

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Number 255

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May 2006

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Inquisitions, Confessionals, or Courts?

John W. Robbins

The abuse of church discipline and authority is a scandal that has hindered the preaching and belief of the Gospel for centuries. Church officers have frequently used force and the threat of force to silence their critics. The Roman Catholic Inquisition is the most infamous example of the use of threats of force and force by church officers,¹ but other church organizations, including Reformed churches, have resorted to force as well. Obviously they were not Reformed enough and retained some un-Biblical ideas and practices that they had learned from Rome and church tradition. The American Presbyterian churches developed the idea of the separation of church and state (please visit www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=92), which is based on the separation of force from church discipline, an idea commanded by Christ, endorsed by the early Luther, and characteristic of the early Reformation. But the notion of separation of church and state itself has come under increasing attack by the Romanists and Reconstructionists and their stepchildren, the Religious Right. They disagree with Luther, who wrote:

It is with the Word that we must fight, by the Word we must overthrow and destroy what has been set up by violence. I will not make use of force against the superstitious and unbelieving.... No one must be constrained. Liberty is the very essence of faith.... I will preach, discuss, and write; but I will constrain none, for faith is a voluntary act.... God's Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay.... I can get no further than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot put faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone....

¹ Of course, the Roman Church State invented the legal fiction that it was not using force, but simply handing over heretics to the civil authorities who then did their duty by torturing, killing, or banishing the dissenters. Such transparent attempts to escape responsibility for their sins are endemic to the Romanist system.

We should preach the Word, but the result should be left solely to God's good pleasure.²

The use of force is a result of a larger problem in church discipline: the absence of justice. The two principal disciplinary institutions in Romanism – the Inquisition and the confessional – are both examples of the lack of justice in Romanist Church discipline. In one, the place of justice is usurped by tyranny and severity; in the other the place of justice is usurped by laxity and permissiveness. In both instances, church authority is exalted, and God's law is ignored. "Corban" is the password in Rome.

Presbyterian Government

Some Presbyterians take pride in their form of church government. There are good reasons to do so, for it is quite different from the Romanist system. It consists of a system of elected, not appointed, church courts, ranging from local to regional to national (it can also be international). The lowest court in the Presbyterian form of government is called the Session: It consists of the Ruling and Teaching Elders elected by the local congregation. The Elders sit together for a meeting, and hence are called a Session. (The distinction between Ruling Elder and Teaching Elder, which is a distinction made by more than Presbyterians, is foreign to Scripture: All Elders must be "able to teach," according to the Holy Spirit writing in Scripture. There are no separate qualifications given in Scripture for Teaching Elders, a/k/a preachers, pastors, or ministers.) The local Session, together with the elected Deacons, handles most of the business of the congregation, usually deferring to congregational wishes on major matters.

The appellate court in the Presbyterian form of government is called the Presbytery, which consists of all the Elders from all the congregations in a region, meeting

² Quoted in John W. Robbins, *Christ and Civilization*. The Trinity Foundation, 2003, 46.

together. (The Presbyterian practice of regarding Teaching Elders as members of only the Presbytery and not of the congregation, stemming from the un-Biblical distinction between Teaching and Ruling Elders, is also foreign to Scripture.) The Presbytery handles those matters that are common to the member congregations, and individual church members can appeal decisions made by their congregational officers (Sessions) to the Presbytery.

The supreme court in the Presbyterian form of government is the General Assembly, which is supposed to hear appeals from Presbyteries. (In the Presbyterian Church in America the General Assembly abdicated this role by creating a Standing Judicial Commission which decides such cases.) The General Assembly handles those matters common to the Presbyteries.

Despite its incorporation of some foreign elements, the Presbyterian system of church government is very close to the Biblical system. (See my book, *The Church Effeminate*, for details.) Neither the episcopal system (which is the form of government not only of the Episcopal Church, but also of the Roman Catholic Church-State, the Methodist Church, and many other organizations), with which the Presbyterian form is sometimes confused, nor the congregational system (which is the form of government not only of the Congregational churches, but also of most Baptist churches), is Biblical. The Presbyterian form of government, comprising elected local, regional, and national courts, is a federal system; and the U. S. Constitution is modeled after the Presbyterian form of government.

But many people – including many church members – do not respect church courts, and for good reason. Perhaps the principal reason for this lack of respect is the lack of justice, or to put it another way, the abuse of authority by church courts. The hierarchical system of episcopacy is a legalized or institutionalized abuse of church power, for it denies, on principle, congregations the right to elect all their officers. The continuing scandals in episcopal churches: the homosexual-child molester scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, involving thousands of priests and coverups by bishops and the Vatican itself, is an example of the inability of an episcopal organization to govern itself properly. Other episcopal churches, such as the Anglican, Episcopal, and Methodist, are rife with similar scandals, though on a smaller scale, since they are smaller organizations. And abuses of power are now becoming common in so-called conservative Presbyterian churches.

The Presbyterian Church in America

For a few years I was a Ruling Elder in the PCA, and I saw the abuse of authority up close and personal.

For example, the local Session of which I was a member (Midway Presbyterian Church in Jonesborough, Tennessee) decided that its meetings were no business of the congregation, and the majority voted to hold meetings in secret. They called it “permanent executive session.” This ecclesiastical arrogance, which included ushering at least

one peaceful church member out of the room so a secret meeting could proceed, continued for months, until a minority of Elders (routinely outvoted) drafted a written complaint against the Session for the Presbytery. At that point the petty tyrants backed down, but they never repented – that is, they never changed their minds about their “authority” to prevent ordinary church members from observing their meetings. Nor were those Elders ever rebuked by Presbytery (Westminster) for their abuse of authority. The Midway Session also defended the theology and persons of the leaders of the Federal Vision cult: Peter Leithart, Steve Schlissel, and Steve Wilkins. Their stubborn defense of the heretics led to the resignation of three Elders from the Session and congregation. The Midway Session has never been disciplined for or repented of its sins. Westminster Presbytery (PCA) of which the Midway Church was a part, though informed in writing and in detail of the problems at Midway, did nothing to correct them. In fact, the Presbytery made things worse by appointing a committee headed by a defender of Federal Vision theology to look into the matter (see www.trinityfoundation.org/midway.php).

At the Presbytery level, an outlandish and arrogant view of the church and church discipline – coupled, as it always is, with a cavalier and un-Biblical view of sin – thwarted discipline of a Teaching Elder who had abused members of his congregation. (This is similar to what happens in the Roman Church-State: Its exalted view of its authority causes a lack of discipline for moral infractions by priests; and fornicators, homosexuals, and child molesters in the Catholic priestly class have been protected for centuries while they prey on their spiritual subjects.) Well, the explanation in the PCA Presbytery (Westminster again) for its lack of discipline of a Teaching Elder was as follows: Yes, the Teaching Elder has sinned, and he requires correction. Therefore, we will give him some counseling. If we proceed to try him, convict him, and depose him from the ministry, we are consigning him to Hell, and what he did does not deserve Hell. As a result, no trial occurred.

Where this PCA Presbytery got the absurd notion that it had the power to send anyone to Hell is a good question. It did not come from Scripture, but most likely from Rome via Reconstructionist theology. This un-Biblical view of church authority is always coupled with an un-Biblical view of sin. Church authority is grossly exaggerated, and the seriousness of sin is deliberately minimized. Some sins do not deserve Hell. One finds the same attitude in Romanism, where some sins are venial, and some mortal, but the Holy Mother Church, outside of which there is no salvation, has the authority to send people to Hell by excommunicating them. This denigration of God’s holiness and law and the exaltation of church authority are thoroughly Antichristian. “Corban” is becoming the watchword in the PCA.

At the national level in the PCA, there are numerous separate corporations that operate under the large goal

umbrella of the PCA. One of these legally separate corporations, the PCA Foundation, disburses millions of dollars and refuses to tell PCA members, Elders, Sessions, and Presbyteries where that money goes. It claims that it is protecting the privacy of its donors. It actually operates in secret to protect the names of the organizations and persons to whom it gives millions of dollars. It does not want ordinary church members to know where the money goes. Now this is also similar to Rome, whose finances remain secret from its spiritual subjects.

Historically, Presbyterians have been leaders in defending religious, political, and economic freedom and the rights of ordinary Christians and citizens; but contemporary Presbyterian clerics have little understanding of or love for freedom. Rather, they are enamored of power. This is true not only of the Dominionists, Reconstructionists, Theonomists, Neo-Legalists, Federal Visionists, and Liberals, but also of many who have been influenced by them. In the past several decades an un-Biblical doctrine called the "involuntary church" has turned some nominally Presbyterian churches into virtual cults. The Reconstructionist church in Tyler, Texas, headed by Ray Sutton (now a bishop in the apostate Reformed Episcopal Church), James Jordan, a guru of the Federal Vision cult, and Gary North is a good example of this. (See the essay "Ecclesiastical Megalomania," in *The Trinity Review*, May 1994, for details. It is posted at our website.)

The "Involuntary Church"

The "involuntary church" doctrine holds that once a person joins a local church, he can leave that church only by excommunication, death, or transfer to another church approved by the church of which he is a member. He cannot simply resign. The most recent example of how this doctrine results in injustice through the abuse of power is St. Peter's Presbyterian Church of Abingdon, Virginia, headed by R. C. Sproul, Jr. St. Peter's Session refused to let a family who had come to disagree with the church on doctrinal matters to depart in peace, and the Session ordered everyone in the church to shun them, disrupting both personal and business relationships. After receiving many complaints about the tyranny of the Session of St. Peter's, Westminster Presbytery (of the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly) belatedly acted and deposed the entire Session from office, on the basis of sins already admitted by the Session, including Junior Sproul: So far so good. See [http://hushmoney.org/R.C. Sproul Jr. disclaimer.htm](http://hushmoney.org/R.C._Sproul_Jr._disclaimer.htm), [http://hushmoney.org/RC Sproul Jr-defrocking-docs.htm](http://hushmoney.org/RC_Sproul_Jr-defrocking-docs.htm).

Unfortunately, the story does not end there. The St. Peter's Session then wrote a letter of repentance and apology to the Presbytery, and the Presbytery absolved it of its sins (three times), and granted its request to leave the RPCGA in good standing, though not as officers. This despite the fact that a week earlier the Presbytery had announced its intention to proceed to trial of the four members of the Session on still more serious charges. But the tears of the Session caused the Presbytery to act like a

Roman Catholic confessional, not a church court, and the charges that warranted a trial a week earlier were now completely forgotten. Once again the church court failed. Justice was not done.

A more famous instance of a Presbyterian church court acting like a Roman Catholic confessional is the decision of the 2003 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which overturned the conviction of Elder John Kinnaird. Kinnaird had been convicted by a church court for teaching a doctrine of salvation contrary to the Scriptures and the *Westminster Confession*. But when his appeal got to the OPC General Assembly, Kinnaird reportedly cried and said he was sorry, and the General Assembly overturned his conviction.

Were the civil courts to behave like church courts, no defendant would be convicted, for all he would need to do is to cry and to tell the judge he was sorry, and all would be forgiven. The Elders, mostly Teaching, who attend Presbytery and General Assembly meetings, at least in the two instances here cited, apparently do not know how a court is supposed to behave, so they are either lax or severe, both of which are abuses of power. In the Sproul and Kinnaird cases, both the RPCGA Presbytery and the OPC General Assembly acted like Roman Catholic confessionals, not like Biblical church courts.

This lack of justice in church courts seems to stem from a lack of understanding of and appreciation for rationality, law, and justice. The effeminate church has effeminate church courts, and they are moved by emotions and feelings, by anger, by weeping, by group hugs; they are not guided by principles of justice and due process. Rationality, with its attendant virtue justice, is an attribute of God. But these qualities are not part of contemporary theology and are despised by contemporary theologians; and the irrationality of modern theology expresses itself in the irrational judgments of church courts.

The same lack of respect for God's rationality and law is at the root of the Neo-legalism that controls so-called conservative Presbyterian churches.

The lack of justice is the principal reason many people do not respect church courts: They are either corrupt or incompetent, or both; they consist largely of good-ole-boy networks that crush ordinary church members and protect seminarians. If church courts want some respect, they should earn it by behaving as church courts ought to behave, not as Roman Catholic tyrants and confessors.

For Further Reading

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church
(www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=156)

Christ and Civilization

(www.trinitylectures.org/product_info.php?cPath=21&products_id=55&osCsid=fcb7c59b7bdeabeac10737bd135dde28)

The Church Effeminate

(www.trinitylectures.org/product_info.php?cPath=21&products_id=65)

Ecclesiastical Megalomania

(www.trinitylectures.org/product_info.php?cPath=21&products_id=73)

Ecclesiastical Megalomania

(www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=184)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ vs. Neo-Legalism

(www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=112)

The Relation of Church and State

(www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=92)

Why Heretics Win Battles

(www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=207)

Forthcoming Books: New Editions

Ecclesiastical Megalomania: The Economic and Political Thought of the Roman Catholic Church, John W. Robbins

Available April 2006. Trade paperback, \$19.95.

Predestination, Gordon H. Clark

Available June 2006. Trade paperback, \$12.95.

Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System, John W. Robbins

Available April 2006. Trade paperback, \$19.95.

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