

The Church: Her Authority in Christ
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Every time a man in an Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church takes office, he vows his acceptance not only to the stated doctrines of the church, but also of “the government, discipline, and worship of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church as agreeable to and founded on the Word of God.” He promises “to submit in the spirit of love to the authority of the Presbytery in subordination to the General Synod, and to promote the unity, peace, purity and prosperity of the Church.” Similar vows are echoed across many evangelical churches and denominations. Why are these sorts of vows made by church leaders and members? One of the reasons lies in the historic struggle between Presbyterianism and Erastianism.

Erastianism commonly denotes undue subservience of the church to the state. Erastus (1524-83) was a Swiss Protestant during the Reformation era. Eventually settling as a physician in Heidelberg, he unsuccessfully opposed the efforts of the Reformed church to implement Presbyterian church polity and discipline. Erastus argued that the sins of Christians should be dealt with by the state, not by the church. Opposed to both the concept of excommunication and preceding steps of church discipline, which could withhold participation in the Lord’s Supper, Erastus argued for a broad “tolerance” within the life of the church. He thus stood in direct contradiction to the conviction of other Reformed theologians in Heidelberg that the church had a God-given authority, independent of civil powers, over its doctrine and life. Discipline, these Reformers argued, was a biblically mandated element of Christian love and truth in the gospel life of the church.

Elsewhere in Reformation Europe, Calvin and others also maintained the kingship of Jesus Christ and the directives of His Word alone over the church. They were convinced that a lack of church independence from state interference, and the failure to maintain accountability to Christian vows, necessarily resulted in the decline and decay of the gospel witness of the church, putting her members in spiritual danger. Calvin spent much of his life working to free the Genevan church from state interference in her discipline so that the church might be a faithful gospel witness. His bitter opponents, the libertine party, realized that should the church to which they belonged, indeed have the right to ecclesiastical discipline of her members, they would stand accountable to pastors, elders, and fellow members for their doctrine and morality.

Perhaps the greatest example of Erastian versus Presbyterian struggle in the history of the continental Reformed churches is in the events leading to the Synod of Dort in the Netherlands in 1618-1619. At this time, the Arminian party, aware of their divergence from the confessional standards of the Dutch Reformed church and their minority status within it, adeptly used existing civil ordinances, in this case the political veto power of the Province of Holland, to prevent a national Synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches from meeting. Why? They knew that the Synod would directly address their teachings within the denomination and its universities, and enforce its own doctrine. They knew the vast majority of the Dutch Reformed Church was deeply opposed to their public departure from the confessional parameters of the church. Arminian attempts at civil circumvention of the church eventually failed, allowing the Synod of Dort to address Arminianism.¹ Yet, it would take until the early 19th century and the development of Secession Dutch Reformed

denominations for the creation of churches in the Netherlands to be truly free of Erastian influence and civil interference: efforts which initially faced civil sanction, fines, and imprisonment, prior to gaining full freedom of, and for, religion.

While continental Reformed church polity followed the general paradigm of Presbyterianism, this is perhaps even more the case in Scottish Reformed church history. Andrew Melville, John Knox's heir to the Scottish Reformation said these bold words against King James' interference in the life of the church:

[T]here are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: there is King James, the lord of this commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose Kingdom he is not a King, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member. We will all yield to you your place, and give you all due obedience, but again I say, you are not the Head of the Church.... Sir, when you were in your swaddling clothes Christ Jesus reigned freely in this land, in spite of all His enemies; His officers and ministers convened for the ruling and welfare of His Church, which was ever for your welfare.... And now when there is more than extreme necessity for the continuance of that duty, will you hinder and dishearten Christ's servants and your most faithful subjects, quarrelling with them for convening, when you should rather comment and countenance them as the godly kings and emperors did?²

Later Scottish theologians were equally bold, including those who took part in the Westminster Assembly debates over Erastianism. George Gillespie minced no words as he fiercely declared the following:

I shall ... make known briefly what I find concerning the rise and growth, the planting and watering, of the Erastian error. The father of it is the old serpent... He hath cunningly gone about to draw men, first into a jealousy, and then into a dislike of the ecclesiastical discipline by God's mercy restored to the reformed churches. The mother of it is the enmity of nature against the kingdom of Jesus Christ, which He as Mediator, doth exercise in the government of the church; which enmity is naturally in all men's hearts, but is unmortified and strongly prevalent in some, who have said in their hearts, 'We will not have this man to reign over us,' Luke xix... The Erastian error being born, the breast which gave it suck were profaneness and self-interest. The sons of Belial were very much for it, expecting that the eye of the civil magistrate shall not be so vigilant over them, nor his hand so much against them for a scandalous and dissolute conversation, as church discipline would be... The tutor which bred up the Erastian error was Arminianism; for the Arminians, finding their plants plucked up, and their poison antidoted by classes and synods, thereupon began to cry down synodical authority, and to appeal the magistrate's authority in things ecclesiastical, hoping for more favour and less opposition that way. They will have synods only to examine, dispute, discuss, and to impose nothing under pain of ecclesiastical censure, but to leave all men free to do as they list... and for the magistrate they have endeavored to make him head of the church...³

Charles II's restoration to the throne led to heavy Erastian impositions on the Church of Scotland and the persecutions known as "the killing times." Thousands died for the Reformed faith and for Presbyterian church government. These persecutions only came to

an end through the Glorious Revolution, where William and Mary, sympathetic to Protestantism, opened the way for a restored Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Yet, here, similar to the Netherlands in the previous century, Erastian interferences soon followed the restoration. In 1731, through an overture before the General Assembly, the Church of Scotland undermined its own Act of 1690 by proposing to give absolute rights in the selection of office-bearers for local churches to elders, local heritors, magistrates, and town councils. The heritors, magistrates, and town councilors were required to be nominally Protestant, but nothing more. Much to the chagrin of those who held strongly to Presbyterian governance in the Church of Scotland, this meant that those who favored Episcopalian government, or who potentially held any of a possibly wide range of theological convictions, or lack thereof, could now play a key role in the selection of ministers; at the very least the Act took a substantial step towards an Erastian model of church government. In this context Ebenezer Erskine proclaimed a solemn warning against threats to the gospel, including the Erastian policy of patronage, decrying these as a rejection of Christ as the cornerstone of the church:

... are there not invasions and encroachments made upon the authority of Christ...? His headship and authority was invaded by an almost boundless toleration of errors in doctrine, and corruptions in worship, excepting Popery, and blasphemy against the Holy Trinity... His authority was at the same time invaded by an act restoring patronages whereby power is given to a malignant lord who has perhaps no more concern about their salvation than the Great Turk. And is it not a matter of lamentation, to see some of the judicatories of this church, whose province it is to contend for the sovereignty of Christ, and the rights of his subjects, falling in with the patrons and heritors of this nation, in opposition to the known rights of the Christian people to elect and choose their own pastors? ... by this act the corner-stone is receded from, he is rejected in his poor members, and the rich of this world put in their room... By this act Christ is rejected in his authority.⁴

How do these words of Erskine, and other gospel ministers of the past, apply to the present? Events in various denominational institutions in recent years amply declare a willingness on the part of evangelical church members to use Erastian and other means to circumvent church governance, rather than pursuing humble submission to the processes of church governance, or gracious departure because of divergent conviction. Recently James Hering, Associate Professor of New Testament at Erskine Seminary and a minister of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod, argued in a blog piece that according to 1 Corinthians 6, individuals are justified in suing the church via the civil courts.⁵ Hering also took part in the civil actions leading to the ongoing civil injunction blocking the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod from its action (through Board restructuring) overriding Erskine College and Seminary Board of Trustee's refusal to uphold the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. Similar actions repeated across evangelical denominations and denominationally affiliated institutions exemplify neo-Erastian efforts to try to trump requirements of doctrinal and life fidelity in churches – a deeply concerning stand for Christians to take, particularly in light of Erskine's words: "by this act Christ is rejected in his authority."

Historically in America, due to a strong awareness of the need to proactively protect religious liberties (partly tied to antipathy towards Erastianism), civil codes have reflected a willingness to not only uphold denominational prerogatives, but to defer to them in cases of

doubt, as expressed in South Carolina's Non-Profit Corporation Act.⁶ Yet, in recent decades in America, in the name of academic freedom or individual liberties, actual religious freedom, the freedom of individual denominations to direct the affairs of connected institutions according to their doctrinal statements has been repeatedly challenged; a concerning trend in an era of increasing judicial activism. This calls for wisdom, foresight and clarity on the part of denominations and congregations in the framing, and where necessary, reframing, of governing documents and polities, as denominational institutions and ministries by nature of their existence also fall under aspects of civil law.⁷ Clear communication, education, and steady accountability of church relationships are necessary. Where there have been failures on the part of churches, or individuals, humble repentance and grace-filled, gospel-hearted forgiveness can bring restoration in and through Christ. Yet, when civil wrangling or interference does come, whether due to the faithfulness or failures of the church, its members, or both, the distinct, biblical nature of a God-ordained higher ecclesiastical authority over the life and doctrine of the church still stands under the Kingship of Christ, so long as the church's expectations stand in harmony with His Word.⁸

In the end, the heart of the matter for the life of the church is not whether institutions are retained, or properties kept: it is far more crucial that informed vows of both confessional subscription and church governance be upheld in a spirit of determined, compassionate love for the body of Christ's church. For when the vows of pastors, elders, and members fail to be meaningful, and accountable, the church herself fails to be the church, the living gospel, of her Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

¹ William VanDoodewaard, "Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic" in *The Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* XXVIII (2007): 139-164; see also William Robert Godfrey, *Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Stanford University: PhD dissertation, 1974).

² John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: Publications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, 1943), 46-47.

³ George Gillespie, *Aarons rod blossoming, or, The divine ordinance of church-government vindicated so as the present Erastian controversie concerning the distinction of civill and ecclesiasticall government, excommunication, and suspension, is fully debated and discussed, from the holy scripture, from the Jewish and Christian antiquities, from the consent of latter writers, from the true nature and rights of magistracy, and from the groundlesnesse of the chief objections made against the Presbyteriall government in point of a domineering arbitrary unlimited power..* (London : Printed by E.G. for Richard Whitaker ..., 1646), 162-163.

⁴ Ebenezer Erskine, "The Stone Rejected by the Builders Exalted as the Head-Stone of the Corner" in *The Whole Works of Ebenezer Erskine* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2004), 503-504.

⁵ James Hering, "Dr. James Hering Examines Litigation in 1 Corinthians 6" in *Erskine Action*, March 18, 2010 (accessed online at <http://seminary.erskine.edu/blog/?p=222>) Hering's argument fails to address the crucial context of both the historic relationship of the Synod to the Board, and the immediate reality that the motive for suit is opposition to the actions of the Synod implementing the requirement for Erskine faculty members to uphold inerrancy.

⁶ “If religious doctrine governing the affairs of a religious corporation is inconsistent with the provisions of this chapter on the same subject, the religious doctrine controls to the extent required by the Constitution of the United States or the Constitution of South Carolina, or both.” *South Carolina Nonprofit Corporation Act, Section 33-31-180*.

⁷ Ken Sande, “Keeping the Lawyers at Bay: How to Correct Members While Staying out of Court” in *Christianity Today*, August 2005 (accessed online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/august/17.34.html>)

⁸ See for example: Psalm 2; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 4:19-20, 5:29; 15:1-29; Acts 16:4-5; I Timothy 5:17-21, 6:3-5.

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