside prejudice and prayerfully examine the New Testament upon this great question. Do not suffer the sophistry of party politicians to deceive you, or bedizen your brains, but look into the perfect law of liberty, and do the will of God, and when you find the New Testament requires you to support civil government, right or wrong, do it, or if you are in duty bound to kill, then kill, but if on the other hand, you are bound to forgive your enemies, and render submission to the powers that be, then discharge in the fear of God, your solemn duty, and may God give us all hearts of peace and love, and may he bless his truth to all. Amen.

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