

SESSION 19: Church and Commonwealth

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 121-123, 126-131, 148-150

WCF	WLC	WSC
23, 25-26, 30-31	61-66, 82-83, 86, 90	36-38

Introduction

In the last session, we considered the subject of oaths, vows, and the institution of marriage. In this session, we turn to consider the other two great institutions God has given to mankind: the church and civil society. The discussion of the former spans several chapters in our confession (WCF 25, 26, 30-31). The discussion of the latter, to which we turn first, comprises but one chapter (WCF 23).

The Civil Magistrate

According to the dictionary, a magistrate is “a civil officer with power to administer and enforce law” or “a person clothed with power as a public civil officer.”²²⁵ Accordingly, when our confession speaks of the “civil magistrate,” it is speaking of civic government and civil society.

Our confession articulates several important truths regarding the civil magistrate. First, according to WCF 23.1, the *purpose* of civil governments is “His own glory, and the public good.” To this end, God has appointed civil magistrates and “hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defence and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.” Second, the *legitimacy* of civil government derives from fact that “God the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under Him, over the people.”

Following these basic points, our confession affirms that “It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto,” (WCF 23.2). Yet when Christians are so called, they “ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.” When the maintenance of such requires it, “they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions.” This idea of *just war* was first articulated by Augustine: “War should have as its goal the establishment of justice and the restoration of peace. It must be fought under the authority of the legitimate ruler and be conducted in a just manner, which included keeping one’s promise to the enemy and refraining from looting, massacre and burning, so that noncombatants would not be injured.”²²⁶

What *limits* does our confession place upon the civil magistrates, particularly in regard to the church?²²⁷ “Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.” Moreover, “no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief,” (23.3).

²²⁵ “Magistrate” from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. and the *Collaborate International Dictionary of English*, <http://www.wordnik.com/words/magistrate> (accessed August 14, 2013).

²²⁶ R.G. Clouse, “War and Peace” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 715.

²²⁷ As evident from the differing texts of 23.3 printed in Smith’s *Harmony*, there is some disagreement on the questions of limits and duties between the *Confession of Faith* as written in 1646 and the American form of the same adopted in 1789. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church subscribes to the latter.

Likewise in regard to the church, what *duties* does our confession place upon the civil magistrate? First, they are to act “as nursing fathers” and “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.” Second, “it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever.” Third, they are “to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

Finally, our confession speaks of the duties of the people toward the civil magistrates: “It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience sake,” (23.4) These duties do not change, *even when the ruler is an unbeliever*: “Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates’ just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them.”

The Church

The first distinction made by our standards with respect to the church is the distinction between the *invisible* and *visible* church. The former consists of *all the elect in all of history*: “the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof,” (25.1). The latter consists of *all professing Christians, with their children, alive in the world today*: “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children,” (25.2).

Our confession makes a strong claim regarding the visible church – namely, that “outside of [it] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation,” (25.2). On what grounds can such a strong claim be substantiated? The answer is simple: union with Christ.²²⁸ When we are effectually called, every believer is “spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband,” (WLC 66). First, note how this latter phrase, “head and husband,” is echoed in the description of the invisible church as “under Christ *the Head thereof*; and is *the spouse*, the body...” (25.1). This teaches us that *union with Christ unites the believer to the invisible church*.

Second, note that, under normal circumstances at any given time in history, the visible church *is the current manifestation of the invisible church*.²²⁹ Thus, while never taking a *magical* or *mechanistic* view of the visible church (WLC 61), our confession suggests a much higher view than that to which many evangelical Protestants are inclined. Let us ever beware of falling into the folly Screwtape describes:

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is

²²⁸ See the previous discussion of union with Christ under “Gospel Identity” in session 13.

²²⁹ Perhaps an analogy will help. First, let us imagine the invisible church as a great railroad track – stretching down through history from the gates of Garden of Eden to the gates of the New Jerusalem. Second, let us imagine a single train traveling this track. The engine is Christ, the passenger cars are the visible church, and the position of the train corresponds to the present calendar date in the world’s history. Now, given this situation, is it possible that legitimate passenger may for a season fail to catch, or fall off, the train? Sure. Is it possible that a person may for a season board the train without possessing a ticket? Sure (cf. WLC 61). But can a person credibly claim to be a passenger if they refuse to board the train? No.

the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.²³⁰

Having made these distinctions and qualification, our confession goes on to describe the *means* and *mission* of the church. The *means* of the church – the weapons of our warfare – are “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God” made effectual “by His own presence and Spirit.” This description is fleshed out further by WSC 88: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” The *mission* of the church is “the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life to the end of the world,” (25.3). This idea of “gathering and perfecting” is the basis from which we derive the church’s threefold task of *worship, walk, and witness* – or *consecration, community, and conversion*.

The Peccability of the Church

Because the church is populated by sinful human beings, sin and error are a part of its life in this world. Without abandoning hope, our confession acknowledges this sad reality: “The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will,” (25.5). Moreover, the confession sets out marks by which we may measure the integrity of the visible church: “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them,” (25.4). From these we may conclude that church is *radically peccable* and *ultimately invincible*.

The peccability of the church necessitates *corrective discipline*. The purpose of such discipline – called “church censures,” (WCF 30) – is multifaceted: “the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church,” (30.3). In pursuing this purpose, the church exercises discipline at three graduated levels: “admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the Church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person,” (30.4).

Both the unity and peccability of the church call for *ecclesiastical connections*. The purpose of such connections – manifested in “synods and councils” (WCF 31) – is “the better government, and further edification, of the Church,” (31.1). Appointed and convened by the “overseers and other rulers of particular churches” in the name of Christ, these connectional assemblies exercise several important prerogatives, and their “decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God,

²³⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5-6.

are to be received with, reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word," (31.2)

Our confession lays two limits on the "decrees and determinations" of ecclesiastical assemblies. First, they may *never be elevated to the level or authority of Scripture*: "All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both," (31.3; cf. WLC 3, WSC 2). Second, they *must be consistent with the spirituality of the church*: "Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the common wealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate," (31.5).

The Resurrection Community

The church, for all its flaws and warts in this life, is a glorious institution. J.I. Packer captures some of this glory in a memorable description:

What is the church? It is the true seed of faithful Abraham, Jew and non-Jew together, chosen by God, justified through faith, and freed from sin for a new life of personal righteousness and mutual ministry. It is the family of a loving heavenly Father, living in hope of inheriting his entire fortune. It is the community of the resurrection, in which the powers of Christ's historic death and present heavenly life are already at work.²³¹

It is this concept of a "community of the resurrection" that our confession describes when it speaks "of the communion of the saints," (WCF 26). United to Jesus "in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory," we are thus "united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man," (26.1). The communion of the saints is manifested by "an holy fellowship" in three areas: "the worship of God... spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things." In this holy fellowship we are to pursue ecumenical connection "as God offereth opportunity" with "all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus," (26.2).

In order to avoid both theological and practical errors in the exercise of this holy fellowship (26.3), the communion of the saints requires wise facilitators to serve as stewards. Who is entrusted with this ministry? Thomas Peck suggests the following:

It was in this form, "in relieving each other in outward things according to their several abilities and necessities" (WCF 26.2), that the communion of saints was first and most conspicuously exhibited in the primitive church; and it was in connection with this form that the deacons first appeared (Acts 6.1-6). They were the deacons of 'tables,' as the apostles were deacons of 'the word.' The saints had communion with each other in the apostles' teaching and in breaking of bread and in prayers (Acts 2.42); but they had also communion with each other in 'outward things'; and this form of communion is that which the narrative enlarges upon in the succeeding verses (44, 45), and reverts to in 4.32-37. The prime aspect, then, of the office of deacon is that of a representative of the communion of saints.²³²

²³¹ Packer, *Knowing God*, 254.

²³² Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (reprint: Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 198.

Important Questions

1. Following the social contract political philosophy of the Enlightenment, the preamble to the *American Declaration of Independence* reads as follows:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

- a. According to the *Declaration*, what makes civil government legitimate? Per this understanding, all civil governments are ultimately manifestations of what form?
 - b. According to our standards, what makes civil authority legitimate? Per this understanding, all civil governments are ultimately a manifestation of what form?
 - c. How do the differing answers to (a) and (b) lead to different rationales for civil disobedience and/or outright revolution?
2. Suppose a young person in your congregation is considering enlisting or taking a commission in the military, and comes to you asking whether you think such service is biblical. What sort of considerations should be included in that conversation?
 3. American political discourse has a long, bipartisan tradition of criticizing one's political leaders or opponents. How should Christians exercise of this liberty?
 4. Is it impossible for a person to be saved without ever joining the visible church? Is it credible for a professing Christian to refuse to join the visible church?
 5. Why is a low view of the church so common among Western Protestant evangelicals?
 6. Though treated in a separate chapter, church censures are as much a mark of the church's integrity as those markers listed in WCF 25.4. This being the case...
 - a. What must we conclude about a church that never exercises corrective discipline?
 - b. What must we conclude about the necessity of church membership?
 - c. How would you counsel a professing believer who sees the need for neither?
 7. Though it is necessary (WCF 26.2), ecumenicity is difficult. Consider the following:
 - a. How does recognition of the peccability of the church facilitate such efforts?
 - b. How does articulation of the marks of church integrity bound such endeavors?
 8. In what ways can we encourage the communion of the saints in our congregation?

Additional Resources

n/a

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 132-147, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
27-29	153-177	85, 88-97