

CHAPTER 24 – CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Civil Government is Instituted by God

1. As the world's supreme Lord and King, God has instituted civil government and has set up civil authorities, subject to Himself, to rule over communities for His own glory and the public good. For these purposes to be achieved He has given them the powers of life and death, both for the safety and encouragement of all men of good behaviour, and for the punishment of the wicked.

Politics must be a great concern to the Christian – hence there is this chapter in the Confession. There are three truths concerning the fact that “God...has set up civil authorities”.

(a) The **position** of the civil government – “subject to Himself, to rule over communities”. Governments only have authority from God (John 19:11, Romans 13:1-2). Their authority is not just by ‘the consent of the governed’, nor just through the will of the majority, nor is it just a social compact. Christ’s words to Pilate show that this applies to individual rulers, and the Roman rulers were certainly not democratic! Our obedience to the Government is therefore because God wills it, as the “supreme Lord and King”. This in turn makes the civil government subject to God and bound to obey God’s will as it rules amongst men.

(b) The **purpose** of the civil government – “for His own glory and the public good”. Civil government glorifies God as it accomplishes God’s will in the world. That will is the “public good” – maintaining social and civil justice and peace by suppressing violence and social injustice, and praising those who socially and civilly do what is good (Romans 13:3-4, see also Psalm 82:1-4, 1 Timothy 2:2, 1 Peter 2:13-14). Government only has authority in the civil sphere; not in the religious sphere. It ought, therefore, to promote the good of the community in such things as education, morals, economic prosperity, protection of life and property, and the preservation of order.

(c) The **power** of the civil government – “the powers of life and death”. Governments have the ultimate power from God as far as the body is concerned, that of capital punishment (Genesis 9:5-6, Romans 13:4). Many governments today are ceasing to execute any criminals, but in cases of premeditated murder God commands that they be executed. This is designed to be a “terror” to the evildoer.

Christians May Be Involved in Civil Government

2. It is lawful for Christians to accept and carry out the duties of public office when called upon to do so, in which case it becomes their responsibility to maintain justice and peace in accordance with the sound laws of the kingdoms and states which they serve. New Testament teaching authorizes them to wage war when this is found to be just and necessary.

As opposed to some Christians at the time of the Reformation and after, notably the Anabaptists, the Baptists did not consider that it was to compromise Christian principles if Christians were involved in the civil government. Primarily this is so because civil government is not the tool of the devil, but the “servant of God” (Romans 13:4). At the time Paul wrote, the Roman civil government was anything but democratic! Think of Daniel, involved in the government of Nebuchadnezzar; or Joseph second only to the Pharaoh of Egypt. John the Baptist did not tell repenting soldiers to leave the employment of the government, but rather to live justly in that

employment (Luke 3:14). Because the purpose of government is for the good of those governed then Christians in government have the responsibility to “maintain justice and peace”. There is a great need for Christians not to abandon political office as if it is something evil, for it is we Christians who are “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), to preserve it from corruption.

There is the problem of Christians, especially those in positions of responsibility, and their involvement in war. The Confession states that war may be “just and necessary”, in which case it would be lawful for Christians to be involved. For example, a war of defence against an aggressor such as Germany in the Second World War. This might seem to be in conflict with Matthew 5:38-42. War is retaliation, returning evil for evil, and does not the Bible condemn this? However, we must make a distinction between what we do in our private relationships, and what those in public authority are to do. Jesus is speaking against the interpretation of the Pharisees who thought they could personally take “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. But this is the standard of judgment in the law courts (Leviticus 24:20 in context). In our private relationships we are to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). It is significant that Romans 13 follows the instructions of 12:14-21. Personally, we must not take vengeance; but it is the duty of civil government to “execute His wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4).

The Christian’s Duty to the Civil Government

3. As civil rulers are set up by God for the aforesaid purposes, Christians are to be subject to them in respect of all their lawful requirements, and that, for the Lord’s sake and for conscience’ sake, and not merely to avoid punishment. They should offer supplications and prayers for kings and all that are in authority, that under their rule they may live a ‘quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty’.

(a) **Subjection.** Romans 13:1,5, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13-14. The primary idea is to ‘put oneself under authority’, here to receive the Roman government as God-given. This is significant because the Romans ruled by conquest, were dictatorial and corrupt in government, and persecuted Christians! Christians were not to rise up and join the Jewish rebellion against Roman government. It is an oft debated question whether it is *ever* right for a Christian to be involved in rebellion – it would appear not. Subjection includes paying taxes demanded, and giving honour to those in authority (Romans 13:7, see also Acts 23:1-5). Of course, it is not the government, but Christ, who is the Lord of our conscience, and it may be necessary to refuse to obey (Daniel 3 & 6, Acts 4:19-20, 5:29). The Church is not a civil power (Catholicism), nor is the state to run the Church (state-churches). Each has its own sphere of responsibility – the government over men’s life in the world; the Church over men’s relationship with God. The reason for subjection is not only fear of the consequences but “for the Lord’s sake” = out of obedience to the Lord so that He will be honoured in our lives; and “for conscience’ sake” = because Christ is Lord of our conscience and disobedience will bring a guilty conscience.

(b) **Prayer.** 1 Timothy 2:1-4. It is a *duty* to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions”. Paul adds, “This is good, and acceptable in the sight of God...”. We should turn whatever complaints we might have into prayer, for it is the Lord’s will that we lead a “quiet and peaceable life”. Such conditions are, of course, the most favourable for the spread of the Gospel.