

Week 23, Wednesday, May 25, 2022: Of Lawful Oaths & Vows and Of the Civil Magistrate

Chapter 22: Of Lawful Oaths and Vows: “... a Christian should be a person whose word can be trusted ... Think about how many problems have arisen in life because people break their word ... when a religious community becomes apostate and when a nation becomes pagan[, t]he first thing ... discarded is truth ... As people of the Word, our word should be our bond.”³⁹⁵ (R.C. Sproul) “... truth-telling is specified as integral to authentic godliness ... Truth-telling ... becomes a fundamental element in true religion and in true love of one’s neighbor.”³⁹⁶ (J.I. Packer).

WCF 22:1: *A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, (a) wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth. (b)*

(a)Deut. 10:20. (b)Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; 2 Cor. 1:23; 2 Chron. 6:22-23.

Recall that the Westminster Divines were reminded of their oath “every Monday morning”³⁹⁷. Oaths promote truth in a world of liars. An oath is something we see God Himself do in Genesis 15 and 22 (see Heb. 6:13) and Psal 132:11, as did Christ in Matt. 26:63-64, and so did Paul in Acts 18:18. It also is something men do before God to other men, such as when Abraham requires it of his servant in Genesis 24. In an oath, we call on God to be witness for what we promise to someone by swearing our truthfulness, and to hold us to it in being trustworthy. Lying (not keeping your word) blasphemes God. No habitual liar will make it to heaven (Rev 21:27).

WCF 22:2: *The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear; and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. (c) Therefore, to swear vainly or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. (d) Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament, as well as under the Old; (e) so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters ought to be taken. (f)*

(c)Deut. 6:13. (d)Exod. 20:7; Jer. 5:7; Matt. 5:34,37; James 5:12. (e)Heb. 6:16; 2 Cor. 1:23; Isa. 65:16. (f)1 Kings 8:31; Neh. 13:25; Ezra 10:5.

Be careful not to swear by God “vainly or rashly” without thinking and then find you were lying or that you get yourself regrettably into something that God will bind you to keep. See Abraham’s servant as an example of first wisely qualifying details (Gen. 24). Be reverent in taking oaths, because God is your witness. And, as God is the only absolute truth and authority, you must not swear by anything or anyone else, including your mother’s grave. Ultimately, your word ought to be enough. Be trustworthy. Don’t swear casually. And don’t say, “honestly”, but “frankly”.

WCF 22:3: *Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act; and therein to avouch nothing, but what he is fully persuaded is the truth. (g) Neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and*

³⁹⁵ Sproul, vol. 2, 349, 352, 355, 362. He adds, “We should always say what we mean” (349).

³⁹⁶ Packer, 190-191.

³⁹⁷ Van Dixhoorn, 298. Per class notes on p. 8 above, in “An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament” printed before the finished standards, we see the vow every member of the Assembly took was this: “I will maintain nothing in point of doctrine, but what I believe to be most agreeable to the word of GOD: nor in point of discipline but what may make most for GOD’S glory, and the peace and good of this church.”

what he is able and resolved to perform. (h) Yet is it a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority. (i)
(g)Exod. 20:7; Jer. 4:2. (h)Gen. 24:2-3,5-6,8-9. (i)Numb. 5:19,21; Neh. 5:12; Exod. 22:7-11.

Duly consider how serious it is to take an oath and make sure you know what you are doing, such as giving a testimony in court. It is a sin to bind yourself to keeping an oath that is not good and just, such as when David makes an oath to kill Nabal, but Abigail saved him from sinning by keeping him from fulfilling it. However, “it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.”³⁹⁸ Van Dixhoorn points out that this last line was sadly deleted by the American Presbyterians.³⁹⁹ If your allegiance given to the military is understood as subservient to Christ, it is right to require; or how could you be trusted to protect your country?

WCF 22:4: *An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. (k) It cannot oblige to sin: but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man’s own hurt. (l) Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels. (m)*
(k)Jer. 4:2; Ps. 24:4; 11 Sam. 25:22, 32-34; Ps. 15:4. (m)Ezek. 17:16, 18-19; Josh. 9:18-19 with 2 Sam. 21:1.

Crossing fingers behind your back, or “not really meaning it”, does not excuse you of what you commit to with your mouth. While you must not take an oath that would cause you to sin, once you make a lawful oath, even if it is to non-Christians, you are bound to perform it even to your “own hurt”. Keeping your word shows you are noble, for “... he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.” (Ps. 15:4) The *Confession* is teaching against Anabaptists and Quakers who believe you may never take an oath due to Matthew 5:33-37. Williamson explains the text: “One of these false interpretations of the Jews was that only some oaths were binding, depending on what men swore by. Christ said that, to the contrary, such distinctions were vain and iniquitous, and that all oaths are binding.”⁴⁰⁰ What’s more, “If I swear an oath by anything less than God, I am attributing divine dimensions to it, which is idolatry.”⁴⁰¹

WCF 22:5: *A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness. (n)*
(n)Isa. 19:21; Eccl. 5:4-6; Ps. 61:8; Ps. 66:13-14.

³⁹⁸ Dickson, 161: oaths and vows are “warranted in ... matters of weight and moment.” He points out that Isaiah 65:16 and Jeremiah 4:2 prophesy that “it is promised under the time of the gospel that the nations to be converted to Christ shall swear by the name of God ...” (162). Further, “... the law concerning an oath was not a type of anything to come ... Therefore, it must be part of the moral law (*Deut.* 6:13; *Jer.* 4:2), and consequently perpetual, which Christ came not to destroy (163).

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴⁰⁰ Williamson, 174. See PRPC’s sermon on this text, “Be Men and Women of Your Word.”

⁴⁰¹ Sproul, vol. 2, 353. He also explains that we not only violate the ninth commandment, but also the third, when we bear false witness. Speaking untruthfully takes God’s name in vain, especially in an oath. Van Dixhoorn agrees, “... as Deuteronomy 10:20 reminds us, when we swear it is always to be by God’s name. In warning us not to use God’s name in vain, the Ten Commandments assume that we will in fact use God’s name.” (298).

A vow is similar to an oath and it too should be treated seriously as described above. What is the difference? “An oath concerns man’s duty to man. A vow concerns man’s duty to God. In an oath man calls God to witness and to judge what he says or promises to men. In a vow man makes a solemn promise to God.”⁴⁰² Or, as Packer explains, “Oaths are solemn declarations that invoke God as a witness of one’s statements and promises, inviting him to punish should one be lying ... Vows to God are the devotional equivalent of oaths ...”⁴⁰³ As both relate to God, both are acts of worship.

WCF 22:6: *It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone:(o) and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want; whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties; or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.(p)*
(o)Ps. 76:11; Jer. 44:25-26. (p)Deut. 23:21-23; Ps. 50:14; Gen. 28:20-22; 1 Sam. 1:11; Ps. 66:13-14; Ps. 132:2-5.

A vow differs from an oath in that it may only be made to God, and only voluntarily (some oaths can be bound on us). A vow tends to have more of an “if/then” aspect to be contingent on a response from God fulfilling a request: generally, you vow your obedience and worship to God alone for His mercifully covenanting with you; specifically, you might vow to do something in thanks, should God answer a specific prayer (like Hannah with Samuel). Do not make empty vows you don’t intend to keep if God answers (Deut. 23:21)⁴⁰⁴. It is better not to vow than to vow and not keep it (Ecc. 5:1-5). Jephtha’s vow is an example of how if it is not an unlawful vow, you must keep it (Judges 11:29ff). We rightly heed John Calvin’s words, “Anyone who obeys my advice will undertake only sober and temporary vows.”⁴⁰⁵ However, “... every true believer must make and keep at least one vow, namely, to embrace Jesus Christ as he is freely offered in the gospel and to walk in newness of life with him.”⁴⁰⁶ Your membership vows are made *before* men, but *unto* King Jesus. The Lord’s Supper is the renewing of your baptism vows (see Psalm 22:25; 50:14; 56:12; 61:5, 8; 66:13; 116:13-14, 18).

WCF 22:7: *No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God.(q) In which respects, Popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.(r)*
(q)Acts 23:12, 14; Mark 6:26; Numb. 30:5, 8, 12-13. (r)Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:2, 9; Eph. 4:28; 1 Pet. 4:2; 1 Cor. 7:23.

⁴⁰² Williamson, 177.

⁴⁰³ Packer, 191. Van Dixhoorn explains, “... vows are made to God only. Oaths are promises that we make in God’s presence.” (303).

⁴⁰⁴ See Leviticus 27 (and PRPC’s sermon on it, “Return God’s Favor and Devotion (Laws Restricting the Revoking of Vows)”).

⁴⁰⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chap. XIII:6, as cited by Spear, 119.

⁴⁰⁶ Williamson, 178.

You may not vow to do anything God forbids in His Word, nor what you do not have the power to fulfill. Neither may you vow to do anything that would keep you from obeying God. Wives and children may not vow without their husband's or father's consent (Numbers 30:1-8). Particularly in view here are Roman Catholic monastic vows as unlawful and not binding.

Some closing thoughts by Thomas Watson:

From *The Ten Commandments*, on The Ninth: "There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie ... Absalom told his father a lie, when he said that he was going to pay his vow at Hebron, and this was a preface to his treason ... Consider your every word an oath ... Jerome. When thou speakest, let thy word be as authentic as thy oath. Imitate God, who is the pattern of truth. Pythagoras being asked what made men like God, answered, ... 'when they speak the truth.' ... Psa xv 2. (170). "That which is condemned in the [ninth] commandment is, swearing to what is false; as when men take a false oath ... 'Love no false oath.' Zech viii 17 [see also v 2-4] ... The devil has taken great possession of those who dare to swear to a lie" (171). "A perjured person is the devil's excrement" (172). From *A Body of Divinity*: "There is nothing true but what is in God or comes from God ... God's truth, [is] as it is taken from his veracity in making good his promises ... God that cannot lie hath promised ... Tit i 2" (99). "Mercy makes the promise, truth fulfils it ... he can as well part with his Deity as his verity" (100). "... he can't deny himself ... 2 Tim ii 13 ... A person of honour cannot be more affronted or provoked, than when he is not believed" (102). "He who tells a lie makes himself like the devil ... a liar is not fit to live in a commonwealth" (102). "How can you converse with a man when you cannot believe what he says? Lying shuts men out of heaven ... Rev xxii 15 ... Counterfeiting friendship is worse than counterfeiting money" (102). On the Fifth Commandment and how a parent can provoke his children to wrath (applying Col. 3:21): "When a parent does anything which is sordid and unworthy, which casts disgrace upon himself and his family, as to defraud or take a false oath ..." (136).

Chapter 23: Of the Civil Magistrate: Noah Webster wrote, "It is clear to me, any government that intends to protect the rights of free people must be based on Christianity."⁴⁰⁷ R.C. Sproul notes, "The central motif in the tapestry woven through the Old and New Testaments is that of the kingdom of God ... The culmination of the ministry of Christ was ... the ascension ... At the center of God's work of redemption is a political consideration ... the reign of God ... The kingdom of God does not exist by referendum. It is not a democracy. It is rooted and grounded in a principle of absolute monarchy, absolute sovereignty, where the Lord God Almighty reigns. Americans resist that."⁴⁰⁸

WCF 23:1: *God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, 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. (a)*
(a)Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-14.

⁴⁰⁷ Noah Webster, in *In God We Trust: Stories of Faith in American History*, by Timothy Crater and Ranelda Hunsicker (Rolla, Missouri: My Father's World, 1997), 108. Per my daughters, Rachel and Olivia Van Leuven.

⁴⁰⁸ Sproul, vol. 3, 5-6. He also writes, "This country was established as a republic and not as a democracy. In a democracy, the majority rules, and the rights of a minority can be trampled underfoot. Majority rule can become mob rule, where the individual or minority falls victim to the desires of the majority." (vol. 3, 26).

What is civil government? J.I. Packer succinctly describes it as “the lawful use of force to enforce just laws”.⁴⁰⁹ Civil Government is an extension of family government and is ordained by God. Thus we are responsible to honor government, even ungodly ones, for God puts them there. Jesus paid taxes to Caesar. We are told to obey the magistrates (Romans 13:1-4, Titus 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13, 17), who have the power of the sword by God: note, Paul wrote in the context of the oppressive Roman Empire (Nero, no less). Anarchy is anti-Christian.⁴¹⁰ Churches that protest the funerals of our soldiers sin against King Jesus. Government is the ordained minister of God in the *civic* sphere of life to punish evil and promote good (including capital punishment). Thus, England still refers to government branches like the “Ministry” of Defence. The idea of separation of Church and State is not that the nation should not be Christian, but that the State has a sphere of authority that the Church does not, and that the Church has a sphere of authority that the State does not, but both cooperate under the reign of King Jesus. For instance, when a man commits murder, he should be excommunicated from the Church (if unrepentant) and executed by the State (even if repentant). Christians who feel uncomfortable with a nation acting alongside the Church and under Christ need to recognize what is happening in our nation and heed the words of Gordon Clark: “... secularism eventuates in dictatorship and totalitarian rule”.⁴¹¹ For instance, it was right for President Eisenhower (who had recently been baptized a Presbyterian) to insert “under God” in the pledge of allegiance in 1954 (the Christian God). The RPCNA had ministers meet with Abraham Lincoln to try and get an amendment to the Constitution recognizing Christ as King of the Nation. The Reformation happened in States and Churches. Remember, the WCF was drafted by the request of the English Parliament. Related to this, the authority of the government does not come from a social compact of “we the people” but from God Himself; thus, the government must rule according to the Laws of God and under Christ.

WCF 23:2: *It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto; (b) in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; (c) so for that end, they may lawfully now, under the New Testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion. (d)*
 (b)Prov. 8:15-16; Rom. 13:1-2,4. (c)Ps. 2:10-12; 1 Tim. 2:2; Ps. 82:3-4; 2 Sam. 23:3; 1 Pet. 2:13. (d)Luke 3:14; Rom. 13:4; Matt. 8:9-10; Acts 10:1-2; Rev. 17:14,16.

Christians may serve in government if they acknowledge Jesus as their highest authority and work for laws to serve Him (see Psalm 2).⁴¹² This section was written against the Anabaptists who believed Christians should not hold public office. In our U.S. situation, this also means we may vote, but we should ideally vote for Christians, for as all just laws come from God, “... in theory, none

⁴⁰⁹ Packer, 238.

⁴¹⁰ Dickson, 179: “... it would bring a mass of confusion, to the utter ruin of all societies, if every man at his own hand might execute vindictive justice upon offenders who deserve it, or upon pretence they deserve it, which is to fight against God, who is the God of order politic as well as ecclesiastic, and not of confusion.” See PRPC’s sermon on Matt. 5:38-42, “Don’t Live Self-Centered Lives: Jesus Teaches Against Demanding Rights for Revenge.”

⁴¹¹ Clark, WPB, 87.

⁴¹² Interesting that Dickson, while qualifying that only men may serve in church government, allows that “The matter of the civil government ... may be a senate, many people, the person of one king, of a child, a woman.” (242). This would be worth considering with Isaiah 3:4, 12 and John Knox’s “infamous work” on women ruling.

should be better fitted for such work.”⁴¹³ A nation also may wage war upon just occasion to protect its people and its sovereignty. Wayne Spear reminds us of the context of this document: “It is interesting to note that all the lay members of the Westminster Assembly were members of the English Parliament, which was then engaged in the great Civil War against the forces of Charles I.”⁴¹⁴

WCF 23:3: *The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: (e) yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order; that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. (f) For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God. (g)*

(e) 2 Chron. 26:18 with Matt. 18:17 and Matt. 16:19; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 4:1-2; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 5:4. (f) Isa. 49:23; Ps. 122:9; Ezra 7:23, 25-28; Lev. 24:16; Deut. 13:5-6, 12; 2 Kings 18:4; 1 Chron. 13:1-9; 2 Kings 23:1-26; 2 Chron. 34:33; 2 Chron. 15:12-13. (g) 2 Chron. 19:8-11; 2 Chron. 29-30; Matt. 2:4-5.

The Civil Government does not have authority over the Church’s spiritual self-government (the Church does have her own formal government, see chs. 30-31). This is against Erastianism, which teaches that the Church is subordinate to and serves the State (related, this is why we de-incorporated to join the RPCGA). Even during the O.T. theocracy, Israel had clear divisions of king and priest, and King Uzziah suffered serious consequences for crossing the line of priestly authorization in the Temple.⁴¹⁵ The Government wields the civic sword, while the Church wields the Sword of the Spirit. Still, the civil magistrate has a duty to serve and preserve the Church, including suppressing blasphemies and heresies and calling for a Presbyterian assembly to advise it in ensuring a pure Christian State Church.⁴¹⁶ The State is not amoral nor a neutral institution. Van Dixhoorn reminds us that “... although Israelite kings were not to carry out the work of the priests or Levites, they could make sure the priests and Levites were carrying out their proper work ...”⁴¹⁷ Kings usually were the cause of Israel’s religious reformation—or, her deterioration. Here is taught “Establishmentarianism” (or, antidisestablishmentarianism: officially supporting an official national church). The America Presbyterian Church (reflected in most Presbyterian denominations today such as the PCA and OPC) reworded this section after “kingdom of heaven:” (also 20:4 and 31:1-2) in 1788, changing to “Disestablishmentarianism”. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America has its *Testimony* alongside the WCF in its *Constitution* that also rejects this section after the

⁴¹³ Ward, 145.

⁴¹⁴ Spear, 122.

⁴¹⁵ Van Dixhoorn, 312-313.

⁴¹⁶ Dickson, 174: “Hath the civil magistrate power to call synods to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God? Yes ...”

⁴¹⁷ Van Dixhoorn, 314.

colon (along with parts of 31:1-2, but more related to the “mediatorial reign” of Christ);⁴¹⁸ the *Confession* here decisively upholds the classic “two kingdoms” view (Christ reigns over nations not as Mediator, but as the Son of God: either way, Christ is Lord over civil governments and they ought to be officially Christian). See Fesko’s discussion of Gillespie’s work on the floor of the Assembly in footnote 366 below. See also in your WCF, pages 16-17, the ratification of 1647 by the Scots and its qualifications; so the EPC Australia (our close friends) fully subscribes to the WCF as understood by the Free Church of Scotland’s “Disruption of 1843”. More on this will be discussed with chapter 31, paragraph 2. This topic relates to King James and Charles’ belief in the “Divine Right of Kings” to run the Church in place of the Pope. We rightly affirm that Jesus *alone* is “King and Head of the Church”, and He governs the church through the plurality of elders locally, and presbyters and General Assembly or Synod more broadly (the State may *not*). There is, however, a long precedent of governments calling on the Church and working with her under Christ, over the people. For instance, when Christianity became the official religion in the Roman Empire, it was through Emperor Constantine who himself called the first ecumenical council of Nicea that gave us the Church’s Nicene Creed. The main thing to gather here is that nations and governments are not a-religious nor a-moral, for they are made of men who are accountable to King Jesus the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Heeding Psalm 2, nations would be wise to affirm and support Christianity as its true religion (presently, the USA is constitutionally a principled pluralist nation that has naturally degraded into a sanctioned religion of pagan, autonomist humanism).⁴¹⁹ It is important to remember that “the Westminster Assembly was convened not by any church but by Parliament. Reformed theologians in Scotland and England were committed to the idea that the magistrate had the

⁴¹⁸ See <https://rpcnacovenanter.wordpress.com/tag/mediatorial-kingdom-of-christ/>. The idea is that Jesus doesn’t just rule over all nations (governments) as the eternal Son of God, but the ascended incarnate Son of Man. We do concede that Christ rules in His power over the world as Mediatorial King *on behalf* of His Church. See our post at <https://www.puritanboard.com/threads/mediatorial-kingship-mediator.92064/page-2#post-1125448>

⁴¹⁹ John Murray probably gets it best advising that we should strive to be an official Christian nation while recognizing we never will perfectly be such, nor last, anywhere until Jesus Christ comes back and fully removes the Kingdom of this World. See “The Christian World Order” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1 (Carlisle, Penna.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976): 356-366. He writes, “We shall have to acknowledge frankly that we do not have the right from God’s Word to believe that a Christian world order in the purity and completeness of its conception will be realized on this side of that great and momentous even towards which the history of this world is moving, namely, the appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, the visible glorious advent of the Lord himself (356).” “We must be bold to say that the Christian revelation does not allow us to do anything less than to formulate and work towards a Christian world order in the life that we now live. It is not difficult to demonstrate the validity and even necessity of this thesis (357).” “... the ideal and goal imposed upon us by the kingship and kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is nothing less than Christian world order (358).” “... it is the function of the church to establish and promote Christian order within its own divinely instituted domain, and it *is* the function of the church to *proclaim* the world order to which God’s sovereignty and Christ’s headship obligate in every sphere (362).” “... the Bible is the only infallible rule of conduct for the civil magistrate in the discharge of his magistracy, just as it is the only infallible rule in other spheres of human activity ... Christ is head over all things ... The civil magistrate is under obligation to acknowledge this headship and therefore to conduct his affairs, not only in subjection to the sovereignty of God, but also in subjection to the mediatorial sovereignty of Christ ... (364, 5).”

responsibility to preserve the one true religion in all three kingdoms.”⁴²⁰ This is not the same thing as Theonomy, which WCF 19:4 rejects.⁴²¹ Here a famous exhortation by Rev. Andrew Melville to King James VI (in Scotland), while he grabbed him by the sleeve in private discussion, is worthy of noting: “Sire, I must tell you, that there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: there is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the Head of the Church, whose subject King James VI. is, and of whose kingdom he is not a head, nor a lord, but a member; and they whom Christ hath called, and commanded to watch over His Church, and govern His spiritual kingdom, have sufficient authority and power from Him so to do, which no Christian king nor prince should control or discharge, but assist and support, otherwise they are not faithful subjects to Christ.”⁴²² This quote essentially applies the balanced ideas taught in this section, that of the exercise of two spheres of sovereignty (civil and ecclesiastical) under the one reign of Christ. Dickson explains, “... church and civil power ... are not, as such, powers of subordinate ... but co-ordinate ...”⁴²³

WCF 23:4: *It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates,(h) to honour their persons,(i) to pay them tribute and other dues,(k) to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their*

⁴²⁰ Fesko, 294. He also writes just before, “... relying on Scripture, natural law, and the reasoned examination of Scripture, magistrates must enforce both tables of the law. If the first table of the law were not enforced, that would lead to violations of the second table.” Nations that neglect Christ’s Law will suffer, as we know. Dickson’s “contemporary” commentary to the *Confession* on this chapter is revealing: “[It is] the duty of the civil magistrate to take order that all blasphemies and heresies but suppressed, all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed; all abuses in worship and discipline reformed, all idolaters, gainsayers, and other obstinate dissenters be obliged and forced to quit their tenets and opinions and conform themselves to the true worship and service of God according to his law ...”; “... the supreme magistrate is ... a keeper of both tables of the law of God ... a Christian prince has ... power to reform his own subjects or to extirpate blasphemers and heretics.” (169, 171).

⁴²¹ Van Dixhoorn explains, “Israel is now God’s church, scattered among the nations. All governments are God’s governments but no nation is God’s chosen nation” (308-309).

⁴²² Source: <http://www.reformation-scotland.org.uk/scots-worthies/andrew-melville/>. Here it is important to know there is great debate in modern Reformed circles about “two kingdom” or “radical two kingdom” theology in relation to works by Westminster Seminary California (Escondido) professor David VanDrunen. For a helpful, balanced review of this topic and VanDrunen’s book, see Keith Mathison’s, “2K or Not 2K? That is the Question: A Review of David VanDrunen’s Living in God’s Two Kingdoms”, at <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/2k-or-not-2k-question-review-david-vandrunen-living-gods-two-kingdoms/>. Also very relevant to the discussion of “Two Kingdoms” relating to church and state is Augustine’s classic, *City of God* available in our library. See also Fesko’s discussion of the historical context of the Assembly’s discussion of the relation between church and state and what he points out as obviously a standard “two kingdom” theology taught in the Westminster Standards; his summary of the break down by George Gillespie (Scottish Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly) of Christ’s rule as Creator over civic affairs as distinct from His rule as Mediator over church affairs, and Gillespie’s influence on the Assembly to change “Christ” to “God” in three places in chapter 23, especially with 1 Cor. 15:24-25, Col. 1:12-18, WSC 102, and WLC 191 in view, is elucidating and challenges a Covenanter position that pastor had previously held (299-314); in Gillespie’s, *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming*, he superfluously appeals to “Two Kingdoms” as his main argument against Erastianism (the purpose of the book): see chapter 5. Dickson similarly explains the Confession’s correct clarity: “... God the creator and governor of the world is the efficient of the power of the civil magistrate ... But God-Christ, our blessed Mediator and Lord of his church, is the efficient of the church particularly and of its government.” (242) Consider also Van Dixhoorn’s words: “Christ’s kingdom is not of this world as civil governments are (*John* 18:36).” Citing Eph. 4:11, 12, he also notes, “Civil governors are gifts, but not gifts to the church [directly]” (316).

⁴²³ Dickson, 242.

authority, for conscience' sake. (l) 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: (m) from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted; (n) much less hath the Pope any power and jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or over any of their people; and, least of all, to deprive them of their dominions, or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretence whatsoever. (o)

(h) 1 Tim. 2:1-2. (i) 1 Pet. 2:17. (k) Rom. 13:6-7. (l) Rom. 13:5; Tit. 3:1. (m) 1 Pet. 2:13-14, 16. (n) Rom. 13:1; 1 Kings 2:35; Acts 25:9-11; 2 Pet. 2:1, 10-11; Jude 8-11. (o) 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:15-17.

Do we pray for our government officials as much as we complain about them? We are commanded to pray for them: 1 Tim. 2:1. Even when they are oppressive we should obey their commands and be subject to their God-given authority with "civil" disobedience if called upon to sin. While they are bound to obey Christ, even if they do not recognize Him, we must recognize Christ's allowing them to be in office: "The right of the representatives of the state to receive respect and obedience is not grounded in their character, but in their office".⁴²⁴ The Roman Catholic Church has always sought to steal or usurp State authority in antichristian rule over nations, and always will.

Naturally there will be no perfect world government until Jesus Christ returns to fully consummate His Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Thus we should pray wholeheartedly, "Thy kingdom come!"

Some closing thoughts by Thomas Watson:

From *The Ten Commandments*, the Fifth: "The political father, the magistrate. The Scripture calls kings, 'fathers.' 'Kings shall be thy nursing fathers.' Isa xlix 23 ... "Such nursing fathers were ... Constantine ... Their place deserves honour. God has set these political fathers to preserve order and harmony in a nation, and to prevent those state convulsions which otherwise might ensue" (122). "These political fathers are to be honoured ... I Pet ii 17. This honour is to be shown by a civil respect to their persons, and a cheerful submission to their laws; so far as they agree and run parallel with God's law. Kings are to be prayed for ... I Tim ii I ..." (123). From *The Beatitudes*: "The magistrate is God's lieutenant on earth ... Though a private person must not render to any man 'evil for evil' (Romans 12:17), yet a magistrate may; the evil of punishment for the evil of offence ... the magistrate sins if he does not draw it out ... Too much lenity in a magistrate is not meekness, but injustice" (109).

Suggested Readings:

- "National Covenant" and "The Solemn League and Covenant" in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*
- "In Response, The RPCNA's Total Abstinence Vow & The CRC in Response," Dennis Prutow: <http://www.wordfortheweek.org/response/1995/1995-07.pdf>
- *Jephthah and His Vow*, David Marcus, (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1986)
- "The Sanctity of Truth", ch. 5, in *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, John Murray
- http://www.trinitylectures.org/MP3_downloads.php; see Gordon H. Clark, "Questions and Answers" MP3 file under "Lectures on Theology, Gordon H. Clark, 5 Lectures", under "Collection 9: Introduction to Theology". The part in this Q&A lecture about Biblical case studies of lying specifically references lecture number 3 in this series, entitled, "The Puritans and Situation Ethics". The pertinent time range of the Q&A lecture is from 1:50 to 10:58.

⁴²⁴ Green, 182.

- Pastor Grant's sermon on Matthew 5:33-37, "Be Men and Women of Your Word": <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=61316152179>
- "The Relation of Church and State" and "The Christian World Order", chs. 34 and 48 in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1, John Murray (esp. ch. 48).
- *Messiah the Prince*, William Symington (classic "Mediatorial Reign" view of RPCNA)
- "From Popery to Principle: Covenanters and the Kingship of Christ", David McKay, in *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*.
- "Christ and His Kingdom", A.A. Hodge, in *The Work of Christ*, Issue 225 (Fall 2013), Free Grace Broadcaster (originally from "Christ the King" in *Evangelical Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust.)
- *Lex Rex*, Samuel Rutherford (Classic "Two Kingdoms" view of the WCF)
- *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, George Gillespie (Classic "Two Kingdoms" view of the WCF)
- *City of God*, St. Augustine
- *Christ and Civilization*, John Robbins
- <http://www.natreformassn.org/> Note: we reject any Theonomic tendencies, but the NRA (National Reform Association) is worth being familiar with and considering.
- *A King and His Kingdom*, Roy Blackwood (RPCNA pastor renown for standing for the classic covenanter "Mediatorial Reign" perspective: http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086_CHID560462_CIID2447338,00.html)
- Our article explaining our position and practice at church during COVID 19 (2020-2022), <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/submit-to-the-government-serving-god-to-save-lives>
- PRPC's excerpts of myriad commentaries old and modern on Romans 13:1-10: <https://puritanchurch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Romans-13-Commentaries-Excerpts.pdf>
- PRPC sermon: "The Government Must Quickly Put Out Anarchy (Kingly Guidance as Ezra Restores Israel)": <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=614201937122921>
- PRPC sermon: "Responsible Government Must Show Respect and Restraint (Rehoboam's Gallingly Response)": <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6820311133777>

Assigned Readings for June 1, 2022: Of Marriage and Divorce

- WCF 24 and corresponding Scriptures
- LC Q&A 122-133, 137-139
- SC Q&A 63-66, 70-72