

The Christian and Civil Government (16th)

(Today we will briefly review our previous studies and begin to supply some history of this dichotomy regarding the Christian assembly and civil government as addressed by the Protestants and Baptists.)

Earlier we stated that “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?” Further we said that “these questions relate to all religions and not only to the New Testament assembly.”

After reviewing the confessions of the Baptists and Protestants, we summarized by saying the following:

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 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. This greatly differs from the Baptist confession where article three states that “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’s 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.”

Furthermore we saw that some of the modern Protestants confessions enlarged their interests in that they affirm that it is the role of organized “Christian” religion to be involved in social justice and seek to persuade civil government regarding these affairs. Equally, we found that as late as 2011 Protestants continue to affirm their aversions to those who differ with them in stating as follows: “Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order, which God hath established among men.”

In reviewing the scriptural references as supplied by the confessions, we found that God ordained civil government and that Christians are to be submissive to such government. However, we also saw that when the civil government seeks to interfere with the house of God and its worship it has overstepped its bounds and that the saints of God and the congregation of the Lord are to obey God rather than man. Israel under the Old Testament theocracy never sought to force the stranger or other nations to worship under their economy. If a stranger desired to be identified with Israel and her worship he was welcomed, but he was never forced under it. Obviously, if Israel captured and subdued a tribe, nation, or kingdom, they were subject to Israel’s civil laws but they were not forced under the Levitical worshiping system. In fact, a “stranger” could not enter into their worship as such. And, likewise, under the New Testament

worship and the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, unbelievers and civil powers were not forced into the worship of the congregation of God.

It cannot be denied that we live in a pluralistic society. Regardless of the country in which one lives, this is a fact. Unless all the citizens of a country believe identically, different people are going to have views that differ from others. While there are countries that basically have one form of religion, there are some within that nation that believe somewhat different from the majority in some fashion. This is a fact of human nature. Even within a family, it is a rare thing (if this is ever the case) that the husband and wife always agree on everything. In a pluralistic society like the United States of America, there are people who live here with various forms of religious worship. Therefore, it is impossible that all will believe alike. In fact, all who profess to be Christian do not believe alike. John Owen said in his answers to a Roman Catholic in his day concerning a unity in profession among all Christian that such could only be achieved by the sword. He said, "In the meantime, to expect unity in profession, by the reduction of all men to a precise agreement in all the doctrines that have been and are ventilated among Christians, and in all acts and ways of worship, is to refer the supreme and last determination of things evangelical to the sword of secular power and violence, and to inscribe 'Vox ultima Christi' upon great guns and other engines or war, seeing otherwise it will not be effected;—and what may be done this way I know not." John Owen, *Works of John Owen*, Volume 14, p. 318. And yet, the followers of John Owen and the *Savoy Confession* sought to do this very thing in the early days of this country under the rule of the Congregationalists. Such practices were likewise done by the Episcopalians and Presbyterians and other Protestants as well. However, such practices of using civil government to enforce so-called Christian beliefs on others began long before this in America. In fact, it can be traced back to Augustine, one of the heroes of the Protestants. Needless to say, Augustine was a Catholic and not a Protestant. Augustine desired to use the civil government to extinguish the Donatists.

We need to give some history regarding the Donatists because Catholics and Protestants alike in their histories always speak of them as being "the filth of the world" and "the offscouring of all things," cf. I Corinthians 4:13. Even John Owen said of them that they were "the wretchedest schism that ever rent the church of God; which makes the wounds of Christendom incurable, and all hope of coalition in love desperate," *Works*, Vol. 14, p. 355.

Also listen to the words of Thomas Goodwin from his Sermon XXXV, on Ephesians 1:22-23:

I will add but two cautions, to inform you concerning two divisions; the one from the universal church, and the other from particular churches. It is proper to the thing in hand, 'church,' 'the church, which is his body;' and there is no schism to be in the body, no schism from the universal church, no schism from particular churches that are truly churches of Christ. I will tell you of two great divisions from either. You have heard of two sorts spoken of, the one of old, the other of latter years; the one the Donatists of old, the other the Brownists of late. You call the Brownists the new Donatists, and the Donatists the old Brownists. I will explain that which is the worst in either opinion, and you shall see it is proper to the thing in hand.

First, for the Donatists that were in Austin's time. I have examined diligently the writings of Austin; among them I find the highest venom of their opinions to lie in this, and it is high enough, —if we may know men by the writings of their adversaries against them, for there is none of their own writings extant,—the truth is, they denied the church universal, they denied that the church was anywhere but in that part of Africa where they were, and this inflamed that holy man Austin against them. They might have put out of their creed, 'I believe the Church Catholic,' and put in 'I believe a little part of the world to be the Church.' Here you see a schism hath been from the church universal.

Now, go take the Brownists; they never deny the church universal, as the Donatists do; they have always affirmed that there is a church universal in all places, yea, and in England the most glorious church of saints of any in the world. But yet herein hath lain their error; they have sinned against particular churches, as they of old did against the universal church. And against these I, for my part, and many of my brethren, profess that they are in an error; and it is evident by Rev.xv., that, from the first time of the separation from Popery, there hath been a temple built to God, churches to God, in all the Reformed Churches.

This is a small sample of many quotes that could be furnished to show the disdain the Protestants have for the Donatists and others who desire to use civil magistrates or civil government to keep the truth of God (as they understand it) “pure and entire.” You will note in both quotes, though not as open in Owen’s as in Goodwin’s, that one of their major objections to the Donatists was their resistance to the belief in “the church universal.” However, that is another study which we have made reference to in previous podcasts. The confusion regarding what is “the church” can be readily seen in another quote by John Owen in his answering the papists John Vincent Cane:

Moreover, we desire to know *what church* you mean in your assertion, or, rather, what is it you mean by *the church*? Do you intend the *mystical church*, or the whole number of God’s elect in all ages, or in any age, militant on the earth, which principally is the church of God? Eph. v.25; or do you intend the whole diffused body of disciples of Christ in the world, separated to God by baptism and the profession of saving truth, which is the *church catholic visible*? or do you mean any *particular church*, as the Roman or Constantinopolitan, the French, Dutch, or English church? *Works*, Vol. 14, p. 301.

As has been noted in previous podcasts, the translators under the rules as established by King James, were not allowed to translate the Greek word ἐκκλησία as congregation as Tyndale did in every place in his New Testament. If the word congregation would have been used throughout the translations of the Bible over the years, I believe there would be less confusion regarding what our Lord meant concerning the house of God. Obviously, there were no denominations or such like religious institutions in the days of the New Testament. But let us return to our topic and the use of civil government by professors of Christianity to rule over or interfere with the assembly of the saints.

We were discussing the Donatists in the days of Augustine. Baptists have generally recognized the Donatists as their forefathers. The noted Baptist Charles Spurgeon, for example, said the following:

And now, it seems to me, at this day, when any say to us, “You, as a denomination, what great names can you mention? what fathers can you speak of?” we may reply, “More than any other under heaven, for we are the old apostolic Church that have never bowed to the yoke of princes yet; we, known among men, in all ages, by various names, such as Donatists, Novatians, Paulicians, Petrobrussians, Cathari, Arnoldists, Hussites, Waldenses, Lollards, and Anabaptists, have always contended for the purity of the Church, and her distinctness and separation from human government.” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1861, Sermon 424.

The famous Baptist historian David Benedict did not include the Donatists in his earlier histories of the Baptists due to the massive negative comments by the Protestant and Catholic historians. (Benedict wrote his earlier two volume history of the Baptist in 1813 and the one volume edition later in 1848.) However, after much study he wrote his book entitled the *History of the Donatists* in 1875 proving that they were “grossly misrepresented” (as well as the Manichees) “as given by Augustine.” Benedict further stated in his book *Fifty Years Among the Baptist*, pp. 267-268, the following:

The history of the Donatists cost me a great amount of labor, and the facts which I have collected from the writings of Optatus, Augustine, and the numerous editors of their works, respecting the character, the publications, the sufferings, and the number of this people, and also their influence in the support of evangelical principles, have far exceeded my most sanguine expectations. I had supposed that no vestiges remained of the literary productions of that large class of able men who are known to have existed among the Donatists; but on this point I was agreeably disappointed, since I found in the works of Augustine an abundance of quotations from Donatist authors, in the veritable Latin in which they wrote, in defense of their own principles and pursuits, and in condemnation of the corruptions and persecutions of their Catholic opponents.

This is quite different from Goodwin's quote above where he said, "I have examined diligently the writings of Austin; among them I find the highest venom of their opinions to lie in this, and it is high enough, —if we may know men by the writings of their adversaries against them, for there is none of their own writings extant"

I regret to say that our time is exhausted for today. The Lord willing, we will continue in our next lesson by further examining the controversy between the Donatists and Augustine and his desire to remove them by civil powers.