

Tyranny Must Be Resisted
Acts 23:1-5; 1 Kings 18:17-18
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Tyranny must be resisted, and not passively accepted. When man's commands clash with God's commands, we must answer the question, whose authority is supreme? Dear ones, no other being than God is lord of your conscience—God alone is lord of the conscience! May the words of that faithful covenanted minister, Samuel Rutherford, ring ever true:

Truth to Christ [faithfulness, loyalty to Christ—GLP] cannot be treason to Caesar . . . (*Lex Rex or The Law and the Prince*, cited from Mr. Rutherford's "Preface").

The parents of Moses resisted Pharaoh's command to drown their son, Moses, in the river though it would have meant their own death if detected, and they rather preserved his life and kept God's commandment. **Daniel** resisted the wicked command to pray to the king alone, and he rather chose the lion's den in order to keep the Lord's command. **The apostles** resisted the command of the Jewish Supreme Court to cease and desist from preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus Christ, and they rather suffered a beating and imprisonment in order to obey the command of the Lord Jesus to preach the gospel.

It's not that we as Christians or Covenanters are trouble-makers and hate all authority placed over us. We're not anti-government! To the contrary, we love all lawful authority that God has instituted and that is the minister of God to us for our good (Romans 13:4). And when we must resist that which is unlawful, it is only because we must obey God rather than rulers who issue unlawful commands (Acts 5:29). We don't disobey because we love rebellion. We disobey because we love the Lord Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His commandments above all rulers (the First Commandment). And, dear ones, it is not our obedience to the commands of the Lord that causes trouble, but is rather the unlawful commands of ungodly rulers that cause the trouble (1 Kings 18:17-18).

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The High Priest Has No Lawful Authority to Do Evil (Acts 23:1-2); (2) Paul Resists the Tyranny of the High Priest (Acts 23:3-5).

I. The High Priest Has No Lawful Authority to Do Evil (Acts 23:1-2).

A. In Acts 22, Paul had been falsely accused by a Jewish mob of bringing Gentiles into the Temple and profaning it. He was rescued by Roman soldiers from the violent beating of the Jews, and was given permission by the Roman commander to address his fellow Jews. The Jews listened quietly until Paul testified that Jesus called him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The Jewish mob went crazy, and the Roman commander rushed Paul up the flight of stairs to the Castle of Antonia to question Paul by scourging and torturing him in order to gain a confession and/or information from Paul. Paul sent shivers up the spine of the Roman commander when Paul made it clear that he was a Roman citizen, who had been denied his rights. Paul was quickly unbound and on the following day he was taken by the Roman commander to be questioned by the Jewish Supreme Court (the Sanhedrin) in an effort to know what Paul had done.

B. Our text begins in Acts 23:1 with Paul addressing the Sanhedrin.

1. Paul begins his address with, "Men and brethren", which likely offended this assembly, who considered themselves not just Paul's Jewish peers (which "men and brethren" implies), but they were

superior to Paul, in which he should have addressed them as “fathers”. Paul intentionally did not follow their politically correct protocol.

2. Paul then testified that in spite of the false charges brought against him in the Temple (i.e. bringing Gentiles into the Temple) he had lived and conducted his life even to this very day with a view of doing what he believed was right before God. Even when he persecuted Christians, he was following his erring conscience in doing what he believed was pleasing to God (Proverbs 14:12). After Paul’s conversion, he realized his conscience was misinformed about Jesus and those who believed and followed Jesus. And since his conversion, he had been walking before the Lord God with a conscience renewed in the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul is emphasizing here to the Sanhedrin that he has done nothing wrong—he has not violated God’s Law despite these false charges. His renewed conscience was clear before the Lord.

a. Dear ones, our conscience is only as faithful as the standard by which it is judging (it is not an independent judge). It will either judge by the changing standards of the world or by the unchanging and infallible standard of God’s Word. Paul sincerely thought he was serving God by persecuting Christians, but his conscience was wrong.

b. Christian liberty is not the freedom to make your conscience lord of your life. Christian liberty is not the freedom to believe whatever you want to believe or to do whatever you want to do. That is not freedom—that is bondage. Christian liberty is the freedom to trust Christ and to love and obey Christ in all of His moral commandments. This nation was founded upon the fatal error that it is a religious liberty to practice whatever religion one sincerely believes and is a divine right granted by God. Where does God in His Word grant the “right” or “liberty” to worship false gods, to practice a false religion, to break the Sabbath, to murder unborn children, or to desecrate marriage by those being of the same sex? Yes, even the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that claims to grant the right to freedom of religion must bow before the First Commandment (Thou shalt have no other gods before me). Man’s law must always bow to God’s Law. When God’s rights are ignored and despised, so will the true rights of men be ignored and despised. If we despise God and His rights, we will despise His image.

C. The Jewish Sanhedrin understood the words of Paul to be both disrespectful of their superior rank over him and to be his denial of any wrong doing in regard to the false charges brought against him. It is at that point that the high priest, Ananias, commands an officer near Paul to slap him across the mouth (Acts 23:2). This sets up what becomes a classic defense against the tyranny of rulers by the Apostle Paul.

II. Paul Resists the Tyranny of the High Priest (Acts 23:3-5).

A. Paul’s stinging words in Acts 23:3 are not a vengeful retaliation against Ananias (which would be unlawful and contrary to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:38-39), but are rather a just rebuke and resistance to the tyranny of the high priest (and the Sanhedrin that did not rebuke the high priest). Paul charges Ananias publicly with two sins.

1. **Hypocrisy** (“Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall” Acts 23:3). Ananias fell under the same condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes by Christ in Matthew 23:27. Ananias was like a wall that was painted white with lime, but was rotten inside and ready to fall down. He broke the Law while claiming to judge by the Law.

a. Dear ones, varying degrees of hypocrisy and inconsistency dwell in all of us as Christians, but they should never dwell there comfortably. We must by God’s grace hate and despise our hypocrisy. We hate the hypocrisy we see in others, but are blind to our own hypocrisy. We must daily seek the Lord’s forgiveness and nail it to the cross of Christ, for it was crucified with Jesus on His cross (Romans 6).

b. Those who received the greatest condemnation from the Lord Jesus were not those who knew and confessed they were sinners, but those who hid their unconfessed sin behind a veneer of

self-righteousness in looking down their nose at others. Those who are filled with a critical spirit (picking people apart) are usually those who are likewise filled with unconfessed hypocrisy in judging others by a different standard than the one by which they judge themselves. The hypocrite is not the one who repents of his hypocrisy, but the one who is comfortable with it and continues in it.

2. **Tyranny.** Tyranny is the arbitrary and unlawful use of authority. Ananias commanded that Paul be slapped and condemned contrary to the God's Law (even though no accusation supported by witnesses had been brought before the Sanhedrin).

a. Tyranny is not necessarily in the degree of cruelty and pain that is meted out, but is in the unlawful use of power. To slap Paul indicated he had already pre-judged the case without a hearing. That is tyranny. To murder the unborn is simply tyranny to a higher degree.

b. Likewise, when Christian bakers are judged by courts to have violated the moral and civil rights of sodomites because they cannot in good conscience before God bake them a wedding cake to celebrate their immorality (contrary to the Seventh Commandment)—that is tyranny. When those practicing a false religion are legally protected (contrary to the First Commandment) so that multitudes are led to destruction—that is tyranny. Bringing into the Church worship and holy days not appointed by God in His Word is also tyranny—the unlawful use of authority. Like Paul we must resist tyranny with God's Law.

3. Paul pronounced a prophetic curse upon Ananias by the Holy Spirit: "God shall smite thee" (Acts 23:3). This curse was fulfilled in 66 A.D. when Ananias was brutally slain by Jewish insurgents within Jerusalem according to Josephus (*Jewish Wars*, ii. 17. 9).

B. Not caring at all about the unjust action of Ananias, those standing near Paul seek to misuse God's Law in order to shame Paul (Acts 23:4). Paul declares that he didn't know that Ananias was the true high priest because God's Law prohibits speaking evil of the rulers of God's people (Acts 23:5). What is Paul saying?

1. Is Paul sincerely apologizing because he really did not know that Ananias was the high priest (whether due to poor eyesight or due to never having seen Ananias)? I think not. Ananias would have been conspicuous by his seat and apparel, if not by the fact that he spoke out as the president of the Sanhedrin for Paul to be slapped.

2. Is Paul speaking with sarcasm and actually justifying his rebuke because Ananias was not by God's Law the high priest, but was only the high priest in name only? I agree with Calvin who says (Commentary on Acts 23:5),

Therefore Paul purgeth himself of this crime; yet so, that he denieth that Ananias is to be counted a priest of God, who hath corrupted and perverted all the order of the Church.

Likewise, the *Westminster Annotations* agree that Paul spoke these words with sarcasm toward Ananias as a usurper of the office of the high priest and not as a lawful high priest:

I knew him not to be a lawful High Priest, who thus violateth the Law; and indeed he was but an usurper.

3. The office of high priest was no longer by this time an office that was constituted and ordered by God's Law. It had become a political office that was appointed by Rome through King Herod. Josephus states (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.1.3):

Herod also, the brother of the deceased Agrippa . . . petitioned Claudius Cesar for the authority over the temple, and the money of the sacred treasure, and the choice of the High Priests: and obtained all that he petitioned for. So that after that time this authority continued among all his

descendants till the end of the war [70 A.D.—GLP].

Thus, Ananias was not a lawful high priest, for the office of high priest was now one that was contrary to the Law of God (one appointed for political favors by a wicked King). The institution that God ordained was gone, and what remained was nothing more than a position of power and wealth given to the highest bidder. But Ananias was also not a lawful high priest because he himself had not the qualifications, being one who “made free use of violence and assassination to further his interests” (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 450). Paul called him a “whited wall”.

4. Thus, Ananias had no lawful authority to issue a command pretending to be the lawful high priest. Paul pulls back the curtain to reveal a usurper practicing tyranny. Paul’s response is not a complacent acceptance, but is rather an active resistance to tyranny.

a. Paul’s description of lawful rulers to whom we as Christians are bound to submit (and not to resist) is one who is described by Paul “as the minister of God to thee for good” (“good” as that which is agreeable to God’s Law, Romans 13:4). He is ordained by God to be “not a terror to good works, but to the evil” (Romans 13:3).

b. The lawful right to rule is not simply bestowed upon those who have the consent of the people or who come into power by the providence of God (Absalom and Hitler all had the consent of the people and were brought into power by the providence of God). Both the office and the officer must be agreeable to God’s Law (whether the Law of Nature in nations not enlightened by the gospel, or by the Law of God in nations enlightened by the gospel). Those who would rule in Christian nations must meet Christian standards and swear Christian covenants to exercise lawful authority (Scotland). They have greater light than heathen nations without the written Word.

C. What unlawful commands have you or will you face as a Christian? You too will be placed in situations where you are pressured to deny Christ and His truth in order to hold a job (work on the Sabbath, sign an unlawful contract that promotes gay rights/same sex marriage) or in order to gain a promotion at work (lying for the boss), or in order to have close familial ties (by celebrating Christmas etc.), or in order to get a good grade in school (by cheating), or in order to maintain ecclesiastical fellowship within a church (when leaders authorize what is contrary to the will of Christ)? Will you resist evil or compromise the truth?

1. What about those secret temptations that come your way in standing for the truth of Christ or falling before the temptation of the enemy? As Christians we are constantly bombarded with temptations to compromise. Will we resist the devil in the power of Christ or give in to it (James 4:7)? Dear ones, the real battle of resistance against tyranny begins there.

2. Ministers are tempted to compromise the truth to keep certain members and their financial support or to avoid addressing certain issues that may be controversial. The bribe of fame, fortune, and sex is dangled all the time in front of politicians, ministers, and owners of companies. The reason tyranny reigns in a nation is because it reigns in the hearts of leaders who have not the power of God to resist the devil.

D. Dear ones, there is a cost in resisting tyranny as did Paul and as did the faithful witnesses of Christ who would not bend the knee to civil or ecclesiastical tyranny and bribes (not accepting indulgences cost ministers their pulpits and support). This is not a mere political or religious issue. It is a lordship issue. Who is Lord of your life? You or Jesus Christ? Your pretended liberty of conscience or God’s Law of liberty?

1. What about the use of authority within the home? Men, your authority will be despised if it is used (like that of the Sanhedrin) for your own benefit rather than for the benefit of your wife and children and to the glory of God (“authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction” 2 Corinthians 10:8).

2. Faithful Scottish minister, Andrew Melville, stood before King James the 6th of Scotland and rebuked him for his tyranny over the Church of Jesus Christ. He called the king “God’s silly vassal” to his face, and then took the king by the sleeve, and resisted the king’s usurpation of power and tyranny over Christ’s Church with these words:

There is Christ and his Kingdome the Kirk, whose subject King James the sixt [sixth—GLP] is, and of whose Kingdom he is not a King, nor a Head, nor a Lord, but a member.

Tyranny denies the lordship of Jesus Christ. It claims there is another lord than Christ. Therefore, tyranny must be resisted for the sake of Christ’s lordship and our loving submission to Christ.

Dear ones, every man, woman, and child apart from Christ is bound by the tyranny of the devil. The delusion of the enemy is that you are simply doing what you want to do and that you are free. No, you are doing what the devil wants you to do, just like Eve (John 8:44). But you may be set free from the bondage and tyranny of the world, the flesh, and the devil. There is hope and freedom in Jesus Christ (John 8:36).

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