

Brothers: you may all recognize your contributions in its attached revision. Further notes will be appreciated J.B.

Covenanting Distinctives Today

III. The Purpose for Society: Theocracy

Christ's disciples pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). In 1743, therefore, when the Reformed Presbyterians who had emigrated to S.E. Pennsylvania renewed the Scottish League and Covenant, they drew their swords and concluded with the Cameronian motto, "Let King Jesus reign, and let all His enemies be scattered." For covenanting proceeds beyond theological method (the principle of Biblical inerrancy) and church discipline (the preservation of ecclesiastical purity) into the realm of society as a whole. This is, in fact, one of the most distinctive, as well as one of the most misunderstood, of its areas of emphasis. How, for example, is one to justify in the past, or apply to the present, the covenanters' refusal to vote? In Britain they still refuse: not as isolationists, but because of an unwillingness to settle for anything short of a theocratic system. Theocracy, in its OT sense of one special nation being chosen by God, had of course terminated with the Jewish state's rejection of Christ (21:43, 23:38); but in its more general sense, as a goal to be sought within society, the covenanters insisted, "The Lord is our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; He will save us" (Isa. 33:22).

In 1896 Reformed Presbyterians from Scotland, Ireland, and America, at the 1st International Convention affirmed "the distinct spheres of the State and Church, and the responsibility of each in its own proper sphere to Christ." They also agreed that "these two institutions mutually help and support each other in the advancement of the kingdom of their common Lord, according to the Divine Word." For while "Synods are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth" (West. Conf., XXXI, 4), and "Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments" (XXIII, 3), the English and Scottish parliaments did bind themselves by the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 to the basic authority of Christ, including "the extirpation of Popery, Prelacy, superstition, profaneness, and whatever is contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness."

It is true, Jesus had told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36); and elsewhere in the NT His kingship may still lie in the sphere of belief (Acts 8:12, 28:23). But the same Jesus who refused Peter's sword "this far" (at His arrest, Lk. 22:51) had already advised His disciples to obtain swords for the days ahead (v. 36). At His ascension He then received a royal investiture, mediated from the Father; and the heavenly (angelic) powers were made subject to His will (I Pet. 3:22). The Gospels, however, do not limit Him to the status of "a refugee on the throne of heaven. . . . [Not simply do] we define the mediatorial kingship of Christ as His official power to rule all things in heaven and on earth [Mt 28:18; cf. I Cor. 15:24] for the glory of God" (L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pp. 410, 406); but His disciples are to lead men "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:20). The Westminster Confession in the Church of Scotland and the R.P.C. of North America ("Old Light") therefore asserts of the Christian magistrate that "it is his duty to take order . . . that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed." (XXIII, 3)

But in the year 1660 Charles II regained the throne of Britain; his Act Recissory of 1661 repudiated the Solemn Covenant to which he had twice sworn loyalty (1650 and 1651); and for the next quarter of a century Scotland was bathed in the blood of those who endeavored to maintain Presbyterianism. What could be done? The NT had instructed believers to submit to governors (Rom. 13:1, I Pet. 2:13), without

resistance (Rom. 13:2), to honor the king (I Pet. 2:17), and to "pray for all in authority, that we may lead a peaceable life in all godliness" (I Tim. 2:2). The ruler was God's "minister, [ideally] for good . . . to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Rom. 13:4). Yet when Rome turned from its role of protecting the good (e.g., rescuing Paul from Jewish lawlessness) to one of persecuting that same good (e.g., executing Paul under Neronian lawlessness), then the NT was able to condemn the empire and its emperor as a "mother of harlots and abominations. . . . Reward her even as she has rewarded you" (Rev. 17:5, cf. v. 18; 18:6). That is, if the state forces its citizens to choose between Christ and Caesar, then the Christian must reject earthly allegiance (Acts 4:19-21) and render <sup>up</sup> to God the things that are God's (Mt. 22:21). So in 1680, after twenty years of persecution, Donald Cargill inscribed in the Queenferry Paper, "We shall set up over ourselves . . . governors according to the Word of God"; and Richard Cameron, in the Sanquhar Declaration, anticipated the action of the parliament of Scotland by eight years, in rejecting the Stuart kings; for they had ceased to "act as ministers of God, in . . . subordination to God, in defence of our covenanted Reformation and the subjects' liberties" (James Renwick's Informatory Vindication, 1687). The decade of the Covenant, that is, had been unique in history: Reformed Christians usually find themselves in the minority, with the reins of government resting in <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ hands of . . . The American Synod of New York and Philadelphia <sup>(and so also the R.P.C. Evangelical Synod, or 'New Light,' today)</sup> thus acted realistically in 1788 when it contented itself with tolerance --- for everybody --- and emended paragraph XXIII, 3, of the Westminster Confession to read, "It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church . . . in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatsoever shall enjoy unquestioned liberty of discharging every function . . . according to their own profession and belief . . . that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity . . . to any other person whatsoever." Even with the accession of William and Mary and the Revolution Settlement of 1690, it was the Act Recissory that remained in force, not the Covenant; England's Test Act still required Anglican communion before the taking of any state office; and the covenanters simply refused to accept it, particularly in the matter of voting.

Could, however, changes of procedure occur in the R.P.C. without affecting the covenanted distinctives? The answer must be affirmative. The Scottish R.P. testimony of 1761 had taken a stand against the payment of taxes; but the testimony of 1839 shifted to one of approval, though it still opposed voting. With the abolition of the Test Act, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel argued that "though the sovereign is bound to maintain the Church of England . . . though that Church is an essential part of the constitution . . . dissenters should not be called upon to acknowledge that principle"; and in 1863 most of the R.P.C. of Scotland voted to accept <sup>the</sup> franchise. As Lord Muir, judge <sup>at</sup> the 1877 Ferguson Bequest case put it, "These matters were dealt with by that body as mere matters of regulation, and not as being in themselves the actual leading tenets of the body. What was done in 1863 as to the Electors Franchise and the Oath of Allegiance was not in the least inconsistent with what was thus done in 1839" (M. Hutchison, The R.P.C. in Scotland: Its Origin and History, 1680-1876, pp. 339, 418-419). Yet Professor John S. More insisted, "The oath of allegiance . . . 1688 to its present form, was undoubtedly intended to bind every person who swore it to recognize and submit to the constitution

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as then settled . . . [including] the supremacy of the Queen in all matters civil and ecclesiastical" (John M'Donald, Jehovah Nissi: the Lord my Banner, p. 194); and it may be significant that thirteen years later the "voting" R.P.'s had joined one of the larger Presbyterian bodies in Scotland and disappeared, while it is the minority that has continued to the present. It was they who hosted the R.P. international conventions of 1896 and 1938, the former of which resolved, "We pledge ourselves anew to practical dissent and separation from the present constituted governments of Great Britain and the U.S.A., which, with all their many excellencies, nevertheless withhold from the King of kings, and from His paramount law of national life, the honor of the ~~S~~upremacy which is their rightful due."

Meanwhile the R.P. in America had adopted the pattern established in Scotland. In its 1806 Reformation Principles Exhibited, the men of the covenant recognized that in pagan lands, just as in the Roman Empire of Paul's day, the believer must live "in submission to such authority as may exist, agreeably to civil duty" (XXIX, 5); but for those nations where conditions had changed to the point that regenerate men had power within the state, as in the U.S.A., it forbade the condoning of evil and quoted Psalm 94:20, "Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with Thee, which frameth mischief by a law?" The accompanying paragraph asserts, "God is the fountain of all authority, and civil magistrates are His duputies. Obedience is due to their lawful commands; but no power, which deprives the subject of civil liberty or which authorizes false religion, is approved by God or ought to be esteemed or supported by man as a moral institution" (XXIX, 3). Covenanters still were not voting! But a primary moral difficulty in the U.S. Constitution lay in its authorization of the slave trade, which authorization expired in 1808. In 1812, the R.P. Synod correspondingly ruled that "disapprobation of the presently existing constitution is a matter of [individual] conscience"; and in 1821, "No connection with the order of the state is prohibited by the church, except what truly involves immorality." Some still felt that believers could not participate in U.S. government until the Constitution, positively, should recognize Christ as its ruler and Scripture as its rule; in 1833 they therefore constituted the separate R.P.C. of North America (Old Light), stating in their Covenant of 1871, "We will continue to refuse to incorporate by any act with the political body, until this blessed reformation has been secured." Now, however, both branches of the R.P.C. frequent the voting booths of this land where, negatively at least, false religion is not authorized.

Has then ~~the~~ Reformed Presbyterianism in America forfeited ~~the~~ <sup>this</sup> covenant distinctive <sup>and</sup> giving up its purpose of seeking a theocratic society? By no means! Whatever be one's particular applications with the overall concept of its "descending obligation" --- e.g., in respect to taxes or the franchise --- the covenant itself, as stated by Professor Chancellor of Belfast in 1881, possesses a "permanence that no power on earth or in hell is able to destroy. It was the simple acceptance of God's Word as authoritative and supreme in all matters. What change can ever be morally effected here?" (M'Donald, p. 16) If the man who prays, "Thy will be done on earth" is concerned ~~for~~ <sup>should</sup> the purity of the visible church, he ~~must~~ also be concerned for the purity of the visible society. As early as 1800 the Reformed Presbytery took the lead among American denominations in decreeing that "No slaveholder should be allowed the communion of the church," even at the loss of

most of its southern congregations. In 1896 the first international R.P. convention spoke out against "this iniquitous and demoralizing drink traffic," even while meeting where the major export <sup>consists</sup> of Scotch whisky. Yet today, while liberals stage demonstrations --- though often unclear over what, or why they should demonstrate --- conservatives, though fully understanding the what and why of God's law, are not conspicuously identifiable with apostles of whom it was said, "These have turned the world [of Caesar] upside down . . . saying that there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7).

Two qualifications, however, must be kept in view, lest the covenanted goal for a theocratic society become misdirected. (1) The Bible makes it clear that human efforts are not about to "bring in the kingdom" (II Tim. 3:1). Yet to believe that only Christ's second coming can establish the millennium in no way justifies negligence in doing what one can now to "establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15, NAS). To believe that only Christ's presence can deal effectively with inward sin (see Zeph. 3:8-9) in no way exempts the believer from courageous efforts on behalf of legislation to bring society's overt conduct into conformity with the law of Christ. Those whom the Lord has providentially placed within free lands may once again strive to obey that OT injunction (which lay beyond the power of NT disciples, muzzled, as they were, under imperial Rome): "Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be established in righteousness" (Prov. 25:5). (2) The Bible makes it clear that the primary task of the church, as a church (just as of the apostles in Acts 17), is to make disciples (Mt. 28:19) --- not democracies. The Westminster Confession requires that synods are to engage in no "civil affairs . . . unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary" (XXXI, 4); or, as stated ~~by~~ in Point 5 of The Frankfurt Declaration of 1970, "The primary visible task of mission is to call out the messianic, saved community from among all people" (II Cor. 5:20, I Pet. 2:9). Still, Point 7 of this same Declaration adds, "We do, however, affirm the determined advocacy of justice and peace by all churches." The individual members of synods do engage in civil affairs; and, as stated by J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., "Whatever the Bible teaches on any subject, the church must teach on appropriate occasions and in due and proper proportion. . . . The principle that we should not bring 'politics' into the pulpit, does not mean that the church must be silent on clear-cut moral issues in the secular world around us" (Systematic Theology, I; 424). In the words of Reformation Principles Exhibited, concerning King Jesus and the R.P. distinctive of His theocratic rule, "Submission is due to the mediatory authority, from all the intelligent creatures of God. Men, not only as saints and church-members, but also in every possible relation and condition, are under obligation to subserve His gracious purposes according to His law" (XX, 3). Next issue: The Practice of Worship, with Majesty.