

16. Government and the civil magistrate

WCF chapter 23 Modern Language version – 1993 – OPC

1. God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, has ordained civil authorities to be, under him, over the people for his own glory and the public good. For this purpose he has armed them with the power of the sword for the defense and encouragement of those who are good, and for the punishment of those who do evil.

2. It is lawful for Christians to hold public office when called to it. In such office they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth. For that purpose they may now, under the new testament, lawfully wage war upon just and necessary occasion.

3. Civil authorities may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven,

[Modern language version of 1788 revision continues]

nor should they interfere in any way in matters of faith. Yet, as caring fathers, it is the duty of civil authorities to protect the church of our common Lord without giving preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest—doing so in such a way that all church authorities shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of carrying out every part of their sacred functions without violence or danger. As Jesus Christ has appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, prevent, or hinder their proper exercise among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil authorities to protect the person and good name of all their people in such an effective manner that no person be allowed, either in the name of religion or of unbelief, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatever. They should also take care that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without interference or disturbance.

The Lord of the lords, and King of the kings

God owns the world... & he appoints some as human governors beneath his authority, = 1 Peter 2:13-14, Romans 13:1-7

The “sword” = defence & punishment

“Determining the scale and conditions of legitimate defence and punishment requires much wisdom. But the *idea* that both are to be administered by civil magistrates on God’s behalf should be beyond question.” C. Van Dixhoorn

Christian response to ungodly government:

- ? reject all civil govt → sect
- ? refuse personal participation
- ? participate only in “Christian” party/country
- serve... and pray (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:2, Ps. 82:3-4)

[Original 1647 text and language]

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, administrated, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

Limits to authority

The Magistrate may not do the work of the church: preaching, sacraments, discipline – Matthew 16:19, 18:17

Should the magistrate promote the church?

1647 England: “Yes”

- The state is to *promote* church order and can call church councils

Biblical basis?

- OT kings who reform worship, e.g. Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18:3-4...
- but does this forget that the NT church and state are distinct?

1788 USA: “No”

- No interference
- *Protect* the church (all denominations)

Biblical response?

- Christ is king of kings and Lord of Lords... there is only one gospel... so shouldn’t a godly ruler promote the truth?

Trickier than it looks!

4. It is the duty of people to pray for those in authority, to honor them, to pay them taxes or other revenue, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority for the sake of conscience. Neither unbelief nor difference in religion makes void the just and legal authority of officeholders nor frees the people—church authorities included—from their due obedience to them. Much less does the Pope have any power or jurisdiction over civil authorities in their domains or over any of their people, nor can he deprive them of their domains or lives if he shall judge them to be heretics or on any other pretense whatever.

The duties of subjects

Pray: 1 Timothy 2:1-2

Honour: 1 Peter 2:17 = attitude

Taxes: Romans 13:6

Obey lawful commands, Romans 13:5, Titus 3:1

Even “Babylon”/Rome, 1 Peter 5:13

Vs. the Papacy

But sometimes obeying Scripture means *disobeying* the state, e.g. Daniel, Revelation

Personal response: for what should we give thanks... confess... pray?

Next week: Marriage and divorce