

# Blueprints for Belief

*Laying the Theological Foundations for Constructing Your Faith*

## Westminster Confession of Faith 23.1-4 – Civil Authorities

Note: This is the most significant point where the American WCF that differs from the original, which established a stronger relationship between church and state.

### The Story of St. Valentine

- God is our sovereign King, but he puts civil authorities in place to govern people for His glory and our good.
  - Romans 13:1 — "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."
- These authorities have the "power of the sword" to defend good and punish evil.
  - Romans 13:4 — "for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."
- Christians may serve in positions of civil authority.
  - On the basis that there is no prohibition in Scripture and examples like centurions imply it.
- Christians may go to war when the cause is just.
  - Implied by use of "the sword".
- Civil authorities should protect the free exercise of religion and not interfere in any way.
  - 1 Timothy 2:1-2 — "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."
- Likewise, the Church should not seek to exercise power over civil magistrates.
  - See Romans 13
- Christians should pray for, honor, and respect civil authorities, even if they are unbelievers, and obey all legitimate laws.
  - 1 Peter 2:17 — "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

### Discussion Questions

1. How does this affect the way we view imperfect leaders and policies?
2. When might Christians non-violently protest civil authority?
3. Does the confession support the idea that the United States is or should be a "Christian nation"?

## **Westminster Confession of Faith – Chapter 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 defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers.

2. It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a 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 occasion.

3. 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, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of 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.

4. It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute or 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 magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, 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 pretense whatsoever.