

Romans 13 forbids Rebellion.

Americans have no command or promise from God to rebel against tyrannical government, even if it would infringe upon their *Second Amendment* rights, for instance.

In 1st Peter 2:13-17 the apostle Peter “exhorts all Christians to be obedient and subject to secular authorities and to keep whatever they establish, order, institute, and command that is not contrary to God, and to do it for God, whose children we are. He wants authorities to be obeyed and the common peace supported. Since not all men are believing and godly, but rather the majority is unbelieving, wicked, and wanton, God so ordained that authorities should bear the sword to punish the wicked and to protect the upright, lest men consume and destroy each other. And though by Christ we are freed from all human laws that bind the conscience, we should nevertheless obey the laws and ordinances of those in authority, insofar as they are not contrary to God, not under compulsion but voluntarily, to please God and serve our neighbor.”¹

In Romans 13:1-7 the apostle “shows the duties which every person owes the government, and in which the Christians will lead all others with a cheerful sense of duty.... Every person, without exception, within a community, state, or country is spoken of and addressed in this command. He should be subject to, submit himself willingly, without the application of force or

restraint, to the existing powers or authorities, to the persons that are invested with power, to the incumbents of the governmental office. The governmental powers vested in these people by virtue of God’s providence or permission gives them a position in which they excel us in dignity and authority; they are our superiors in the sense of the Fourth Commandment. This is expressly brought out: For there does not exist an authority except by God; but those that exist are ordained by God. If a government is actually in power, whether tyrannical or otherwise, its existence cannot be explained but by the assumption that it is due to God’s establishment, either by His providence or by His permission. It would be impossible for any government to keep evil in check if the almighty hand of God were not the sustaining power.... This being the case, therefore, whosoever, every one that, resists the power resists the institution of God. If any person refuses obedience to the government to which he is subject in any point left free by God’s express command or prohibition, he rebels, not only against the lawful authority of the government, but incidentally against God Himself, who established government. And they that resist will receive to themselves judgment, the sentence of condemnation.... They will be looked upon and treated as rebels by God, who will not have the authority vested by Him disregarded....

“The government, according to God’s will, is the guardian of law and order, including external morality....If a hostile government uses tyrannical measures to suppress the work of the Church, Christians will not assume a rebellious attitude, but will try to gain

¹ Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, editor and translator Matthew Carver (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2014), page 186A.

their object by legitimate means, by invoking the statutes and the constitution of their state or country. It is only when the government demands anything plainly at variance with the revealed will of God that the Christians quietly, but firmly refuse to obey, Acts 5, 29.”²

Rulers “sit in God’s seat, and God calls them gods (Ps.82 [:1]).”³ That is, authority is God’s very image.

Furthermore, patriot Americans who would disobey Romans 13 along with 1st Peter 2 will not be prompted by the Holy Spirit to do so. The genuine followers of God in biblical times were prompted by the Holy Spirit to obey their rulers, even those rulers who, at the time of Christ, for example, ignored the laws of their own land, ruled by whim at times, and committed atrocities, such as Pontius Pilate and Herod.

Just the same, Acts 5:29 commands, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” In other words, the Bible has put bounds on governmental authority in regards to God’s will. That is, God will not allow the government to overrule God himself. If the government ever would pass a law which would amend or suspend Christian morality, then Christians will have to obey the clear biblical maxim of Acts 5:29, and obey God’s law and not the government’s law which would contradict it. That is to say, Christians should not comply with such a law. In order to accomplish this, they may even have to flee the locale or the country. Nevertheless, they are not actively to overthrow their government.

² Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, New Testament volume II (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1922), pages 69A&B, and 70A.

³ Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, editor and translator Matthew Carver (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2014), page 352.

This Acts 5:29 maxim of noncompliance would be different from rebellion in this way: the Christian would continue to comply with God’s law, but would decline to comply with the newly enacted governmental law. This noncompliance would consist neither in an attempt to use physical force to resist compliance with this law (insurrection), nor to overthrow the government which enacted this law (rebellion). Just the same, instead of repealing this bad law, the government actually may view the Christian’s noncompliance as an insurrection or rebellion, legally pronounce it as such, and prosecute it. In this case the Christian either should flee the locale, or bear the consequences of it willingly, as the Lord looks down upon him (Acts 7:55), sustained by the examples of his biblical predecessors, and much more by God’s gospel pledges of support.

Furthermore the maxim of Acts 5:29 does not mean that a Christian should not obey the government whenever the government itself would act immorally and would commit criminal acts, but only after the government by law would command the Christian to act immorally and to commit criminal acts which would contradict God’s biblically commands.

It has been argued that rebellion against governmental tyranny is moral and justified, because tyranny itself is immoral. That is to say, any loss to the citizen, up to and including the loss of his own life, which has been due to gross negligence, to malice, or to fraud on the part of government, will be immoral and will constitute tyranny.

John Locke followed this line of unbiblical reasoning. He turned tyrannical civic, legal, and political

acts of government into moral matters. Then he argued that fighting these immoral acts by means of rebellion would be the moral thing to do; or, as Thomas Jefferson more strongly put it, "It is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government" (*Declaration of Independence*).

Nevertheless, in his biblical commands and promises God has not laid down the principle that whenever anyone, whether your peer or whether someone in authority (parents, employers, or government, for instance) causes any loss to you, you have a moral right to retrieve that loss by whatever means available. Rather, it is just the opposite.

For example, when the shade from your neighbor's tree falls over your garden and causes a loss in crops, not only the Bible, but even *Black's Law Dictionary* advises, "It is better to suffer every ill than to consent to ill."⁴ Even Jefferson observed: "Mankind are disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves" (*Declaration of Independence*).

To be sure, in a loss significant enough for the courts to recognize, that has been due obviously to gross negligence, to malice, or to fraud, a Christian citizen, in order to protect himself, may ask for compensation through legal or legitimate channels, not through personal reprisal. In regards to any loss incurred by the Christian citizen at the hands of his government which he is not able to recover through legal or legitimate channels for the time being, the Christian is to obey his

⁴ Henry Campbell Black, *Black's Law Dictionary*, Fifth edition (Saint Paul: West Publishing Company, 1979), page 887B.

government, pay his taxes, and not to recover his loss by reprisal or rebellion.

Will you not see this?

Then why did God bless the Whig party, the revolutionary party in the American colonies, with success in their rebellion against Great Britain?

Throughout the war of rebellion all three groups of colonists were punished severely by God: The Whig party, the Loyalists, and the remaining neutral camp. The war did not go well at all for any of them. To be sure, in fighting the Whigs, the British army "regulars (not the Hessians or loyalists) won every major tactical engagement they fought, with the single exception of Cowpens."⁵ In fact, the rebellion which the Whigs waged went so badly for them generally the whole time that in 1780 Alexander Hamilton wrote "as a candid declaration of our circumstances" that "we must make terms with Great Britain" if we would not get a loan from France.⁶ In other words, the war was going so badly that they simply could not carry it on any longer. So what happened, subsequently?

In response to the pious, repentant, and gospel-believing prayers of the various Whigs, Loyalists, and neutrals, God kept his unbreakable pledge that "if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will

⁵ Franklin and Mary Wickwire, *Cornwallis: The American Adventure* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), page 63.

⁶ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *The American Revolution*, editor James Albert Woodburn (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), page 424 footnote.

forgive their sin and will heal their land” from war and bring peace (2nd Chronicles 7:14).

Then, in his inexplicable providence which no one could fathom (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-34), the Lord “brought forth upon this continent a new nation” (Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*) by giving success to the revolutionary party.

Nevertheless, this was not the first time that the Almighty had done something like this. Martin Luther has pointed out, “It is said that years ago the Swiss slew their overlords and made themselves free, and the Danes have recently driven out their king. In both cases their subjects were driven to do this by the intolerable tyranny which they suffered at the hands of these rulers. However, as I said above, I am not discussing here what the heathen do or have done, or anything that resembles their examples and history, but what one ought to do and can do with a good conscience. That is the course of action that makes us certain that what we are doing is not wrong in God’s sight. I know well enough and I have read in not a few history books of subjects deposing and exiling or killing their rulers. The Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans all did this and God permitted it and even let these nations grow and prosper in spite of it. However, the final outcome was always tragic. The Jews were finally conquered and their nation destroyed by the Assyrians. The Greeks were defeated by King Philip. And the Roman nation was conquered by the Goths and the Lombards. As a matter of fact, the Swiss have paid and are still paying for their own rebellion with great bloodshed, and one can easily predict what the final outcome will be....

“My reason for saying this is that God says, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ [Rom. 12:19]. He also says, ‘Judge not’ [Matt. 7:1]. And the Old Testament strictly and frequently forbids cursing rulers or speaking evil about them. Exodus 23

[22:28] says, ‘You shall not curse the prince of your people’. Paul, in 1 Timothy 2 [:1-2], teaches Christians to pray for their rulers, etc. Solomon in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes repeatedly teaches us to obey the king and be subject to him. Now no one can deny that when subjects set themselves against their rulers, they avenge themselves and make themselves judges. This is not only against the ordinance and command of God, who reserves to himself the authority to pass judgment and administer punishment in these matters, but such actions are also contrary to all natural law and justice. This is the meaning of the proverbs, “No man ought to judge his own case’, and, ‘The man who hits back is in the wrong’.

“Now perhaps you will say, ‘How can anyone possibly endure all the injustice that these tyrants inflict on us? You allow them too much opportunity to be unjust, and thus your teaching only makes them worse and worse. Are we supposed to permit everyone’s wife and child, body and property to be so shamefully treated and always to be in danger? If we have to live under these conditions, how can we ever begin to live a decent life?’ My reply is this: My teaching is not intended for people like you who want to do whatever you think is good and will please you. Go ahead! Do whatever you want! Kill all your lords! See what good it does you! My teaching is intended only for those who would like to do what is right. To these I say that rulers are not to be opposed with violence and rebellion, as the Romans, the Greeks, the Swiss, and the Danes have done; rather, there are other ways of dealing with them.

“In the first place, if you see that the rulers think so little of their soul’s salvation that they rage and do wrong, what does it matter to you if they ruin your property, body, wife, and child? They cannot hurt your soul, and they do themselves more harm than they do you because they damn their own souls and that must result in the ruin of body and

property. Do you think that you are not already sufficiently avenged?

“In the second place, what would you do if your rulers were at war and not only your goods and wives and children, but you yourself were broken, imprisoned, burned, and killed for your lord’s sake? Would you slay your lord for that reason? Think of all the good people that Emperor Maximilian lost in the wars that he waged in his lifetime. No one did anything to him because of it. And yet, if he had destroyed them by tyranny no more cruel deed would ever have been heard of. Nevertheless, he was the cause of their death, for they were killed for his sake. What is the difference, then, between such a raging tyrant and a dangerous war as far as the many good and innocent people who perish in it are concerned? Indeed, a wicked tyrant is more tolerable than a bad war, as you must admit from your own reason and experience.

“I can easily believe that you would like to have peace and good times, but suppose God prevents this by war or tyrants! Now, make up your mind whether you would rather have war or tyrants, for you are guilty enough to have deserved both from God. However, we are the kind of people who want to be scoundrels and live in sin and yet we want to avoid the punishment of sin, and even resist punishment and defend our skin....

“In the third place, if the rulers are wicked, what of it? God is still around, and he has fire, water, iron, stone, and countless ways of killing. How quickly he can kill a tyrant! He would do it, too, but our sins do not permit it, for he says in Job [34:30], ‘He permits a knave to rule because of the people’s sins’. We have no trouble seeing that a scoundrel is ruling. However, no one wants to see that he is ruling not because he is a scoundrel, but because of the people’s sin. The people do not look at their own sin; they think that the tyrant

rules because he is such a scoundrel – that is how blind, perverse, and mad the world is!”⁷

Indeed, as the people are, so the government will be.

Pray to the Lord to give you patience under this affliction! May he strengthen you by his powerful gospel pledges to perform your religious duties regarding Romans 13 and 1st Peter 2 in spite of the lawlessness all around you!

⁷ Martin Luther, “Whether Soldiers, too, can be saved,” translator Charles M. Jacobs, *Luther’s Works*, editor Robert C. Schultz, Volume 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pages 106-109.