



Abstract from Article

RESISTANCE AND THE UNGODLY MAGISTRATE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: THE MARIAN EXILES

Danner, D G

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Abstract

The backdrop against which English theories of resistance must be placed can be seen clearly in the thought of William Tyndale. Rather than look toward Wittenberg, Zurich, or Geneva for the formative roots of English Protestantism, it is more perceptive to see English Protestant thought in its own singularity and uniqueness. English reformers looked at the nation of England as a new Israel of God, in covenant relationship with him. It did not escape their memory that Constantine himself was of British origin. Indeed, church history began with father Abraham, whom Jahweh promised to make a nation after his own choice. The Old Testament thus became their favorite textbook and authority, for the history of Israel opened up within divine revelation a corporate depository of the divine will within a nation. Seeing themselves as part of God's covenant of promise and fulfillment, the English could think only of the divine right of kings; and David's example of sparing Jahwe's anointed, Saul, was evidence enough of Christian obedience (Tyndale, 1967). John Ponet, the Cambridge scholar and Edwardian bishop divided various laws into natural and positive law (Hudson:139-40). The former rests on the sovereignty of God, while the latter rests on God's human agents. Natural law is prior to any form of civil law. One may see it in the Scriptures, and it is discoverable by human reason. The authority to implement this natural scheme of justice falls upon states and governments (Ponet:22). The people may thus exercise the mandate of law-making or surrender it to another by their consent (27). Tyranny was not God's way of punishing sin; here Ponet departed from Tyndale and the mind of English reformers prior to the Marian exiles. A tyrant is not an agent of God, and the people owe him no obedience; Ponet found ample evidence of this in the Old Testament as well as English history. To depose such an ungodly magistrate would normally fall to the ancient office of the high constable. Christopher Goodman, erstwhile Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Brasenose College, Oxford, also left England for the Continent in 1554. He was first seen at Strassburg, later with Peter Martyr at Basel, and he went to Frankfurt when troubles among the English exiles began brewing over church polity. He sided with the more radical party and John Knox, ending up in Geneva in 1555. As one of the appointed ministers of the English church in Geneva, Goodman had preached a sermon on the passage in Acts 4 where Peter emphasized, "We must obey God rather than man." To obey human statutes contrary to God's will is no obedience at all. Magistrates are appointed by God, and the people of a nation should take care whom they appoint as ruler, for the ruler is the one "by whom Realms and nations are either preserved if they be Godly, or utterly destroyed and shamefully oppressed if they be ungodly" (Di, recto). Using the Old Testament as a pattern, Goodman suggested that the people must choose a magistrate who would be favorable to God and that, at all costs, "that monster in nature, and disorder amongst men ... the empire and government of a woman" was to be eschewed (Dii, verso). England thus stood condemned in Goodman's eyes, even further embarrassed by an illegitimate queen whose Spanish ties were just as abominable (Diii, recto). Likening the queen to a "furious Jezabel," Goodman was

quick to point to the blood of the martyrs and the "counterfeit Christians" who betrayed their own countrymen by acting in obedience to the recalcitrant Mary (Dvii, recto). Goodman appealed to the Maccabean Revolt as an example to the common people to revolt with violence against Mary. The inferior magistrates in Parliament had sold their souls to the words of men instead of upholding the true word of God. John Knox had developed the theory that subjects of a Catholic sovereign were lawfully entitled to overthrow their sovereign by armed revolution as early as the spring and summer of 1554. This departure can be seen in his Letter to the Faithful in London, Newcastle and Berwick, the first part of which was written in December 1553; the letter was finished at Dieppe in January 1554 (Laing, 111:192-94; Ridley:171-75). Not only will the wicked be punished, but also those who consent to their activity stand in the judgment of God. When the Scot reached Geneva in 1554, he apparently had the matter vividly on his mind, for he addressed the famous four questions about political revolution to Calvin and later formulated them in writing to Bullinger. Calvin was quite negative, but Bullinger was somewhat more encouraging.

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