

Seminar: Turretin on Ecclesiastical Power
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Topic 18, Q29: “Does any spiritual power distinct from the political belong to the church?”

We affirm.

1. God has given power/authority to pastors. God has willed that pastors should be furnished with some lawful power and authority that they might execute the office committed to them in a sacred manner.”

BUT, this power is often abused, so we “must diligently examine within what limits it ought to be circumscribed, that it may not be extended too far, or to be restricted too much.”

2. This power is not “intolerable domination and tyranny over the conscience” as the Roman Catholic believes. It is not “supreme and absolute” such as the Pope, which is the antichrist claims.

On the other hand, “Erastians, Libertines and other such disturbers of the church err in defect. Who acknowledge no spiritual power to have been given to the church, but that mere preaching and persuasion are left to pastors.”

“Wishing to destroy tyranny, they fall into anarchy and on account of the abuse of the thing, take away its lawful use.”

To help better understand the nature of ecclesiastical power...

1. The question does not relate to monarchical power—that belongs to Christ alone.
2. The question does not relate to power outside of the realm of the church—this is merely a spiritual question.
3. The question does not concern extraordinary power, such as the Apostles and prophets had.
4. The question does not concern the invisible church as the church has no “right or power” over the invisible church, merely power within the visible church.

So what power does the church hold?

V on p 275 notes, “This power is distinguished in different ways: Either preaching, sacraments and discipline. Or preaching and sacraments. Turretin shows how “other remaining ecclesiastical acts and those which subserve them as means...” Such as: Gathering/ establishing of churches, election of ministers, holding public assemblies.

Turretin prefers to speak of the authority of the church in these three ways:

1. Dogmatic: “occupied with the doctrines of the faith, the preaching of the word and the administration of sacraments.”

2. Ordinating: Ecclesiastical laws and the government of the church.
3. Judicial and disciplinary: Exercise of discipline and the right of excommunication, acceptance at the Table, exclusion from the church, and restoring those excommunicated.

Now these are distinguished from the marks of the church, which Turretin deals with in 18.13.

So how do we prove this ecclesiastical power?

1. By the presence of keys of the kingdom. "The keys which were given to the church. For since it is evident that the keys are a sign of power and authority, it cannot be doubted that some power distinct from political was given to pastors." (276)

Matthew 16:19, 20

Matthew 18:18

John 20:22,23

2. From the nature of society. "No society can remain entire and unimpaired without some order and government; and government cannot subsist without some power to rightly and fitly dispose all those things which pertain to the common good and to eliminate and remove the evils threatening ruin to the society."

3. From the nature of the office. "Every office or function and ministry bespeaks power; and to whomsoever any office is committed, to him is given the right and power of acting according to that office.

4. From the titles that are given to those that hold office.

I Timothy 5:17: "Those who rule well."

I Thessalonians 5:12: "Who are over."

Hebrews 13: 7, 17: "Ruling over."

Acts 20:28: "Overseers."

I Cor. 4:1: Stewards

"All of these titles involve some authority and power over those who are committed to your care." 276

5. From several passages of Scripture: This section is quite weak and should have been enfolded into the other reasons. He only supplies 2 passages, and it could be argued that the authority/power mentioned here is apostolic, which was dealt with in the "what it is not" section, number 3.

2 Corinthians 10:8... authority.

2 Cor 13:10: "according to the power..."

6. Because we see the exercise of power in the Counsel of Jerusalem (Acts 15). "They could by no means have done this unless they understood that a spiritual authority and power had been conferred upon them for that purpose."

7. From the Old Testament Church: The church and state had different forms of government in the OT: “The church of the Old Testament had its peculiar polity and form of sacred government, in the exercise of which the ministry had a power distinct from the political according to the institution of God himself.” (277)

8. From I Cor 14:32: “and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.” Turretin says, “Namely as to the examination of doctrine and as to corruption and censure if anything perchance occurs whether in doctrine or in morals worthy of reprehension. From this it is apparent that power was granted to the prophets taken collectively to judge the prophets singly... by an ecclesiastical judgment.”

How is this power distinct from political power?

1. The origin of these powers: “Political power was instituted by God the creator, and supreme ruler of the world; but ecclesiastical power was instituted by Jesus Christ, the supreme head of the church and its Lord and governor.”

2. The subject of the powers: Political power can be in the hands of unbelievers, but not ecclesiastical. Women can hold political office, but not ecclesiastical.

3. As to form: Political power is magisterial, ecclesiastical is ministerial.

4. As to the end: The end of the magistrate’s power is the glory of God through public tranquility, the good of the state. The end of the the power of the church is the propagation and preservation of the kingdom of Christ.

5. As to the object: The object of political power is “things, actions, and persons which... pertain to the animal life, public companionship, and external man.” The object of ecclesiastical power is “sacred things, persons and actions.”

6. As to effects: The magistrate uses political laws, fines, and means of civil peace. The ecclesiastical power is occupied with “a spiritual object in a spiritual manner and for a spiritual end and has spiritual effects.” This is done with the keys of the kingdom.

7. As to the mode: Civil power is earthly and natural, reaching only the external man; but ecclesiastical power is spiritual, regarding the internal man.”

Q30: Is the ecclesiastical power concerned with doctrines, creeds, and confessions of faith?

We affirm.

1. Negatively, this is not the church “conciliating” authority to the Word.

2. Negatively, this is not the church making new articles of faith.

3. Negatively, this is not the church making an infallible interpretation (the Scriptures are the only infallible interpreters of the Scriptures).

4. Negatively, this is not the church being the supreme judge of all controversies—this belongs “to Christ alone, the infallible teacher, and can no more be transferred to another than his prophetic office.”

Positively:

1. "In the custody of the Scriptures as a sacred deposit."
2. The church is the guardian, herald, and defender of Scripture.
3. "This power is properly to be attended to in the judgment which the church to make concerning doctrine; also in the creeds and confessions which she ought to compose for the conservation of doctrine and the bond of ecclesiastical communion." (282)

In judgment: Creeds and confessions bind the conscience "no farther than it is found to be conformed to the infallible canon of the sacred Scriptures." (282)

About creeds and confessions in general: (282-283)

"To this power belongs the making of public creeds and confessions which are usually and by synods and presbyteries to preserve the unity and agreement of faith and reject errors. They do not have the same authority as the Scriptures, since they must be compared with and corrected by them. Yet they have even their own memorable weight and ought to be valued very highly by the pious."

"They are like barriers against the errors and corruptions which can injure religion."

"They are the bonds of ecclesiastical communion and formulas of consent which testify of the unity of faith and the agreement of churches with each other."

Concerning Creeds, beginning with the Apostles' Creed:

"Made at the beginning of Christianity."

"Not that it was composed by the apostles themselves for a rule of faith... but because it was gathered from the writings of the apostles as a compendium of the doctrine delivered by them."

"This symbol others followed afterwards, written in various times and by various men; such as the Nicene, the Constantinopolitan, the Athanasian, and the Chalcedonian."

Concerning Confessions:

"Confessions are... fuller explanations of the creeds themselves, whether of the articles of faith or also of the doctrine of morals, and so of the whole of religion written for the necessity of one or more churches. Many of this kind were put forth from the beginning of Christianity and in these latest times... that by them, what should be taught in the churches might be made manifest against the calumnies and unjust prejudices of men." (283)

Two questions:

1. Their necessity? "It is not absolute, as if the church could not do without them..." But because of heresies, etc. the church has them.
2. Their authority? "Great with the pious, but still sinking below the authority of Scripture."

“They are at best secondary rules, not of truth, but of the doctrine received in any church, since from them can be seen and decided what agrees with or what differs from the doctrine of the church.”