

§ iii. . . . *Objection:* Our adversaries argue from Romans 13,<sup>1</sup> which says the magistrate does not bear the sword in vain because he is the minister of God, who is supposed to execute wrath upon those who do evil. Heresy, they say, is evil. Ergo.<sup>2</sup>

*Answer:* But hypocrisy is evil also, and they confess that the magistrate should not punish hypocrisy. Therefore this verse in Romans must be interpreted as applying to moral evils, of affairs between one person and another, and not to matters of opinion or worship. If not, great absurdities would follow. Consider that Paul was writing to the Church of Rome, which was under the government of Nero, an impious heathen and persecutor of the Church. If a power to punish heresy is included here, it will logically follow that Nero had this power and that he had it from God. After all, the apostle urges obedience because the power of the magistrate is from God. But can there be anything more absurd than to say that Nero had the power to judge in such cases? Surely if Christian magistrates should not punish for hypocrisy because they cannot discern it outwardly, far less could Nero punish anybody for heresy, which he was unable to discern. If Nero did not have the rightful power to judge or punish for heresy, then nothing can be argued from this verse in Scripture, since all that is said in this verse is applicable to Nero and it was written with a particular reference to him. On the other hand, if Nero had that power, surely he was supposed to exercise it according to his judgment and conscience, and in doing so he was not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 13:4.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore.

blamed; that is enough to justify him in his persecution of the apostles and his murder of the Christians.

*Objection:* Our adversaries object based on that saying of the apostle to the Galatians, 5:12, "I wish that those who trouble you were cut off."<sup>3</sup>

*Answer:* They do not, and cannot show how this could mean anything more than cutting off from the Church. Beza,<sup>4</sup> commenting on this place says, "We cannot interpret that in any way except excommunication, such as was done to the incestuous Corinthian.<sup>5</sup> Indeed it is madness to suppose otherwise, for Paul would not have these people cut off in any way other than he did Hymenaeus and Philetus,<sup>6</sup> who were blasphemers; he gave them over to Satan, rather than cutting off their heads."

The same answer may be given to the other argument drawn from Revelation 2:20, where the Church of Thyatira is reprov'd for tolerating the woman Jezebel. This cannot be interpreted in any other way than that they did not excommunicate her, or cut her off by a Church censure. As for corporal punishment, it is known that at that time the Christians did not have power to punish heretics in that way, even if they wanted to.

*Objection:* They allege that heresies are numbered among the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:20). Ergo, etc.

*Answer:* We deny that magistrates have power to punish all the deeds of the flesh, and it has not been proved that they have that authority. Every evil is a work of the flesh, but every evil does not come under the magistrate's jurisdiction. Is not hypocrisy a work of the flesh? Our

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<sup>3</sup> From very early on, there have been two principal schools of thought about this verse. In modern times translators usually give some variant of "I wish they would castrate (or mutilate) themselves."

Barclay ignores this variant, to interpret "cut off" as "excommunicate."

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Beza (1519-1605) was an important Calvinist theologian.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 2:16-17.

adversaries confess it should not be punished by the magistrate. Are not hatred and envy mentioned in that passage as works of the flesh? And yet the magistrate cannot punish them, in themselves, until they express themselves in other actions which come under his power. As long as heresy does not express itself in any action destructive to human society and things like that, but rather is kept within the sphere of the duties of doctrine and worship which stand between a person and God, heresy does not come under the magistrate's power in any way.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XIV § iii (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 415-417 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 320-322.