

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
March 23, 2005

This column is the first installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

A preacher recently proclaimed: “Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God.” Another pastor once told me: “If it’s illegal, it’s sinful.” (He must be thankful for much grace to cover his sins of disobedience to the state—in light of all the legislation he inadvertently violates.) And a recent caller to my radio show said something like: “Once a proposal becomes the law a Christian must obey it,” implying that disobedience is sin. These Tory principles are widely-held by American Christians. But is such sentiment correct? Is *resistance* to tyrants, which they call “rebellion”, necessarily sinful?

Rebellion against God is certainly always wrong. It is condemned in Scripture as being analogous to “witchcraft” (1 Samuel 15:23). Having a rebellious attitude or to “despise authority” is likewise unacceptable Christian practice (2 Peter 2:10; Jude 1:8). The Bible teaches that Christians are to “be subject to the governing authorities” which are “appointed by God” (Romans 13:1) and to submit “to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake”—both in the case of kings and lower magistrates or governors (1 Peter 2:13). Nevertheless, the civil ruler submission doctrine is surely *qualified*. No Christian theologian has ever held that the New Testament requires absolute submission to *every* civil government decree. Even the Apostles disobeyed civil authority when they believed obedience to it would cause disobedience to God. They resisted tyranny by obeying God and were thus wrongly considered “rebels”.

No Bible-believing Christian should consider the commands in Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17, and Titus 3:1 to be *absolute*. Indeed, taking into account the “whole counsel of God”, it is clear that God’s people have *not* and should *not* submit themselves to “*every* ordinance of man” (1 Peter 2:13) in an absolute sense. The Egyptian midwives defied Pharaoh’s decree to murder infants (Exodus 1:15-21). Ehud acted against public policy by deceiving the king’s ministers and then slew the king (Judges 3:15-26). Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refused to comply with public policies that mandated religious rituals contrary to proper worship (Daniel 3:8-18; 6:6-10). The wise men from the East disobeyed Herod’s direct order to disclose Jesus’ whereabouts (Matthew 2:7-12). Peter and John forthrightly disobeyed the “ordinance of man” that mandated that they desist from preaching (Acts 5:28-29).

Judging from these biblical premises, therefore, the foremost doctrinal issue for a Christian theology of public policy is apparently *not* whether Christians may ever disobey state decrees, but rather *when* civil disobedience by Christians becomes mandatory—or, further, when obedience becomes optional or discretionary for a Christian who must be free to act within the parameters of his conscience. Indeed, the core question boils down to when (or at what point) civil disobedience is justified, and what test must be applied to determine when such rebellion is righteous. Remember, *civil disobedience* and *rebellion* to the state are synonymous terms, the former being the patriot’s perspective and the latter the tyrant’s. At many points over the course of history, rebellion has been widely held to be a good thing and has thus been proclaimed by church leaders. Their message has been simple and straightforward: to disobey tyrants is to obey God. So it was at the founding of the United States of America.

In the 1770s, American Christians viewed British public policies as grounds for armed resistance. The colonists not only believed that they had a right to resist British “tyranny”, they held that submission (or not rebelling) would have been sinful. Thus, preachers *incited* revolution. The arguments advanced by preachers of the day in support of this sentiment were manifold: (1) Parliament had set itself up in an idolatrous manner by claiming sovereignty “in all cases whatsoever” over the colonies (and it was blasphemy to think that mere human beings could ever have such authority); indeed, Reformed colonists wanted to preserve their identity as a covenant people, and Parliament’s claims represented both tyranny and idolatry, because honoring the claims of the king would be tantamount to forsaking God who says to “have no other gods” before Him; (2) the vibrant church in the “wilderness” of America represented the “New Israel”, while the King and his cronies represented a satanic onslaught aimed at harming God’s chosen people, thus giving Christians a rationale for self-defense against the civil authority; (3) Christians

have a right to be free from tyranny (citing Galatians 5:1) along with the means to redress grievances regarding unfulfilled expectations in (or violations of) colonial charters and basic human rights; and, more implicitly, (4) the abuses of life and property which emanated from King George III and Parliament, including their undertaking legal plunder of the colonies, justified self-defense. The civil authority could be resisted in the same way that a homeowner resists a robber or a businessman withstands a thug.

This series of articles highlights the actions of the American Founders—Christian ones in particular—in endeavoring to showcase the various historical Christian theologies of public policy. While many of us believe that the Founders were right in “rebell[ing]”, many other Christians disagree. Thus, I think it is worthwhile to discuss the interaction (and intersection) of faith and civil disobedience, especially in light of the rising onslaught of modern public policies against Christians.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
March 30, 2005

This column is the second installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

The Bible indicates that being a revolutionary can bring temporal trouble. “My son, fear the Lord and the king; do not associate with those given to change [via revolution]; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two can bring?” (Proverbs 24:21-22). When the Jewish religious leaders were “furious” with the Apostles for preaching the Gospel, Gamaliel reminded his Council about the failed revolutionary attempts of Theudas and Judas of Galilee (and their men)—most of whom were executed by the civil authorities (Acts 5:33-39). Not all revolutionary attempts fail of course, but the probability of success is low and the likelihood of imprisonment or death for treason is high. As Gamaliel said, if a revolutionary movement “is of God” it will stand; otherwise it will fail. And the general counsel of the Bible is that if one wants to preserve his life he had better think twice about being a revolutionary.

The Founding Fathers knew what they were getting into in opposing the world’s most powerful empire. Their commitment was summed up in the closing language of the Declaration of Independence: “And for the support of this Declaration with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” The Founders who read Proverbs 24:21 evidently viewed it as mere practical advice about avoiding temporal consequences rather than as a general directive to be obeyed in all cases. And their resulting successful revolt was extraordinary, being aided by many symbiotic cultural dynamics of the time. Still, Proverbs 24:21-22 and Acts 5:33-39 provide a constant reminder to Christians to beware of participating in revolution. Indeed, what was practical for the Founders might not be prudent for us today. Moreover, the Bible indicates that the motive for submitting to civil authority is to glorify God, to avoid worldly distractions that detract from the church’s main mission, and that Christians may lead “a quiet and peaceable life” (1 Timothy 2:2). At least in the short term, revolution would seem to be counter-productive to evangelism and building the church.

In order to meet such biblical objectives, Christians may have to be practical or expedient when confronted by the civil authority. The Bible counsels that when eating with a ruler, “put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite” (Proverbs 23:2). Jesus told Peter to fetch a coin from the mouth of a fish—not because he had been worried about His unpaid tax liability but because He did not want to “offend” the civil authorities (Matthew 17:27). Jesus knew that the tax had not been paid and yet had apparently expressed no concern about breaking the rules. Perhaps this event formed part of the rationale that led the Pharisees to accuse Jesus of “forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar” (Luke 23:2). At any rate, avoiding confrontation in general is important for a Christian. This ideal is the driving force behind the Apostle Peter’s wide admonition: “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

The American Founders sought to avoid confrontation with King George III, and only after what Thomas Jefferson called a “long train of abuses and usurpations” did they choose to “rebel” against him. Would the Apostles have rebelled against Rome at some point too? Surely, Nero was every bit as evil and defiant as King George III, and yet the Apostles did not rebel against Nero. Perhaps they would have done so—at least if they had the arms and soldiers to pull it off (cf. Luke 14:31). The War for American Independence was fought over a fundamental issue of authority: specifically, the place where “the consent of the governed” rested and who was entitled to rule. In 1775, there was widespread doubt about the legitimacy of centralized power exercised from London.

Apparently the Christians in the 1770s believed that civil disobedience and armed revolution were justified and prudent so long as a good or godly reason could be found for such revolt and as long as the insurgents were backed with sufficient firepower to have a decent shot at success. The Scripture is silent (or at least not conclusive) on whether Christians can revolt against the state when they have the means to do so. We do not know what Paul and Peter would have done or taught if pro-Christian forces were able to muster sufficient resources to defy Nero. Yet the Scriptures seem to indicate that Christians have a right of self-defense (Luke 22:36), which could be taken as the right of defense against both criminals and state plunderers like King George III—or George W. Bush for that matter. Or should we simply believe that apostolic teaching regarding submission to (and honoring of) civil rulers prohibits Christians from ever defending themselves against them? Must Christians never attack civil rulers—no matter how tyrannical the state becomes or how much it plunders its citizenry? I don’t think so.

The Tory preacher’s view, “Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God”, is wrong while the Founders’ actions were right. King George III was an overbearing thief and a depriver of civil liberties. Since the colonists had the power to resist, they were rightly exhorted to do so—especially considering the implications of 1 Corinthians 7:21-24. For some of us, no further justification is needed to attack a wayward, tyrannical, and predatory state beyond the fact that it is plundering us or depriving us of our liberties. Like a robber or other criminal, the state can be opposed when it is prudent and possible to do so.

Other willing Christian insurgents, however, need further validation. For instance, many preachers and theologians in the 1770s proclaimed that Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 were only binding insofar as government honors its “moral and religious” obligations. Otherwise, the duty of submission was nullified. Indeed, rulers had no authority from God to do mischief; it was blasphemous to call tyrants and oppressors the ministers of God. And each individual was left to decide when a ruler crossed the line.

In the final analysis, using either of these methods to justify civil disobedience leads to the conclusion that state tyranny can be properly resisted by Christians. Indeed, Christians are remiss who do not oppose tyrants.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 3)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
April 6, 2005

This column is the third installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

According to a public policy theology popular among modern Evangelicals, the American Founders sinned greatly by rebelling against their earthly sovereign King George III. Why? Let’s consider a few of the “sins” committed by the American Founders and their associates.

On June 9, 1772, the British revenue cutter *Gaspee* ran aground near Providence, Rhode Island. The hated and feared anti-smuggler Lt. Dudingston was put ashore along with his crew, and on the next morning the *Gaspee* was burned by a group of patriots led by Abraham Whipple. Rhode Island chief justice Stephen Hopkins refused to bring the men to justice. Even though the Crown offered a reward for the names of the culprits, no one would turn in Whipple and his men. There was overwhelming public (and Christian) support for the revolutionary action.

Similarly, on October 12, 2000 the USS Cole was bombed by several Arabs who thought that they were fighting for the right cause, killing seventeen American servicemen. But should the Arab insurgents be deemed criminals or patriots for their cause? Our tendency is to justify the American insurgents and condemn the Arabian ones, although in the abstract there is not that much difference between the actions of the two bands. Would our view change if the USS Cole had been attacked by Christians in New Zealand instead? The usual American response is that anyone who attacks American interests is wrong. What about the Christian response—irrespective of nationality or politics? For whatever reason, it seems that there is an underlying (moot) assumption that what is against America must also be against Christianity. Indeed, it seems that American Christians in 2005 have a more confused public policy theology than their predecessors did some 230 years earlier.

By January 1773, dozens of “Committees of Correspondence”—political communication conduits that spread news that fostered the revolutionary movement—had been formed in Massachusetts and other places, including Virginia and the Carolinas. These groups actively utilized lively political meetings and printed materials to incite a spirit of rebellion against the king. British governors viewed their actions as treason. But were these colonial Englishmen really criminals and rebellious sinners against the king and God, or were they courageous and righteous believers defending themselves against a tyrant and thus glorifying God in the process? If Christians have the means and power to rebel against evil, then why shouldn’t they do so—to the glory of God?

On December 16, 1773, the British ships *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, and *Beaver* (laden with tea belonging to the East India Tea Company) were anchored in Boston harbor. They were boarded by about 150 patriots (a.k.a. rebels) disguised as Mohawk Indians. Recalcitrant local merchants were unwilling to accept the cargo since they did not want to pay the import duty imposed on the tea. Congregationalist Christian John Hancock, Boston’s richest resident, reportedly led the raiding party that emptied 342 chests of tax-tainted tea (worth 18,000 pounds sterling) into the sea. The raiders did not destroy any other property on the ships. Were these British subjects—mainly Christian men who knew what the Bible said about submission to the king—sinning by committing crimes of destroying private property and disobeying the civil authority? If a Boston Tea Party was justifiable Christian action in 1773, why would it not be today?

On September 5, 1774, the first Continental Congress was firmly established, being comprised largely of professing Christians. Since the assembly had no basis in English law, and could have been held as illegal by the king, its very existence was an act of revolution. May a Christian in good conscience be part of a movement that is considered “revolutionary” and “treasonous” by the civil authority?

On December 14, 1774, Continental Congressman and attorney John Sullivan led the first military action by 400 Colonial Minutemen against the British in Portsmouth. Without casualties, they captured Fort William and Mary, seizing the military hardware that the militia would use in future military actions. In January 1775, King George III made clear that he considered such activities rebellious: “The new England governments are in a state of rebellion. Blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this country or independent.” Parliament responded by ordering troops against the largely Christian residents of Massachusetts. Later, on August 23, 1775, the king issued “A Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition” whereby he accused the colonists of proceeding “to open and avowed rebellion, by arraying themselves in a hostile manner, to withstand the execution of the law, and traitorously preparing, ordering and levying war against us.” Do Christians have a right to defend themselves against a king that the Sovereign Lord has placed over them? What about Christians rising up with arms against George W. Bush and his cronies? Is there a difference? Does the existence of democratic processes debilitate just revolt?

On April 19, 1775, Christians fought against the British in church courtyards in Lexington, and on the road to Concord, Massachusetts. In this overt rebellion against civil authority, 49 (mostly Christian) patriots were killed and another 46 were wounded or missing, while 73 British troops were killed and another 200 were wounded or missing. On June 17, 1775, the Battle of Bunker Hill took place. British forces attacked Patriots on Breed’s Hill overlooking the sea approach to Boston Harbor. Nearly half of the British troops (1,054 of 2,400) were killed or wounded. American Colonel William Prescott told his troops: “Don’t fire till you see the whites of their eyes!” Is it proper for Christians to take aggressive ac-

tion against legitimate civil authority? What would we think of a group of Christians led by a modern-day Prescott pointing at a group of ATF agents about to assail them? Does anyone remember the government-led massacres in Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 and in Waco, Texas in 1993? May Christians fight back against the oppressive state? Is martyrdom the *only* righteous option in the face of state cruelty?

On September 22, 1776, a few months after America declared independence—and despite not being recognized by Britain as an independent nation—Capt. Nathan Hale said “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” At the age of 21, he was about to be executed by the British for espionage. Hale was a devout Christian in the Puritan tradition. The king considered him a rebel regardless of whether or not Hale considered his allegiance changed on account of the Declaration of Independence. Did that Declaration free Hale and other Christians from their duty to obey the previous civil authority? Even though that authority did not recognize the new nation’s independence? Who should a Christian obey when two sovereigns are vying for recognition over him as citizen?

These questions may be difficult to answer but serious Christians must strive to do so. Revolution is never legal. If Christians really want to change the world they will probably have to break the law at some point. Those who want to be patriots and hope to promote liberty within the political process are living in a fantasy world. States do not yield power voluntarily. Citizens must take rulers to Runnymede in order to have any hope of securing greater liberty. The American Founders realized this truth and pursued it with unflinching vigor. We enjoy the benefits of their labors and sacrifices. Let’s be bold in likewise defending those liberties just as our valiant forefathers did, putting aside the torpid Tory mindset that would torpedo our freedoms.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 4)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
April 13, 2005

This column is the fourth installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

Our Christian forefathers who lived during the 1770s were revolutionaries. Preachers and theologians of the day actively advocated rebellion against the civil authority and Christians complied—participating in the social and political upheaval.

We should consider that the position of Christians in England might have been different. Did English preachers condemn the activities of the colonists in their sermons? No doubt many would have remarked that the American colonists who were rebelling against their king were (sinfully) violating Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Tory pastors in America—Anglican or otherwise—also thought that the rebels (patriots) were in sin. Since the king had a divine right to rule, Christians must therefore maintain their allegiance to him. However, these loyalist Anglicans lost their influence in America, being assailed intellectually and otherwise—primarily by Baptists, Presbyterians, German Reformed, Dutch Reformed, French Huguenots, Lutherans, and Congregationalists.

Furthermore, during the War for American Independence, to whom should these divine right Tories have been loyal: a colonial government body or King George III? Looking back, one would be tempted to say ‘to the colonial government’ because we know the outcome of the war. But the outcome was hardly clear to Nathan Hale or to King George III. It was not clear to General Benedict Arnold either. He was considered both a patriot and a traitor by both sides during the war. Clearly, colonial victories in upstate New York were achieved by this brilliant general, who later proved helpful to the British.

On May 10, 1775, Arnold and Ethan Allen led 200 Green Mountain Boys to capture Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, confiscating 50 cannon, 2,300 pounds of lead and a barrel of flints for muskets from the king in order to supply the militia in Boston. He led tremendous military campaigns in New York and Quebec. Yet he was mocked by the Continental Congress, and on September 21, 1780, he offered to exchange West Point for 20,000 pounds and a commission as major general in the British army. Now here’s the tough question: “Was Arnold in sin when he joined the Americans, when he joined the

British, or on both occasions?” He obeyed the civil authority of King George III but disobeyed American authorities. If the Apostles Paul and Peter were Arnold’s contemporaries, to whom would they tell him to “submit” and to “honor”? Given his duplicity and bad character, was Arnold a Christian? Could he have been righteous in following his conscience at both junctures?

A Christian’s judgment about how Tories or Arnolds should be treated, or about how one should respond to revolutionary movements in general, will depend on his presuppositions regarding the nature of the state and what is entailed in appropriate Christian response to public policy. Christians can be orthodox and Evangelical with respect to the fundamentals of the faith and the doctrine of salvation and still disagree widely in their public policy theology. This doctrinal divergence was manifest between the Christian patriots and the Christian Tories, and it is still seen in modern American Christianity.

There are two historical schools of Evangelical thought regarding the nature of the state and public policy: (A) the Integrated Authority School and (B) the Competing Kingdom School. The former school views the state as (at least) a potential ally of the family and church in establishing or advancing God’s kingdom in the world. The state’s role may be as small as simply restraining what God thinks is evil or as large as actively clearing the way for the establishment of true religion in a nation. Some integrated authority adherents believe that a strong nexus between church and state is necessary for a godly society, where the church preaches to the state regarding what it should enforce and the state upholds the biblical standard it receives via the power of the sword.

The latter school views the state, encompassed in the biblical terminology as “the kingdoms of this world”, running a course that is antithetical to God’s. Whether driven by its own cultural norms or Satan himself, the state *competes* against God. Nevertheless, God holds the ultimate reigns on the state and uses it to accomplish certain ends in this world, such as bringing terrestrial judgment upon sinners or sanctifying His church through state persecutions. Perhaps paradoxically, some competing kingdom adherents also view the state as restraining civil evil at times.

Both of these schools have two branches (or sub-classifications) which make up a total of four Christian perspectives of public policy. The two branches of the integrated authority school are (1) the theonomy view or Christian Reconstructionism and (2) the revitalized or reshaped divine right of kings view. These views may be condensed to simply the terms *theonomy* and *divine right*. The two branches of the competing kingdom school are (1) the Anabaptist (strict separationist) or pacifist view and (2) the liberty of conscience view.

Professor Mark Noll’s work *Christians and the American Revolution* (1977) is especially helpful in forming a historical perspective on these positions. I would also recommend my book *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* (2003). The instigators of the American “Revolution” were largely theonomic Presbyterians and Congregationalists, along with liberty of conscience Baptists. These groups took an active role in transforming their world, albeit for very distinct reasons. In my next two columns, I will examine these four views in greater detail.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 5)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
April 20, 2005

This column is the fifth installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

In my last column, I outlined the two historical schools of Evangelical thought regarding the nature of the state and public policy: (A) the Integrated Authority School and (B) the Competing Kingdom School. In this column, I pick up that discussion by delineating the principles of Integrated Authority School, and the two views associated with it, in greater depth.

The integrated authority school views the state as a special sphere of authority along with the family and the church. The state has a useful purpose in directly advancing the kingdom of God in the world.

In his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (book 4, chapter 20), John Calvin stated that the Christian finds himself under two governments: one secular and the other ecclesiastical. The secular or civil government has the obligation to be godly and promote the Christian religion. The ecclesiastical government provides spiritual discipline and administers the sacraments. Since the civil government punishes those who are condemned as evildoers by God's word, they must know God's rules. Thus, in order for the state to know what it should promote and condemn, the church has a responsibility to preach the word of God to civil rulers.

Theonomy (or Christian Reconstructionism) forms the first, and most sophisticated, branch within the integrated authority school. Although its doctrine is far more refined than Calvin's, theonomy (which is almost exclusively Reformed) has consistently carried Calvin's ideas. Theonomy embellishes Calvin by including all of the Old Testament laws that are not explicitly repudiated in the New Testament (although there is some disagreement between theonomists about what has been repudiated, e.g., dietary rules). Revolution is a proper and useful function, so long as an alternative authority structure is preserved, in order to maintain a godly quality in civil government. Some of the major Evangelical proponents of theonomy include Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, Rousas John Rushdooney, Pastor John Weaver (an outspoken modern American "patriot"), and John Calvin. Theonomy holds a transformational, active or involved theology of public policy, and is characteristically postmillennial.

Theonomists like Greg Bahnsen, in his work *Theonomy and Christian Ethics* (chapter 19), hold that passages like Romans 13:1-7 apply to an idealized state. For instance, Paul was stepping out of a very practical section of his treatise to the Romans to describe what a good government *should* be like either now or in some future golden age. Paul was not describing the actual, current experience of the Christians in Rome, nor was he reveling in some fancy that Nero was serving the Lord by upholding His law. Instead, he was explaining what a proper civil government *should* look like in the world (and what it will be like during the postmillennial golden age). Thus, theonomists avoid the problem of reconciling the plain meaning of the text with the fact that Nero was in power by viewing Romans 13:1-7 as an abstraction.

The second branch within the integrated authority school is what could be termed the **revitalized (or reshaped) divine right of kings** view—denoted simply as *divine right* for short. Evangelical proponents of this view include, Samuel E. Waldron (a leading, modern Reformed Baptist), John Eidsmoe (a modern theologian and writer on public policy motifs), pastor John MacArthur, English Baptist John Gill, Charles H. Spurgeon (most likely), and probably Martin Luther (who would otherwise be a theonomist). Recall too the Tory preacher (mentioned in Part 1 of this series) who proclaimed that "Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God." He holds a divine right perspective.

According to this view, the state is a special sphere of authority along with the family and the church. The state has a useful purpose in directly advancing the kingdom of God in the world, but the parameters under which the state must operate or decree public policy have not been very well delineated theologically. Unlike theonomy, where the state and church are more closely linked, the state serves God directly without necessary intervention from the church, restraining chaos and sin in society. Believers owe allegiance to the state and nation in a way that is tantamount to their allegiance to their local church. The American flag is proudly displayed in church sanctuaries, and pastors fondly commemorate national holidays.

The state becomes a sort of oracle of God, although not in a fully inspired sense. Christians must obey virtually any command of public policy as if the decree had come from God Himself. For a divine righter, breaking either the "letter of the law" or the "spirit of the law" is sin. For example, speeding, hiring an illegal alien, or not coming to a full and complete stop before the limit line before the stop sign would be morally wrong (in nations where such activities are illegal).

In the divine right view, the state is benign or even innocuous. Like a television set, the state can be good when good things (men) participate in it. But when evil things (men) dominate then the state will be evil. A few favored biblical rules are declared to be within the proper range of civil government function. However, the biblical principles that underlie state rules often end up being an arbitrary selection of

favorite behavioral ideals (e.g., (1) enforcing the Ten Commandments, or (2) just the 5th through the 9th Commandments, or perhaps (3) enforcing all New Testament rules as well as a few Old Testament ones regarding sodomy, bestiality, homosexuality, etc.). Unlike theonomists, which are more consistent in selecting what biblical principles apply to the state, the divine righter becomes the arbiter of what is right and wrong in a social sense and, therefore, what particular moral issues should be enforced by the state and which ones should be left to church discipline.

Revolution and civil disobedience are frowned upon, including the American Revolution and the so-called Civil War. The instigation of either war is widely considered to have been sinful. Hence, divine right holds a passive or non-confrontational view in terms of public policy theology. With respect to apostolic doctrine, divine right seems to have the most difficulty of the four views in avoiding the problem of reconciling the plain meaning of Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 with the fact that Nero was in power. As incredible as it might seem, some argue that Nero *was* (albeit imperfectly) punishing those who did evil in the sight of the Lord and rewarding those who did well in God's sight. Others seem to have never really thought about the implications of what the words *good* and *evil* might mean in the cultural context of Nero's Rome.

For my part, I think that the divine right view is an embarrassment for American Christianity. Although it is convenient, amicable, and mollifying, the divine right view is also naïve and lacks a cogent and consistent understanding about the nature of the state and the Christian's response to public policy.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 6)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
April 27, 2005

This column is the sixth installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

In my previous two columns, I outlined the two historical schools of Evangelical thought regarding the nature of the state and public policy: (A) the Integrated Authority School and (B) the Competing Kingdom School. In this column, I pick up that discussion by delineating in greater depth the principles of Competing Kingdom School, and the two views associated with it.

The competing kingdom school views the state as an entity entirely distinct from the church and family insofar as promotion of the Kingdom of God is concerned. Some proponents of this school would see the state as benign, although it often rears up its ugly side to assail the church of God. Others would view it as significantly aligned with Satan's kingdom and his efforts in the world. Either way, the state is *not* a special sphere of authority along with the family and the local church.

The first branch of this school is the **Anabaptist** (strict separationist) or pacifist view. Leading Evangelical theologians of this perspective include Menno Simmons, Mark Roth, Harold Bender, and Heinrich Bullinger. Submission is passive for the Anabaptist, and even though rebellion is unavoidable in most lifetimes (as Christians inevitably come into contact with trying public policies), armed revolt is never the role of a Christian. Hence, the Anabaptist view holds a passive or non-confrontational public policy theology. However, like the divine righters, the Anabaptists do not make a very compelling or consistent case for reconciling the plain meaning of Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 with the fact that Nero was in power.

The Anabaptist view is the least sophisticated branch of the competing kingdom school and at some points (like divine right) is attenuated by some apparent logical contradictions in its structure. For instance, the Anabaptist preacher tells believers that it is sinful to be involved with the state's "social security" plan, running for office, jury participation, military service, or voting because the state is effectively evil. The state is also exposed as the frequent afflicter of the church, persecuting God's people. Yet many of this persuasion hold, paradoxically, that the malevolent state is in some way doing God's bidding by restraining evil in the world and punishing criminals. While Anabaptists view the state as a

separate, competing kingdom (some even see it as having a satanic nexus), they also see the state (even in Nero's Rome presumably) as an instrument of God to punish criminals or those who do evil in God's sight. This fact is rather odd given that Anabaptists, who are presumably the good guys in general, have suffered more persecution at the hands of state than perhaps any other Christian group.

The second branch of the competing kingdom school may be aptly termed **liberty of conscience**. Although this term has not been commonly used historically to describe theological views of public policy, many theologians and pastors have held it. Proponents include Baptists at the time of the American War for Independence such as Isaac Backus, John Leland, and John Wallers, as well as Roger Williams and probably John Bunyan (who at least held the seeds of the liberty of conscience view). Any Christian who holds to a dispensational or a "new covenant" Calvinistic perspective of biblical interpretation will tend to embrace this view, along with Baptists in general. Such Christians prize volunteerism and freedom of thought among believers and in society, shunning the notion of using Old Testament law or public policy to coerce people into behaving in a proper manner. For instance, few of them would want to force people to abstain from working on Sunday and to attend church services instead. Few of them would want to enlist the tools of the state to better Evangelism by compelling people to hear the Gospel. Only God has a right to "compel" sinners to come to Him (Luke 14:23; Psalm 65:4).

The liberty of conscience view is developed and applied in a practical way in my book *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* (2003). In the same way that theonomy is the logical outcome of a Presbyterian and postmillenarian theology, liberty of conscience is the logical outcome of a Baptist theology (whether premillenarian or amillenarian). More resolutely than its Anabaptist counterpart, liberty of conscience views the state as evil, having a strong link with Satan and his kingdom. Yet Christians are left to their liberty with regard to where and when to resist the state, work within the state, or participate in revolution. Like theonomy, liberty of conscience holds a transformational, active or involved view of public policy theology. It is morally wrong at times to rebel against the state, but not always. Yet the state is never viewed as something to be transformed or that can ever become anything other than evil. The state is not the benign entity of the divine righters.

Moreover, those who hold a liberty of conscience view have a well worked out and cogent view of the words good and evil used in Romans 13:3-4 and 1 Peter 2:13-14. Unlike the divine righters, they do not try to make Nero into an overall bad ruler that nonetheless did imperfectly bring law and order to society. And unlike the Anabaptists, they do not try to impose a godly role on the state as an occasional punisher of criminals. They do not share the theonomic quest to idealize the passages and push them off as a theological abstraction with little practical significance for the Christians at Rome. Instead, they interpret the words good and evil to mean good and evil as defined by the state (or Nero) rather than as defined by God. So a state may consider Christians to be "evil" and punish them with the sword (as Nero did), while rewarding adulterers, idolaters, and murderers that it deems to be "good".

The liberty of conscience view (which is my perspective) permits Christians to disobey public policy at times. Even though the general rule is for them to submit to rulers and public policies, Christian submission to civil government must be *passive* rather than active. The Greek verb ὑποτασσεσθω, translated "be subject" in Romans 13:1, is in the present tense, passive voice in the original language. Likewise, Paul uses the passive voice in Titus 3:1 (ὑποτασσεσθαι), as does Peter in 1 Peter 2:13 (ὑποταγητε). In other words, Christians are to obey whenever directly called upon to do so, so long as God is not defrauded or any sin committed, but it is not their duty to *actively* pursue a course wherein they scour the "law of the land." They do not need to make sure that they are in compliance with every point of public policy if the state does not directly pressure them to do so. Accordingly, Christians do not sin by violating government rules *per se*. They sin if their actions sidetrack them from their primary mission, cause harm to a neighbor, or detract from the glory of God. Being unduly harassed by the state for things of miniscule importance (from an eternal perspective) must not be the primary focus of a kingdom-minded saint. But acts of disobedience—even revolution—are both permissible and righteous.

Christian Views on Rebellion (Part 7)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the final installment of a seven part series dealing with Christians and rebellion against the civil authority.

Not only are the great majority of rulers recorded in the Scriptures wicked, they also share certain common immoral character traits. And such bad behavior even arose in otherwise good theocratic rulers. While it is said that “anger rests in the bosom of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9), it also seems to rest in the bosom of kings and other civil authorities. Pharaoh got “angry” (Genesis 40:2; 41:10) and King Saul became both “angry” and “displeased” (1 Samuel 18:8), as did King David (2 Samuel 13:21) and the princes of the Philistines (1 Samuel 29:4). Good King Asa was likewise affected, being enraged with a seer and oppressing some of God’s people (2 Chronicles 16:10), and King Uzziah was angry with the priests over the divine technicalities of a ritual (2 Chronicles 26:19). Nebuchadnezzar responded “in rage and fury” to the faithful Jews (Daniel 3:13). King Ahasuerus’s “anger burned in him” after Queen Vashti refused to obey him (Esther 1:12). Sanballat was angered by the Jews’ rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls “and took great indignation” (Nehemiah 4:1, 7). The “princes” were angry with the Prophet Jeremiah, beat him, and cast him into prison (Jeremiah 37:15). Herod was “exceedingly angry” with the Magi (Matthew 2:16). Herod had also been “very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon” (Acts 12:20a). Herod hated Jesus too and desired “to kill” Him (Luke 13:31). Perhaps political power tends to promote the sin of anger? Or is this tyrannical anger induced from within a ruler by the hateful adversary of good, viz. the devil?

Instead of being for “praise” those who do “good” (cf. Romans 13:3), as many Christians today suppose the civil authority should be, rulers have proven to be a violent and terrifying foe of good people. From the time of His birth, even Jesus Christ was assailed by bad public policy: “...for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him” (Matthew 2:13). Eventually, the civil authority did abuse Jesus: “Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate” (Luke 23:11). Moreover, since a servant is not above His master (Matthew 10:24), the church also suffered persecution by the hand of the state. “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church” (Acts 12:1). A civil junta of “the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees” (Acts 4:1) hated the Apostles and had determined to “severely threaten them” (Acts 4:17, 29). Enraged, Satan pledged to “make war” with the church by means of his “beast” of civil authority (Revelation 12:17-13:1).

Alternatively, Jesus Christ was never angry. While civil rulers became enraged as a result of self-indulgence in their own lusts and pride, Jesus only assailed other men (e.g., harassing the money changers in the Temple or mocking the Scribes and Pharisees) when “zeal” to please His Father inspired him (John 2:14-17). Angry civil rulers throw tantrums when they do not have their way, but Jesus—and all Christians who desire to imitate Him—only participate in social upheaval out of a zeal for the glory of God. So it was for the Christian Founders in America. They fought tyranny for the glory of God. As a result we enjoy the fruits of prosperity for our lives and the Gospel that has been unparalleled in the history of the world.

Harry Stout postulates: “When understood in its own times, the American Revolution was first and foremost a religious event” (*Christianity Today*, Spring 1996). At the time of the War for American Independence, perhaps eighty percent of the 2.3 million free Americans attended Protestant churches regularly (with the overwhelming majority being Calvinists). Baptists and Methodists were growing rapidly, and would eventually eclipse all other denominations. They dominated Virginia and overwhelmed areas of the South and elsewhere (notably Pennsylvania and Rhode Island) with Evangelicalism. And preachers *en masse* backed the revolt against King George III. Were the faithful sinning? Was the Christian church dreadfully backslidden? Tory preachers affirm this sentiment and pronounce that God was merely working through—and in spite of—the sinful actions of the rebellious colonists in order to bring about His pur-

poses. That's euphemistic parlance meaning "Yes, the American colonists sinned but we still like the results anyway." But perhaps their actions were not sinful.

Jesus taught his disciples to not only be concerned about the evil doctrine emanating from false religion but also to beware the evil public policies of the civil authority. "Then He charged them, saying, 'Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod'" (Mark 8:15). Herod's leaven was promulgated through wayward public policy. Christians have many enemies in the world, both religious and secular (or civil). If Christians cannot flee (Luke 21:21), then perhaps some of them will have opportunity to defend their families from criminals and tyrants. If they can neither flee nor fight, then they will surely become martyrs to the Glory of God (Revelation 2:13).

Ultimately, we win. The Bible says that "kings of the earth" and the "rulers" take a stand "against the Lord and against His Christ" (Psalm 2:2; Acts 4:26), but their actions (as any other action of Satan) are under the control of God's foreordained and predetermined purpose (Acts 4:27-28). The Bible teaches that satanic forces hold sway over civil rulers and turn them against God's Kingdom: "For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:14, cf. 13:1). Nevertheless, civil authorities will not prevail against God or His people. "It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord will punish on high the host of exalted ones, and on the earth the kings of the earth" (Isaiah 24:21).

The day is coming, dear Christian, and dear lover of liberty, that you too might join the ranks of the Founding Fathers in resisting tyranny. Are you really prepared to take a stand against the "kings of the earth"? If not, now's the time for a paradigm shift in your public policy theology.