

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XXIII

*(Reading: Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22)*

### Where The State Fits In

I like how one commentator saw this chapter fitting with where it is found in the Confession of Faith. He noted that it is the third Chapter of the third - and last - part of the Westminster. And as with other Reformed confessions, it's the third part which deals with the practical side of things. So this is where it shows out in our lives.

This commentator wrote that like those other confessions, the Ten Commandments as the summary of the Law are found in this section. They are, after all, the divine way in which we can show our thankfulness. And looking at Chapter 21 about Worship and the Lord's Day, and Chapter 22 about oaths and vows, you can see that that's about the 1st Table of the Law. They are tying in with the first four commandments in relating how we worship and serve the Lord vertically.

In Chapter 23 he says that we have the first chapter of two chapters which looks at how we love and serve the Lord horizontally. So this is about how we are to relate to our fellow man.

And, indeed, the Commandments follow this pattern. For what does Chapter 23 about the Civil Magistrate come from but the fifth commandment about the right authority in society? And Chapter 24 will go on to show how the sixth till tenth commandments are all about how else we are to relate to others.

So when the Heidelberg Catechism in Answer 104 says that God's will for us in the fifth commandment is, "That I honour, love, and be loyal to my father and mother," it also has to add, "and all those in authority over me." Because this is what politics is about. It's about who runs what and how.

It's interesting that in Chapters 23 and 24 we have the two traditional no-go areas for polite social conversation, for they're about politics and sex. And as for the other subject you're not meant to talk about in polite company - religion - well you're in the wrong place altogether to avoid that! So this 23rd Chapter is all about where the State fits in. And it certainly has a place. A God-ordained one in fact!

Article 1 is very clear about this. The state is an institution set apart by God for a purpose which is appointed by His will. Romans 13 verse 1 ends by stating, "The authorities that exist have been established by God." And so firstly we note, congregation, **THE PLACE CIVIL GOVERNMENT HAS.**

### **The Place Civil Government Has**

We can see here why Christian theologians in the past have talked about different spheres in life. They talk about the spheres of the church, the family, and the Christian school. Each has its own particular distinctive. And yet each one of them is to interweave with the others so that everyone can do what God lays out for them to do.

What characterises civil government in its sphere is that it must work towards God's glory and the public good. To achieve this purpose it has the courts of law to enforce its laws.

You will notice in our prayers for the government that we ask that they work for the "common good" and not out of selfish interest. This is the same thing as the "public good" mentioned here.

G. I Williamson says that “while the civil government is restraining and punishing crime and violence, protecting the good and punishing the evil, the Christian must support, pray for, and honour that government. But when that government punishes the righteous, and rewards the evil, becoming militaristic and bent upon aggression, it is the duty of Christians to resist that power because it subverts the ordinance of God.”

As Williamson goes on to acknowledge, however, this can be a hard line to draw. Recognising the state as a divine institution is all well and good where the state accepts this view of itself. So in a Christian country, as our nation once was and as so many western countries were, this fitted in with the democratic principle that all questions of policy are made through free discussion by the elected representatives of the people.

When you're in a State, though, which recognises no right to religious expression and which exercises complete control over her citizens' things are different. And yet you still owe a duty to the state. We shouldn't forget that the apostle Paul wrote the words of Romans 13, the key passage for our relation to civil government, at a time when the Roman Empire didn't see itself as protecting and nurturing anyone's rights. Within a few decades of this the Emperor would be literally spilling the blood of Christians while having his breakfast!

So there is no type of worldly government more biblically preferred than any other. Calvinism has tended to favour republicanism over monarchy, because it is better, in the words of Proverbs 11 verse 14, that many advisers guide a nation. That's why Calvinism has certainly been politically inclined. Nowadays, however, the type of monarchy we have is far removed from the absolute rule they had in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **The Responsibilities The Christian Has**

Here we come to the second Article in Chapter 23. This is about THE RESPONSIBILITIES THE CHRISTIAN HAS. You see, at the time of the Reformation and at various other times in church history, there have been groups within Christendom who separated the sacred and the secular. They were not here to be part of this world, they said. So emphasising very much their loyalty to Christ and His Kingdom, they kept out of any participation in government.

Those groups, which include the Mennonites, see that any interaction with the world is compromising their faith. But they misquote the apostle. For when Paul said that while we're in this world we are not to be of this world he didn't mean we're not to have anything to do with it. Rather, he meant that as those who are in this world we have to go out and show why we're different than it.

That's what believers do when they protest unjust laws. We have seen that happen on a number of times in this country's recent history. Many Christians have not stood still in the face of severe attacks against God's Word. There have even been Christians in Parliament who have strongly showed that.

Now, they faced ridicule for that. It seems that it's politically correct to subvert nature and to openly kiss someone of the same sex as you but to be praying and fasting is a sure sign of madness! But those believers are doing what Article 2 teaches that Scripture says.

In theory there should be no one better for holding public office than a Christian. It has been times when there has been a strong biblical influence that our nations have been their must blessed.

Because then everyone was truly ennobled!

Putting everything under the Divine Sovereign means we are all accountable. No one can get away with it then. But today that's become the catch-cry of every Tom, Dick and Harry. They

want all the privileges but no responsibilities. They want to do what they want. And so what tears down the public good is what's enshrined as a matter of rights and justice.

Article 2 also brings in the subject of warfare. This is an area where Christians have differed also. For there are those saying that we are blessed being peacemakers not war-makers. It's another misinterpretation of Scripture. For where can you honestly have peace on this earth if there isn't the way to secure that peace? As there's discipline in the family so there has to be among the family of nations.

Remember Neville Chamberlain coming back from Germany in 1938 holding up that useless bit of paper signed by Hitler? The piece of paper that could never be true, for with it he declared, "Peace in our time!"

There has to be accountability. That's why there are International Justice Courts. Tyrants can be brought to account. And while it doesn't seem there is much justice there, it does at least show there are those countries whose aggression and invasion should be resisted.

So when Romans 13 verse 4 warns us that if we do wrong we should be afraid it doesn't exempt the despotic leaders of this world. There is always a higher authority, especially, of course, God's authority.

### **The Function The State Has**

Then we come to the next Article – Article 3. For, thirdly, we see THE FUNCTION THE STATE HAS.

Now looking at this area we need to note, right from the outset, that church and state are separate. While it might not seem as clear as we might think it should be, and certainly not as clear as the American Presbyterians have made it in their revised Article 3, there is yet a division here between sacred and secular. There is an obvious difference between church and state. And there's also something else. Something the American Presbyterians took out. For what their versions take out is the duty of the state to encourage the unity of the church and the maintenance of the truth.

Thus what Prince Maurice of Orange did in calling the 1618 Synod of Dordt wouldn't be what their version favours. In fact, their versions favour leaving a level playing field between all the Christian denominations.

What Maurice did, however, would be consistent with what the original said. As we also see in the Belgic Confession of Faith. In Article 36 of its original version it stated that civil government is to protect the sacred ministry and to do that by removing and preventing all idolatry and false worship.

So there has continued to be much debate amongst Presbyterians about this Article. And we need to note that the concern is over one Article. Out of all we find in this Confession of Faith this is the only real point of contention.

The fact that through the centuries this is the only thing to be substantially changed says a lot. But, as we'll see in Article 4, it's a change that didn't really need to be made.

You see, this Article 3 begins quite definitively in separating the sacred from the secular. But within a Christian country there is provision made to help the Church, when the Church herself is out of sorts. Like Prince Maurice did in calling together the Synod Dordt. It also happened in a similar way in the very compiling of this Confession of Faith, through the English Parliament calling together the Westminster Assembly.

Then we need to agree with the version we have. Because what the apostle Paul thought writing Romans 13 verses 1 till 7 is in line with the original Westminster or Belgic Articles. And if one were to answer that what Jesus replied to those Pharisees and Herodians goes against that, we would have to remember the context of that. When the Lord replied in Matthew 22 verse 21, using that illustration of the coin, "Give to Caesar what it Caesar's, and to God what is God's," he was referring to a situation with a completely non-Christian government. As we are in now today!

While Article 3 might not use the expression, "public good," the American versions use, it yet pictures what the public good is all about. And it's noticeable when this role isn't being done. Because when the state becomes an abusive father we see a false religion being actively promoted. Then we return to the worst excesses of the Roman Empire where the persecution of believers was so fierce.

### **The Privileges The Christian Has**

That's why we turn, in the fourth place, to THE PRIVILEGES THE CHRISTIAN HAS. Here Article 4 brings out our response to where God has placed us politically, because God's Word to you is to pray for the rulers of this land and the rulers of all lands. 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy chapter 2, the verses 1 and 2, says that in our worship "requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

This is what brings the glory to God. People coming to be saved and to know the truth is what honours Him. Because then they see that it's what Jesus Christ did that matters most of all. Friends, we need to be very careful here that our negativity here doesn't blunt the joy of gospel. You don't like this present government, you see how it's attacking so much of what is good in our nation, and you're sure that the police are more interested in raising revenue than actually providing a service. But you have to pray for them.

And you know praying for someone isn't first of all asking God to change them. It's you being changed so that God can work through you to them.

The apostle Peter knew this. He describes it in his first letter chapter 2 verse 12 this way, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." And then, as if reading our minds, he goes on, "Submit yourself for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men."

Even if our leaders are a bunch of self-serving deviant homosexuals we have to honour them. It doesn't mean we cannot raise our protests. And it doesn't mean they won't be judged one day in the highest court of all for what they have done. But so will you.

The way Article 4 ends, however, does tell us there is an end to what we may bear. When we confess that we repudiate any claims the Pope may have over secular authority we are saying that we must oppose false religion ruling a nation. Remember this Confession of Faith was written in the Reformation period - the Reformation which begun because Martin Luther took his stand upon God's Word alone.

There are different ways of doing that. There is what many Dutch Christians did during World War 2 with fighting in the resistance. And, actually, wasn't that also an example of supporting the legitimate government, which was in exile in England?

And then there is the East German model of peaceful protest over many years. And it was the church which really led the movement that broke down the Berlin wall.

Mind you, it doesn't mean that Christians there now are that much more blessed. It seems they've swapped the religion of Marxism for that of Materialism! But it does show how a Christian voice can have an impact. Even if it appears that the Lord is letting our society descend into the deepest and darkest pits morally. Yet one day He uses the believer ready to be used, whether that's a George Whitefield or John Wesley at the time of the Great Awakening, or a simple and faithful believer in our day.

We have to be open to that, though. That's why we pray. Every one of us is part of a priesthood. As 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2 verse 5 says, we're offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So, much as the false religions of men may take their toll on the Church, she is and always will be the Church. She has a government and an authority quite apart from any here below. You see, citizenship in God's city means the greatest election of all has taken place. Because God voted for you!