

The American Revolution:



*Reformed Influence on Justifiable
and Non-Justifiable Resistance.*

The Influence
of the Bible in
Colonial America

The Bible and
Governing
Authorities

The Depravity
of Man and the
Principle of *Lex Rex*

America's
Founding
Documents



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Introduction

Did Reformed theology and thought influence the founders' views on rebellion against a Romans 13 governing authority? This issue and others surrounding justifiable and non-justifiable resistance as it pertains to the American Revolution have been the subject of much historical debate since the founding era. The founders' views on submission and rebellion leading up to and into the American Revolution in light of the first seven verses of Romans 13 have been the source of a great deal of not only historical controversy, but also controversy within evangelical circles. This research project will explore the thesis that Reformed theology and thought had a profound influence upon the views of the founders and other leading figures pertaining to resistance to governing authorities. The thesis has great significance to gaining an accurate view of not only whether the American colonies were justified in their rebellion, but also towards understanding the principles embedded in Romans 13 as they relate to a biblical worldview toward submission to governing authorities.

The research involves a critical look at the reformed view of resistance using primary source sermons, letters, and other writings of both notable founders and other more obscure individuals who wrote about this issue. The research project will also take advantage of scholarly secondary articles and books written from a variety of perspectives covering different aspects of the thesis topic. The anchor sources for the research will include a comprehensive sermon written in 1750 by Boston Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew. Mayhew's sermon is significant because it predates the Revolutionary War time period. Also serving as an anchor source will be Romans 13:1-7. The first seven verses in Romans 13 are critical because they are used by both sides of the argument concerning resistance to authority. Lastly, the research will

connect the dots between the reformed influence, the Declaration of Independence, and the document that ultimately came out of the American Revolution, the United States Constitution.

Ultimately the research effort will answer the questions of justifiable and non-justifiable resistance and who the Romans 13 governing authority is in the United States of America. Samuel Rutherford introduced the Church to the truth that men, due to their depraved nature, could never govern above the law, but rather needed to be constrained by law. The founders of the nation and the framers of the Constitution understood this and therefore set up a system of civil government where law would be king. If what Samuel Rutherford believed is true, it has huge implications for the Christian American citizen.

There are weaknesses in any possible source for a project of this nature and it is important to keep in mind the limitations of available evidence. This understanding must serve as a check on the historian drawing conclusions and developing a historiography about any body of research. In conducting a research project undertaken from a biblical worldview, there are key biblical principles that must guide the analysis effort. Chief among those principles for historical investigation—especially for a thesis subject surrounded in controversy—is a commitment to the admonition found in Proverbs 12:19 to maintain objectivity and honesty.¹

Setting the Stage: The Influence of the Bible in Colonial America

The roots of American freedom can be traced to multiple sources. One of the sources that has often been overlooked, intentionally downplayed, or even denied is the Bible. Strong arguments can be made in areas such as political and legal culture, rhetoric, political thought, and constitutional ideas, that the Bible was influential to America's founding well before the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

American Revolution.² To set the stage for the thesis, it would first be helpful to begin with a look at the Bible's influence as it pertains to founding era education and political thought.

Just how far back do the biblical roots of the American founding go? If the Bible can be said to be part of the roots of American freedom, it is noteworthy to first make the connection between the translating of the scriptures into the English language and Reformed American political thought. In his famous work *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe records the words of William Tyndale: "if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than he (the Pope) did."³ To make the connection between the Bible and the American founding, Constitutional scholar Michael Farris makes the case in his work *From Tyndale to Madison* that when the Bible was first translated into English and could be accessed by the common man, biblical truths containing principles that apply to civil government became available to the masses. Farris contends that those ideas and principles made their way across the Atlantic and fomented Republican ideas in the minds of not only America's forefathers, but continued on into the men of the pre-revolutionary and founding era.⁴

Probably one of the most compelling arguments that can be made about the Bible's influence on American freedom is the way it permeated the education of almost all of the leading men of the founding era regardless of whether they claimed orthodox Christianity. Their common use of biblical text or phraseology reveals thought processes that were inundated in the scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments. One of the reasons for the frequent if not near

² Daniel L. Dreisbach, "The Bible and the Political Culture of the American Founding", In *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic*, edited by Mark David Hall, and Daniel L. Dreisbach, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144.

³ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 1563, reprint (Springdale, PA.: Whitaker House, 1981), 139.

⁴ Michael Farris, *From Tyndale to Madison* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 4.

universal use of scripture by those of the founding era can be found in the primary sources of early childhood education.

The New England Primer, also known as the “The Little Bible of New England,” was the primary textbook for learning to read and write in America in the founding era.⁵ The book that was first brought to America at the end of the seventeenth century starts out teaching the alphabet; it then goes on to show students how to put syllables together. The Primer combines letters with scripture passages intended to teach Bible verses while learning the alphabet.⁶ Paul Leicester states that “the puritan mood is caught with absolute faithfulness” in the Primer.⁷ Leicester also points out that the Primer was the “schoolbook for dissenters in America” and was frequently printed for almost two hundred years beginning at the end of the 17th century.⁸ The text even contains the Westminster Shorter Catechism and was as prevalent on bookshelves as the Bible. The inventory of Michael Perry, a Boston bookseller in the year 1700, reveals “28 primers and 44 dozen Primers,” and standard advertisements in newspapers and books announced that “such and such a printer has for sale Bibles, Testaments, Psalters, Psalm-Books, Primers, Account Books, and Books of Record.”⁹ It should be noted that in spite of its title, the Primer had wide circulation throughout the colonies and was used as a primary text for most children learning to read.¹⁰

⁵ Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development: with a Reprint of the Unique Copy of the Earliest Known Edition and Many Fac-Simile Illustrations and Reproductions* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1898), 1.

⁶ *The New-England Primer improved for the more easy attaining the true reading of English: to which is added the Assembly of Divines, and Mr. Cotton's Catechism*, Liberty University, Sabin Americana, Gale, Cengage Learning, (Boston: Edward Draper, 1777), accessed September 3, 2018.

⁷ Ford, *The New-England Primer*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰ Stephanie Schnorbus, “Calvin and Locke: Dueling Epistemologies in The New England Primer, 1720-1790”, *Early American Studies* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 251.

It was common in the early eighteenth-century for books to be full of word lists, catechisms, prayers, and accounts of saints and martyrs. Books frequently and intentionally communicated accepted principles and truths about God, the world, and humanity's place in relation to the two.¹¹ By far the most pervasive book was the Calvinist New England Primer; its early-eighteenth-century contents reflect a focus on teaching humanity's proper role in the universe.¹² The idea of “humanity’s proper role” is a critical component toward understanding the founders’ reformed views on man’s fallen nature which in turn influenced their view of civil governing authority—and hence their resistance.

In looking at the Bible’s influence on the American founding, political scientist Donald S. Lutz conducted a study and reported that the Bible was cited in the founders’ writings more frequently than any European writer or European school of thought.¹³ Lutz concluded that the Bible accounted for about a third of all citations in the writings.¹⁴ The argument here is not that the Bible was the only source of thought for many of the founders, but rather that it is hard to deny its profound reformed influence upon them.

Historian Daniel Dreisbach is a professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C. His area of expertise includes American constitutional law and history, First Amendment law, church-state relations, and criminal procedure. His chapter work *The Bible and the Political Culture of the American Founding* in *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic* is significant to the thesis because of the arguments he makes concerning the reformed influence on the American founders. Dreisbach explains that among the leaders of the

¹¹ Schnorbus, “Calvin and Locke”, 251.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Donald Lutz, *A Preface to American Political Theory*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 136.

¹⁴ Donald Lutz, “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought”, *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 1 (March 1984), 191.

American founding were men who “believed the model of political leadership and civil government established by God through Moses and practically developed under Joshua and his successors for the Hebrew nation was worthy of imitation in their own polities.”¹⁵ He goes on to say that today a “growing body of scholarship identifies Hebraic republicanism as among the ideas that informed the political thought of the founders.”¹⁶ If the founders’ views on civil government were biblically based, it follows that their views on civil government and their Reformed theology both influenced their views on resistance to tyranny. Dreisbach also points out that the Bible permeated both the private expressions and public pronouncements of the founders who argued for and shaped the new nation and its civil government.¹⁷ Perhaps John Adams summed up the Bible’s impact on American freedom best when he said “Let not Geneva be forgotten or despised. Religious liberty owes it much respect.”¹⁸ Although Adams was directly referring to the Protestant Reformation, he was nonetheless clearly pointing out access to the Bible and its principles of liberty as one of the reformed roots of political thought.

As stated at the outset of this analysis, much of founding era historiography tends to dismiss the Bible’s influence on the roots of American freedom. However, with just a cursory look into the areas of education and political thought, it is clear that the worldview driving the political thought of many if not most of the founders was shaped by the Bible.

The Bible and Governing Authorities

Any analysis of the reformed influence on justifiable and non-justifiable resistance as pertains to the American Revolution should start with the biblical passages and principles that

¹⁵ Dreisbach, “The Bible and the Political Culture of the American Founding”, 161.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁸ John Adams and Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, Volume VI* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 313.

pertain to civil governing authorities. Romans 13—the preeminent biblical text on civil governing authorities—contains design, purpose, and parameters for civil government that are often overlooked:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed (Romans 13:1-7).

In his powerful sermon that predates the American Revolution by a quarter century, Jonathan Mayhew makes a clear initial point that this passage from Romans lays down “some general principles concerning the office of civil rulers, and the duty of subjects, together with the reason and obligation of that duty.”¹⁹ Mayhew points out that it is imperative for those who claim Christ to gain an understanding of the parameters God ordained for civil government found in this passage.²⁰

The passage begins with a general command for all people to submit to the governing authority. The passage then follows with the fact that all authority comes from and ultimately rests with God and anyone who resists that authority will incur judgement from God. It is noteworthy to point out that many times discussions and analysis of this passage tends to stop at that point. All people must be subject to the governing authority because that authority comes

¹⁹ Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse, Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With Some Reflections on the Resistance Made to King Charles I*, (Boston: D. Fowle, 1750), 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

from God—and resisting that authority will cause the resister to incur judgment from God. However, the verses that follow (3-4) offer important context and provide biblical design, purpose, and parameters of civil government.

The context, design, purpose, and parameters for this passage are foundational to understanding the biblical worldview of civil government. The passage states that “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good” (Romans 13:3-4). It is clear civil governing authority has a distinctive limiting parameter of being for the “good” of the people who are served. The distinction to be made is that not all governing authorities operate under the design and parameters of the biblical model. Stephen Case argues that the passage is speaking of lawful rulers, not tyrants; but rather all that are defined and qualified here, deriving their powers ordained by God, “terrors to evil works and ministers of God for good.”²¹

The question then becomes, is it biblically lawful to ever resist the governing authority? If so, when is that resistance justifiable? To answer these questions, it is helpful to take a look at relevant and crucial reformed doctrine and biblical principle that help build an understanding of the thesis argument. Among these doctrines are the depravity of man and the biblical principle that men must be under law rather than above it.

Depravity of Man and Lex Rex

Samuel Rutherford is one of the most renowned figures of the Protestant Reformation and brings great credibility to any discussion of Reformed thought. One of his most famous

²¹ Stephen Case, *Defensive Arms Vindicated*. In *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, Volume 1, (1730-1788)* edited by Ellis Sandoz, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991). Accessed September 10, 2018, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/sandoz-political-sermons-of-the-american-founding-era-vol-1-1730-1788--5>, 723.

works was *Lex, Rex, or, the Law and the Prince: A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*. Written in 1644, Rutherford's *Lex Rex* invokes what would have been radical thought for the time. *Lex Rex* proffered the idea that Law had to be superior to the King—an inherently different notion than what could be found in Europe in the early seventeenth century where the prevailing political philosophy was the opposite “Rex Lex” or King is Law.²² The legal and political principle today of “the rule of law” comes directly from Rutherford's ideas, which themselves flow from the biblical doctrine concerning the depravity of man. Rutherford was coupling the truth of mankind's fallen nature with the need for human leaders in any form of civil government. With that principle in mind, Rutherford says that one of the biblical ways to check human depravity is for civil rulers to be placed under law rather than above it where there is no external check.²³ Rutherford and other reformers such as John Calvin and John Knox discovered principles from the scriptures concerning civil government that would find their way across the Atlantic and eventually into the minds of the American founders.

The Reformed Tradition Carried on In America

Mark David Hall is a professor of politics at George Fox University. He is the author of a number of books on religion and politics in American life, and the majority of his research has been in religion in the American founding era. In Hall's work concerning the influence of the Reformed tradition in the American founding, he refutes the idea that America's founders were Deists “who embraced a rationalist approach to politics.”²⁴ This is important for the thesis

²² Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or, the Law and the Prince: A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*, 1644, reprint, (Colorado Springs, CO.: Portage Publications, Inc., 2009), xxiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁴ Mark David Hall, “Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: The Influence of the Reformed Tradition in the American Founding”, In *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic*, edited by Mark David Hall, and Daniel L. Dreisbach, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34.

because of the erroneous contemporary view that religion, much less Reformed Christianity, did not have much of an impact in the American Revolution.

Hall argues that prior to the Protestant Reformation most Christians who thought about politics assumed monarchy was the preferred and right form of government. They paid “little attention to subjective individual rights.”²⁵ Hall states that while most pre-reformation Christians believed that Christians should refuse to obey an unjust law, “virtually none of them contended that the people had a right to revolt against unjust rulers.”²⁶ Hall argues that this all changed with the Protestant Reformation. Hall’s idea that Reformed political theory broke in significant ways from previous Christian views of nonresistance is significant.

One of the points in the argument that Reformed thought had an influence in the understanding of justifiable and non-justifiable resistance is the supposition that ideas concerning resistance to tyranny were found in the scriptures once the Bible became readily available to the common man. Within the Bible, individuals could see that they were responsible for their relationship with God, and that His will for them is most clearly revealed in His Holy Scriptures.²⁷ Hall contends that those views and practices “helped undermine existing hierarchies and nurtured a desire for self-government.”²⁸

Lastly but of most importance is Hall’s explanation concerning the genesis of resistance ideas. These ideas were “extensively developed, defended, and applied within the Reformed tradition.”²⁹ Hall notes that within a generation of Calvin, almost every Reformed civil and

²⁵ Mark David Hall, “Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: The Influence of the Reformed Tradition in the American Founding”, 36.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

ecclesiastical leader had become convinced the Bible taught that governments should be limited and that unjust or ungodly rulers should be resisted or even overthrown.³⁰

The question then becomes when is resistance to tyranny justified? To understand the reformed view and how it influenced those in the revolutionary war period it is helpful to turn to some of those that spoke and wrote most comprehensively on the subject.

Justifiable Resistance

Jonathan Mayhew

Perhaps one of the strongest sermons ever preached on the subject of justifiable resistance and non-justifiable resistance was preached by Boston Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew in 1750. Mayhew's discourse is one of the most comprehensive dissertations written in the pre-founding era on the subject of whether or not submission to governing authorities is prescribed in cases in light of the instructions given in Romans 13. Mayhew's discourse can actually be used as a source document for both sides of the resistance argument due to his in-depth look at arguments for and against unlimited submission to higher powers. Although his sermon decidedly puts forth the argument that submission to governing authorities is not unlimited, he dissects the first seven verses of Romans 13 in such a way as to provide balance to his argument. He makes the point that "those who resist a reasonable and just authority, which is agreeable to the will of God, do really resist the will of God himself; and will, therefore, be punished by him."³¹ He then goes on to ask the question "how does this prove, that

³⁰ Mark David Hall, "Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: The Influence of the Reformed Tradition in the American Founding", 39.

³¹ Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse, Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With Some Reflections on the Resistance Made to King Charles I*, (Boston: D. Fowle, 1750), 25.

those who resist a lawless, unreasonable power, which is contrary to the will of God, do therein resist the will and ordinance of God?”³²

Mayhew asks questions in his sermon such as “Is resisting those who resist God’s will, the same thing with resisting God?” He answers by reasoning from what the Apostle Paul said in the passage—“for revering, and submitting to magistracy, from this consideration, that such as really perform the duty of magistrates.” Mayhew suggests that when civil authorities (the magistracy) are performing the biblical function of a governing authority they would be enemies only to the evil actions of men, and would “befriend and encourage the good; and so be a common blessing to society.”³³ Mayhew argues that is where the Apostle Paul is directing the act of submission. He goes on to use inverse reason to drive his point home by asking the poignant question of how does the command to submit to an authority that has defined, God ordained parameters, equate to honoring and submitting to magistrates who are “not enemies to the evil actions of men, but to the good; and such as are not a common blessing, but a common curse, to society!”³⁴

Mayhew’s interspersing of reason is woven throughout the sermon; examples such as “the argument here used no more proves it to be a sin to resist such rulers, than it does, to resist the devil that he may flee from us” reveal that Reformed thought was also reasoned thought grounded upon a biblical worldview.³⁵ Take for example Mayhew’s illustration as to the suggestion of unlimited submission—in all cases:

Suppose God requires a family of children, to obey their father and not to resist him; and enforces his command with this argument; that the superintendence and care and authority of a just and kind parent, will contribute to the happiness of the whole family;

³² Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse, Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With Some Reflections on the Resistance Made to King Charles I*, 25.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 26.

³⁵ Ibid., 27.

so that they ought to obey him for their own sakes more than for his: Suppose this parent at length runs distracted, and attempts, in his mad fit, to cut all his children's throats: Now, in this case, is not the reason before assigned, why these children should obey their parent while he continued of a sound mind, namely, their common good, a reason equally conclusive for disobeying and resisting him, since he is become delirious, and attempts their ruin?³⁶

Mayhew concludes that upon a careful review of this scripture passage, it appears that the argument to enforce submission is connected to the rulers described in the passage itself; i.e. such as rule for the good of society. Tyrants and wicked governing authorities are not entitled to obedience from their subjects by virtue of anything laid down in the passage in Romans 13.³⁷

John Adams

In 1765, John Adams wrote his famous *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*. Although there is ongoing debate about John Adams' true beliefs, it is unmistakable that he held to biblically reformed beliefs in the area of resistance to tyranny, and his position as a key founder provides him great credibility to frame the issue. His *Dissertation* is very significant to the issue of justifiable and non-justifiable resistance not only because it predates the revolution by ten years, but also because of the strong arguments Adams makes against tyrannical civil authority. Adams posits that the two greatest systems of tyranny the world had known up to that point could be categorized as "canon" and "feudal" law.³⁸ Adams calls "the desire of dominion" the "great principle" by which people attempting to govern speak of doing great good, but when that desire for dominion is unrestrained it leads to much evil.³⁹ He explains that when power is

³⁶ Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse, Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With Some Reflections on the Resistance Made to King Charles I*, 30.

³⁷ Ibid., 28.

³⁸ John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law 1765*, In *The Works of John Adams, Volume 3 (Autobiography, Diary, Notes of a Debate in the Senate, Essays)*, edited by Charles Francis Adams, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1851), Accessed October 9, 2018, 449, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/adams-the-works-of-john-adams-vol-3-autobiography-diary-notes-of-a-debate-in-the-senate-essays#lf1431-03_head_067.

³⁹ Ibid.

properly restrained, it is a “useful and noble movement in the human mind.”⁴⁰ However, Adams says that when such restraints are taken off, they “become an encroaching, grasping, restless, and ungovernable power.”⁴¹

Whether intentional or not, Adams is accurately describing the Reformed, fallen view of man as being in a state of total depravity. In the first of these two categories, Adams describes the “canon,” referring to ecclesiastical tyranny that had “persuaded mankind to believe that God Almighty had entrusted them with the keys of heaven, whose gates they might open and close at pleasure; with a power of dispensation over all the rules and obligations of morality; with authority to license all sorts of sins and crimes.”⁴² In the latter, Adams describes the tyrannical monarch as the “feudal law” which originally would be formed for the necessary defense of a people against the inroads and invasions of her neighboring nations, yet because of the same depravity ended up just as the former. Adams’ *Dissertation* reconstructs the Reformed Puritan past into a legend of republican beginnings, thereby introducing it in the cause of the American Revolution.⁴³ In his article *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*, Merrill D. Peterson argues that Adams’ Calvinism entered into his republican vision and colored his theory of human nature—he goes so far as to suggest that Adams “read Montesquieu through Calvinist lenses” and was keenly aware of what he (Adams) referred to as the “rascality” of men in power.⁴⁴

Jonas Clark

A sermon preached by the minister Jonas Clark in Lexington, MA, April 19, 1776 to commemorate the bloodshed that started the Revolutionary War was used to rouse and excite the

⁴⁰ John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* 1765, 449.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Merrill D. Peterson, “Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue”, *The Wilson Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1976), 110.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

colonists to a religious acknowledgement of God's hand in the actions undertaken to resist a violent oppressor. The sermon title alone, *The Fate of Blood-Thirsty Oppressors, and God's Tender Care of His Distressed People* gives a sense of the intensity among Reformed clergy to bring the biblical worldview to bear on the war in which the Americans found themselves immersed. Clark refers to the British troops as "instruments of violence and tyranny."⁴⁵

He refers to the "liberty or slavery of the American world according as a sovereign God shall see fit to smile or frown upon the interesting cause in which we are engaged."⁴⁶ Clark's continual references to biblical Egypt and Edom throughout the sermon show the Reformed view of resistance to tyranny as being justified when an oppressor is outside the bounds and biblical purposes of civil governing authorities. Although this sermon is geared more towards encouragement for the listeners in understanding and embracing God's divine providence, it does show how a contemporary Reformed view impressed his listener to realize that "God is Governor among the nations," and that "His government is wise and just."⁴⁷ Because God's government is wise and just, human civil government must be modeled in like manner. This principle underscores the purposes of civil government under Romans 13 and points to the boundaries for discerning when civil government has exceeded its biblical mandate according to Reformed thought.

Stephen Case

Another sermon that exemplifies the Reformed influence on justifiable resistance is *Defensive Arms Vindicated*, thought to have been preached by Stephen Case. In this sermon

⁴⁵ Jonas Clark, *The Fate of Blood-Thirsty Oppressors, and God's Tender Care of His Distressed People*, Liberty University, Sabin Americana. Gale, Cengage Learning, (Boston: Powars & Willis, 1776), accessed October 9, 2018, 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

preached towards the end of the American Revolution in 1782, the defensive use of arms for self-preservation is argued to be right and lawful and therefore justifiable. Case argues that not only is the defensive use of arms lawful and justifiable but that it is a self-evident truth. Of great importance to the thesis is Case's mentioning of the great lengths undertaken to rectify the differences between the colonies and Great Britain. To this end, Case states that it was known the Americans did not hastily, nor violently, rush into war. Rather, they petitioned, remonstrated, and took every reasonable method that reasonable people could invent in order to prevent war. But when all of their efforts were rejected and treated with "scorn and contempt," only then did they take up arms.⁴⁸

This argument is significant because it correlates to the founders' argument in the Declaration of Independence concerning the long train of abuses suffered by the American colonists.⁴⁹ One important point seen consistently among Reformed thought on the issue of justifiable resistance was that resistance to a governing authority could not be undertaken lightly or for transient causes without exhausting all other courses of action short of rebellion. Case's sermon also provides the proper distinction between a lawful rebellion against tyrants, and an unlawful one against lawful authority.⁵⁰

The Founding Document Connection

Thomas Jefferson

To help understand the reformed connection to the Declaration of Independence, it is helpful to look at Thomas Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America*. Published before the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's *Summary* offers a view into

⁴⁸ Stephen Case, *Defensive Arms Vindicated*, 720.

⁴⁹ *Declaration of Independence*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed September 12, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp.

⁵⁰ Stephen Case, *Defensive Arms Vindicated*, 721.

his thoughts pertaining to the encroachments of the British crown and Parliament. Jefferson refers to natural law and natural rights being stripped away by a tyrannical king usurping powers from a free people.⁵¹ He says “these exercises of usurped power have not been confined to instances alone, in which themselves were interested, but they have also intermeddled with the regulation of the internal affairs of the colonies.”⁵² Jefferson points out that single acts of tyranny “may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day”; but he adds that a series of tyrannical acts continually pursued “proves a deliberate and systematical plan” of reducing the American colonists to slavery.⁵³

These sentiments provide a connection to the founders’ thoughts on justifiable resistance to authority that has overstepped its God ordained boundaries. Jefferson’s summary also provides more evidence of the voluminous writings of the founders painstakingly laying out the case for resistance by listing the charges against a power usurping governing authority and the repeated peaceful attempts to redress those grievances with the object of their injury, the British crown and Parliament. Jefferson was not known for being beholden to a Reformed ecclesiastical position but his worldview in this area, along with the worldview of many others, nevertheless came from the same cloth. With Jefferson’s views in mind, the connection to the Declaration of Independence can be made.

Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence provides a key link to the thesis argument because the founders’ Christian worldview is unmistakable in its contents. Regardless of the actual spiritual condition of the founders—for no man can know the depths of another’s heartfelt belief

⁵¹ Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1774), accessed October 9, 2018, 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

system—the Christian worldview of civil government permeates the Declaration and lays down the bedrock principles upon which the Constitution would be built. Four key principles derived from the Christian worldview can be found in the Declaration of Independence: 1) rights come from God, 2) the purpose of civil government is to secure those rights, 3) the power of civil government is given by the consent of the governed, and 4) the right to govern is forfeited by a tyrant to lower civil magistrates in order to restore the rule of law.⁵⁴ All four of these principles are uniquely Reformed Christian.

The Declaration can be connected to Samuel Rutherford’s *Lex Rex* in that no king could claim to rule by divine right, unaccountable to the people. To be fair, it is not part of the thesis argument that Reformed thought was the only influence upon the Declaration as it can also be linked to Lockean thought, but rather that the Reformed influence can be seen throughout the document. It is important however to recognize that Lockean thought traditionally associated with Enlightenment rather than Reformed thought, bears strong resemblance to a Reformed theology of civil government. Indeed, a strong case can be made that Lockean/Enlightenment philosophy on civil government has its genesis in Reformed theology. John Adams declared that John Poynt, the English Protestant minister known for his attacks on the “divine right of kings” espoused “all of the essential principles of liberty, which were afterwards dilated on by Sidney and Locke.”⁵⁵ Jefferson indisputably borrowed from Locke, but the ideas to which he referred predated Locke by years.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ CharismaNews, “The Christian Influence Behind the Declaration of Independence July 4, 2013”, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.charismanews.com/us/40100-the-christian-influence-behind-the-declaration-of-independence>.

⁵⁵ John Adams and Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

The Declaration of Independence contains these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” and “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁵⁷ These words show that government has a God-ordained purpose to protect humanity’s inherent worth that comes from the biblical truth that mankind is made in the image of God. The protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is the very essence of the biblical purpose for government found in Romans 13. Historian Robert Middlekauff summed up the founders’ sentiments when he said “the colonies were founded by free men exercising their natural right to depart from Britain.”⁵⁸ The United States Constitution that eventually followed would build upon the founding charter and create the ultimate “rule of law.”

America’s Governing Authority

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, questions surrounding justifiable and non-justifiable resistance and the Romans 13 governing authority in the United States have huge implications for Christian American citizens. Samuel Rutherford introduced the Church to a biblical principle for civil government in the necessity for all human magistrates to be under law rather than above the law. The founders of the nation and the framers of the Constitution understood this and therefore designed a system of civil government whereby law would be king. The men who drafted and debated the United States Constitution at the federal convention in Philadelphia over the summer of 1787 and those that undertook ratification in the state conventions that followed understood and embraced the reformed view of civil government and

⁵⁷ *Declaration of Independence*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed September 12, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp.

⁵⁸ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 242.

resistance regardless of their religious or spiritual inclinations. James Madison in Federalist 51 explained “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”⁵⁹ Madison used the metaphor of angels to make his point that imperfect men need external restraints. Therefore, because governments are made up of imperfect men, “external and internal” controls are necessary to ensure that governments do not overstep their boundaries.⁶⁰ Madison was explaining the need for decentralized and divested power. The framers intentionally did this in order to prevent the aggregation of power in a single entity.

The most significant correlation between the United States Constitution and the Reformed view is the connection between the content of Article VI and the passage in Romans 13.⁶¹ Article VI of the Constitution states that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land—not the Article I legislative branch, not the Article II executive branch, and not the Article III judicial branch.⁶² By placing law above men, the framers of the Constitution did something completely unheard of in their time. In the United States, the Romans 13 “governing authority” is not a human being but rather the Constitution. Unlike any other nation on earth at the time of its drafting, the Constitution became the ultimate governing authority. It in effect became king!

Conclusion

Although there are many other primary sources that could have been added to this research and analysis effort to support the thesis argument, only a sampling of the contemporary Reformed heavy hitters and founders have been used to support the relevant points. Let it be suggested that

⁵⁹ James Madison, *Federalist 51*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed October 10, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed51.asp.

⁶⁰ George Kurian and Mark A. Lamport, *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 2374.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2375.

⁶² *United States Constitution*, From Yale Law School, Lilian Goldman Law Library, *Avalon Project*, accessed October 6, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp.

Reformed theology and thought did have a profound influence upon the views of the founders and other leading figures pertaining to resistance to governing authorities.

No closing words can better describe the founders' Reformed views on justifiable and non-justifiable resistance better than their own:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government.⁶³

With these words written by Thomas Jefferson, the “Pen of the Revolution”, the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence succinctly answered the question of the why, when, and how of justifiable and non-justifiable resistance to tyrannical civil government.

⁶³ *Declaration of Independence.*

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