

A DEFENSE OF LIBERTY AGAINST TYRANTS

Editor's Note: *In this crucial election year Americans are faced with the same issues that confronted our Founders: taxation without representation and the overreach of government beyond its God-ordained authority. The article below, by Bill Heid, wisely explains these issues and posits solutions for our nation today.*

The American Revolution was a war over taxation, lawful authority, and the traditional rights of Englishmen. When the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act (1765), it sought to impose on the American Colonies an authority the Colonies did not recognize. Parliament was the legislature of Great Britain, and her peoples were represented in it. The colonists weren't. The Colonies had their own legislatures. The colonists believed they should only be taxed by their own elected representatives and that "Taxation without representation is tyranny." In their minds, they were fighting for their proper rights as Englishmen—indeed, for the rights that God gave to every man. They believed they were fighting in terms of God's law and with His blessing. In fact, in many churches, especially those with Calvinist leanings, the Revolution was preached as a revival: to oppose tyranny was to defend the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

According to John Adams, one of the most popular books in the colonies on the eve of the Revolution was *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos [A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants]*, written in 1579 by an anonymous French Calvinist calling himself Junius Brutus. The book details the ideas and words that propelled Christian pastors and laymen to hazard their lives and fortunes in a war for liberty and independence more than two centuries ago. These excerpts from *Vindiciae* come

from the Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics (www.reformed.org).

The Ruler as God's Minister

From the beginning, *Vindiciae* argues for and from the sovereignty of God. All authority comes from the Creator, and ought to be exercised

on His terms. Civil rulers are not autonomous lawmakers; their authority comes from God.

First, the Holy Scriptures teach that God reigns by His own proper authority, and kings rule by derivation: God from Himself, kings from God. God has a jurisdiction proper and kings are his delegates. It follows then that the jurisdiction of God has no limits, but that of kings is finite; that the power of God is infinite, but that of kings is confined; that the kingdom of God extends itself to all places, but that of kings is restrained within the confines of certain countries.

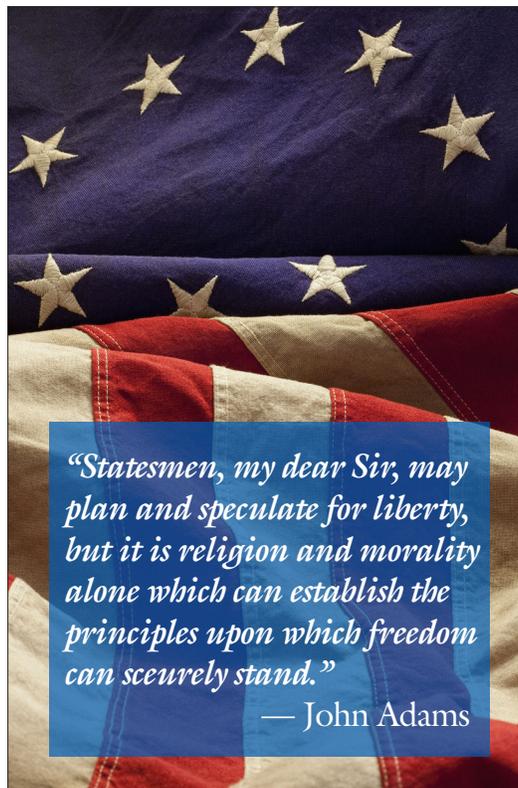
All the rulers and governors of the world are but His hirelings and vassals, and are obligated to take and acknowledge their in-

vestitures from Him. God alone is the owner and lord, and all men, whatever their station in life, are His tenants, agents, officers and vassals. All without exception owe fealty to Him, according to that which He has committed to their dispensation.

This being so, every king, every ruler, ought to maintain and defend the law of God found in Scripture.

Therefore all kings are the vassals of the King of Kings, invested into their office by the sword, which is the recognition of their royal authority, to the end that with the sword they maintain the law of God, defend good, and punish evil.

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"Statesmen, my dear Sir, may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand."

— John Adams

Statism, Then and Now

But the author's world was not unlike our own. Many who called themselves "Christian" had no problem with human tyranny masquerading as lawful government, especially if they themselves held the power.

But there are many rulers in these days who call themselves "Christian," who arrogantly assume that their power is limited by no one, not even by God, and they surround themselves with flatterers who adore them as gods upon earth. Not to mention the many others who, out of fear or constraint, either believe, or appear to believe, that rulers ought to be obeyed in all things, and by all men.

The rulers exceed their authority, not being content with that authority which the almighty and all good God has given them, but seek to usurp that sovereignty which He has reserved to Himself over all men. And not being content with absolute power over the lives and property of their subjects, these tyrants seize for themselves the right to rule over their consciences as well, over which the authority belongs to Jesus Christ alone. Holding the earth not great enough for their ambition, they want to climb and conquer heaven itself. The people, on the other hand, follow the commandments of men when they yield to these rulers who command that which is against the law of God.

God-Ordained Solutions

What is the legal or political remedy for such tyranny? And who ought to apply it?

But who may punish the king...if it be not the whole body of the people? For it is the people to whom the king swears and obliges himself, no more nor less, than the people do to the king.

But what should be the nature of this "punishment"? Is *Vindiciae* advocating anarchy or some sort of popular uprising?

Will you say that a whole people, that beast of many heads, must run in a mutinous disorder, to order the business of the commonwealth? What address or direction is there in an unruly and unbridled multitude? What counsel or wisdom, to manage the affairs of state? When we speak of all the people, we understand by that, only those who hold their authority from the people, that the magistrates who are inferior to the king, and whom the people have substituted, or established, an assembly with a kind of

tribunal authority, to restrain the encroachments of sovereignty, and to represent the whole people.

Vindiciae held no place for vigilante justice or public anarchy. Opposition to tyranny ought to be led by lesser magistrates—by governors, legislatures, judges, city councils, by those who have the duty and authority under God to oppose lawlessness when it impinges upon their jurisdictions. In the American Revolution, the "lesser magistrates" were the colonial legislatures.

In short, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* is arguing for a world under God's law, for all human authority comes from God and ought to operate in terms of His revealed Word. When one ruler, even a king, opposes God's law and assumes tyrannical powers, the other rulers—who also have their authority from God—ought to oppose and remove him. When the tyrant is a king, he ought to be challenged in God's name by the lesser magistrates who have the faith and courage to do so. In twenty-first century America, "lesser magistrates" would certainly include state governors and state legislatures.

– Bill Heid

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A Final Note: Violent riots and revolutions will not solve our problems. As John Adams asked: "What do we mean by the American Revolution The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people...a change in their religious [convictions]." Americans today need a deep seated renewal of our religious and biblical convictions in order to restore our Constitutional freedoms.



— Marshall Foster



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