

# Why the RPCUS Has the Original Westminster Confession of Faith Unrevised

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Teaching Elder Joe Morecraft made a presentation of the establishment of the constitution of Covenant Presbytery, [now the RPCUS]:...the WCF, Larger and Shorter Catechisms as originally published by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland must be subscribed to by all ordained members. Passed.

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Why did I make that motion? Let me give you four reasons.

First, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland edition of the Westminster Standards is a sturdy, hardback book with readable print. It contains the Westminster Assembly's Scriptural footnotes completely written out, for the Confession, Catechisms and Book of Church Government. It also includes other historical documents that are important for organizing a church and understanding our heritage as Presbyterians, which documents are not included in other editions of the Standards, such as the original Directory of Publick Worship, the Form of Presbyterial Church-Government, the Solemn League and Covenant, etc.

Second, although our presbytery has no disagreement at all with the revision of chapter 23, paragraph 3, as it appears in the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in America, we believe that the original chapter 23, paragraph 3, spells out more completely, more Biblically, and with less ambiguity the functions and limits of the civil magistrate with reference to the Law of God and the relation of church and state, by which as nursing fathers, the state carries out its God-given duty to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner, that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every

part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. In other words, it speaks directly and relevantly to the political issues facing us today, offering specific, Biblical, and workable (although politically incorrect) answers to the questions people are asking.

Third, one revision of the Westminster Confession led to another and then to another and another. We want our church in some clear, although small, way to intervene and rescue the Church from the accelerated move away from the historical and Biblical Calvinism and Presbyterianism of the original Westminster Confession. Adopting the original was an attempt on our part to "stop the flow of blood," and thereby, hopefully, by God's grace, to bring the Church back to renewed purity and vitality.

Fourth, tying our little denomination to the original Westminster Confession of Faith was a deliberate effort to root ourselves firmly and self-consciously in the English, and more particularly the Scottish, Reformations, (along with the Swiss, German, and French, of course), so as to lay down a basis for a strong advance into the future, which we pray will bring us an even greater Reformation of the Church. Hopefully, our people would not only love the Westminster Standards, but also come to love the historical context that gave it birth. Hopefully, our youth will find some of their heroes in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

### Why did American Presbyterianism revise 23:3 in the Westminster Confession of Faith?

The early American Presbyterians, mostly fresh from northern Ireland and Scotland, and a century or less away from "the killing times," when an Erastian<sup>1</sup> English monarchy tried to subjugate the churches of Scotland and England, were understandably "gun shy" with reference to some of the language of chapter 23:3 and 31:2 in the Confession. They, along with the English Puritan immigrants, did not ever want the same thing to happen in the colonies, and thus the revision of these chapters. However, I am convinced that their understanding of that chapter was sadly mistaken, that in no way can the original Westminster Confession of Faith be charged and convicted of Erastianism. Not all the Westminster divines, however, after the publication of the Confession, were consistent in their actions with what they wrote in the Confession: their doctrine was better than their practice as is always the case with Calvinists. Two good defenses of chapters 23 and 31 against the charge of Erastianism are: Robert Shaw, THE REFORMED FAITH, pp.

xxf, and James Bannerman, THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, Vol. 1, pp. 171f. A good history of 18<sup>th</sup> Century American Presbyterianism is Charles Hodge, THE CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

The Westminster Confession commits itself unequivocally to the exclusive headship of Jesus Christ over His Church:

The Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.- WCF, 30:1. ...to these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain and remit sins; to shut the kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures...- WCF, 30:2.

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven...- WCF, 23:3.

Such clear statements are certain evidence that the Westminster Confession is not Erastian. Robert Shaw makes this point in the introduction of his excellent commentary on the Confession, entitled THE REFORMED FAITH, pp. xix-xx. You would think by his remarks that he was addressing the situation today, although he wrote these words in 1845 in Scotland:

Another decided and great merit of the Confession consists in the clear and well-defined statement which it makes of the principles on which alone can securely rest the great idea of the coordination, yet mutual support, of the civil and the ecclesiastical jurisdictions. It is but too usual for people to misunderstand those parts of the [original] Confession which treat these jurisdictions—some accusing those passages of containing Erastian concessions, and others charging them with being either lawless or intolerant. The truth is, they favor no extreme. Proceeding upon the sacred rule, to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, they willingly ascribe to the civil magistrate a supreme power in the State—all that belongs to his province, not merely with regard to his due authority over the persons and property of men, but also with regard to what pertains to his own official mode of rendering homage to the King of kings. It is in this latter department of magisterial duty that what is called the power of the civil magistrate, circa sacra—about religious<sup>2</sup> matters, consists. But there his province ends, and he has no power

in sacris—in religious matters. This is most carefully guarded in the leading proposition of chapter xxx—The Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hands of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate. The leading Erastians of that period, learned and subtle as they were, felt it impossible to evade the force of that proposition, and could but refuse to give to it the sanction of the Legislature. They could not, however, prevail upon the Assembly either to modify or suppress it; and there it remains, and must remain, as the unanswered and unanswerable refutation of the Erastian heresy by the Westminster Assembly of Divines.

What does the original Westminster Confession teach regarding the duty of the state toward the Church?

Of the Civil Magistrate, Chapter 23 in the WCF, contains four paragraphs, each explaining one main point of doctrine:

- i. The origin and function of the state;
- ii. The political involvement of Christians;
- iii. The limitations and power of the state; and
- iv. The responsibility of the Christian citizenry.

The original 23:3 reads as follows:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God fully settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

What is the point being made in WCF 23:33?

First, the authority of the state is about but not in the Church. The WCF 23:3 teaches that, whereas the state has no power within the Church, God has given it power relating to and around the Church as the Church's protective nursing father and nursing mother, Isaiah 49:23. The civil magistrate is to protect and promote the welfare of the Church of God. As King David said about his duty as civil magistrate towards the Church: For the sake of the house of the LORD our God I will seek your good, Psalm 122:9.

The state has no jurisdiction within the organization and policies of the Church, but it does have jurisdiction around and about the Church. It is to protect the Church and her interests, but no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof [the regular government and discipline of the Church appointed by Christ]. The state is to exercise its authority justly and wisely so as to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance, revised 23:3.

These two areas—about and within the Church—are vastly different, and they must not be confused. The state—its office-holders and constitutions—has no jurisdiction inside the institutional Church, but it does have a God-given responsibility to promote and advance the interests of the Church, and to protect her from those who would do her harm:

God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under Him over the people, for His own glory, and the public good; and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil-doers, WCF 23:1.

In the Confession's Scriptural footnote to this underlined statement it gives Romans 13:1-4, which prescribes the duty of the civil government before God as being the minister of God to you for good, vs. 4. The phrase "to you" refers to the recipients of the epistle to the Romans, which were the called of Jesus Christ...all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints, i.e., the Church. Even the revised chapter 23:3 makes this point when it says: Yet as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord.

The Confession distinctly and frequently announces the doctrine, that the civil magistrate has a certain power about religion—a certain authority and duty to provide for and promote by competent means the well-being and interests of the Church. — All that is fairly implied in it, (23:3), is the ascription to the state of a certain authority about the Church, for the purpose of promoting its interests not the ascription to it of an authority within the Church, for the purpose of exercising jurisdiction there.— James Bannerman, *THE CHURCH OF CHRIST*, Vol. I, p. 177.

In other words, the state's authority with reference to and about the Church involves no usurpation of authority in or over the Church.

Second, what does the WCF teach regarding the duties of the state about the Church? It sets forth four duties.

(1). The state is to take order for those objects at which it aims. This expression is a technical one, common in the theological debates of the Westminster Assembly. It means "to provide for, to attend to, to take care, to accomplish," language far from implying the usurpation of authority over the church by the state. The Scriptural footnotes of the original chapter 23:3 supportive of this duty are Isaiah 49:23, Psalm 122:9, Ezra 7:23-28, Leviticus 24:16, Deuteronomy 13:5,6,12, II Kings 18:4, II Chronicles 34:33, II Chronicles 15:12,13, which footnotes show the theonomic perspective of the Westminster divines. Because of their Biblical hermeneutic, they could, without hesitation or apology, quote Old Testament laws and examples for the state today, believing as they did that the Hebrew Republic was in many ways a model for nations today.<sup>4</sup> As Greg Bahnsen pointed out: "the Mosaic law is a 'model' to be emulated, not a code to be simply quoted or read into modern statute books."- NO OTHER STANDARD, p. 160.

(2). In order to reach its objectives with reference to the Church, the state has the power to call synods, i.e., assemblies of Church officers. This power does not imply any authority within the Church to decide or rule in spiritual or ecclesiastical things pertaining to the government and inner life and mission of the Church. In the original WCF 31:2, this duty is carefully explained: magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with about matters of religion... This is what Parliament did in calling the Westminster Assembly to meet in the 1640's: to consult with Parliament and to give it advice from the Word of God. There is no Erastianism here, for, these councils and synods, such as the Westminster Assembly, were not courts of the Church, but consultant committees to the state. After all, although the Church and state are separate institutions, the state is as accountable to obey God's Law as is the Church, for both are accountable to God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, 23:1. If critics of the original 31:2 are correct in saying it is illegitimate for the state to call synods, then the men who heeded the summons of Parliament to participate in the Westminster Assembly were wrong to do so, for it was a blending of Church and state. However, the Scripture footnotes of the original Confession show that the Word of God is on the side of the original: II Chronicles 19:8-11, II Chronicles 29-30 and Matthew 2:4,5.

(3). In order to reach its objectives with reference to the Church, the state has the power to be present at synods which it calls. This is a logical deduction from the previously mentioned power. The state has the right to be present at any assembly whatever convened within its dominion. This is true even of synods of the Church, as long as the state does not preside, dictate or interfere with their deliberations. The Scriptural footnotes in the preceding paragraph are also applicable here.

(4). To reach its objectives with reference to the Church, the state has the authority not only to be present at meetings of synods, but also to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God, as revealed in Scripture. As in the case of the phrase, take order, this expression is somewhat of a technical one, and is to be understood according to the use of such theological terms at the time of the Westminster Assembly. The term meant "to make it an object of care and attention generally, that what is done be done according to the Word of God. So interpreted, it comes very far short indeed of anything implying Erastian control on the part of the magistrate in seeking his object, or any assertion of a right to review, or reverse, or in any way overbear, the decisions of Church courts. — These are all the means specified by the WCF as lying open to the civil magistrate to employ in seeking to promote the interests of [the Christian] religion and of the Church of Christ; and it is plain that none of them imply or necessitate on his part the assumption of any proper control or jurisdiction in spiritual matters."— James Bannerman, *THE CHURCH OF CHRIST*, Vol. I, pp. 180f.

#### The Responsibility of the World's Nations to Bow Before the Kingship of Jesus Christ, the Ruler of the Kings of the Earth

According to Psalm 2, which the New Testament refers to Jesus Christ in Acts 4:24-27, 13:33, Hebrews 1:5-5:5 and Revelation 2:27, the nations and political establishments of the world today are in deliberate rebellion against Jehovah and His Christ, making every effort to break free from God's moral order and from the consequences that come from breaking that order. They find the Lord and His Law restrictive and burdensome, keeping them from reaching their humanistic and tyrannical goals for human society. In the meanwhile, He who sits enthroned as universal Sovereign laughs at all their efforts to dethrone Him and to escape Him. In fact, He scoffs at them in contempt of their evil. Furthermore, He causes all their efforts to fail by speaking His powerful Word to them, confusing and

terrifying them in His fury, Hebrews 4:12-13. They drive themselves to distraction and despair trying to suppress this truth in unrighteousness.

What has the Sovereign of the nations spoken that is so terrifying to the rebels of this world? "I have installed My unique Son, Jesus Christ, as the mediatorial king of the nations. I have given Him all the world's nations as His own personal possession. They are not only under My providential government, they are also under His moral government, accountable to Him as nations with all their institutions. Those who refuse to recognize His supremacy over them and bow in submission to Him, He will break and shatter as if they were cheap clay pots; but those who take refuge in Him will be blessed." (A paraphrase and interpretation of Psalm 2)

From His throne at God's right hand, Christ now calls upon all His servants and subjects in places of political power:

O kings, show discernment; Take warning, O judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with reverence, And rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, And you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him.

This extortion is addressed not merely to the kings and judges of O.T. Israel, but to the kings and judges of the earth, of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Syrians, Americans, Europeans, Russians, Chinese, Sudanese, Iraqis, Peruvians, South Africans, Polynesians, Australians. All the political powers of all of Christ's possessions which include all nations to the end of the earth are accountable to Him as their King, and are called upon by Him to bow in obedience before His royal scepter. It is not simply as individual human beings that these kings and judges are to receive His instruction, worship Him and pay Him homage; rather it is in their official capacity as kings and judges that they are to do these things. In their executive offices, legislative assemblies, and courtrooms, they are to obey and enforce the laws and crown rights of Christ the King. If they refuse to do so, for whatever reason, they will be considered and treated by Him as rebels doomed for destruction.

First, the political institutions of the world's nations are to show discernment and take warning by giving heed to the revealed instruction of their Lord in His written Law by which infallible and absolute standard they can correctly distinguish between right and wrong and effectively administer justice.

Without such a standard, justice is a meaningless and arbitrarily defined word used as a hammer by tyrants to keep the people in slavery. Distinguishing between right and wrong is impossible without a revelation from God; and without such a standard people, doing whatever seems right in their own eyes, become ungovernable unless a tyrant imposes order.

Second, these political powers are to worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling. They are called upon to worship and serve the triune God through faith in Jesus Christ, which brings to their land joy, reverence for God, and God's blessings. Furthermore, they are to protect the pure worship of the triune God, forbidding the public worship of all other gods.

Third, they are to do homage to the Son. The political institutions of the world's nations are to confess publicly their allegiance to Jesus Christ as their ultimate Head of State and to His Law as their statute book. They are hereby called upon to confess the supremacy of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and King of kings, to covenant with Him that their nations will always walk before Him in obedience, and that no law shall be enacted in their nations contrary to His revealed will found in Holy Scripture. In other words, political powers are called upon in Psalm 2 to be distinctively, comprehensively, genuinely, legally, permanently and unashamedly Christian, nationally confessing that Jesus is Lord.

Since Jesus Christ has been invested by God with dominion over the nations of the world, and since He actively administers that dominion everyday, it follows naturally and unavoidably that the world's nations have duties which they owe to their King, our Mediator.

First, it is the duty of nations and their political establishments to honor their king as faithful subjects in all their institutions and laws. Whether we are individuals or nations, citizens or elected officials, it remains true that in whatever we do, we are to do all to the glory of God. It is not enough that they promote the general welfare of the citizenry; but as moral subjects of the King of kings, responsible to govern in His name, they are to have as their ultimate and self-conscious objective in the formation of their constitutions, the establishment of their institutions, the shaping of their foreign and domestic policies, the election and appointment of their officials, all their legislation and in every act of administration to honor and glorify Him to whom they owe their being, preservation and powers.

A devoted regard to the prince's honor and a willingness to maintain his dignity against every infringement, enter essentially into the nature of loyalty. William Symington, MESSIAH THE PRINCE, p. 232.

Because Nebuchadnezzar failed to do this, God inflicted him with the terrifying judgment of being driven from human society and made to live like and live with the beasts of the field for seven seasons. Why did the Lord treat him in this manner? The answer is found in Daniel 4:32:

O king, this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: that you be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is Ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.

It was for this same reason that God would destroy the Babylonian king, Belshazzar: you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven...the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified, Daniel 5:23. These verses should make all those who hold public office pause and consider with fear and trembling. Not only do they have the duty to do all to the glory of the triune God; but if they neglect or violate this duty, they expose themselves to the judgment of God. The point is: being a constitutional republic is not sufficient. A nation must be a Christian republic unashamedly honoring Christ the King in all its affairs of state.

Second, it is the duty of nations as the subjects of the Lord Christ to make His civil laws revealed in His Bible as the basis and source of their own laws. They are to have Christ as their only source of Law, and the Bible as their only source of all their political statutes, because God in Christ is the one Lawgiver, Judge, King and Savior incarnate, Isaiah 33:22. Their standard of legislation and administration may not be human reason, national conscience, public opinion, expert opinion, or political expediency. None of these is, nor all of them together, are competent guides in the governing of a nation.

We contend...that the Bible is to be our rule, not only in matters of a purely religious nature, in matters connected with conscience and the worship of God, but in matters of a civil or political nature. — To require nations, who possess the sacred volume, to confine themselves,

in their political affairs, to the dim light of nature, is not more absurd than it would be to require men, when the sun is in the heavens, to shut out its full blaze and go about their ordinary duties by the feeble rays of a taper [candle].

Indeed, if nations are moral subjects, they are bound to regulate their conduct by whatever law their moral Governor has been pleased to give them; and as they are the subjects of the Mediator, they must be under the law of the Mediator as contained in the Scriptures. He has not placed His moral subjects in ignorance of His will, nor left them to search for it amid the obscurities and imperfections of a law which sin has effaced and well nigh obliterated. In the Holy Scriptures of truth, He has given them a fairer and more complete exhibition of the principles of immutable and eternal justice, than that which is to be found in the law of nature. - Symington, p. 235

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Erastianism takes its name from Thomas Erastus, 1524-1583, of Heidelberg, Germany. It emerged in England at the Westminster Assembly, 1643, when a small number of the men present advocated the supremacy of the state over the Church. Their position was defeated and refuted by the overwhelming majority of the Assembly. Erastianism holds that the Church is a creature of the state and that the state has supreme authority over the Church and supreme jurisdiction within the Church. Erastianism has been soundly refuted time and again by Presbyterian scholars: (1). James Bannerman, *THE CHURCH OF CHRIST*, Vol. I, pp. 171f; (2). William Cunningham, *HISTORICAL THEOLOGY*, Vol. II, pp. 557f; (3). Robert Shaw, *THE REFORMED FAITH*, pp. xixf; (4). George Gillespie, *AARON'S ROD BLOSSOMING*; (5). William M. Hetherington, *HISTORY OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY OF DIVINES*, pp. 232f; (6). Robert S. Paul, *THE ASSEMBLY OF THE LORD*; (7). J.R. DeWITT, *JUS DIVINUM: THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY AND THE DIVINE RIGHT OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT; AND* (8). Samuel Rutherford and others, *THE DIVINE RIGHT OF CHURCH-GOVERNMENT*.

<sup>2</sup> As this paragraph later shows, by "religious," Shaw had in mind "ecclesiastical and spiritual" issues. Although the institutional, functional and jurisdictional separation of church and state is clearly taught in the WCF, the Confession also presupposes, as several chapters show, that it is impossible to separate religion and politics, and is most undesirable to separate the Bible and politics, God and politics or Christianity and

politics, (as even the revised 23:3 shows). WCF 23:1 makes this very point in its first sentence: God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates TO BE UNDER HIM over the people, FOR HIS GLORY, and the public good.

<sup>3</sup> In understanding 23:3 correctly, it is important to keep these two principles in mind: (1). The language of two or more passages in a document claiming to be accurate, systematic and authoritative statements of Divine-revealed doctrine must be interpreted in a way that makes them consistent with each other and not contradictory to each other. (2). The language of such a document must be understood in the sense commonly given to it in its authors' day, without imposing our own meaning upon it.

<sup>4</sup> See Samuel Rutherford, *LEX REX*, E.C. Wines, *THE HEBREW REPUBLIC*, and John Shearer, *HEBREW INSTITUTIONS SOCIAL AND CIVIL*, reprinted by Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

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"Jesus appears to have devoted Himself specifically to pray at times when His life was unusually full of work and excitement (cf. Luke 5:15-16)...Many in our day know what this congestion of occupation is: they are swept off their feet with their engagements and can scarcely find time to eat. We make this a reason for not praying; Jesus made it a reason for praying. Is there any doubt which is a better course?"

- James Stalker