

SOCIAL DUTIES

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CHAPTER VIII. SOCIAL DUTIES IN RELATION TO GOVERNMENT

“Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. . . . For this cause ye pay tribute also; for they are ministers of God’s service” (Rom. 13:1-7).

I. THE CHIEF FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

(1) The national or federal government, with its central offices at Washington, is that form through which the entire nation executes its will, defends every citizen and every part of territory from foreign attack, and secures unity and law for every state. (2) State governments constitute another form, with their constitutions and laws, their courts and administrative officers. (3) Lastly, we have local governments, as of counties, cities and towns, or townships.

TOPICS FOR STUDY OF CLASS

The Constitution of the Union and the constitutions of the several States. A good lawyer or teacher of “Civics” can tell the class what are the duties of the various officers of town, county, state, and nation.

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Modern democracy, the rise of the people to power, has put into the hands of the doer of good and the righter of wrongs a tool the reformer in Wesley’s time had not. That tool is the free democratic republic, through which the power of all can be used for the benefit of all. Democracy is the use of all the resources of nature by all the faculties of man for the good of all the people. The reformer today is thrice-armed; to personal effort he can add political effort. He can socialize, organize the doing of good. He can institutionalize the Golden Rule. . . . Our central problem is to regenerate the individual, and the proof that an individual has been regenerated is that he proceeds to regenerate things about him—and that’s Democracy, and that’s the Religion of Labor.—H. D. Lloyd, *Man, the Social Creator*, p. 273.

II. WHAT IS THE USE OF GOVERNMENT?

Government in this country is not something imposed on us nor given to us, but it is an institution which has grown with the needs of men and is maintained by the will and means of the people. The people of a land or of a town can do some things for the common welfare better through government than in any other way. Some illustrations will make this clear and show what a people can accomplish by means of a good government. (1) The first condition of life is public order, since we could not make plans of business or pleasure or worship if we were exposed to interruption and disturbance by persons who chose to act selfishly. There are always men ready to enjoy their lives in a way to annoy and injure others unless there is a power to restrain them: and in order to have rules of conduct for all we must have a law made by consent of all. No private individual can be trusted to make regulations for all others. (2) Protection is needed against the attacks of rude, selfish, dishonest, and criminal men. Without law and courts and police strong and bad men will rob or hurt children and women and the sick or aged. We sleep in greater security only because the policemen walk the street at night and watch lawless men. The firemen defend our houses against fire, often at risk of life. (3) Laws and rulers guard and regulate liberty of speech and action so that the equal freedom of all is not hindered. There is no liberty without law. (4) It is through government that health is protected. Only by law can ignorant and careless persons be prevented from leaving foul and decaying matter to poison air and water. Boards of health in states and cities enact and enforce regulations which prevent the spread of diseases like cholera, smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and consumption. At the seaports all immigrants are examined to see that they do not infect others with dreadful diseases. Hospitals are frequently erected or paid for healing the sick; and scientific men are kept busy studying the causes of illness and means of prevention. (5) Ways of travel and transportation are either furnished or improved and regulated by governments. Over the entire land is a network of roads, paths, and highways which have been provided by laws and improved by officials elected by the people. (6) The postal system is a fine illustration of means of communication open to rich and poor alike and

kept from private control. This system reaches every nook and corner of the land; it serves many humble villages and homes which could not afford to send and receive letters if they were compelled to depend on private enterprise. In Europe the telegraph and telephone, as well as the postal system, are managed cheaply and efficiently by state governments. (7) Men need frequently to have a peaceable and impartial means of defining their rights and duties, and when "self the wavering balance shakes, 'tis rarely right adjusted." Men bring such disputes before the learned and impartial courts and, without violence, accept and act upon the lawful decision. The alternative would be fighting, in which the strong and cunning rather than the upright would have the advantage. (8) Few citizens have taken the pains to learn what our governments are doing for knowledge, for that science which enables us to navigate the seas, discover the riches of mines, increase wealth and civilization by culture of the soil and rearing of animals. The agricultural experiment stations alone add to the national wealth billions of dollars beyond their moderate cost. (9) Inventions are fostered by the national patent office which secures the inventor his rights and encourages new experiments by its method of rewards. (10) The most important work of governments is that of education. No nation has yet avoided the disgrace and danger of supporting an ignorant and degenerating class if it left education to private enterprise. There are always many who are too poor to send their children to school, and many too lazy or stupid or cruel. An ignorant class is a national peril, a menace to health, wealth, and morals. Where all citizens have the franchise our very government itself is threatened by the presence of a horde of voters who cannot understand the effect of their use of suffrage. Further than this every child has a right to education, and only through public schools can these rights be secured to all. There never was nor can be universal education which is not compulsory education.

The illustrations just given might be greatly extended in all directions. Indeed as society grows in numbers and civilization it is inevitable that the government shall have more duties, simply because in no other way can the people get things done which they believe it is their duty and interest to have done.

An honest judge, in charging a jury, thus urged the supreme value of the government to all citizens:

Do you know there is no other friend you have that is as good a friend to you as the law? It made provision for you before you were born; it enables you to wear that coat which you have on your back, the shoes on your feet, or someone stronger would take them away from you.

It is a guard over your house. It protects you from burglars; it stands guard over your property, your reputation, your life; and if you are sick and friendless it will take care of you in the hospital; if you are dying it will protect your body. No labor union has ever been the friend to you that the law has been. You ought to have respect for the law above any other institution.

TOPICS FOR STUDY

Members of the class may find out and report what is done by the officers of their township, school district, city, county, state, such as for poor relief, for constructing roads, bridges, parks, and other matters not here mentioned. Interviews with policemen, justices of the peace, township trustees, school superintendents, councilmen, jailers, superintendents of poorhouses, and others, might reveal to the class the aims, difficulties, usefulness, temptations, and defects of the public administration. Such officers are made more earnest and faithful if they are made aware that their work is inspected; that if they are negligent they may be rebuked, and if they are faithful they will be praised and rewarded.

III. HOW ARE GOVERNMENTS SUPPORTED?

The government cannot render all these services without means: money and services. The chief source of support comes from taxes upon the property, industry, and incomes of citizens. It is true that where a city, for example, carries on an enterprise like gas-making, water supply, street transportation, it may support these works from the income of the business. It is a grave question of our times whether and how far this kind of business is wise. At present we pass over this factor. (1) The principal sources of income for the support of the federal government are the internal revenue from liquor and tobacco taxes, taxes on imported goods (tariffs), stamp duties, and, in times of special need, income taxes. (2) The state and local governments are supported by direct taxes levied on real estate and on all kinds of personal property, and fees for services of public officers, licenses, and others. Further details for each state must be studied in the local laws, as well as in books to be cited. That it is the duty of all citizens to support their government, and thus pay for the good

that is done and received, in proportion to the ability to pay, is theoretically admitted by all except an immoral or an eccentric minority. This is one of the conclusions about social duty which the moral sense of this nation will not permit to be set at defiance. But there are grave wrongs which tend to corrupt morality and call for earnest co-operation.

IV. ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF ASSESSMENT AND TAXATION. WHAT IS RIGHT TO REQUIRE AND DO?

1. *Problems of national support.*—The actual support of our federal government comes largely from taxes on imported goods, on alcoholic liquor, and on tobacco. What is the duty of upright citizens in this matter, so far as they have influence? A few questions will show that only prolonged and careful study will justify any man in exerting his political power actively on such subjects. What is the effect of a tariff imposed on goods brought from Europe, as books, clothing, furs, machinery, wines, furniture, pictures, glass ware, and other articles? Does this tax make our people pay higher prices for the goods they consume? Does the higher price benefit few or many? Are manufactures improved and enlarged by this policy? Is the collection of this tax at ports fair and honest? What are the wrong acts provoked by the modes of collection? How do travelers and merchants seek to evade the import tax and what immoral acts arise from attempts to cheat the government? What is the duty of importers if they think the law itself is wrong and unjust? In voting for members of Congress and for the President, what responsibility has the citizen in reference to the methods of national revenues? What should one do who thinks it morally evil for the government to seek support from the profits on intoxicants and tobacco? The student should try to learn all the consequences of this system in every direction and on all classes of the community. This is not an easy task, yet many speak with dogmatic confidence on such themes without giving them prolonged study. If some thousand of young men were reading the best books on the subject and discussing their contents the leaders of the nation would be more carefully and wisely chosen.

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2. *Problems of support of state and local governments.*—(a) The present methods. While there are many variations in different states, the essential elements in general are these: assessors are appointed according to state law to make lists of the amounts and values of all kinds of property of all citizens, and a rate of taxation is fixed according to which each owner of property is required to pay each year about one cent (more or less) for every dollar assessed, no matter what kind of property it may be. When this money is collected in the public treasury it is divided among the various public governments as required by law. If all the property were listed at its true value then all would contribute to the support of government according to their ability, or practically so, and this would be nearly fair. If the property of a citizen is a farm or houses or other visible things the assessors can see it for themselves and judge its value. If they are intelligent and honest this kind of tax will be collected justly. But in recent years very much wealth has been created which is not easily found, such as that invested in bonds, mortgages, stocks, and franchises.

(b) Evils in this system. Members of the class, by talking with assessors and business men, as bankers, may find more evils than can be discussed briefly here. They will learn, among other things, that there is a direct temptation for taxpayers to hide stocks, bonds, notes, and other papers in vaults, and, where an oath is required to confirm their statements, to perjure themselves by reporting values much less than they actually own. In most towns and even in the country a majority of persons report to the assessors much less than the true amounts. But there are some who will not lie about this matter, and they tell the assessor all that they own, even when he could not otherwise find out. These more honest persons must therefore pay more, often many times more taxes than rich but unscrupulous neighbors

who are willing to lie in order to save money. The estates of widows and orphans are often placed in the control of courts where all the property is recorded in public books and cannot escape assessment. Thus the tendency of our system is to reward the cheat and liar and compel the honest and the widows and orphans to bear too heavy a share of the cost of government. All the great authorities on finance condemn this method which is common in all parts of our country. Thus Professor Seligman, one of the highest authorities, says of this kind of tax:

Practically, the general property tax as actually administered is beyond all doubt one of the worst taxes known in the civilized world. Because of its attempt to tax intangible as well as tangible things, it sins against the cardinal rules of uniformity, of equality and universality of taxation. It puts a premium on dishonesty and debauches the public conscience; it reduces deception to a system, and makes a science of knavery; it presses hardest on those least able to pay; it imposes double taxation on one man and grants entire immunity to the next. In short, the general property tax is so flagrantly inequitable, that its retention can be explained only through ignorance or inertia. It is the cause of such crying injustice that its alteration or its abolition must become the battle cry of every statesman and reformer.¹

How much of this inertia and ignorance is due to the neglect of the churches and adult Bible classes? How many of the moral teachers of the nation have even studied this gigantic wrong? How guilty are the theological seminaries? How many will still claim that it is not a proper subject for Sunday study? "Evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart."

(c) Have the authorities who condemn the present system any better method to substitute for it? From the purely financial standpoint the modes of raising revenues for the federal government are generally satisfactory. It is thought that the incomes for the state should be separated from those of the cities, counties, and towns; that the state should derive its revenues chiefly from corporation and inheritance taxes; that local revenues should come from real estate and from other elements of wealth; that a carefully devised method might properly reach notes secured by mortgage without taxing the same wealth twice; and that other revenues might be taken from the visible resources of persons with income as indicated by

¹ E. R. A. Seligman, *Essays in Taxation*, 2d ed., p. 61.

their expenditures for enjoyment, such as residences, vehicles, etc. The tax on inherited wealth is collected at the moment when the heirs receive in large bulk property for which they have not labored. The tendency in our country is to extend the use of the inheritance tax as a source of revenue for the state. Society tolerates, and at great sacrifice protects great fortunes of individuals, partly on the ground that those who are most competent to manage capital are the most productive agents of control. But this reason does not hold good in case of heirs; for children do not always inherit ability and energy, and often become indolent from absence of motive to work, and persons in the second generation of wealth are far removed from sympathy with those who by their toil make capital reproductive. Hence the income tax and the inheritance tax have come to be demanded as means of returning to general social possession a large part of the accumulations of men of vast industry, thrift, initiative, and power of organization and direction. The sifting process of each generation comes by redistribution of estates.

V. SUPPORT OF GOVERNMENT BY PERSONAL SERVICE

The citizen in a nation with universal suffrage and free speech owes many duties to government which are not included in payment of taxes. One of these duties is to know, as far as possible, the nature, functions, history, and needs of the political institutions which our forefathers improved and intrusted to the present generation.

On important matters which are proposed for legislation each voter is under obligation to seek the best possible information and to assist by voice and vote those policies which seem to him to promise the highest results to the material and moral interests of the entire people. There are enough men who will secretly and often corruptly try to secure legislation that will enrich a few at the expense of many; but under our laws each citizen is rightfully bound to study and promote laws which will benefit all. Some of these policies are mentioned elsewhere in this series.

In the choice of representatives in city councils, state legislatures, and Congress those men should be nominated in all parties who have proved that they are intelligent, educated, and honest, and who will give their best study to the questions on which they are called to

frame and enact laws. For judges should be chosen lawyers known to be upright, just, clean in life, and learned in law. For administrators of law, as governors, members of state boards of health and charity, mayors, trustees of towns, all citizens should insist upon one single principle—that of fitness by nature, character, and special training. In positions which require knowledge of medicine, only competent medical experts should be favored for election or appointment; for administrators of schools, only educated and experienced teachers; for legal direction, only trained lawyers; for policemen, only those who have proved physical and mental fitness, and who merit advance by fidelity to duty; and thus throughout. That a man has been loyal to his party, or has helped an incompetent man to be elected congressman or mayor, or has delivered the vote of clients of a saloon, or has done any sort of partisan political work, ought not to be once considered. Every administrative office ought to be open to all competent citizens without regard to party, on proof of fitness, and then the officers should be promoted in the line of their skill after faithful labor for the community as a whole. This is the merit system as contrasted with the spoils system; the first being based on the welfare of the community, the other on selfish, private, or party interests; the first is moral, the second is distinctly immoral.

Military service, that is the offer of life itself to defend the unity, integrity, safety, and honor of the nation, is the sacrifice which may be lawfully and rightly required of every strong man. Membership in the militia is training for such service. The grounds and reasons for these demands should be discussed in Christian circles. It is tragic when the nation or state requires its citizens to fight for an unjust cause, when patriotism is made to conflict with the sense of justice and humanity.

Many kinds of civil service are rendered without pay or with only small reward: as the service on juries in courts of justice, committees and councils of cities, school boards, directions of state institutions of charity. In all countries much of the best work is done for commonwealth and nation without money; the reward being enjoyed in a good conscience, a sense of usefulness, and the esteem of the public.

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