



Abstract from Article

A STUDY IN THE WESTMINSTER DOCTRINE OF THE RELATION OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE TO THE CHURCH

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Abstract

From the days of its inception the Christian Church has been confronted with the problem posed by its very existence in the world, namely, the problem of the church's relation to the state. The question of the attitude and relation which the church should properly bear to the governments of this world has never ceased to agitate the minds of leaders in both the ecclesiastical and the political spheres. In the course of the history of the church both extremes in that relation may be witnessed. At one time the church asserts and exercises a dominating influence over the affairs of the state. At another time the church becomes the mere tool of the state. The political and religious upheaval attendant upon the Reformation brought the question into the sharpest focus and forced it upon the consideration of the church. The problem was not solved at once and the history of the struggle to solve it differs with the varying circumstances of each country in which the question arose. The controversy between church and state in England is of particular interest, for ultimately many of the ideas germinated there and some of the leaders in that struggle found their way into this country and became a determinative factor in our present-day doctrine of the separation of the church and state. The Westminster Confession of Faith was framed at the very height of the effort to bring into full and conscious expression the doctrines of the Reformation. Likewise it was drawn up in the midst of the controversy between church and state which was engendered by the Reformation. Consequently, in its attempt to apply the principles of the Reformation to this specific problem the Westminster Confession provides us with a most interesting problem respecting the difficult relation of the government of the state to the government of the church. The formulation of the Westminster Confession which we have quoted at the beginning of this article provides us with the main outlines of the position of the Westminster divines on the subject, but in so doing they seem to raise a question as to the harmony and the consistency of the main elements which they set forth. It can hardly be denied, either from a consideration of the Confessional statements themselves, or with respect to the opinions of the preponderant majority of the divines, that the framers of the Confessions meant to be perfectly clear in their assertion of the Kingship and Headship of Christ over His church and that there is a consequent government in Christ's church which is distinct from the civil powers. Nevertheless, we can hardly be blind to the difficulty posed by the equally positive assertions of the Confession which seem to blur and confuse that distinction of powers. Not only does the Confession set forth the principle of a distinct government for the church, it also sets forth the seemingly contradictory principle that the civil magistrate has a right and a duty to keep order and suppress heresies in the church and that to the effecting of the same he has power to summon synods and be present at them. The apparent incompatibility of the elements thus set forth has been the occasion of numerous charges that the Westminster Confession of Faith embodies a position of Erastianism. Judged from several angles, such a charge might seem to be

difficult, if not impossible, to refute. Not only do some of the actual declarations of the Confession seem certainly to support such a charge, but many of the circumstances of the meeting of the Westminster Assembly would seem to lend plausibility to the accusations. Consequently, it cannot be without profit that we give some attention to the meaning and intent of the Westminster divines when they set forth their position as embodied in the quotations at the head of the article.

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