

DOES THE BIBLE PROHIBIT REVOLUTION?

by Thomas Kidd, Baylor University

My graduate students and I recently read James Byrd's terrific *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution*. This book is a treasure trove of information about how the Patriots and Loyalists actually used the Bible during the Revolution. The most surprising fact I learned from the book is that Romans 13—in which Paul commands submission to the “higher powers”—was the most commonly cited biblical text in Revolutionary America. This passage, alongside a similar passage in I Peter 2, are precisely the texts I might have imagined that Patriots would have avoided. How does one “honor the king” while engaging in revolution?

“Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.” I Peter 2:13–16

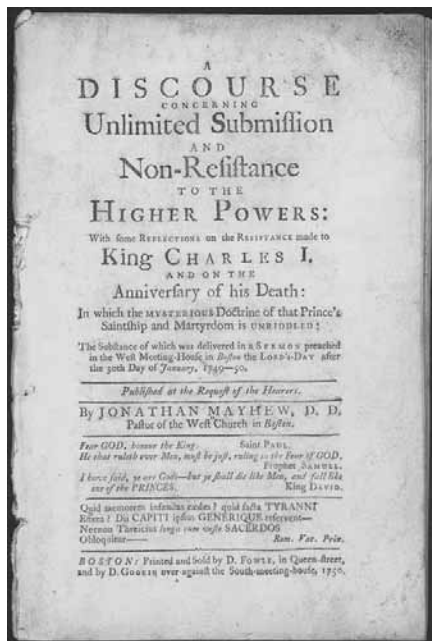
These passages would seem, on a plain reading, to have prohibited Christians from participating in the American Revolution. Indeed, some former Patriot leaders such as Savannah pastor John Zubly withdrew when they realized that the protests against British taxes were likely to morph into violent revolution, which Zubly believed was not an option for Christians.

But instead of avoiding Romans 13 and I Peter 2, Patriot pastors (to their credit) took them on frequently

and directly. They usually replied to Loyalist critics that the command to submit was never unconditional—just as it is not unconditional in marriage, in church, or in any other social setting. The Bible was replete with stories of resistance against unjust rulers. Even Peter and Paul routinely confronted and flouted the authority of Jewish and Roman officials, saying that they must obey God rather than man.

Perhaps the key sermon on resistance used by the Patriots

This article, published October 14, 2014, at The Anxious Bench channel on the Patheos website, is reprinted by permission. Thomas Kidd teaches history at Baylor University and is senior fellow at Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion. Check out his latest book, George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father.



was Jonathan Mayhew's *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, originally preached in 1749. During the Revolution, John Adams claimed that the reprinted sermon was "read by everybody." Mayhew insisted that submission was contingent upon a ruler being just, or being "the minister of God to thee for good," as Paul put it. Wicked, oppressive rulers were better

designated "messengers of Satan" than ministers of God, Mayhew thundered. Patriot ministers insisted that if the command to submit to authorities was absolute, then Peter and Paul should have stopped preaching the gospel, Christian martyrs throughout history should have denied their faith, and the Reformation should never have happened.

Logically, the idea of contingent submission seems correct: given Peter and Paul's own behavior, they cannot plausibly have meant that Christians should passively acquiesce to any and every government directive. But still, any Christian should pause at Romans 13 and I Peter 2 when considering the justice of the Patriot cause. Can we wholeheartedly accept Jefferson's assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably

the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is [the people's] right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government"? Resisting patently ungodly commands is one thing. Resisting unjust taxes on consumer goods is another. But "throwing off" a government for such taxes, and for a lack of effective representation, is hard to square with the stance recommended by Scripture. Maybe John Zubly had a point?