

§ ii. It is evident that no one, by virtue of any power or principality he has in the government of this world, has power over people's consciences. The conscience of man is the throne of God in him, of which God is the only proper and infallible Judge. Only God, by his Power and Spirit, can correct the mistakes of conscience, and therefore he has reserved to himself the power of punishing errors of conscience, as he thinks fit. If a magistrate assumes this power, he takes it upon himself to meddle with things which are not within his jurisdiction.¹ . . . We will speak later about that excuse which says that the magistrates ought to punish according to the church's censure and judgment, which is nothing less than making the magistrate the church's hangman. Although the chief members of the church are ordained to inform, instruct, and reprove, they are not allowed to have dominion over the faith and conscience of the faithful, as the apostle explicitly states (2 Corinthians 1:24). They should not usurp this dominion, nor should they stir up the magistrate to persecute and murder those who cannot yield to church leaders in matters of conscience.

Secondly, this pretended power of the magistrate is inconsistent² with and contrary to the nature of the Gospel, which is something completely separate from the government of political states. Christ explicitly says this, saying that his Kingdom was not of this world.³ If the

¹ Latin: *in Dei cathedram ascendit, & iis se immiscet*, "he ascends to the throne of God and involves himself."

² Latin: *repugnans*, "repugnant."

³ John 18:36.

spreading of the Gospel had any necessary relation to political government, Christ has not said so; but we are supposed to imitate him in matters of this nature, and Christ has abundantly shown by his example that the Gospel is to be spread by persuasion and the Power of God, not by whips, imprisonment, banishment, and murders. Those who spread the Gospel often suffer at the hands of the wicked, but they must never cause the wicked to suffer. When he sends his disciples out, he tells them he sends them as “lambs among wolves,”⁴ to be willing to be devoured, not to devour. He tells them of their being whipped, imprisoned, and killed for their conscience, but never tells them they shall whip, imprison, or kill. Indeed, if Christians must be like *lambs*, it is not the nature of lambs to destroy or devour anyone.

It does no good to allege that in Christ’s and his apostles’ time the magistrates were all heathens, and since neither Christ nor the apostles, nor any of the believers were magistrates, they could not exercise that power. It cannot be denied that Christ, being the Son of God, had a true right to all kingdoms⁵ and was righteous heir of the earth.⁶ As regards his power, it cannot be denied that if he thought it right he could have called for legions of angels to defend him, and could have forced the princes and potentates of the earth to be subject to him (Matthew 26:53). He did not call the angels only because it was contrary to the nature of Christ’s Gospel and ministry to use any force or violence in gathering souls to him. He expressed this fully in his reproof to the two sons of Zebedee who wanted to call for fire from heaven to burn people who refused Christ. It cannot be doubted that refusing Christ then was as great a crime as to be in error now concerning the faith and

⁴ Matthew 10:16 RB.

⁵ Latin: *jure omnibus magistratibus præerat*, “by right was in command of all magistrates.”

⁶ Matthew 28:18 RB.

doctrine of Christ. It cannot be supposed that the disciples lacked the power to have punished those refusers of Christ; since they had done other miracles they might have done this also, and moreover they had the precedent of Elijah, who was a holy man in the time of the law.⁷ Yet we see what Christ says to them (Luke 9:55), “For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” Christ shows here that he did not at all approve of that kind of zeal. Those who think to make way for Christ or his Gospel by this means do not understand what spirit they are of. If it was not lawful to call for fire from heaven to destroy people who refused to receive Christ, it is far less lawful to kindle fire on earth to destroy people who believe in Christ because for conscience’ sake they will not believe, and cannot believe as the magistrates do. . . .

It was not according to the wisdom of Christ, who was and is King of kings, to constrain people by outward force to believe or receive him, since that was inconsistent with the nature of his ministry and spiritual government. So don’t people grossly offend him when they want to be wiser than he, and think they can force people to conform to their doctrine and worship, against their convictions? The word of the Lord says, “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6). But these people say, not by the Spirit of the Lord, but by might and carnal power. The apostle plainly says, “we do not wrestle with flesh and blood;”⁸ and “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual.”⁹ But these people insist on wrestling with flesh and blood when they cannot prevail with the Spirit and the intellect.* And since they have no spiritual weapons they attempt to establish Christ’s kingdom with carnal weapons, which they can never do. When the matter is thoroughly

⁷ 2 Kings 1:9-1:12.

⁸ Ephesians 6:12.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 10:4 RB.

examined, it is found to be rather from love of self than from the love of God, and from a principle of human pride which makes them want to have all others bow to them. Christ in fact uses another method, for he says, “He will make his people a willing people in the day of his power;”¹⁰ but these people do not strive against men’s wills and consciences by Christ’s power, but rather they try to make men into the people of Christ by the outward sword, which is something they can never do, as shall be shown later.

Thirdly, Christ fully and plainly declares to us his opinion in this matter, in the parable of the tares (Matthew 13). He himself is our interpreter of this parable (verses 38-41), where he says they are the “children of the wicked one,” and yet he will not allow his servants to meddle with them, lest they pull up the wheat with the tares. No one can deny that this includes heretics; the servants saw the tares and had a certain opinion of them, yet Christ didn’t want them to meddle, because they might hurt the wheat. This hints that man’s capacity to be mistaken ought to be like a bridle on him, to make him very careful in such matters. Therefore, to prevent this damage, he gives a positive prohibition, “He said, ‘Nay’ ” (Verse 29). Notwithstanding all this, those who want to pull up what they think is tares, are openly declaring that they make no bones about breaking the commands of Christ. There is a miserable evasion which some of our adversaries use, alleging that these tares are meant to be hypocrites, and not heretics! They do not have any proof except their own bare affirmation, which is therefore justly rejected. Heretics, as well as hypocrites, are children of the wicked one.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XIV § ii (Glenside PA: Quaker

¹⁰ Psalm 110:3 RB.

Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 410-413 and Roberti Barclaii,
Teologiae verè Christianae apologia, facsimile (Amsterdam:
Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 316-319.