



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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June 26, 2020

Dear Saints of God in Christ,

When I was in college, I first encountered the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), the doctrinal standard of the PCA.

The WCF was written in the 1640s after a synod was called by the English Parliament to revise and perfect the *Articles of Religion* to make them more thoroughly Reformed. The Articles governed the Church of England. The Assembly soon realized the task of merely revising those Articles would simply not do, so they set about writing a new Confession of Faith to unite the churches of England and Scotland as Presbyterian churches.

The WCF contains thirty three very short chapters that summarize the Bible's teaching on the most important topics in the Scripture. One of those chapters (Ch. 23) deals with "the Civil Magistrate," which outlines in the broadest terms the authority of the government and the Christian subject's duty toward the government. The English Parliament approved the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1648. The influence of our WCF is hard to overstate; it was later used as the starting point for the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalist churches as well as for the London Baptist Confession.

Although the Assembly was summoned, approved, and paid for by the English Parliament during the Civil War in which the Parliament fought against King Charles I, the WCF does not leave much room for rebellion against a sovereign.

Additionally the Civil War was brought, more or less, to an end when King Charles was found guilty of treason and - by order of Parliament - his head was detached from his neck; although there were further conflicts in the 1650s, King Charles I was unable to participate in them due to the aforementioned injury at the hand of Parliament's axeman. The whole matter is quite fascinating and you can read about it somewhere else.

But when I first encountered the WCF, I asked my pastor - who was also a British subject - how the same group of people who signed the death warrant of their king could also approve a confession of faith that does not sanction rebellion, but instead teaches the magistrate's authority is derived from God. Looking back, I assume there was a fair amount of snark in my question, but it was fundamentally genuine.

My pastor kindly explained that the Bible's teaching does not give government authorities unlimited power. In fact, the Bible gives positive examples of Christians refusing government commands when those commands violate God's Word (cf. Acts 4, Acts 5), standing up for one's civil rights (cf. Acts 22), and even refusing to obey commands after one's civil rights have been violated (cf. Acts 16) in order to obtain civil redress and remedy.

After every other attempt at remedy failed, the English Parliament responded to the tyrannical policies of their king, by taking up arms against him, defeating him on the field of battle, making him to stand trial for treason, and ultimately executing him because of his crimes.

The English Parliament well understood God had not given absolute power to their monarch. In fact, under the English constitutional system, by God's providential care the Parliament developed to restrain and restrict the power of the monarch, the highest (but not absolute) magistrate of the realm.

These "lower magistrates" in parliament possessed divinely granted authority just as much as the king. And in God's providence, they were raised up to restrict his power and protect the liberty of the people.

This is the week leading up to the observance of Independence Day, so it may be fitting to think on the authority of government and the duty of the Christian citizen. The argumentation the English Parliament used in the 1640s was appealed to by the American colonists to justify their own rebellion against the English Crown three generations later when they pulled down the Statue of King George, melted it into musket balls, and then fired on the King's troops with them.

We can debate whether the American Revolution was a just cause or not, but that is for another place entirely.

But what is important to remember both for the national holiday soon to be observed as well as in light of the current crises ongoing in many American cities, is that God's people have long recognized the importance of maintaining **both** respect for lawful authority and ensuring that those authorities exercise their ministries (service) in a manner that is lawful according to civil law as well as Divine Law.

Christians must not be under the misconception that a Christian citizen is subject to the governing authorities in every matter in every way without exception. Instead, just as the Apostles, we must first obey God rather than men. But we are also free as Christians to call attention to and seek lawful redress if the government violates our civil rights or, by extension, the civil rights of our neighbors.

By God's providence, we live in a land where we have a great many rights and privileges guaranteed by the constitution of this Republic. Let us pray for and seek the welfare of the Republic as we await the return of our King who will bring perfect justice and righteousness to the earth.

Your friend,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan Biese", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ryan Biese,
Pastor