

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS No. XIX: How Much Error Is Tolerable? by Gary North

And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it. And Joab answered, The Lord make his people an hundred times so many more as they be: but my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? why then doth my lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab 1 Chron. 21:2-4a).

The numbering of the nation was to take place only prior to military action. They were numbered when they departed from Egypt in preparation for the invasion of Canaan (Ex. 12:37). Forty years later, they were numbered again, also in preparation for that invasion (Num. 26:51). This was holy war. The nation was numbered because it was a holy army. Only in preparation for holy war was the nation lawfully numbered. At that time, each male 20 years or older had to pay blood money - atonement money - to the priests (Ex. 30:12-16). This was not a civil tax, i.e., a "head tax," which would have been paid to the State. It was an atonement payment.

David numbered the people despite the fact that no holy war was looming. Joab understood that David was breaking the law. David was attempting to assess his army's strength. Why would the king need to do this except in his role as the senior military officer in command of Israel's holy army? He wouldn't. Joab recognized that this was some kind of military assessment by the civil government - an illegitimate act under the Mosaic system.

Joab warned David, who refused to listen. As a result, God brought a plague on the nation: 70,000 men died (II Sam. 24:15). This was appropriate; God had really been angry with Israel. "And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah" (II Sam. 24:1).

The issue was David's error of judgment. Joab recognized that David had told him to do something illegitimate. What should Joab have done? He did warn David, but David ignored his warning. Then Joab went out and did what he knew was wrong.

Is It Time to Resign?

When a Christian is told to do something morally wrong, he should refuse. But Joab was not a man to refuse the king. He had already killed Uriah the Hittite, on the instructions of the king, in David's stupid attempt to cover up David and Bathsheba's adultery. (People could count to nine then, as today.) What was illegal numbering compared to becoming an accomplice to a murder? Answer: about 70,000 times

worse, as it turned out.

Therefore, Joab should have resigned his commission. He could have announced: "I will not be a part to this. This is wrong. God will bring judgment against you or the nation." He did as he had been told. Again. But Joab did save his own life. He had warned the king. God did not kill Joab during the plague. He received a reward for his partial honesty.

Down the military chain of command, no one resigned. They numbered the people. Then God brought the plague.

That fateful question - "Should I resign?" - is never easy to answer. When a person is told by a lawful authority to break the law, he has to make a decision. He asks: Is the law more important than the consequences of breaking it? He also asks: If I get caught, am I willing to bear the consequences? Some laws deserve to get broken on occasion. But what of God's laws? This makes things far less subjective, less problematical. Men are to obey God, not other men (Acts 5:29).

Tolerating Error

But what if the lawful official commands no evil act? What if he merely preaches an inaccurate sermon? What if no one is compelled to believe him. What if no one is compelled to obey him? Is it time for those under him to resign?

That depends on the magnitude of the error. Even the creeds and confessions are man-made documents. They sometimes contain errors of omission or even commission. They are all subject to revision. If this were not true, then the creeds would be equal in authority to the Bible. Nothing in history is equal in authority to the Bible.

Is it the responsibility of a local church member automatically to resign because of an error in the denomination's confession? No. His job is to work as best he can to get it changed. Consider the 1646 version of the Westminster Confession. It said that the civil government has the authority to call an ecclesiastical council into session (Chap. XXIII:3). The Westminster Assembly was such a State-called assembly. So was the Council of Nicea in 325.

This fact bothered American Presbyterians in 1787. They revised the Confession in 1788, removing this theocratic passage. Why? Because American Christianity was becoming confessionally Newtonian-Unitarian with regard to civil government. The closed assembly later known as the Constitutional Convention began meeting in Philadelphia the same week that the Presbyterian General Assembly ended its sessions in Philadelphia. The presbyteries voted the next year to ratify the new Confession, with its one theocratic provision stripped out. This matched the ratification of the U.S. Constitution's stripping away of the old rule that representa-

tives to the Congress had to take a Trinitarian oath of office if their states required one, and most of the states did. Article VI, Section III did to the national government what the revision of the Confession did: stripped it of its formal theological authority as the minister of God (Rom. 13:4). There would be no national ecclesiastical assemblies called by the American civil government.

Was this grounds for staying out of the Presbyterian Church? Those who founded the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America ("the Covenanters") thought so. They held to the 1646 Confession of Faith. They fully understood that the U.S. after 1788 was no longer confessionally Trinitarian, and therefore was in defiance of God. But the price of this ecclesiastical rigor was separation: from American Presbyterianism and from the judicial office of voter. They refused to vote in civil elections for the next century and a half. So, to maintain their Confessional rigor on this issue, they sacrificed all political power. They resigned politically.

In our day, they have begun to vote again, but simultaneously they have abandoned their original theological commitment. Their denominational college, Geneva College, no longer presents the Scottish Calvinist confessions as theologically binding. Today, as much as a third of its student body is Roman Catholic. Tuition money talks! When one RPCNA pastor asked me what I thought his church's highest priority ought to be, I told him, "Make Geneva College Calvinistic again." He answered: "That task is too hard." But if reforming your church's college is too hard, what about getting Americans to ratify a Trinitarian amendment to the Constitution?

Such is the problem of theological rigor vs. institutional participation. If you pull out of an organization, you are in a poor position to reform it. In order to get the U.S. Constitution revised to include a Trinitarian statement, the Christian voter must submit temporarily (i.e., two centuries or more) to a document whose oath professes theological neutrality, i.e., is anti-Christian, since there is no judicial neutrality in civil government.

Men must tolerate some degree of error in order to remove error. This is the reality of temporal existence in a fallen world. To claim anything else is to indulge in perfectionism, an ancient Christian heresy that still exists in certain sectarian circles. It often leads to ecclesiastical withdrawal: house church ("my house!") Christianity.

The practical question is: How much error should a godly person tolerate?

We All Live With Bad Theology

The implications of the removal of Chapter XXIII:3 and the parallel insertion of Article VI, Section III into the U.S. Constitution were horrendous. We are living with the results. I can spell it out in four letters: **ACLU**. At first, the errors made the U.S. politically Unitarian; then, after the Civil War, agnostic; today, atheistic. Add to this progression the curriculum of every government school, not to mention the curriculum of the whole of neo-evangelicalism higher education. The evangelicals are going liberal, both theologically and politically. (See James D. Hunter's book, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.)

Yet we all have learned to live with this two-fold error. It used to be called the American civil religion. It is also known as

religious pluralism. It is the most widely accepted lie in American history: that God does not care if a civil covenant does not acknowledge His sovereignty over it. But we are stuck with this error, probably for a long time. I do not see Christians rushing to leave the country to escape living under this theologically evil system. They pay no attention. Most of them accept it.

Those Christians who are somewhat skeptical of the ACLU's version of the church and state under the Constitution unfortunately, the correct interpretation, given the 14th Amendment – have created a mythology to defend their refusal to resign politically: the Christian history of the Constitution. They indulge themselves with the illusion that they can bring the nation back to its originally Christian Constitutional roots. They are not speaking of the Articles of Confederation. Meanwhile, those who, like myself, see the evil are content to stay where we are, work to change people's minds, and pray for reformation, followed by Trinitarian Constitutional amendment. We postmillennialists know that we can bide our time. But every American Christian now lives with pluralism's twin errors: in church and state.

Nevertheless, there are Christians who get terribly upset because of some theological doctrine of vastly less consequence than the myth of civil neutrality. They are ready to depart in righteous indignation from a local congregation because the preacher occasionally preaches some theological doctrine far less threatening to men and society than the religion of civil neutrality.

Is this sensible? No. What is sensible is to seek out a local congregation that holds a more rigorous doctrine, and then resign quietly and transfer membership. But even in this case, resigning may be unwise. There may be other important benefits of remaining in the congregation whose pastor occasionally preaches some erroneous doctrine. It depends on how serious the actual implications are of his particular error. It also depends on what opportunities there are for service in this congregation, and the opportunities to reform either the pastor or the congregation.

I know of Calvinistic congregations whose members send their children into the government schools. Sometimes they do so defiantly. I know of Arminian congregations that have started Christian schools. Now, which is better: a church that preaches predestination and accepts the myth of neutral education, or a church that preaches free will and Trinitarian education? Should someone tithe to a church that thinks it is all right – or at least theologically irrelevant – to send young children into the pits of academic hell, or to one that has rejected the myth of neutrality? Is the error of Arminianism worse than the error of public school education? I do not think so. Arminianism is Trinitarian; the public schools are officially atheistic and increasingly New Age. Yet Christian perfectionists strain at gnats and swallow camels.

All of which is to say that so long as there are valid reasons for staying where you are – reasons that are not overwhelmed by the outworking of bad theology or bad something else – it is legitimate to stay put. The goal should be long-term reform: bringing greater theological rigor back to the congregation through word and deed: faithful service backed up by faithful proclamation. Laymen can change things ecclesiastically, for both good and evil.

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