

John Knox on Rebellion Against Evil Authority

John Knox, *On Rebellion*, ed. By Roger A. Mason (Cambridge University Press, 1994) containing various tracts and letters by John Knox and the debate at the General Assembly of June 1564.

The Cambridge edition of John Knox's political writings aims "to bring together in a single volume those of his works in which the problem of rebellion is discussed at length." (*Rebellion*, p. vi) A major theme of these writings is the duty of the magistrates to root out idolatry and rebellion against God, and not just leave the matter to ecclesiastical authorities such as bishops. In fact sinfulness by the clergy falls as much under the authority of the magistrate as does that of anyone else. But what concerns this review is the question of disobedience to and correction of the civil authorities.

John Knox advocated disobedience to and removal of rulers who had rebelled against God. He did so citing various patristic authors (Augustine was especially important to him) but principally on the bases of Biblical texts, mostly drawn from Old Testament, including the law, precedents from the history of Judah and Israel, as well as maxims from the Psalms. In applying these precepts Knox had in mind a Christian nation which had made a profession of Christianity and submitted to the authority of God.

In a Summary of the Second Blast of the Trumpet (1558) he explained what he proposed to cover in that book. Although the book was never published, this summary brings together topics that he addressed in comments widely scattered through his other writings.

1. It is not birth only nor propinquity of blood that maketh a king lawfully to reign above a people professing Christ Jesus and His eternal verity, but in his election must the ordinance which God had established in the election of inferior judges be observed.
2. No manifest idolater nor notorious transgressor of God's holy precepts ought to be promoted to any public regiment, honour or dignity in any realm, province or city that hath subjected the self to Christ Jesus and to His blessed Evangel.
3. Neither can oath nor promise bind any such people to obey and maintain tyrants against God and against His truth known.
4. But if either rashly they have promoted any manifest wicked person, or yet ignorantly have chosen such a one as after declareth himself unworthy of regiment above the people of God (and such be all idolaters and cruel persecutors), most justly may the same men depose and punish him that unadvisedly before they did nominate, appoint and elect. (*Rebellion*, pp. 128-129)

Today's Churchianity in its approach to state authority features Romans 13 and obedience to the powers that be as the key idea, generally advocating the alternative of passive disobedience and suffering when confronted with the choice between obeying this command and other commands from God. Seldom do today's moralists, when they claim to be Biblically based, call for the removal of an unjust ruler. Therefore it is important to begin with the reason that Knox cited Old Testament Biblical authority. The Reformers believed that the moral law in the Old Testament continued in force, and that the only parts of the law that passed away were the judicial (with the

passing of the state of Judah) and the ceremonial (with the coming of the New Covenant), whereas the moral law continued as an obligation to Christians. Today people who style themselves Reformed generally hold that only the Ten Commandments remain in force, and they often claim that the Ten Commandments and the moral law are the same thing. But that is not the view of the Reformation, at least in England and Scotland.

Knox put it this way:

Now if the law moral be the constant and unchangeable will of God to the which the Gentile is no less bound than was the Jew; and if God will that amongst the Gentiles the ministers and executors of His law be now appointed as sometimes they were appointed amongst the Jews; further, if the execution of justice be no less requisite in the policy of the Gentiles than ever it was amongst the Jews, what man can be so foolish to suppose or believe that God will now admit those persons to sit in judgement or to reign over men in the commonwealth of the Gentiles whom He by His expressed Word and ordinance did before debar and seclude from the same? (*Rebellion*, p. 30)

The argument seems to be that the moral law includes the administration of the moral law, and this in turn requires morally qualified judges. Citing Joshua 1:6-8 and Deuteronomy 17:18-19 he argues:

Of these two places it is evident that it appertaineth to the king or to the chief magistrate to know the will of God, to be instructed in His law and statutes and to promote His glory with his whole heart and study, which be the chief points of the First Table. (*Rebellion*, p. 29) [See Matthew 22:36-40, which seems to be what Knox had in mind by “chief points”.]

Also:

For it is a thing more than certain that whatsoever God required of the civil magistrate in Israel or Judah concerning the observation of true religion during the time of the Law, the same doth he require of lawful magistrates professing Christ Jesus in the time of the Gospel, as the Holy Ghost hath taught us by the mouth of David, saying (Psalm 2): “Be learned, you that judge the earth, kiss the Son, lest that the Lord wax angry and that ye perish from the way.” This admonition did not extend to the judges under the Law only, but doth also include all such as be promoted to honours in the time of the Gospel, when Christ Jesus doth reign and fight in His spiritual kingdom, ... (*Rebellion*, p. 91)

From Deuteronomy 17:14-15 and Joshua 1:6-8 Knox argues:

If any think that the forewritten law did bind the Jews only, let the same man consider that the election of a king and appointing of judges did neither appertain to the ceremonial law neither yet was it mere judicial, but that it did flow from the moral law as an ordinance, having respect to the conservation of both the Tables. For the office of the magistrate ought to have the first and chief respect to the glory of God commanded and contained in the former Table, as is evident by that which was enjoined to Joshua by God what time he was accepted and admitted ruler and governor over His people.... (*Rebellion*, pp. 28-29)

These being the duties of the kings and judges, the subsequent consideration is the duties of the magistrates and people under them in regard to the kings and judges fulfilling their duties. Are these obligations on the chief rulers given with or without a provision to deal with their failure to follow their obligations?

First, Knox sees a general obligation to anyone in authority to admonish the wicked in Ezekiel 33:7-9.

Son of man, I have appointed thee a watchman to the house of Israel that thou shouldst hear from my mouth the word and that thou mayst admonish them plainly when I shall say to the wicked man: O wicked, thou shalt assuredly die. Then if thou shalt not speak that thou mayest plainly admonish him that he may leave his wicked way, the wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require of they hand. ...

This precept, I say, with the threatening annexed, together with the rest that is spoken in the same chapter, not to Ezekiel only, but to every one whom God placeth watchman over his people and flock.... (*Rebellion*, pp. 7-8)

The lessor rulers, in this case the Lords of Scotland have a duty to the king to

correct and repress whatsoever ye know him to attempt expressedly repugning to God's Word, honour and glory, or what ye shall espy him to do, be it by ignorance or be it by malice, against his subjects great or small. Of which last part of your obedience, if you defraud your king, ye commit against him no less treason than if ye did extract from him your due and promised support what time by his enemies unjustly he were pursued. ...

For it is no less blasphemy to say that God hath commanded kings to be obeyed when they command impiety than to say that God by His precept is author and maintainer of all iniquity. True it is, God had commanded kings to be obeyed, but like true it is that in things which they commit against His glory, or when cruelly without cause they rage against their brethren, the members of Christ's body, He had commanded not obedience, but rather He hath approved, yea, and greatly rewarded, such as have opposed themselves to their ungodly commandments and blind rage. (*Rebellion*, p. 95)

He cites Daniel 3, 6 and Jeremiah 38. "And the same, I say, is the duty of every man in his vocation, but chiefly of the nobility which is joined with their kings to bridle and repress that folly and rage. Which thing if the nobility do not, neither yet labour to do, as they are traitors to their kings, so do they provoke the wrath of God against themselves and against the realm in which they abuse the authority which they have received of God to maintain virtue and repress vice." (*Rebellion*, pp. 96-97) In this choice of vocabulary Knox seems to have in mind the authority Paul speaks about in Romans 13.¹

Knox eventually does take up a discussion of Romans 13, "Let every soul be subject to the superior powers." The first application he makes is that the clergy are not exempt from civil authority as "men of the church (as they are termed) do this day claim." (*Rebellion*, p. 107) Of course, the papacy also made this its text saying that the import was that civil authorities had to be subject to the pope, as the pope was the superior power. Knox account, of course, is different.

Your Honours do wonder, I doubt not, from what fountain than did this their immunity, as they term it, and singular privilege spring. I shall shortly touch that which is evident in their

1 However far Knox meant the nobility should go to "bridle and repress that folly and rage" of the kings, the Westminster Confession in the next century stated that "Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them:" *Westminster Confession* 23:4.

own law and histories. When the bishops of Rome, the very Antichrists, had partly by fraud and partly by violence usurped the superiority of some places in Italy and most unjustly had spoiled the emperors of their rents and possessions and had also murdered some of their officers, as histories do witness, then began pope after pope to practice and devise how they should be exempted from judgement of princes and from the equity of laws.” (*Rebellion*, pp. 107-108)

He expands on this theme for several more pages. There is also a discussion of the Romans passage in his *Appellation* to the nobility, estates, and commonality of the realm (1558).

“As the Apostle in these words most straitly commandeth obedience to be given to lawful powers, pronouncing God’s wrath and vengeance against such as shall resist the ordinance of God, so doth he assign to these powers their offices, which be to take vengeance upon evil doers, to maintain the well doers, and so to minister and rule in their office that the subjects by them may have a benefit and be praised in well doing. Now if you be powers ordained by God (and that I hope all men will grant), then by the plain words of the Apostle is the sword given unto you by God for maintenance of the innocent and for punishment of malefactors. But I, and my brethren with me accused, do offer not only to prove ourselves innocents in all things laid to our charge, but also we offer most evidently to prove your bishops to be the very pestilence who have infected all Christianity. And therefore by the plain doctrine of the Apostle you are bound to maintain us and to punish the other being evidently convict and proved criminal.

Moreover, the former words of the Apostle do teach how far high powers be bound to their subjects: to wit, that because they are God’s ministers by Him ordained for the profit and utility of others, most diligently ought they to intend upon the same. (*Rebellion*, p. 83)

The Romans 13 passage comes up a final time in Knox’s debate at the General Assembly of 1564. He was asked (by Lethington) to explain “How will you prove your division and difference...and that the person placed in authority may be resisted and God’s ordinance not transgressed, seeing that the Apostle says: ‘He that resists, resisteth the ordinance of God.’”

[T]he plain words of the Apostle make the difference, and the facts of many approved by God, prove my affirmative. First, the Apostle affirms that the powers are ordained of God [for the preservation of quiet and peaceable men, and for the punishment of malefactors: whereof it is plain that the ordinance of God] and the power given unto man is one thing, and the person clad with the power or with the authority is another; for God’s ordinance is the conservation of mankind, the punishment of vice, the maintaining of virtue, which is in itself holy, just, constant, stable and perpetual. But men clad with the authority are commonly profane and unjust; yea, they are mutable and transitory, and subject to corruption...

And now...to answer to the place of the Apostle who affirms “that such as resists the power, resists the ordinance of God”, I say that the power in that place is not to be understood of the unjust commandment of men, but of the just power wherewith God had armed His magistrates and lieutenants to punish sin and maintain virtue. As if any man should enterprise to take from the hands of a lawful judge a murderer, an adulterer or any malefactor that by God’s law deserved death, this same man resisted God’s ordinance, and procured to himself vengeance and damnation because that he stayed God’s sword to strike. But so it is not if that men in the fear of God oppone themselves to the fury and blind rage of

princes; for so they resist not God, but the devil, who abuses the sword and authority of God. (*Rebellion*, p. 191)

In Romans 13 Paul expands upon this command to be subject to the governing authorities with a longer explanation of the reason why God appointed the governing authorities and, Paul seems to argue, the reason why God appointed these authorities, i.e. their promotion of good and suppression of evil is the reason why one should obey them. “Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.” But what about when this reason that Paul gives does not hold, when the authorities try to suppress good? Knox has offered a theory of how it can be that God appointed the authorities, and no authority exists except from God, when what these authorities do is the opposite of what Paul says that they do and why we should obey them. Knox’s solution is to distinguish the office from the person. We can respect and acknowledge the purpose for the office while at the same time recognizing that the person who holds the office, or as Knox puts it is clad with the authority, is evil and should be removed, both for justice and for the sake of the office.

This is not the only solution of course, as one could say, for example, that although the authority goes to the person, yet it stops when the authority is abused. Knox’s solution better preserves the sense of an established, abiding authority, which the language of the first verse of Romans 13 perhaps suggests. This is not a new invention by Knox and it is similar to the legal idea of the king’s two bodies, the natural and the political one, which was the medieval solution to the problem of how authority continues when kings die.²

The Westminster Confession of a century later goes a long way to state views similar those of Knox on the duty of the magistrate, yet leaves out what he taught about the duties of lesser officials to restrain the king.

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God. (*Westminster Confession*, 23:3)

Knox’s political theology is out of favor today among his theological successors in Presbyterianism. There are plausibly three main reasons. 1) Knox’s belief that the duty of the magistrate extends to oversight of the religious allegiance of the nation, and the removing of idolatry, preeminently the Roman region, and the removal of those clerics who promote idolatry is not at all welcome among a clergy that has made its peace with pluralism in exchange, they suppose, for an area of freedom wide enough to accommodate their own religious practices. This may include some sphere sovereignty ideas to the effect that authority is divided with the church officers in charge of

2 Sir Edward Coke still appealed to the king’s two bodies doctrine in 1608. “It is true, that the King hath two capacities in him: one a natural body, being descended of the blood royal of the Realm; and this body is of the creation of Almighty God, and is subject to death, infirmity, and such like; other other is a politic, body or capacity, so called, because it is framed by the policy of man ... and in this capacity the King is esteemed to be immortal, invisible, not subject to death, infirmity, infancy, nonage, &c.” *The Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, Vol. 1, ed. by Steve Sheppard (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003) p. 189. Cole held, however, that allegiance was owed to the natural body, in part because the king swore a reciprocal oath to his subjects, and as the political body has no soul, it cannot swear an oath.

religious matters that do not concern the magistrate. This is the view that Knox opposed strenuously in the greater part of his political writings in the Cambridge collection, but which are largely omitted from this review. The Reformed confessions are not silent on this either, but these portions of the confessions seem a dead letter to most contemporary clergy. 2) Knox's appeal to Old Testament law and precedent, which expands way too far, for the modern mind, the matters on which the clergy would be obligated to extend their comprehension and admonitions; and 3) our great distance from the conditions of those Reformation times, when Knox addressed the lords of the realm on their political duties in the election and removal of kings and magistrates. Today everyone votes, and is the one who selects and has responsibility for the highest government office holders. Knox could address the lords as a body, convoked and able to act. Today the people never gather as such, there are only intermediary bodies, and these are controlled by political parties and hidden hands. Thus the responsible parties seem elusive and any action futile.

In 1788 the *Westminster Confession* was modified in America, with the main change being to chapter 23, section 3. It now reads:

Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.

All the duties of the magistrate toward the Kingdom of Christ are now replaced by a duty to the church "in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger." The protection in this clause is limited to ecclesiastical persons, evidently the clergy, and only so far as the protection of "their sacred functions". Further, the magistrates are to do this as "nursing fathers", although there is no such thing, except perhaps until recent years when biological women are now allowed to identify as fathers. The next provision is that no law should interfere with "the due exercise" of the "regular government and discipline of the church". The final provision is that no person should do violence to other persons "either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity", or be allowed to disrupt religious assemblies. But there is no stipulation that the state may not do so, except with the above noted provision that the state may not interfere with the ecclesiastical government or discipline.

Christians in the Presbyterian tradition are now left with a very minimal political philosophy in their confessions indeed. If they are to admonish the civil rulers they must find help somewhere else about what they should say. While one could say there is plenty of help in the Bible, yet the American denominations, generally, have rejected those teachings that John Knox thought he saw plainly in the Bible. Each man is left to stand with his personal interpretation.

Yet the wickedness of the civil officials and their unfitness for office is only too apparent. They have even lately banned church meetings, on public health grounds. Yet a strict reading of the modified *Confession* only states that the civil authorities may not stop the clergy from attending. As for the ordinary members, it is only other members of the public who may not interfere with their right to assemble and worship. If Christians—and Knox would say especially those holding leadership positions—today have Biblical obligations toward this situation, to admonish, restrain or remove these officials, they had better find out quickly what those duties are, to whom they extend, and how they must be carried out.