

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and Reformed Resistance (II)¹

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Saint Bartholomew's day (August 23, 1572) made it clear that royal power and papal oppression were twin enemies of the Reformation. It was widely thought that they would lead the counterattack and impose conformity to the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) throughout Europe. The massacre unleashed a flood of pamphleteering for freedom of conscience and for constitutional rights within the legal framework of the state. The leaders of this movement were members of a group called the Monarchomachs, who advocated resistance biblically and theologically.²

The Magdeburg Confession laid the foundation for the development of Protestant resistance theory. In 1548, after the imperial victory in the first Schmalkaldic War, two decrees, the Interims of Augsburg and Leipzig, were imposed on the Lutherans. They were not accepted by the “authentic Lutherans” (Gnesio-Lutherans) of Magdeburg, who advocated resistance rather than compromise. The Confession, written by nine pastors, stated

¹ Cf. Paul Wells, “The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Huguenots and Taking up Arms,” in *My Kingdom Is Not of This World: Papers Read at the 2021 Westminster Conference* (Dewsbury, 2022), 119–42.

² From the Greek *μόναρχος* (*monarchos*—“sole ruler”) and *μάχουμαι* (*makhomai*—“to fight”). The term seems to have been coined by the Scottish lawyer William Barclay as a term of abuse in *De regno et regali potestate adversus Buchananum, Brutum, Boucherium, et reliquos Monarchomachos, libri sex* (Paris, 1600).

their position.³ The central idea is found in the preamble:

If the superior authority does not refrain from unjustly and forcibly persecuting not only the lives of their subjects but even more their rights under divine and natural law, and if it does not desist from eradicating true doctrine and true worship of God, then the lower magistracy is required by God's divine command to attempt together with their subjects, to stand up to such superiors as far as possible. The current persecution which we are suffering at the hands of our superiors is primarily persecution by which they attempt to suppress the true Christian religion and the true worship of God and to reestablish the Pope's lies and abominable idolatry. Thus the Council and each and every Christian authority is obliged to protect themselves and their people against it.⁴

Against the doctrine of passive submission to political authority, the Confession brought up an arsenal of examples from the Bible, history, and natural law in favor of legitimate resistance. If the authority does evil, if Caesar takes what is God's, if the creation ordinances are flouted, the Christian cannot be passive but must defend God's honor. Excessive authority may be resisted by force as a form of self-defense, as against any common thug. Christians are responsible because of the priesthood of believers, which applies not only to the ecclesiastical but also to the civic domain, and failure to resist what is contrary to divine authority brings "eternal shame before the world and harm to their successors."

This was an inspiration for Theodore Beza's *Right of Magistrates over Their Subjects* (1574). Beza was the principal protagonist of resistance in France, with Francis Hotman and Philippe DuPlessis-Mornay as aides de camp, in what came to be known as the "Genevan triumvirate."⁵

Beza ran into difficulty publishing. The Genevan authorities were wary of French reprisals, and finally, his treatise appeared anonymously in Heidelberg. As John Witte remarks, "The title of the tract is ironic and strategic. Beza's real topics were the *duties of rulers and the rights of their subjects*."⁶ His argument is based on four propositions, which may be summed up by

³ *The Magdeburg Confession, 13th April 1550*, trans. M. Colvin (n.p.: Create Space Publishing, 2012).

⁴ Quoted by John Witte, "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition: Early Protestant Foundations," *Law and History Review* 26.3 (September 2008): 71–72; cf. also his *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Cf. John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Horde of Women* (1558); Francis Hotman, *Francogallia* (1573); Lambert Daneau, *Treatise on the Taking up of Arms by the Christian Man* (1576); Stephanus Junius Brutus Celt (often thought to be Philippe DuPlessis-Mornay), *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579).

⁶ Witte, "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition," 78.

the aphorism Beza adopted from Hotman: "A people can exist without a king ... whereas a king without a people cannot even be imagined":

1. Rulers exist for the welfare of the people and are created by election and consent.
2. Kingly authority is conditional, a legal compact binding sovereign and people.
3. Should the monarch violate the conditions on which authority was granted, the people are no longer bound and may remove him.
4. The king is a vassal to his kingdom and forfeits office by violating faith.

Beza put forward a legal argument for the constitutional rights of citizens based on the idea of a political covenant. "His argument in a nutshell was a Christian social and government contract theory."⁷ Following Magdeburg's three-pronged approach, Beza argued biblically, historically, and legally for the rights of citizens. In fact, he turned the rights of kings into the rights of citizens, whereas the covenantal duty of rulers under oath was to exercise authority properly.

The second protagonist of the Genevan triumvirate was Hotman, whose *Francogallia* is a curious, rambling document. If Hotman did not hesitate to make the facts suit his argument, its relevance was obvious to his contemporaries. It gives a constitutional history of France, pointing to the elected nature of the early Frankish monarchy and the role of the Estates General of the people, both as kingmaker and in government. This council of the people is the ultimate power in the state. Hotman contended that its power had been undermined by the Roman church. Therefore, a legal cause was found for justified resistance to royal absolutism in legitimate assemblies of the people. This argument appealed to both Protestants and discontented Catholics after the massacre.

The third musketeer of the triumvirate was the anonymous writer of *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (*Defense against Tyrants*), published in Basel in 1579, widely thought to have been DuPlessis-Mornay.⁸ It raises four questions about princely power, the third being the centerpiece:

May a prince who oppresses or devastates a commonwealth be resisted; to what extent, by whom, in what fashion, and by what principle of law?

⁷ Ibid. Johannes Althusius in his *Politica* (1603) developed a fully blown notion of social structures in a federal (covenantal) context.

⁸ [Philippe DuPlessis-Mornay], *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, in Julian H. Franklin, ed., *Constitutionalism and Resistance in the 16th Century: Three Treatises by Hotman, Beza, and Mornay* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 137–200.

State authority depends on a series of covenants between God, the ruler, and the nation. The objective rule of God applies subjectively in a pact between ruler and people. A tyrant is the opposite of a king, since tyranny overthrows God's rule: A king promotes the public interest, a tyrant seeks his own.

To complete the picture, in 1576, Lambert Daneau, relying on both Hotman and Beza, wrote a treatise that focused explicitly on the taking up of arms. Against absolutism, he suggested that a tyrant should be resisted for the sake of the public good. This is the duty not only of the representatives of the people but also of local authorities and with them the citizens themselves.

Beza was the leading advocate for taking up arms in resistance against tyranny within certain limits. He virulently opposed disorderly rebellion, considering that "anarchy is worse than tyranny."⁹ He recognized that opposition to power is no light undertaking, but without church intervention, people can resist abuse through their constitutional representatives.

Those who teach that notorious tyranny may be resisted in good conscience are not denying good and legitimate rulers the authority God has given them, nor are they encouraging rebellion. On the contrary, the authority of magistrates cannot be stabilised, nor that public peace which is the end of all true governance be preserved, unless tyranny is prevented from arising, or abolished when it does.¹⁰

In chapter X of his treatise, Beza deals with the question of offering resistance to persecution of the true religion by armed force. Faith concerns the conscience and can be neither subjected to nor advanced by coercion or arms. If believers are persecuted for their faith, then,

they should rather endure persecution patiently while continuing to serve God, or else go into exile. But if there are edicts, lawfully passed and promulgated by public authority, permitting exercise of the true religion, then the prince is even more bound to respect these than any other law since the religious order is of greater consequence than any other, and he may not repeal them at his own initiative and discretion. If he does, he is guilty of flagrant tyranny, to which opposition is permitted according to the distinctions previously laid down, and with all the better reason in that our souls and our consciences ought to be more precious to us than all the goods of this world.¹¹

Three conditions are always necessary before resorting to the use of arms against the abuse of power:

⁹ Theodore Beza, Letter to Bullinger, September 9, 1563.

¹⁰ Theodore Beza, *Right of Magistrates over Their Subjects*, in *Constitutionalism and Resistance*, ed. Franklin, 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 134–35.

- Tyranny has become obvious.
- All other attempted remedies have failed.
- Consideration has been given not only to what is permitted but also to what is expedient so that the remedy is not worse than the disease.

Beza limited the taking of arms in such a way that legal constitutional requirements must be respected and certain conditions met. No doubt, he considered that his participation in the French wars stood up to the scrutiny of what is legally legitimate and what is expedient because of the abuse of power by the monarchy and its connivance in the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. His avowed goal was to save the Kingdom of France from ruin.

Subsequently, in the 1580s, Beza was discouraged when he saw anarchy spreading in France, unprecedented moral license among the Huguenots resulting from war, and the aggressive expansion of Jesuit evangelism. He must have wondered whether it had been worth it and whether the right course of action had been taken. Were the Monarchomachs justified in going beyond Calvin's passive submission and suffering under the cross? Was it a mistake to lead the Huguenots in a physical combat rather than a spiritual one? We may well wonder. Huguenot destiny became entwined with the military interests of the nobility and the intellectual elite. This social attachment held back growth among the lower classes through church planting and evangelism. The stark fact remains that in the following century, the Huguenots not only registered negative growth, but they were poorly prepared to stand up spiritually against the absolute monarchy of Henry IV's grandson, Louis XIV.

Whether the Monarchomach way of resistance was biblical, constitutional, or legitimate remains an issue that divides those who confess Christ down to the present. The Huguenots were a minority in France, as believing Christians have become in the West today, and they organized as such. We may take issue with their *practice*, recognizing the problems with taking up arms while acknowledging that we often lack their *principled attitude* of resistance, a spiritual opposition to the idolatry of the age. The Huguenots faced up to their enemies, considering that they were opposed to God, his word, and the freedoms that it brings.

Western Christians today have been gaslighted into thinking that their ruling superiors are benevolent or pragmatic neutrals. Maybe they were like that in the past, in the age when nations were "Christian," but they are not anymore. Governments, political parties, public services, legal systems, multinational corporations, and the media consistently promote perversity that is *opposed to* Christ and his word. Their fundamental presuppositions

are those of postmodern relativism at best and social Marxism at worst. They play fast and loose with God's law, both natural and revealed, and join together in a united front to celebrate every form of deviance imaginable. Christian values are scorned by the social codes of secular righteousness. Surely, believers must not follow this caravan of fools?

Freedoms gained by the Protestant Reformation are disappearing as Western culture falls apart. We are standing in an amoral wasteland as the bombs fall. The last fifty years bear witness to a sustained assault against God's creational law and its Mosaic republication in the Ten Commandments, particularly regarding family, marriage, and sexuality. Progressive legislation rejects God's law and replaces what is natural with unnatural progressive humanistic laws that are contrary to creational structures. This is *idolatrous* in its opposition to God because it erects state rights as absolute *above* God's creational mandate for the family.

Beza and his allies considered the family to be the fundamental social unit established by God prior to, and having precedence over, historical and cultural social structures, including the body politic. This is why Marxism and social Marxism invariably go about deconstructing the family and removing intermediate social organizations between the all-powerful autonomous state and isolated powerless individuals.

Beza and the Monarchomachs rooted their resistance in God's law, natural and revealed, and so established the values of individual freedom, rights, and conscience in civil society. Citizens have these rights, and rulers have duties toward them. The other path leads to unfreedom and untold human miseries, as the tyranny of Louis XIV was soon to demonstrate when he clamped down on the Huguenots. Today's absolutism is of a different kind: rights are now dictated by minorities, invariably against creational ordinances. The consequence is that Christians are increasingly stripped of God-given liberties through snooping, restrictions on freedom of speech, and exclusion from public places. Freedom of conscience is being hemmed in by the agenda that tolerates every deviance. We are being told how to think; more and more believers will have to shut up or get out of their professions. Pressure will increase; resistance will have to be justified and organized, and it will require a great deal of courage.

The believing church has now become a minority comparable to that of the early church or the Huguenots. However, it is hardly an *effective* minority in the way other minorities are. Do we have a game plan—the lucidity, the will, and the means for public resistance? Are we not all too often compliant with, and respectful of, the powers that be, even though they are no respecters of God's truth? When this is the case, the devil has an easy job:

Christianity self-destructs from the inside. The compliant Anglican Church in England provides a case in point.

A strategy is needed for the church to become an effective minority in an alien society. That strategy ought to be like that of Beza and the Genevan triumvirate: the honor of God, confession and promotion of biblical truth, resistance to the darkness that opposes it, and willingness to sacrifice everything for Christ's kingdom. The tactics will be different and will no doubt give rise to disagreement and debate among believers.

The need of the hour is to realize this by recognition of the situation, to react prayerfully through teaching, awakening those "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1), and to put spiritual *protest* back into Protestantism. Francis Schaeffer, in *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, quoted Martin Luther as an encouragement to do this:

If I profess, with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition, every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christianity. Where the battle rages the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace to him if he flinches at that one point.¹²

¹² Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 50–51. This quote attributed to Luther is not actually from the great Reformer, although it is close to what he wrote in many instances. Cf. Martin Luther, *Briefwechsel*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 3:81ff.