

The Church and the Civil Government

Exodus 5:1-4; 11:10; Acts 5:27-29, 40-42; BELGIC CONFESSION ARTICLE 36

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Congregation of Christ: Last Sunday, President Trump attended a worship service at a church in Las Vegas. The pastors there are a husband-and-wife team, and the wife declared a “prophetic” word about the coming election, “At 4:30, the Lord said to me, ‘I am going to give your president a second win.’ The Lord said, ‘he is ready for the next four years.’” After she “prophesied,” President Trump then addressed the congregation. During election years, these political visits in churches intensify. Candidates claiming to be Christians visit churches during their worship services to promote themselves, sometimes even given the pulpit.

In the year 800, on Christmas Day, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne the “Emperor of the Romans,” or the “Holy Roman Empire.” He became emperor of all northern Europe, Christendom as historians call it. Charlemagne wanted the state and the church to be allies in the Christianization of the empire. He wrote to the Pope, “Our task [as secular ruler] is externally, with God's help, to defend with our arms the holy Church of Christ against attacks by the heathen from any side and against devastation by the infidels and, internally, to strengthen the Church by the recognition of the Catholic faith.” Therefore, he not directed the empire’s civil affairs, but was also the lord of the church. He appointed and deposed clergy, revised the Bible, changed the liturgy, and set rules for monks. As the de facto head of state and of the church, Charles became the model for all of the medieval age. Kings and their nobles on one side, and popes and the churches on the other, quarreled and even fought violently for control of each other’s domain. Rulers claimed control over the church, and the church claimed lordship over kingdoms.

This was the same situation when Guido de Brés wrote the Belgic Confession of Faith in 1561. King Philip II had control over the church in the Low Countries, and the Spanish Inquisition executed many Protestant Reformers, including de Brés in 1567. This is what we will study today. What does Scripture say about the relationship between the church and the civil government?

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession summarizes three teachings of the Scriptures regarding the civil government. Last Sunday, we learned that God himself ordained the civil government. Today, we will look at the second teaching concerning the relationship between the church and the civil government. Next Sunday, we will meditate on the third and last teaching about the Christian’s response and duty towards the civil government.

So our theme today is **The Church and the Civil Government**, under three headings: first, **The Civil Government Must Remove All Obstacles Against the Gospel**; second, **The Civil Government Must Not Have Absolute Authority**; and third, **The Church Must Preach the Gospel Even Under an Anti-Christian Civil Government**.

The Civil Government Must Remove All Obstacles Against the Gospel

Last Sunday, we learned from our text in Romans 13 that God established the civil government so that they would ensure peace and order in the nation that they rule. They are to punish evildoers and reward good, law-abiding citizens. When Paul wrote this letter, he was under the authority of Nero, one of the most evil, brutal Roman emperors. Yet, he and the other apostles instructed believers then to submit to the civil authorities, no matter how evil they were.

Guido de Brés was under the same situation. He was under the authority of King Philip II, the evil ruler of Spain who, together with the Pope and the Spanish Inquisition, persecuted and martyred thousands of Protestant Reformers. Yet, in writing Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, affirmed the Scriptures' command to all Christians to "be subject to the government." He wanted to prove two things to the King: first, that the Reformers' faith was the ancient, apostolic Christian faith; and second, that they were not rebels against the civil authorities, unlike the radical Anabaptists (we will discuss this latter point next Sunday).

In return for this loyalty to the Scriptures and to the King, de Brés wrote, "the civil rulers have the task, subject to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship." This is so "the kingdom of God may make progress."

If you go to the footnote on this Article, we read the original wording by de Brés of the civil government's task, "with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist." This seems to be a harsh statement encouraging the civil authorities to act against all non-Christian religions. Was de Brés encouraging the King to persecute others as they were persecuting him and other Protestant Reformers? No, what he was saying was that the civil authorities must remove every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to the worship service. If this was done, it would promote true worship and discourage idolatry and false worship. Obviously, all idolatry and false worship will not be completely destroyed even if the true gospel was preached. We have seen this all throughout Biblical history. Satan will always put obstacles before the preaching of the gospel using evil rulers. Therefore, in writing this Article, de Brés wanted the civil authorities to protect the church and Christians from unlawful persecution.

But the opposite is what many liberal and socialist politicians, celebrities, sports people, mainstream news media, and social media are doing. They are blatantly anti-Christian. They curse the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. They call all who openly proclaim their faith in Christ bigots, racists and intolerant religious fanatics. Their goal is to eliminate any vestiges of Christianity in the public square—schools, universities, public buildings, businesses, sports events and discussions. They oppose our historic freedoms of free speech, religion and assembly. The outbreak of Covid-19 gave them a great opportunity to squeeze the life out of Christian churches with their inconsistent and hypocritical restrictions of churches. They are not unlike the Pharaoh who rejected Moses' pleas to let the Israelites free so they would be able to worship God in the wilderness. Only after God punished the Egyptians with ten plagues did Pharaoh let them leave and go to Mount Sinai where God made a covenant with them as they worshiped him.

The hatred of Christians is openly promoted. A few days ago, there was an article about an NBA coach who took his team to the playoffs two out of his three seasons before he was fired in 2014. For such a good coach, no other team has hired him since then—six years now. Why? The team’s executives announced several reasons why he was fired. But the article’s bottom line is that he was fired, and no NBA team want to hire him because he is a Christian. As a coach, he practiced his Christianity in and out of games and the locker room. When a player came out and announced that he was gay, this coach said, “Not in my locker room.” Can you imagine the hatred and the ridicule he suffered after that? He has no chance to be a coach again in a league that has actually become the BLMBA, glorifying an anti-Christian, Marxist and terrorist organization.

The civil government must remove all obstacles against the church’s preaching and worship.

The Civil Government Must Not Have Absolute Authority

These last seven months, the authorities have imposed severe restrictions on church services because of the pandemic. Churches can only meet virtually. Some of the restrictions have been lifted, even completely in some places. But in many places in California, the restrictions are still in place with no end in sight. The authorities have said churches, schools and businesses can fully open only when the pandemic is “under control.” But who determines when it is “under control”? It is the political authorities, not physicians and scientists. In addition, the policies are very inconsistent, hypocritical and anti-Christian. Churches are restricted, but casinos and marijuana stores are not. In addition, thousands of people can gather to protest and even riot and loot without masks and social distancing.

From these events, we see that our civil authorities can wield absolute power against its citizens, especially against the church. The Bible speaks against totalitarianism. Even in the Old Testament, Israel had representation. They had seventy elders teaching God’s law and judging cases publicly by the city gates. In the New Testament, the 70 elders of Israel formed the ruling council. The 11 apostles chose Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot. When the controversy over circumcision of Gentile converts, the apostles called all the pastors in the Roman empire to meet in a council in Jerusalem to decide the matter. All throughout human history, there is representation in the civil government. Why is this universal? Because God put it into human hearts and minds.

This is why Article 36 says, civil rulers must “completely refrain from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority.” During the medieval age, kings and Popes wielded absolute authority without restraints. They had advisers, but the ultimate power and judgment rested on one person. In 1857, British politician Lord Acton wrote, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

This is the reason why most of the kings of Israel were evil. They had absolute power and it corrupted their sinful hearts more and more. The most common refrain to describe these evil kings was, “And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” After David and Solomon, there

were only five out of 38 kings who were righteous. All the rest were wicked because absolute power corrupted their hearts.

One other warning that Article 36 tells us about civil government is this: While ruling, they must “function in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them.” Their sphere of authority is the civil affairs of the nation, not the spiritual affairs. Ruling on spiritual matters belong to the church. They are not to meddle in the affairs of the church, unless the church violates the nation’s laws. However, in many recent cases, the government has dipped their dirty fingers into spiritual matters. They have taken churches, Christian bakeries, photographers and even a county clerk to court when these believers disobeyed their order to serve the homosexual community. This is against their Christian conscience. Civil rulers must not bind the conscience of its citizens with laws that restrict their God-given rights. Our nation must learn the lesson of failed totalitarian Communist governments of the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and Venezuela, including the totalitarian Islamic government of Iran.

The means entrusted to them is punishing evildoers and rewarding the good (Rom 13). This is why we have civil courts of law to judge whether the accused is guilty or not guilty. The judge does not have absolute authority to decide the verdict. Twelve jurors are given that responsibility. When civil authorities do what is right in God’s sight, the nation is rewarded with peace, contentment, economic prosperity, righteousness and justice. When kings are evil, they influence the people to be evil, as in the case of the evil kings of Israel “*who made Israel to sin*” (1 Kgs 22:52). And this is what we see in our culture today. Our nation is divided almost exactly in half: half agrees with the anti-Christian culture, half disagrees. But God has also given the civil rulers the power of the sword (Rom13). This can only refer to the death penalty for capital crimes.

First, the civil government must remove all obstacles against the church’s preaching and worship. Second, it must not have absolute authority and function only in the sphere and means given to them by God.

The Church Must Preach the Gospel Even Under an Anti-Christian Civil Government

Early in their ministry, the apostles were imprisoned and flogged by the Jewish ruling council for disobeying its order to stop preaching the gospel. They submitted to the flogging, but they did not submit to the unlawful order to stop preaching. They boldly declared, “*We must obey God rather than man*” (Acts 5:29). So, as soon as they were released, they went to the temple and continued preaching. The Apostle Paul did the same, so he was repeatedly beaten, flogged and finally beheaded.

We find this disobedience by God’s people in several examples in the Bible. In Exodus, the Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew babies as soon as they were born. They disobeyed, so Moses was saved from Pharaoh’s murderous order. When Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, ordered all people to bow down to his statue, three Hebrew men disobeyed and were thrown into the furnace. But Christ saved them from the fire. The prophet Daniel also disobeyed King Darius’ order that all should pray to him, so he was thrown into the lions. Again, God saved

him from being torn into pieces by the lions. In all these instances, believers declared their complete loyalty to God and Christ on the pain of death.

Article 36 says that the reasons why civil authorities must not place obstacles to the preaching of the gospel and divine worship are: “in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.” We must give God praise and thanksgiving that our nation has the freedoms of speech, religion and lawful assembly. There are signs that these freedoms are slowly being eroded, but in general, we still have them. Let us pray that these freedoms will not be restricted.

When the gospel of Christ is preached, salvation comes to those whom God has chosen. When true faith comes, good works follow. When good works follow, unbelievers see the light of Christ. And in turn, they too come to faith in our Lord. This is why Jesus tells us, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt 5:16). Peter also gives us the same encouragement, “*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation,*” on the day of Christ’s return (1 Pet 2:12).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are on the verge of one of the most important presidential election in our history. This election might decide whether Christians and churches will continue to be blessed by God with a civil government that places no obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to the divine worship; a nation where the civil authorities know their God-given bounds and means of authority.

Therefore, let us consider the civil government that we will choose. Let us pray for a fair and orderly election. Let us pray that there will be peace no matter who gets elected. Amen.