

‘Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God’ and the Declaration of Independence

By R. Andrew Myers

“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said,

We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Acts 5.29

"Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

This famous saying of both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin is said to have been on the epitaph of [John Bradshaw](#) (1602-1659), a British judge who presided over the trial of King Charles I, when his body was re-interred in Jamaica (where it was taken by his son to protect it from the fury of the Restoration towards regicides).

"Men must be governed by God, or they will be ruled by tyrants." -- **William Penn**

"Man will ultimately be governed by God or by tyrants." -- **Benjamin Franklin**

This article traces some of the known or probable influences of history upon the writing of our national Declaration of Independence and quotes relevant extracts

c. 410 – Augustine

Sermon 12 [Ben. 62] on the New Testament (Matt. 8.8 and 1 Cor. 8.10) (the chronology of Augustine's sermons is difficult to pin down precisely):

“Do we lift up ourselves unto pride, or tell you to be despisers against the powers ordained? Not so. Do ye again who are sick on this point, touch also that border of the garment? The Apostle himself saith, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God. He then who resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.”

But what if it enjoin what thou oughtest not to do? In this case by all means disregard the power through fear of Power. Consider these several grades of human powers. If the magistrate enjoin anything, must it not be done? Yet if his order be in opposition to the Proconsul, thou dost not surely despise the power, but chooseth to obey a greater power. Nor in this case ought the less to be angry, if the greater be preferred.

Again, if the Proconsul himself enjoin anything, and the Emperor another thing, is there any doubt, that disregarding the former, we ought to obey the latter? So then if the Emperor enjoin one thing, and God another, what judge ye? Pay me tribute, submit thyself to my allegiance. Right, but not in an idol's temple. In an idol's temple He forbids it. Who forbids it? A greater Power. Pardon me then: thou threatenest a prison, He threateneth hell. Here must thou at once take to thee thy “faith as a shield, whereby thou mayest be able to quench all the fiery darts of the enemy.”

1100 -- *The Charter of Liberties*

Issued by Henry I of England, upon his accession to the throne, made public his voluntary submission to the principle of *Lex Rex*, that is, that he as prince was under the law and bound to uphold the law.

c. 1159 -- John of Salisbury

A friend and biographer of [Thomas Becket](#), himself a martyr for ecclesiastical liberty, wrote *Policratus*, the first modern European justification of tyrannicide.

“For myself, I am satisfied and persuaded that loyal shoulders should uphold the power of the ruler; and not only do I submit to his power patiently, but with pleasure, so long as it is exercised in subjection to God and follows His ordinances. But on the other hand if it resists and opposes the divine commandments, and wishes to make me share in its war against God; then with unrestrained voice I answer back that God must be preferred before any man on earth. Therefore inferiors should cleave and cohere to their superiors, and all the limbs should be in subjection to the head; but always and only on condition that religion is kept inviolate.”

1215, June 15th -- *The Magna Carta*

England's first charter of citizen liberties, was promulgated.

“1. We have in the first place granted to God and by this our present charter have confirmed, for us and our heirs forever, that the English Church shall be free and shall have its rights entire and its liberties inviolate. *And how we wish [that freedom] to be observed appears from this, that of our own pure and free will, before the conflict that arose between us and our barons, we granted and by our charter confirmed the liberty of election that is considered of prime importance and necessity for the English Church, and we obtained confirmation of it from the lord pope Innocent III — which [charter] we will observe ourself and we wish to be observed in good faith by our heirs forever.* We have also granted to all freemen of our kingdom, for us and our heirs forever, all the liberties hereinunder written, to be had and held by them and their heirs of us and our heirs.”

1265-1274 -- [Thomas Aquinas](#)

Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, opposes tyrannicide but upholds the right of resistance to tyrants. *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 42 (Concerning Sedition), a. 2:

“A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the ruler, as the Philosopher states (Polit. iii, 5; Ethic. viii, 10). Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind, unless indeed the tyrant's rule be disturbed so inordinately, that his subjects suffer greater harm from the consequent disturbance than from the tyrant's government. Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely; for this is tyranny, being conducive to the private good of the ruler, and to the injury of the multitude.”

1291, August 1 -- *The Schweizer Bundesbrief*

This was Switzerland's national charter which documented the Eternal Alliance, or League of the Three Forest Cantons. The signers were known as *Eidgenossen*, or *Confederates*, a term that has been proposed as the possible etymological origin of "Huguenot."

1320, April 6 - *The Declaration of Arbroath*

This was signed, among others, by **Thomas Randolph**, 1st Earl of Moray (d. 1332) -- whose uncle was **Robert the Bruce** -- an ancestor of Thomas Jefferson, and was a declaration of Scottish independence from England.

“But from these countless evils we have been set free, by the help of Him Who though He afflicts yet heals and restores, by our most tireless Prince, King and Lord, the Lord Robert. He, that his people and his heritage might be delivered out of the hands of our enemies, met toil and fatigue, hunger and peril, like another Macabaeus or Joshua and bore them cheerfully. Him, too, divine providence, his right of succession according to or laws and customs which we shall maintain to the death, and the due consent and assent of us all have made our Prince and King. To him, as to the man by whom salvation has been wrought unto our people, we are bound both by law and by his merits that our freedom may be still

maintained, and by him, come what may, we mean to stand.

Yet if he should give up what he has begun, and agree to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom -- for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself”

1536-1560 -- John Calvin

While opposing rebellion by individual citizens, Calvin upheld the principle of interposition of lesser civil magistrates, *Institutes*, 4.20.31:

“I speak only of private men. For when popular magistrates have been appointed to curb the tyranny of kings (as the Ephori, who were opposed to kings among the Spartans, or Tribunes of the people to consuls among the Romans, or Demarchs to the senate among the Athenians; and perhaps there is something similar to this in the power exercised in each kingdom by the three orders, when they hold their primary diets). So far am I from forbidding these officials to check the undue license of kings, that if they connive at kings when they tyrannise and insult over the humbler of the people, I affirm that their dissimulation is not free from nefarious perfidy, because they fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, while knowing that, by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians.”

1556 -- John Ponet

A Short Treatise of Politike Power (commended by John Adams):

“Chapter VI. Whether It Be Lawful To Depose An Evil Governor, And Kill A Tyrant.

...

Now for as much as there is no express positive law for punishment of a tyrant among Christian men, the question is, whether it is lawful to kill such a monster and cruel beast covered with the shape of a man. And first for the better and more plain prose of this matter, the manifold and

continual examples that have been from time to time of the deposing of kings, and killing of tyrants, do most certainly confirm it to be most true, just and constant to God's judgment. The history of kings in the Old Testament is full of it.

But now to prove the later part of this question affirmatively, that it is lawful to kill a tyrant: there is no man that can deny, but that the ethnics (although they had not the right and perfect knowledge of God) were endued with the knowledge of the law of nature.

For it is no private law to a few or certain people, but common to all: not written in books, but grafted in the hearts of men: not made by man, but ordained of God: which we have not learned, received or read, but have taken, sucked, and drawn it out of nature: where unto we are not taught, but made: not instructed, but seasoned: and (as St. Paul says) man's conscience bearing witness of it.

This law testifies to every man's conscience, that it is natural to cut away an incurable member, which (being suffered) would destroy the whole body.”

1557-1644 -- The Geneva Bible Notes

These incurred royal wrath for their opposition to tyranny (see Lewis Lupton's summary of this point [here](#)).

1558 -- Christopher Goodman

How superior Powers ought to be obeyed of their subjects, and wherein they may lawfully be by God's word disobeyed and resisted.

“Chapter VIII. The conclusion of these two parts with a further declaration of the same, that it is both lawful and necessary some times to disobey and also to resist ungodly magistrates and wherein.

Wherefore (dear brethren in the Lord) to return to our purpose, you may well understand these things which have been hitherto mentioned, not only the cause of all our misery in England this day, to have been for that we neither taught, knew, nor used true obedience: but also what obedience God requires of all men, and what He condemns for disobedience. Obedience is to hear God rather than man, and to resist man rather than God, as by the answer and doings of the Apostles, and examples of others you have been instructed. Wherein you may see how little the commandments, threatening, power, authority, or punishments of any king, prince or emperor, ought to prevail with us against the commandment of God, where with we are charged.”

1573 -- François Hotman

Franco-Gallia

“Translator's Preface:

Tis certainly as much a *Treason* and *Rebellion* against this *Constitution*, and the *known* Laws, in a *Prince* to endeavour to break thro them, as 'tis in the *People* to rise against him, whilst he keeps within their Bounds and does his Duty. Our Constitution is a Government of *Laws*, not of *Persons*. *Allegiance* and *Protection* are Obligations that cannot subsist separately; when one fails, the other falls of Course. The true Etymology of the word *Loyalty* (which has been so strangely wrested in the late Reigns) is an entire Obedience to the Prince in all his Commands according to Law; that is, to the *Laws themselves*, to which we owe both an active and passive Obedience.

By the old and true Maxim, that *the King can do no Wrong*, no body is so foolish as to conclude, that he has not Strength to murder, to offer Violence to Women, or Power enough to dispossess a Man wrongfully of his Estate, or that whatever he does (how wicked soever) is just: but the Meaning is, he has no *lawful Power* to do such Things; and our Constitution considers no *Power* as *irresistible*, but what is *lawful*.

Chapter 1

...

Now concerning the Extent of their *Power* and *Jurisdiction*, he brings in *Ambiorix*, King of the *Eburones*, giving an account of it, *lib. 5. cap 8*. "The Constitution of our Government is such (says he) that the People have no less Power and Authority over me than I have over the People. *Non minus habet in me juris multitudo, quam ipse in multitudinem*. Which Form of Government, *Plato*, *Aristotle*,

Polybius and *Cicero* have for this Reason determined to be the *best* and *most Excellent*: "Because (says *Plato*) shou'd Kingly Government be left without a Bridle, when it has attained to supreme Power, as if it stood upon a slippery Place, it easily falls into Tyranny: And therefore it ought to be restrained as with a Curb, by the Authority of the Nobles; and such chosen Men as the People have empower'd to that End and Purpose."

1574 -- Theodore Beza

De jure magistratuum (On the Rights of Magistrates Over Their Subjects).

"Chapter 5. Whether Manifest Tyrants Can Lawfully Be Checked By Armed Force.

To give a clearer answer to this question I must first lay down certain principles constituting as it were the foundations of the whole question. Assuredly, (*it is clear*) that peoples did not in the first instance originate from rulers, but whatever peoples desired to be ruled by a single monarch or by chief men elected by them were anterior to their rulers. Hence it follows that peoples were not created for the sake of rulers, but on the contrary the rulers for the sake of the people, even as the guardian is appointed for the ward, not the ward for the guardian, and the shepherd on account of the flock, not the flock on account of the shepherd. This proposition is not merely obvious in itself but may be corroborated by the history of nearly all nations, So much so that God Himself, although he had elected Saul to substitute him for Samuel in accordance with the desires of the people, yet willed that he should be chosen and accepted as King by the suffrages of the people. Thus David, although he had first been chosen as king by God Himself, yet would not undertake the administration of the Kingdom except he had first been confirmed by the suffrages and unfettered concord of the tribes of Israel.

...

In short, if we would investigate the histories of ancient times recorded by profane writers also, it will be established — as indeed Nature herself seems to proclaim with a loud voice — that rulers by whose authority their inferiors might be guided were elected for this reason that either the whole human race must needs perish or some intermediate class must be instituted so that by it one or more (*rulers*) might be able to command the others, (*and*) protect good men but restrain the wicked by means of punishments....Here we are doubtless on dangerous ground; I would therefore once again beseech my readers to bear in mind my remarks

immediately preceding lest they draw inadmissible conclusions from what must be said in the sequel. I admit that I most strongly approve of Christian patience as laudable beyond all the other virtues and never sufficiently commended; I admit that men should be zealously exhorted to it because it contributes largely to the attainment of eternal bliss: rebellions and all disorder I detest as awful abominations; in affliction especially I am of opinion that we should depend upon God alone; prayer accompanied by a serious recognition of our error I recognize as the true and necessary remedies for the overthrow of tyranny since this evil is rightly counted among the scourges sent by God for the chastisement of the people. But I deny that all these considerations deprive nations crushed by manifest tyranny of their right to safeguard themselves against it by means of prayers and repentance as well as other just remedies; and this I corroborate whilst I reply on the following powerful arguments.”

1579 -- *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*

“A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants,” or, “A Vindication Against Tyrants,” was published by Stephen Junius Brutus, nom de plume for (most likely) [Philippe Duplessis-Mornay](#) (1549-1623) or [Hubert Languet](#) (1518-1581), and republished in 1660 (read it online [here](#)). John Adams credited this treatise with being widely read and influential on the eve of the American War of Independence.

“THE FIRST QUESTION.

Whether subjects are obligated to obey rulers who issue commands contrary to the law of God.

At first, the answer to this question may seem to be obvious, for it seems to question an axiom held by all Christians, confirmed in many places in Holy Scripture, various examples throughout history, and by the deaths of all the holy martyrs. For it may be well asked why Christians have endured so many afflictions if it weren't true they were always persuaded that God must be obeyed simply and absolutely, and kings with this exception, that they command not that which is repugnant to the law of God. Otherwise, why should the apostles have answered that God must rather be obeyed than men? (Acts 5:29) Also, seeing that the will of God is always just, while the will of men may be, and often is, unjust, who can doubt that we must always obey God's commandments without any exception, and men's ever with limitation?

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.

...

Everyone knows that if a man disobeys a prince who commands that which is wicked and unlawful, he shall immediately be accused of being a rebel, a traitor, and guilty of high treason. Our Savior Christ, the apostles, and all the Christians of the early church were accused with these false charges.

...

There are no rulers which ought to be considered as firm and stable, except for those in whom the temple of God is built, and which are indeed the temple itself. These we may truly call Kings. For they reign with God, seeing that it is by Him only that kings reign. On the contrary, what beastly foolishness it is to think that the state and kingdom can be maintained if God Almighty is excluded, and His temple demolished. From this view comes so many tyrannous enterprises, unhappy and tragic deaths of kings, and ruinations of people. If these sycophants knew what difference there is between God and Caesar, between the King of Kings and a simple king, between the lord and the vassal, and what tributes this Lord requires of His subjects, and what authority he gives to kings over those his subjects, certainly so many rulers would not strive to trouble the kingdom of God. And we should not see some of them cast down from their thrones by the just instigation of the Almighty, revenging himself of them, in the midst of their greatest strength, and the people should not be sacked and pillaged and trodden down.

...

Accordingly, rulers need to know how far they are permitted to extend their authority over their subjects, and their subjects need to know in what ways they are to obey, lest should the one encroach on that jurisdiction, which no way belongs to them, and the others obey him which commands further than he ought, they be both chastised when they shall give an account of themselves before another Judge. Now the end and scope of this question in which the Holy Scripture shall principally give the resolution, is that which follows. The question is, whether subjects are bound to obey kings, in case they command that which is against the law of God: that is to say, to which of the two (God or king) must we rather obey? When the question is resolved concerning the king, to whom is attributed the fullest power, the question concerning other magistrates will be also determined. First, the Holy Scripture 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. In like manner God has created out of nothing both heaven and earth, therefore, by good right He is lord and master of both. All the inhabitants of the earth have received

from Him everything they have, and are, essentially, His tenants and leaseholders. All the rulers and governors of the world are but His hirelings and vassals, and are obligated to take and acknowledge their investitures 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. The higher their place is, the greater their responsibility to God must be, and according to the rank where God has raised them, must they make their reckoning before His divine majesty. This is what the Holy Scriptures teach in innumerable places, and all the faithful (and even the wisest heathens) have ever acknowledged: that "the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains" (Psalm 24:1). And to the end that men should not falsely worship their own labor and enterprise, the earth yields no increase without the dew of heaven. This is why God commanded that His people should offer to Him the first of their fruits, and the heathens themselves have consecrated the same to their gods, that is, that God might be acknowledged lord, and they his farmers and field workers. The heaven is the throne of the Lord, and the earth His footstool. And, therefore, since all the kings of the world are under His feet, it is no marvel, if God be called the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; all kings he termed His ministers established to judge rightly, and govern justly the world in the quality of lieutenants. By me (says the divine wisdom) kings reign, and the princes judge the earth. If they do it not "He takes off the shackles put on by kings and ties a loincloth around their waist" (Job 12:18). As if He should say, it is in my power to establish kings in their thrones, or to thrust them out, and for that reason, the throne of kings is called the throne of God. As the Queen of Sheba said to King Solomon: "Blessed be the Lord your God who delighted in you to set you on his throne to be king for the Lord thy God, to do judgment and justice." (2 Chron. 9:8) In like manner we read in another place, that Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord, or on the throne of the Lord's kingdom."

1581, July 26 - [The Act of Abjuration, or Dutch Declaration of Independence](#)

The Dutch Low Countries hereby declared their independence from Spain (read it online [here](#)).

“As it is apparent to all that a prince is constituted by God to be ruler of a people, to defend them from oppression and violence as the shepherd his sheep; and whereas God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his

commands, whether right or wrong, but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects (without which he could be no prince), to govern them according to equity, to love and support them as a father his children or a shepherd his flock, and even at the hazard of life to defend and preserve them. And when he does not behave thus, but, on the contrary, oppresses them, seeking opportunities to infringe their ancient customs and privileges, exacting from them slavish compliance, then he is no longer a prince, but a tyrant, and the subjects are to consider him in no other view. And particularly when this is done deliberately, unauthorized by the states, they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another prince for their defense. This is the only method left for subjects whose humble petitions and remonstrances could never soften their prince or dissuade him from his tyrannical proceedings; and this is what the law of nature dictates for the defense of liberty, which we ought to transmit to posterity, even at the hazard of our lives. And this we have seen done frequently in several countries upon the like occasion, whereof there are notorious instances, and more justifiable in our land, which has been always governed according to their ancient privileges, which are expressed in the oath taken by the prince at his admission to the government; for most of the Provinces receive their prince upon certain conditions, which he swears to maintain, which, if the prince violates, he is no longer sovereign.”

1603 -- Johannes Althusius

Politica

“Chapter XXXVIII - Tyranny and Its Remedies

...

When a ruler has failed only in some part of his office or government, however, he is not immediately to be called a tyrant. Regarding such a person one must consider that even the best at some time or other are weak in the performance of their offices, and are not for this reason to be thought of and treated as tyrants, provided the foundations and bonds of the universal association remain safe and unharmed, and are not shaken, assaulted, or upset by vices or faults of princes. Nor is one to be treated as a tyrant who, having already started on the road to tyranny, nevertheless does not obstinately and insanely persist on it. For the wicked life of a magistrate does not invalidate his royal authority, just as a marriage is not dissolved by every misdeed committed by one mate against another — unless it is the misdeed of adultery, because this is directly contrary to the nature of marriage. So not every misdeed of a magistrate deprives him of his sceptre, but only that in which he, having accepted and then neglected the just rule of administration, acts contrary to the fundamentals and essence of human association, and destroys civil and social life....”

1613 -- David Pareus

Commentary on Romans (see David Pareus, *Operum theologicorum*, Vol. II, pp. 246-263) was published, a book that was burned publicly at Oxford and Cambridge in 1622 by order of the British Privy Council because of its exposition of Romans 13, which upholds the Calvinist theory of resistance to tyranny.

1642, August 4 – *Declaration of the Lords and Commons to Justify Their Taking Up Arms*

The British Parliament, already engaged in a civil war with King Charles I, issued this declaration, which has sometimes been referred to as the Puritan Declaration of Independence. It was directly influential upon the 1775 Second Continental Congress as mentioned below. The document can be found in part online [here](#), and in full in the John Rushworth edition, *Historical Collections of Private Passages of State, Weighty Matters in Law, Remarkable Proceedings in Five Parliaments* (1680-1722), vol. 4, pp. 761-768; or online at 'House of Lords Journal Volume 5: 2 August 1642', *Journal of the House of Lords: volume 5: 1642-1643* (1802), pp. 256-260).

We the Lords and Commons in Parliament assembled, having taken into serious Consideration, the present State and Condition of imminent Danger in which the Kingdom now stands, by reason of a Malignant Party prevailing with his Majesty, putting him upon violent and perilous Ways, and now in Arms against us, to the hazarding of his Majesty's Person, and for the Oppression of the true Religion, the Laws and Liberties of this Kingdom, and the Power and Priviledge of Parliament: all of which every honest Mand is bound to defend, especially those who have taken the late Protestation, by which they are more particularly tied unto it; and the more answerable before God, should they neglect it:

Wherefore we finding ourselves ingaged in a Necessity to take up Arms likewise for the Defense of these, which otherwise might suffer and perish, And having used all the good ways and means to prevent Extremities, and preserve the Peace of the Kingdom (which good endeavors of ours the Malignity of our Enemies hath rendered altogether successless and vain) do now think fit to to give this Account unto the World, to be a Satisfaction unto all Men of the Justice of our Proceedings, and a Warning unto those who are involved in the same Danger with us, to let them see the Necessity and Duty which lies upon them, to save themselves, their Religion and Country, for which purpose we set out this ensuing Declaration.

...

Therefore, we the Lords and Commons, are resolved to expose our Lives and Fortunes for the Defence and Maintenance of the true Religion, the King's Person, Honour and Estate, the Power and Priviledge of Parliament, and the Just Rights and Liberties of the Subjects.

...

And we do here require all those who have any sense of Piety, Honour or Compassion, to help a distressed State, especially such as have taken the Protestation, and are bound in the same Duty with us unto their God, their King and Country, to come into our Aid and Assistance: This being the true cause for which we raise an Army, under the command of the Earl of Essex, which whom in this Quarrel we will live and die.

1644 -- [Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*](#)

This major Calvinistic treatise teaches that the king is under the law, not above it, and that the ruler who becomes a tyrant may lawfully be resisted. Read it online [here](#).

Question XXVIII. Whether or no wars raised by the subjects and estates, for their own just defence against the king's bloody emissaries, be lawful.

...

We hold, that the king using, contrary to the oath of God and his royal office, violence in killing; against law and conscience, his subjects, by bloody emissaries, may be resisted by defensive wars, at the commandment of the estates of the kingdom.

1648 -- [John Goodwin's *Right and Might Well Met*](#)

This treatise vindicates the British Parliament and its army against charges of rebellion in its resistance to King Charles I.

The first-born of the strength of those who condemn the said act of the Army as unlawful, lieth in this: that the actors had no sufficient authority to do what they did therein, but acted out of their sphere, and so became transgressors of that law which commandeth every man to keep order, and within the compass of his calling.

To this I answer: . . . as our Saviour saith (Matt. 2. 27) that the sabbath was made for man (*i.e.*, for the benefit of man), and not man for the sabbath, so certain it is, that callings were made for men, and not men for callings. Therefore the law of the sabbath, though enacted by God, was of right, and according to the intention of the great Lawgiver himself, to give place to the necessary accommodations of men, and ought not to be pleaded in bar hereunto; in like manner, if the law of callings at any time opposeth, or lieth cross to, the necessary conveniences of men, during the time of this opposition it suffereth a total eclipse of the binding power of it.

1649 -- John Milton's *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

Read it online [here](#)

For if all human power to execute, not accidentally but intendedly, the wrath of God upon evil doers without exception, be of God; then that power, whether ordinary, or if that faile, extraordinary so executing that intent of God, is lawfull, and not to be resisted. But to unfold more at large this whole Question, though with all expedient brevity, I shall here setdowne from first beginning, the original of Kings; how and wherfore exalted to that dignitie above thir Brethren; and from thence shall prove, that turning to Tyranny they may bee as alwfully deposed and punished, as they were at first elected: This I shall doe by authorities and reasons, not learnt in corners among Scisms and Heresies, as our doubling Divines are ready tocalumniat, but fetch't out of the midst of choicest and most authentic learning, and no prohibited Authors, nor many Heathen, but Mosaical, Christian, Orthodoxal, and which must needs be more convincing to our Adversaries, Presbyterial.

...

It follows lastly, that since the King or Magistrate holds his autoritie of the people, both originally and naturally for their good in the first place, and not his own, then may the people as oft as they shall judge it for the best, either choose him or reject him, retaine him or depose him though no Tyrant, meerly by the liberty and right of free born Men, to be govern'd as seems to them best. This, though it cannot but stand with plain reason, shall be made good also by Scripture. Deut. 17.14. When thou art come into the Land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt say I will set a King over mee, like as all the Nations about mee. These words confirme us that the right of choosing, yea of changing thir own Government is by the grant of God himself in the People.

...

Therefore Saint Paul in the forecited Chapter tells us that such Magistrates he meanes, as are, not a terror to the good but to the evil; such as bearenot the

sword in vaine, but to punish offenders, and to encourage the good. If such onely be mentiond here as powers to be obeyd, and our submission to them onely requir'd, then doubtless those powers that doe the contrary, are no powers ordain'd of God, and by consequence no obligation laid upon us to obey or not to resist them.

1750, January 30 -- [Jonathan Mayhew](#)'s *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to Higher Powers*,

This famous sermon was credited by John Adams with being greatly influential in leading to the commencement of the War of American Independence.

Let us now trace the apostle's reasoning in favor of submission to the *higher powers*, a little more particularly and exactly. For by this it will appear, on one hand, how good and conclusive it is, for submission to those rulers who exercise their power in a proper manner: And, on the other, how weak and trifling and unconnected it is, if it be supposed to be meant by the apostle to show the obligation and duty of obedience to tyrannical, oppressive rulers in common with others of a different character.

...

Thus, upon a careful review of the apostle's reasoning in this passage, it appears that his arguments to enforce submission, are of such a nature, as to conclude only in favor of submission to *such rulers as he himself describes*; i.e., such as rule for the good of society, which is the only end of their institution. Common tyrants, and public oppressors, are not intitled to obedience from their subjects, by virtue of any thing here laid down by the inspired apostle.

I now add, farther, that the apostle's argument is so far from proving it to be the duty of people to obey, and submit to, such rulers as act in contradiction to the public good, and so to the design of their office, that it proves *the direct contrary*. For, please to observe, that if the end of all civil government, be the good of society; if this be the thing that is aimed at in constituting civil rulers; and if the motive and argument for submission to government, be taken from the apparent usefulness of civil authority; it follows, that when no such good end can be answered by submission, there remains no argument or motive to enforce it; if instead of this good* end's being brought about by submission, a *contrary end* is brought about, and the ruin and misery of society effected by it, here is a plain and positive reason against submission in all such cases, should they ever happen. And therefore, in such cases, a regard to the public welfare, ought to make us withhold from our rulers, that obedience and subjection which it would, otherwise, be our duty to render to them. If it be our duty, for example, to obey

our king, merely for this reason, that he rules for the public welfare, (which is the only argument the apostle makes use of) it follows, by a parity of reason, that when he turns tyrant, and makes his subjects his prey to devour and to destroy, instead of his charge to defend and cherish, we are bound to throw off our allegiance to him, and to resist; and that according to the tenor of the apostle's argument in this passage.

1775, May 20 - *The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence*

Although its authenticity has been questioned by some, this declaration was signed by the citizens of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, making it the first declaration of independence issued within the British colonies. Read it online [here](#).

Resolved: That whosoever directly or indirectly abets or in any way way form or manner, covutenances the invasion of our rights, as attempted by the Parliment of Great Britain, is an enemy to his country, to America, and the rights of man.

Resolved: That we, the citizens of Mecklenburg county, do hereby dissolve the political bonds which have connected us with the mother country, and absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British crown, abjuring all political connection with a nation that has wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of Americans at Lexington.

Resolved: That we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, that we are and of right to be, a sovereign and self-governing people under the power of God and the general Congress; to the maintenance of which independence we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor.

1775, May 31 - *The Charlotte Town Resolves*

These resolves were issued by the Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Committee of Safety. Read it online [here](#).

1775, July 6 - *The Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*

Read it online [here](#). This declaration was written by Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson, and issued and signed by the Second Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson records in his *Autobiography* that his study of the historical collections of [John Rushworth](#) (personal secretary to Oliver Cromwell, who is the source of record for the British Parliament's August 4, 1642 Declaration of the Lords and Commons to Justify Their Taking Up Arms) was the primary model for the 1775 Continental Congress Declaration.

Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign assistance is undoubtedly attainable. -- We gratefully acknowledge, as signal instances of the Divine favour towards us, that his Providence would not permit us to be called into this severe controversy, until we were grown up to our present strength, had been previously exercised in warlike operation, and possessed of the means of defending ourselves. With hearts fortified with these animating reflections, we most solemnly, before God and the world, declare, that, exerting the utmost energy of those powers, which our beneficent Creator hath graciously bestowed upon us, the arms we have been compelled by our enemies to assume, we will, in defiance of every hazard, with unabating firmness and perseverance, employ for the preservation of our liberties; being with one mind resolved to die freemen rather than to live slaves.

Lest this declaration should disquiet the minds of our friends and fellow-subjects in any part of the empire, we assure them that we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored. -- Necessity has not yet driven us into that desperate measure, or induced us to excite any other nation to war against them. -- We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain, and establishing independent states. We fight not for glory or for conquest. We exhibit to mankind the remarkable spectacle of a people attacked by unprovoked enemies, without any imputation or even suspicion of offence. They boast of their privileges and civilization, and yet proffer no milder conditions than servitude or death.

In our own native land, in defence of the freedom that is our birthright, and which we ever enjoyed till the late violation of it -- for the protection of our property, acquired solely by the honest industry of our fore-fathers and ourselves, against violence actually offered, we have taken up arms. We shall lay them down when hostilities shall cease on the part of the aggressors, and all danger of their being renewed shall be removed, and not before.

With an humble confidence in the mercies of the supreme and impartial Judge and Ruler of the Universe, we most devoutly implore his divine goodness to protect us happily through this great conflict, to dispose our adversaries to reconciliation on

reasonable terms, and thereby to relieve the empire from the calamities of civil war.

Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography*, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 1, pp. 6-7:

The next event which excited our sympathies for Massachusetts, was the Boston port bill, by which that port was to be shut up on the 1st of June, 1774. This arrived while we were in session in the spring of that year. The lead in the House, on these subjects, being no longer left to the old members, Mr. [Patrick] Henry, R. H. [Robert Lee, Fr. L. Lee, three or four other members, whom I do not recollect, and myself, agreeing that we must boldly take an unequivocal stand in the line with Massachusetts, determined to meet and consult on the proper measures, in the council-chamber, for the benefit of the library in that room. We were under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen, as to passing events ; and thought that the appointment of a day of general fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention. No example of such a solemnity had existed since the days of our distresses in the war of '55, since which a new generation had grown up. **With the help, therefore, of Rushworth, whom we rummaged over for the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans of that day, preserved by him, we cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases, for appointing the 1st day of June, on which the port-bill was to commence, for a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, to implore Heaven to avert from us the evils of civil war, to inspire us with firmness in support of our rights, and to turn the hearts of the King and Parliament to moderation and justice.** To give greater emphasis to our proposition, we agreed to wait the next morning on Mr. Nicholas, whose grave and religious character was more in unison with the tone of our resolution, and to solicit him to move it. We accordingly went to him in the morning. He moved it the same day; the 1st of June was proposed; and it passed without opposition. The Governor dissolved us, as usual.

1776, July 4 - *The United States Declaration of Independence*

The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress, and signed on August 2, 1776.