

CHAPTER 23

OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

Basis for civil government

“1. God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.”

The authority of government comes not only from the consent of the governed, but ultimately comes from God himself. In this sense the government is a divine establishment, just as are the family and the church. The main duty of government is to be the lawful exerciser of force in society. And this force is to punish evildoers and to encourage those living lawfully (Rom. 13:1-4).

The Christian’s relation to government

“2. It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions.”

The Bible plainly teaches that a Christian may with good conscience serve as an official in government. Holding such a position, a Christian may exercise the duties of that office, including collecting taxes, enforcing criminal justice, and defending against enemies; compare the publicans and soldiers during Christ’s time (Luke 3:12-14).

If God in his providence puts a Christian in such a position, he should use his influence to procure and enforce good laws (1 Tim 2:2; 1 Pet 2:13-14). We in America each have a voice in government; we too must exercise our Christian duty to make sure our influence is felt for good.

Also, the Bible approves of Christians taking part in just warfare (Matt 8:9-10; Luke 3:14; Acts 10:1-2; Rom 13:4).

Relation of the civil magistrate to the church

“3. Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of the civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

Government officials must not use their office in government to interfere with the churches in their jurisdiction, or to perform religious functions (2 Chr 26:4-21). Today Communist governments use their power to promote the religion of atheism and Marxism; Islamic states use coercion to enforce the Muslim religion; and “gay-rights” advocates in Western nations use government power to impose their values and silence Christian opposition. Christians, from NT times on, have used prayer, the Christian life, and preaching and witnessing to win converts. When Christians have stooped to worldly methods to promote their faith, disaster has been the result: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor 10:4).

Many verses in the Old Testament are intended for and directed to the theocracy—God’s direct rule over Israel; and, as such, they are not applicable to governments today. The theocracy will not be resumed until Christ returns to the earth (see notes on WCF 19:4).

This section also teaches that the state must protect religious liberty for all religious groups—liberty from government interference or pressure, and liberty from violence or unlawful opposition from others. The civil magistrate must see to it that churches can freely exercise their responsibilities; these include, among other things, the following: baptism and training of the young, evangelism (some call it “proselytizing”), private and collective worship, synods and assemblies, and publishing and defending their doctrines.

Our American Presbyterian churches have changed this section of the Confession from the original version passed by Parliament. The original version gave the civil magistrate power to enforce correct doctrine in the churches and to punish heretics. Here is the original version (the parts the American churches have deleted are shown as crossed out, and the American additions are in brackets):

~~“The civil magistrate [Civil magistrates] may not assume to himself [themselves] the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven [;or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.]: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God. [Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of the civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.]”~~

This change in the Confession is proper. Until Christ returns, we must win converts and defend the true faith not through force, but through preaching, prayer, and the power of a Christian life and example.

Authority of civil government

“4. It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute and other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience’s sake. Infidelity or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrate’s just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to him, from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted; much less hath the Pope any power or jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or over any of their people; and least of all to deprive them of their dominions or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretence whatsoever.”

Citizens must render for their government prayer (1 Tim 2:1-2), honor (1 Pet 2:17), tribute (Rom 13:6-7), and lawful obedience (1 Pet 2:13-14; when not against God, Acts 4:17-20; 5:17-20, 27-29, 40-42). Churchmen must obey too (Acts 25:9-11); and certainly the pope has no authority over the state.