

AN ELECTION SERMON

GAD HITCHCOCK (1718-1803)

from *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pp. 93-94

Pastors and ministers were among the highest educated citizens in the American colonies, and often addressed politics from the pulpit. This sermon by Gad Hitchcock was delivered on election day in 1774, in the presence of General Thomas Gage, the British military governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay. It decries British monarchical rule and celebrates the idea of the consent of the governed, appealing to reason as well as revelation.

1774

...In a mixed government, such as the British, public virtue and religion, in the several branches, though they may not be exactly of a mind in every measure, will be the security of order and tranquility—Corruption and venality, the certain source of confusion and misery to the state.

This form of government, in the opinion of subjects and strangers, is happily calculated for the preservation of the Rights and Liberties of mankind.—Much, however, depends on union; and the concern of every part to pursue the great ends of government....

In such a government, rulers have their distinct powers assigned them by the people, who are the only source of civil authority on earth, with the view of having them exercised for the public advantage; and in proportion as this worthy end of their investiture is kept in sight, and prosecuted, the bands of society are strengthened, and its interests promoted....

Rulers are under the most sacred ties to consult the good of society. 'Tis the only grand design of their appointment. For the promotion of this valuable end, they are ordained of God, and clothed with authority by men.

In a state of nature men are equal, exactly on a par in regard to authority: each one is a law to himself, having the law of God, the sole rule of conduct, written on his heart.

No individual has any authority, or right to attempt to exercise any, over the rest of the human species, however he may be supposed to surpass them in wisdom and sagacity. The idea of superior wisdom giving a right to rule, can answer the purpose of power but to one; for on this plan the

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Wiseest of all is Lord of all. Mental endowments, though excellent qualifications for rule, when men have entered into combination and erected government, and previous to government, bring the possessors under moral obligation, by advice, persuasion and argument, to do good proportionate to the degrees of them; yet do not give any antecedent right to the exercise of authority. Civil authority is the production of combined society—not born with, but delegated to certain individuals for the advancement of the common benefit.

And as its origin is from the people, who have not only a right, but are bound in duty, for the preservation of the property and liberty of the whole society, to lodge it in such hands as they judge best qualified to answer its intention; so when it is misapplied to other purposes, and the public, as it always will, receives damage from the abuse, they have the same original right, grounded on the same fundamental reasons, and are equally bound in duty to resume it, and transfer it to others.—These are principles which will not be denied by any good and loyal subject of his present Majesty King George, either in Great-Britain or America—The royal right to the throne absolutely depends on the truth of them,—and the revolution, an event seasonable and happy both to the mother country and these colonies, evidently supports them, and is supported by them....