

The New Testament Church
Christian Heritage Sunday – June 29, 2025

The 250th Anniversary of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms:
The Doctrine of Interposition
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Introduction: The Theology of Interposition

Robert Robinson, in 1752, at 17 years old, came with a gang of his friends to disrupt a tent meeting in England where the revival preacher George Whitfield was speaking. But hearing Whitefield declare from Matthew 3:7: “*O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” he later wrote that those “*words sunk into my heart like lead in the water. I wept... and for weeks, I could think of little else.*” In 1755, only three years later, he found “*full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.*”¹

With a transformed heart, he would write the famous hymn, Come Thou Font of Every Blessing in 1757 when he was only 22 years old. One verse told his life story, “*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand’ring from the fold of God. He to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood.*” The blood of Jesus had rescued his sinful heart by coming between the wrath of God on sin and his certain destiny in hell. Christianity calls this theology the **atonement**. It is the seminal definition of the word **interposition** – to come between two at odds to bring reconciliation.

God is Sovereign – perfectly righteous and holy (separate from sin). We are crippled by sin, desiring to set our own rules and get our own way. Even the good things we do cannot offset the guilt for our heart finds no rest in the pride of self. So what is the answer? It is the interposition of the blood of Jesus. Jesus, the God-man, died on the cross – taking our punishment, but satisfying the requirements of the law to forgive sin – the shedding of blood. Just as Robert Robinson found out, Jesus is our mediator, and the one whose blood interposes between us (and our sin) and the holiness of God.

It is virtually impossible to fully understand the century of development of the ideas of liberty embraced by colonial America by the time of the Revolution without an understanding of biblical theology. Why would that be so, you might ask? This is because the actions of the people and civil magistrates of that time were largely inspired and directed by the clergy who preached and applied their biblical theology to every area of life – and almost all the magistrates went to church.

The Historic Context of the Declaration of Independence

Today we often celebrate and interpret the Declaration of Independence, which soon turns 250, outside its theological and historic context. But there would not have been a Declaration of Independence if there had not been *A Declaration Setting forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms*. Ratified by the Second Continental Congress on July 6, 1775, a full year before

¹ [The Story Behind: Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.](#)

the more familiar one, it sets forth the reasoning for full separation while still hoping for reconciliation. It stands between the First Continental Congress of 1774 and the third one in 1776 which produced the Declaration of Independence. Americans need to understand this document for it is based upon the *doctrine of interposition*, an application of biblical atonement which became the theological foundation for the lawful resistance to tyranny. It was understood that *lawful resistance* was approved by God, but lawless rebellion makes God our adversary.

Though distant from most American thought today, the *theological roots of interposition*, “the process of coming between a tyrant and the people,” was clearly in the minds of civil magistrates at the time *because* of what they heard from the pulpits of colonial America. Theologians of the Reformation faced this question, *when civil government in general and kings in particular overstep their bounds, how does God want us to respond?*

The Bible teaches that tyranny is *the unjust control of another through the means of manipulation or force* (Genesis 3).² Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary, based on biblical words, defined tyranny as *arbitrary or despotic exercise of power; the exercise of power over subjects and others with a rigor not authorized by law or justice, or not requisite for the purposes of government. Hence tyranny is often synonymous with cruelty and oppression.*³

So how should people respond? Some proposed passivity, that martyrdom was the only option. Others proposed rebellion, taking the law into your own hands against established authority. But neither of these options were satisfactory responses according to the Bible. The first had been witnessed when martyrs died for their faith. Though an option for individuals facing no other option, there must also be a further way to lawfully resist evil. The second option of anarchy produced unfavorable results as well, for it leads to greater tyranny and control – the latter end is worse than the initial injustice that caused the anger in the first place.

The answer from the Bible to these polar opposite positions is the doctrine of interposition or the *lawful process by which one resists injustice and tyrannical government*. It was in concert with the *Magna Charta* of 1215 when the Barons forced King John to sign this seminal document of rights. It was first articulated in John Calvin’s *doctrine of the lower magistrate*. He wrote in 1536 that when a lower magistrate *connives* or conducts *nefarious perfidy* (wicked deception pretending to do the right thing but siding with tyranny), *they fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, while knowing that, by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians.*⁴

After thousands of French Huguenots were slaughtered for their faith in 1572, *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos* (Defense of liberty against tyrants) was written by Junius Brutus in 1579. He dealt with the question of *whether subjects are bound and ought to obey princes, if they command that which is against the law of God*. He also dealt with the issue of *whether it be lawful to resist a prince who doth*

² Jehle, Paul, *Tyranny: Unfit to be the Ruler of a Free People*, The New Testament Church, June 30, 2024, pages 1-2 where the biblical definition is derived from Genesis 1-3.

³ Webster, Noah, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828, republished by the Foundation for American Christian Education, www.face.net, 1967.

⁴ Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1989, Book 4, pages 674-675.

infringe the law of God; by whom, how, and how far it is lawful. His conclusion? Only magistrates, inferior to the king, representing the people, can and should lawfully resist the King's tyrannical duties.⁵

Another example is Pastor Samuel Rutherford who wrote *Lex Rex* (the law is king) in 1644. Since God models his covenant with the people and the King, the King is answerable to God should he become a tyrant. Government is not our father, and neither is the king, the King is not above the law, ruling "of the people." Thus, the steps of resistance to tyranny is to appeal, mediate through lower magistrates, flee, and as a last resort, defend oneself in resisting by force.⁶ His views were consonant with John Knox, from Scotland, who wrote forcefully in the late 1500's in his stand against the practices of Queen Mary.

What were the sentiments of these and many other theologians of the Reformation? *Resistance to tyrannical rule is only permissible under authority – in personal self-defense or under the lesser magistrate.* In other words, individuals must demonstrate submission at lower levels of authority to resist lawfully at higher levels. As we have noted, *interposition* was not a new concept. It was articulated clearly in the Old Testament and affirmed by Jesus in the New Testament.

When Egypt commanded Hebrew midwives to kill their male children, they interposed themselves, deceived the government, and "*God dealt well with the midwives*" (Exodus 1:20). When Queen Athaliah seized the throne of Judah by force and overstepped her jurisdiction, Jehoida interposed as a lower magistrate and restrained her (2nd Kings 11). When Uzziah as a civil magistrate attempted to burn incense as a priest, overstepping his bounds, Azariah interposed as a lower magistrate, and God struck Uzziah with leprosy (2nd Chr. 26). In all these cases, *fearing God meant demonstrating submission to Him under law so that we might not resist tyranny directly, incurring His wrath.*⁷

Resistance to tyrants through mediation – the lower magistrate – is a process, a progression of smaller steps until the last resort is reached, and even then, only entered into cautiously and under counsel and under authority. Consider the historic example of the German Magdeburg Confession of 1550. The magistrates of Magdeburg applied the biblical theology of making a distinction between "patient forbearance" of injustice and defensive resistance to outright tyranny. They, in fact, articulated four levels of injustice in their application of the doctrine of interposition.

The first might be called *not excessively atrocious*. All people and hence governments "have their own vices and sins, by which, either knowingly or wantonly, they sometimes do injuries, not excessively atrocious, but remediable."⁸ To revolt at such offenses would be to cause unnecessary strife. The second might be called *the lawless tyrant*. These were "atrocious and notorious injuries."⁹ This is where a magistrate violates his own oath. These more atrocious violations of the law most people will understand that they are not bound to obey and are willing to suffer the consequences.

⁵ [A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants | Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism](#).

⁶ Rutherford, Rev. Samuel, *Lex Rex*, 1644, republished by Sprinkle Publications, 1982, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

⁷ Jehle, Paul, *Whom Shall we Obey?* – published by the New Testament Church, July, 2020.

⁸ Colvin, Matthew, article and translation of the Magdeburg Confession, 1550 - [4 Levels of Injustice: Knowing When to Suffer Patiently and When to Resist - Into Your Hands LLC](#)

⁹ *Ibid.*

The third level might be called *the coercive tyrant*. This means that individuals can no longer tolerate such injustice. The line here can be difficult and requires “accurate and true judgment.”¹⁰ Here interposition is required, and the lesser magistrate should stand up to the higher official who is abusing the law. Finally, the fourth can be called *the persecutor of God*. “Tyrants begin to be so made that they persecute with guile and arms, not so much the persons of the inferior magistrates and their subjects, as their right itself... and that they persecute God, the author of right in persons, not by any sudden and momentary fury, but with a deliberate and persistent attempt to destroy good works for all posterity.”¹¹

The Declaration of Independence identifies at least five areas of tyranny practiced by King George II. If we identify them by clauses, they could be put in the following categories:

- Cl 1-10 - Obstruction of justice – oppression of people
- Cl 11-15 - Military use of Civil law – political bullying
- Cl 16-22 - Abuse of power – unlawful control beyond one’s jurisdiction (authority)
- Cl 23-27 - Inciting violence/chaos - to gain more control...
- Cl 28-31 - Promotion of corruption – evil is now classified as good¹²

The Declaration also stated that, *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.*”

It is obvious from the historic example of Magdeburg that those who wrote this Confession were attempting to inspire the lesser magistrate to stand up to the tyrant so that the people would not have to do so directly, violating the Scriptures which forbid direct rebellion against those in power. Rebellion produces anarchy which in turn brings upon a people greater evil. This is seen throughout history. Thus, both the theology of resistance, and the civil examples that followed it, reveal a *slow progression* of resistance, with the last and final resort a call to arms.

James 4:7 depicts this truth by stating “Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” The degree to which we walk in humility, acknowledging God, submitting our temper, emotions, and will under His control, is the degree to which we will be able to resist evil properly without bringing a great evil upon us as a result. Remember, **the attitude and actions we pursue to correct a wrong will also be used to enact the solution.**

The greatest fear of the clergy and the civil magistrates who attended their churches was that if the colonies did not resist lawfully, the Supreme Sovereign of the Universe would be their adversary.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See the oration by Paul Jehle, *Tyranny: Unfit to be the Ruler of a Free People*, June 30, 2024, www.tntchurch.net.

There is no way you can win a war when God opposes you! It is interesting to note that just prior to the document under examination today, George Washington was appointed by the same Continental Congress to be the commander of the Army. We just witnessed the 250th anniversary of the U.S. Army – June 14, 1775. What many do not realize but is relevant to the point we are making, is the humility in which Washington accepted this position on June 16:

“Mr. President, Tho’ I am truly sensible of the high Honour done me in this Appointment, yet I feel great distress, from a consciousness that my abilities & Military experience may not be equal to the extensive & important Trust: However, as the Congress desire it I will enter upon the momentous duty, & exert every power I Possess In their service & for the Support of the glorious Cause: I beg they will accept my most cordial thanks for this distinguished testimony of their Approbation... As to pay, Sir, I beg leave to Assure the Congress that as no pecuniary consideration could have tempted me to have accepted this Arduous employment at the expense of my domestic ease & happi(ness) I do not wish to make any profit from it: I will keep an exact Account of my expenses.. that is all I desire.”¹³

Note that Washington agreed to serve only *under* the civil authority of Congress. Humility is a trait that rarely exists unless the individual sees themselves under the Sovereignty of God. Washington’s humility was coupled with his fear and respect for God. His initial orders to the newly formed army, interestingly on July 4, 1775, were discipline and honor of God:

It is required and expected that exact discipline be observed, and due Subordination prevail thro’ the whole Army, as a Failure in these most essential points must necessarily produce extreme Hazard, Disorder and Confusion; and end in shameful disappointment and disgrace. The General most earnestly requires, and expects, a due observance of those articles of war, established for the Government of the army, which forbid profane cursing, swearing & drunkenness; And in like manner requires & expects, of all Officers, and Soldiers, not engaged on actual duty, a punctual attendance on divine service, to implore the blessings of heaven upon the means used for our safety and defence.¹⁴

The Second Continental Congress justified the taking up of arms, noting that the British army “made an unprovoked assault on the inhabitants of... Lexington.”¹⁵ Pastor Jonas Clarke, an eyewitness, documented that the British fired first in his one-year anniversary sermon of April 19, 1776. This was also confirmed by many legal depositions.¹⁶

The Second Continental Congress declared that “*Our forefathers, inhabitants of the island of Great-Britain, left their native land, to seek on these shores a residence for civil and **religious freedom**.*”¹⁷ The place where religious freedom exists, which determines the quality of civil liberty, is the condition of the heart. Just as the physical condition of the heart is vital in order to remain healthy,

¹³ Founders Online; [Address to the Continental Congress, 16 June 1775](#)

¹⁴ Founders Online; [General Orders, 4 July 1775](#).

¹⁵ Perry, Richard L., Cooper, John C., editors; [Sources of our Liberties](#), American Bar Foundation, 1978, Ch. XX, page 298.

¹⁶ Clarke, Jonas, *The Battle of Lexington: A Sermon and Eyewitness*, April 19, 1776 – Nordskog Publishing, 2007.

¹⁷ Sources, p. 295.

so the condition of our spiritual heart is vital as well. Jesus, in the sermon on the Mount, defined what it meant to be free internally when He said, “*Every tree is known by its fruit... a good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil.*”¹⁸ In other words, the condition of the heart is the source of good and evil.

So, the place to begin in resisting evil is the heart. I have good news today, for Jesus cleanses hearts and it is by His power alone that transforms them, for as Jesus said, “*the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*”¹⁹ The gospel is that due to Jesus’ sacrifice, we can invite Him in, and He will cleanse it and make it a new source of good more powerful than the evil. The Bible teaches plainly that resistance to evil begins in our hearts, not externally. A heart cleansed of sin and walking in freedom of guilt is the root of religious liberty.

When facing conflicts in life and culture, however, Jesus stated in Matthew 5:38-41 that we are not to make minor offenses major ones, but instead “turn the other cheek,” **avoiding conflict**. The Second Continental Congress declared that, in violation of their written charters, Parliament has *undertaken to give and grant our money without consent, though we have ever exercised an exclusive right to dispose of our own property.*²⁰

From 1660 to 1764, Parliament passed laws restricting navigation and economic productivity without the consent of colonial assemblies as required by law. Whatever the colonies produced, Parliament wanted to control – a few examples are the *Navigation Acts* of 1660, 1663 and 1696; the *Woolen Act* (1699); *Hat Act* (1732); *Molasses Act* (1733); *Iron Act* (1750); *Revenue Act* (1764). The colonies turned the other cheek on these except to avoid the negative consequences.

Jesus stated in Matthew 18:15-18 that when conflicts occur, another step is to **appeal** to authority peacefully (privately) to attempt a restoration of relationships. Congress stated that *We for ten years (1764-1774) incessantly and ineffectually besieged the throne as supplicants; we reasoned, we remonstrated with parliament, in the most mild and decent language.*²¹ All this was to no avail during this ten years that have been dubbed “the constitutional debate period.”

A further step, in the spirit of Matthew 18, of calling more witnesses, in response to royal Governors dissolving colonial assemblies (miniature parliaments,) *A Congress of delegates from the United Colonies was assembled at Philadelphia*²² (called the First Continental Congress.) This was the election of new lower magistrates, for the purpose of **civil redress**. Acts 25:11 indicates that Paul the Apostle, as a Roman citizen, appealed in this way utilizing lawful interposition.

In addition, the First Continental Congress in 1774 enacted a further peaceful measure of resistance, the economic **boycott**. Jesus taught that this was a proper action in Matthew 10:14 when he indicated that if a city or village does treats you improperly, you can *shake off the dust of your feet*. This was

¹⁸ Luke 6 :44-46.

¹⁹ Mark 1:15

²⁰ Sources, p. 296.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 297.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 297

the middle eastern form of boycotting, refusing to do business with those who treat you unjustly. The Congress stated, *We have pursued every temperate, every respectful measure; we have even proceeded to break off our commercial intercourse with our fellow-subjects, as the last peaceable admonition, that our attachment to no nation on earth should supplant our attachment to liberty.*²³

Though Jesus explained to his disciples that they were not to fight to keep him from being crucified, he made it clear that there would come a time when *he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one* (Luke 22:36.) In other words, a last resort when no other is possible, is **resistance by force** but again, only when justified as self-defense.

Having followed these peaceful steps of resistance – or *submissive disobedience* to unrighteous and unlawful commands, over a period of a hundred and fifteen years, from 1660 to 1775, the document states that the *unprovoked assault... commenced by the British troops... butchered our countrymen... burnt Charlestown... our ships are vessels are seized... we are reduced to the alternative of choosing an unconditional surrender to the tyranny of irritated ministers, or resistance by force.*²⁴

It is important to note, as well, that long before the conflict of the English Colonies with her Crown and Parliament, theologians and others had recognized that in certain cases, a pre-emptive strike is warranted as a form of self-defense. In the context of Just War Theory, three criteria are given in the context of preemptive strikes, especially in the case of nuclear weapons and terrorism. First, *the immediacy of the threat*. There are clear intentions from the enemy. Second, *the credibility of the intelligence* that indicates preparedness to attack from consistent actions. Third, *the failure of diplomatic attempts* to alleviate such a need.²⁵ Even with all of these cautions, the strike, if enacted justly, would have to target military and their industrial facilities, not civilians.

In Conclusion

In the case of the Colonies, the very context of the July 6, 1775 document we are examining made it clear that Britain was conducting the preemptive strike. On July 5, just prior to this declaration, the “Olive Branch” petition, prepared by John Dickinson, was submitted to Parliament. On August 23, “the day Penn was to have presented the petition to Lord Dartmouth, King George III issued a proclamation of rebellion.”²⁶ This was in response to the battle of Bunker Hill. He declared that the colonies were now traitors.²⁷ Then, the “Prohibitory Act” was given December 22, 1775; severing the colonies completely. John Adams wrote that this, “*throws the thirteen colonies out of the royal protection, levels all distinctions, and makes us independent in spite of our supplications and entreaties... It may be fortunate that the act of independency should come from the British Parliament rather than the American Congress.*”²⁸

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298, 299.

²⁵ [Understanding the Rationale for Preemptive Strikes in Policy - Total Military Insight.](#)

²⁶ Sources of our Liberties, p. 293-294.

²⁷ [Proclamation of Rebellion, King George III, Text, Primary Source Document.](#)

²⁸ [From John Adams to Horatio Gates, 23 March 1776](#)

In summary, then, the Declaration of Independence is a document of interposition, clearly stating that the colonies were justified in taking the final step as a last resort, severing the relationship with Great Britain, which, as John Adams wrote, had already occurred. The clear preparation for the Declaration, however, was the document drafted a year before by the Second Continental Congress in 1775 – 250 years ago. It articulated the steps already taken that would show to the world that the colonies were not acting in anarchy or outright rebellion. It is this context historically, that is left out of today's discussions.

The federal constitution, ratified in 1789, also had clear boundaries of jurisdiction that would curb abuses by any of the three branches if they overstepped their bounds. In addition to horizontal interposition among the branches, interposition was imbedded vertically in relation to States, counties and the national government. Counties were formed to protect the people from State encroachment. States were to interpose against federal encroachment as well. And most importantly, *only the Congress can declare war*. It is only a multitude of counselors, as representatives of the people, that can authorize the use of force, except in immediate self-defense.

The most underused Amendment of interposition at the national level is the 10th Amendment to the Bill of Rights. It states, *The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people*. Black's Law Dictionary confirms it applies to interposition, "*The concept is based on the 10th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States reserving to the states powers not delegated to the United States.*"²⁹

My point is simple. The Bible has been used for generations to give a priority to the process by which we ought to preserve peace and order when we disagree or have civil discourse. This is true neighbor to neighbor, as well as in the differences we all have with one another politically. If we silence our conscience, or allow public policy to do so, we surrender by omission. If we use the tools of anarchy, as is often the case today, we simply label others an enemy, before even hearing their reasoning. We need to reject these extremes and begin by following the concepts of interposition – civil and respectful discussion - at the local level.

After John Adams stood and read a letter from his wife Abigail about the battle of Bunker Hill, the serious tone of the Second Continental Congress was felt. Even though there was the sliver of hope for reconciliation in this document, it was clear that the Congress echoed the views of the clergy, for only a few days later, on July 20, the Congress called a day of fasting and prayer, and a sermon was preached entitled, *Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless!*³⁰ The document closed with some powerful words that lead to a greater understanding of the Declaration written a year later:

Our cause is just... Our internal resources are great, and if necessary, foreign assistance is undoubtedly attainable. We gratefully acknowledge, as signal instances of the Divine favor towards us, that his Providence would not permit us to be called into this controversy, until we were grown

²⁹ Black's Law Dictionary, Fourth Edition (1961-1967) – definition of Interposition.

³⁰ Jones, Rev. David, *Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless*, Fast Day Sermon on July 20, 1775, Philadelphia, reprinted in *The Christian History of the American Revolution: Consider and Ponder*, Foundation for American Christian Education, 1976, pages 536-543, www.face.net.

up to present strength, had been previously exercised in warlike operation, and possessed of the means of defending ourselves. With hearts fortified with these animating reflections, we most solemnly, before God and the world, declare, that, exerting the utmost energy of those powers, which our beneficent Creator hath graciously bestowed upon us, the arms we have been compelled by our enemies to assume, we will, in defiance of every hazard, with unabating firmness and perseverance, employ for the preservation of our liberties; being with one mind resolved to die freemen rather than to live slaves.

...we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored. Necessity has not yet drive us into that desperate measure... We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain, and establishing independent states. We fight not for glory or for conquest. We exhibit to mankind the remarkable spectacle of a people attached by unprovoked enemies, without any imputation or even suspicion of offense....

In our own native land, in defense of the freedom that is our birthright, and which we ever enjoyed till the late violation of it – for the protection of our property, acquired solely by the honest industry of our fore-fathers and ourselves, against violence actually offered, we have taken up arms. We shall lay them down when hostilities shall cease on the part of the aggressors, and all danger of their being renewed shall be removed, but not before.

With an humble confidence in the mercies of the supreme and impartial Judge and Ruler of the Universe, we most devoutly implore his divine goodness to protect us happily through this great conflict, to dispose our adversaries to reconciliation on reasonable terms, and thereby to resolve the empire from the calamities of civil war.³¹

The Declaration, a year later, would close in a similar way, calling upon God in humility, to *appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world, and with a firm reliance of Divine Providence, mutually pledge to each other our Lives, Fortunes and our sacred Honor!*

May God give us wisdom in the days ahead, to lead all those in our influence to avoid anarchy and rebellion on one hand, and surrender by silence on the other, should the situation warrant it. Most importantly, however, let us conduct ourselves with the understanding that there is a God in heaven, and He rules over the affairs of earth, and thus it is imperative that we remain humble before Him. May God help us to learn the lessons from our history!

³¹ *Ibid.* pgs. 299-300.