

VINDICIAE
CONTRA TYRANNOS:
A DEFENSE OF
LIBERTY AGAINST
TYRANTS

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VINDICIAE
CONTRA TYRANNOS:
A DEFENSE OF
LIBERTY AGAINST
TYRANTS

A TREATISE WRITTEN BY
STEPHEN JUNIUS BRUTUS

*Translated by William Walker
with an Introduction by Glenn Sunshine*

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INTRODUCTION

Vindiciae contra tyrannos (“A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants,” 1579) is a short political treatise written to justify Huguenot resistance against the king of France’s attempts to stamp out Protestantism. Despite its brevity, the *Vindiciae*’s sharp defense of the right of subjects to resist unjust or ungodly rulers even to the point of armed rebellion helped shape the political theories of John Locke in England and the American Founding Fathers. Its arguments on the rights and responsibilities of rulers and subjects continue to be relevant today as we consider the limits of the power of the government and the rights of citizens to oppose governmental overreach.

To understand *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, we need to look at the religious history of France in the sixteenth century. France had been a very Catholic country for centuries, though relations with the papacy were frequently strained. The French king was a quasi-sacred figure, and among other things was obligated in his coronation oaths to fight heresy. That said, Francis I (r.1515-1547) supported church reform as necessary for reforming French society, which allowed various Catholic and Protestant reform programs to arise in competition with traditional Catholicism. The religious ferment that resulted led

THE FIRST QUESTION

Whether subjects are bound and ought to obey princes, if they command that which is against the law of God.

This question happily may seem at the first view to be altogether superfluous and unprofitable, for that it seems to make a doubt of an axiom always held infallible amongst Christians, confirmed by many testimonies in Holy Scripture, divers examples of the histories of all ages, and by the death of all the holy martyrs. For it may be well demanded wherefore Christians have endured so many afflictions, but that they were always persuaded that God must be obeyed simply and absolutely, and kings with this exception, that they command not that which is repugnant to the law of God. In another way, wherefore, should the apostles have answered that God must rather be obeyed than men, and also seeing that the only will of God is always just and that of men may be, and is, oftentimes unjust, who can doubt but that we must always obey God's commandments without any exception, and men's ever with limitation?

But forso much as there are many princes in these days, calling themselves Christians, which arrogantly assume an unlimited power, over which God himself hath no command, and that they have no want of flatterers which adore them as gods upon earth, many others also,

which for fear or by constraint either seem or else do believe that princes ought to be obeyed in all things and by all men. And withal, seeing the unhappiness of these times is such, that there is nothing so firm, certain, or pure which is not shaken, disgraced, or polluted, I fear me that whosoever shall nearly and thoroughly consider these things will confess this question to be not only most profitable, but also, the times considered, most necessary. For my own part, when I consider the cause of the many calamities wherewith Christendom hath been afflicted for these late years, I cannot but remember that of the prophet Hosea, “the princes of Judah were like them that remove the bounds: wherefore I will pour out myself like water. Ephraim is oppressed and broken in judgment, because he willingly walked after the commandments” (5:10-11). Here you see the sin of the princes and people dispersed in these two words. The princes exceed their bounds, not contenting themselves with that authority which the almighty and all good God hath given them, but seek to usurp that sovereignty which He hath reserved to himself over all men, being not content to command the bodies and goods of their subjects at their pleasure, but assume license to themselves to enforce the consciences, which appertains chiefly to Jesus Christ. Holding the earth not great enough for their ambition, they will climb and conquer heaven itself. The people on the other side walk after the commandment when they yield to the desire of princes, who command them that which is against the law of God, and as it were to burn incense and adore these earthly gods, and instead of resisting them, if they have means and occasion, suffer them to usurp the place of God, making no conscience to give that to Caesar which belongs properly and only to God.

Now is there any man that sees not this: if a man disobey a prince commanding that which is wicked and unlawful, he shall presently be esteemed a rebel, a traitor, and guilty of high treason. Our Savior Christ, the apostles, and all the Christians of the primitive church were charged with these calumnies. If any, after the example of Ezra

and Nehemiah, dispose himself to the building of the temple of the Lord, it will be said he aspires to the crown, hatches innovations, and seeks the ruin of the state. Then you shall presently see a million of these minions and flatterers of princes tickling their ears with an opinion: that if they once suffer this temple to be re-built, they may bid their kingdom farewell and never look to raise impost or taxes on these men.

But what a madness is this! There are no estates which ought to be esteemed firm and stable but those in whom the temple of God is built, and which are indeed the temple itself, and these we may truly call kings, which reign with God, seeing that it is by him only that kings reign. On the contrary, what beastly foolishness it is to think that the state and kingdom cannot subsist if God Almighty be not excluded and his temple demolished. From hence proceeds so many tyrannous enterprises, unhappy and tragic death of kings, and ruins of people. If these sycophants knew what difference there is between God and Caesar, between the King of kings and a simple king, between the lord and the vassal, and what tributes this lord requires of his subjects and what authority he gives to kings over those his subjects, certainly so many princes would not strive to trouble the kingdom of God and we should not see some of them precipitated from their thrones by the just instigation of the Almighty, revenging Himself of them in the midst of their greatest strength, and the people should not be sacked and pillaged and trodden down.

It then belongs to princes to know how far they may extend their authority, and to subjects in what they may obey them, lest the one encroaching on that jurisdiction which no way belongs to them, and the others obeying him which commands further than he ought, they be both chastised when they shall give an account thereof before another judge. Now the end and scope of the question propounded, whereof the Holy Scripture shall principally give the resolution, is that which follows. The question is if subjects be bound to obey kings in case they

command that which is against the law of God, that is to say, to which of the two (God or king) must we rather obey, when the question shall be resolved concerning the king, to whom is attributed absolute power, that concerning other magistrates shall be also determined.

First, the Holy Scripture does teach that God reigns by his own proper authority and kings by derivation, God from Himself, kings from God, that God hath a jurisdiction proper, kings are His delegates. It follows then that the jurisdiction of God hath no limits, that of kings bounded; that the power of God is infinite, that of kings confined; that the kingdom of God extends itself to all places, that of kings is restrained within the confines of certain countries. In like manner God hath created of nothing both heaven and earth; wherefore by good right He is lord and true proprietor, both of the one and the other. All the inhabitants of the earth hold of Him that which they have, and are but His tenants and farmers; all the princes and governors of the world are His stipendiaries and vassals and are bound to take and acknowledge their investitures from Him. Briefly, God alone is the owner and lord, and all men of what degree or quality soever they be, are His servants, farmers, officers and vassals, and owe account and acknowledgment to Him, according to that which He hath committed to their dispensation; the higher their place is the greater their account must be, and according to the ranks whereunto God hath raised them must they make their reckoning before His divine majesty, which the Holy Scriptures teaches in infinite places, and all the faithful, yea, and the wisest among the heathen have ever acknowledged. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof (so saith king David, Ps. 24:1). And to the end that men should not sacrifice to their own industry, the earth yields no increase without the dew of heaven. Wherefore God commanded that His people should offer unto Him the first of their fruits, and the heathens themselves hath consecrated the same unto their gods, to the end that God might