

## Of the Civil Magistrate (Part 3)

John 18:28-40; WCF 23.3

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 25 October 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)<sup>1</sup>

### Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here is the third sermon in which we want to see what God's Word says about the relationship of the church and the state – yes, about the church authorities and the civil authorities. (But it's the second sermon in which we scrutinise the words of WCF 23.3)

Our sermon has three points...

- Civil Government not to Give Preference to Any One Denomination
- Civil Government a Protector of the Church
- Civil Government A Protector of All Religions?

### Civil Government Not to Give Preference to Any Denomination

My brother & sister, right through the ages, many civil governments of many countries chose one religion (or even one denomination) to be that country's official religion.

So, for example, has England already for a long time had the Church of England (Anglican Church) as its established church!

That's just one example of an established church! Many countries have (or have had) a particular church/denomination which is/was their favoured church (or so-called "established church").

Now, the relationship between such an established church and the civil government (the state) can vary.

For example, at different times and places through the ages, the state was under the control of the established church (as in a theocracy), but at other times & places the state was *in control of* the established church.<sup>2</sup>

Today, just gauging by observation, the Church of England (Anglican Church) and the civil government in England seem to be in loose relationship – a relationship in which neither the church nor the state is in control of each other.

Well, when Europeans discovered America (528 years ago), many different Christian denominations quickly settled on the east coast of the USA – each one seeking religious freedom. And, there were Puritans, Quakers and Baptists. There was the Dutch Reformed Church in New York. And then there was the Anglican Church and the Presbyterians. Then there was the Roman Catholic Church.

At times, each of these Christian denominations wanted to be the state-favoured church (established church), for, at times, that would also mean that they could get financial support from the state. So, if a church could not be the established church of the central government, then at least they would want to be the established church of one of the provinces.

And so, the Congregationalists generally prevailed in the New England states of the USA, whereas the Church of England (Episcopal) generally prevailed in the Southern states. And, in

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> "State religions are official or government-sanctioned establishments of a religion, but the state does not need be under the control of the religion (as in a theocracy) nor is the state-sanctioned religion necessarily under the control of the state" (cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_religion#Disestablishment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_religion#Disestablishment))

time, the Church of England, usurped the Dutch Reformed Church in New York. The Quakers and their allies were prominent in the middle states. Maryland eventually established the Episcopal Church.<sup>3</sup>

What a shameful situation – this rivalry among Christians! How at odds with our Lord’s high-priestly prayer (in John 17) that His followers should be *one*, so that the world may know that the Father has sent Him!<sup>4</sup>

Well, thankfully, this vying for the position of getting established by the state was given a good blow after the end of the USA’s War of Independence (in 1783).

You see, after the USA got its independence, many voices were raised against having established (state-favoured) churches.

One of those voices came from the American Presbyterian Church.

Yes, in 1788 (less than five years after the USA received its independence from England),<sup>5</sup> the American Presbyterian Church held a Synod in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at which they changed the original Article 23.3 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).

Why?

For, at that stage, the original version of the WCF 23.3 still spoke in favour of the state’s control over the church (as we have seen in last Sunday afternoon’s sermon).

However, those Presbyterians of Philadelphia came to see that the idea that the state must establish/prefer one church in a nation was a confusion (a “mixing-up”) of the two governments which God has established upon the earth. God established the state, and He established the church, and the one should not in the slightest manner try to have power over the other! You see, if the state would establish one specific denomination, then that could lead to the state getting financial or political leverage over to work of the church.

And it is at this point that we should remember our Lord Jesus’ words which he spoke to Pontius Pilate (in John 18:36), “***My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.***”<sup>6</sup>

Well, it is because God has established these two distinct powers on earth – the state and the church – that the American Presbyterians, meeting at Philadelphia, concluded that the state (civil government) should not “in any way interfere in matters of faith.”<sup>7</sup>

Granted, while it can be a great gift (and a blessing) to Christians to experience the rule of a good civil government, no civil government should think that it can use its gifts to rule the church!

After all, as civil governments *are* of this world, Christ’s kingdom is not of this world!

And, again, it must be said that if the state goes against the church, then it’s obvious that Christians should obey God rather than men – as the apostles told the Jewish authorities!<sup>8</sup>

Another matter: Is the church in need of rulers so that she should go ask the state for gifted men?

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<sup>3</sup> “Congregationalism generally prevailed in the New England states, whereas the Church of England (Episcopal) generally prevailed in the Southern states (and in time usurped the Dutch Reformed Church in New York), and Quakers and their allies were prominent in the middle states. Although Maryland was originally founded in part to provide religious freedom for Roman Catholics, it eventually established the Episcopal Church” (Cf. John R. Vile, *Established Churches in Early America* at <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/801/established-churches-in-early-america> )

<sup>4</sup> Jn 17:20 “***My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.***”

<sup>5</sup> The war lasted from April 1775 until September 1783

<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New International Version\*](#). (1984). (Jn 18:36). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> WCF 23.3 “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, nor should they interfere in any way in matters of faith....”

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Acts 5:29 ***Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!”***

Not at all! I mean, did not our Lord Jesus, after He ascended into heaven, shower His church with the necessary gifts that will lead His loved-ones to the perfecting of their faith? Yes, did our Lord not give gifts for the work of Christian service/ministry, and for the upbuilding of the body of Christ?

Of course, He did! We see it! And His Word tells us that He did (in Eph 4:11,12): “*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,* <sup>12</sup> *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*”<sup>9</sup>

So, what shall we say about civil governors – yes, about politicians?

Well, they are gifts from God (whether they realise it or not), but they are not gifts to the church!

Well, that was point 1 “Civil Government Not to Give Preference to Any One Denomination.” Here is the second point...

### **Civil Government a Protector of the Church**

My brother & sister, in Isaiah 49:23, the Lord gave a promise to the remnant of His people who were in exile in Babylon. This is what the Lord told them: “*Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers...*”<sup>10</sup>

Well, that’s how the American Presbyterians also thought at their 1788 synod in Philadelphia – that it is the God-given responsibility that the state to be “nursing fathers” to God’s New-Covenant people, just as kings were promised to be “nursing fathers” to God’s Old-Covenant people.

And that’s in sync with Rom 13 where God’s Word tells Christians to *submit to the governing authorities*<sup>11</sup> (13:1) and to do what is right, for then the civil government *will commend you*,<sup>12</sup> *For he is God’s servant to do you good...*<sup>13</sup>

Thus, said that Presbyterian Synod, “...*as caring fathers, it is the duty of civil authorities to protect the church of our common Lord...*”<sup>14</sup>

Then that synod continues saying that, “...*it is the duty of the civil authorities to protect the church of our common Lord without giving preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest*<sup>15</sup>—*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.*”

Now, as far as we can see, the idea that the state should not give preference to one denomination is never so clearly stated in the Bible – for the Bible did not work with denominations. However, one could say at least this: that this idea is not incompatible with the Bible!<sup>16</sup>

Well, next, the WCF 23.3 says that, “*As/Because 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.*”

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that the state should do as Ps 105 (verse 15) says. What does it say? “*Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.*”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Eph 4:11–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Is 49:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rm 13:1

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rm 13:3

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rm 13:4

<sup>14</sup> So, the second sentence of WCF 23.3

<sup>15</sup> WCF 23.3 (Emphasis mine)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. Van Dixhoorn (ibid:316)

<sup>17</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 105:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Next, that Philadelphia synod says, *“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 molestation or disturbance.”*

In short, what does this say?

Well, that the state should permit freedom of religion and freedom of assembly!

Perhaps someone might say, “But does the Bible also say that?” “Yes, does the Bible say that the state should permit freedom of religion and freedom of assembly?”

Well, Rom 13:3-4 does say that Christians ought not to be afraid if they have done no wrong!<sup>18</sup>

And 1 Tim 2:2 does give the reason why Christians should pray for our civil rulers!

What is that reason? Well, *“that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”*<sup>19</sup>

So, what do we see?

Well, we see there are some Bible verses that indicate that the state should protect the church!

However, it is fair to say that, when they wrote these words of WCF 23.3, the Philadelphia assembly was thinking more theologically and logically about the fact that God has established a civil government apart from a church government; and that each of the concerns expressed by the Philadelphia assembly – and each of the warnings issued by them, and boundaries demarcated by them – flow from this general distinction which the Bible makes between church and state.

And how beautiful that some themes and phrases that the Philadelphia assembly used in writing WCF 23.3, were later on also taken up by the US government at their First United States Congress, and in the American Bill of Rights!<sup>20</sup>

Well, so far regarding point 2: **“Civil Government a Protector of the Church.”**

Here is the last small point...

### **Civil Government A Protector of All Religions?**

My brother & sister, here’s a question: Did those American Presbyterians in 1788 when they rewrote the words of WCF 23.3 at that Philadelphia synod – did they have only the Christian Church in mind? Did they mean to say that the state should only protect the true church, or that false churches and false religions should also enjoy the protection of the state?

Well, one has to say that at the time when that Philadelphia synod took place, there had not yet been a big influx of cults and pagan religions into their country – the USA.

Yes, it was not until the late 1800’s that cults and pagan religions reached any kind of prominence in the USA.

So, that’s why the Philadelphia synod of 1788 did not openly make any statement about religions other than Christian.

Yet, that Philadelphia synod did know of fellow countrymen who did not believe in the Trinity.<sup>21</sup>

And they did know that there were biblical sceptics, deists (who thought that God is no longer actively involved in creation) and self-made prophets.

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<sup>18</sup> Rm 13:3-4, *“...Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”*

<sup>19</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Ti 2:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Van Dixhoorn (ibid:317)

<sup>21</sup> The Socinians. Socinianism (/səˈsɪniənɪzəm/) is a system of Christian doctrine named for Italians Lelio Sozzini (Latin: Laelius Socinus) and Fausto Sozzini (Latin: Faustus Socinus), uncle and nephew, respectively, which was developed among the Polish Brethren in the Minor Reformed Church of Poland during the 16th and 17th centuries and embraced by the Unitarian Church of Transylvania during the same period. It is most famous for its Nontrinitarian Christology but contains a number of other unorthodox beliefs as well ( cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socinianism> ).

And so, they could well under other circumstances have spoken up for the civil protection of other religions.

However, there's another angle from which Christians could argue for the state's protection of all people from all religions, and that is that our Lord made it quite clear that His Gospel is not spread by forceful oppression of people – yes, not by the sword, but by the Word!

What reason for us as Christians to proclaim the Gospel in word and in deed!

So, should the state protect all its citizens – even those who are holding to non-Christian beliefs?

Without a doubt! But it's on Christians to spread the Gospel peacefully!

In this regard, although I, for one, wish and pray for the day that our prime minister will come to a heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ, yet we can at least be thankful that she – even though she is a self-confessed agnostic<sup>22</sup> – has the will and zeal to protect all New Zealand citizens.

AMEN (2093 words excluding footnotes)

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<sup>22</sup> Here is a snippet from an interview held with Jacinda Ardern on 19 August 2017: "It was one of the issues that became a real flashpoint. You drift along a bit, there are always going to be things you can't reconcile, but I could never reconcile what I saw as discrimination in a religion that was otherwise very focused on tolerance and kindness."

And now?

"I can't see myself being a member of an organised religion again."

Does she talk to God?

"No. But I have a real respect for people who have religion as a foundation in their lives. And I respect people who don't. I'm agnostic. I don't spend a lot of time trying to figure it out. I just think people should be free to have their personal beliefs and not be persecuted for it, whether they be atheist or staunch church members" (cf. Exclusive: Jacinda and Clarke's first interview at <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/the-politics-of-life-the-truth-about-jacinda-ardern/4WEA6GJ4UZCLE23QCG23WTHR7I/>)