

## Government, tyrannical Government, and Rebellion.

For a more thorough study of what the Bible would have to say regarding the topics of government, tyrannical government, the violation of the legal rights of citizens by the government, rebellion, and other related subjects which would be pertinent to the American interest today, and what the biblical principles are that would govern the Christian's conduct in view of the same, consult these sources which are available for purchase on the market new or used –

*Luther's Works*, editor Walther I. Brandt (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1962), volume 45. In this work consult the following writings:

*A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion*, 1522.

*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523.

See also *Luther's Works*, editor Robert C. Schultz (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1967), volume 46. In this work consult these writings:

*Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, 1525.

*Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, 1525.

*An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*, 1525.

*Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526.

*On War Against the Turk*, 1529.

See also *Luther's Works*, editor Gottfried G. Krodel (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1975), volume 50. In this work consult these writings.

*A Letter to Lazarus Spengler (February 15, 1531)*.

*A Letter to Duke Joachim of Brandenburg (August 3, 1532)*.

See also Koestlin's remarks in his biography of Martin Luther: Julius Koestlin, *Life of Luther* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1927), pages 429-431, 456-457, & 503-504.

The following excerpts have been taken from those sources that are listed above. The location of these excerpts from *Luther's Works* has been noted by volume number and by page number at the end of each quote. These excerpts have been arranged topically.

*Proper government and proper citizenship.*

"If there is no word of God for it, then we cannot be sure whether God wished to have it so" (*Luther's Works*, volume 45, page 105).

“All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil. For this reason God has provided for them a different government beyond the Christian estate and kingdom of God. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even though they would like to, they are unable to practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity. In the same way a savage wild beast is bound with chains and ropes so that it cannot bite and tear as it would normally do, even though it would like to; whereas a tame and gentle animal needs no restraint, but is harmless despite the lack of chains and ropes.

“If this were not so, men would devour one another, seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely a single true Christian. No one could support wife and child, feed himself, and serve God. The world would be reduced to chaos. For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that – no thanks to them – they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace. Thus does St. Paul interpret the temporal sword in Romans 13 [:3], when he says it is not a terror to good conduct but to bad. And Peter says it is for the punishment of the wicked [I Pet. 2:14]” (*LW45, 90f.*).

“But you say: if Christians then do not need the temporal sword or law, why does Paul say to all

Christians in Romans 13 [:1], ‘Let all souls be subject to the governing authority’, and St. Peter, ‘Be subject to every human ordinance’ [I Pet. 2:13], etc. as quoted above? Answer: I have just said that Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor useful for them. Since a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by the very nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor. Because the sword is most beneficial and necessary for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear. Although he has no need of these things for himself – to him they are not essential – nevertheless, he concerns himself about what is serviceable and of benefit to others, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 [:21-6:9]

“Just as he performs all other works of love which he himself does not need – he does not visit the sick in order that he himself may be made well, or feed others because he himself needs good – so he serves the governing authority not because he needs it but for the sake of others, that they may be protected and that the wicked may not become worse. He loses nothing by this; such service in no way harms him, yet it is of great benefit to the world. If he did not so serve he would be acting not as a Christian but even contrary to love; he would also be setting a bad example to others who in like

manner would not submit to authority, even though they were not Christians. In this way the gospel would be brought into disrepute, as though it taught insurrection and produced self-willed people unwilling to benefit or serve others, when in fact it makes a Christian the servant of all. Thus in Matthew 17 [:27] Christ paid the half-shekel tax that he might not offend them, although he had no need to do so. Thus you observe in the words of Christ quoted above from Matthew 5 [:38-41] that he clearly teaches that Christians among themselves should have no temporal sword or law. He does not, however, forbid one to serve and be subject to those who do have the secular sword and law. Rather, since you do not need it and should not have it, you are to serve all the more those who have not attained to such heights as you and who therefore do still need it. Although you do not need to have your enemy punished, your afflicted neighbor does. You should help him that he may have peace and that his enemy may be curbed, but this is not possible unless the governing authority is honored and feared. Christ does not say, 'You shall not serve the governing authority or be subject to it', but rather, 'Do not resist evil' [Matt. 5:39], as much as to say, 'Behave in such a way that you bear everything, so that you may not need the governing authority to help you and serve you or be beneficial or essential for you, but that you in turn may help and serve it, being beneficial and essential to it'" (LW45, 93-95).

"We gain the true meaning of Christ's words in Matthew 5 [:39], 'Do not resist evil', etc. It is this: A Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every

evil and injustice without avenging himself; neither will he seek legal redress in the courts but have utterly no need of temporal authority and law for his own sake. On behalf of others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help, and do as much as he can to achieve it" (LW45, 101).

"Temporal obedience and authority, you see, apply only externally to taxes, revenue, honor, and respect" (LW45, 110).

"If a prince should happen to be wise, upright, or a Christian, that is one of the great miracles, the most precious token of divine grace upon that land. Ordinarily the course of events is in accordance with the passage from Isaiah 3 [:4], 'I will make boys their princes, and gaping fools shall rule over them'; and in Hosea 13 [:11], 'I will give you a king in my anger, and take him away in my wrath'. The world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have many wise and upright princes" (LW45, 113f).

"' I belong to the land and the people, I shall do what is useful and good for them. My concern will be not how to lord it over them and dominate them, but how to protect and maintain them in peace and plenty' ....'I will use my office to serve and protect them, listen to their problems and defend them, and govern to the sole end that they, not I, may benefit and profit from my rule'" (LW45, 120).

“Rulers are not appointed [by God] to exploit their subjects for their own profit and advantage, but to be concerned about the welfare of their subjects” (LW46, 22f).

“The Scripture passages which speak of mercy apply to the kingdom of God and to Christians, not to the kingdom of the world, for it is a Christian’s duty not only to be merciful, but also to endure every kind of suffering – robbery, arson, murder, devil, and hell. It goes without saying that he is not to strike, kill, or take revenge on anyone. But the kingdom of the world, which is nothing else than the servant of God’s wrath upon the wicked and is a real precursor of hell and everlasting death, should not be merciful, but strict, severe, and wrathful in fulfilling its work and duty. Its tool is not a wreath of roses or a flower of love, but a naked sword; and a sword is a symbol of wrath, severity, and punishment. It is turned only against the wicked, to hold them in check and keep them at peace, and to protect and save the righteous [Rom. 13:3-4]. Therefore God decrees, in the law of Moses and in Exodus 22 [21:14] where he institutes the sword, ‘You shall take the murderer from my altar, and not have mercy on him’. And the Epistle to the Hebrews [10:28] acknowledges that he who violates the law must die without mercy. This shows that in the exercise of their office, worldly rulers cannot and ought not be merciful – though out of grace, they may take a day off from their office” (LW46, 70).

“Those who are in God’s kingdom ought to have mercy on everyone and pray for everyone, and yet not

hinder the kingdom of the world in the maintenance of its laws and the performance of its duty; rather they should assist it” (LW46, 71).

*Citizenship under an Evil Government.*

“You assert that no one is to be the serf of anyone else, because Christ has made us all free. That is making Christian freedom a completely physical matter. Did not Abraham [Gen. 17:23] and other patriarchs and prophets have slaves? Read what St. Paul teaches about servants, who, at that time, were all slaves.... A slave can be a Christian, and have Christian freedom, in the same way that a prisoner or a sick man is a Christian, and yet not free” (LW46, 39).

“If you claim that you are Christians and like to be called Christians and want to be known as Christians, then you must also allow your law to be held up before you rightly. Listen, then, dear Christians, to your Christian law! Your Supreme Lord Christ, whose name you bear, says, in Matthew 6 [5:39-41], ‘Do not resist one who is evil. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. If anyone wants to take your coat, let him have your cloak too. If anyone strikes you on one cheek, offer him the other too’. Do you hear this?... You do not want to endure evil or suffering, but rather want to be free and to experience only goodness and justice. However, Christ says that we should not resist evil or injustice but always yield, suffer, and let things be taken from us. If you will not bear this law, then lay aside the name of Christian and claim another name that accords with your actions” (LW46, 28).

“Indeed, our leader, Jesus Christ, says in Matthew 7 [5:44] that we should bless those who insult us, pray for our persecutors, love our enemies, and do good to those who do evil to us. These, dear friends, are our Christian laws” (LW46, 29).

“The Christian law tells us not to strive against injustice, not to grasp the sword, not to protect ourselves, not to avenge ourselves, but to give up life and property, and let whoever takes it have it. We have all we need in our Lord, who will not leave us, as he has promised [Heb. 13:5]. Suffering! Suffering! Cross! Cross! This and nothing else is the Christian law! But now you are fighting for temporal goods and will not let the coat go after the cloak, but want to recover the cloak. How then will you die and give up your life, or love your enemies and do good to them?” (LW46, 29).

“A second example is Christ himself. What did he do when they took his life on the cross?... He did just what St. Peter says. He committed the whole matter to him who judges justly, and he endured this intolerable wrong (I Pet. 2:23). More than that, he prayed for his persecutors and said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ [Luke 23:34]....

“If you do follow the example of Christ, you will soon see God’s miracles and he will help you as he helped Christ, whom he avenged after the completion of his passion in such a way that his gospel and his kingdom won a powerful victory and gained the upper hand, in spite of all his enemies. He will help you in this

same way so that his gospel will rise with power among you, if you first suffer to the end, leave the case to him, and await his vengeance. But because of what you are doing, and because you do not want to triumph by suffering, but by your fists, you are interfering with God’s vengeance and you will keep neither the gospel nor your fists” (LW46, 30f).

#### *Rebellion against an Evil Government.*

“The fact that the rulers are wicked and unjust does not excuse disorder and rebellion, for the punishing of wickedness is not the responsibility of everyone, but of the worldly rulers who bear the sword. Thus Paul says in Romans 13 [:4] and Peter, in I Peter 3 [2:14], that the rulers are instituted by God for the punishment of the wicked. Then, too, there is the natural law of all the world, which says that no one may sit as judge in his own case or take his own revenge.... The divine law agrees with this, and says, in Deuteronomy 32 [:35], “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord” (LW46, 25).

“I make you the judges and leave it to you to decide who is the worse robber, the man who takes a large part of another’s goods, but leaves him something, or the man who takes everything that he has, and takes his life besides. The rulers unjustly take your property; that is the one side. On the other hand, you take from them their authority, in which their whole property and life and being consist. Therefore you are far greater robbers

than they, and you intend to do worse things than they have done" (LW46, 26).

"The word of Christ in Matthew 7 [:3] applies to you; you see the speck in the eye of the rulers, but do not see the log in your own eye" (LW46, 26).

"If your enterprise were right, then any man might become judge over another. Then authority, government, law, and order would disappear from the world; there would be nothing but murder and bloodshed. As soon as anyone saw that someone was wronging him, he would begin to judge and punish him. Now if that is unjust and intolerable when done by an individual, we cannot allow a mob or a crowd to do it. However, if we do permit a mob or a crowd to do it, then we cannot rightly and fairly forbid an individual to do it. For in both cases the cause is the same, that is, an injustice. What would you yourselves do if disorder broke out in your ranks and one man set himself against another and took vengeance on him? Would you put up with that? Would you not say that he must let others, whom you appointed, do the judging and avenging? What do you expect God and the world to think when you pass judgment and avenge yourselves on those who have injured you and even upon your rulers, whom God has appointed?" (LW46, 27.)

"If you were Christians you would stop threatening and resisting with fist and sword. Instead, you would continually abide by the Lord's Prayer and say, 'Thy will be done', and, 'Deliver us from evil, amen' [Matt.6:10,

13]. The psalms show us many examples of genuine saints taking their needs to God and complaining to him about them. They seek help from God: they do not try to defend themselves or to resist evil.... As his promises declare: 'God is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe', I Timothy 4 [:10]; 'Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you', Psalm 50 [:15]; 'He called upon me in trouble, therefore I will help him', Psalm 91 [:15]. See! That is the Christian way to get rid of misfortune and evil, that is, to endure it and to call upon God" (LW46, 34).

"You have not been putting this program into effect and achieving your goals by patiently praying to God, as Christians ought to do, but have instead undertaken to compel the rulers to give you what you wanted by using force and violence" (LW46, 34).

"To sum it up, [according to you:] everything is concerned with worldly and temporal matters" (LW46, 35).

"Everything was 'rights'....'Rights, rights, rights'! They were everything" (LW46, 67).

"If this bloodshed once starts, it will not stop until everything is destroyed. It is easy to start a fight, but we cannot stop the fighting whenever we want to. What have all these innocent women, children, and old people, whom you fools are drawing with you into such danger, ever done to you? Why do you insist on filling the land with blood and robbery, widows and orphans?" (LW46, 42).

“Because they knew nothing of God, the heathen did not know that temporal government is God’s ordinance (they thought of it as the fortunate creation of men) and therefore they jumped right in and thought that it was not only right, but also praiseworthy, to depose, kill, and expel worthless and wicked rulers. This is why the Greeks, in public laws, promised jewels and gifts to tyrannicides, that is, to those who stab or otherwise murder a tyrant. In the days of their empire the Romans followed this example very closely and themselves killed almost the majority of their emperors. As a result, in that great empire almost no emperor was ever killed by his enemies, and yet few of them died a natural death in bed. The people of Israel and Judah also killed and destroyed some of their kings” (LW46, 104).

“I have read in not a few history books of subjects deposing and exiling or killing their rulers. The Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans all did this and God permitted it and even let these nations grow and prosper in spite of it. However, the final outcome was always tragic. The Jews were finally conquered and their nation destroyed by the Assyrians. The Greeks were defeated by King Philip. And the Roman nation was conquered by the Goths and the Lombards” (LW46, 107).

“Now perhaps you will say, ‘How can anyone possibly endure all the injustice that these tyrants inflict on us? You allow them too much opportunity to be unjust, and thus your teaching only makes them worse and worse. Are we supposed to permit everyone’s wife

and child, body and property to be so shamefully treated and always to be in danger? If we have to live under these conditions, how can we ever begin to live a decent life?’ My reply is this: My teaching is not intended for people like you who want to do whatever you think is good and will please you. Go ahead! Do whatever you want! Kill all your lords! See what good it does you! My teaching is intended only for those who would like to do what is right. To these I say that rulers are not to be opposed with violence and rebellion, as the Romans, the Greeks, the Swiss, and the Danes have done; rather, there are other ways of dealing with them.

“In the first place, if you see that the rulers think so little of their soul’s salvation that they rage and do wrong, what does it matter to you if they ruin your property, body, wife, and child? They cannot hurt your soul, and they do themselves more harm than they do you because they damn their own souls and that must result in the ruin of body and property. Do you think that you are not already sufficiently avenged?

“In the second place, what would you do if your rulers were at war and not only your goods and wives and children, but you yourself were broken, imprisoned, burned, and killed for your lord’s sake? Would you slay your lord for that reason? Think of all the good people that Emperor Maximilian lost in the wars that he waged in his lifetime. No one did anything to him because of it. And yet, if he had destroyed them by tyranny no more cruel deed would ever have been heard of. Nevertheless, he was the cause of their death, for they were killed for his sake. What is the difference, then, between such a raging tyrant and a dangerous war as concerned?

Indeed, a wicked tyrant is more tolerable than a bad war, as you must admit from your own reason and experience.

“There is as great a difference between changing a government and improving it as the distance from heaven to earth. It is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better, and the danger is that you will not. Why? Because it is not in our will or power, but only in the will and the hand of God” (LW46, 111-112).

“Suppose that a king or lord has given an oath to his subjects to rule according to articles that have been agreed upon and then does not keep the agreement. He thereby forfeits his right to rule’.... Here is my answer: It is right and proper for rulers to govern according to laws and administer them and not to rule arbitrarily. I add, however, that a king does not only promise to keep the law of his land or the articles of election, but God himself commands him to be righteous, and he promises to do so. Well, then, if this king keeps neither God’s law nor the law of the land, ought you to attack him, judge him, and take vengeance on him? Who commanded you to do that? Another ruler would have to come between you, hear both sides, and condemn the guilty party; otherwise you will not escape the judgment of God, who says, ‘Vengeance is mine’ [Rom. 12:19], and again, ‘Judge not’ (Matthew 7 [1]) (LW46, 113).

“Here you say, ‘Are we, then, to put up with a ruler who would be such a scoundrel that he lets land and people go to ruin’?... We have this to say: God has

thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are less than ten disasters or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, ‘How good God is to me!’” (LW46, 117).

“Those fools who are the first to fight in their thoughts and even make a good start by devouring the world with words and are the first to flash their blades, are also the first to run away and sheathe their swords” (LW46, 119).

“What is done by duly constituted authority cannot be regarded as insurrection” (LW45, 61).

“Even if insurrection were a practical possibility, and God were willing to impose so merciful a punishment upon them, it is still an unprofitable method of procedure. It never brings about the desired improvement. For insurrection lacks discernment; it generally harms the innocent more than the guilty. Hence, no insurrection is ever right, no matter how right the cause it seeks to promote. It always results in more damage than improvement, and verifies the saying, ‘Things go from bad to worse’. For this reason governing authority and the sword have been established to punish the wicked and protect the upright, that insurrection may be prevented, as St. Paul says in Romans 13 [1-4] and as we read in I Peter 2 [13-14]. But when Sir Mob breaks loose he cannot tell the wicked from the upright, or keep



them apart; he lays about him at random, and great and horrible injustice is inevitable" (LW45, 63).

"Insurrection is nothing else than being one's own judge and avenger, and that is something God cannot tolerate.... God is not on the side of insurrection" (LW45, 63).

*God will punish both an evil government and its evil citizenry.*

"It is unfortunately all too true that the princes and lords who forbid the preaching of the gospel and oppress the people unbearably deserve to have God put them down from their thrones [Luke 1:52] because they have sinned so greatly against both God and man. And they have no excuse" (LW46, 23).

"If, now, you really want to keep the divine law, as you boast, then do it. There it stands! God says, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' [Rom. 12:19], and 'Be subject not only to good lords, but also to the wicked' [I Pet. 2:18]. If you do this, well and good; if not, you may, indeed, cause a calamity, but it will finally come upon you.... God is just, and will not endure it" (LW46, 28).

"In saying this it is not my intention to justify or defend the rulers in the intolerable injustices which you suffer from them. They are unjust, and commit heinous wrongs against you; that I admit. If, however, neither side accepts instruction and you start to fight with each other - my God prevent it! - I hope that neither side will

be called Christian. Rather I hope that God will, as is usual in these situations, use one rascal to punish the other" (LW46, 32).

"See the end that finally comes to rebellion in the story of Korah, Numbers 16 [:31-35], and of Absalom [II Sam. 18:14-15], or Sheba [II Sam. 20:22], Zimri [I Kings 16:18], and others like them. In short, God hates both tyrants and rebels; therefore he sets them against each other, so that both parties perish shamefully, and his wrath and judgment upon the godless are fulfilled" (LW46, 41).

"I can easily believe that you would like to have peace and good times, but suppose God prevents this by war or tyrants! Now, make up your mind whether you would rather have war or tyrants, for you are guilty enough to have deserved both from God. However, we are the kind of people who want to be scoundrels and live in sin and yet we want to avoid the punishment of sin, and even resist punishment and defend our skin. We shall have about as much success at that as a dog has when he tries to bite through steel.

"In the third place, if the rulers are wicked, what of it? God is still around, and he has fire, water, iron, stone, and countless ways of killing. How quickly he can kill a tyrant! He would do it, too, but our sins do not permit it, for he says in Job [34:30], 'He permits a knave to rule because of the people's sins'. We have no trouble seeing that a scoundrel is ruling. However, no one wants to see that he is ruling not because he is a scoundrel, but because of the people's sin. The people do not look at

their own sin; they think that the tyrant rules because he is such a scoundrel – that is how blind, perverse, and mad the world is! That is why things happened the way they did when the peasants revolted. They wanted to punish the sins of the rulers, as though they themselves were pure and guiltless; therefore God had to show them the log in their eye so they would forget about the speck in another man's eye [Matt.7:3-5].

“In the fourth place, the tyrants run the risk that, by God's decree, their subjects may rise up, as has been said, and kill them or expel them. For here we are giving instruction to those who want to do what is right, and they are very few. The great multitude remain heathen, godless, and un-Christian; and these, if God so decrees, wrongfully rise up against the rulers and create disaster, as the Jews and Greeks and Romans often did. Therefore you have no right to complain that our doctrine gives the tyrants and rulers security to do evil; on the contrary, they are certainly not secure....

“In the fifth place, God has still another way to punish rulers, so that there is no need for you to avenge yourselves. He can raise up foreign rulers, as he raised up the Goths against the Romans, the Assyrians against the Jews, etc. Thus there is vengeance, punishment, and danger enough hanging over tyrants and rulers, and God does not allow them to be wicked and have peace and joy. He is right behind them; indeed, he surrounds them and has them between spurs and under bridle” (LW46, 108-110).

[National] “self-defense is a proper ground for fighting and therefore all laws agree that self-defense is

innocent in the eyes of all men. But when the people of Israel wanted to start an unnecessary war with the Canaanites, the Israelites were defeated, Numbers 14 [40-45].... Why? Because God rules the world powerfully and leaves no wrong unpunished. He who does wrong will be punished by God, as sure as he lives, unless he repents and makes amends to his neighbor” (LW 46, 120, 121).