

“Because of the Depravity of Mankind”

A Sermon on Article Thirty-Six of the Belgic Confession

Texts: Proverbs 8:12-21; Romans 13:1-7

Article 36 - The Civil Government

We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.¹ He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies,² in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order.³ 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 (Rom 13:4). Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere,⁴ and God may be honored and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.

Moreover, everyone - no matter of what quality, condition, or rank - ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things⁵ which do not disagree with the Word of God.⁶ We ought to pray for them, 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 Tim 2:1, 2).

For that reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice,⁷ introduce a communion of goods, and confound the decency that God has established among men.

¹ Prov 8:15; Dan 2:21; Jn 19:11; Rom 13:1 ² Ex 18:20 ³ Dt 1:16, 16:19; Judg 21:25; Ps 82; Jer 21:12, 22:3; 1 Pt 2:13-14 ⁴ Ps 2; Rom 13:4a; 1 Tim 2:1-4 ⁵ Mt 17:27, 22:21; Rom 13:7; Tit 3:1; 1 Pt 2:17 ⁶ Acts 4:19, 5:29 ⁷ 2 Pt 2:10; Jude 8

In Judges 21:25 we find a remarkably insightful description of what happens when sinful human nature goes unchecked by legitimate governing authority—“*In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*” Where there is no legitimate civil government, lawlessness reigns, even in the covenant community. Because God is gracious to his sinful creatures, he has given us civil government to protect us from ourselves and from each other, as well as to provide a certain level of order and protection so that the church can go about its own divinely-appointed mission of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. This is why in Romans 13, the apostle Paul can speak of the pagan Roman Empire as a “minister of God.”

As we near the end of our series on the Belgic Confession, we come to article thirty-six, which deals with the Christian view of civil government. Like so many of the other articles of our confession, this article must be considered against the historical circumstances at the time it was written. As we have mentioned

on numerous occasions, the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster is clearly in his mind when Guido De Bres composed this article in 1561. During the years of 1534-35, a number of Anabaptist radicals led by John Mattys and then after his death, John of Leyden, overthrew the city government of Münster and instituted what is now known as the “Anabaptist kingdom of Münster.”

Claiming to receive direct revelation from the Holy Spirit, and appealing to those Old Testament passages which refer to Israel’s unique role in redemptive history as a theocracy ruled by of God, and then applying those verses to himself as though he were a Davidic king, John of Leyden and his followers declared all forms of civil government to be illegitimate—except, of course, that government which they claimed God was establishing through them.

Not only did John declare all existing contracts and marriages null and void, he abolished all private property and established a city-wide communal form of living. But what was worse, seeing Münster as the millennial kingdom of God then dawning upon the earth, John and his followers took up arms, and for nearly two years held off the poorly trained local armies, claiming these military victories proved that God was on their side. John’s soldiers were not defeated until the local prince finally brought in paid mercenaries, for whom the Anabaptists were no match.

Thus the Anabaptists were not only guilty of heresy, but of anarchy as well. With the fall of Anabaptist kingdom of Münster and the execution of all those who brought this horrible thing to pass, all of Europe was determined never to let such a thing happen again. In fact, some have argued that the roots of modern Europe’s current secularist mind set can be traced to this very event—if religious zealots can do such things, then religious zeal is a bad thing. If the Reformed wing of the Reformation was to have any legitimacy at all, Reformed theologians and confessions had to be very clear that they had no sympathies for the Anabaptists, not only on a theological level, but they must also clearly state that the Anabaptist view of civil government was not only unbiblical, but that those who perpetrated this disaster got everything they deserved—harsh as that was. God gives the sword to civil government to defend its citizens from the likes of John of Leyden.

Therefore, as our confession takes up this very important subject, De Bres must not only set forth a biblical view of civil government—especially its legitimacy (indeed, its necessity), but he must distance the Reformed view of civil government from that of the Anabaptists, since it was a common Roman Catholic tactic at the time, to state that the Anabaptist’s behavior was the inevitable consequence of the Reformation’s challenge to Rome’s authority. The Roman church saw itself as the glue which held together all of the various institutions of life. So, if Protestants attack the authority of Rome, they are sowing the seeds which came to full flower in Münster.

To accomplish his purpose, De Bres makes five main points in article thirty-six. First, our confession discusses the origin of human government—because of human sin, God instituted human government as a function of his common grace. Thus human government is to be of benefit for all—Christian and non-Christian alike. Second, our confession discusses the purpose of human government—restrain human sinfulness through armies and police forces, with courts, judges and jails to punish and restrain wrong doers. God gives to government the sword, not only for a national defense, but also to mete out punishment for capital crimes (death penalty). Third, our confession discusses the relationship between human government and the kingdom of God (the church). By establishing and preserving civic order, the secular government provides an environment in which the church go about fulfilling its kingdom mandate, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. Fourth, our confession addresses the duties of Christian citizens—which is to participate in civic government to the fullest, as Christian

citizens, and therefore, to be the best citizens possible. Article thirty-six concludes by rejecting the errors of the Anabaptists, who, in many cases denied the legitimacy of private property, as well as the legitimacy of civil government.¹

What, then, is the origin of human government?

While our many of contemporaries see the development of human government as a parallel to the evolution of the species, our confession rightly rejects this. Our confession states, “we believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.” Indeed, the fact of the divine origin of human government is clearly taught throughout Holy Scripture.

As we see in Proverbs 8, when the author is discussing the meaning of true wisdom, he reminds us that true wisdom, in part, consists in the knowledge of that revealed in verses 15 and 16: “*By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth.*” Thus God has decreed that kings rule and governments make laws. The same thing is taught in Daniel 2:21: “*He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them.*” God determines who is royalty and who is a commoner. In Psalm 86:9, we read of “*all the nations you have made.*”

And then in John 19:11, when Jesus is brought before Pilate, our Lord tells the Roman prefect, “*You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.*” Thus, God is sovereign over all nations and those who rule them, even a Roman governor in the backwaters of Palestine.

In Acts 14:24-26, Paul puts it this way.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”

Not only do all men and women descend from Adam (the biological and federal head of the human race), but God sets the boundaries of all nations as part of his providential control over all the earth. Therefore, human government is not a human invention. Rather, government and nations are given to us by God after the fall of the race into sin, so that just laws will be made and so that some form of rule and order will be established upon the earth.

It is not a good thing when everyone does what is right in their own eyes! Unless there are courts and judges and police and jails to back them up, we will do what is right in our own eyes, just as Israel did when there was no king!

The key biblical text in this discussion is Romans 13:1-7. In this passage, Paul writes “*everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*” It is important to keep in mind that Paul is not speaking about Israel—the only theocracy ordained by God according to his redemptive-historical purpose, so as to ensure that promised seed would come and to point us ahead to that day when

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 266.

the kingdom of God is fully manifest upon the earth. No, Paul says this of Rome—that pagan empire which seemed to rule to the ends of the earth. And since even Rome has been established by God, governing authorities are to be obeyed.

In fact, Paul goes on to say,

“Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.”

Paul’s point is very simple—good citizens need not fear the state. Only those who do wrong (criminals) need fear legitimate governing authority. In fact, those who serve in government, are now called God’s servants. *“For he [the governing authority] is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”* Thus, God clearly grants the sword—the symbol of arms for self-defense—to the state, so that the state can punish those who do wrong, as well as protect its citizens from other nations who seek to harm its citizens. Just as private citizens have the right of self-defense, so do nations and governments.

Given this vital role, in verse 5, Paul goes on to speak of the duties of Christian citizens. *“Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”* As Christians, we are required to submit to those who rule over us in the city of man because God has placed them there, giving them their legitimacy to rule in the first place. This is why Paul can speak of this as a matter of conscience.

Furthermore, since government is established by God, *“this is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.”* Even though I am sure that when we get to heaven, we’ll discover that the command to pay our taxes is a scribal addition which is not in the original biblical text, until we make such a discovery, not only are we to pay our taxes, we are to *“give everyone what you owe him: `If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”*

This virtually echoes the words of 1 Peter 2:13-15:

“Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

Thus as Christians, we are commanded to obey those who rule over us and show them proper respect, since they have been given to us by God so that we are not able to do what is right in our own eyes.

That being said, it is also important to point out that even though Paul saw Rome as a legitimate and divinely-instituted authority in the mid-fifties of the first century, when his letter to the Romans was written, for the apostle John, who wrote the Book of Revelation some thirty years later, Rome was now

the God-hating Satanically-energized beast, bent on waging war on the saints. Thus, it is possible for legitimate civil government like Rome to become the beast (the agent of Satan to persecute God's people), such as was the case when Nero came to rule, and who put both Peter and Paul to death. Thus when any government ceases from exercising its God-given role to restrain evil and provide for the common good, and begins to persecute the people of God, such as we see in China, the Sudan or with the Muslim nations of the Middle East, that state is no longer to be considered a "minister of God." Christians must see such a government as a manifestation of the beast. In this case, the words of Peter and the apostles from Acts 5:29 come to mind, when they were ordered by the members of the Sanhedrin to stop preaching the gospel. "*Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men.'*" While this is not the time nor the place to talk about civil disobedience, nevertheless, this, has at times, and will perhaps again, become a necessity.

Although we've already touched on this briefly when considering those biblical texts which speak of the origin of human government, our confession now goes on to deal with the more specific question, "what is the purpose of human government?"

Our confession defines the purpose for human government along the lines just discussed in Romans 13. "[God] wants the world to be governed by laws and policies, in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order. 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 (Romans 13:4)." Given human sinfulness and our propensity to do what is right in our own eyes, it is very important to consider the words of Psalm 82, which remind of us God's attitude toward the importance of securing justice for all—especially the oppressed. "*How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*" This, of course, is but one of the divinely-determined mandates of civil government.

Indeed, the importance of maintaining justice is found throughout redemptive history as essential to the well-being of God's people. In the opening words of Deuteronomy we read of the Lord's charge to Israel,

"And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it."

The same holds true in chapter 16:

"Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you."

And then in Jeremiah 22:3, we read, "*This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.*" Since Israel was a theocracy, in which church and state are not separated it is clear that God demands just laws and protection of the

weak.

The same thing holds true in creation and natural law. As a common-grace institution, human government is to ensure that there are just laws and impartial enforcement of them, that the rich do not exploit the poor, nor are the strong allowed to exploit the weak. It is for this very reason—the exercise of justice—that God gives the sword to government, so that justice is to be preserved and defended. Just as the church is to be governed so that all things are done decently and in good order, our confession makes the point that so too, the same thing holds with human government. Evil is to be restrained and all things are done in good order—and that is the purpose of legitimate civil (a very limited and secular purpose, I might add)!

That being said, what then is the relationship between human government and the church?

Given the Anabaptist rejection of human government and their mistaken belief that their murderous, polygamous and vile kingdom of Münster, was supposedly the kingdom of God on earth, our confession must not only define and defend the legitimate role of civil government, but it must also define the relationship of church and state in an age when only baptized Christians could be full citizens of the Holy Roman empire.

This was also an age in which the Roman church often exercised its religious and political will through the princes.² It was Spanish soldiers who put De Bres and other Reformed Christians in France and the low countries to death—but they were doing the will of the Prince, who was himself doing the will of the Roman church. Thus our confession declares of the civil magistrate, “Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honored and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.”

With the coming of Christ, and his fulfillment of both the prophetic and kingly offices found in Israel, there is no theocratic form of government sanctioned under the new covenant. All governments are secular, common grace institutions, which should reflect and enforce laws which we find in the so-called second table of the law (commandments five through ten) since these are revealed through the created order (natural law) and are to reflect the value and dignity of human life, the sanctify of the family and the preservation of truthfulness and private property.

God never assigns to the secular state, the enforcement of the first table of the law—commandments one through four.³ Here is where we must keep the church and the city of God, distinct from the secular state and the city of man. It was Jesus after all who gave us the basis for keeping these two kingdoms distinction when he told the Pharisees as recounted in Matthew 22:21: “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.*” Thus, in the economy of God, there are distinct roles for both church and state and every Christian is simultaneously a citizen of both kingdoms.

² Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, pp. 269-270. Note the original wording of the confession, which included the statement that the purpose of government was “to remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship that the Kingdom of Antichrist might be destroyed.” See the decision of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (1910), as discussed in Beets.

³ R. Scott Clark, “Theses on Covenant Theology,” 4.4.8.5-11, <http://public.csusm.edu/guests/rsclark/CovTheses.htm>

Which brings us to the next point made by our confession, “What are the duties of Christian citizens?”

Our confession describes the duties of Christian citizens as follows. “Moreover, everyone - no matter of what quality, condition, or rank - ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things⁵ which do not disagree with the Word of God. We ought to pray for them, 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 2:1, 2).” Since our confession includes 1 Timothy 2:1-2 as a reference, it would be help, I think, to simply quote the entire passage.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior.”

While some mistakenly believe that this is a passage in which God desires, but does not achieve the salvation of all men (verse 4, states, that God wants “*all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*”), in reality this verse is simply describing the “all” for whom we are to pray—kings and all those in authority.

Thus it has always been the practice of the Reformed church to devote at least part of the pastoral prayer to all those whom God has placed in authority over us and for the continuance of peace, quiet and prosperity of our nation. For this is of benefit to all. God commands us to pray for our secular leaders, and thus we pray for them to rule justly and exercise mercy. We implore God to protect our nation and we give thanks for our freedom and prosperity.

But since we are called to be good citizens precisely because God has ordained all human government, and especially since as Americans, we of all people bask in the light of freedom and prosperity, it is vital that we participate in the electoral process as informed Christian citizens. In a sense, our Christian voter’s guide is the second table of the law (commandments 5-10). As Christian citizens, we are to vote for and support those candidates who believe that these commandments (and the natural law which reflects them) are the basis for our freedom and liberty and who will ensure that the kind of just and equitable laws which God requires are enacted and enforced—laws which protect our religious freedom (and that of others), which further the well-being of the poor and oppressed, which defend and respect private property and individual rights, which defend the sanctify of marriage and the family (something of which we should be especially mindful, now that we face the real possibility of homosexual marriage and since we live in an age of a holocaust upon the unborn through abortion). We are obligated to be informed so as to be the kind of citizens God demands that we be.

There is simply no excuse whatsoever for Christians not being informed on political issues, or not voting and not participating in the electoral process as Christian citizens. Since God ordained government and instructs us to obey those who lead, it is vital that we seek the election of those who will preserve and defend the kinds of things we find in the second table of the law. Furthermore, since human government comes from God, public service is a legitimate and important calling. Christians should be willing to consider public service, should God call them to serve in such a capacity in the city of man. This not only extends to public office, but things such as military service, police, fire and even public works. God commands us to pray for our leaders and public servants and to respect and honor them.

And briefly, what about the Anabaptist view of government which De Bres opposes?

Our confession identifies the issues as follows, “For that reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice, introduce a communion of goods, and confound the decency that God has established among men.” Given Rome’s polemic that Protestantism is essentially seditious, it is vital for the author of our confession to affirm as clearly as possible that Reformed Christians are law-abiding citizens, who endeavor to fulfill their civic responsibilities and who do as Paul has commanded in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, “*make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands,*” in other words, be a good citizen.⁴ Therefore, de Bres must not only condemn the Anabaptist error, he must reaffirm with equal force that the Reformed will endeavor to be good citizens.

What then, do we say by application?

The biblical record is clear that God gives us civil government because of the depravity of mankind. Legitimate civil government not only restrains that sinful impulse to do what is right in our own eyes, but such government is to provide that peace and security which is necessary to enable the church to fulfill its mission. Since government is given to us by God, Christians are to be the best citizens possible, knowing the current issues at stake and then as conscience dictates. We are to vote for those individuals who will govern in such a way as to promote and defend those laws and policies which comport with the second table of the law. Everyone here should be a registered voter and vote as a Christian citizen.

But if we must acknowledge the legitimacy of government, we must also acknowledge its limits. While civil government is given because of the depravity of mankind and can restrain sinful human behavior through the use of force if need be, neither government nor its policies and do anything about human depravity except to restrain it. The transformation of sinful human nature is something only the grace of God and the gospel can accomplish. Thus let us not be naive enough to think that if enough of the right people are elected to office, the millennial age will dawn.

Legitimate civil government is to provide the space for the church to fulfill its mandate—preaching the law and the gospel and administering the sacraments according to the word of God. Neither government nor the church can do what they are ordained to do if the government takes on religious duties, or if the church sees its mission as essentially political. In such cases, both divinely-ordained institutions lose their legitimacy and sadly, the gospel is emptied of its power.

Thus let us do as we are called to do. As Christians we preach the law and the gospel. We administer the sacraments and see our duties in the city of man as informed by our citizenship in the kingdom of God. Let us be good citizens. Let us pray for those in authority over us. Let us do as Peter commands: *Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*

⁴ Beets, [The Reformed Confession Explained](#), p. 272.