

# “Because of the Depravity of The Human Race”

## An Exposition of Article Thirty-Six of the Belgic Confession

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### Article 36: The Civil Government

We believe that because of the depravity of the human race our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.<sup>1</sup> He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies<sup>2</sup> so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings.<sup>3</sup> For that purpose he has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good. And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject to God’s law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.<sup>4</sup> They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them. They should do it in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.\*

Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honor and respect, and obey them in all things<sup>5</sup> that are not in conflict with God’s Word,<sup>6</sup> praying for them that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency.

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.<sup>7</sup>

\* The preceding three paragraphs are a substitution for the original paragraph below, which various Reformed Synods have judged to be unbiblical:

“And the government’s task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.”

<sup>1</sup> Prov 8:15; Dan 2:21; Jn 19:11; Rom 13:1 <sup>2</sup> Ex 18:20 <sup>3</sup> Dt 1:16, 16:19; Judg 21:25; Ps 82; Jer 21:12, 22:3; 1 Pt 2:13-14 <sup>4</sup> Ps 2; Rom 13:4a; 1 Tim 2:1-4 <sup>5</sup> Mt 17:27, 22:21; Rom 13:7; Tit 3:1; 1 Pt 2:17 <sup>6</sup> Acts 4:19, 5:29 <sup>7</sup> 2 Pt 2:10; Jude 8

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In Judges 21:25 we find a remarkably insightful description of what happens when sinful human nature goes unchecked by legitimate governing authority—“*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” Where there is no legitimate civil government, lawlessness reigns, even in the covenant community. Because God is gracious to his sinful creatures, he has given us civil government to protect us from ourselves and from each other, as well as to provide a certain level of

order and protection so that the church can go about its own divinely-appointed mission of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. In Romans 13:1-7, the apostle Paul speaks of the pagan Roman Empire with Nero as the current emperor as a “minister of God.”

As we near the end of 37 articles of the Belgic Confession, we come to Article Thirty-Six, which deals with the Christian view of civil government. Like so many of the other articles of our confession, this article must be considered against the historical circumstances at the time it was written. As we have mentioned on numerous occasions, the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster is clearly in his mind when Guido De Bres composed this article in 1561. During the years of 1534-35, a number of Anabaptist radicals led by John Mattys and then after his death, John of Leyden, overthrew the city government of Münster and instituted what is now known as the “Anabaptist kingdom of Münster.”

Claiming to receive direct revelation from the Holy Spirit, and appealing to those Old Testament passages which refer to Israel’s unique role in redemptive history as a theocracy ruled by divinely-appointed kings, and then applying those verses to himself as though he himself were a Davidic king, John of Leyden and his followers declared all forms of civil government to be illegitimate—except, of course, that government which they claimed God was establishing through them.

Not only did John declare all existing contracts and marriages null and void, he abolished all private property and established a city-wide communal form of living. Seeing Münster as the locale of the millennial kingdom of God then dawning upon the earth, John and his followers took up arms, and for nearly two years held off the poorly trained local armies, claiming these military victories proved that God was on their side. John’s soldiers were not defeated until the local prince finally brought in paid mercenaries for whom the Anabaptists were no match.

The Anabaptists were not only guilty of heresy (for their Christology and rejection of justification sola fide), but of anarchy as well. With the fall of Anabaptist kingdom of Münster and the execution of all those who brought this horrible thing to pass, all of Europe was determined never to let such a thing happen again. In fact, some have argued that the roots of modern Europe’s current secularist mind set can be traced to this very event—if religious zealots can do such things, then religious zeal is a bad thing. If the Reformed wing of the Reformation was to have any legitimacy at all, Reformed theologians and confessions had to be very clear that they had no sympathies for the Anabaptists, not only on a theological level, but they must also clearly state that the Anabaptist view of civil government was unbiblical and those who perpetrated this disaster got everything they deserved—harsh as that was. God gives the sword to civil government to defend its citizens from the likes of John of Leyden.

As our confession takes up this very important subject, De Bres must not only set forth a biblical view of civil government—especially its legitimacy (indeed, its necessity), but he must distance the Reformed view of civil government from that of the Anabaptists, since it was a common Roman Catholic tactic at the time to contend that the Anabaptist’s behavior was the inevitable consequence of the Reformation’s challenge to Rome’s authority. The Roman church saw itself as the glue which held together all of the various institutions of life. So, if Protestants attack the authority of Rome, they are sowing the seeds which came to full flower in Münster.

To accomplish his purpose, De Bres makes five main points in article Thirty-Six. First, our confession discusses the origin of human government. Because of human sin, God instituted human government as a part of common grace. Human government is to be of benefit for all—Christian and non-Christian alike. Second, our confession discusses the purpose of human government, which is to restrain human

sinfulness through the use of military and police power, with courts, judges, and jails to punish and restrain wrong doers. God gives to government the sword, not only for a national defense, but also to mete out punishment for capital crimes (death penalty). Third, our confession discusses the relationship between human government and the kingdom of God (the church). By establishing and preserving civic order, the secular government provides an environment in which the church go about fulfilling its kingdom mandate, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. Fourth, our confession addresses the duties of Christian citizens—which is to participate in civic government to the fullest, as Christian citizens, and therefore, to be the best citizens possible. Article Thirty-Six concludes by rejecting the errors of the Anabaptists, who, in many cases denied the legitimacy of private property, as well as the legitimacy of civil government.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, is the origin of human government? While our many of contemporaries see the development of human government as a parallel to the evolution of the species, our confession rightly rejects this. Our confession states, “We believe that because of the depravity of the human race our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.” The fact of the divine origin of human government as a post Fall institution is clearly taught throughout Holy Scripture.

In Proverbs 8, the author is discussing the meaning of true wisdom, he reminds us that true wisdom, in part, consists in the knowledge of that revealed in verses 15 and 16: “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.” God decrees that kings rule and governments make laws. The same thing is taught in Daniel 2:21: “He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.” God determines who is royalty and who is a commoner. In Psalm 86:9, we read of “*all the nations you have made.*”

And then in John 19:11, when Jesus is brought before Pilate, our Lord tells the Roman prefect, “Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.’” God is sovereign over all nations and those who rule them, even a Roman governor in the backwaters of Palestine. In Acts 14:24-26, Paul puts it this way.

*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.*

Not only do all men and women descend from Adam (the biological and federal head of the human race), but God sets the boundaries of all nations as part of his providential control over all the earth. Therefore, human government is not a human invention. Rather, both human government and nations are given to humanity by God after the fall of the race into sin, so that just laws will be made and so that some form of rule and order will be established upon the earth.

It is not a good thing when everyone does what is right in their own eyes! Unless there are courts and judges and police and jails to back them up, we will do what is right in our own eyes, just as Israel did

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<sup>1</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 266.

when there was no king!

The key biblical text in this discussion is Romans 13:1-7. In this passage, Paul writes “*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.*” It is important to keep in mind that Paul is not speaking about Israel—the only theocracy ordained by God according to his redemptive-historical purpose, so as to ensure that promised seed would come and to point us ahead to that day when the kingdom of God is fully manifest upon the earth. No, Paul says this of Rome—that pagan empire which seemed to rule to the ends of the earth. And since even Rome has been established by God, governing authorities are to be obeyed. Paul goes on to say, “*therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval*” (Romans 13:2-3).

Paul’s point is very simple—good citizens need not fear the state. Only those who do wrong (criminals) need fear legitimate governing authority. In fact, those who serve in government, are now called God’s servants. “*For [the governing authority] 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.*” God grants the sword—the symbol of arms for self-defense—to the state, so that the state can punish those who do wrong, as well as protect its citizens from other nations who seek to harm its citizens. Just as private citizens have the right of self-defense, so do nations and governments.

Given this vital role, in verse 5, Paul goes on to speak of the duties of Christian citizens. “*Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*” As Christians, we are required to submit to those who rule over us in the city of man because God has placed them there, giving them their legitimacy to rule in the first place. This is why Paul can speak of this as a matter of conscience.

Furthermore, since government is established by God, “*for because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.*” Even though I am sure that when we get to heaven, we’ll discover that the command to pay our taxes is a scribal addition which is not in the original biblical text, until we make such a discovery, not only are we to pay our taxes, we are to “*pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*”

This virtually echoes the words of 1 Peter 2:13-15:

*Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.*

As Christians, we are commanded to obey those who rule over us and show them proper respect, since they have been given to us by God so that we are not able to do what is right in our own eyes.

That being said, it is also important to point out that even though Paul saw Rome as a legitimate and divinely-instituted authority in the mid-fifties of the first century when his letter to the Romans was written, when the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation some thirty years later, Rome was now the

God-hating Satanically-energized beast, bent on waging war on the saints. It is possible for legitimate civil government like Rome in a short amount of time to become the beast (the agent of Satan to persecute God's people). This was the case when Nero put both Peter and Paul to death. When any government ceases from exercising its God-given role to restrain evil and provide for the common good, and begins to persecute the people of God, such as we see in China, the Muslim nations of the Middle East, that state is no longer to be considered a "minister of God." Christians must see such a government as a manifestation of the beast. In this case, the words of Peter and the apostles from Acts 5:29 come to mind, when they were ordered by the members of the Sanhedrin to stop preaching the gospel. "*But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'*" While this is not the time nor the place to talk about civil disobedience, nevertheless, this, has at times, and will perhaps again, become a necessity.

Although we've already touched on this briefly when considering those biblical texts which speak of the origin of human government, our confession now goes on to deal with the more specific question, "what is the purpose of human government?" Our confession defines the purpose for human government along the lines just discussed in Romans 13. "[God] wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings. For that purpose he has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good." Given human sinfulness and our propensity to do what is right in our own eyes, it is very important to consider the words of Psalm 82:2-4, which remind of us God's attitude toward the importance of securing justice for all—especially the oppressed. "*How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*" This, of course, is but one of the divinely-determined mandates of civil government.

Indeed, the importance of maintaining justice is found throughout redemptive history as essential to the well-being of God's people. In the opening words of Deuteronomy (1:16-17) we read of the Lord's charge to Israel,

*And I charged your judges at that time, 'Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.*

The same holds true in chapter 16:18-20, when YHWH commands Israel,

*You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

And then in Jeremiah 22:3, we read, "*thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.*" Since Israel was a theocracy, in which church and state are not separated it is clear that God demands just laws and protection of the weak.

The same thing holds true in creation and natural law. As a common-grace institution, human government is to ensure that there are just laws and impartial enforcement of them, that the rich do not exploit the poor, nor are the strong allowed to exploit the weak. It is for this very reason—the exercise of justice—that God gives the sword to government, so that justice is to be preserved and defended. Just as the church is to be governed so that all things are done decently and in good order, our confession makes the point that so too, the same thing holds with human government. Evil is to be restrained and all things are done in good order—and that is the purpose of legitimate civil government.

What is the relationship between human government and the church? Given the Anabaptist rejection of human government and their mistaken belief that their murderous, polygamous, and vile kingdom of Münster, was supposedly the kingdom of God on earth, our confession must not only define and defend the legitimate role of civil government, but it must also define the relationship of church and state in an age when only baptized Christians could be full citizens of the Holy Roman empire.

This was also an age in which the Roman church often exercised its religious and political will through the princes.<sup>2</sup> It was Spanish soldiers who put De Bres and other Reformed Christians in France and the low countries to death. But they were doing the will of the Prince, who was himself doing the will of the Roman church. Our confession declares of the civil magistrate, “And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject to God’s law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship. They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them. They should do it in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.”

With the coming of Christ, and his fulfillment of both the prophetic and kingly offices found in Israel, there is no theocratic form of government sanctioned under the new covenant. All governments are secular, common grace institutions, which should reflect and enforce laws which we find in the so-called second table of the law (commandments five through ten) since these are revealed through the created order (natural law) and are to reflect the value and dignity of human life, the sanctify of the family, and the preservation of truthfulness and private property.

God never assigns to the secular state, the enforcement of the first table of the law—commandments one through four.<sup>3</sup> Here is where we must keep the church and the city of God, distinct from the secular state and the city of man. It was Jesus after all who gave us the basis for keeping these two kingdoms distinction when he told the Pharisees as recounted in Matthew 22:21: “*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” In the economy of God, there are distinct roles for both church and state and every Christian is simultaneously a citizen of both kingdoms.

Which brings us to the next point made by our confession, “What are the duties of Christian citizens?” Our confession describes the duties of Christian citizens as follows. “Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives

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<sup>2</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 269-270. Note the original wording of the confession, which included the statement that the purpose of government was “to remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship that the Kingdom of Antichrist might be destroyed.” See the decision of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (1910), as discussed in Beets.

<sup>3</sup> R. Scott Clark, “Theses on Covenant Theology,” 4.4.8.5-11, <http://public.csusm.edu/guests/rsclark/CovTheses.htm>

in honor and respect, and obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God's Word, praying for them that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency." Since our confession appeals 1 Timothy 2:1-2 in support, it would be help, I think, to simply quote the entire passage. "*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.*" While some mistakenly believe that this is a passage in which God desires, but does not achieve the salvation of all men (verse 4, states, that God "*who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*"), in reality this verse is simply describing the "all" for whom we are to pray—kings and all those in authority.

It has always been the practice of the Reformed church to devote at least part of the pastoral prayer to all those whom God has placed in authority over us and for the continuance of peace, quiet and prosperity of our nation. For this is of benefit to all. God commands us to pray for our secular leaders, and thus we pray for them to rule justly and exercise mercy. We implore God to protect our nation and we give thanks for our freedom and prosperity.

But since we are called to be good citizens precisely because God has ordained all human government, and especially since as Americans, we of all people bask in the light of freedom and prosperity, it is vital that we participate in the electoral process as informed Christian citizens. In a sense, our *Christian Voter's Guide* is the second table of the law (commandments 5-10). As Christian citizens, we are to vote for and support those candidates who believe that these commandments (and the natural law which reflects them) are the basis for our freedom and liberty and who will ensure that the kind of just and equitable laws which God requires are enacted and enforced—laws which protect our religious freedom (and that of others), which further the well-being of the poor and oppressed, which defend and respect private property and individual rights, which defend the sanctify of marriage and the family (something of which we should be especially mindful, now that we face the reality of homosexual marriage and since we live in an age of a holocaust upon the unborn through abortion). We are obligated to be informed so as to be the kind of citizens God demands that we be.

There is no excuse whatsoever for Christians not being informed on political issues, or not voting and not participating in the electoral process as Christian citizens. Since God ordained government and instructs us to obey those who lead, it is vital that we seek the election of those who will preserve and defend the kinds of things we find in the second table of the law. Furthermore, since human government comes from God, public service is a legitimate and important calling. Christians should be willing to consider public service, should God call them to serve in such a capacity in the city of man. This not only extends to public office, but things such as military service, police, fire and even public works. God commands us to pray for our leaders and public servants and to respect and honor them.

And briefly, what about the Anabaptist view of government which De Bres opposes? Our confession identifies the issues as follows, "and on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings." Given Rome's polemic that Protestantism is essentially seditious, it is vital for the author of our confession to affirm as clearly as possible that Reformed Christians are law-abiding citizens, who endeavor to fulfill their civic responsibilities and who do as Paul has commanded in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, "*aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed*

*you.*” In other words, be a good citizen.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, de Bres must not only condemn the Anabaptist error, he must reaffirm with equal force that the Reformed will endeavor to be good citizens.

What then, do we say by application? The biblical record is clear that God gives us civil government because of the depravity of humanity. Legitimate civil government not only restrains that sinful impulse to do what is right in our own eyes, but such government is to provide that peace and security which is necessary to enable the church to fulfill its mission. Since government is given to us by God, Christians are to be the best citizens possible, knowing the current issues at stake and then as conscience dictates. We are to vote for those individuals who will govern in such a way as to promote and defend those laws and policies which comport with the second table of the law. Everyone should be a registered voter and vote as a Christian citizen.

But if we must acknowledge the legitimacy of government, we must also acknowledge its limits. While civil government is given because of the depravity of mankind and can restrain sinful human behavior through the use of force if need be, neither government nor its policies and do anything about human depravity except to restrain it. The transformation of sinful human nature is something only the grace of God and the gospel can accomplish. Thus let us not be naive enough to think that if enough of the right people are elected to office, the millennial age will dawn.

Legitimate civil government is to provide the space for the church to fulfill its mandate—preaching the law and the gospel and administering the sacraments according to the word of God. Neither government nor the church can do what they are ordained to do if the government takes on religious duties, or if the church sees its mission as essentially political. In such cases, both divinely-ordained institutions lose their legitimacy and sadly, the gospel is emptied of its power.

Thus let us do as we are called to do. As Christians we preach the law and the gospel. We administer the sacraments and see our duties in the city of man as informed by our citizenship in the kingdom of God. Let us be good citizens. Let us pray for those in authority over us. Let us do as Peter commands: *“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor”* (1 Peter 2:17).

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<sup>4</sup> Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 272.