

Discovering How the Church Has Resisted Tyranny

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Introduction

- Does Romans 13 demand passive obedience to all government dictates?
- Does Christian freedom permit chaotic rebellion against government?
- Learn how the Church has responded to tyranny by Nazism and by Soviet and Chinese Communism, and how we can apply those lessons to today’s issues.

1521: Luther’s Stand at the Diet of Worms

“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

1522: Luther’s German Translation of Romans 13:4

- “Denn sie [die Obrigkeit, vv. 1–2] ist Gottes Dienerin dir zu gut.”
- “For she [the constituted order; not “he,” the king] is God’s maidservant for you, for good.”

1524–25: The Peasant Revolt

- Thomas Muentzer led a political uprising in the name of the Reformation.
- Luther denounced Muentzer as violating God’s established order in the civic realm and misusing the church to sponsor an insurrection.

1530: The Torgau Declaration

- Romans 13 does not require obedience to a person, but to an office, as defined by a constitution.
- The constitution defines offices in relation to each other, such that not even the Holy Roman Emperor holds absolute power; the local electors hold Charles V in check.
- Therefore, if the emperor exceeds the constitutional limits of his office, the lesser magistrates (e.g., the imperial electors) may correct or even depose him.
(On this basis, the Smalcaldic League formed to protect Lutherans from the emperor.)

1550: Magdeburg Confession

- Romans 13:3–4 defines the positive duties that civil government has toward its subjects; a government failing to uphold these God-given duties thereby violates God’s establishment.
- The people and their lesser magistrates have distinctive vocational responses appropriate to each of the four levels of injustice:
 - **Level 1 (occasional injustice due to human weakness)**
 - *People*: bear patiently
 - *Lesser Magistrates*: may intervene by reminding the ruler of the limits of his office
 - **Level 2 (violation of oath due to systematic corruption)**
 - *People*: may peacefully disobey
 - *Lesser Magistrates*: may intervene to protect the people
 - **Level 3 (imposition of immoral requirements on people or lesser magistrates)**
 - *People*: must not obey
 - *Lesser Magistrates*: must not obey, but instead must interpose to protect the people
 - **Level 4 (assault upon God-given rights and God Himself):**
 - *People*: must resist such an antichrist, ideally peacefully, submitting to lesser magistrates
 - *Lesser Magistrates*: must resist such an antichrist, using force according to office

1930s: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jewish Question

- Although it is not wrong if a church happens to have only Aryan clergy and no Jewish-descended clergy, this ceases to be an indifferent matter when the Nazis force it upon the churches.
- The Great Commission (“all nations,” Matthew 28) and Holy Baptism (“neither Jew nor Greek,” Galatians 3) mean that no ethnic limitations should be imposed on the church.
- The church must, therefore, faithfully proclaim God’s Word to correct the erring state.

1940s: Eivind Berggrav and the Nazified Church of Norway

- Based on 75 pages of Luther notes (his “Luther arsenal”) to correct the pseudo Luther:
 - Indeed, Luther opposed violent mass uprisings (Peasant Revolt of 1525).
 - But, Luther did not teach unquestioning obedience to the state.
- The Augsburg Confession (1530) emphasized “*lawful* authority,” which Berggrav italicized. (Melancthon distinguished a “lawful kingdom” from a “robber kingdom.”)
- As for the National Socialist “Romans 13” trump card, “Luther would have asked whether the Word of God enjoins obedience to Satan!”
- Citizens should still suffer patiently and not revolt violently, but pastors should preach God’s Word to teach the correct limits of state authority, citizens may petition for reform, and lesser magistrates may have to resort to force to protect people from tyranny.
 - 85% of teachers refused, in writing, to teach the NS curriculum.
 - Tens of thousands of parents’ letters inundated the Nazified education department *daily*.
 - 93% of the clergy resigned from the Nazified Church of Norway on Easter Sunday, 1942.
 - Bishops and pastors resigned from Nazified church boards and theological faculties.
 - The underground church conducted clandestine ordinations.
 - Berggrav personally forgave Norway’s Nazi puppet-governor Vidkun Quisling.

Lessons from Christians under Soviet and Chinese Communism

- It took 22 years (1917–1939) for Soviet communism to close 98% of churches and imprison or execute 90% of clergy.
- It took 17 years (1949–1966) for Chinese communism to co-opt compromising Christians into state churches, force the faithful remnant underground, and then shut down state churches, too.
- Christians who compromised with tyranny for short-term gains only invited long-term suffering.
- Being “wise as serpents but innocent as doves,” many Christians outsmarted their persecutors and—more importantly—out loved them.

Summary

- **Three Forms of Tyranny:**
 - A person does *not* legitimately hold an office, but exercises the powers of that office anyway. (Romans 13, a *citizen* rebelling against God’s established civil order)
 - A person *does* legitimately hold an office, but exercises powers that *go beyond* that office. (Romans 13, an *officer* rebelling against God’s established civil order)
 - A person holding a position in either civil government or the church exercises power within the other kingdom—thus, violating not merely the vocation of one’s particular office, but also the entire established order of God’s two kingdoms. (Revelation 13, two beasts establishing a grotesque caricature of God’s kingdoms by colluding church and state)
- **Four Levels of Injustice:**
 - The Magdeburg Confession guides citizens and office-holders in a God-pleasing response to injustice and tyranny, ranging from patient suffering to interposition and resistance.
 - Nazi and communist regimes of the 20th century reveal that unless injustice is checked at level 1 or level 2, it readily expands toward level 3 and level 4—when resistance become more difficult.
- God has promised that persecution will come and that He will ultimately turn it for our blessing.
- We are called to be faithful to Him and to defend those entrusted to our care.
- God does not promise victory within the political realm, but Christ Himself already has won eternal salvation for all of us—forgiving us our sins and giving us a new life that begins even now.