

The
RELATION of CHURCH
and STATE

By
RICHARD C. REED, D. D.



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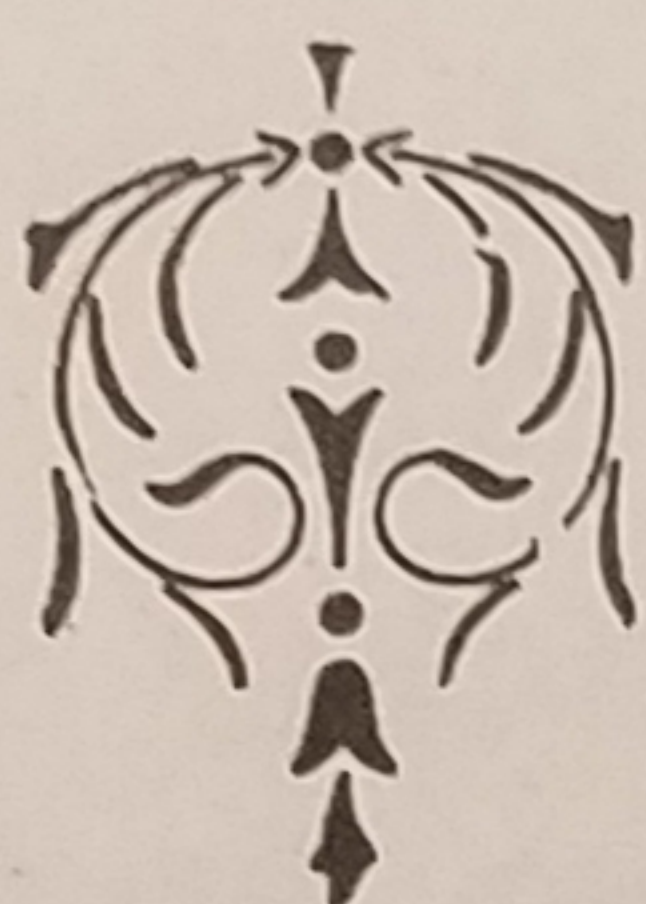
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“Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

This stands as an official doctrine, as a credal statement in the Confession of Faith of every Presbyterian Church in this country. There is perfect harmony of profession; but differences of interpretation have made this the battleground for many a war of angry words. The existence of our Church as a separate organization is due immediately to what our fathers regarded as a violation of the principles embodied in this statement. The famous protest of Dr. Hodge against the “Spring Resolutions” was based on the ground that the Old School Assembly of 1861 adopting those resolutions decided the political question as to what government the allegiance of Presbyterians as citizens was due, and made that decision a condition of membership in the church. Such an “intermeddling with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth” was deemed a plain violation of our Constitution. Forty-seven Presbyteries in the South took that view of the Assembly’s action, withdrew from the mother Church and organized what is now the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. From that day to this our Church has avowedly stood for a strict construction of this provision of the Constitution. It has tried, not with perfect success, to exclude from its courts all discussion of political questions; and refuses alliance with any and all

organizations that aim merely at political or social reforms. Perhaps this more than any other one thing distinguishes our Church from the other Presbyterian Churches not only of this country, but of the world. The Presbyterian Churches of England, Scotland and Ireland bring all manner of political questions into their courts for discussion; and they embody the results of their discussion in pointed resolutions for the benefit of the civil powers. As a rule the Presbyterian Churches of this country are somewhat restrained, and yet with the exception of our Church, which, sad to say, is not always an exception, they put a very liberal interpretation on this paragraph of their Constitution.

Christians owe allegiance to two distinct sovereignties. Andrew Melville, the illustrious successor of John Knox, expressed this truth in words which have become familiar to students of Presbyterian history: "There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland; there is King James, the head of the commonwealth, and there is King Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James VI is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member." This dual relation, this twofold citizenship, involving two distinct spheres of duty, has through all the history of the Church given rise to much confusion and strife. The Divine Head of the Church did not fail to note the distinction between the two sovereignties and the two sets of obligations. On the contrary He clearly defined and strongly emphasized the distinction. But when it comes to dealing with power, it is very difficult for men to keep within proper limits. So it has come to pass that things secular and things spiritual, which

should ever be kept separate, have been mixed and mingled to the unspeakable hurt of both Church and State and to all the dearest interests of man. It is not easy to say which has been the greater sinner in the abuse of power, the State or the Church. It would be only truth to say that during a long period of history they were partners in guilt. The sad story ought to impress the lesson that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

A fruitful source of error touching the relation of Church and State, and which is bearing bitter fruit down to our own day, has been a failure to apprehend the full significance of the change which took place when the Church passed from its Jewish to its Christian form. The Theocratic Constitution under which the Jews lived merged the two jurisdictions of Church and State into one. The same officers administered the laws of both; the same kind of penalties attached to both tables of the decalogue; and punishments were meted out alike to sins against God and to crimes against man. But at the dawn of the Christian era, Christ annulled this old order, and drew a line broad and deep between the things which belong to Caesar and the things which belong to God. He distinctly disclaimed kingship over the temporal and secular sphere. "My kingdom is not of this world else would my servants fight." The plain and necessary implication is that His kingdom was not established for worldly ends, however good and desirable some of these may be; nor must the ends for which His kingdom was established be sought in the use of worldly means. These pregnant words were spoken to a civil ruler, and were obviously meant as a distinct disclaimer of all purpose to intermeddle with the affairs of State. They

were so understood by Pilate, who, on this understanding, at once pronounced the prisoner innocent: "I find no fault in this just person."

The whole career of Jesus may be cited as proof of the correctness of Pilate's interpretation. He made no complaint against political conditions, notwithstanding the fact that His fellow countrymen were writhing under them, and brought the utmost pressure to constrain Him by word or deed to put Himself in opposition. But He persistently refused to do this. He sought no change of a single law; He agitated for no kind of social or political or industrial reform. Surely it is instructive to note that so far as appears from His recorded utterances, He was perfectly content with the civil order under which He lived. Some burning invectives fell from His lips, but they were leveled not against officials of the State, but against self-righteous and hypocritical ecclesiastics.

His apostles, trained under Him and inspired by Him, followed His example. They submitted without a murmur to the "powers that be," and taught others so to do. They denounced no officials of government; they circulated no petitions to influence civil legislation; they did absolutely nothing, said absolutely nothing, so far as the record shows, for the purpose of bringing about a better social or political condition. They were accused of "turning the world upside down," but the accusation was not brought by those who feared for the welfare of the State.

As if to make the lesson more plain, and to free the Church from all temptation to recur to Old Testament precedents, the Providence of God com-

pletely separated the Church from the State for the space of three hundred years, and permitted a relation of antagonism to exist between them. During all this while, the Church could not if it would mingle the things of Caesar and the things of God. It was constrained willingly or unwillingly to endure things as they were, bad as they were, and to give itself to the single task of winning individual souls to the obedience of the faith. Results proved that this single task was not only the Church's divinely appointed task, but its all-sufficient task. Never has the Church made a more glorious history than when it was shut up to its proper work and its exclusive work of preaching the Gospel of Christ, and administering His laws. It asked nothing of the State but the privilege of existence, and when this was denied, it proved its power to flourish and to conquer by patient suffering and heroic martyrdom. Moreover, its efficiency in the transformation of civil, political and industrial conditions was never greater than when it had no voice and could have no voice in directly influencing the policy of the State. Even while the government was persecuting, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified was emptying the temple of idols, and sending the currents of a pure transforming life through all the social and political activities of the empire.

The lesson of Divine Providence extending over three hundred years of the Church's early history demonstrated most clearly that the Church did not need any kind of alliance with the State in order to do the work assigned it by its glorified Lord. It was rapidly growing in numbers, in strength and spreading its benign influence through all ranks of society, and exerting a transforming

power on all the social, religious and political institutions of the Roman Empire. But the lesson was not thoroughly learned; or if so it was soon forgotten. No sooner did the opportunity offer than the Church struck hands with the State. Immediately on the conversion of Constantine, the fair bride of Christ, freed from persecution, began to listen to the wooings of imperial power, and to soil her garments with the stain of worldly politics. The Emperor, still wearing the title of "Pontifex Maximus," signifying that he was head of the Pagan Priesthood, assumed also the office of "Bishop in externals" of the Church and thus wedded the power of the sword to the power of the keys. From that day dissent from the Church was treated as a crime against the State, and religious liberty, promised in the famous Edict of Milan, perished from the face of the earth. The Church, still bearing the marks of recent persecution, became itself a persecutor, and started on that pathway which led to St. Bartholomew, the Spanish Inquisition, and the butcheries of the Duke of Alva. Such was the final outcome of the maladjustment of the relation between the Church and the State. Christianity, wielding a power that was foreign to its nature, won an easy pre-eminence over Mohammedanism as a more heartless and implacable system of cruelty. The Jews, driven from Spain by the terrors of the Holy Inquisition, found a refuge among the followers of the Arabian prophet, which they sought in vain among those who wore the name of Christ.

In the upheaval of the sixteenth century the nations of Western Europe broke the fetters with which the Papacy had so long bound them. Rejoicing in this hardly won liberty, they were care-

ful in readjusting the relation of Church and State to safeguard their own rights. They would take no risk of putting their necks again under the yoke of spiritual domination. In an excess of caution they went to the other extreme and enslaved the Church. To this day, the Protestant Churches of Europe, especially of Continental Europe, are strangers to the spiritual and ecclesiastical independence which belongs to them by Divine right. A relation of Church and State, known as Erastianism, which means State control, is still paralyzing to some extent the spiritual forces set free in the sixteenth century by the revolt against Rome.

When the American Colonies secured their independence, and came to set up a government of their own, the conditions were such as to demand a very careful scrutiny of the relation which should exist between the power of the sword and the power of the keys. The presence of several religious denominations, entitled to equal rights and privileges, precluded all thought of a church establishment. The wise statesmen of that day reached the conclusion that the proper thing to do was to decree an absolute divorce between the civil and ecclesiastical powers. This decision was first embodied in the Bill of Rights framed by the Virginia Convention in May, 1776. The same principle has been incorporated in every state constitution, and was written into the Federal Constitution in the first amendment that was made to that document. This principle of the complete separation of Church and State has been pronounced by one of our statesmen "the chief cornerstone of the great American system of government," and by another "the contribution which

America has made to the science of government."

The American doctrine is that State and Church move in different orbits that do not intersect or overlap, and consequently each is absolutely independent in its own sphere. Both are ordained of God, but for different ends, demanding different methods. The end of the State is social justice. It deals with men merely as moral beings, and seeks its end by regulating and controlling men in their relations to one another. The end of the Church is spiritual regeneration. It deals with men as sinners against God, and seeks its end by bringing them to a saving knowledge of the truth. The State knows nothing of religion because it has nothing to do with man's relation to God. The Church knows nothing of civil affairs because it has nothing to do with regulating the relations of those beyond its own pale. The means of the State is force, and its symbol is the sword. The means of the Church is truth and its symbol the keys. Owing to this manifest difference as to end and method, it might seem an easy matter for both institutions to occupy the same territory and exercise jurisdiction over the same subjects without the slightest encroachment on each others prerogatives. But life is a complicated thing. Ignorance and passion and prejudice are a common inheritance, and under the blinding influence of these, we may fail to see the broadest distinctions, and may even run rough shod over our own avowed principles. To have a correct theory does not ensure against incorrect practice.

It is believed that a perfect application of the American doctrine of complete separation of Church and State would secure perfect civil and religious

liberty. But in the practical application of the theory grave difficulties have arisen. The question is raised, has the Church no mission to the State? Must it not seek to guide the civil magistrate in his official duties? When any great moral question, vitally affecting the interests of society, becomes a question of civil polity, must the Church keep its lips closed? Must it sit with folded hands when the fate of great moral reforms is trembling in the political balance? Many able and devout souls have answered these two last questions with an emphatic negative. They insist that when a political question rises into the sphere of morals, then the Church should make her voice heard. It is even asserted that in such case the Church is shamefully derelict in duty if it do not take the lead and furnish both guidance and inspiration. Appeal is made to the example of the stern and fearless prophets of the Old Dispensation. These had their commission directly from God, and they hurled their fierce denunciations into the ears of godless kings, and warned them of impending judgments. Have we not fallen heir to their mission? and shall we not emulate their noble example?

It is altogether possible that this is going too far back for our precedents. Such was the mistake of James and John, who wished to imitate the fiery zeal of Elijah. They were very promptly taught that they had not succeeded to the mission which God entrusted to the prophet of old. We should never lose sight of the fact that the worst abuses of the Church in the worst period of its history were supported by appeals to Old Testament precedents. As early as the fourteenth century, men of keen vision like Marsilius of Padua and William of

Occam saw that the very foundations of Papal despotism rested on precedents drawn from the theocratic system of the Jews; and that the only way to escape from the tyranny under which they suffered was to draw a broad and impassable line between the economy of the Old and that of the New Testament; and to recall the Church to the lessons taught both by the precepts and by the example of Christ. In vain do we look in the New Testament for a precept or a precedent that will justify the Church in throwing the weight of its corporate influence to a political party for the purpose of securing a moral reform.

As citizens of the commonwealth, Christians have ample opportunity to exert themselves to the utmost in helping to secure such civil legislation as will prove helpful to the social order. As citizens they should seek moral reforms by the use of political methods. Moral reforms are an appropriate end for the State to seek, and political methods are an appropriate means. But neither holds good with respect to the Church. The Church's commission is to make the inside of the cup and platter clean that the outside may be clean also; to make the tree good that the fruit may be good. The evidence is quite conclusive that Jesus Christ cared little for a clean outside when the inside did not correspond. His most fruitless labor was with those who were in no need of moral reformation. None were further from the kingdom than those who, "as touching the law, were blameless." The Church is traveling beyond the terms of its charter when it is using the pulpits and its courts to help the State write laws in its statute books. Christ has never authorized His Church to join with Caesar in an effort to con-

strain men to outward decency by the enactment of civil legislation and armed police. This is precisely what He avowedly did not authorize His Church to do. Moral reforms are a by-product, incidental results, of the Church's legitimate activity, but the end is spiritual regeneration, and the means are strictly and exclusively spiritual.

Another question has been raised bearing on the relation of Church and State. The world is much disturbed by evils growing out of our present social, economic and industrial order. On every hand, in the neverending conflict of selfish interests, the weak are suffering from the encroachments of the strong; capital, it is charged, is robbing labor of its just earnings; and soulless corporations are accused of coining money out of the life-blood of their victims. Those who suffer have banded themselves together in various forms of organization with the purpose and hope of ultimately forcing a recognition of their claims. In this warfare for social justice shall the Church remain neutral? Has it no mission to society as distinct from the individual? May it not—indeed, should it not—express its sympathy for the weak and oppressed by throwing the weight of its corporate influence in behalf of every movement that gives promise of bettering social conditions, and that holds out the prospect of a fuller, richer and happier life for the submerged masses? Large sections of the Church have given a practical answer to these questions by publishing programs of social service, and by enumerating lengthy lists of legal remedies for which the Church should strive. The mere fact that wrong is to be righted does not determine the Church's duty. The method of righting wrong must also be considered. This

should ever have a decisive bearing on the Church's duty. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh; for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds." The same social wrongs that now exist, existed in our Saviour's day. His sympathies were tender and active. How did that sympathy show itself? Exclusively in ministry to the individual; never by devising any program of social reform; never by hinting at any methods of relief involving civil legislation. He left it to those who exercise the rights of citizenship, and on whom the responsibility of citizenship rests, to devise all such methods of reform as depend upon the power of this sword.

The Second Book of Discipline, issued by the Church of Scotland in 1578, contained the following admonition: "Diligence should be taken, chiefly by the moderator, that only ecclesiastical things be handled in the Assemblies; and that there be no meddling with anything pertaining to the civil jurisdiction." The most rigid stickler for the absolute disjunction of Church and State could wish for no clearer, stronger statement than this. It was copied with hardly the slightest change of phraseology by the Westminster Assembly into our Confession of Faith: "Synods and Councils are to handle, or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical, and are not to meddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary." These words deserve to be taken at their face value. Note the stringency of the restraint which they impose: "Synods and Councils are to handle or conclude nothing, absolutely nothing but that which is ecclesiastical." That there might be no room

for misunderstanding, it is added "and are not to meddle with civil affairs which pertain to the commonwealth." It is not added expressly or by implication, "Except in cases where questions pertaining to civil affairs rise into the sphere of morals." Such an addition would nullify the restraint, and stultify the authors of our Confession. For nearly all questions pertaining to civil affairs have moral quality, and the Church would be forever dabbling in politics, as indeed some branches of it are.

One of the greatest, perhaps the greatest theologian of the Church in America, the saintly and scholarly Dr. Charles Hodge, was well within the bounds of truth when he said, in an article published in the Princeton Review in July, 1862: "It is the doctrine of the Scriptures and the Presbyterian Church that the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world; that it is not subject as to faith, worship or discipline to the authority of the State; and that it has no right to interfere with the State, or give ecclesiastical judgment in matters pertaining to State polity." If this be true at any time, it is true at all times. Political passions, even when war is waging, will not justify an exception; the desire for moral reforms; indignation at social wrongs; sympathy for the poor—none of these, not all of these combined, can furnish a justification for breaking over the limits of Church jurisdiction as thus defined. Those who are acting for the Church and in the name of the Churches (does this not include the Federal Council?) should not "interfere with the State, or give ecclesiastical judgment in matters pertaining to State polity." This doctrine of the complete separation of Church and State rules the civil magistrate out of

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the Church. He can not be known as civil magistrate, but only as a sinner needing salvation. This is not going a whit beyond Andrew Melville in his speech to King James: "Of whose kingdom James VI is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member." The king left his royal offices and dignities behind him when he passed through the "straight gate." It equally rules the Church authorities of the State. They can be known, not as representatives of the Church, not even as Christians, but merely as citizens of the commonwealth. The Church as such and the State as such stand unrelated. The Church has no more right to a voice in the civil affairs than the State has to a voice in ecclesiastical affairs.

It may be said that such limitation fetters the Church's energies, and shuts the door of opportunity for wide and beneficent service to a needy world. It should be borne in mind that "the good is often the enemy of the best." When the Church is seeking social, political and economic reforms, however sorely these may be needed, it is diverting its energies from the supreme task of giving lost souls a knowledge of the Saviour and winning them to penitent obedience. Moreover, it is magnifying temporal ills that already bulk too largely in the minds of those who suffer to the obscuring of the immeasurably greater spiritual ills of which men are but slightly conscious.

The Divine Head of the Church, who defined the boundaries of His Kingdom, knew better than we know that sphere within which the energies of the Church should be confined. We should not seek or desire a larger freedom of activity than is clearly authorized by His Word. The highest freedom for the Church, as for the individual, is

slavery to Christ. This is slavery to truth unmixed with error; it is slavery to the guidance of infinite wisdom and love; it is slavery to that redemptive purpose which embraced a world in its sympathies. It is like the slavery of the planets to the sun—a slavery which holds them in blessed relation to the fountain of life and light, and saves them from wandering into utter darkness and remediless ruin.

The sum of all that has been said is that our Church should remain true to the principles that gave it birth; true to the position which God in His Providence and the wisdom of our fathers assigned it; true to both the spirit and the letter of our constitution to which we have pledged our allegiance; and not suffer itself to be drawn away by the spirit of the times; or by the example of others; or even by the laudable desire for close association and co-operation with beloved brethren. We should find other ways, and we can find other ways, to express our desire for close and helpful relations with our brethren than by surrendering our priceless heritage, and dimming, or completely obliterating, our testimony to the doctrine of the separation of Church and State.

To prevent, if possible, all misunderstanding let it be noted that in its witness-bearing function the Church is not to recognize any boundary line between Church and State, or between the Church and the world. "I came to destroy the works of the devil, and every plant that my Heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up." The Church is to wage an uncompromising warfare against sin in all its forms and wherever it may show its ugly face. Quoting from our Book of Church Order, the Church is to "bear testimony against error in

Doctrine and immorality in practice within or without the Church." If the State connives at sin or abets it, this does not shield sin from the condemnation of the Church. It must lift up its voice and spare not. But its voice is to be lifted up against the sin and not against the State. Neither must the Church either through its pulpits or its courts bring a railing accusation against the officers of the State. If they are sinning as public servants, they are to be dealt with, not as public servants, but merely as sinners, and the Church should use precisely the same form of efforts to save them that it employs to save sinners who are not employees of the State. If the cashier of a bank defaults, it would be an abuse of his office for a minister of the gospel to single him out by name or otherwise and hold him up to scorn. So with a public official. It is no concern of the Church what form of service a sinner is engaged in. It is all the same whether he sins in serving a commercial, or a political corporation. The church can deal properly only with the sin and the sinner.

In the days of Pagan Rome, polytheism was supported by the laws of the government. The Emperor was deified and his worship was the most popular of all and was more nearly universal throughout the empire. This worship was made a test of loyalty. Many were the martyrs who went to their death because they would not burn incense before the Emperor's bust. Did this silence the voice of the Church against the sin of idolatry? Not for one moment. Such writers as Minucius Felix and Tertullian poured out unmeasured ridicule and sarcasm on the blemishes and immoralities of the heathen gods and upon the insincerity and inconsistency of the worshippers.

But they indulged in no harsh criticisms of their rulers. Refusing in the face of death to worship the Emperor, they nevertheless claimed him as belonging more to the Christians than to the heathen, because he reigned by the ordinance of the Christians' God, and in obeying him, they were fulfilling God's requirements.

So an argument for the activity of the Church in promoting moral, social and political reforms it is said that Christ is rightly the Lord of the whole of life, and consequently it is the mission of the Church to do what in it lies to make His Lordship effective over all spheres of human activity. There is a sense in which all this is true. Christ is not only entitled to Lordship over the whole of each human life, but He claims to be exercising this Lordship. "All authority in heaven and in earth is given into my hands." He is not waiting on the slow conquests of the church to give him supremacy. He is even now "Head over all things for the church which is His body." This is His providential Lordship, and waits not on the will of man. There is another Lordship in the Kingdom of grace. This does wait on the will of man. In this Kingdom, He reigns over none but willing subjects. It was touching this that He said: "Lo the Kingdom of God is within you." It is the mission of the church to do what in it lies to make His Lordship effective in the Kingdom of grace over every man by bringing him into willing discipleship to Christ. And then by teaching him to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded, to make Christ Lord over every department of human activity. This may seem a slow method for bringing all men in all spheres of service under the Lordship

of Christ. But it is the method which He ordained, and the only method which He has commissioned this Church to use. Moreover it is the only possible method. Never did a wilder dream, one more impossible of realization, than that of "Christianizing the social order" without first Christianizing the units composing the order.

Of course, the ethical ideals of Christianity are spreading out beyond the church and pervading all classes of citizens. In this way the church is rendering a service of incalculable value for the uplift of social, industrial and political life. But this is a far different thing from the Church trying through influencing civil legislation to force these ethical ideals on the people. Let the Church devote itself to making Christian citizens: and then in Christ's good time, we shall have a Christian Social Order, and a Christian government.