

## **The Christian and Civil Government** (3<sup>rd</sup>)

(In our study today, we summarize the issues from the previous two podcasts regarding this topic. We introduce briefly the foundations of modern religious involvements in civil government that has resulted in the government becoming more active in defining acceptable religious worship and working to set the guidelines for it.)

In our previous podcasts regarding Christianity and its connection with civil government, we initially quoted from the major Protestant confessions being the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration* and the contrast of the Baptist *London Confession of 1689*. From these we discovered that while articles one, two, and four were essentially the same (though there are only three articles in the Baptist confession), there were differences with article three of the Protestant confessions. The differences between articles three of the two Protestant confessions were given 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 leeway so for others who differ from them by saying “not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them,” whereas the Westminster does not allow such liberty of conscience and freedom of worship; 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. We further noted that these differ from the Baptist confession where article three simply states “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.”

Subsequently, in our second podcast, we further quoted from latter Presbyterian confessions to verify that while these confessions give broader latitudes for other denominations, yet they affirm that civil government continues to have a role in the affairs of the congregation of the Lord. They further assert that the house of the Lord is to be involved in the affairs and environment of society. We will summarize them by the following: (1) while affirming that all denominations should be free in their worship, they say, “as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord”; (2) as late as 2014, the Presbyterian Church of USA stated “that the preservation and purification of religion is particularly the duty of kings, princes, rulers, and magistrates. They are not only appointed for civil government but also to maintain true religion and to suppress all idolatry and superstition. This may be seen in David, Jehosaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, and others highly commended for their zeal in that cause”; and, (3) that while the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, too, affirmed religious freedom for all denominations, it further declared that the church is to be an advocate for all victims of violence and “to promote reconciliation, love, and justice among all persons, classes, races, and nations.” Through various means, these confessions, while affirming freedom for all denominations, they affirm that civil government has some responsibility to the house of God for protection, the idea that the “purification” of true religion and suppression of “idolatry and superstition” be the duty of civil government. The question arises as to the definitions of “true religion” and of “idolatry and superstition.” In other words, the implication is that civil government is to identify “true religion,” and that “idolatry and superstition” be suppressed. This means that civil government is to determine what is “true religion” and it is to suppress anything else because it constitutes “idolatry and superstition.”

Furthermore, we saw that congregations are to be involved with the promotion of “reconciliation, love, and justice among all persons, classes, races, and nations.” Here congregations are encouraged to be involved in civil government and society in every area of life. As can be seen from all the Protestant confessions from history to modern times, the role of a connection with civil government and congregations is encouraged. No wonder religious institutions are involved in lobbying and other forms of influence for the purpose of establishing governments and laws regarding the various denominations and the advancement of their ideas. With such beliefs, is it any wonder that our current government is becoming more aggressive in seeking to define the ministry and the message and practice of all religions, especially by denigrating the gospel of Christ?

Allow me to digress briefly and say that it is one thing for an individual, whether a Christian or not, to become involved in civil government, but it is entirely different for a religious assembly to do so. I encourage Christians to be involved in civil government, but only as a citizen and not as a representative for a denomination or a congregation unless it is to appeal to the government for the freedom of religious worship. (We plan to say more about this later.) The role of the New Testament congregation does not include involvement of civil government or of worldly organizations of any kind. With religious societies and denominations more and more being involved in the shaping and forming of civil government, is it any wonder that government is more and more striving to establish the boundaries of religious institutions? Also, when congregations and religious institutions run to the government to obtain their 501c(3) nonprofit status they were in effect allowing the government validate and/or define them as to whether they are a house of God or not. Neither did Christ or the New Testament congregations go to Caesar for approval to exist. Likewise, the New Testament assemblies did not seek to establish the governmental laws of Rome or any other country. However, when the Catholic religions were formed they connected with civil government for aid in advancing their cause. Later, when the protestant reformation came about, the Protestants adopted this union of civil government. Likewise, in the early days of the United States of America, civil government in various states (and also the federal government, somewhat) sought to include laws for the advancement of religion and the Baptists appealed to the government in opposition to this. (As mention before regarding appealing to government for religious freedom, we plan to discuss this later.)

Essentially, I believe, there are basically two questions or issues that need to be addressed: (1) what role should the civil government play in the New Testament congregation, or in any form of religion; (2) what role should the New Testament congregation (or any form of religion) be involved in civil government or in any worldly organization? As you can see, these questions relate to all religions and not only to the New Testament assembly. However, it is not our intentions to try to discuss or address all issues related to the topic or topics at hand. We only desire to address these questions with regard to the New Testament congregation.

Historically, these questions and problems are not new, nor did they begin with the reformation or the protestant religions. They go back to the early days of Christianity. While there were some who advance the cause of civil government having ties with New Testament Christianity before the time of Constantine, it became more solidified with him and the Catholics. Even Augustine (he lived from 354 to 430 B.C.), who is praised by Protestants and the reform camp in many ways, was instrumental in supporting the government in persecuting Christians. For information regarding this, see the last work of the famous Baptist historian David Benedict entitled *History of the Donatists*. Benedict did not include the Donatists in his earlier histories, but after further studies he wrote this history of them to validate their orthodoxy. We plan to document some of the consequences of that arose in history concerning those who aligned with civil government and believe it is to be “as nursing fathers” for the household of faith. Before doing that, we will direct our attention to what the Scriptures teach regarding this subject.

In doing this we must essentially direct our attention to the New Testament because we are now under the new covenant that is a “better covenant” that is “established upon better promises,” Hebrews 8:6.

There is no question but that Israel was under a theocracy whereby God joined the priesthood with judging over the civil affairs of Israel. Therefore, it is imperative that we maintain a distinction regarding this under the New Testament economy as we do with the dietary laws, animal sacrifices, and other similar aspects of the kingdom of God today. There are times when we may draw lessons from those things, but there are clear differences between the worship activities and practices of the Old Testament and how those actions are to be carried out in the New Testament congregation.

Our time is up for today. The Lord willing we will look more directly to the Word of God regarding this subject matter.