

The Civil Magistrate

extract from Proposition XIV § i

§ i. In recent years the liberty of conscience from the power of the civil magistrate has been discussed with such detail and erudition that I shall be brief. It is lamentable that few have walked according to this principle, each one advocating it for themselves but scarcely allowing it to others, as I shall discuss more in depth later.

First, in order to clear up some mistakes, it is appropriate to say something about the state of the controversy, so that what follows may be more clearly understood.

As I observed in the explanation of the Fifth and Sixth Proposition, the word “conscience” should be understood to mean that persuasion of the mind which arises from the mind’s being convinced of the truth or falsity of any thing. Though his conscience may be false or evil in itself, yet if a man goes against his conscience, he would commit a sin. What a man does which is contrary to his faith is in no way acceptable to God, even if his faith is wrong. This is why the apostle says, “whatever is not from faith is sin,” and “he who doubts is condemned if he eats,” though the thing might have been lawful for someone else.<sup>1</sup> . . .

So the question is, first, whether the civil magistrate has power in religious matters to compel people to do something contrary to their conscience, and if they refuse whether he has power to punish them by taking away their goods, their liberty, or their lives? Our answer to this is negative.

Secondly, in the same way we want the magistrate to avoid this extreme of imposing on people’s consciences, on the other hand we are far from joining with or encouraging

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:23 RB.

those free-thinkers who would stretch the liberty of their consciences to the point that hurts their neighbors or ruins human society.

Matters of conscience have to do with the relationship between God and an individual, or between some people and others who have the same understanding and meet together and worship God in the way they believe is most acceptable to him. Such groups should not impose their ideas on their neighbors or seek to force them, except by reason or the other means that Christ and his apostles used, that is, preaching and instructing those who are willing to listen and receive it. We do not at all approve of people who, under the notion of conscience, do anything contrary to the moral and perpetual statutes generally acknowledged by all Christians. In such cases the magistrate may very lawfully use his authority, for example against those who, under a pretence of conscience, say it is a principle to kill and destroy the wicked, that is, all who differ from them. Such people, calling themselves the saints, may seize power and seek to make all property common, and want to force their neighbors to share their property with them, and many other wild notions such as those reported of the Anabaptists of Münster. This evidently comes from pride and covetousness, and not from purity or conscience, and therefore I have sufficiently guarded against it in the last part of the thesis.

The liberty we lay claim to is the same as what the primitive Church justly sought under the heathen emperors: that is, for people of sobriety, honesty, and peaceable behavior to enjoy the free exercise of their conscience towards God and among themselves. They can accept others among them who come to be convinced of the same Truth, by persuasion and influence. They should not be persecuted by the civil magistrate for doing this.

Thirdly, though we would not have people hurt physically or in their property nor robbed of their privileges

as men and members of the commonwealth because of their inward beliefs, still we do not think that there should not be censures in the Church of God against those who fall into error as well as those who commit open evils.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we believe that if Christian church finds that any of her members fall into any error, and if she finds that they are stubborn after due warnings and instructions according to Gospel order, it would be legitimate for her to cut them off from her fellowship by the *sword of the Spirit*<sup>3</sup> and strip them of the privileges they had as fellow members; but not to cut them off from the world by the temporal sword, or rob them of their common privileges as men, seeing they do not possess these privileges as Christians or in that kind of fellowship, but rather as men, and members of the creation.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XIV § i (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 408-410 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 315-316.

---

<sup>2</sup> Latin: *in eos, qui in errorem prolabuntur, non minus quam erga eos, qui in peccatum cadunt*, "in those who lapse into error, not less than towards those who fall into sin."

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6:17.