

## "The powers that be"

The source of their authority, and the obligations of Christians towards them; with remarks on Capital Punishment

W. Kelly (Broom 1854)

*"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God"* (Rom. 13: 1).

Human government, it has been justly said, finds its *root* in the authority which God conferred upon Noah. There was no such thing, properly speaking, in the antediluvian earth. Adam had a most extensive dominion, but no power over life. "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man," etc. (Gen. 1: 26-28). There was no authority delegated over man, nor even to deprive the least animal of its life. Hence it was that the murder of a brother did not draw down vengeance from man, though conscience dreaded the retributive blow from every hand. "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto ME from the ground," said the Lord to guilty Cain; and He set a mark upon him, *lest* any should slay the fugitive. Then followed a long reign of gigantic and uncurbed wickedness. Finally, a preacher of righteousness was raised up who warned for the space of one hundred and twenty years, when God swept away the corruption and violence of the race in the waters of the deluge.

After that catastrophe, a new commission opens. Noah and his sons have the Adamic grant confirmed; but they have much more. Every moving thing that liveth, even as the green herb, should be meat for them, the blood thereof excepted. "And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man: at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made He man.\* And you, be ye fruitful," etc. (Gen. 9: 5-7). Evidently, the world was then placed under new conditions, which, in their substance, continue and must subsist till a new and yet future dealing of God change the face of all things, as may be gathered from 2 Peter and other scriptures.

\*Will it be believed that some have gone so far as to treat these words as a mere prediction, and not as a solemn permission and charge on God's part?

The principle, then, of the divine charge to Noah and his sons remains true and obligatory till the day of the Lord. Now what is its chief characteristic? Clearly it is *God's committal of the sword*, or the power of life and death, into the hands of man. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, BY MAN shall his blood be shed." Such is the true source and basis of civil government. It did *not* spring from social contract. It did *not* grow by degrees out of family relationships. It did *not* originate in the usurpation of man or of a class. As *God's* command gave it being, so it can never cease to be clothed with His authority, whether men hear or forbear. If there be any one part of the charge which stands most prominent, it is the responsibility of *man* to visit capitally him who sheds man's blood. Such is the requirement of God, grounded upon the fact that *He* made man in *His* image. But though the reason of the thing might apply from Adam downwards, no such power was delegated till Noah. The notion, therefore, of its being, in any sort or degree, a right inherent in man, is thus cut off. It is a right *of God*, which He, ever since the flood, has been pleased to entrust to human keeping, which those in authority are bound to enforce in subjection to Him, and for the exercise of which they must by-and-by give account to Himself (Psalm 82).

It is easy to say that God has withdrawn or quashed the commission given to Noah and his family. But I ask, where? when? how? and await in vain the shadow of a proof.

Undoubtedly, God revealed other thoughts and hopes to the faith of Abraham and of his seed. With the fathers he entered into a new relationship — a covenant of grace and promise, as proved by Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 — which did not clash with the previous bond signed, sealed, and delivered, if I may so say, to Noah and his sons. *This was a covenant between God and the earth at large; that was a special covenant between God and His own people.* By the one, the world's wickedness was kept in check; by the other, the wandering patriarchs walked as strangers in a land promised to them and their seed for an everlasting possession. The former menaced human violence, if need were, with death; the latter led the men who embraced its hopes, pilgrims on earth, under the guidance of a known and almighty Friend. The government of the earth proceeded in its own sphere, wide as all the families of the earth. The calling of Abraham and his seed had its proper and peculiar domain. Between them there was no confusion, much less contradiction.

It is true that, after the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, the principle of *government*, first committed to Noah, and that of *God's call*, first manifested in Abraham, were seen united. In that chosen people, separated from the Gentiles as His witness, God developed His ways as a Ruler. But, alas! at Sinai, instead of confessing their sin, and pleading the absolute promises made to the fathers, they accepted the conditions of their own obedience. The result was ruin under all variety of circumstances: the law broken before it was brought down from the Mount, God Himself rejected, failure under priests, under prophets, under kings, "till there was no remedy," and God at length gave them into the hands of their enemies. During their national existence in Canaan, none can pretend that God relieved Israel from the responsibility of punishing with death.

At the Babylonish captivity, God severed the principle of earthly *rule* from that of His *call*, transferring the former to the Gentiles. The four great empires appeared in succession, as Daniel and other inspired writers predicted and attested. The last, or Roman empire, bore sway, as is notorious, when our Lord was born and died; and God began to call His church, chosen from Jews and Gentiles, as one body here below. But it is clear and certain, from the Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament, that the church in no way interfered with the government of the earth, which God had placed in the hands of magistrates. They had, no doubt, to hear and to bear the reproach of turning the world upside down, and of doing contrary to the decrees of Caesar; but it was false. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. They knew it, they had it, and they did not want another. They remembered His own glowing words about them: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world"; and they waited for Him from heaven, assured that those who suffer shall also reign with Him. As they never resisted the authorities by force, so they sought in their teachings to uphold, not to weaken, the just place which God of old had assigned them. Hence St. Paul thus addressed the believers in the imperial city: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (rather *judgment*, as also in 1 Cor. 11: 29, where the context is decisively against the idea of "damnation"). "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same; for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger [or *avenger*] to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake," etc. (Rom. 13). The reigning emperor was a pagan and a persecutor; but clearly that was not the question. The language of the Spirit is so framed as to exclude cavil, founded either on the

profession or the practice of the ruler. "There is *no* power but of God: *the powers that be* are ordained of God." What can be conceived more definite on the one hand, more comprehensive on the other? What more opposed to revolutionary movement? It was most wholesome; just in the right place and time. For the Jews were then turbulent, and the Christians were obnoxious in the extreme to the ruling powers. It seems probable that some at Rome, from old Jewish associations, found it hard to own and respect, as of God, rulers whom they saw sunken in the spiritual and moral degradations of heathenism. Under such circumstances, if under any, one might have supposed *à priori* that God might have revoked the grant of power from its Gentile holders, if He did not transfer it to the church. But no! The door is closed against every excuse. "The powers that be are ordained of God."

As regards Christian responsibility, it is of no essential importance what may be the form of government. It may be despotic or constitutional: it may be aristocratic or republican. Nay, more, in its profession, it may be Pagan or Mahometan, Popish or Protestant. The principle or rule, as regards mankind and the earth, remains untouched. Thus, the Christian is bound to pay allegiance and honour wherever he may be — in England to the Queen, and in France to the Emperor; in Russia to the Czar, and in Turkey to the Sultan; and the same thing is true of all subordinate authorities. The only limit is that the Christian owes absolute subjection to God; and therefore when obeying an earthly government entails — happily a rare thing — disobedience to God, it need scarcely be said that he must obey God rather than man. To resist the powers is to resist God's ordinance. The alternative for the Christian, when he may not obey a human command that involves a breach of God's will, is suffering, not resistance. But in general it remains true that to him who does good, the magistrate, under any government you please, is God's minister for good. So said St. Paul in view of an arbitrary and an idolatrous power. "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid: FOR HE BEARETH NOT THE SWORD IN VAIN." That is to say, we have the Apostle, long after Christ had been extensively preached among the Gentiles, urging the saints at Rome to submit themselves to the existing authorities, to render to Caesar the things of Caesar. Of course, if Caesar had sought to corrupt the faith or destroy the worship of God's church; if Nero had ordered them to give up the Lord, positively like Nebuchadnezzar, or negatively like Darius, their duty had been plain — not to protest merely, and sin all the while, but to suffer for righteousness' sake: they were not to render the things of God, but of Caesar, to Caesar. But if the State demanded any service, however hard, Christianity taught them to yield it, if not positively sinful. If it insulted and persecuted them, still they were taught to pray for kings and for all in authority, "that we may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."

But suppose, instead of doing good, and having praise of the ruler, a man does evil, what then? "Be afraid, for he beareth not the sword in vain." Assuredly, if the ruler is not to use the sword, he *does* bear it in vain. He might as well, or better, not bear it at all; for an idle threat is a proof of feebleness, and a *brutum fulmen* brings a ruler, of all men, into contempt. St. Paul, however, anticipates no such dereliction of duty on the part of the magistrate, but warns the ill-disposed that he is God's servant, "a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." The passage is clear as noonday. It demonstrates that the authority of the sword delegated to Noah and his sons, as representatives of government, is no more repealed or neutralised by the *grace* of the Christian revelation, than it had been by the *righteousness* of the Mosaic code. It proves that the Christian is bound to respect that sword by whatever hands it may be wielded. Even if the magistrate were an infidel, if he degraded his office by regarding the popular will, not God, as the source of his authority, the Christian is not the less bound to own God's authority in him, and to honour him as *God's minister in worldly things*, in "the things of Caesar." It is mere delusion, therefore, to suppose that Christianity deprives a government of the authority to punish evil-doers with the sword. St. Paul, as we have seen, fully recognises that power, and describes the ruler as one authorised by God to avenge evil. To speak of mercy, amendment, etc.,

as the sole or chief aim when law is violated and a man is convicted of murder, for instance, is to evince the utmost confusion of thought. For while *grace* is the central idea in God's scheme for saving sinners by the cross, *justice* is and must be the foundation of all earthly government, Jewish or Gentile. Doubtless, *in the gospel* God can and does justify — not pardon only, but *justify* — the chief of sinners freely, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. But thence to infer that a world's ruler ought to deal on the same principle towards criminals, is, in my opinion, to despise both revelation and reason.

Some, I am aware, find a difficulty because of Matt. 5: 38, etc., and similar texts. This is due to a failure in seizing the bearing of these scriptures; for no believer would even insinuate that one part of God's word contradicts another. Now we have seen Rom. 13 to teach distinctly that the ruler is to be owned as bearing not the sword in vain; as an avenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil; in short, as God's minister in earthly things, no less than Paul and Apollos were God's ministers in heavenly things. This chapter formally sets the Christian in the place of subjection to the powers that be, asserts the authority which God has vested in them, and finally makes it a matter not of wrath merely, but of *conscience* to the believer. Matt. 5 is in quite another direction, but perfectly consistent with the former teaching. *Here* the Lord instructs His disciples in their *individual* path, not their relation to governors, and puts *their* calling to walk *in grace*, active or passive, in contrast with the *Jews*, who were called to act *in the righteousness of the law*. It is absurd to apply such a passage to a government or a worldly tribunal. If it did so apply, it would prove that magistrates ought to caress and reward every culprit, instead of punishing any.

1 Peter 2 connects and enforces both truths within a narrow compass. On the one hand, we are exhorted, in verses 13 and 14, to submit ourselves to "every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto *them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers*, and for the praise of them that do well." On the other hand, we are told that this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, *suffering wrongfully*. "For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." The latter verses savour as strongly of Matt. 5 as the former do of Rom. 13; they teach different but harmonious truths. And the present day is a time when we need to put each other in mind "to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men" (Titus 3: 1, 2); for there is no lack of them that "walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, self-willed; they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities." The Lord keep His own in the path of obedience.

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