THEN AND NOW

By R. J. G. McKnight

Some years ago I received from Dr. J. G. Vos a little book entitled The Scottish Covenanters. It was printed in China and contained a part of a thesis written for presentation to the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary of Philadelphia looking towards the granting of a degree. I have read this book many times and was delighted to find that a man of his ability should choose to enter the Covenant Church by conviction.

In the preface to this book he writes: "The author believes that the great principles for which the Scottish Covenanters contended are Scriptural and therefore valid for all time, though the application of those principles must vary according to the circumstances of different countries and periods of time."

The quotations below are taken from the book written by Dr. Vos and are cited here without note or comment.

THE INHERENT OBLIGATION OF THE COVENANTS AS HELD BY THE EARLY COVENANTERS

Samuel Rutherford held that "to pass in silence over the sworn Covenant was more than a denial of Christianity itself. The Marquis of Argyle, in his speech on the scaffold in 1685, spoke thus: "But whatever they (Gallions) think, God hath bound us by covenant upon our land; we are tied by Covenant to religion and Reformation. Those that were before us are engaged to it, and in our baptism we are engaged to it; and it passes the power of any under heaven to abrogate a man from the oath of God, and to make his conscience what he will."

A few days later James Haldane was hanged, and in his speech on the scaffold he stated that no power on earth could loosen or displace the Covenant, that they were "sacrificing the name of Jesus Christ on the scaffold." His last words were "The Covenant, the Covenant, shall yet be Scotland's revising."

A sermon preached in 1653 by John Guthrie, minister at Tarbolton, sets forth with great simplicity the arguments then in use by the Covenanters to prove the dispensation of the Covenant. His text was Ezekiel 17:19, and his theme was the indispensable tie of the Covenant: "And lest any of you, who sometimes have missed us grievous to the covenant in these lands, should now-a-days think it advisable, and look upon it as a thing to be dispensed with, we are, through God's strength, firm Scripture, to make out the indissoluble tie of the Covenant." The text was unanswerable, but does not explicitly state, says Guthrie, that "every thing that is covenant is that, be it a thing invisible, that is, may not and cannot be broken." He continues that he is not speaking of the covenant of works, nor of the covenant of grace, either in its old or new dispensation, because these covenants were broken by God. "This we take the covenants in this place, to be of men's nature in the land, and for keeping them the better, we take an oath upon us in things that are neither really evil nor good but indifferent. But a man once engaged by oath cannot retract. Though they be not commanded duties, yet once
entered into, they must stand, for when we open our mouths to the Lord we cannot go back." He continues, 'these things are necessary to an oath or covenant of God. 1. It must be a thing in itself lawful. 2. It must be a thing in itself possible, within man's power. 3. It must be taken in the name of the Lord. He next cites Scripture proofs to show that an oath is binding; then, that the inviolability of an oath is ' founded upon the law of nature and nations'; then he cites Scripture to show that God is pleased by the man who swears to his own hurt, and changes not: next, that when people have taken a lawful covenant upon them and broken it, "God will appear evidently in sending plagues upon them".

One distinction is the distinction between obeying a government which rejects Christ, and incorporating with such a government. Even under a covenant-breaking and Christ-rejecting civil government, the Christian ought to be subject to the government and obey the laws in all things not contrary to the law of God. He ought to submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake. It is the duty of Christians to give their support to whatever is in itself moral, praiseworthy, and beneficial, in the administration under which they live, and as much as in them lies to be quiet and peaceable in their deportment, and thus to promote the peace and order of society and other ends of good government. When the government, though anti-Christian, grants civil and religious liberty, Christians may, quite consistently with their testimony, pay their share of the common taxation in return for the protection and other advantages which they receive; but they may not pay taxes levied for an immoral purpose or exacted as a pledge of allegiance to an unscriptural constitution. Even though the government is not regarded as God's moral ordinance, it is God's providential ordinance and the Christian should be subject to it in all things moral and lawful. But this is a very different thing from incorporating with the civil government, which would in effect amount not merely to submitting to the government but actually becoming a part of the government itself, and which, in a democracy, would take the form of holding public office or exercising the elective franchise. There are two possible relationships between the Christian citizen and the civil government. The first is the relationship between the subject and the ruler, or between the citizen and the civil magistrate, which implies obedience and submission. This relationship is legitimate in all things lawful, even when the civil government is not clearly anti-Christian in its constitution and character. The other relationship is the relationship between the Christian as a member of the political body and the civil government. In this relationship the Christian is not ruled by the government, but is a subject of the government, as an officer, soldier, or voter he has incorporated with the political society and is an integral part of the same. The Reformed Presbyterian principle is, that this second relationship ought to exist only when the civil government is constituted on a definitely Christian basis. The first relationship implies simply recognition of a fact, namely that a certain civil government exists as the providential ordinance of God, and that in this sense the powers that be are ordained of God, and ought to be obeyed by Christians except when they demand something which is contrary to God's commandments; the first relationship implies, then, no approval of the government or its constitution, but simply the recognition that by God's permission it exists and therefore ought to be obeyed in things moral so long as it continues to exist. The second relationship, that of incorporation with the political body, implies the approval of the constitution, for it makes the Christian an integral part of the government and therefore responsible for the character and policies of the same. This is the Reformed Presbyterian conception as it is held today in Scotland, Ireland, and America.

SCRIPTURE THE RULE FOR THE REGULATION OF CIVIL AFFAIRS

The Covenanters throughout the entire history of their movement have taken a very high view of the Holy Scripture. They have held and held today the plenary inspiration, entire sufficiency and supreme authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament; as set forth in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith.
the Bible not merely as the standard for religion and ecclesiastical matters in the strict sense, but as the supreme standard for all relationships and activities of life. Since the State is regarded as a divine institution, and the authority of the civil magistrate is derived from the kingly office of Jesus Christ, it follows that the Word of God must be the standard for civil as well as for all other affairs. The civil magistrate must not be regarded as primarily the servant of society, but as the minister of God to men for good. All legislation and administration should seek first the glory of God and second the benefit of society. Nations as such are bound to regulate their civil affairs by the moral law of God. No sphere or department of human life can claim exemption from the authority of Scripture, and therefore in the sphere of civil government, rulers ought not merely to rule according to this standard, but ought to publicly profess to do so. The Bible should not only be the guide, but the officially recognized guide in civil affairs. This does not mean that the Bible is a text-book of political science of government, but that the principles revealed in Scripture must be applied to civil affairs as to all other affairs.

This principle finds its expression, first of all, in the requirement that the nation as such recognize the mediatorial kingship of Christ and enter into covenant with Him. Second, it finds its expression in the requirement that holders of public office be possessed of Scriptural qualifications. The modern American idea that no religious test should be prescribed for public office is utterly contrary to the Covenanter position on civil government from the Second Reformation to the present day. The doctrine that public officials must be possessed of Scriptural qualifications is the basis of the Act of Clauses which was passed in 1649. The same requirement found expression in the coronation oath which Charles II was required to take at Scone in 1652. The Queensberry Paper, Sanquhar Declaration and various later declarations, protests and testimonies set forth the same principle with more and more clearness and insistence. It was, however, no novelty, for it was the solemnly approved and recognized position of the nation in 1649. The modern Reformed Presbyterian Testimonies do not approve of ecclesiastical or denominational tests for public office, but they do insist on the necessity of religious tests. For example the Irish Reformed Presbyterian Testimony regards as an error the proposition "that atheists, agnostics, idolaters, deists, atheists, papists, pagans, political ascetics, or any others who do not receive the Word of God as the supreme law for all relations of life, who do not profess the Christian faith, or whose lives are openly in conflict with Christian morality, may lawfully be civil rulers in a Christian nation." This of course may be held to be an infringement on the rights of men, but it must be remembered that the whole emphasis of the Covenanters movement is on the rights of God, and that according to this viewpoint, men do not have any rights that conflict with the rights of God. Man cannot have inalienable rights except those given by God himself; God gives to no man the right to be an unbeliever or to break the commandments; therefore no man has the right to these things and the unbeliever, being in rebellion against God and Christ, has no right to hold office in a Christian nation which recognizes Christ as King and Scripture as its supreme standard. The Covenant position is in effect, a challenge of the modern secular state to exist in God's world. This position is held today by a very small number of people, but it is a position which can be traced back to the Scottish Church and nation of the Second Reformation.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN DOCTRINE ON CHRISTIAN CIVIL GOVERNMENT

The distinctive doctrines of the Covenanters have been enumerated as (1.) the perpetual obligation of the Scottish Covenants; (2.) the sole headship of Christ over the Church; and (3) Christian civil government. The first two of these are not really distinctive doctrines of Reformed Presbyterians today in the strict sense.
for the first is also held by the United Original Secession Church, and the second has found general acceptance in many parts of the world, especially in countries where the Church and State are completely separated. There was a period, however (1661-1733), when these two doctrines were distinctive doctrines of the Covenants, in the sense that they were the only body to give a public testimony for these doctrines during that period.

The third doctrine, the Reformed Presbyterian doctrine of Christian civil government, however, has been a distinctive doctrine of the Covenanter or Reformed Presbyterians ever since the overthrow of the Second Reformation, in the strict sense that no other Church or organization whatever has maintained a public profession of and witness for this doctrine. The various ascensions from the Revolution Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were all protests against Erastianism in the relation between Church and State and against corruptions or abuses in the Church; none of them was a protest against the constitution of the State itself. This the Reformed Presbyterian position was and is, and it is this fact that sets the Reformed Presbyterian Church over against all other branches of the Presbyterian family in Scotland and in other countries. For this reason the Covenanter doctrine of Christian civil government, or of the mediatorial kingship of Christ over the nations, in the civil sphere, may justly be regarded as the material principle of the Covenanter movement from the Second Reformation to the present day.

A number of other principles are commonly spoken of as distinctive principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, but incorrectly so, for none of them is really distinctive, since all of them are held, to a greater or less extent, by other denominations at the present time. Historically speaking, the formal principle of the Covenanter movement is the perpetual obligation of the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, and the material principle is the mediatorial kingship of Christ over the nations. And as already stated, both of these principles and also the principle of the sole headship of Christ over the Church can be reduced to a single fundamental principle: Jesus Christ or the divine right of God, which are to be recognized in the Church, the State and every sphere of life.

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COMMENTS

Dr. Vos states: "The third doctrine, the Reformed Presbyterian doctrine of Christian civil government, however, has been a distinctive doctrine of the Covenanter or Reformed Presbyterians ever since the overthrow of the Second Reformation, in the strict sense that no other Church or organization whatever has maintained a public profession of and witness for this doctrine . . . For this reason the Covenanter doctrine of civil government, or of the mediatorial kingship of Christ over the nations, in the civil sphere, may justly be regarded as the material principle of the Covenanter movement from the Second Reformation to the present day." He further states that "our principle respecting our relation to the state is scriptural and all we need to say about it is that we believe in God and that God has certain rights. Does he mean that our principle respecting our relation to the state is scriptural and all we need to say about it is that we believe in God and that God has certain rights? Does he reject the right of dissent from a constitutional government?

Here is what our Testimony says: "The only postition consistent for the Christian is the position of dissent from any constitution or form of civil government which refuses allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Prince of the Kings of the earth." Yet the very proposed strike on error! That it is lawful to profess or aver allegiance to an immoral constitution of civil government."
Have we forgotten the position of power in the dissent of the Christian? Christians will never effect a change in an immoral constitution or civil government by averring to petition and defend it as it is!

Why is it that dissent has become a mystic word in the thinking of men who have made a solemn Covenant with God by which they have bound themselves for all time to refuse to incorporate by any act with an immoral constitution of civil government and they will shy away from the word dissent? It was called silly in the 1663 Synod.

Dissent is power. It precedes every attempt to eradicate evil from its strong hold. Every Covenant martyr who died for his faith was a diaster from the political tyranny and ecclesiastical corruption in Scotland down to 1668. What did dissent accomplish? Diaster cost the lives of 18,000 Covenanters! Surely they did not die in vain. Travel Scotland today. Worship in any church you choose. There no Archbishop Sharp can send his minions to cut the throats of godly men.

There is nothing left of the House of Stuart, no Clevehouse to hunt down and slay dissenters.

The words of James Guthrie on the scaffold were: "The Covenant, the Covenant shall yet be Scotland's reviving." Truly he spoke prophetically!

I do not know who wrote item number 1 in answer to the reasons for dissent of D.E. Boyle, et al., (Minutes of Synod 1956, p. 175) which reads: "The church has found it necessary to violate the spirit of the Covenant of 1671 in permitting service of Juices, voting on amendments, serving on school boards and similar practices Scripture alone is the one infallible guide of faith and life." As I say, I do not know which one of the four members of the committee wrote it. Dr. Yous name is first in the Minutes. Still I cannot believe that scholar such as Dr. Yous could have written it. It begins with: "The church has found it necessary to violate the spirit of the Covenant of 1671 and abuses with the refrain Scripture alone is the one infallible rule of faith and life." Where is Scripture does God condone the breaking of a solemn covenant by an individual or church? "Necessary?" Does the writer of that paragraph know the meaning of the word? Does he know that necessary in such a setting means unavoidable? The meaning is: "The church has found it unavoidable to violate the spirit of the Covenant of 1671." It means that the church had no alternative. It had to break the Covenant. Why? So that a jobless Covenanter could earn his bread by sitting on a Jury! And as for Scripture (which they say is our only infallible guide) Psalm 150:

"God hath sworn in truth to David;
He his oath will not disown:

If thy seed will keep My covenant
And My teachings will obey,
Then shall also children's children
Sit upon thy throne for ages."