

**REVIEW OF DR. BROWN ON THE
LAW OF CHRIST RESPECTING
CIVIL OBEDIENCE, ESPECIALLY IN
THE PAYMENT OF TRIBUTE. WITH
AN APPENDIX**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649487080

Review of Dr. Brown on the Law of Christ Respecting Civil Obedience, Especially in the Payment of Tribute. With an Appendix by Alexander Carson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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PREFACE.

THE grounds and extent of the doctrine of obedience to Civil Government are questions of the greatest practical importance to Christians in every country and in every age. Civil rulers demand obedience, and if the Law of Christ suspends the submission of his people on their conviction with respect to the quality of the government, or the purposes of taxation, Christians must, in every country, be often at war with the existing powers. What, then, is the will of God on this subject? On this subject he has revealed his will in Rom. xiii. 1—7, in a strong, clear, full, and precise manner. Yet strong, clear, full, and precise as is the Apostle's language on this duty, his meaning is variously expounded. To ascertain, then, the meaning of this part of the word of God, according to the laws of language, must be of the utmost importance to every

events of the age and country in which it was written, and with the customs and habits of thought of the people to whom it was originally addressed." I utterly deny the authority of this canon. On what does it rest? It is a mere assumption. It is not self-evident, and therefore cannot challenge assent. On the contrary, I maintain that it is quite possible to write a book, not on science, which will be intelligible to all who thoroughly understand the language, while the reader has no other acquaintance with the events of the age and country in which it was written, nor of the customs and habits of the people to whom it was originally addressed, than that which the work itself affords him; far from such prerequisites being necessary, if a book is not intelligible to those properly acquainted with the language, there must be a fault in the composition. It is a foul calumny on the Scriptures, to represent that the laws of Christ, which are intended to direct his people in every age and in every country, are not intelligible without the knowledge of other things not contained in the Scriptures. If any law of Christ cannot be understood by his people, without knowledge which the Scriptures do not afford, the Scriptures are a deficient guide. If they are such a book, they are not a revelation. It is as absurd as it is wicked, to suppose that the Holy Spirit modified his language in recording the laws of Christ, by the customs and habits of those to whom they were originally addressed. Obedience to civil rulers is perfectly the same thing to Christians in all ages and countries. The Scriptures are to be interpreted, not from such previous knowledge, nor from "the modes

of thought and feeling" prevalent in the times of the interpreter, but from their own language. The interpretation of Rom. xiii. 1—7 is perfectly the same thing, whether the interpreter lives in an age and country of the purest barbarism and of the most tyrannical despotism, or in an age and country of the highest civilization and liberty. Such differences have not the smallest effect on the language of the law of Christ, and should not have any on the interpretation of it.

To the want of the above prerequisites, or inattention to them, Dr. Brown ascribes the opposite expositions of this chapter in former times in this country. But the fact alluded to had no such origin. The opposite expositions of this part of the word of God were not owing to ignorance of the times in which the epistle was written, but to the different inclinations and prepossessions of the interpreters. Each party found their own doctrine on Rom. xiii. 1—7, because they wished it to be there. The Apostle taught either the divine right of kings, or the duty of rebellion, according to the system of his interpreter.

III. He assumes, p. 5, that what is "present to the mind" of the writer, and "the direct and primary object" of the writing, must be known, not from what is written, but from other sources of information. This is divination, not interpretation. The interpreter can lawfully know what was before the mind of the writer, or what was his direct and primary object in writing, only from the writing itself.

IV. That Christian subjects have a right, in certain circumstances, to rebel, he founds on a principle not contained in Scripture. "On the one hand," says he,

p. 5, "it was maintained by Milton and Vane, and Locke and Hoadly, with invincible argument and overwhelming eloquence, that civil government, being an institution intended entirely for promoting the security and welfare of the community at large, whenever that end was obviously not obtained,—when the power which was created for the purpose of protecting life and property was habitually and notoriously exercised in endangering or destroying both,—that it was the right and the duty of every man, by all lawful and constitutional means, to have the government so altered as to gain its end ; and if all other methods were found ineffectual to secure the necessary alteration, that the people had the right as well as the power to put down such an intolerable tyranny by force." Here the right of rebellion is founded on reason, without alleging even the colour of Scripture. Can that be a Christian duty which is not taught in Scripture ? If this is a right and duty, it cannot be called a Scripture right and duty ; for it pretends no origin in Scripture. If this is a right and duty, the Scriptures are defective ; for they do not teach it. Are Milton and Vane, and Locke and Hoadly, the depositaries of the Spirit of God on the subject ? If Christians have such a right and duty, the Scripture must teach it, and what the circumstances are in which it exists. But as the Scriptures teach no such thing, no such right and duty can exist.

V. The principle on which Milton and Vane, and Locke and Hoadly, build their doctrine, is not only not Scriptural, but is in itself false. That civil government, as an institution of man, ought to be en-

tirely for the promoting of the security and welfare of the community at large, may be true; but the Apostle in this chapter, treats of civil government as the ordinance of God. It is not self-evident, then, that the promoting of the security and welfare of the community is *entirely* the object of God in the institution of civil government. It is possible that God may have other objects also in view, such as the punishing of wicked nations through tyrannical rulers, and the affording of an opportunity for the manifestation of the cruelty of man in tyranny and oppression. Rulers may serve the great purpose of preserving society, while they are enormously profligate. We know that tyrannical rulers were given to Israel to punish them for their idolatry. The only person in the house of Jeroboam in whom there was any good, was taken away in youth. Righteous rulers sometimes do not answer God's purposes. He can do his work by his enemies as well as by his friends. The great monarchies to which God gave the world were all savage "beasts;" and the fiercest of them was in power when the Apostle wrote. We cannot assume what are all God's purposes in the institution of civil government. The above extract assumes what is false, even with respect to government as a *creation* of man. It assumes, that every government has originally been created for the purpose of protecting life and property. Of all the governments that ever have existed in the world, this is the case with very few. The implied compact, so much talked of, is a mere phantom. It is unsound, then, to reason from such a compact.

VI. It is not self-evident that Christians have a

right to rebel, even when their rulers most flagrantly abuse their power. It is possible that God may have wise reasons for not allowing them to rebel. If this is possible, the contrary cannot be assumed. God's own declaration only can determine the question. And God has determined it. Even when they are persecuted in his own cause, they are forbidden to fight. They may fly; but they must not resist.

VII. Another false and most mischievous principle assumed by this interpreter, is, that the peculiar circumstances of the Roman Christians were among the grounds of the obedience inculcated in this paragraph. "In the agitation of passion," says he, "utterly forgetting, or warped by interest, studiously keeping out of view that the circumstances of the Christians in Rome,—a small body,—chiefly of the lower orders, many of them foreigners,—under a heathen government essentially absolute, over which they had and could have no control, and the circumstances of the British nation, with few exceptions, making a profession of Christianity,—under a government administered by men professing Christianity,—essentially free,—on whose management the Constitution gives their subjects the means of making an impression by petition or representation, and whose very existence depended on their will, were by no means parallel,—from the passage before us, they attempted to prove that the existing government was the ordinance of God, its administrators his appointed ministers, and that whoever resisted them violated the law of Christ, and drew down on himself the righteous vengeance of Heaven."

In what part of the document is it stated that the fact that the Christians at Rome were a small body, was any part of the grounds on which the Apostle urged obedience to civil government? Does not this give a reason for obedience, not assigned by the Scripture? Does not the passage rest obedience on a different ground? Is not this to inculcate Scripture duty on grounds of men's own devising? This is forgery. The Apostle urges obedience on the ground that civil rulers are an ordinance of God. Dr. Brown grounds it on different reasons, that in other circumstances would justify rebellion. The Apostle does not say, obey civil rulers because ye are a small body, mostly of the lower orders, many of you foreigners, but because "there is no power but of God." Does Dr. Brown think that obedience, in the most unlimited sense, implies that British freemen when they become Christians, must become slaves like the subjects of the Roman Cæsars? This would be to give rulers more than their due. Our rulers are not powers in such a sense. But should a Cæsar overturn our constitution, or a mad democracy be by an avenging God let loose on us, we must obey. Even such a government, if it actually holds the reins of empire, is of God. Jehovah-Jesus actually sways the sceptre even when it is in the hands of infidels and tyrants. In this view the Christian may have consolation. The Lord God omnipotent reigneth! The disciples of Christ have no need to unite with his enemies in plots to overturn a wicked and oppressive government. If a wicked government is to be overturned, Jesus has instruments fit for effecting his purpose. He de-