

**A Reformed  
Semi-Monthly  
Magazine**

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# THE STANDARD BEARER

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## THE REFORMED FAITH ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT

*"... our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, has appointed kings, princes and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose He has invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the protection of them that do well. And their office is . . . to have regard unto, and watch for, the welfare of the civil state . . . Wherefore we detest . . . seditious people and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order, which God has established among men."*

*The Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 36*

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December 1, 1988

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## In This Issue . . .

This is the first of our "special issues" for the current volume year. You'll look in vain therefore for the regular rubric titles. In their place are articles dealing with the subject which appears on the cover: The Reformed Faith on Civil Government.

It seemed to us that this topic would be of quite general interest. There are, after all, with regard to civil government, questions not only of a theoretical but also a very practical nature — as practical, even, as our praying for government leaders (How should we do that?) and our own involvement in the political process. Going to the polls — is that an *obligation* for the child of God? How about women — should they vote too? And, can a Christian himself run for and serve in political office? Synodical resolutions on political issues—is that legitimate? And what about participation, on the personal level, in petition drives or in demonstrations?

Then there's the whole idea of the "separation of church and state." And, in connection with that, is it the task of the state to enforce *both* tables of the law? Is the civil magistrate required to punish those who are guilty, for example, of Sabbath desecration? Article 36 of our Belgic Confession speaks to that — also in the footnote to that article. Are we as Protestant Reformed Churches bound by the footnote? . . . or just by the article? Prof. Hanko was asked to address that matter in an essay for this issue. He did, and found that he just couldn't do justice to the topic in the space allotted. So his article will have to be continued in a later issue. He will go on to argue that, though we may be thankful that our government does *not* attempt to legislate the morality of what, *in its judgment*, is the true religion, the principle is not changed, for all that. That is, the magistrate *does* have an obligation, before God, to enforce His law — and will be called to account for his failure to do so.

At any rate, all those questions, and others besides, you will find addressed in the pages that follow. So . . . read on.

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*Meditation*  
Prof. Robert Decker

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# The Christian and Civil Government

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*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing (Romans 13:1-6).*

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*Prof. Decker is professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.*

This passage speaks of two matters: the Christian's calling toward the civil government, and the civil government's calling toward its citizens.

Let every soul be subject to the higher powers! This means precisely what it says. Every soul means every person. No one is excluded. All people must be subject to the higher powers.

Those higher powers are those who stand above or over us and who, therefore, are superior in rank to us. The reference is to the governmental authorities, or civil rulers. In the apostle's day these higher authorities were the rulers of the Roman Empire, from the Emperor down to the lowest-ranking local officials in the Roman provinces. In our day and land the higher powers are the national and state (provincial) governments, the judicial officials, and the police.

The translation "powers" is a bit unfortunate. The apostle does not mean to refer to raw or sheer power but to the authority which these officials have been granted. These officials have been given the right to govern us in the civil realm. Thus they possess the authority to rule our outward life.

These higher powers are said to be "the powers that be." These are the existing authorities at any given time in history, in whatever form, and in any given

country. The point is that Scripture does not here or in any other passage sanction a particular form of government. Nor does Scripture condemn any particular form of government. A democratic form of government (American or otherwise) is not given the stamp of approval by the Bible. Nor does Scripture condemn a monarchy or socialism or a dictatorship. As a matter of fact, "the powers that be" of the apostle's day were imperial Rome, a government about as corrupt as any in all of history! Scripture does condemn the sinful misuse or abuse of authority. Scripture also calls rulers to govern justly and obediently.

To these higher powers, the powers that be, the rulers (verse 3), we must be subject. To be subject means to arrange ourselves under, to yield ourselves under, or, more simply, to obey the civil authorities.

We are subject to the higher powers when we do not resist them. Resistance the text plainly forbids! That word "resist" is interesting. It means to "range oneself in battle against." One who resists the authorities battles against them! In other words he rebels or revolts against the authorities. This is more than disobedience; it's revolution. To resist is to attempt to overthrow the civil authorities. This the Bi-



ble plainly forbids. Revolution even against a corrupt, ungodly government such as existed in Paul's day is sinful. We may not do that! The only exception to our obedience to the rulers is when they require of us that which is contrary to the law or will of God. In that case we must say, "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Cf. Acts 4:18, 19 and Acts 5:29.) But even then we must not attempt to overthrow the government. We obey God rather than men and suffer patiently the consequences at the hand of an unjust, corrupt government.

Still more, we must not do the evil, but we must do the good. This simply means we must live in harmony with the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture and summed in His Law. We are to obey the civil government. Our calling is to obey the laws of the land.

And it's necessary that we be good, loyal, obedient citizens, "... not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake" (verse 5). In other words, we are to obey the authorities not because we fear the punishment they are authorized to inflict upon evil doers (verses 3, 4), but for God's sake. We "know with" (this is "conscience sake") God that His will is that we should obey the civil authorities.

This the inspired apostle applies very specifically in verse 6 which reads:

*For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Not resisting the government, refraining from doing evil, and doing good means we must pay our taxes. We must contribute to the support of the civil authorities so that they are able to carry out their God-given duties. Whether they misuse those tax monies or not makes no difference. Our calling is to pay them tribute.*

Why must we obey the higher powers? Because "there is no power but of God." God's is all the authority! There is no authority above God or even equal to God. God's is all the authority. Ephesians 1:19-23 makes clear that God's great, sovereign power and authority are revealed in that He raised Christ from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in heavenly places, far above all principalities and authorities and might and dominion and every name that is named.

Thus the text teaches that the powers that be are ordained of God. God ordains, sets up, puts in place the authorities. Whether the authorities acknowledge this or not, whether they know it or not, whether they strive to serve God in their positions of authority or not, they are placed there by God. And for this reason we must obey them.

This means that if we resist them we are resisting the ordinance of God! The one who takes his stand against the authorities has set himself against that which God Himself has ordained. To disobey the author-

ities is to disobey God. And the one who resists incurs damnation, the just punishment of God!

This is our calling over against the state.

But the civil authorities also have a calling over against their citizens. They are said to be God's ministers or servants. Their calling as God's servants, again whether they realize this or not, is to reward with praise those who do good and to punish those who do evil. They must govern the outward behavior of their citizens. Thus God has provided for good order and decency in society.

God has given the sword power to the civil authorities. They do not bear that sword in vain, without purpose. As God's ministers they have been given the authority to punish evildoers and reward those who do good with praise.

Let us then be subject to these higher powers. God has placed them over us for the sake of His church and cause in the world. Let us obey them since "it pleases God to govern us by their hand" (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. XXXIX). □

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## Editorially Speaking. . .

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■ We are devoting this special issue of *The Standard Bearer* to the testimony of the Reformed Faith concerning civil government. In keeping with a tradition that goes back to John Calvin's prefatory address of his *Institutes* to King Francis I of France and to John Knox's fearless witness to the kings, and especially the queens, of his day, we are sending a copy of this issue to the President of the United States,

the President-elect of the United States, the Supreme Court Justices of the United States, the United States Senators, and the Prime Minister of Canada. Extra copies have been printed and are available for \$1 per copy to those of our readers who might desire to send a copy to their Congressman or local officials. Place your order with our Business Manager.

■ We welcome all contributors to this special issue. A



special welcome is in order to the two laymen. Mr. Jon Huiskens is registrar at Hope College, Holland, MI. He is a member of the Theological School Committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Mr. Huiskens and his family are members of the PRC

of Grandville, MI, where he has served as an officebearer. Mr. James Lanting is a practicing attorney in South Holland, IL. He is a member of the Board of Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, IL and of the Board of the Protestant Reformed Christian School,

South Holland, IL. Mr. Lanting will be contributing articles on church-state and Christian school-state relationships to *The SB* periodically. He and his family are members of the PRC of South Holland, IL, where he has served as an officebearer. □ -DJE

## Editorial

# The Reformed Faith on Civil Government

No one can doubt the importance of sound, clear understanding of civil government, of the authority that civil government has over him, and of the duty he has toward civil government. Not only does Scripture make the Christian's relationship to the state part of his, or her, thankful, holy life (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:11-17), but also the broad sphere of the state's power assures that each of us comes into direct contact with civil government, or is affected by civil government, daily. The teenager who wants to drive must receive a license from the state, and thereafter submit to the state every time he gets on the highway. The preacher officiates at the wedding of a couple only if the state has authorized the marriage, and says so in the ceremony. The government of the United States requires parents to educate their children to a certain age, and stipulates the manner in which this is to be done. Farmers and businessmen have to contend with many laws regulating their operations. The working man is painfully aware

of the state every time he notices the large chunk of his wages withheld for taxes. There are also the effects of civil government upon our lives that we usually take for granted (but should not!): the protection by the police; the security from invasion because of the armed forces; and the general order in our country because of government at all levels.

It is especially urgent that Reformed Christians be clear and sound in their thinking about civil government today because of powerful movements that tempt them to adopt erroneous notions and unlawful practices in this area of their lives. Revolution is now a Christian option! Indeed (we are told), revolution is the Christian calling! In the 60s, the liberal churches joined in the civil disobedience by which the blacks forced the state to give them their civil right. At present, liberation theology approves violent revolution as the means of liberating the oppressed in Latin America and South Africa, if not as the primary means, then as a last resort. Of

late, conservative and evangelical Christians, including some of the most prominent names, not only approve civil disobedience, i.e., deliberate, strategic violation of certain laws of the land and flaunting of the authority of the state behind these laws, in order to compel the state to change laws regarded as unjust, by force; but they also proclaim this lawless behavior as obedience to the gospel and call gospel-believing Christians to participate in it as the expression of discipleship to Christ. Liberals and conservatives, modernists and evangelicals are both playing the same game, the one to deliver the downtrodden from a life of poverty and misery, the other to save the unborn from the murder of abortion. "For God's sake, rebel!"

It cannot have escaped the attention of the members of our Protestant Reformed Churches that at least three cases of appeal involving the relationship of the Reformed believer and the civil government have come to the broader assemblies in the past few years. This reminds us, if we



need reminding, that the matter of the Reformed Faith's teaching about the state is of practical importance for the life of our own churches. In 1986, Classis West upheld a consistory's discipline of a member who refused to comply with the income-tax laws of the land, thus condemning as revolutionary the tax-protest movement. Synod, 1987 decided on a case of the remarriage of a divorced person. One important element of the decision was Synod's recognition of the state's regulation of the civil and societal aspect of marriage, so that "the sinfulness of the marriage of a divorced person does not make null and void this civil aspect of the marriage, and thus all reality of the marriage, contracted under the God-given authority of the State" ("Acts of Synod," Art. 14). Last year, an appellant asked Synod to overturn a decision of Classis East that required him to submit to the ruling of a civil court granting visitation rights to the children of his divorced wife. Synod upheld Classis' decision on the ground, in part, that "the right of a biological mother to have visitation rights with her children is recognized and protected by the State (Romans 13). . ." ("Acts of Synod," 1988, Art. 29). In all three of these cases, the assemblies honored the authority of the state and called on our members to submit to this authority.

As Reformed churches, we confess that civil government has been ordained by God. Whatever particular government exists in a country has been ordained by God. Government is not "of the people"; government is of God: "There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). The officials of a government, from the chief

executive to the bureaucrat who shuffles papers, have received authority to govern you and me "from above" (John 19:11).

The state, with its myriad of officers, is the servant of God. Three times in the classic passage in the New Testament on the Christian's responsibility to the state, Romans 13:1-7, does the apostle call the state and its officers "ministers," or servants, of God. This is an honorable title, indeed! Government is not only, or even primarily, the servant of the people. As the servant of God, government must serve God. What a difference it would make, if our government would see itself as a servant, not primarily of the people, but of God. In this case, great issues would not be decided on the basis of public opinion polls, but on the basis of the will of God. Even though slightly over half of the population might favor abortion on demand, the Supreme Court would rule that abortion is murder, punishable by death, on the ground that this is the will of God, plainly revealed both in the law of nature and in the Bible.

Regardless of the state's ignorance of its servanthood, it does, in fact, serve God. The service it renders is the keeping of some outward order in society by the punishment of criminals and the protection of those who do well (I Pet. 2:14). The state's task is the administration of external, earthly justice in a nation; and every state carries this task out, however imperfectly, even the most corrupt of them.

This is no small benefit to the church and to the Christian. Outward order in a land is a precious gift of God to us. Take away the magistrates, and, as Calvin said, "we all must live like rats in the straw." The worst government is much to be preferred to anarchy.

God's purpose with civil government is that, by the outward restraint of the dissoluteness of men, the church can exist and carry out her task of preaching the spiritual, inner righteousness of the gospel, thus extending the Kingdom of God. Likewise, the people of God can live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty, i.e., Kingdom-lives (I Tim. 2:2).

God has two great servants in the world — the church, which serves Him freely by grace, and the state, which serves Him for the most part (there are a few Christians in government, here and there) by dint of God's sovereign might of providence, even as Cyrus in the Old Testament.

Reformed Christians ought to honor God's servant, the state. They may not view it as devilish. They should not dismiss government as "dirty politics." No God-fearing young person may ever call the policeman, "pig."

We may use the state, in the functions God intends it to serve. The Christian may have recourse to the courts in defense of his name and property. A church may claim the protection of the authorities for the possession of their property and the peace and order of their meetings, as Article 28 of the Reformed Church Order states. A position in government is a perfectly proper profession for a Reformed Christian. Young men must register for the draft, and serve in the armed forces when called up.

Never may the child of God revolt, or "resist," as the King James Version puts it in Romans 13:1ff. The prohibition against revolution is absolute and unconditional. This is historic Calvinism. The notion, popular today, that Calvinism is a revolutionary theology is mistaken. Both Luther and Calvin unconditionally forbade revolution by the Christian.



For both, the only permissible way to bring a tyrant down was the legal resistance by the “lesser magistrates.” One of the main purposes for the writing of the Belgic Confession was to dissociate the Reformed church from the seditious anabaptists. Writ large in our Confession is the claim, “We Reformed are not revolutionaries.” The Heidelberg Catechism makes rejection of all revolutionary conduct (including rebellion of the heart!) a creedal stand, when it binds upon every Reformed person that he submit to “all in authority over me . . . and also patiently bear with their weaknesses . . .” (Lord’s Day, 39).

The importance is twofold:

1. Thus, we escape the wrathful judgment of God, indeed the damnation that He visits on all who resist His ordinance, His servant.

2. Thus, we distinguish ourselves from the world that is in revolt against the authority of God, pleasing our Sovereign by a holy life.

Perhaps by this time alone among Reformed and Presbyterian churches, the Protestant Reformed Churches are, and can be, consistent in their testimony and behavior of submission to God-ordained authority. For, at the cost of great personal

sacrifice by many working men and at the cost of numerical growth, these churches have resolutely opposed the revolt against the authority of the employer — the *violent* revolt against the authority of the employer — in the sphere of labor that is inherent in the labor union. Our talk against rebellion has not been cheap.

Unconditional submission is not the same as unconditional obedience. The state is not God. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is God. Only He commands our unconditional obedience. The state is to be obeyed except when its law demands disobedience to the will of God in Holy Scripture. Exactly because Reformed Christians obey for God’s sake, or for “conscience sake,” as Romans 13:5 puts it, they adopt a watchful, critical stance with regard to civil government. Caesar shall not have the things that are God’s.

There are ominous signs in our country. The state deifies itself, taking to itself the prerogatives of God, as is evident in the abortion-law — the state seizes sovereignty over life and death. The state becomes totalitarian, thrusting itself into every area of life, as is evident generally in the welfare state and particularly in

the state’s funding of and control over the care of little children in the day-care centers. The state intrudes into the sphere of the church, attacking what the Scottish Presbyterians called the “crown rights of King Jesus.” A court recently fined a church for exercising church discipline upon a member; a current case has the courts threatening a church’s pastoral counselling of its members; and the fear that the state may penalize churches that refuse to allow women to hold church-office or to permit practising homosexuals to be members is not far-fetched.

Even then, the church may not revolt. But neither will it obey. In the name of Christ, she says to the insubordinate servant of God, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Then, as has happened again and again in the history of the church, she suffers for Christ’s sake, not resisting.

Still, the state is God’s servant. For the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

As for the punishing of the ungodly, unjust, corrupt, and even antichristian rulers, we let the God of these gods deal with them. He has His ways of doing so. □ -DJE

## Calvin’s Concept of the State

Mr. Jon Huiskens

*Mr. Huiskens, a member of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, is registrar at Hope College, in Holland, Michigan.*

Calvin’s main treatise on civil government is found in Book IV, Chapter 20 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Since Chapter 20 constitutes the final chapter in

his *Institutes*, it is considered by many to be strategically placed — a culmination of his teaching on what it means to be Christian in this world, the consequence of



his theology. Whether this is indeed true we will leave for the Calvin scholars to argue, but what we do know is that Calvin gives prominence in his *Institutes* to this topic. For several reasons. Certainly Calvin's time in history forced him to think about the state. He witnessed the tyranny of the pope who claimed both temporal and spiritual power. He lived at a time when kings and rulers openly persecuted the followers of the reformation (consider the introduction to his *Institutes*, his letter to Francis I where he pleads the cause of the Reformed in France). He himself was educated as a lawyer. His first published work was on Seneca's *De Clementia*, a work considered to be a dissertation on political science. He *knew* law and government. And added to his experience with governments and law and the Romish Church was the turmoil created by the Anabaptists within the reformation movement. These folks seized upon their newly found liberty and declared themselves to be free of all rule and government. Calvin knew well the history of this movement. The fiasco in Munster where the Anabaptists were holed up in the city waiting for the parousia, but who in the end were defeated by the government forces, occurred as his *Institutes* were in press.

So Calvin's concern with civil government was indeed natural. But what I hope we will see is that it was more than that. Calvin saw government as both necessary and essential. Government was ordained of God to serve His purpose.

As is typical of Calvin's thought, however, one needs to have a global view of his thinking in order to arrive at an understanding of the concept he is writing about. One has to

understand, or at least have some sense of, the context of Calvin's thinking on the topic at hand. Calvin was logical and systematic in his writing. His *Institutes* especially reflect this fact. Thus, when Calvin opens Book IV of the *Institutes* with the words *Now, since we have established above that man is under a twofold government, and since we have elsewhere discussed at sufficient length the kind that reside in the soul of inner man and pertains to eternal life (Book III, Chapters 1-19A) this is the place to say something about the other kind, which pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality.*

you know that words such as *now* and *since* and *above* are going to force you into going back to get the "lay-of-the-land" with regard to Calvin's concept of the state. We need to know where this concept of civil government fits in Calvin's thinking if we are to begin to have an understanding of it.

If we take this approach, then, in working toward an understanding of what Calvin believes the state to be, an understanding of Calvin's organization of the *Institutes* will be of help here in determining that sense of logical sequence in Calvin's thinking. What will happen, in fact, is that by setting Calvin's thoughts on the state in the context of his *Institutes*, his beliefs concerning the state will naturally unfold. (Ford Lewis Battles' *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion* is very helpful here since it gives the *Institutes* in outline form.) The organization of the *Institutes* proceeds as follows: Books I and II give the dogmatic loci of theology and christology, Book III is soteriology, and Book IV ecclesiology. Calvin moves in Books I-III from God and Christ and salvation — that which makes God and Christ internal — to Book IV which title begins with "The External Means . . ."

And, to Calvin, these means are the two kinds of government referred to above, the government of the church through its offices and the government of the individual and society through the magistrate and civil government, both of which according to the rest of Calvin's title for Book IV are "Means and Aids By Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Jesus Christ and Holds Us Therein."

Thus it can be argued, as many do, that Calvin's final chapter of the *Institutes*, Chapter 20 on civil government, is in a real sense a necessary consequence of all that went before. Given all the theologizing that went before, Calvin now sees to it that these truths will be maintained in the church and in society. All these truths of God and Jesus Christ are to be upheld and regulated by the two kinds of government mentioned above: 1) church government which deals with the things of the inner man and 2) civil government, the necessary corollary, which concerns the outward deportment of men.

Further, Calvin is at pains to point out that these two kinds of government are not at variance; they are not antithetical, but complementary. This idea is important here if we are to understand Calvin's concept of the state. For these governments both point to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over man's life — both his inner and outer man are to recognize and believe and live in that consciousness.

In order to get hold of this idea, one needs to recognize at the outset that overreaching all of Calvin's consideration of civil government is not first of all whether Calvin proposes a republic or a monarchy as the best kind of government, or even whether the Christian is obligated to obey the government (that will



all naturally follow), but his belief in the authority of the Word of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all of life. Some make a crucial mistake and insist that Calvin be made the father of modern democracy (cf., for example, Boettner), and they make that the central teaching of Calvin on the state. It certainly can be argued that Calvin preferred democracy (he despised most kings, it seems), but it would be a mistake if this is what we get out of Calvin's teaching on the state. Calvin was indeed concerned with the types of government, and his preference was for a republican form of government; but the point of Calvin is that "who governs" is not the *sine qua non* for right and legitimate government, but *how* one governs and *what* one does as ruler is central. Wilhelm Niesel, in his book *The Theology of Calvin*, puts it correctly when he states that

*Calvin regards the state as fulfilling its appointed role in the service of Christ's dominion. When he speaks of secular government, he is not concerned about the state as such, nor even about the Christian state; but about Christ and about the significance which the civil power has for our life in fellowship with this Lord.*

Niesel (*op. cit.*), again, correctly analyzes Calvin's thought when he writes:

*In the fourth book of the Institutes Calvin treated of the Church, the Word, and the Sacraments, and he now proposes to show that among these "outward aids or instruments by which God calls us to and maintains us in communion with Christ", the secular government also belongs. The latter is not the same things as the spiritual reign of Christ; but neither does it function merely in juxtaposition with it, but it exists for the good of those who in this perishable world belong to Christ*

*and His eternal kingdom. There can be no decisive separation between state and church because the state has the same Lord as the church. Christ as the Head of His church is also precisely the Lord of this world. The fundamental section containing those reflections which Calvin devotes to the subject of civil government in his Institutes received therefore in the first edition the title: "The civil order is necessary for the well-being of the church."*

Calvin sets forth this basic idea already in the introduction to his *Institutes*, his "Letter to Francis I," when he asserts that all rulers rule rightly if they acknowledge themselves to be "the ministers of God." Those who rule according to the Word of God rule rightly. As Niesel observes, "Calvin teaches that when the glory of God is not the end of government, there is no legitimate sovereignty, but usurpation."

Calvin further solidifies this idea of government being the minister of God when he argues that civil government has its origin in God, and its institution is by God. It is not something which has been derived by a society's sense of the need for governance, as secular anthropologists would have us believe; but government, rightly conceived, is that which recognizes that its right to rule is given by God. Says Calvin (*Institutes*, IV, 4): *It has not come about by human perversity that the authority over all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers, but by divine providence and holy ordinances. For God was pleased so to rule the affairs of men, inasmuch as he is present with them and also presides over the making of laws and exercising of equity in courts of justice.*

Calvin believes with Paul in Romans 13:1 that power is an ordinance of God and that there are no powers except those ordained by God.

Good government, then, according to Calvin, will recognize

where its authority comes from, will rule according to the Word of God, will recognize itself as God's servant doing God's will in ruling over the matters of men and society.

But we must see, further, that church and state, although distinguished by Calvin, are necessarily connected. The church gives instruction to the state as to what it must be and how it must behave; the state must see to it that the church is preserved in order that the pure gospel may be preached.

This idea becomes even clearer when Calvin speaks of the tasks of the state. Says Calvin (*Institutes*, IV, 20, 2):

*... Civil government has as its appointed end . . . to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.*

This is not to say, however, that civil government does not have a secular duty. It does. But this duty is subordinate (*Institutes*, IV, 20, 3).

*Its function among men is no less than that of bread, water, sun, and air; . . . indeed its place of honor is far more excellent. For it does not merely see to it . . . that men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm, even though it surely embraces all these activities . . . but it also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truths and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among themselves; that honesty and modesty may be preserved among men. In short, it provides that a public institution of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.*



The task of government, then, has two aspects. Niesel (*op. cit.*) sums it when he says that "Peace in a country is threatened when God is not worshipped and His commands are not heeded, and the public worship of God is imperilled when strife prevails among men." It is the task of the state to see to both tables of the law. The state is obligated to protect the pure preaching of the word lest "idolatry, sacrilege . . . blasphemies," arise. And further, government must create an environment where the church can

prosper. "They (magistrates) are ordained protectors and vindicators and public innocence, decency, and tranquillity, and that their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all" (*Institutes*, IV, 20, 9).

But Calvin warns about intermingling church and state. Conscience (Book III, 19) is man's connection with God and His law and is the preview of the church. Conscience belongs to the inner man. No human law may bind that conscience. The state, as em-

phasized above, governs the outer man. Maintain that distinction, argues Calvin, and there will be no problems between church and state.

Such is Calvin's concept of the state. Much can yet be written (and has) about Calvin's idea of war and taxes and revolution. But that all follows from his idea of the state. I refer you to Book IV, Chapter 20 of the *Institutes* if you are inclined to pursue these topics — it's all there. □

Rev. Ronald Cammenga

## Caesar's Calling

The citizen has a duty toward the state. The Scriptures are clear that we have this duty and what the nature of this duty is. Equally clear is the teaching of Scripture that the state (Caesar, if you will) has a duty toward the citizenry.

The church has a calling here. As much as the church must preach the will of God with respect to the obedience owed the state by the citizens, the church must make plain the will of God for government. What tasks does God give to government? What calling does the government have towards those who are its subjects? When does government overstep its calling?

The Scriptures have some things to say about these questions, some basic things to say about the calling of civil government. The teaching of Scripture on this score comes out especially in the two classic passages in the New Testament that deal with the relationship between the Christian and the state (Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13-16).

### THE BASIS FOR CAESAR'S CALLING

Of fundamental importance in understanding the calling of civil government is the proper view of government itself. What government is, has everything to do with what duties government is called to perform.

The Scriptures are not uncertain on this point. Government is an institution of God. Government has been established by God. In Romans 13:1 the apostle

says that ". . . the powers that be are ordained of God." In I Peter 2:14 we are told that government officials are sent by God.

Because government has been established by God, twice the Apostle in Romans 13 refers to the officials of government as "ministers of God." The word "ministers" is just the word "servants." Government officials (like all who hold office from God) are servants of God. Since God has instituted government, government officials are responsible to God. Since government has the basis of its existence in God, government is called to exist for God. This applies whether the officials of government are elected by a majority vote of the people or receive their position by heredity.

It ought to be obvious how important a proper understanding

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of the basis of government is to a proper understanding of government's calling. If, for example, the view that one has of the basis of government is that government is derived, not from God, but from the consent of the governed, that view is going to have a rather drastic effect on what one conceives the calling of government to be. Then, quite obviously, the calling of government is to uphold not first of all the law of God in the public life of the nation, but the will of the majority of the people. Then the controlling question is not what does the Word of God say on a certain issue, but what are the results of the latest poll.

Nor is the particular form of government of any significant consequence. Nowhere does the Bible prescribe one legitimate form of civil government, for example democracy, so that only those who are officials in a democratic government need be regarded by the Christian as servants of God. In the Old Testament, God ruled His people through a monarchy. At the time of the New Testament, the world was being ruled by a dictator, the Caesar in Rome. It makes no essential difference, whether monarchy, or oligarchy, or democracy, the officials of government are sent by God, and as such function as the servants of God. "The powers *that be* (whatever they may be) are ordained by God" (Rom. 13:1).

#### A LIMITED CALLING

Since government is derived from God, God and God's Word prescribe the proper role of government. That role is defined in Romans 13:3, 4: "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that

which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." The Apostle Peter expresses basically the same thing in 1 Peter 2:14 where he teaches that the officials of government are sent by God "... for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well."

The church must proclaim today, amidst all the confusion about what the government must do, what the proper calling of government is. For the most part, churches are not doing that. Instead of calling government to its God-assigned task, the synods and assemblies pass silly resolutions concerning nuclear warfare, concerning civil rights, and concerning our nation's foreign policy. Rather than to call government to its duty, the churches become involved in the work of the government. Church leaders dabble in politics and stick their ecclesiastical noses where they do not belong. The church makes a serious mistake here. The government does not benefit, and the church and the work of the church suffer.

The calling that God assigns to government is the punishment of evildoers and the praise of them that do well. The calling of government is to uphold the law of God in the sphere of the public life of the nation. The government must concern itself with the DOING of the law of God, that is, outward obedience to the law of God on the part of the citizens. It must protect and praise (reward) the well-doer. And it must punish the evildoer. It must protect the well-doer BY punishing the evildoer.

From this it is plain that government has a LIMITED calling. God does not give government authority over everything. Government has a

limited sphere of authority. It has a calling as regards the well-doing and evil-doing of its citizens — no more, no less.

That is why totalitarian governments are evil. Communist governments are evil because they usurp authority over everything. They set the government itself up as God, as the absolute authority for every area of life. And then, quite naturally, they refuse the citizens the right to worship God.

Our government, too, is moving in this direction. It is a matter of serious concern that, more and more, our government refuses to recognize the limited area over which God gives it the right to rule. This is the wrong in such a thing as our government's involvement in social welfare programs. God does not give the government the duty to support me. Nowhere in Scripture does He give the government that duty. I am called to support myself. And then if there is a legitimate reason why I am unable to do this, if there is mercy that needs to be shown, that is the duty of the church through the office of the deaconate.

That is also the wrong in the government's present involvement in education. Now I believe that the government has a legitimate interest in education. The government has the right to insist on it that children receive an education, an academically sound education. The welfare of the state itself is involved here. But the government does not have the right actually to do the educating of children, nor the right to dictate what is and what is not to be the content of our children's education. Government is disobedient to God when it involves itself in areas where God has not given it authority. The calling of government is a limited calling.



### *A CALLING TO BEAR THE SWORD*

An important aspect of the calling of civil government is its calling to punish evildoers. This is often referred to as the sword-power. In Romans 13:4 the Apostle says that the government "beareth not the sword in vain." He goes on to refer to the government as "a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." The Apostle Paul says that government officials are sent "for the punishment of evildoers" (I Peter 2:14).

Especially has God given the government the calling to punish serious offenders of His law by taking away their life. A sword, after all, is an instrument of death. God, in other words, has given the government the duty to exercise capital punishment. To put it in today's language, God has given the government the electric chair, the gas chamber, the hangman's noose, or the firing squad, in order to punish evildoers, and by that very fact protect well-doers.

How our government is disobedient to this plain word of God!

How our government refuses to carry out its God-given calling

when it neglects to punish the evildoer. That is obvious in the whole attempt of the government to reform and rehabilitate criminals today. Our government spends millions of tax dollars on this endeavor annually. Nowhere does God give government the calling to reform or rehabilitate evildoers. The calling God gives to the government is to PUNISH evildoers. the government's refusal to do this today is judged by God in the lawlessness that prevails in our country.

Not only is our government remiss in its duty to punish the evildoer, it fails also in its calling to praise and reward the well-doer. In many cases, in fact, it is the well-doer who is being punished. Think once of the millions of abortions performed in our country, a thing sanctioned by the government and, in some instances, even paid for by government tax dollars. In this matter the government is responsible for taking up the sword against those who are not evildoers. Or think of the government's ominous encroachment in recent years on the Christian school movement, and its mistreatment of and penalties against certain well-doers in this area. Admittedly, the future looks dark.

In order that government may carry out its God-given task, God has given government the right of taxation. Now a government must not abuse its right of taxation in order to fund all sorts of activities that the government ought not be involved in, as our government certainly does. But government does have the right from God to tax its citizens. Part of the submission of the Christian to the government is that he is faithful in paying his levied taxes. The Apostle exhorts us in Romans 13:6, 7: "For for this cause pay ye tribute also . . . . Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom . . . ." The Christian takes seriously the admonition of the Lord, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's . . ." (Matthew 22:21).

This is the task of government, the calling of Caesar. For the carrying out of this calling he will be held accountable before God, now and in the day of the judgment. Woe to that servant of God, that government official, who is not able to give good account of the charge that was entrusted to him! □

*Rev. James Slopsema*

## **Our Duty to the State**

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The Scriptures teach that every citizen has various obligations to the civil government under which he finds himself. Our Re-

formed fathers understood these duties and set them forth very beautifully in the confessions of the church. The duties of the



citizens to the state are summarized, for example, in the Belgic Confession, Article 36.

*Moreover it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition soever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*

We find something similar in the Westminster Confession,

*It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute and other dues, to obey their lawful command, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience sake. Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrate's just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to him . . . .*

It is the duty of every citizen, first of all, to honor the civil magistrate.

By the civil magistrate is meant all government officials. This includes all those who make the laws, judge the laws, and enforce the laws in all levels of government, whether the national, state (provincial), or local level. This includes everyone from the President (Prime Minister) down to the local policeman.

Our duty as citizens is to honor these officials. Speaking of rulers, the Scriptures in Romans 13:7 teach us, "Render therefore to all their dues . . . fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor." In 1 Peter 2:17 we are instructed, "Honor all men . . . honor the king." This means we are to hold the civil magistrate in high esteem. We are to show this honor to the magistrate when we deal with him as well as when we speak of him to others.

We certainly need to be reminded of this duty in our day.

Government officials are generally held in very low esteem. They are made the butt of endless jokes; they are harshly criticized; often they are held in open contempt. It is true that much of this is occasioned by the ineptness and greed of the magistrate himself. Nevertheless, the Scriptures instruct us to honor the magistrate even then. The kings and rulers which the apostolic church was commanded to honor were just as inept and greedy as the magistrate of our day.

We are commanded to honor the magistrate for especially two reasons. First, we must bear in mind that the powers that be are ordained of God (cf. Romans 13:1). This means that God has ordained civil government and has given to every magistrate his place of rule and authority. God has done so because it is His good pleasure to rule and regulate our lives through the magistrate. This was true even of the corrupt magistrates in the days of the apostles. The magistrate occupies a high office. And for that reason he must be honored.

Secondly, we must remember that the magistrate is the minister or servant of God to the church for good (cf. Romans 13:4). This was true even of the wicked magistrates in the days of the apostles. The magistrate is the servant of God in that God uses the rule of the magistrate to preserve good order in society so that the church may be gathered and survive on the earth. Also for that reason we are to honor the magistrate.

In harmony with all this it is also the duty of every citizen to submit himself to the rule of the state. In Romans 13:1 we are taught, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." The higher powers here refer to the powers of the civil government. In 1 Peter 2:13 & 14 we read,

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers." Finally, there is the instruction of Paul to Titus (Titus 3:1), "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates . . . ."

Submission or subjection to the civil magistrate means that we place ourselves under their rule and authority. This submission implies, first, that we obey the magistrate. After instructing Titus in Titus 3:1 to remind the saints to be subject to principalities and powers, he adds, "to obey magistrates." This means that we must do our best to comply with the rules and regulations the magistrate establishes for the regulation of our lives as citizens in the state. This includes the traffic laws, the safety regulations, and other laws we tend to ignore so easily. We must obey the magistrate even when he misuses his office for personal gain or when we fail to see the wisdom of the laws he establishes. The only time we may refuse obedience to the magistrate is when he requires that we disobey God. Then we are taught to obey God rather than men (cf. Acts 4:19). But even then, we may not be rebellious, seeking the overthrow of government. Even when for conscience sake we can not obey the magistrate, we must still be submissive.

The duty of submission to the magistrate also implies that we pay our taxes. In Romans 13:6 & 7 we are instructed, "For this cause pay ye tribute also . . . . Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom . . . ."

For the maintenance of civil government the magistrate has the right to tax



the citizenry. Jesus went even so far as to say that the tribute levied by the magistrate belongs to the magistrate. Referring to the paying of taxes, Jesus taught, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars" (cf. Luke 20:25). Payment of taxes is really implied under obedience to the magistrate. But the Scriptures emphasize this duty especially because it is one of the hardest duties to perform. The taxes the government exacts of us take hard-earned money directly out of our pocket. In some cases these taxes have taken food off the table and clothes from the back. In addition to that, consider how foolishly these tax revenues are spent. Often the taxes the citizens find so difficult to pay are squandered by a few in high places through extravagant living. That was the case no less in the days of the apostles than it is now. Nonetheless, the instruction of God through the apostles was, "... pay ye tribute also" (Romans 13:6).

As we consider these duties towards the state we ought to be reminded of what we are taught in Romans 13:5: "Wherefore, ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." This means that we must not subject ourselves to the magistrate for fear of his wrath and punishment upon disobedience. We must submit to the magistrate rather because this is the will of God and pleasing to Him.

In light of all that we have said, it ought to be very clear that it is also our duty to promote the welfare of the magistrate and the civil government. This follows from the fact that civil government has been ordained by God and that every

magistrate has been given his place of rule by God for the sake of the church. Through the rule of the magistrate God provides for the decency and good order in society necessary for the church to be gathered and survive. Hence, by promoting the welfare of the magistrate and civil government we are promoting the welfare of the church.

We promote the welfare of civil government by praying for the magistrate. The Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy (1 Timothy 2:1 & 2), "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." This instruction is given to the church for her public worship but also applies to the prayers we utter as families and individuals in our homes. We must pray for those in authority. We must pray that God will lead the magistrate to rule in harmony with His Word, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. As the following verses make clear, this also implies that we pray for the salvation of those in authority.

We promote the welfare of civil government also by assisting the magistrate as much as possible in ruling according to the will and Word of God. According to Romans 13:3 & 4, the calling of the magistrate is to praise that which is good and to execute wrath upon him that does evil. In this way civil government serves the cause of the church. But this requires that the magistrate rule according to the law of God. What God forbids, he must forbid. What God requires, he must require. To be very specific, it is the duty of the magistrate to forbid and punish profanity, murder by abortion, the destruction of

marriage and the home through adultery and unbiblical divorce, and many other abuses to which natural man tends. It is the duty of every citizen to encourage the magistrate so to rule and to admonish him (always showing respect) should he fail. This can be done face to face, through letters, and (in a democracy) through voting. What a golden opportunity we have to promote the welfare of civil government when we are given a voice in government through voting. This is something we should not neglect.

Finally, God calls some to serve as magistrates in civil government. Some are of the opinion that due to the corruption found in government the child of God may not serve as a magistrate nor be involved in the political process. This opinion conflicts, however, with the truths that government has been ordained of God and that the magistrate is the minister of God. Certainly we must not abandon this high office to the unbeliever. In addition, we have the examples of Joseph and Daniel, who served in high places in two of the most godless governments of history. In harmony with this the Westminster Confession teaches (Chapter XXIII, Section II),

*It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of magistrate, when called thereunto; in the management whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth . . . .*

Should God call us to execute the office of the magistrate by opening the way for us to do so, then our duty is to accept this responsibility and serve as the minister of God. □



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# Our Obligation to Vote

Rev. Meindert Joostens

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In keeping with the topic of this special issue, it falls to me to say a few words concerning the practical aspect of the political process as it affects each of us. When the issues have been debated at length, we have the opportunity to step behind the curtain and cast our vote. What is the calling and responsibility of the child of God here? Should we consider this a Christian duty? For whom must we cast our ballot? Or, would it be better for the child of God to withdraw himself altogether from the political process?

Christians, in the nature of the case, hold a dual citizenship. We are, first of all and primarily, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. This citizenship is not by birth; but by being reborn from above we belong to the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. By virtue of this heavenly citizenship we have become pilgrims and strangers in the earth. We are the spiritual children of father Abraham who looked for the city with foundations whose Builder

and Maker is God. Yet, at the same time, we are born into a citizenship in the land of our earthly sojourn. The two are not par. They are not on the same level. They may, and often do, conflict! When this happens we are under the clear Scriptural injunction that we must seek first the Kingdom of God! Our place here below, in whatever country or under whatever regime God has placed us, must be in total subservience to our heavenly citizenship.

There are certain principles, discussed in the other articles of this special issue, that we must clearly understand in order properly to function in our dual citizenship. Government is ordained of God. All authority is derivative. The risen Lord, who is the Head and King of His church, exercises the counsel of God through the human agency of government. The hearts of the kings of the earth are in His hand and He turns them at will as a river of water. God is sovereign in the bringing into power and disposition of government. In the second place, Peter instructs us that it is our calling to submit to this ordinance of God as His servants. In as far as possible we must obey for God's sake. We submit to government until it requires a disobedience to the laws and precepts of the Kingdom of Heaven. We must obey the earth-

ly, ordained government as long as we do not have to deny the Lordship of Christ. When the two conflict, we humbly "obey Christ rather than men." Thirdly, we must understand that the purpose of God in the ordination of earthly rulers is that they be His ministers to us for good and an avenger for wrath to evildoers. Walking in all good works, the Christian need not fear the sword of the magistrate but expect his praise. We leave much unsaid about these principles as it does not directly find application to the issue at hand.

The exercise of government is politics. In that political process we become involved at the voting booth. We set aside a broader discussion of various other involvements in the political system in order to keep our focus on voting clear.

There are a couple of errors we must avoid. We may be tempted to take the anabaptist approach on non-involvement in the political process. This is the practice of a political asceticism whereby we hide ourselves behind the walls of total political inactivity, or, worse, take a stand of fatalism and say to ourselves, "These things are in the Lord's hands and He will take care of it." If there is still a small pang of being guilty of neglect, we say to ourselves, "One vote won't make a difference anyway." Whatever

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we may say (pro or con) regarding the political process we call a democracy, it is God-ordained! It is a system put in place by His hand, though gained through revolution. We have the God-given privilege and obligation to exercise the vote we have been given, whether that be on the national or municipal level. This has to do with the manner in which it has pleased God to appoint the "ordained authority." It has pleased God to do that through the popular vote. As Calvin observed long ago, it is "... an idle pastime for men . . . to dispute what would be the best kind of government in the place where they live. (But) . . . divine providence has wisely arranged that various countries should be ruled by various kinds of governments" (Instit. IV, 3).

Before we engage the question as to whom we must vote for, it may not be superfluous to say a few words regarding the question whether women should vote. Though the question has long been laid to rest politically it often lingers in the church. We understand the place of the woman in the church. But her right to vote in the political sphere is sometimes questioned. In Christ there is neither male nor female, bond nor free, but all are equal as believers. Men and women share equally in the benefits of Christ's atonement. They have both been anointed in the office of all believers as prophets, priests, and kings under Him. They both have the calling to exercise themselves in that threefold office. Both have the right and obligation to exercise their civic responsibility to cast their ballot. God's will that the woman keep silent in the government and teaching of the church must not be confused with her civic responsibility, whether married or single.

Having the right and obligation to cast our ballot, the matter of choice confronts us. What criteria must we use to determine the candidate for whom we will mark our ballot? Often we find ourselves upon the horns of a dilemma. We seldom wholly approve of either candidate. We are never entirely happy with the slate that is placed before us. We sometimes feel as if our choice is simply a matter of seeking the lesser of two evils! We must remember that we are dealing with the selection of a man to be placed in a God-given office of authority. The responsibility of that office is clearly set forth in the Scripture. Government is ordained of God. He is a minister of God to us for good, but he does not bear the sword in vain. He is, as well, an avenger of God to execute wrath upon evildoers. That is the guiding principle. These are the matters which control the casting of our ballot.

Understand a moment that we are not engaging in a lofty idealism of the insidious post-mil variety. It is not our vision that the kingdoms of this world shall evolve into the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know much better than that. The scheme of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation is clearly

before our minds. We live in the latter days. More and more that Man of Wickedness becomes revealed. We see fearful indications of the possibility of a unified antichristian world. The fearful reality of the number of the Beast seems close at times! The Lord will guide history according to His purpose! We may not help the propagation of the wickedness that will bring the terrible things of the end of the ages along. We may not vote for a candidate who stands on a platform that is patently antichristian. We must be careful to compare and evaluate the candidates and select from among them those who most nearly represent the God-ordained purpose in government. There are usually a host of issues, such as crime and abortion, that plainly illustrate the convictions of the candidates. It is our desire for the church of Christ to live as long as possible in peace, quiet, and tranquility in the midst of the world, for that is for the advancement of God's covenant and church and gives to us opportunity to minister in the cause of His Kingdom, raise our families, and proclaim the Gospel to the hastening of the anticipated day of Christ's coming. □

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*Take the time to read and study the Standard Bearer. It is an excellent source of devotional reading material for your daily use.*



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# The Duty of the Church in Respect to the State in Preaching, Praying, and Positions

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Rev. Dale H. Kuiper

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The church of Jesus Christ, as she honors her Head as the Lord of lords and King of kings, is very conscious of the fact that she lives and witnesses in the midst of a world which contains governments of many different kinds and at many levels. Her attitude towards the magistracy in her official labors, as well as in the life of her members, is very definitely set forth in Holy Scripture; it is set forth as binding and for all time. Since this is part of God's Word, it becomes part of the preaching; as part of the preaching, it belongs to the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Rather than adopting an attitude of superiority on the part of believers towards the magistracy, or encouraging ignorance in them regarding the purpose, source, and function of civil government, or engendering disobedience against the law of the land, the church in her preaching calls the people of God to submission and obedience, with understanding and joy. That the church must do this periodically in the preaching is clear from the powerful Word of

God found in such passages as Matthew 22, Romans 13, 1 Peter 2, and Titus 3. Further, this is plainly demonstrated by the examples of David, Daniel, the apostles, and Jesus Christ Himself.

The Gospel's call to submission unto the civil magistrates is a matter of thankfulness to God. For this reason those Reformed churches that still carefully preach the Heidelberg Catechism hear this call under the third part of the Catechism, "Of Thankfulness," when the fifth commandment of the Law of God is expounded and when the requirement to "show all honor, love, and fidelity to my father and mother, and all in authority over me" is set forth (Lord's Day 39). That thankfulness enters in here, rather than fear or merit, ought to be seen from two points of view. First, we testify by this submissive conduct gratitude toward God for providing Jesus Christ as the perfect Keeper of the law in our place, as the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes. In the knowledge of that, the believer, with the law as his guide, shows his love to God. But more, he finds in the keeping of the fifth commandment an opportunity to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, because he understands that the powers that be are ordained of God, and are

ordained of God to function as the means through which the exalted Christ rules! He submits always, and obeys unless for conscience sake he cannot, as unto the Lord.

The Gospel's call to submission carries with it the call to the church to be witnesses of God. When the apostle Peter exhorts us to "submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake," he does so under the heading of "an honest conversation among the Gentiles." When the unconverted see the good works of the saints, they shall under God's grace "glorify God in the day of visitation." This truth the Catechism includes in Lord's Day 32: ". . . and that, by our godly conversation, others may be gained to Christ."

Without controversy, the church preaches the Word of God as that Word of God describes civil government and calls the believer to honor that government. Thus sermons on the paying of taxes, the honoring of authority, the lawful work of government, and the end of earthly governments, are perfectly in order in the church.

What is not so clear is how the church *prays* in respect to the government God has instituted in this world in general or in a particular part of the world specifically. Here there is some

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controversy. Pastors hear from members of their flocks, from time to time, that they are not praying for the government. At a recent office-bearers conference in the West, the complaint was sounded that our ministers don't pray for government officials nearly enough. Are these well-meant criticisms justified? Scripture makes clear that prayers must be made for kings and others in eminent places *by the church*. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in I Timothy 2:1-7, part of which reads:

*"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."*

Before we face the questions, *how* are earthly rulers to be mentioned in our prayers? and, what is the *purpose* of these prayers for them? let us get two points firmly in mind. The purpose of Paul's first letter to Timothy is that he and the church may know how to behave in the house of God (3:15). Therefore the apostle is giving instruction regarding the public prayers of the people of God during the worship services; we would say, during the congregational prayer offered by the minister. So, too, the exhortations regarding the dress of women and the silence of women pertain to their behavior and their silence in the church. Secondly, the word "all" in this passage (verses 1, 4, 6) does not mean "every." The word "every" counts noses, refers to each individual in a group; it is distributive in nature. The word "all" is collective; it looks at people as groups, without saying anything about every member within the group. Unless

this is appreciated the only alternative is the Arminian notion that God wills every man to be saved and Christ gave Himself a ransom for every individual in the world. And then we are to pray for every person in the world (verse 1) without distinction. Indeed, a Reformed commentator claims, "the church must remember that she is the intercessor for the world. The world cannot pray. The church is to bring the needs of the world before the throne of God. Herein too she is the salt of the earth. The world will not last long if the salt has lost its savor. When the church is gathered for worship, she is to bring the world's needs to God's mercy seat." With this we cannot agree. See Jesus' prayer in John 17:9.

Prayer must be made for all men, that is, for all kinds or classes of men. This is borne out by Titus 2 and Galatians 3 where we read of these various classes of people: Jews and Greeks, bond and free, male and female, young and old. Paul must have noticed that in Ephesus a certain class or group of people was being neglected in the congregational prayers: the kings and princes. How surprised Timothy and the saints at Ephesus must have been to receive this instruction! Nero was the Roman emperor; the governors, proconsuls, and town clerks for the most part were decidedly against the Christian faith and were ready to do the Jews a favor. But it is wrong to exclude any class of people from our prayers.

The reason that prayers are made also for government officials is that God wills to save His elect also from this group, have them come to the knowledge of the truth, and enjoy the ransom that Christ paid for them. The church is to pray for the

salvation of kings and princes! This does not require, as a matter of fact, that a certain segment of the congregational prayers be given over to petitions on behalf of these officials, at length and by name! But they are to be included as the church prays for the salvation of the people of God, known unto Him before the foundations of the world!

There is another aspect to all this. After all, God does not will to save many from the class of the powerful, rich, and mighty (I Cor. 1:27-28). But these rulers do have a great influence upon the life of the church and the labors of the church. If there is a believing ruler over a certain domain, it certainly is easier for the believers there to live a "quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." We think of laws concerning the Sabbath, concerning the right to work, and the right to assemble. On the contrary, unbelieving magistrates, ruling according to opinion polls, taking bribes, lusting for power, can cause hardship for the church — perhaps no right of assembly, sermons to be approved by the secretary of religion, no religious programs on radio or television, no mission work allowed in the country! And since God wills to gather His church from all classes of people and from every nation of the world, prayers are to be made that Christ may so rule that the work of the preaching of the Gospel be not hindered. Finally, let us who live in lands of religious freedom, such as the United States and Canada, be sure to express thanksgiving to God for these liberties that we presently enjoy! How easily we take for granted these wonderful freedoms which many people of God do not presently enjoy and which will be taken from us before Jesus returns.



Briefly we wish to consider yet the duty of the church in respect to the actions or proposed actions of various governmental bodies — the whole matter of the church writing position papers on certain issues which are then presented to the government with the purpose of influencing legislation. Many church bodies are engaged in such activity. Synods and other assemblies of the church formulate positions on nuclear bodies, abortion, the righteousness of a certain war, pollution of the environment, admission of Red China to the UN, apartheid in South Africa, and the like. Here we must make a clear distinction between the activity of the church as an institute on the one hand, and the individual member of the church who is a citizen of a certain country on the other hand. Elsewhere in this issue the calling of the child of God toward his government and the issues that face his government will be discussed. Here we are concerned

only with the proper involvement of the church in these things. How ought the church to behave?

We find nothing in Scripture to suggest, much less demand, that the church concern herself with matters of civil legislation. The church by her very marks is busy with the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the application of Christian discipline to unrepentant sinners within her membership. The church is not called by God or directed by Scripture to discipline the world. The church is not the salt of the earth in the sense of getting out into that world to preserve it; Scripture never speaks of salt as a preservative. Salt is that which renders something savory or tasty! And the presence of the faithful church on the earth makes the entire earth tasty unto God! Let the church be busy in preaching all the truth, and applying that truth to the problems and trials that believers face in this

world. Thus armed, the child of God can go forth to battle as a saint who is a citizen of some earthly kingdom for a time. Thus informed, he votes according to the dictates of his conscience, signs petitions as he sees fit, trains his children to honor the king.

That this is the Reformed view of the duty of the church regarding the things of the state is clear from Article 30 of our Church Order where we find that in Consistory, Classis, and Synod "ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted." This maintains the separation of church and state. This helps to insure that the church does not mistake her mission in this world. And this shows that the church becomes involved only when one of her membership *breaks* a civil law, or when the state so intrudes into the sphere of the church, that under oppression the church addresses the State for relief and points it to her God-given duty. □

## A Nation of Laws or Lawlessness?

Mr. James Lanting

*Truth is the majority vote of the nation that can lick all the others.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes

*There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.*

Allan Bloom

*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work . . . . The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan . . . with all unrighteous deception among those who perish because they did not receive the love of the truth . . . .*

II Thes. 2:7, 9, 10 (NKJV)

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It is almost a year now since the U.S. Senate rejected President Reagan's nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. Distracted by the inevitable clamor and chimera of an election year and always suffering from an alarmingly short memory, our nation has largely forgotten the unprecedented and bitter battle that broke out last year over the scholarly jurist's nomination to the highest Court in our land. The announcement of Bork's nomination galvanized scores of liberal political organizations which joined forces to wage collectively an unparalleled political assault against a Supreme Court nominee. The A.C.L.U., the National Organization of Women, People for the American Way, Planned Parenthood, and countless others spent millions of dollars nationwide disseminating propaganda scandalously characterizing Judge Bork as a right-wing fascist intent on stripping Americans of their hard-won constitutional civil rights. This historic mobilization of liberals was ironically spearheaded by perhaps the two least likely politicians to challenge anyone's credentials, Senators Joseph Biden and Ted Kennedy. Although observers expected typical partisan opposition to such a significant assignment, many were bewildered by the passionate antipathy towards Bork displayed by his liberal detractors. Indeed, was there something more than a prestigious appointment at stake?

#### *A War for the Constitution*

In a recent speech in Chicago, Bork sounded his own call to arms, declaring that the nation is embroiled in nothing less than "a war for control of the Constitution." What is at stake, he said, is the "very idea of the rule of law in this country." He warned that we are confronted by a leftist political movement that is at-

tempting to "gain control" of the Constitution. We are now engaged, he asserted, in an ideological civil war involving the most fundamental issues of democratic freedom.

He accused his liberal foes of having a "hidden agenda" that no legislature would ever adopt; their only hope is that some sympathetic judges will implement it by judicial fiat. Their agenda is "egalitarian and redistributionist," he charged, and also includes such controversial goals as abortion-on-demand, affirmative action programs, and homosexual rights. But since the Constitution insures no such liberties, the liberals embrace "judicial activism." This doctrine views the Constitution as a "living document" which can be subjected to new readings by each generation of jurists. Judges, then, should be free-wheeling and expansive in their interpretation of the document, creatively forging new rights and notions which (in their view) address contemporary society's problems.

It is generally acknowledged that the most infamous product of judicial activism is the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision wherein a Texas state statute outlawing abortions was struck down by the Supreme Court as violative of a newly discovered constitutional guarantee — a woman's "right to privacy" over her own body, a right admittedly nowhere mentioned in the Constitution or its supporting historical documents. And, more recently, an attempt to persuade the Supreme Court to strike down Georgia's sodomy statute as violative of another new constitutional right — the right to engage in homosexual conduct — failed by only one vote.

#### *Judicial Restraint and Original Intent*

Bork argues that such unfettered activism by the judiciary is a frightening usurpation of the power of the legislature. The "moral content" of the law, claims Bork, should be given by the legislature; the judge's only role is to apply that law to unforeseen circumstances. Rather than yielding to the temptation to wield power to accomplish societal goals ignored or even resisted by the legislatures, the judiciary should instead scrupulously exercise deference and restraint.

Coupled with this conservative doctrine of "judicial restraint," Bork also espouses the belief that judicial Constitutional interpretation must be limited by the "original intent" of its authors. No judge may fashion or finagle new rights or notions that were never incorporated in the Constitution. If, for example, state legislatures outlaw abortion or sodomy, the judiciary may not strike down such laws as violative of some newly found Constitutional guarantees unknown to the Framers, but rather must defer to the "moral content" of the law enacted by the legislature as representative of the majority of the people. To do otherwise would result in an "undemocratic" substitution of the moral preferences of the legislature for that of the judiciary. Such "judicial activism" is not rule by law in a democracy, suggests Bork, but rather rule by oligarchy.

#### *A Moral Catastrophe*

Bork's judicial conservatism is embraced generally by evangelical Christians, but his implicit trust in the ability of the legislature to afford law its "moral content" is perhaps unduly optimistic and naive. For it can be argued that the great legal problem today is not that our jurisprudence



is becoming “undemocratic.” The profound crisis rather is that *all* moral debate — legislative, judicial, or otherwise — has become arbitrary and meaningless. Many religious writers have lamented America’s abandonment of the Christian ethical tradition since the 1940’s. And now even reputable secular scholars today such as Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*) and Alisdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) have announced that a “moral catastrophe” has occurred in this country. “We have — very largely, if not entirely — lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality,” writes MacIntyre.

If so, then Bork has ignored the foundational question that lurks beneath the conservative/liberal debate in jurisprudence: How can *anyone* (including legislators) make moral judgments in a society that is now morally adrift without any charts or navigational aids? And Bork himself offers us little hope. Not a member of any church and describing himself facetiously as a “generic Protestant,” Bork personally refuses to declare that abortion-on-demand and homosexuality are morally wrong. Pre-

sumably, then, his only objection to *Roe v. Wade* is that it is an “undemocratic” decision contrary to the moral preferences of the majority of Texans (at least in 1973). He does not explain, however, why the caprice of a majority of Texans is any less arbitrary than the whims of a Washington, D.C. judiciary. But perhaps Bork is essentially a relativist not unlike Justice Holmes, the father of American legal skepticism, and believes that principles of truth and justice are to be determined solely by the *vox populi*.

#### *Christian Duties*

The Reformed jurist, legislator, and citizen rejects such relativism and refuses to look to the collective preferences of citizenry or the judiciary for the fundamental notions of morality and justice needed in making, interpreting, and obeying our laws. Rather, he will appeal to the “natural law” concepts of truth and justice which are implicit in the Creation (Romans 1), written in man’s heart and conscience (Romans 2), and more fully and clearly known in the Holy Scriptures. And, unlike Bork, he will unequivocally declare that abortion-on-demand and homosexuality, for example, are violative of

“natural law” and scripture, and therefore should be proscribed by the civil law of the state.

If a legal system that is fundamentally arbitrary is essentially lawlessness, then the “mystery of lawlessness” is already at work in this country. But even in the face of this apostasy being ushered in by the “lawless one,” Paul urges the Christian to “stand fast and hold the traditions” which he was taught (II Thes. 2:15). The Reformed citizen must remain undaunted and fulfill his duties to all three branches of our government. He must pay taxes, show due honor and respect, and obey “in all things not repugnant” to the Word of God.

But the Reformed citizen is called to more than passive obedience. He has a mandate actively to be the salt of the earth by witnessing to the government by speaking to or corresponding with his elected representatives, lawfully demonstrating when necessary, and exercising his right to vote and take office. Finally, the Christian citizen will pray for his legislators and judges that “God may rule and guide them in all their ways, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (Belgic Confession, Art. 36). □

## Church and State in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession

*Prof. Herman Hanko*

*Prof. Hanko is professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.*

Article 36 of our *Belgic Confession* has been a source of considerable controversy in the church, especially in the last cen-

tury or so. This article deals with the subject of magistrates and discusses, among other things, the “office” of magistrates which is



defined as being,  
*not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of anti-christ may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as he commands in his Word.*

It is very clear from this statement that the *Belgic Confession* supports the idea that the magistrate is called, not only to enforce the second table of the law (punish those who commit, murder, adultery, theft, slander, and their related sins), but the magistrate must also enforce observance of the first table of the law (punish those guilty of idolatry, false worship, Sabbath desecration, and public blasphemy).

That the Reformers held to this position is clear enough from history. John Calvin supported this position in Geneva; John Knox did the same in Scotland; the Anglican Church in England was established on the same principle; the Reformed Church in Netherlands was founded on the basis of this same view. In fact, it was not until 1834 (the year of the Secession under De Cock) that a Reformed Church was established in the Netherlands which was completely free from state control; and this freedom from state control came about only after a period of struggle, strife, and persecution of the Seceders. In the early history of our own country, although the First Amendment forbade the intrusion of the government into religious matters, the various states passed laws against taking God's name in vain, and a man could be imprisoned for opening his store on the Lord's Day.

In more recent years the First Amendment has been applied more broadly with the result that all laws which give to either state or local governments any kind of right to enforce the observance of the first table of the law of God have been struck down by Supreme Court rulings. One may now publicly blaspheme without penalty of the law; he may desecrate the Sabbath either by opening his store or going to the beach and not worry about offending the police officer. He may, as a matter of fact, spout in any public place any heresy he wishes and be guaranteed freedom of speech. The government is "neutral" in all matters of religion — so "neutral" that no religion (except the religion of evolutionism) may be taught in the public schools; no prayers may be offered in the classrooms; and no public building may contain any reference to any religion at all — not even a copy of the ten commandments hanging on the wall.

But this same principle has even been extended now to the second table of the law. To oppose the murder of unborn babies is a matter of religion and not, therefore, a matter of the state — so it is said. To oppose adultery, homosexuality, pornography, etc. is to be religious, and to insist that the state enforce laws against these sins is said to be the intrusion of religion into affairs of state, and, therefore, a violation of the Constitution. So our country is fast going in the direction of holding that the magistrate must not enforce either the first *or the second* table of the law of God.

So, at least in this country — and in most countries in the world — Article 36 of *The Belgic Confession* is said to be hopelessly out of date.

Another problem with Article 36 is that the state is almost

always in the hands of unbelievers. If, therefore, the state would take it upon itself to enforce and promote what *in its judgment* was the true religion, the true church of Christ would be persecuted. To understand this we need only ask ourselves the question: How often has it happened in the history of the world that a government anywhere was genuinely Christian and favored that church which held to the truth of God's Word? Or we could ask the question: What would happen to all those who are Reformed and Calvinistic in our own land if our present government would decide to defend, promote, and enforce only one religion which it considered to be the true religion? We would have to go to prison, see our churches shut down, and attempt to escape to some other country. So, you see, Article 36 seems so abstract, so far removed from the practical realities of life, so filled with incipient dangers that it is reason to be grateful to God that no one believes this article anymore.

At any rate, the position that the magistrate must enforce the first table of the law as well as the second led to the idea that it was the duty of the magistrate to establish a state-church, "one denomination of Christians within the land which would enjoy governmental approval and support" (P.Y. De Jong, "The Church's Witness to the World," p. 407). In fact, in some instances the idea of a state-church went beyond this to include the notion that all people within a given land, by virtue of birth alone, belonged to that one state-church, to be baptized and confirmed in it, married by its ministers, and buried under its auspices. Or, if this idea of all within a country actually belonging to a church was too stringent, at least the church was in some



way responsible for every single person which lived within its boundaries — the boundaries of the church being the same as the boundaries of the state.

Because of these objections to the article, Reformed churches have done things about the article and to it that tried to avoid these problems.

In 1896 in the Netherlands certain objections were brought to the Synod of the Reformed Church against these statements of Article 36. The Synod, after careful study, deleted from the Confession this entire section of Article 36 which we quoted above. In 1910 the Christian Reformed Church in this country considered the same problem. It seems, however, that, rather than delete the section of Article 36 which seemed so offensive and out of date, the Christian Reformed Church simply adopted a footnote to the article. The footnote is worth reading here.

*This phrase, touching the office of the magistracy in its relation to the Church, proceeds on the principle of the Established Church, which was first applied by Constantine and afterwards also in many Protestant countries. History, however, does not support the principle of State domination over the Church, but rather the separation of Church and State. Moreover, it is contrary to the New Dispensation that authority be vested in the State to arbitrarily reform the Church, and to deny the Church the right of independently conducting its own affairs as a distinct territory alongside the State. The New Testament does not subject the Christian Church to the authority of the State that it should be governed and extended by political measures, but to our Lord and King only as an independent territory alongside and altogether independent of the State, that it may be governed and edified by its office-bearers and with spiritual weapons only. Practically all Reformed churches have repudiated the idea of the Established Church, and are advocating the autonomy of the*

*churches and personal liberty of conscience in matters pertaining to the service of God.*

*The Christian Reformed Church in America, being in full accord with this view, feels constrained to declare that it does not conceive of the office of the magistracy in this sense, that it be in duty bound to also exercise political authority in the sphere of religion, by establishing and maintaining a State Church, advancing and supporting the same as the only true Church, and to oppose, to persecute and to destroy by means of the sword all the other churches as being false religions; and to also declare that it does positively hold that, within its own secular sphere, the magistracy has a divine duty towards the first table of the Law as well as towards the second; and furthermore that both State and Church as institutions of God and Christ have mutual rights and duties appointed them from on high, and therefore have a very sacred reciprocal obligation to meet through the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from Father and Son. They may not, however, encroach upon each other's territory. The Church has rights of sovereignty in its own sphere as well as the State.*

The Christian Reformed Church was, however, not satisfied with this statement either. When objections were raised against this "footnote" to the article, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1958 adopted a revision which deleted the controversial part (which we quoted at the beginning of this article) and inserted instead: *And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, while completely refraining from every tendency towards exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them and with the means belonging to them to remove every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship, 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. (All*

*this historical material is found primarily in P.Y. De Jong's "The Church's Witness to the World.")*

A couple of general remarks about all this. In the first place, the revision adopted by the C.R.C. in 1958 really leaves the matter somewhat in doubt. What is left for the state to do is "contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God" and "remove every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship." It can be argued that for the state to do this would require that the state enforce the first table of the law. But if this was the intended meaning, then the original footnote was sufficient and there was no need to tamper with the article itself. The Synod apparently had something less than enforcement of the first table of the law in mind when it defined the duty of magistrates.

In the second place, as far as our own Protestant Reformed Churches are concerned, we are not bound by the decisions of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1896, nor the decisions of the Christian Reformed Church in 1958. But the decisions of 1910 are our decisions. This is evident from the fact that the Synod of our Churches in 1946 published "The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches." This "Church Order" was, according to the "Preface," the same (with a couple of changes which are enumerated in the Preface) as the "Church Order" adopted by the Combined Consistories at the very beginning of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches. And the "Church Order" adopted by the Combined Consistories was the edition of "Keegstra and Van Dellen of 1915, adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1914" (Preface to the 1946 edition of the Church Order). With the references in the Church Order



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to the creeds (see Article 53 as well as the "Formula of Subscription" adopted at the same time), the obvious implication is that the footnote to Article 36 of the Belgic Confession was also adopted. (It is a point worth making because repeatedly questions have come up concerning this matter, i.e., whether the "footnote" to Article 36 is indeed binding upon our Protestant Reformed Churches. It is my conviction that it is.)

The result is that the official position of our churches contains Article 36 as it originally read and the footnote adopted by the CRC in 1910. For this I am thankful, for I agree not only with the original article of the *Belgic Confession*, but I agree also with the footnote. And I agree with the footnote, not as a *revision* of Article 36 — which it is not; but as the correct explanation of Article 36. □ (to be continued)

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## NOTICE

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Jon J. Huisken, Stated Clerk

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