

LESSON 29

Belgic Confession Article 36 The Civil Government

General:

In this lesson we examine the function of the Civil Government and note the relationship between the Church and the State.

1. The Importance of this Article

Many Reformed scholars have argued against the existence of this article in the Confession of the Church, their reasoning being that since the Church and the State are separate entities, the Church should refrain from making principle statements about the purpose and the task of the civil government.

However, since the Word of God itself speaks about the origin and purpose of the civil government, and since the members of the Church, as citizens of their country, must reckon with the civil government, there is good reason for this article.

This is augmented by the fact that the Confession here warns against various wrong conceptions concerning the relationship between the Church and the State:

- a) the Roman Catholic teaching that the State is subject also to the Church and that the Pope has political authority (Papal system)
- b) the Lutheran viewpoint that the Church is subject to the state (Territorial system)
- c) especially the Anabaptist heresy that Christians are subject only to God and must therefore reject all (human) authority of the civil government (Revolutionary system).

The principle position of our Confession is that while the civil government is secular (i.e. designed for the affairs of this world), it cannot be *neutral* towards the Church, since the government also finds its origin in God and must rule in accordance with His Will.

It is remarkable that the Church which often has experienced so much devastating resistance and terrible persecution from the side of the civil government, speaks so positively and reverently about the office of the civil government.

2. The Origin of the Civil Government

The Confession makes the positive statement that "our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers." This clearly refutes any theory that the civil government is a result of some evolutionary process or is a practical invention of mankind itself.

Romans 13:1, "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

In the Scriptures, the civil government is called "God's servant," and must be obeyed for Christ's sake (1 Peter 2:13). It may be clear that the Confession does not leave room for the idea of "the sovereignty of the people." Neither do we find here any indication as to *how* these governments are established. This can be realized through a specific historical process or by the outright cooperation of the people (1 Samuel 8). The Confession also does not make any statement as to which *form* of government is desired. Most Christians would prefer that system where the rights and the duties of both parties – government and citizenry – are duly regulated in a well-balanced Constitution and where a legally chosen Parliament acts in a supervisory capacity.

Since the civil government is appointed by God, it is essentially also *responsible* to God. When a specific regime obstinately refuses to reckon with God's will, and even comes to persecution of God's people, the Lord sets this government aside and forms another (Daniel 5:24-28). Scripture also teaches that God in His sovereign government of the world determines the rise, duration and fall of the empires, and thus fulfilling the course of history, works toward the establishing of the Kingdom of Heaven (Daniel 2:31-45).

3. The Office of the Government

The Confession teaches that God has appointed the civil government "because of the depravity of mankind." This means that the government is there, by reason of sin, to promote and maintain law and order. The much debated issue whether there would have been a government if there had been no fall into sin, is quite irrelevant here.

The government clearly has a two-fold task:

- a) a *legislative* duty: certain "laws and policies" designed to curb lawlessness and to restrain "the licentiousness of men." These laws will deal with all aspects of public life and will also regulate the duties of the citizens towards one another (e.g., morality, marriage laws, etc.)
- b) an *enforcing* duty: the government must not merely legislate, but must also enforce the law among the people, otherwise it robs itself of its authority and credibility. "For that purpose He has placed the sword in the hand of the government to punish wrongdoers and to protect those who do what is good" (See also: Romans 13:4).

Note: The notion of the "sword," entrusted to the civil government, included the authority to make use of "capital punishment" as a meeting out of God's wrath (Genesis 9: 6).

4. The Civil Government and the Church

There has been much controversy about the extent of the duty which the civil government has towards the Church. The Reformed Churches agreed on the fact that the government must not merely grant freedom of religion, but should also see to "the protection of the Church and its ministry in order that the kingdom of Christ may come." As already stated earlier, this means that the government cannot be *neutral*, but shall set up its policies in accordance with God's Word and make suitable provisions that the Church has a good place in society. For example, the government shall preserve the Sunday as day of worship.

Such agreements could not be reached on the question whether the government has a calling "to remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship, that the kingdom of the antichrist be thus destroyed." These words were deleted by the Reformed Churches at the General Synod in 1905, while others retained them. Many felt that the Confession here went too far, encouraging the government to go beyond its authority by forcing the consciences of the citizens. These words, indeed, can give rise to misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the basic notion contained in these words has value: if the government does not in matters of *public life* withstand the inevitable rise of idolatry and false worship, it contributes to the spiritual and moral decline of the nation.

These "twenty words" were deleted perhaps under the influence of the teachings of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, who led to believe that the civil government had indeed to be neutral. This teaching ultimately contributed to the deformation of reformed politics in the Netherlands and caused the principle downfall of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP).

The Church and the Government do have a different calling. The Church is called to preach the Gospel and exercise spiritual rule over its members. The Government is called to regulate public life in accordance with God's Law. In these diverse callings, both have an own responsibility and jurisdiction, and may not exercise authority over one another.

The calling of the Church with respect to the civil government can be indicated as follows:

- a) "to impress diligently and sincerely upon the whole congregation the obedience, love and respect which are due to the civil authorities" (Church Order, Article 28; see also: 1 Peter 2:17).
- b) to pray for the government "that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (1 Timothy 2:2).

5. The Limit of Civil Authority

The Scriptures clearly teach that the civil government must be shown reverence and given obedience, and this is not restricted to governments that are favourably inclined towards the Church.

1 Peter 2:18, "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle, but also to the overbearing."

Yet there is a clear limitation to the authority of the magistrates. Whenever the government (or any person in authority, for that matter) would demand of its subjects that which is contrary to God's Word, the children of God have the outright calling to refuse (Acts 4:19).

QUESTIONS (Lesson 29):

1. Against which misconceptions does this article teach?
2. What is the principle position of the Confession towards the civil government?
3. Where lies the origin of civil government?
4. To whom is the government responsible?
5. What is the task of the civil government?
6. Explain the relationship between the Church and the civil government.
7. What is the calling of the Church with respect to the civil government?
8. Wherein lies the limit of civil authority?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 39.

ARTICLE 37

THE LAST JUDGMENT

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, that when the time, ordained by the Lord but unknown to all creatures, has come and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty. He will declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead and set this old world afire in order to purge it. Then all people, men, women, and children, who ever lived, from the beginning of the world to the end, will appear in person before this great Judge. They will be summoned *with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God*.

Those who will have died before that time will arise out of the earth, as their spirits are once again united with their own bodies in which they lived. Those who will then be still alive will not die as the others but will be changed in the twinkling of an eye from perishable to imperishable. Then the books will be opened and the dead will be judged according to what they have done in this world, whether good or evil. Indeed, all people *will render account for every careless word they utter*, which the world regards as mere jest and amusement. The secrets and hypocrisies of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all. And so for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

The wicked will be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences and will become immortal, but only to be tormented in *the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*. On the other hand, the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honour. The Son of God will acknowledge their names before God His Father and His elect angels. *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*, and their cause – at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil authorities – will be recognized as the cause of the Son of God. As a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as the heart of man could never conceive. Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*