

# HONOUR *the King*

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In an earlier column we looked through a church polity lens at the relationship between church and school (CO Art. 58). This time we want to look at another relationship, the one between the church and the state, or to be more precise: church office bearers and civil authorities. We find this in Article 28. Both articles illustrate the reality that the church is present in and operates within the world.

The Bible makes clear that, yes—our citizenship is in heaven, and our destination as people of God is the kingdom of heaven, to be experienced in the fullness of its glory on the great day of Jesus's return. We are pilgrims indeed. However, that perspective does

not mean that we have nothing to do with earthly authorities as we walk through this life. Remember Jesus's words in Matthew 22 about rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, words that are affirmed by the apostle Paul in Romans 13:7.

## SEPARATION, BUT HOW?

That being said, history shows that throughout the centuries the question of how the relationship between church and state ought to function has been answered in wildly different ways. Also, how this relationship has worked in practice has been incredibly diverse. The separation of church and state as we know it today



An artist's rendering of the Canadian Parliament buildings in Ottawa

only developed in the nineteenth century. The point was to set the church free from state supervision.<sup>1</sup> But it also implies that the church should not have any authority in state matters. Yet, it's good to be alert here. In our secular society we are often told: "leave your Christian views and morals out of the political discussion, because we have separation of church and state." But that's not what that expression means or ever meant. My Christian conviction cannot be isolated from my political choices, which are often also moral choices, in the same way that an unbeliever's convictions can't be separated from his political choices, moral or otherwise. What you believe to be right or wrong, based on your faith, will unavoidably influence your political choices and decisions.

## CO ARTICLE 28 ≠ BC ARTICLE 36

How does all of this affect the application of Article 28 of the Church Order? To begin with, does this article actually belong in the Church Order? In his lecture notes on the Church Order, Dr. F. L. Rutgers<sup>2</sup> simply says, "no."

Some have said that the first part of Article 28 (summarizing the duty of the civil authorities with respect to the ministry of the gospel) does not belong in the Church Order since the church cannot instruct the civil authorities how to deal with

Christians and the church's ministry. Others say that this opening sentence simply reflects what we confess in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession about the civil government, and in this way provides the "basis" for the second part of the article, about the duty of the office bearers.

But is this a valid argument? Article 36 of the Belgic Confession says that "the task [of the civil government] includes the *protection* of the church and its ministry," whereas Article 28 of the Church Order says that "it is the office of the civil authorities to *promote in every way* the holy ministry." That's not the same thing: "promoting" assumes a much more active role towards the church than "protecting." Is that significant? I think it is. All the Bible passages that refer to the civil authorities are about our attitude towards these authorities.<sup>3</sup> Christians are instructed to obey, submit, respect, honour, pay taxes to, and to pray for the authorities.

That does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about the role and responsibility of the civil authorities. They are instituted by God who gave them authority to govern. They must therefore be respected and honoured as God's servants. They are appointed to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good, so that we may lead a peaceful, godly, and quiet life and enjoy freedom to

<sup>1</sup> Recommended reading to learn more about this: Cornelis Van Dam, *God and Government*, Eugene, Oregon, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Frederik Lodewijk Rutgers (1836-1917) was a Dutch theologian. Between 1879 and 1910 he was professor in church history and church polity at the Free University in Amsterdam.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 13:1-7; Acts 5:29; John 19:10-11; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Daniel 4:17; Matt 22:21; 1 Tim 2:1-3; Titus 3:1; Eccl 8:2-4; Matt 17:24-26; Matt 20:25-26. In the O.T. the Israelite kings were spiritual leaders of God's people, but the theocratic kingdom of Israel cannot serve as model for governments in the NT era. This is not to deny that also today God is the King who rules all the nations. See Van Dam (note 1), p.66-70.

worship.<sup>4</sup> But Scripture does not directly address the civil government about its duty towards the church or Christians.

## IDEAL ≠ PRACTICE

This triggers the question: how did we end up with the line in Article 28 that “it is the office of the civil authorities to promote in every way the holy ministry”? It is interesting to note that no one knows how or why this article was inserted in the Church Order. Most articles came up out of the churches and, via classes and synods, were eventually finalized by the Synod of Dort 1618/19. Not so with Article 28. No church had asked for it and there is no previous history concerning it at minor assemblies. Most authors suggest that Synod added it to please the authorities so that the government would approve the Church Order. Although the Church Order of Dort reflects the desire to decrease government influence, Synod was facing the reality that the political authorities still wielded significant power in church matters.

After all, the Synod of Dort was not convened by the church but by the States General, and political officials kept an eye on the proceedings. Also, for 200 years after Dort the civil authorities prevented the church from convening a subsequent general synod, despite the stipulation in the Church Order that a synod should be held every three years.

In the old Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Article 28 was exactly the same as the Dort original. Even the thorough revision of the CanRC Church Order adopted by GS 1983 left Article 28 basically the same. The wording is somewhat more contemporary and the description of the office of the civil authorities is a bit shorter. Interestingly, until 1983 the office of the civil authorities is characterized as “promoting” and “protecting” the church, whereas GS 1983 keeps “promoting in every way” but deletes “protecting.”

GS 1994 of our Australian sister churches adopted the version of Article 28 (their Article 27) as it had been revised by GS 1978 of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands:

*The office bearers shall impress upon the congregation its obligation to be obedient and show respect to the government, because God has instituted it. They must set a good example in this regard and by means of proper communication invoke the government to protect the ministry of the church.*

Here it no longer directly describes the duty of the office of the civil authorities, but the entire focus is on the duty of the office bearers, which is also the case in the second part of our Article 28.

## RESPECTFUL INTERACTION

As mentioned earlier, as God’s church under the headship of Jesus Christ as our only King, we do live in this world. We live in a particular country, province, and municipality, where we all as Christians and corporately as churches interact with the civil authorities God has appointed to rule over us. Article 28 of the Church Order highlights the important role office bearers are to play in this interaction. The article points at two things all office bearers are to do. They are to lead by:

### 1. Teaching the congregation

They are to impress on the congregation obedience, love, and respect. Ministers do this by regular prayer for the authorities, but also in sermons. Elders address this at home visits. How do we talk about government officials? What does respecting them look like when we are critical of their policies? They may stimulate respectful interaction with the local MP or MPP/MLA or the use of the freedom of demonstration by getting involved in things like the annual march for life.

### 2. Being examples to the congregation

How do the office bearers themselves interact with the civil authorities? What do you do as elder, deacon, or pastor to leave the authorities with a positive impression of the church? Make it a point to connect once in a while with your MP or MPP/MLA and your city or town councilor. Let them know: as church we pray for you. And then there are occasions when we need to communicate with local officials. We need building permits for churches and Christian schools. Are we doing everything according to building codes, fire safety regulations, etc? Do the civil authorities know: we can trust those people to keep their word and submit to our regulations? This will be good for the reputation of the church, and thus for the reputation of Jesus Christ.

And as we do all these things we do so with the one provision that we must disobey any government demand that is in conflict with God’s Word (Acts 4:19–20; Acts 5:29; see BC Art 36). 



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<sup>4</sup> Faithfully summarized in BC Art. 36.