

AN EXPLANATION AND DEFENCE
OF THE TERMS OF COMMUNION,
ADOPTED BY THE
COMMUNITY OF DISSENTERS.

By the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland, 1801.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 6.

ON ARTICLE II: CONFESSION, &c.

continued...

It is observable, that even under the Old Testament, which, in these matters at least, is now considered by many as entirely out of the question, the church and state were, by divine appointment, kept perfectly distinct. They had distinct judicatories, a civil and an ecclesiastic Sanhedrim. Their respective office-bearers were easily known and distinguished; judges and officers in the state, priests and Levites in the church. The causes, tabled before their respective courts, and submitted to their decisions, were different; civil matters in the one, and religious in the other. The pains and censures which they severally inflicted were also dissimilar; corporal punishments in the state, suspension from privileges and excommunication in the church. The rulers in the one were positively prohibited then, as well as now, from interfering with the work belonging to the rulers in the other. ► Hence that very explicit doctrine, “Behold, Amariah the chief priest is over you in all the matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king’s matters.” And that severe reprimand, addressed to even a righteous king of Judah, “It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense.” [2 Chron. 19.11; 26.18.] Even under this dispensation, we see civil and religious things must be kept quite distinct. It is, indeed, expected that the office-bearers in both departments shall profess the true religion, act in the fear of the Lord, and co-operate in the prosecution of the same great and general object, the glorifying of God upon earth. But they must do it by acting, each in his own proper sphere, taking good heed that the one never intermeddle with that which properly belongs to the province of the other.

Our reforming forefathers, in Scotland especially, clearly perceived this distinction, and were very careful to have it observed, even in what is ordinarily called the first period of the reformation. Let them speak for themselves. “The power and policy ecclesiastical,” say they, “is different and distinct in its own nature from that power and policy which is called civil power:—albeit they be both of God, and tend to one end if they be rightly used, viz. to advance the glory of God, and to have godly and good subjects.—The civil power is called the power of the sword: and the other the power of the keys.—The magistrate commandeth external things, for external peace and quietness amongst the subjects; the minister handleth external things only for conscience’ cause. The magistrate handleth external things only, and actions done

before men; but the spiritual ruler judgeth inward affections and external actions, in respect of conscience, by the Word of God. ► The civil magistrate craves and gets obedience by the sword, and other external means; but the ministry by the spiritual sword and spiritual means. The magistrate neither ought to preach, minister the sacraments, nor execute the censures of the kirk [*church*], nor yet prescribe any rule how it should be done, but command the ministers to observe the rule commanded in the Word, and punish the transgressors by civil means. The ministers exercise not the civil jurisdiction, but teach the magistrate how it should be exercised according to the Word. The magistrate ought to assist, maintain, and fortify the jurisdiction of the kirk. The ministers should assist their princes in all things agreeable to the Word, provided they neglect not their own charge, by involving themselves in civil affairs.”¹ ► And again, the Commissioners of the kirk, addressing themselves to the king, very plainly tell him, “—Although the persons of men are subject to your majesty and the civil judges when they offend against your laws; yet, in matters merely ecclesiastical, and concerning conscience, no Christian prince can justly claim, or ever claimed such a power to judge; seeing the prince in this behalf is but a member of the kirk [*church*], and Christ only the Head, who only hath power to give laws in matters of conscience. To confound the jurisdictions, civil and ecclesiastical, is that thing wherein all men of good judgment have justly found fault with the Pope of Rome, who claimeth to himself the power of both the swords.” ► Concerning the king’s act, annulling the excommunication of a Mr. Robert Montgomerie, they observe, “To pronounce the sentence of excommunication against impenitent sinners, or absolve them from the same, or to decern the same, effectual or not effectual, can no more pertain to the prince or any civil magistrate, than to preach the Word and minister the sacraments: for they are both in like manner committed by Christ our Master to the true office-bearers within his kirk, whenas he said, ‘TELL IT TO THE CHURCH,’ &c.”²

The famous Mr. James Melville, in his reasons for not subscribing an Erastian writ, issued by the king and parliament, anno 1584, and required to be subscribed by the ministry, hath these remarkable words, when expostulating with those who had subscribed, “Ye have taken away the lawful power, by your subscriptions, of pastors, doctors, and elders of the kirk, which they have to convene in the name and authority of Christ, the only sovereign Ruler and Commander of his kirk, for discharging of their duties and callings, which he hath laid on them, to be used for his service, and salvation of the souls of his people. ► And truly, as well might they have discharged the conventions, for hearing the Word and ministration of the sacraments, as for the exercise of discipline and government of the kirk; seeing the one is no less laid upon the back of the officers of Christ’s kingdom, as a special part of their duty and charge, than the other; and they have the command and power to use the one no less than the other, without waiting for any authority or command of men. As freely as the king hath his power and authority of God the Creator, to discharge his office, in things civil and temporal; as freely have

1 2nd Book of Discipline, chapter 1. Agreed upon in Gen. Assembly 1578, and inserted in the Register of Assembly, 1581.

2 Animadversions presented by the Commissioners of the Kirk to the King at his Parliament in Linlithgow, Dec. 1585. Calderwood’s History, p. 188, 192.

pastors, doctors, elders, and deacons in the kirk, power and authority from Christ their Mediator to do their office, in things heavenly and spiritual:”—Doctrine marking a very clear distinction between church and state.

His [father’s] brother, Mr. Andrew Melville, in like manner, addressing himself to the king, in a private conference between him and some ministers, makes bold to tell his prince, “Sir, there are two kings and two kingdoms. There is Christ and his kingdom the kirk [*church*], whose subject King James the sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a head, nor a lord, but a member; and they whom Christ hath called, and commanded to watch over his kirk, and govern his spiritual kingdom, have sufficient authority and power from him so to do, which no Christian king nor prince should control nor discharge, but fortify and assist.”³ The two first of these extracts speak the sentiments of the ancient church of Scotland, collectively considered, in her public representatives; and the two last, the sentiments of two valiant witnesses for the royal prerogatives of Christ, individually considered, but who, at the same time, spoke the language of many others, whose testimony could be produced, were it necessary.

If we descend to the ever-memorable second period of the reformation, when our subordinate standards were composed, we will find the distinction between church and state very clearly taught, and sanctioned by the highest authorities, in both the civil and religious departments. The Parliament of Scotland, Feb. 7, 1649, “Enact and ordain, that before the king who now is, be admitted to the exercise of his royal power, he shall, among other things, consent and agree, that all matters civil be determined by the Parliaments of this kingdom; and all ecclesiastic matters by the General Assembly of this Kirk.” ► And it is well known, that when the king’s commissioner presumed to exercise an Erastian power over the church, by taking upon him, in his majesty’s name and authority, to dissolve that famous assembly of the church of Scotland which sat at Glasgow in the year 1638, they solemnly protested against that glaring encroachment on the royal prerogatives of Christ, the alone King of Zion; boldly asserted the church’s liberties, as a distinct, free, and independent, spiritual kingdom; and went forward with their work in the face of the royal proclamation, and many other daring threatenings, issued out against them. ► In the Hundred and Eleven Propositions, drawn up by order of the General Assembly, 1645, our reformers declare, “The civil power and the ecclesiastic ought not, by any means to be confounded or mixed together.” Accordingly, they go on, with much judgment and accuracy, to draw the line of distinction between the two, in a considerable number of particulars.⁴

Add to these the express doctrine of the standards themselves, “The Lord Jesus as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.” [Westminster Confession, chap. 30.] Agreeably to this, the London ministers assert, “As the church and state are distinct polities, so have they subjects, laws, and officers, distinct always in the formal conception, though materially in divers things

3 Calderwood’s History, pages 167-168, [referring to James Melville,] and p. 329, [for Mr. Andrew.]

4 Edit. Glasgow, 1797, p. 17-27.

they may agree.—A preacher and a judge are two distinct callings.”⁵ In like manner the Scots Commissioners, when they were sent to treat with the king, amidst the public disturbances in 1639, and were asked, what they particularly wanted, requested, amongst other things, “That all matters ecclesiastical might be determined by the assemblies of the church, and matters civil by parliament.”⁶

Discussion Questions

1. Is the Separation of Church and State, in their jurisdictions, functions, etc. a policy first established for God’s people in the New Testament?

A.

2. Did the Scottish reformers of the first reformation period overlook the importance of the distinct policies of Church and State?

A.

3. Should ecclesiastical officers be subject to civil rulers or ecclesiastical rulers when it comes to civil matters?

A.

4. Who do the commissioners of the Kirk affirm to have been found at fault by all men of good judgment, when it comes to confounding the civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction?

A.

5. Who did James Melville find fault with in the matter of maintaining the distinct jurisdiction of the Church?

A.

6. What did Andrew Melville want King James VI to know about his place in the Church of Christ?

A.

7. Are there any examples of civil rulers in the Reformation eras acknowledging the distinct jurisdictions of Church and State, or only church leaders doing so?

A.

8. What famous publication, drawn up with direction from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, affirmed that the powers civil & ecclesiastical must not be confounded or mixed together?

A.

5 Divine Right of Gospel Ministry, p. 66.

6 [Andrew] Stevenson’s History, vol. 2, p. 741.