

STATE & CHURCH
Romans 13:1-7
Belgic Confession – Article # 36

Teaching for Peace Church
October 26, 2008

PURPOSE – In light of the upcoming election, help people to think through the calling of government, its purpose, its limits and its need for our support & prayers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's turn in our Bibles to Romans 13.

1. The part of the Belgic Confession that I want to examine this Reformation Sunday evening is Article 36 – titled, "The Civil Government". We'll turn to it momentarily. Its thoughts are largely drawn out of this section of Scripture.

November 4 draws nigh! So I thought it fitting to reflect on this teaching about government – in light of the opportunity to vote; and the ongoing call to pray for our civil leaders.

Read Romans 13:1-7

Those words were written in a context not unlike Guido DeBres' in the mid-1500's – a time when the State was persecuting the church!

... submit to governing authorities ... give them what you owe them – taxes, revenue, respect, honor!

2. Now let's read ARTICLE 36 (Gray Hymnals, p. 856) - *READ*

You'll notice too a couple of ASTERIKS in this article – tied to footnotes below. Let me read the last one (I'll deal later with the first asterisk)

Read - The Synod of 1985

3. The reason this was FOOTNOTED was because of how HISTORICALLY PARTICULAR the statement was & rather offensive in language.
- (i) You recall that DeBres had a very specific AGENDA with this part of his Confession – to try to convince the governing authorities – in Doornik & Spain - that they were not revolutionary insurrectionists.
- A. So he writes, “we DETEST (= original word, not denounce) ... certain other Christian groups.”
- ANABAPTISTS were those who felt that the Mainline Reformation (“Magisterial” Reformation = Lutherans, Reformed, Episcopal) – did not go far enough. They believed Scripture taught adult / believer baptism. Some of them too felt that Christians should withdraw from the world. They were world-denouncing, not world-TRANSFORMING in theology. So they had a very limited theology of government and culture.
- The Synod of 1985 voted to footnote this because, while we may disagree with Anabaptists – not only about covenant baptism, but also the role of government – it’s wrong to state publicly in a confession that we DETEST them!
- B. Further, later research has revealed that it was only a MINORITY of Anabaptist groups – a lunatic fringe – who actually advocated the “subversion of justice and common ownership of goods”. DeBres was taking too broad a swipe! Most Anabaptist movements did not reject the higher powers and magistrates.

So that’s why DeBres’ words are now stuck on the bottom of the page.

4. For the rest of the Article, you can see that it is outlined according to:
- THE ORIGINS OF GOVERNMENT
 - THE PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT
 - THE GOVERNMENT’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH
 - WHAT CHRISTIANS OWE THE GOVERNMENT

II. THE ORIGINS OF GOVERNMENT

Both Romans 13 and Article 36 teach that government originates in God. Its authority / its “sovereignty” comes from Him.

1. This is significant because it means that, as Christians, we have a responsibility to tell our government WHO it's responsible to.
 - The Defender of the unborn, orphan and widow, poor & outcast
 - The Author of marriage – between a man & woman
 - The Giver of Life – so life is Sacred and cannot be taken with severe consequence
- (i) Because government's authority comes from God, in its exercise of authority government is responsible to Him. It must not act independent of the One who gave it authority.

Romans 13:1 – *The authorities that exist have been established by God ... Therefore the magistrate is GOD'S SERVANT to do you good (v. 4)*

In this sense, government is not neutral. There's no neutrality in anything. (Jesus said you're either for me or against me.) So within its sphere of sovereignty and responsibility, it is called to be honorable to the God who gives it authority.

- A. And we are the ones to let government know that and watch over government for that.
 - No matter the cost

III. THE PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT

1. Moving to the PURPOSE of government, Article 36 indicates that God ordained government because of the depravity of the human race. That is true! Government sets laws & enforces them by the power of the sword to restrain evil & maintain good order.

Romans 13:4 adds – *The magistrate is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

- (i) But we mustn't think that government has only arisen because of the fall of mankind into sin. Even if mankind had not sinned, there would yet be government. Government is a God-ordained means of providing order & harmony to society.
- A. This is reflected in Article 36's statement – That government is "*called to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God.*"

John Calvin put it this way: “The work of government is not only to put a BRIDLE on sin, but to be a SPUR to good.”

Under those 2 BROAD headings – “a bridle to sin and a spur to good”, there’s disagreement on how large and involved the government should be to do such – especially the latter. To what extent and how directly should a government “spur good”?

2. Article 36 – focuses on the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God so that there’s the “free preaching of the gospel & divine worship”.

- In other words, the government is responsible to create a society where there is freedom of conscience with respect to one’s beliefs in God.

- (i) The Article recognizes that government has a “tendency” to grow too large and monolithic – exercising “absolute authority” – not allowing the preaching of the Word of God.

I.e. – So in some Western countries with larger governments (and hence more monolithic thought), it’s becoming TESTY for preachers to speak on Biblical views of marriage & homosexual practice.

- (ii) But government should “function in the sphere entrusted to them” (Article 36) – which is to create a PEACEABLE SOCIETY – in which “the Word of God can have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted”

- a. By that we take it to mean every power that would limit the freedom to proclaim the gospel – as in some Muslim-dominated states.

2. MORE GENERALLY, in Reformed thinking we recognize that the government is responsible to uphold the SECOND-HALF of the Law of God – to do with human relations: murder (the sanctity of life) and stealing (the rights of property). A wise government too is concerned with the social of the family (thou shalt not commit adultery) & perjury (thou shalt not bear false witness) – All so that a society is constructed in which the gospel is proclaimed.

The government, however is NOT responsible to enforce the first half of the law – which God to worship, days of worship, names of God, etc – those are matters of freedom of conscience. We don't FORCE people to be Christians – we invite them through the proclamation & teaching of the Word.

In that sense, we have “separation of Church & State”

3. If you notice the FIRST ASTERIK (*), the Belgic Confession was altered (involving 3 Synod meetings) to reflect this.

READ – The Synod of 1958

- (i) In our Reformed theology, we do not believe in a “SACRAL STATE” – where the church is in charge of the government – and sends it out in force to remove false worship. We believe that the power of the WORD, not the power of the SWORD, accomplishes that.
- (ii) Nor do we believe in a government that is in charge of the church – running its pulpits (like Hitler attempted to do), paying its ministers – as some Scandinavian governments yet do, owning its churches!

NO! We uphold “sphere-sovereignty” – both church and state have their own authority from God. That doesn't make the government NEUTRAL – because its authority is to honor God, like the church's. Government isn't purposed to force its citizens to be Christians, but instead create PEACEABLE CONDITIONS for the preaching of the Word.

Church & state – functionally separate – but not theologically – because both are responsible to God.

4. So how involved / how large does government get in creating such a society?

There are a number of FACTORS & “TENSIONS” you need to take into account.

- (i) One is HUMAN DEPRAVITY – Government exists to check evil.
For example, greed. We've seen this in the recent economic meltdown. When banks are too unregulated, bad things happen – poor loans, people taking advantage of others, economies begin to collapse. – people suffer –
- A. GOVERNMENT – Article 36 – is to protect the good.

(ii) Yet if you're TOO REGULATED (too involved) – the other factor & tension is the limitation that inevitably puts on human creativity, industry, freedom & responsibility.

A. As humans, we're made in the image of God. We're made to be responsible, creative; to work, to risk, to initiate and be rewarded for such. But when government gets too large, it discourages those dimensions of who we are.

If government looks after me from cradle to grave, what stimulus have I to be creative and industrious. Government can do it. All I need to do is subscribe to its ideologies.

No! When government tells me how to think, what to believe, how to raise my children, it is stepping beyond its scope of sovereignty.

The United States has become a great country because it has set up governments which both protect the good AND stimulate its citizens to be creative and productive, through a historical commitment to government limited to its own spheres of responsibility.

5. So how we vote as Christians, as I see it, takes those 2 issues into account:

(i) How does the government HONOR the God who gives it its authority? – His values as reflected in the second tablet of the Law? Creating a peaceable society for the proclamation of the gospel?

(ii) Two, is the condition of society & its citizen currently better served by MORE government involvement - stemming the effects of depravity, or LESS government involvement - encouraging human initiative and responsibility?

IV. CONCLUSION

However the upcoming election turns out, here's how ARTICLE 36 closes:

Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be SUBJECT to the government – in these FOUR SPECIFIC WAYS:

1. Pay your taxes (Rom. 13:7)
2. Hold your representatives – Democrat, Republic, or Independent – in honor & respect
3. Obey them – unless their demands conflict with our heavenly Ruler (Acts 5:29)
4. Pray for them – 1 Tim. 2:1-2

... which we'll do at this time, in response to the Word.

PRAYER