



STATEMENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

On Union of Church and State, 1830¹

A RESOLUTION

That said Presbyteries invite the attention of the General Assembly, to certain slanderous reports extensively circulated against the Presbyterian and other denominations, involving the charge of an attempt on the part of these denominations to unite Church and State, and thus subvert the civil institutions of our country, and intimate their desire that this Assembly would take order on the subject, and by some public act disabuse themselves and their constituents of such unfounded and injurious imputations.

THE COMMITTEE REPORT

In the opinion of your committee no public act is necessary on the part of this Assembly to refute a charge wholly unsupported by testimony and facts; nor any exposition of their principles in relation to civil magistracy and the claims of the church demanded, other than that contained in our acknowledged ecclesiastical standards, and published to the world. For the better information, however, of any who may be in danger of imposition from unfounded statements, the Assembly would refer to the following exhibition of their principles as contained in the accredited constitution of the church.

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.

It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of magistrate, when called thereunto; in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth, so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions.

Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest in such a manner, that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let,

¹ From *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America From A. D. 1821 to A. D. 1835 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication. No. 265 Chestnut Street), pp. 299-300.

or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denominations of Christians of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury, to any other person whatsoever; and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.

It is the duty of the people to pray for magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute and other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. Infidelity or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrate's just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to him; from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted; much less hath the Pope any power or 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.²

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.³

That God alone is Lord of the conscience; and hath left it free from the doctrine and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. Therefore they consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable. They do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.⁴

Such are the constitutional principles of the Presbyterian church in these Linked States. They were our fathers' principles before and during the revolution, which issued in the consummation of our liberty and independence, and *under* the influence of which they prayed, and fought, and bled by the side of the father of our country. They have been the principles of their descendants ever since. They are *our* principles still, adopted from conviction, to whose support we have pledged ourselves under the most solemn sanctions, and by the preservation of which we believe that the common interests of evangelical religion and civil liberty will be most effectually sustained.

In closing this statement, the Assembly would affectionately and earnestly exhort the members of their communion, that in the fulfillment of their civil and religious duties, they watch against all unhallowed feelings, and that they suffer reproach meekly, not rendering railing for railing, nor evil for evil, but by patient continuance in well doing, they commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

² Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter XXIII, "Of the Civil Magistrate."

³ *Ibid.*, chapter XXXI, "Of Synods and Councils," § IV.

⁴ *The Form of Government*, "Preliminary Principles," § I.

FOR FURTHER READING:

- Dabney, Robert L. "Civic Ethics." *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.* Edited by C.R. Vaughan. Vol. III, *Philosophical*. Richmond, VA: PCP, 1892. Reprint, Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books and Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1980, pp. 302-328.
- . "Civic Ethics," and "The Morals of Individuals in Their Civic Actions." *The Practical Philosophy. Being the Philosophy of the Feelings, of the Will, and of the Conscience, With the Ascertainment of Particular Rights and Duties*. Kansas City, MO: Hudson, Kimberly Publishing Co., 1897. Reprint, with an intro. by Douglas F. Kelly. Harrisonburg: VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984., pp. 372-419; 432-447.
- . "The Civil Magistrate," and "Religious Liberty and Church and State." *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology Taught in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia*. Published by the Students. Richmond, VA: Shepperson & Graves, Printers, 1871. Reprint of the 2nd ed. entitled *Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985, pp. 862-872; 873-887.
- . "New State-Church." *Central Presbyterian* 3:28 (Jan. 29, 1868): 2. "Religious Liberty." *Central Presbyterian* 3:29 (Feb. 5, 1868): 2. "Is Jesus Christ King of Nations?" *Central Presbyterian* 3:30 (Feb. 12, 1868): 2. Reprint of the first article only, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.* Edited by J.H. Varner. Vol. V, *Miscellaneous Writings*. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1999, pp. 275-279.
- Peck, Thomas E. "Church and State." In *Miscellanies of Rev. Thomas E. Peck, D.D., LL.D.* 3 vols. Selected and arranged by T.C. Johnson. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1896, II:266-289.
- . "The Nature and Extent of Church Power" and "The Power Ecclesiastical Contrasted With the Power Civil. Relation of the Church to the State." Chaps. in *Notes on Ecclesiology*. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892, pp. 106-119, 119-156.
- Robinson, Stuart. "Relation of the Temporal and Spiritual Powers Historically Considered. The Scot-American Theory." Note D in *Discourses on Redemption*. . . . Louisville, KY: A. Davidson, 1866, pp. 474-488.