

THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH  
XXIII. OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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## I & 2. MAGISTRATES ORDAINED BY GOD

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 evildoers.

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, not under the new testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.

# I & 2. MAGISTRATES ORDAINED BY GOD

- **God is Lord in the secular realm as in the spiritual realm; in the civil realm as well as the church.**
  - God is “the supreme Lord and King of the world.”
  - Civil magistrates therefore are accountable to God.
- **God establishes and ordains all civil authority**
  - “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1).
    - Contrary to the U. S. Declaration of Independence which ascribes authority to “the consent of the governed.”
    - God has not ordained a particular form of government, but providentially establishes a variety of types.
  - For this reason, civil magistrates are to be respected and obeyed.
    - “Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur” (Rom. 13:2).
    - “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him” (1 Pet. 2:13-14).
  - The exception is where civil rulers give commands that restrict or compromise our higher duty to God (Acts 5:29).
  - Civil magistrates are accountable to God to do his will: “for his own glory, and the public good.”
    - “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly” (Prov. 8:15-16).

# I & 2. MAGISTRATES ORDAINED BY GOD

- **God has armed the civil magistrate with “the power of the sword.”**
  - Refers to civil punishment (to include capital punishment)

“He is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:3-4).
  - Includes the right to bear and issue arms and to take human life judicially.
    - “War must be regarded as a great evil, but in the present state of the world it is sometimes necessary; and if a nation were to adopt and act upon the principle that war is absolutely unlawful, it would soon become a prey to its ambitious neighbors. [But] aggressive wars, or such as are undertaken to gratify views of ambition or worldly aggrandizement, cannot be justified” (R. Shaw).
- **Christians may hold civil office and exercise its function, including war and justice.**
  - Ex. Joseph in Egypt, Daniel as Satrap, Nehemiah as Persian governor.
  - We rule so as to serve on God’s behalf “piety, justice, and peace” according to the rule of law.

“He that rules over men must be just, ruling in fear of God” (2 Sam. 23:3).

### III. CIVIL MAGISTRATES & THE CHURCH

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 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 pretense 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.

## III. CIVIL MAGISTRATES & THE CHURCH

- **Civil officials must not usurp church authority**

“My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36).

- May not assume the preaching of the Word or administration of sacraments, or the standards of church membership.
- Separation of civil and ecclesiastical office rooted in the OT (2 Chron. 26:18).
- The NT assigns the rule of the church, under Christ, to the elders

“If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church, but if he neglects to hear the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18:17-18).

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Tit. 1:5).

- The civil magistrate may not impose doctrines upon the church.

# III. CIVIL MAGISTRATES & THE CHURCH

- **Civil magistrates have a duty to promote and protect the church.**
  - It is duty of civil authority to promote the success, vitality, and growth of the church  
“Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers” (Isa. 49:23).
- **Civil magistrates must preserve the free exercise of religion.**
  - Ministers must be free to exercise their office “without violence or danger.”  
“Touch not my anointed, and do my prophets no harm” (Ps. 105:15).
  - Civil authorities are not to enter into disputes between Christian churches/
    - It was assumed by them that no godly civil government would promote non-Christian churches
  - They must not interfere with biblical church discipline.
  - The American version of the WCF removes a statement calling on the civil authority to oversee sound doctrine for the sake of the unity and peace of the church, and a statement that civil magistrates may summon and control church councils. The American revision says instead “that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

## IV. CHRISTIAN CIVIL OBEDIENCE

It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, much less hat the pope any power and 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 pretense whatsoever.



## IV. CHRISTIAN CIVIL OBEDIENCE

- **Christian honor to civil magistrates**

- Christians have a special duty to pray for civil leaders

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

- We are to honor their persons, obey their lawful commands, and pay taxes they impose.
- Non-Christian magistrates are to be obeyed despite their unbelief or even ungodliness.
- Christian ministers must also obey as good citizens.
- Our goal is to lead peaceful lives (1 Tim. 2:2) and to advance the cause of the gospel.

“For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Pet. 2:15).

- **What about civil disobedience to tyranny?**

- Christians should resist sinful laws and may engage in civil disobedience to injustice.
- The doctrine of the lesser magistrate: Christians are not engage in rebellion, but it is the duty of lower officials to defend the people from the tyranny of higher officials.