

The
Duties of Citizens

UNDER A LAWFUL GOVERNMENT

and the

Duties of Dissenters

UNDER AN UNLAWFUL GOVERNMENT :

Being the Concluding Sections of David Scott's
"Distinctive Principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church,"

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This re-print publication has been prepared privately by an individual dedicated to the church and doctrines known by the name Reformed Presbyterian. It is made available as a printable PDF in 2020 so that it can be re-printed by any individuals who wish to circulate this literature as helpful to keep fellow Reformed believers in the path of Christian duty, and out of the paths of sin. It should also be considered a helpful tool for Presbyterian ministers who want to preach on this topic with the guidance of a former minister whose labors aimed at the preservation of the doctrines of Holy Scripture, as matters of truth and duty.

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David Scott, the author, was ordained in the RPCNA as a Home Missionary in 1832. He then served as pastor of the congregation of Albany, New York, and later of Rochester. As a teacher and defender of the Reformed Presbyterian Church’s doctrines, he withstood the errors of the New Light party who effected division in the church in 1833 by their promotion of worldly and Americanized beliefs about civil government. He died at his home in 1871.

THE DUTIES OF CITIZENS.

I. They owe obedience to the government.

The laws and regulations of a lawfully constituted government ought to be respected and obeyed. I do not mean however by this, that the subjects of law are under obligation to obey every enactment that those having power may choose to impose. I take it for granted in the remark which has been made that the government is not only rightfully constituted but also rightfully administered. I take it for granted that the laws requiring obedience are right and lawful. Otherwise they have no claim on the people; for claim arises out of the consideration that the thing commanded is in conformity to right. And this being determined, the duty of citizens is obedience to law. It is not a blind submission to whatever may be called law. It is intelligent. It judges of the authority to command, and of the thing commanded; of the right which is possessed to command and of the conformity of the command to the principles of rectitude. For no human authority has a right to impose on the subjects of government any thing whatever, that is in opposition direct or implied to the revealed law of God. There is reserved then to the citizen the right of discriminating. Though it is to be observed that he must

exercise this on his own responsibility. His resistance to civil authority is not justifiable merely because he may think so; it must be tried by the law and the testimony.

1. Obedience is due to civil government because it is a divine institution. The obedience of which I speak is not given if there is a respect to it only as a human institution: if it is sustained and obeyed by citizens simply on the ground that it is their own. The principle of obedience is respect to it as a divine institution. That it has pleased God to appoint that men should not live like wild beasts, without government and without subordination, but that they should live in society; so should they do honor to his institution by cheerfully obeying lawful authority. And obeying it too from the principle of conscientious regard to a divinely instituted ordinance. "Not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake."

2. Because obedience to the laws is necessary to the public welfare. The good of mankind is the immediate and direct end of civil society. Every violation of order or disregard to righteous authority is a direct assault upon the welfare of society, and its obvious tendency is to break up civil order and introduce anarchy and confusion. While regard is to be had to the institution as from God, regard is also to be had to the end which God had in view.

II. Civil government should be supported.

The civil ruler is entitled to remuneration for his services. It does not lie in the way of my present inquiry to ascertain on mere political grounds the advantages or disadvantages of remunerating all who are employed in the respective branches of government, as well legislative as executive and judicial. I proceed on the ground of scriptural equity, that those who serve the community have a right to be supported by the community.

Not only have the officers of government a right to be supported but the government itself needs to be supported; and it is the duty of a people to furnish the means by which the government may be sustained. “For this cause pay you tribute also; for they are God’s ministers, attending continually on this very thing.”¹ I have a reference however not so much to the furnishing of the means of carrying on the government, as to the principle from which it flows. Every government constituted on principles of representation will have provided by its constitution for the means of carrying it on. It is the will of God expressed in scripture that those who enjoy the advantages of government should cheerfully furnish the support required. As the scripture requires conscientious obedience to law, it requires also conscientious support of the government. The constitution or the law will have empowered the compulsion of paying taxes, but submitting to such compulsion is not fulfilling the obligation imposed on citizens by divine appointment. In this matter they “must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.”²

III. Those who bear civil rule are entitled to honor and respect.

I speak not of that blind admiration approaching to awe which the tyrants of the earth have exacted from their servile subjects, on the ground of divine hereditary-right or otherwise. This is as far removed from the honor and respect required by scripture as it is subversive of independence and freedom of thought.

It is the will of God that civil rulers should be held in honor and respect. “Render fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” is due.³ “Fear God; honor the king. For so is the will of God, that

1 Rom. 13.6.

2 Rom. 13.5.

3 Rom. 13.7.

with well doing ye put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.”⁴ The honor thus commanded to be given to the “king” is due on the same principle to every chief magistrate, whether known by this or any other name. The honor is due, not to the man but to the officer; and that not as known by any mere political distinction, but as possessed of lawful civil power. For while the scriptures do not determine the particular form, it determines the character of civil government; and wherever this character is possessed there is lawful power, whether the form may be republican or kingly. It is the character, and not the form of government that decides whether the power is or is not of a moral scriptural kind. The honor then is due to a lawful magistrate, whether known by the names, governor, president, or king. It is due however not only to those who bear chief authority in a state, but to subordinate magistrates in their respective places. The obligation to honor and respect civil rulers flows from the divine command: they are entitled to honor because they are his ministers.⁵

The ordaining of honor to civil rulers bears all the marks of divine wisdom and goodness. Obedience in this respect is as much for the advantage of the community at large as it is their duty. A despised government can never be advantageous to the people. There must be confidence in civil rulers on the part of the people, before they can successfully undertake to conduct public affairs so as to promote public interests on any thing like an enlarged and beneficial plan. But there can be no confidence whatever without respect or honor. This is a matter of far more vital importance to the welfare of a community than is commonly understood. Every man who values his country’s prosperity should be cautious of saying or doing any thing calculated to bring disrespect upon those who conduct its civil concerns; the Christian will especially be

4 1 Pet. 2.17,15.

5 [Rom. 13.6.]

cautious of doing any thing that may discredit a divine institution.

IV. Civil rulers should be prayed for.

“I exhort therefore,” says the apostle “that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks be made for all men: for kings and for all that are in authority.”⁶ Called to the performance of very important duties, in which the welfare of the community both civil and religious is vitally interested, they need wisdom to direct them in their counsels and actions. But the wisdom necessary for the attainment of legislative, judicial, or executive righteousness in a nation, like every other kind of wisdom, comes down from the “Father of lights.” Prayer is the way by which it is to be sought and obtained. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”⁷ The command of God makes it a duty to pray for civil rulers, and the advantage to be reaped from it should prove an incitement to discharge it. “That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”⁸

V. Citizens should remonstrate with civil rulers when they do wrong.

I speak not now of the right of petition, which every citizen possesses, which cannot be denied without a violation of the principles of justice and equity. I speak of a *duty* which they *ought* to perform; not of something they may claim as a right, but something they are bound to do as a duty. Even good and wise men may, in the performance of official as well as private duties, do far wrong. It is a duty which in such instances citizens owe to

6 1 Tim. 2.1-2.

7 James 1.6.

8 1 Tim. 2.2.

civil rulers to remonstrate discreetly, and in a becoming manner with them. Nor is this inconsistent with another duty already specified, that of honoring and respecting civil rulers.

THE RELATION OF DISSENT FROM AN IMMORAL CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

It has been taken for granted in the remarks made in the preceding section, that the government to which the duties specified are due is not any government simply existing in the providence of God. For it is alike opposed to reason as to scripture to imagine that every civil government constituted by men possesses the character that gives a government all its claim to conscientious obedience and support as the moral ordinance of God. The mere fact of existence does nothing in determining the question whether a government is conformed to the preceptive will of God, which is the only claim that gives a right to the conscientious acknowledgment of a Christian people.⁹ The existence is one thing and its character is another, but it is the character that determines the claim.

[I. They must withhold allegiance.]

To withhold allegiance from a government that is not the moral ordinance of God, is so far from being wrong that it is a duty which Christians owe to the Lord Jesus Christ. A government is immoral, in the constitution of which there is no acknowledgment of God, the Ruler of the universe; nor the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of the kings of the earth; nor the obligation of the scriptures

9 Readers may find it helpful to consult various publications on this topic, such as “The Act, Declaration, and Testimony,” Published in 1761, which includes a discussion of this distinction in part 3. For help understanding the more basic concept of Civil Government as an ordinance of God, see section IV in the Reformed Presbyterian Catechism published by William Roberts. And for help understanding the relevance of the above distinction to the United States government, see the article, “The U.S. Constitution Weighed in the Balance.”

as the supreme rule in civil things. A government is immoral, the constitution and laws of which contain unjust and inequitable principles. Finally, a government is immoral that neglects to secure the end for which magistracy is instituted; namely, the glory of God in the happiness of men; protecting them in their rights, executing justice, promoting morality, and encouraging education and religion.

“Civil society is a *voluntary association*; the nation is not bound to admit to all its peculiar privileges every person who may reside within the reach of its power, nor is every person dwelling within the limits of a nation under obligation to incorporate with the national society. Every government has the right of making laws of naturalization, and every individual possesses the right of expatriation, and both these rights are to be exercised in conformity to the law of God, the Supreme Ruler and Judge.”¹⁰

[II. It is their duty to live peaceful and orderly lives.]

Christians are not bound, therefore to incorporate themselves with a state, where such immorality exists, though they may be geographically within its jurisdiction. Yet it is their duty for the sake of peace and order “to conform to the common regulations of society in things lawful; but to profess allegiance to no constitution of government which is in hostility to the kingdom of Christ, the Head of the church and the Prince of the kings of the earth.” While thus endeavoring “to further the true end of civil government, the maintenance of peace and quietness in all godliness and honesty, they have a right to protection in their lives, liberties and property.”¹¹ It is the duty of Christians to abstain from association with, and to testify against immoral governments.

10 Reformation Principles Exhibited ch. 29/30, § 1.

11 R.P.E. ch. 29/30, § 3.

[III. They must abstain from association, and testify against such institutions.]

1. By abstaining from oaths of allegiance. An oath of allegiance is a direct recognition of the constitution sworn to, and involves the swearer in the guilt of its immorality—the guilt of swearing to maintain an immorality! Nor is the sin lessened by any consideration arising from the fact that the constitution may contain provisions for its own future amendment. Because when the oath of allegiance is taken, it is to the constitution as it *is*, and not to what it *may* be.

2. By refusing to hold office, one qualification of which is an acknowledgment of the constitution directly, or implied. To hold civil office is not wrong, and cannot be inconsistent with the Christian character; for civil government is the ordinance of God. The Christian character is not too holy to be engaged in civil transactions, nor are they too profane for his character. But civil office may be suspended on terms direct or implied, that are inconsistent with his character, and obligations as a Christian, and as a witness for the testimony of Jesus. The objection to civil office, then, is not on any abstract ground relating to civil government, but is determined by the character of the particular government objected to. The ordinance itself is entitled to every respect on the part of the Christian, because it is a divine institution, but immoral principles or radical defects in the constitution invalidate the claim of a particular government. Such are not an exemplification of the moral ordinance of God, and therefore have no claim upon that acknowledgment which is due to his institution.

3. By abstaining from the exercise of the right of suffrage, [voting.] The elective franchise is, in a representative system of government a right of great importance, and intimately connected

with the best interests of a commonwealth. The discharge of this duty with fidelity may promote the welfare of a country, or improperly exercised, it may materially injure it. Considered as the right of a citizen, it is one of great magnitude and value. When exercised the Christian ought always to feel himself bound to act on Christian principle: and never to elevate by his suffrage to a place of power and trust an unworthy individual. The character given in scripture of civil rulers, furnishes the test by which he ought to try every candidate for office—"men that fear God."¹² An irreligious man, whatever may be his talents and acquirements, can never in the administration of office be a blessing to the commonwealth. I am far from undervaluing high mental qualification for civil office, whether original or acquired; but they are of comparatively less importance than moral and religious qualifications. Honesty and uprightness of purpose, directed by the ennobling principle of "fear of God and love to man," will produce efforts of patriotism and self denial, that talented but ungodly men cannot even imagine; and will achieve for their country a prosperity permanent as it is pure, which is utterly beyond the reach of intellectual attainment, apart from moral and religious principle. But there is another question which the Christian ought to settle before he exercises the right of suffrage. Can he consistently exercise the right in the given case? The right is conceded to him as a citizen; but as a Christian can he consistently exercise it, where the government is immoral, where there is not an exemplification of the ordinance of God for good to man?¹³

Every reason that satisfies him that he ought not in such circumstances to hold office, ought to satisfy him at the same time that he should not use the elective franchise to choose another as

12 [Exod. 18.21.]

13 [Rom. 13.4.]

his representative, to do what he judges inconsistent with his own Christian character to do. There is a oneness existing between the representative and those who are represented, that makes in a certain sense the actions of the former that of the latter; and the oath of office he swears as their representative; the constitution he recognizes in this oath, he recognizes as their representative; the acts which he performs, whether legislative, judicial or executive, he performs as their representative. His official actings are theirs, done through his official agency.

It is a settled principle in morals, that a man may not ask or appoint another to do for him what he knows or believes to be improper. If wrong for himself to have done, it is wrong to ask another to do it for him.

It is evidently the will of God, that the great moral revolution which is to take place among the nations, shall be effected by the testimony of the witnesses of Christ. But it is a testimony sustained by a consistent practice, a practice illustrative of general holiness, and a faithful application of the doctrines which it contains. No testimony, however orthodox or pure, will obtain the blessing of God, that is not supported by consistency of conduct. It was this that recommended the testimony of Elijah and proved the means of restraining for a time, the idolatry of the Israelites. It was this practical consistency of James Renwick¹⁴ and the few other faithful witnesses associated with him, that was blessed by the Head of the church as the means of overturning one of the most cruel governments that ever oppressed a civilized people. Though holding generally the same principles with this noble martyr, the great part of the nation truckled and wavered in their practice,

14 Those unacquainted with the life and testimony of this Christian martyr should consult Howie's "Scots Worthies," and "The Cloud of Witnesses for the Royal Prerogatives of Jesus Christ," as well as Mr. Renwick's own writings and sermons published in the late 1600s and 1700s.

while he continued steadfast and consistent, maintaining a testimony as well by his practice as by the principles which he held, till the power of the persecutor was broken, and the throne of the Stuarts tottered on its base!

Other Resources to Consider:

A Reformed Presbyterian Testimony Against the U.S. Constitution, first published in 1839 as “Testimony Against the Moral Evils in the Civil Institutions of the United States” by order of Synod.

An Article titled, *The Presidential Contest*, printed in 1856.

An Article titled, *The Position of the Reformed Presbyterian Church with Regard to the American Government*, printed in 1857.

Truth. A Sermon on Steadfast Adherence to the Distinctive Doctrines of the Church, by Samuel M. Willson, published at Albany, 1833. With the Letter in the appendix written by Robert Gibson.

Argument for the Jury Law. Published as an overture at the appointment of the Synod of the R.P. Church in the U.S., 1834.

The Author's Design in the pages enclosed: "to furnish such a view of the principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, as may point out the position which she occupies: and vindicate her distinct organization as a church." – First Paragraph of Introduction.

The subjects he chiefly considers in the work from which these sections are extracted: "the dominion of Christ, and the application of scripture to things civil as well as religious." – Last Paragraph of Introduction.