

Is America the Result of a Violation of Romans 13?

It's quite common in some segments of the evangelical community to criticize our war with England in the colonial era as a rebellion against God-given authority and therefore a violation of Romans 13.

For instance, noted expository preacher John MacArthur, for whom I have enormous respect, has said, "So the United States was actually born out of a violation of New Testament principles, and any blessings God has bestowed on America have come in spite of that disobedience by the Founding Fathers." Is he right?

We can readily stipulate that Romans 13 does command submission to civil authority. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Rom. 13:1-2).

There are some obvious caveats here. For one, whenever civil authority commands us to do something that violates the laws of nature and nature's God, the Christian citizen has a duty to obey God rather than government. As the apostles themselves put it, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29b). This is precisely what county clerk Kim Davis did when she went to jail rather than allow her name to be used to sanction what God had clearly condemned.

If Martin Luther King, Jr. had not been imbued with that same spirit, there would have been no civil rights movement. As he put it in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law

or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws ... Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Romans 13 does not in any way compel us to believe that everything that civil government does is right or must be accepted without criticism or complaint. We know from Romans 13 that every single little tiny slice, every last bit of political power that a politician has, he received from God. Remember that Paul said there is no political authority except from God. And those that exist have been established by God.

Now this divinely delegated power and authority can either be used for good purposes or for evil purposes, and God will hold political leaders accountable for misusing his power and authority. He used Babylon to discipline the wayward kings of Judah in 586 BC, and he used the Allies to discipline Hitler in World War II.

The American Revolution Was Biblically Justified

There is no "divine right" of the kings in Scripture, which is the doctrine that kings are not accountable to any earthly authority since their authority comes directly from God himself. Under this theory, the authority of the king is absolute, and therefore rebellion against the king is the worst of all political crimes.

But this is not the view of either the Scriptures or the Founders. In the Declaration, the founders issued a comprehensive and prophetic catalogue of the 27 things King George had done that were evil in the sight of the Lord. This "long train of usurpations" and "oppressions" included such

transgressions as refusing his assent to their laws, imposing stiff taxes on them without representation or their consent, obstructing the administration of justice, establishing arbitrary forms of government, imposing tyrannical legislation on them, conducting himself in a way that was "totally unworthy of the head of a civilized nation," stirring up hostile Indian nations against them and in general seeking to establish "an absolute tyranny" over the states. He, in short, had conducted himself in every way not as a king but as a tyrant.

The king, they complained, had refused their humble and repeated petition for the redress of their grievances. Their petitions had been answered "only by repeated injury."

They concluded, "A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

Having declared "the causes which impel them to the separation," they soberly and solemnly declared that "all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved" and that "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States."

The Biblical Paradigm for the American Revolution

Is there a parallel in the Scriptures to our political separation from England? Yes, for the separation of the northern kingdom of Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah, as recorded in 1 Kings 11-12, followed almost precisely the same template.

After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam replaced him as king. The northern tribes, who functioned much as our colonies did, met with the king to bring their just complaints regarding what they had had to endure under Solomon's heavy-handed rule. With Jereboam as their spokesman, they complained

that Rehoboam's father had "made our yoke heavy." If Rehoboam would "lighten the hard service" Solomon had imposed on them, "we will serve you" (1 Kin. 12:4c).

In other words, they too had been made subject to a long train of abuses and petitioned humbly for relief.

Unfortunately, Rehoboam responded as King George did. "The king did not listen to the people" (1 Kin. 12:15), but responded instead with arrogance and anger. He "answered the people roughly" (almost the same word the founders used of King George) and promised them "whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your burden. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chasten you with scorpions!" (1 Kin. 12:11). Instead of lightening their load, he was determined to throw even more bricks in their backpack.

Whereupon the northern colonies declared their independence from the crown. "What portion do we have in David? We also do not have an inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel, and see to your own house, David!" (1 Kin. 12:16). That was their declaration of independence. They were, from that day forward, free and independent tribes.

All this, the Scriptures make clear, was God's doing. The Lord, speaking to Jereboam through the prophet Ahijah, had said "See, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and will give ten tribes to you ... because they have forsaken Me" (1 Kin. 11:31b, 33a). God promised Jereboam that his blessing would rest on this fledgling nation – under one condition. "... if you will listen to all that I command you and will walk in my ways ... I will be with you and build you a sure house, as I built for David" (1 Kin. 11:38b-c).

God's sovereign hand was seen even in the hardening of Rehoboam's heart. "Thus the king did not listen to the people, for the cause was from the Lord, that He might fulfill His saying (1 Kin. 12:15).

The parallels are impossible to ignore. A heavy-handed central government. Repeated petitions for relief, which were ignored. A declaration of independence from former political allegiances. God's blessing on the endeavor. In fact, the entire affair in both instances was under the sovereign direction of God. God engineered an independence movement in 930 B.C., and he did it again in A.D. 1776.

After July 4, 1776, America Was the Romans 13 Government

Now we can address the Romans 13 question. Our war for independence was not a violation of the command to submit to the authority of government. In fact, it was just opposite. It was a war carried to success through the willing submission of the American colonists to their new governing authorities.

For on July 4, 1776, a new nation came into being by the providential hand of God. According to Romans 13, this new government was established by God, and its citizens were now biblically obligated to submit to their new government as they had been to the old.

So contrary to John MacArthur, beginning on July 4, 1776, the Romans 13 command to submit to the governing authorities applied to the United States and not to Great Britain. A colonist on July 3 obeyed Romans 13 by submitting to the crown. On July 5, he obeyed Romans 13 by submitting to the government of the United States.

Those who took up arms under the direction of the Continental Congress did so in willing submission to Romans 13 and not in violation of it. Even those who had resorted to force to defend American interests prior to the Declaration did so in obedience to Romans 13, for the militias who defended the colonies, and the Continental Army who defended them all, did so under the direction of the authorities God had placed over them, whether the authorities were colonial governors and legislatures or the Continental Congress.

So affairs are exactly the other way around from the way in which many evangelicals frame the issue. The American who was violating Romans 13 on July 5 was the American who refused to submit to the newly established American government. This is what made Benedict Arnold a traitor to his country.

This changes dramatically the way we view the armed conflict with Britain. Our war for independence was not a rebellion, it was a war of self-defense. It was a war to protect America's sovereign independence from foreign aggression. It was a war to defend this new nation from the invasion of a foreign power.

On July 4, the British armed forces became an invading force with no legal right to remain on U.S. soil. It had no more moral right to occupy American soil than the German armies had to occupy France in 1940.

Every nation, even a brand-new one, has the moral right to defend itself from invasion. This is exactly what the Continental Army did under General George Washington until Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown and the redcoats, every last one of them, were sent home.

So with all due respect, I disagree with John MacArthur. America has not been blessed in spite of the Declaration of Independence but because of it. {eo}

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