John Cotton, “Limitation of Government”

[Drawn from John Cotton, An Exposition upon the 13th Chapter of Revelation (London, 1656), 71-73.]

This may serve to teach us the danger of allowing to any mortal man an inordinate measure of power to speak great things: to allow to any man uncontrollableness of speech, you see the desperate danger of it: Let all the world learn to give mortall men no greater power than they are content they shall use, for use it they will: and unlesse they be better taught of God, they will use it ever and anon, it may be make it the passage of their proceeding to speak what they will: And they that have liberty to speak great things, you will find it to be true, they will speak great blasphemies. No man would think what desperate deceit and wickedness there is in the hearts of men: And that was the reason why the beast did speak such great things, hee might speak and no body might controll him: What, saith the Lord in Jer. 3. 5. Thou hast spoken and done evil things as thou couldst. If a Church or head of a Church could have done worse, he would have done it. This is one of the straines of nature, it affects boundlesse liberty, and to runne to the utmost extent: What ever power he hath received, he hath a corrupt nature that will improve it in one thing or other; if he have liberty, he will think why may he not use it. Set up the Pope as Lord Paramount over Kings and Princes, and they shall know that he hath power over them, he will take liberty to depose one, and set up another. Give him power to make Laws, and he will approbe, and disprove as he list; what he approves is Canonical, what he disproves is rejected: Give him that power, and he will so order it at length, he will make such a State of Religion, that he that so lives and dyes shall never be saved; and all this springs from the vast power that is given to him, and from the deep depravation of nature. Hee will open his mouth, His tongue is his own, who is Lord over him, Psal. 12. 3, 4. It is therefore most wholsome for Magistrates and Officers in Church and Common-wealth, never to affect more liberty and authority than will do them good, and the People good; for what ever transcendent power is given, will certainly over-run those that give it, and those that receive it: There is a straine in a man’s heart that will sometime or other runne out to excess, unlesse the Lord restraine it, but it is not good to venture it: It is necessary therefore, that all power that is on earth be limited, Church-power or other. If there be power given to speak great things, then look for great blasphemies, look for a licentious abuse of it. It is counted a matter of danger to the state to limit Prerogatives; but it is a further danger, not to have them limited: They will be like a Tempest, if they be not limited: A prince himselfe cannot tell where hee will confine himself, nor can the people tell: But if he have liberty to speak great things, then he will make and unmake, say and unsay, and undertake such things as are neither for his owne honour, nor for the safety of the State. It is therefore fit for every man to be studious of the bounds which the Lord hath set: and for the People, in whom fundamentally all power lyes, to give as much power as God in his word gives to men: And it is meet that Magistrates in the Commonwealth, and so Officers in Churches, should desire to know the utmost bounds of their own power, and it is safe for both: All intrenchment upon the bounds which God hath not given, they are not
enlargements, but burdens and snares; They will certainly lead the spirit of a man out of his way sooner or later. It is wholesome and safe to be dealt withall as God deales with the vast Sea: Hitherto shalt thou come, but there shalt thou stay thy proud waves: and therefore if they be but banks of simple sand, they will be good enough to check the vast roaring Sea. And so for Imperiall Monarchies, it is safe to know how far their power extends; and then if it be but banks of sand, which is most slippery, it will serve, as well as any brazen wall. If you pinch the Sea of its liberty, though it be walls of stone or brass, it will beate them downe. So it is with Magistrates, stint them where God hath not stinted them, and if they were walls of brass, they would beate them downe, and it is meet they should: but give them the liberty God allows, and if it be but a wall of sand it will keep them: As this liquid Ayre in which we breath, God hath set it for the waters of the Clouds to the Earth; It is a Firmament, it is the Clouds, yet it stands firme enough, because it keeps the Climate where they are, it shall stand like walls of brasse: So let there be due bounds set, and I may apply it to Families; it is good for the wife to acknowledg all power and authority to the Husband, and for the Husband to acknowledg honour to the Wife, but still give them that which God hath given them, and no more nor less: Give them the full latitude that God hath given, else you will finde you dig pits, and lay snares, and cumber their spirits, if you give them lesse: there is never peace where full liberty is not given, nor never stable peace where more then full liberty is granted: Let them be dueely observed, and give men no more liberty than God doth, nor women, for they will abuse it: The Devill will draw them, and God’s providence lead them thereunto; therefore give them no more than God gives. And so for children; and servants, or any others you are to deale with, give them the liberty and authority you would have them use, and beyond that stretch not the tether, it will not tend to their good nor yours: And also from hence gather, and goe home with this meditation; That certainly here is this distemper in our natures, that we cannot tell how to use liberty, but wee shall very readily corrupt our selves: Oh the bottomlesse depth of sandy earth! of a corrupt spirit, that breaks over all bounds, and loves inordinate vastness; that is it we ought to be carefull of.