



## On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Non-Resistance Jonathan Boucher (1775)

*Jonathan Boucher was a priest of the Church of England who was ministering in Maryland when the American Revolution began. Loyal to the British government and outspoken in opposing the revolution, he abandoned the colonies under threats of violence and returned to England. Not long before he left America, he preached the sermon from which these selections come, condemning the political philosophy of the revolutionaries—the same philosophy that would be enshrined a year later in the Declaration of Independence.*

In the infancy of Christianity, it would seem that some rumor had been spread (probably by Judas of Galilee, who is mentioned in the Acts) that the gospel was designed to undermine kingdoms and commonwealths, as if the intention of our Savior's first coming had been the same with that which is reserved for the second, viz., to *put down all rule, and all authority, and all power*. On this supposition, the apparent solicitude of our Savior and his apostles, in their frequent and earnest recommendation of submission to *the higher powers*, is easily and naturally accounted for. Obedience to government is every man's duty because it is every man's interest, but it is particularly incumbent on Christians because (in addition to its moral fitness) it is enjoined by the positive commands of God; and, therefore, when Christians are disobedient to human ordinances, they are also disobedient to God. If the form of government under which the good providence of God has been pleased to place us be mild and free, it is our duty to enjoy it with gratitude and with thankfulness and, in particular, to be careful not to abuse it by licentiousness. If it be less indulgent and less liberal than in reason it ought to be, still it is our duty not to disturb and destroy the peace of the community by becoming refractory and rebellious subjects and *resisting the ordinances of God*. [...]

True liberty, then, is a liberty to do everything that is right, and the being restrained from doing anything that is wrong. So far from our having a right to do everything that we please, under a notion of liberty, liberty itself is limited and confined [...] It can, however, hardly be necessary to inform you that ideas and notions respecting liberty, very different from these, are daily suggested in the speeches and the writings of the times [...]

This popular notion, that government was originally formed by the consent or by a compact of the people, rests on, and is supported by, another similar notion, not less popular nor better founded. This other notion is that the whole human race is born equal; and that no man is naturally inferior or, in any respect, subjected to another; and that he can be made subject to another only by his own consent. The position is equally ill-founded and false both in its premises and conclusions. [...] Man differs from man in everything that can be supposed to lead to supremacy and subjection, *as one star differs from another star in glory*. It was the purpose of the Creator that man should be social; but without government, there can be no society, nor without some relative inferiority and superiority can there be any government. [...]

It was not to be expected from an all-wise and all-merciful Creator that, having formed creatures capable of order and rule, he should turn them loose into the world under the guidance only of their own unruly wills, that, like so many wild beasts, they might tear and worry one another in

their mad contests for preeminence. [...] Accordingly, when man was made, his Maker did not turn him adrift into a shoreless ocean, without star or compass to steer by. [...] Copying after the fair model of heaven itself, wherein there was government even among the angels, the families of the earth were subjected to rulers, at first set over them by God, *for there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God*. The first father was the first king, and [...] it was thus that all government originated; and monarchy is its most ancient form.

[...] Adam had and exercised sovereign power over all his issue. But the first instance of power exercised by one human being over another is in the subjection of Eve to her husband. This circumstance suggests sundry reflections of some moment in this argument. In the first place, it shows that power is not a natural right. Adam could not have assumed it, nor could Eve have submitted to it, had it not been so ordained of God. It is, therefore, equally an argument against the domineering claims of despotism and the fantastic notion of a compact. It proves, too, that there is a sense in which it may, with truth, be asserted that government was originally founded in weakness and in guilt; that it may and must be submitted to by a fallen creature, even when exercised by a fallen creature, lost both to wisdom and goodness. [...]

Now, it is certain that mankind are nowhere in the scriptures commanded to resist authority, and no less certain that, either by direct injunction or clear implication, they are commanded to *be subject to the higher powers*; and this subjection is said to be enjoined not for our sakes only, but also *for the Lord’s sake*. The glory of God is much concerned that there should be good government in the world; it is, therefore, the uniform doctrine of the scriptures that it is under the deputation and authority of God alone that *kings reign and princes decree justice*. [...] So far from deriving their authority from any supposed consent or suffrage of men, they receive their commission from heaven; they receive it from God, the source and original of all power. However obsolete, therefore, either the sentiment or the language may now be deemed, it is with the most perfect propriety that the supreme magistrate, whether consisting of one or of many, and whether denominated an emperor, a king, an archon, a dictator, a consul, or a senate, is to be regarded and venerated as the viceregent of God.

**Source:** Jonathan Boucher, “On Civil Liberty; Passive Obedience, and Non-Resistance,” in *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1797), 495-560, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000001144314>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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These edited excerpts from Boucher’s sermon are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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