

The Christian and Civil Government (12th)

(We return today to our study of reviewing some of the scriptural references as listed in the confessions. This lesson discusses Isaiah 49:23, Deuteronomy 13:5-6 and Titus 3:1.)

In the previous podcast, we devoted some time to the objections and directions of the “religious right” instead of continuing our studies of the scriptural references of the confessions. It is our desire to take up again the references of the confessions to see if they in anyway affirm that Caesar (civil government) and the house of God are to be joined together in any way. So far, we have found the opposite regarding the passages previously studied. In fact, we have reviewed the strongest of the verses as found in the Holy Scriptures. Many of the remaining passages are from the Old Testament and are in reference to the theocratic kingdom of Israel where the worship of God and civil government were interwoven and connected together under the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws given to them by God through Moses. While civil governments are ordained by the Lord and clearly Christ instituted the congregational worship while here on earth, He plainly said (as mentioned in previous podcasts) that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) and there are things which belong to Caesar (civil government) and other things that belong to God, Matthew 22:21. Furthermore, since the New Testament assembly was established under the new covenant, we ought to derive the rules and functions of it from the New Testament and only used scriptural references from the Old Testament to support principles clearly expressed in the New. Therefore, we will not expand this study to exegete all of the many Old Testament passages supplied by the Protestant confessions to support their idea of the civil government being a “nursing father” to the congregation of God. However, we will look at some to see the intent and objective that Protestants believe civil government should exercise its power not only in society but also in the house of the Lord.

The first sentence of Article Three of the *Westminster Confession* reads as follows:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: 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, administered, and observed.

Several passages are referenced for this sentence and many are from the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament) regarding the discipline of the congregation. Many of these do not include civil government and simply affirm that the congregation is to discipline its erring members. One passage, however, to which I draw your attention is Isaiah 49:23, “And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with *their* face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I *am* the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.” It appears from the context that this passage is referring to the latter days of the kingdom of God whereby the Gentiles will be included in the covenant promises of Israel, and that it is inclusive of the day when “all flesh shall know” that the Lord is the Redeemer. This reminds us of Philippians 2:10 when all men shall bow and confess that our Savior is Lord of all. However, nothing is said regarding kings or civil government ruling in the congregation of the Lord. Also, we must remember that the Protestant view of “the Church of God” is defined as being “catholic or universal ... which is invisible,” and “consists of the whole number of the elect,” *Westminster Confession*, Chapter, XXV, Article One. Furthermore, “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government” of this confession continually affirm that “many congregations were one church, and that they were under one presbyterial government.” Therefore, there

is a “universal invisible church” and within this umbrella is a “church” or “presbyterial government” consisting of “many congregations.” Sadly, this is the general consensus of much of “evangelical Christianity,” or the second view, which is dispensational concept, that the “universal church” is composed of all believers from Pentecost until the return of Jesus. Whereas a study of the historical use and the common meaning of the Greek word ἐκκλησία is a congregation or assembly. This was covered in previous podcasts and, therefore, we will not take the time here to verify it again. Since the Protestant view has so influenced modern “evangelical Christianity” so much that the English word “church” is often used to signify the people of God or New Testament believers, commentators will supply the word “church” into their interpretation of passages like this in Isaiah 49:23. This is confusing because often when reading commentators or historians they will use the word “church” to refer to the people of God or to organized religion and/or to a denomination and/or to an individual congregation within the same paragraph or to Christianity in general; therefore, it is difficult to know what the author actually means by the use of the word. Equally, too often the kingdom of God and “the church” are set forth as being identical or the same thing when in reality they are two separate things. For time sake, I will simply say that I believe the congregation of the Lord is included in the kingdom of heaven, but the kingdom extends far beyond that of the house of God. Nevertheless, this too, is another subject that time will not permit us to enlarge on at this point in our study of civil government and its role in the assembly of the saints.

It is to be noted also that the Protestant confessions proclaim that the civil magistrate has the “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, administered, and observed.” Nowhere in the New Testament did Caesar (Rome), or the elders or Jewish leaders of Israel, or any other form of civil government take part in any congregation regarding how the Christians were to worship. In fact, when the Jews in Corinth took Paul to the judgment seat of Rome under the deputy Gallio, he drove them away because it was not “reason” (or logical) that he should consider “a question of words and names” of Jewish law or religion, cf. Acts 18:12-17. Besides, what may be heresy to a Baptist may not be to a Protestant or *vice versa*. The same may be said concerning “abuses in worship,” “congregational discipline,” “blasphemies,” or “the ordinances of God.” The civil government is never authorized give judgment on to such practices in the New Testament. Likewise, there was not any denominational hierarchy within the New Testament that dictated to any congregation, or a group of congregations, as to how to perform religious worship or set orthodox standards for any congregation. The congregation of God is the only ecclesiastical authority in the New Testament outside of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In connection with this, the *Westminster Confession* referenced Deuteronomy 13:5-6. To better understand these two verses, it would be better to consider them in the context of verses one through eleven. The passage plainly declared that a prophet or a dreamer of dreams (even if it included a family member) sought to lead the Israelites away from worshiping and serving the Lord as affirmed by the Scriptures he was to be stoned to death. This punishment was to be administered by not only the one(s) who brought the charge but by all the people, Deuteronomy 13:9. It was not a punishment inflicted by the rulers or judges at the gate nor by the Levites or priests of God, it was by the people of the congregation. As for false prophets or teachers or ministers in the assembly of the saints today, we are instructed to “mark them” and “avoid them,” (Romans 16:17-18), “withdraw” from them and “have no company with” them, (II Thessalonians 3:6, 14), or other such like actions. We are never told by God in His Word to call for civil government to come in and rule over the congregation of the Lord or administer judgment on it or any of its members or officers. As we pointed out in a previous podcast, Paul rebuked the congregation at Corinth for going to the civil government to settle differences between the members instead of the congregation judging and settling the matter among their own selves, I Corinthians 6:1-8.

Another scriptural reference not previously considered is Titus 3:1 as listed by the 2001 *Confession of Faith* for the Cumberland Presbyterians. It says, “Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work.” This verse in no way suggests that civil government is to be involved within the congregation of God. In fact, this is teaching no more than what we found in previous podcasts concerning Romans 13 and civil government.

At this time we will close our lesson for today. May the Lord bless and keep you by His grace and power.