John Wise
“Democracy is Founded in Scripture” – 1717

Introduction: John Wise was a Congregationalist minister from Massachusetts and an ardent early supporter of American independence. In this essay, Wise lays out the Biblical argument for democracy, believing that God had ordained a natural law that was superior to civil law, and since God had made all men free, any restriction of that freedom was by definition unholy. Wise thought monarchy and aristocracy contradicted Christ’s ministry because they “subverted the design of the Gospel, and the end for which Christ’s government was ordained, viz., the moral, spiritual, and eternal happiness of men.”

The forms of a regular state are three only, which forms arise from the proper and particular subject, in which the supreme power resides. As,

A democracy, which is when the sovereign power is lodged in a council consisting of all the members, and where every member has the privilege of a vote. This form of government, appears in the greatest part of the world to have been the most ancient. For that reason seems to show it to be most probable, that when men (being originally in a condition of natural freedom and equality) had thoughts of joining in a civil body, would without question be inclined to administer their common affairs, by their common judgment, and so much necessarily, to gratify that inclination, establish a democracy; neither can it be rationally imagined that fathers of families being yet free and independent should in a moment or little time take off their long delight in governing their own affairs and devolve all upon some single sovereign Commander, for that it seems to have been thought more equitable that what belonged to all should be managed by all when all had entered by compact into one community. The original of our government, says Plato, (speaking of the Athenian Commonwealth) “was taken from the equality of our race. Other state there are composed of different blood, and of unequal lines, the consequence of which are disproportionable sovereignty, tyrannical or oligarchical sway; under which men live in such a manner, as to esteem themselves partly lords, and partly slaves to each other. But we and our countrymen, being all born brethren of the same mother, do not look upon ourselves, to stand under so hard a relation, as that of lords and slaves; but the parity of our descent incline us to keep up the like parity by our laws, and to yield the precedency to nothing but to superior virtue and wisdom.” And moreover it seems very manifest that most civil communities arose at first from the union of families, that were nearly allied in race and blood. And though ancient story make frequent mention of kings, yet it appears that most of them were such that had an
influence rather in persuading than in any power of commanding. So Justin describes that kind of government as the most primitive which Aristotle styles an heroic kingdom, viz., such as is no ways inconsistent with a democratical state.

A democracy is then erected when a number of free persons do assemble together in order to enter into a covenant for uniting themselves in a body: And such a preparative assembly has some appearance already of a democracy; it is a democracy in embryo, property in this respect, that every man has the privilege freely to deliver his opinion concerning the common affairs. Yet he who dissent from the vote of the majority is not in the least obliged by what they determine until by a second covenant a popular form of government actually established, for not before then can we call it a democratical government, viz., till the right of determining all matters relating to the public safety is actually placed in a General Assembly of the whole people, or, by their own compact and mutual agreement, determine themselves the proper subject for the exercise of sovereign power. And to complete this state, and render it capable to exert its power to answer the end of a civil state, these conditions are necessary:

1. That a certain time and place be assigned for assembling;
2. That when the assembly be orderly met, as to time and place, that then the vote of the majority must pass for the vote of the whole body.
3. That magistrates be appointed to exercise the authority of the whole for the better dispatch of business, of everyday occurrence, who also may, with more mature diligence, search into more important affairs, and if in case anything happens of greater consequence, may report it to the assembly, and be peculiarly serviceable in putting all public decrees into execution. Because a large body of people is almost useless in respect of the last service, and of many others, as to the more particular application and exercise of power, therefore, it is most agreeable with the law of nature, that they institute their officers to act in their name and stead.

The second species of regular government is an aristocracy. And this is said then to be constituted when the people, or assembly united by a first covenant, and having thereby cast themselves into the first rudiments of a state, do then by common decree devolve the sovereign power on a council consisting of some select members, and these having accepted of the designation are then properly invested with sovereign command; and then an aristocracy is formed.

The third species of a regular government is a monarchy, which is settled when the sovereign power is conferred on some one worthy person. It differs from the former because a monarch, who is but one person in natural as well as in moral account, and so is furnished with an immediate power of exercising sovereign command in all instances of government. But the forenamed must needs have particular time and place assigned, but the power and authority is equal in each.

Mixed governments, which are various and of diverse kinds (not now to be enumerated) yet possibly the fairest in the world is that which has a regular monarchy; (in distinction to what is despotic) settled upon a noble democracy as its basis. And each part of the government is so adjusted by pacts and laws that renders the whole constitution an
Elysium. It is said of the British Empire, That it is such a monarchy, as that by the necessary subordinate concurrence of the Lords and Commons, in the making and repealing all statutes or acts of Parliament; it has the main advantages of an aristocracy, and of a democracy, and yet free from the disadvantages and evils of either. It is such a monarchy, as by most admirable temperament affords very much to the industry, liberty, and happiness of the subject, and reserves enough for the majesty and prerogative of any King, who will own his people as subjects, not as slaves. It is a Kingdom, that of all the Kingdoms of the world, is most likely to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, whose yoke is easy, and burden light.” Thus having drawn up this brief concerning Man, and the nature of civil government he is become sole subject of, I shall next proceed to make improvements of the premises to accommodate the main subject under our consideration.

I shall now make some improvement of the foregoing principles of civil knowledge, fairly deduced from the Law of Nature. And, I shall peculiarly refer to ecclesiastical affairs, whereby we may, in probability, discover more clearly the kind and something of the nature of that government which Christ has placed in and over his Church. The learned debates of men and Divine Writ sometimes seem to cast such a grandeur on the Church and its officers as though they stood in peerage with civil empire. But all such expressions must needs be otherwise interpreted. God is the highest Cause that acts by Council, and it must needs be altogether repugnant to think he should forecast than to order two sovereign powers in the same grand community, which would be like placing two suns in the firmament, which would be to set the universe into a flame; that should such an error happen, one must needs be forthwith extinguished to bring the frame of nature into a just temper and keep it out of harm’s way. But to proceed with my purpose, I shall go back upon the civil scheme and inquire after two things: first of rebellion against government in general and then in special; whether any of the aforesaid species of regular government can be predicable of the Church of God on earth.

In general concerning rebellion against government, for particular subjects to break in upon regular communities duly established, is from the premises to violate the Law of Nature, and is a high usurpation upon the first grand immunities of Mankind. Such rebels in states and usurpers in churches affront the world with a presumption that the best of the brotherhood are a company of fools and that themselves have fairly monopolized all the reason of Human Nature. Yea, they take upon them the boldness to assume a prerogative of trampling underfoot the natural original equality and liberty of their fellows, for to push the proprietors of settlements out of possession of their old, and impose new schemes upon them, is virtually to declare them in a state of vassalage, or that they were born to, and therefore will the usurper be so gracious as to insure them they shall not be sold at the next market. They must esteem it a favor, for by this time all the original prerogatives of man’s nature are intentionally a victim smoking to satiate the usurper’s ambition. It is a very tart observation on an English monarch, and where it may by proportion be applied to a subject, must need sink very deep and serve for evidence under this head. It is in the Secret History, says my author, “Where the constitution of a nations is such that the laws of the land are the measures both of the sovereign’s command and the obedience of the subjects whereby it is provided that, as the one are not to invade what by concessions and stipulations is granted to the ruler, for the other is not to deprive them of their lawful and determined rights and liberties; then the Prince who strives to subvert the fundamental laws of the society is the traitor and rebel, and not the
people who endeavor to preserve and defend their own.” It’s very applicable to particular men in their rebellions or usurpations in Church or state.

In a special I shall now proceed to inquire whether any of the aforesaid species of regular, unmixed governments can, with any good show of reason, be predicable of the Church of Christ on earth. If the Churches of Christ, as churches, are either the object or subject of a sovereign power entrusted in the hands of men, then most certainly one of the forecited schemes of a perfect government will be applicable to it.

Before I pursue the inquiry, it may not be improper to pause and make some caution here by distinguishing between that which may have some resemblance of civil power and the thing itself, for the one is truly coercive, the other persuasive, the one is sovereign power, the other is delegated and ministerial. But not to delay, I shall proceed with my inquiry and therein shall endeavor to humor the several great claimers of government in the Church of Christ. And,

I shall begin with a monarchy. It’s certain his Holiness, either by reasonable pleas or powerful cheats, has assumed an absolute and universal sovereignty; this fills his Cathedral Chair and is adorned with a Triple Crown, and in defense thereof does protest, “The Almighty has made him both Key-keeper of Heaven and Hell, with the adjacent territories of Purgatory, and vested in him an absolute sovereignty over the Christian world.” And his right has so far prevailed, that princes and civil monarchs hold their crowns and donations as his dutiful sons and loyal subjects. He therefore decks himself with the spoils of the divine attributes, styling himself, “Our Lord God, Optimum, Maximum et supremum numen in Terris,” a God on Earth, a visible Deity, and that his power is absolute and his wisdom infallible. And many of the great potentates of the earth have paid their fealty as though it was really so. One of them, clad in canvas, going barefoot in the depth of winter (in obedience to the decree stinting the penance in proportion to the wickedness of princes), has waited many days for absolution at the pious gates. Another has thrown himself down prostrate, a humble penitent, before him; he has placed his Holy Foot on the monarch’s profane neck as crushing a vermine, crawling out of the stable of his sovereignty; and others frequently kiss his toes with very profound devotion. These and such like triumphant signals of his sovereign power does he wear. And indeed if he is the universal monarch of the Catholic Church, princes that are members of it must needs knock under, for that in one world there cannot possibly be two “Most Highs” and more than two “Infinities.” Thus you see the clergy, or Gospel ministry of the Christian World, have so wisely handled business and managed the Gospel that they have fairly (as they avow) found a sovereign power bequeathed in it to the Ministry of Christ, and rummaging more warily and nicely, at last found a Spiritual Monarch very completely furnished with the keys of all sorts of power hanging at his girdle; and may we not pronounce the wiser they seeing the world growing weary of religion, was willing to lull itself down to sleep, and leave them in sole trust with the whole interest of God’s Kingdom. But the said inquiry is whether this sort of government has not plainly subverted the design of the Gospel, and the end for which Christ’s government was ordained, viz., the moral, spiritual, and eternal happiness of men?

But I have no occasion to pursue this remark with tedious demonstrations: It’s very plain; it’s written with blood in capital letters to be read at midnight by the flames of Smithfield, and other such like consecrated fires. That the government of this ecclesiastical monarch has instead of sanctifying, absolutely debauched the world, and
subverted all good Christianity in it. So that without the least show of any vain presumption we may infer that God and wise Nature were never propitious to the birth of this monster.

An aristocracy which places the supreme power in a select company of choice persons. Here I freely acknowledge were the Gospel Ministry established the subject of this power, viz., to will and do in all Church affairs without control, etc., if we could be assured they would make the Scripture and not their private will the rule of their personal and ministerial actions; and indeed, upon these terms, any species of government might serve the great design of Redemption; but considering how great an interest is imprecated, and how frail a bottom we trust, though we should rely upon the best of men, especially if we remember what is in the hearts of good men, (viz., much ignorance, abundance of small ends, many times cloaked with a high pretense in religion, pride skulking and often breeding revenge upon a small affront, and blown up by a pretended zeal, yet really and truly by nothing more divine than interest or ill nature), and also considering how very uncertain we are of the real goodness of those we esteem good men, and also how impossible it is to secure the entail of it to successors: And also if we remind how Christianity by the foresaid principle has been peeled, robbed, and spoiled already, it cannot consist with the light of Nature to venture again upon such perils, especially if we can find a later way home. More distinctly.

It is very plain (allowing me to speak emblematically) the primitive constitution of the Churches was a democracy, as appears by the foregoing parallel. But after the Christian Churches were received into the favor of the Imperial Court, under the Dominion of Constantine the Great, there being many preliminaries which had furnished the ministers with a disposition thereunto, they quickly deprived the fraternities of their rights in the government of the churches, when they were once provided of a plentiful maintenance through the liberality of Constantine, that when Christianity was so luxuriantly treated as by his great bounty and noble settlement, it is said there was a Voice heard from Heaven, saying, “Now is poison poured into the Church.” But the subversion of the constitution is a story too long now to tell...

In a word, an aristocracy is a dangerous constitution in the Church of Christ as it possesses the Presbytery of all Church power: What has been observed sufficiently evinces it. And not only so but from the nature of the constitution, for it has no more barrier to it against the ambition, insults, and arbitrary measures of men than an absolute monarchy. But to abbreviate, it seems most agreeable with the Light of Nature that if there be any of the regular government settled in the Church of God it must needs be: A Democracy. This is a form of government which the Light of Nature does highly value and often directs to as most agreeable to the just and natural prerogatives of Human Beings. This was of great account in the early times of the world. And not only so, but upon the experience of several thousand years after the world had been tumbled and tossed from one species of government to another, at a great expense of blood and treasure, many of the wise nations of the world have sheltered themselves under it again, or at least have blended and balanced their governments with it.

It is certainly a great truth that man’s original liberty, after it is resigned (yet under due restrictions), ought to be cherished in all wise governments; or otherwise a man, in making himself a subject, he alters himself from a freeman into a slave which to do is repugnant to the Law of Nature. Also the natural equality of men among men must
be duly favored, in that government was never established by God or Nature to give one
man a prerogative to insult over another; therefore in a civil, as well as in a natural, state
of being, a just equality is to be indulged so far as that every man is bound to honor every
man, which is agreeable both with Nature and Religion. The end of all good government
is to cultivate humanity and promote the happiness of all and the good of every man in all
his rights, his life, liberty, estate, honor, etc. without injury or abuse done to any. Then
certainly it cannot easily be thought that a company of men that shall enter into a
voluntary compact, to hold all power in their own hands, thereby to use and improve their
united force, wisdom, riches, and strength for the common and particular good of every
member, as is the nature of a democracy; I say it cannot be that this sort of constitution
will so readily furnish those in government with an appetite or disposition to prey upon
each other or embezzle the common stock, as some particular persons may be apt to do
when set off and entrusted with the same power. And, moreover, this appears very
natural, that when the aforesaid government or power, settled in all, when they have
elected certain capable person to minister in their affairs, and the said ministers remain
accountable to the Assembly, these officers must needs be under the influence of many
wise cautions from their own thoughts (as well as under confinement by their
commission) in their whole administration: And from thence it must needs follow that
they will be more apt and inclined to steer right for the main point, viz., the peculiar good
and benefit of the whole and every particular member fairly and sincerely. And why may
not these stand for very rational pleas in Church order?

For certainly if Christ has settled any form of power in his Church he has done it
for his Church’s safety, and for the benefit of every member: Then he must needs be
presumed to have made choice of that government as should least expose his people to
hazard, either from the fraud or arbitrary measures of particular men. And it is as plain as
daylight, there is no species of government like a democracy to attain this end. There is
but about two steps from an aristocracy to a monarchy, and from thence but one to a
tyranny. An able standing force and an ill-nature, ipso facto, turns an absolute monarch
into a tyrant. This is obvious among the Roman Caesars and through the world. And all
these direful transmutations are easier in Church affairs (from the different qualities of
things) than in civil states. For what is it that cunning and learned men can’t make the
world swallow as an article of their creed if they are once invested with an uncontrollable
power, and are to be the standing orators to mankind in matters of faith and obedience?