

Of the Civil Magistrate (Part 2)

2 Chronicles 26:11-21; WCF 23.3

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 18 October 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here is the second of a series of four sermons on the relationship of the Church and the State.

Our sermon has two points...

- Civil Government's Limits
- Is Civil Government a Promoter of (and Guide to) the Church?

Civil Government's Limits

From the Bible we learn that God has allowed for two domains of power/authority to exist among human beings:

- 1) the domain of the *civil* service with its politicians and courts of law and judges – in short, we can call this the *state*; and...
- 2) the domain of the *spiritual* service, which, in short, we can call the *church*.

Well, from the Bible we learn that we have to distinguish between the role of the state and the role of the church, because they are two separate institutions.

Now, that does not mean they cannot support each other. Yes, just as the church has the responsibility to honour the civil magistrates by praying for them and obeying them, so, too, has the state the responsibility to honour the functions of the church.

They are to support, rather than oppose, each other.

However, because they remain two separate institutions, the state is not to do the work of the minister of the gospel. Yes, no politician or civil judge is to preach or administer the sacraments (Lord's Supper or baptism).

And they are not to do the work of an elder either! After all, it is not a politician's or civil judge's task/place to administer church discipline.

My brother & sister, the distinction between the spiritual service (church) and the civil service (state) is clearly seen in our Old Testament passage (2 Chronicles 26).

King Uzziah of Judah² was for most of his reign a God-fearing king. However, sadly, when he had become powerful and successful as king, he suddenly got the audacity and pride to go into the temple to try and do a task which God had ordained for priests only – yes, only for the descendants of Aaron who had been consecrated to burn incense.

And you know how Uzziah was still trying to resist the priests who came to rebuke him when, suddenly, the Lord struck him with leprosy to such a degree that he no longer

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2007. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 3: *The State, the Family, the Church, and Last Things* (Chapters 23-33 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 281p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Uzziah was also known as Azariah (cf. 2 Kings 15). He reigned as king of Judah from 783 to 742 B.C. For this date, cf. Kings of Judah at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kings_of_Judah

needed the *priests* to dissuade him from burning incense, but he himself hurried out of the temple.

Clearly, King Uzziah had overstepped the rights and duties of king! After all, the offices in the church are for those who have been called by God to perform them!

That's what we hear also in the New Testament (in 1 Cor 4:1-2), when the Apostle Paul tells us that *ministers/servants of Christ* are those who have been *entrusted with the secret things of God*.³

Well, if kings and civil servants have to remember their place when it comes to *leading in worship*, then surely, they also have to remember that it is not their place to administer church *discipline*.

In this regard, RC Sproul tells of a church minister who was also a member of the so-called *League of the South*.

What is the League of the South?

Well, you may know that in the USA there is the Federal Government – that's the body that rules over all of the fifty states of the USA. But then, apart from being under the Federal Government, each of the fifty states also has its own law-making body.

Now, if all things go well, then the balance of power between the Federal Government and the fifty states' governments should go smoothly. However, that does not always happen. And so, for that reason the League of the South was formed to encourage the leaders of each of the fifty states to work for the preservation of the fifty states' rights against the continued intrusion by the Federal Government.

Well, this church minister, apart from being a minister, was also working for this League of the South.

And, one has to say, that this League of the South is not a trouble-making or racist group. And Sproul also assures that, as this church minister was working for the League of the South, he never tried to "sell" this League of the South to his church members – he never preached sermons on the League of the South.

But, sadly, in this minister's church there was a member who was fiercely patriotic to the Federal Government, so he did not like his pastor's affiliation with the League of the South.

So, this member then brought charges against his minister before the church's Session. Yet, when this member lost his case at Session, he went to Presbytery where he also lost! Well, then sadly, the member took his case to the civil court where he filed suit against the minister.

Some church members then wrote a letter to the judge pleading with him not to even hear this case because it was a church matter – not a state matter. Besides, if the judge would proceed with hearing this case, he would violate also the First Amendment of the USA's constitution.

Yet, what did that judge do?

He heard the case, and ruled in favour of the congregation member. And then? Well, then that judge *removed the church minister from his pulpit*!⁴

My brother & sister, what a shocking example of how a civil magistrate claimed for himself the authority to decide who is fit to be a pastor in a local church.

³ 1 Cor 4:1-2 *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.* ² *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful* (NIV84).

⁴ Cf. Sproul (ibid:16-17)

I mean, gauging by the Bible, it is not for kings and civil servants to administer church discipline!

After all, Matthew 18:17 tells us that Christians are to take their most challenging problems to the church. That's why our Lord says about an unrepentant sinner that, "***If he refuses to listen to them*** (the two or three who have called him to repentance), ***tell it to the church..***"⁵

And does not Matthew 16:19 tell us that it was to the *elders* of the church that Christ gave the keys of the kingdom – which means the authority of entry into the church, and even heaven!⁶

And so, it is clear that *God* sets people in the church – people with gifts of *spiritual* government.⁷

Thus, no wise man – not even a political leader or a civil judge who is very wise – is allowed to take on himself the honour of ruling God's church.

My brother & sister, do you realise that not even our Lord Jesus Christ took the honour of the high priesthood on Himself, but that He was called to this responsibility by His Father?

Look, is this not what Heb 5:4-5 says...?

*No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*⁸

Wow! What a lesson for all politicians who crave to have influence over the church! That was point 1 "Civil Government's Limits."

Here is the last point...

Is Civil Government a Promoter of (and a Guide to) the Church?

My brother & sister you and I may laugh at this question.

But if we lived in the 1600's in England, then we would have seen this as a good & valid question.

Today, this question is still good to ask and to be answered so that Christians in New Zealand and worldwide will know what's wrong and what's right when a civil government oversteps its mark. In fact, today's Christians in China can be greatly encouraged from having this question answered.

Here is the question again – this time put in different words: "Is it civil government's task to make sure that the church does its own work well; and to call for church synods?"

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Mt 18:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

⁶ Mt 16:19 "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" Also Mt 18:18 "*I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 12:28-29 *And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?*

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Heb 5:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Why do we even ask this question?

Well, because the original text of the Westminster Confession of Faith – the 1647 text⁹ – not the two versions we have in our RCNZ Creeds & Confessions booklet¹⁰ – contained the following wording: “...*he (i.e. the civil magistrate) has 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, and observed.*”

Wow! Can this be that the civil government (e.g. the New Zealand Parliament) has the God-given task to make sure that the church (even our RCNZ) does its work well and according to the Bible?

Well, the 1647-version of the WCF continues saying: “*For the better effecting whereof (of the church), he (the civil government) has power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide (make sure) that whatsoever is transacted in them, be according to the mind of God.*”¹¹

Wow! Is it really the task of the civil government to make sure that the church does its tasks well? Is it really the New Zealand government’s task to call e.g., our RCNZ together in a synod and then sit in in those synods?

Well, in 1647 the Westminster Assembly thought so! They even quoted passages from the Old Testament to show how godly and zealous *civil governors* did great reforms in the worship practices of God’s Old-Covenant church; and how, also from *their side, priests* in godly zeal brought changes to civil society;¹² also how good kings like Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah called religious leaders to the royal palace to give those religious leaders information or advice on how to deal with religious/church matters.¹³

Well, here is the problem with the Westminster Assembly’s thinking on this point. They seemed to have forgotten that what was good for God’s Old Testament people is not good for His New testament people. After all, is it not so that Ancient Israel was two things in one – they were 1) the church of God, and, at the same time 2) God’s chosen nation?

But in the New Testament era (the era in which also you & I also live), the church of God is *spiritual* Israel – a select group of people from *all* nations. And so, there is no longer *one/single* political nation chosen by God to be His people!¹⁴

⁹ Known as the Historic Text

¹⁰ Which have been based upon the WCF form adopted by the OPC in the USA in 1956

¹¹ The bracketed words & phrases are mine, in an effort to make the original text more understandable for the modern English listener.

¹² Cf. Isa 49:23; Ps 122:9; Ezra 7:23, 25-28; Lev 24:16; Deut 13:5, 6, 10; 2 Ki 18:4; 23:1-26; 1 Chron 13:1-9; 2 Chron 15:12, 13; 34:33.

¹³ Cf. 2 Chron 19:8-11, ***In Jerusalem also, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites, priests and heads of Israelite families to administer the law of the Lord and to settle disputes. And they lived in Jerusalem. ⁹ He gave them these orders: “You must serve faithfully and wholeheartedly in the fear of the Lord. ¹⁰ In every case that comes before you from your fellow countrymen who live in the cities—whether bloodshed or other concerns of the law, commands, decrees or ordinances—you are to warn them not to sin against the Lord; otherwise his wrath will come on you and your brothers. Do this, and you will not sin.***

¹¹ ***“Amariah the chief priest will be over you in any matter concerning the Lord, and Zebadiah son of Ishmael, the leader of the tribe of Judah, will be over you in any matter concerning the king, and the Levites will serve as officials before you. Act with courage, and may the Lord be with those who do well.”***

Also cf. 2 Chron 29 and 30; Matt 2:4, 5.

¹⁴ Cf. Gal 6:16 ***Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.***

Also Eph 2:11-16 ***Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of***

So, why did the Westminster Assembly, in their original confession, said that it is civil government's task to promote the work of the church and even to call synods in which government is to make sure that everything happens according to pure Biblical doctrine? My brother & sister, we must remember that when the Westminster Assembly wrote the words we have just heard, England was in a very unique stage of its history – a stage in which even the Westminster Assembly, godly men as they were, still had to learn how the Church and State are to work alongside one another. Besides, at that stage England was in the middle of a civil war – a war which was, in part (and sadly), fought over differences that Christian denominations had with one another!

Thus, the English *Parliament* (the so-called “Long Parliament”) called together this church/ecclesiastical meeting which we now know as the Westminster Assembly. And this church assembly, which lasted for nearly six years, worked in the Westminster Abbey very near to the Parliament buildings.

Parliament gave them the task to advise them on how to bring the Church of England into greater conformity with the Church of Scotland and with the Reformed Churches on the continent of Europe.

So, this was a unique situation in which the civil government, *in order to keep the peace among its citizens*, convened a church meeting of high calibre to seek advice from the church.

Now, if the English Parliament at the time was only *seeking advice* from the church, that would not have been bad.

However, on many an occasion, the relationship between the Long Parliament and the Westminster Assembly turned sour, when Parliament tried to make changes to this *church meeting's* (this Westminster Assembly's) texts.¹⁵

And so, *that* parliament overstepped the mark when they were not pleased with just seeking advice from godly church leaders, but sought to govern the church councils! What do Christians today learn from this mistake?

Well, firstly, for Christians in today's China it will be heart-warming news to hear that their civil government in Beijing is overstepping the mark by dictating to churches where and when they can or cannot meet – even what they are allowed to preach and what not; and, of course, where the government in Beijing has gone to the shocking extreme of changing even several passages in God's holy Word in an effort to promote their own status and power – for *that*, God will sooner or later punish them, as He did with other governments and civil rulers who tried to work against God, e.g. Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Chairman Mao.

What have we learned regarding the New Zealand government and the Christian Church in this country?

Well, that our government can rightly ask for advice from the church – for example, by way of topics to be discussed in government's select committees.

men)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

¹⁵ This happened especially in many months during 1645 and 1646 (cf. Van Dixhoorn, *ibid*:315)

However, it's another matter as to whether our secular government will listen to the voice of the church.

I mean, on several issues in the recent past, when they were given advice from church leaders – e.g. also from Rev John Goris on the topic of euthanasia – *that* clearly did not make a dent in their thinking, because (so it seems) the government officials in question had already made up their minds to go in favour of the End-of-Life-Choice Act!

One wonders what will happen further in the future, if this nation and this government become more & more secular, and take a stronger (more active) stance against the Bible and the church. Could it come to the stage when they will not just no longer seek advice from the church, but (like the Long Parliament of the 1640's and like the current Chinese government) even dictate to the church how she should run her own affairs?

Well, let's remember that the Sovereign Lord is in control of all of world history – yet, without Him to be blamed for evil rulers and evil events.

After all, even in Bible times, God used evil kings & evil nations for seasons to discipline His chosen people.

So, what is our duty & calling as Christians?

Well, is it not to persevere in our Christian walk and to obey our government in all things that are not going against God's Word?

Yes, as the Apostle Peter says, “***Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.***”¹⁶

And let us continue to pray ***for kings and all those in authority, that we may*** (be that God's will) ***live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.***¹⁷

AMEN (2511 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁶ 1 Pet 2:13a & 15

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Ti 2:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.