

Feature Articles

The Magdeburg Interpretation of Romans 13: A Lutheran Justification for Political Resistance

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Martin Luther and, therefore, Lutherans have a reputation for being *quietists*—for not wanting to “rock the boat” but instead accepting the existing political order. While Thomas Muentzer, a radical Anabaptist leader, was promoting the Peasant Revolt of 1525, Luther called for obedience to the state. In the view of many Lutherans even today, the American colonists committed a sin by declaring their independence from England in 1776.¹ Such, however, is not the only Lutheran way of thinking, nor does this thinking necessarily reflect Luther’s own mature view of the duties of citizens and of Christian magistrates in the face of tyranny.

The Torgau Declaration of 1530

To question whether Luther was a quietist does not, however, lead automatically to the other extreme, as if he must have been either a quietest or else a revolutionary. Luther was cautious and moderate, not radical. Throughout his life, his default position remained obedience to the state. However, by the 1530s he had become more open to political resistance than he had been during the 1520s. One turning point in Luther’s thinking came in 1530, when Lutheran lawyers met with Lutheran theologians in Torgau.² The resulting Torgau Declaration acknowledged that under the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, the emperor was *not* entitled to absolute obedience by local magistrates or their subjects; rather, political power was to be shared between the emperor and the local magistrates, particularly with those magistrates who served as electors of the emperor. The electors had the responsibility not only to choose who the emperor should be, but also to hold that officeholder accountable to his office. Accordingly, the prevalent doctrine of the divine right of kings had to be adjusted to recognize that no monarch wields power unconditionally, but local magistrates (and even the citizens themselves) have political rights and duties involving a corresponding limitation upon the centralized authority of the state.

Throughout the 1530s, Luther, Lutheran theologians, and Lutheran lawyers continued to unpack the implications of the Torgau Declaration, even as their political rights in Saxony fell increasingly under the threat of Emperor Charles V, who had sided with the Roman Papacy against the Lutheran Reformation. Local princes formed the Schmalkaldic League in preparation for the protection of the Lutheran church. They did so under a

principle that came to be known as interposition (<http://www.intoyourhandsllc.com/interposition>)—the duty of a lesser magistrate to *interpose*, or place himself between, a tyrannical higher magistrate and the people. Luther’s own life had been spared by an act of interposition following the Diet of Worms in 1521: Frederick the Wise staged a kidnapping of Luther and then hid him away safely in Wartburg Castle to protect him from the Edict of Worms. That edict, adopted by a dubious constitutional procedure, had declared Luther an outlaw and demanded that local magistrates assist in apprehending him; anyone who found him could kill him without fear of punishment. Instead, Frederick defied the emperor and rescued Luther.

As a result of the protection received from Frederick the Wise, Luther lived for a quarter of a century after the Edict of Worms. His post-Worms activities included translating the Bible into the language of the German people, publishing his Small (</lutheran-confessions/75-small-catechism-preface.html>) and Large Catechism (</books/254-studying-luthers-large-catechism.html>), coaching Lutherans from behind the scenes for the drafting of the Augsburg Confession (</lutheran-confessions/59-augsburg-confession-xvi.html>), and leaving posterity a wealth of theological insight through his sermons, Bible commentaries, and treatises. Luther also taught by example as he demonstrated God’s will for family life through his faithful marriage to Katherine von Bora (<https://amzn.to/29B16wM>) and through his hands-on approach to fatherhood.

In the years immediately following Luther’s death (1546), Charles V renewed the pressure for Luther’s followers to return to the Roman Church. For the sake of peace, the Augsburg Interim allowed Lutherans to hold to some of their teachings, but nevertheless required them to adopt the Roman Catholic position on other doctrines. Lutheran theologians were split: some agreed to make concessions, whereas others insisted that no compromise was permissible when the Word of God addresses a matter so clearly. Local magistrates also were divided. Some chose to make their peace with the Emperor. Others chose political resistance; most notably, the city of Magdeburg withstood a 400-day siege.

The Magdeburg Confession of 1550

The Lutheran theologians of Magdeburg not only supported their magistrates in resisting the Augsburg Interim, they also wrote a confession of faith justifying their decision.³ The Magdeburg Confession of 1550 closely tracks both Luther’s own writings and the Torgau Declaration. Whenever possible, citizens were to obey the state. The church was not to meddle in civil affairs, nor the state meddle in theological matters, but rather each should respect what Lutherans call the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, or the divinely established distinction between church and state. The Magdeburg theologians were by no means eager for revolt. That being said, Romans 13 was not to be interpreted as a *carte blanche* endorsement of the current ruler, nor as an unqualified demand that citizens obey the ruler’s every whim. The “authorities ... appointed by God” (Romans 13:1) and “every ordinance of man” (1 Peter 2:13), to whom people were subject, referred not so much to individuals who held an office but rather to the constitutionally defined office itself.

The frontispiece of the Magdeburg Confession reveals a significant departure from the absolutist interpretation of the divine right of kings, which justified whatever decisions a ruler made. Whereas Romans 13:3 literally reads, “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil,” the title page of the Magdeburg Confession restated this declarative sentence as an imperative, indicating what God expects of rulers: “The powerful are commanded by God to fear not good works but evil ones.” Just as Luther, in the Large Catechism (</books/254-studying-luthers-large-catechism.html>), expounds upon the literal command to children, “Honor your father and your mother,” by discussing also the duties that parents have toward their children as they serve as God’s

stewards over the family, so also the Magdeburg Confession expounded the literal command that citizens must obey their governors to include the complementary duties that governors have before God toward their subjects.⁴

Echoing the Torgau Declaration, the Magdeburg Confession also explained that citizens and lower magistrates owe their obedience not so much to the higher *officer* but rather to the higher *office*. This distinction accords with Luther's doctrine of vocation (</articles/310-the-doctrine-of-vocation-sacramental-blessing-not-sacrificial-duty.html>): God places people into their various offices to serve as a channel of His blessings to the people served by such an office. The Magdeburg confessors argued that when the person inhabiting an office of civil government transgresses the constitutional limits of his power, then those beneath him are not obligated to follow him in that breach, but rather may resist and correct him. Specifically, lower magistrates have the duty, according to their own vocation from God, to interpose for the protection of the people when a higher officer becomes a tyrant.

The Magdeburg confessors were neither simplistic nor rash. They recognized that there is tyranny and then there is *tyranny*. They did not intend to invite anyone to resist at the smallest breach; rather, their confession identified four levels of injustice (<https://www.intoyourhandsllc.com/blog/84-4-levels-of-injustice-knowing-when-to-suffer-patiently-and-when-to-resist.html>) and the appropriate response to each one.

4 Levels of Injustice

Level 1 The "Not Excessively Atrocious" Governor

Level 2 The Lawless Tyrant

Level 3 The Coercive Tyrant

Level 4 The Persecutor of God

Adapted from the Magdeburg Confession (1550)
www.intoyourhandsllc.com/interposition

(<https://www.intoyourhandsllc.com/blog/84-4-levels-of-injustice-knowing-when-to-suffer-patiently-and-when-to-resist.html>)

Only because Charles V had refused prior warnings and advanced to the fourth degree of injustice—a tyranny so horrific as to attack not merely the rights of the people but God Himself, the Author of their rights, and concerning a matter not merely political but spiritual, since now the preservation of the Gospel was at stake—only because Charles V had, as it were, signed a pact with the Antichrist himself did the Magdeburg confessors insist upon the divinely assigned duty of their local magistrates to resist. Even at this point, however, they begged the emperor to restore their rights and they offered to renew their obedience to him, if only he would restrain himself to the proper boundaries of his office.

Ultimately, Elector Maurice of Saxony, one of the German magistrates who had sided with Charles V, reversed his position. Maurice, whose army had surrounded Magdeburg for over a year, agreed in 1551 to permit the local churches to retain the Lutheran theology of the Augsburg Confession. Charles V never would achieve his dream of a Europe united under the Roman Catholic Church; the Magdeburg Confession had exposed his political tactics as tyrannical and his theological posture as diabolical, and the people of Magdeburg had demonstrated both their right and their resolve to resist such tyranny under the protection of their local magistrates. As conflicts throughout the German states simmered down, the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 recognized the prerogative of each local magistrate to regulate religion within his region. Saxony would remain Lutheran.

From Magdeburg via Geneva to England and Scotland

Beyond Saxony, reprints of the Magdeburg Confession and hundreds of related pamphlets brought a Lutheran theology of political resistance to Switzerland, Scotland, and England, where it inspired the Calvinists who in turn shaped the political culture of colonial America. The *Geneva Bible* (1560), an English translation with Calvinist footnotes, parroted the Magdeburg Confession in its treatment of Romans 13. The Geneva Bible interpreted “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers” (Romans 13:1) to show what “subjects owe to their Magistrates, to wit, obedience ... not only due to the highest Magistrate himself, but also even to the basest, which hath any office under him.” Translating Romans 13:3 as “For Magistrates are not to be feared for good works, but for evil,” the Geneva Bible added in a footnote: “the Magistrates themselves are put in mind of that duty which they owe to their subjects.” Verse 5 read, “Wherefore ye must be subject, not because of wrath only, also for conscience sake,” with a footnote limiting the sphere of obedience to lawful and moral commands only, “so far as lawfully we may: for if unlawful things be commanded us, we must answer as Peter teaches us, It is better to obey God than men [Acts 5:29].” When addressing 1 Peter 2:13–14 (“Therefore submit yourself unto all manner of ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether it be unto the King as superior, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him ...”) the Geneva Bible framed the topic as “obedience which is due both to the Laws, and also to the Magistrates both higher and lower.” Furthermore, the Geneva Bible situated obedience to civil laws not as blind obedience to the authority of the lawgiver, but rather as obedience to the authority of the constitution that empowers the lawgiver, asserting that “by ordinance is meant” not a civil law individually considered but rather “the framing and ordering of civil government” broadly considered, namely, the constitution.

In summary, the Geneva Bible promoted obedience to both higher and lower magistrates, and to the laws of the land, as limited within a constitutional framework—and all of this only so long as no civil mandate ran afoul of God’s moral law. Such a posture left open the possibility that a citizen would have to disobey one magistrate in order to obey a differently minded magistrate, with the prioritization among magistrates being determined not by rank alone, but by agreement with two other standards: the jurisdiction of each magistrate as defined by the operative constitution and, trumping all other considerations, the immutable principles of God’s moral law.

To King James I, who espoused a strong theory of royal prerogative, the Geneva theology was tantamount to treason; for Calvinist Puritans (who in time would gain enough votes in Parliament to depose two of James’s successors), the Geneva footnotes preserved a theology worth dying for. As smuggled copies of the outlawed Geneva Bible floated across the English Channel in ever growing quantities, James abandoned censorship in favor of a more practical means of preventing the English people from reading the Puritans’ prized republican footnotes: the king sponsored an alternative translation, devoid of political contraband, and sought to flood the market with cheap copies. Thus originated the “Authorized [i.e., not smuggled] Version,” also known as the “King James Version.”⁵ Significantly for American history, it was not the KJV, but rather than Geneva Bible, that became the Bible of New England’s Puritans.

Meanwhile, John Knox, a Scottish exile to Geneva, likewise had borrowed from the Magdeburg Confession in concluding that Romans 13 teaches that God has established civil governments for the people’s benefit. Having fled from Queen Mary Tudor of England (the “Bloody” Mary who executed Protestants), Knox was emboldened by the Lutherans’ example. Citing over seventy Bible passages, Knox argued resolutely for both the right and the duty of lesser magistrates to interpose against rulers who despoil the public good.⁶ A man feared by many but who feared no one, Knox even went so far as to insist, in his *Appellation to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland* (1558), that both the magistrates and the people of England had a duty to sentence “Mary, that Jezebel,” to death.⁷ While Calvinists like Knox, compared to Lutherans, have tended to extrapolate a bolder positive duty of lesser magistrates and citizens themselves toward political resistance in the face of tyranny, the crucial break with the alternative doctrine of royal absolutism was Lutheran, not Calvinist, in origin.⁸

From the Magdeburg Resistance to the American Revolution

In a sense, the Magdeburg confessors are America’s “Lutheran founding fathers”; their resistance during 1550–1551 left a legacy that can be traced into the political and theological culture of colonial America.

No, the Declaration of Independence and the Magdeburg Confession are not identical. In fact, Lutherans today may continue to disagree in good conscience over whether the American Revolution was justified. Even so, some connections may be drawn, the clearest of which is this: *that Romans 13 does not insist upon unqualified obedience to an officer but rather God-fearing obedience to an office, and that each office is defined by the operative constitution.* With this principle in mind, one can perceive clearly that the American Revolution of 1776 had more in common with the Magdeburg Resistance of 1550 than with the Peasant Revolt of 1525. Similarly, the Second Continental Congress bore a greater resemblance to the Schmalkaldic League than to



Muenzer's partners in the Peasant Revolt. Colonial American citizens of the British Empire looked to their local magistrates—to the colonial assemblies—much as Luther's followers looked to their local magistrates for interposition between themselves and an empire that had gone tyrannical.

In the case of Magdeburg, the empire clearly had progressed to a level 4 injustice; in the American situation, arguably the British empire had only progressed to level 2 or 3, violating rights that the British constitution had designated for local assemblies and local subjects. Whereas the Magdeburg Confession affirms a *duty* to resist against a level 4 injustice, the document acknowledges that the *necessity* of resistance against a level 3 injustice first requires an “accurate and true judgement” of the precipitating events; rather than speaking again of duty or necessity, the confessors conceded only the *permission* to resist, upon prudent deliberation, against level 2 injuries.

Questions of prudence, of course, cannot be answered so sharply as questions of morality. Christians may conscientiously disagree with one another, and in fact the history of the American Revolution reveals that they did. Therein lies the issue to be debated by armchair philosophers and passionate theologians concerning the American Revolution: did the lesser magistrates who gathered in Philadelphia in 1776 have sufficient cause to establish the prudence of declaring independence or not? The Continental Congress, first convening in 1774, had certainly been in no hurry to declare independence, but by July 4, 1776, the delegates were prepared to adopt a statement declaring 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 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. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

With this assertion of a level 3 injustice, the delegates, as representatives of the colonial assemblies and of the inhabitants of those colonies, resolved to sever the political bonds connecting themselves to the imperial British government. Romans 13 no longer could mean obedience to both the local magistrates and to the imperial government; each American had to choose one or the other. Perhaps some of them made the decision from sinful motivation. It does not follow, however, that all of the signers of the Declaration did so in sinful rebellion. For many of America's founding fathers, their letters, diaries, and public speeches consistently indicate that their resistance came reluctantly, their desire for reconciliation with the Crown had been sincere through the close of 1775, and their ultimate decision for independence in 1776 followed the broad outline articulated first at Magdeburg, albeit later adapted and reworked in Geneva and beyond.

Not a single Lutheran signed the Declaration of Independence, but it seems appropriate that one might have done so had he been elected as a colonial delegate. Lutherans did later serve at the conventions drafting the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution, and the first Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives was a Lutheran.



The image shows an Amazon product listing for the book "Rediscovering the American Republic: Progression, Principles, Character, and the Founding Fathers' Vision of the American Republic" by Murray Friedman. The book cover features a blue and red design with the title in gold and white text. Below the book cover, the title "Rediscovering the American..." is displayed in blue, followed by the price "\$5.00" and a "Shop now" button.

American Lutherans today needn't feel ashamed of their nation's origin. Indeed, their time would be far better spent preparing for the next occasion in which interposition becomes not merely a moral option, but a moral imperative. Lutherans of the twenty-first century have good reasons to cherish their 500-year heritage that includes the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the doctrine of vocation, and—during the 20 years spanning the Torgau Declaration (1530) and the Magdeburg Confession (1550)—the biblically sound development of a “mature theory of political resistance.” (<https://www.intoyourhandsllc.com/blog/81-5-crucial-components-for-a-mature-theory-of-political-resistance.html>) Let us preserve that heritage today, for it may be the tool by which God preserves our children's church tomorrow.

Footnotes

1. “The American Revolution cannot be justified on the basis of the Word of God, no matter how many times God's name is dragged into it.” Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Civil Government: God's Other Kingdom* (<https://amzn.to/1XWXWqI>) (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), 154. (↔)
2. Cynthia Grant Shoenerger, “The Development of the Lutheran Theory of Resistance, 1523–1530,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 1 (1977): 61–76. (↔)
3. *The Magdeburg Confession* (<https://amzn.to/1XpAHam>), trans. by Matthew Colvin (CreateSpace, 2012). (↔)
4. David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (<https://amzn.to/1XWXvgh>) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 68. (↔)
5. Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (<https://amzn.to/1svgUZV>) (New York: Anchor Books, 2001). (↔)
6. Matthew J. Trehwella, *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates: A Proper Resistance to Tyranny and a Repudiation of Unlimited Obedience to Civil Government* (<https://amzn.to/1VKHbPr>) (CreateSpace, 2013), 3, 39–45. (↔)
7. William Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300–1564* (<https://amzn.to/28NtX3B>) (rpt., New York: MJF Books, 1985), 613. (↔)
8. David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance* (<https://amzn.to/1XWXvgh>), 101–2. (↔)

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