

The Christian and Civil Government (1st)

(Many will think this topic is not essential for our modern times, but in reality it is extremely important. In fact, many Baptists are following Reformed ideology more than the historic Baptist position.)

First and foremost in this discussion is the fact that the kingdom of God is not of this world. When Pilate questioned Jesus concerning His kingship, our Lord replied, “My kingdom is not of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence,” John 18:36. Indeed, Jesus is a king and He is first to every Christian. The Scriptures make it clear from the testimony of the apostles when they were commanded not to “teach in this name”; that is, in the name of Jesus, their answer was, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” For the Christian, the kingship of Christ is before that of any earthly authority. This does not mean that Christians are to totally disregard civil authority. Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13-17 and other passages within the New Testament clearly declares that Christians are to be submissive to civil authority; however, when the civil authority is in opposition to the commands of Christ, the Christian is to obey Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth. Admittedly, there are times when there is a fine line of distinction and the line of demarcation is not easily determined. This problem arises regarding many other situations than that of the Christian’s response to civil government and the best preparation for such situations in life as to know what and how to do in such circumstances is for the Christian to live continually his life in obedience to the teachings of our Lord and to live in close fellowship with God daily. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to determine what the Lord would have us to know and do as clearly stated and practiced in His Word.

Since Israel was established by the Lord to function as theocratic kingdom, we must essentially confine our study to the kingdom of God as described in the New Testament. Obviously, general moral principles as taught in the Old Testament will equally apply to the Christian in the New Testament, but it is clear that Christ is “the mediator of a better covenant” which is “established upon better promises,” Hebrews 8:6.

It is clear from the confessions that there are differences between the Protestants and Baptists regarding the place of the house of God and civil government. Under the chapter regarding civil magistrates, the *1689 London Baptist Confession* has three articles, while the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* have four articles. (*The Savoy Declaration* is the confession of faith of the Congregational-Independents of 1658.) Articles one and two of all three confessions are essentially identical with variations with scriptural references. In order to show wherein both agree, I will summarize these two articles, though I may comment on some of the points later in our studies. These articles state (1) that God has ordained civil authority; (2) that the civil authority is under or subject to God; (3) that civil authority is over the people; (4) that civil authority is for the glory of God; (5) that civil authority is for the public good; (6) God has given the sword for the defense of the public; (7) the sword is to be used for the encouragement of those who do good and for the punishment of evil doers; (8) that it is lawful for a Christian to serve in this office; (9) this civil authority ought to maintain justice and peace according to the laws of each commonwealth and kingdom; and, (10) that under the New Testament, it is lawful for civil authority to wage war on just and necessary occasions.

The differences are the articles following articles one and two. Though they are somewhat lengthy for our studies, I believe it will be good to quote articles three and four of the Protestant confessions along with article three of the Baptist confession to set the stage for subsequent discussions.

Here are the articles for the *Westminster Confession*:

Article 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; 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 in them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

Article 4, 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, does 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 has 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 pretence whatsoever.

Since article four of the *Savoy Declaration* is identical to article four of the *Westminster Confession*, I will only supply article three.

Article 3, Although the magistrate is bound to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the gospel, and to manage and order civil administrations in a due subserviency to the interest of Christ in the world, and to that end to take care that men of corrupt minds and conversations do not licentiously publish and divulge blasphemy and errors, in their own nature subverting the faith and inevitably destroying the souls of them that receive them: yet in such differences about the doctrines of the gospel, or ways of the worship of God, as may befall men exercising a good conscience, manifesting it in their conversation, and holding the foundation, not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them; there is no warrant for the magistrate under the gospel to abridge them of their liberty.

Here is *article three* of the Baptist confession:

Civil magistrates being set up by God for the ends aforesaid; subjection, in all lawful things commanded by them, ought to be yielded by us in the Lord, not only for wrath, but for conscience' sake; and we ought to make supplications and prayers for kings and all that are in authority, that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty.

As is readily seen, there are not only differences between that of the Baptist and the Reformers, but there are differences between the Protestants in article three. I believe the differences between articles three of the two Protestant confessions may be given briefly as such: (1) the Westminster focuses article three around the Church (which according to their "Form of Church-Government" is an umbrella over congregations) whereas the Savoy centers it around the "interest of Christ in the world"; (2) both affirm that civil government is to encourage, promote, protect, and preserve the gospel and professors of the gospel; (3) both affirm that blasphemies, heresies, corruptions, and wicked practices be prevented and that the truth of God be kept pure; (4) the Savoy allows some lead way so as "not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them," whereas the Westminster does not allow such liberty of conscience; and, (5) the Westminster grants that the civil authority has "power to call synods, to be present in them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God,"

where the Savoy does not allow. Obviously, the Baptist confession is greatly different from those of the Protestants.

Our time is up for today, but the Lord willing we will continue our studies of this subject going forward.