

THE
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RELATION OF THE STATE TO CHRIST.

THE petition of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, now met and sitting in the city of Augusta, in the State of Georgia, to the Congress of the Confederate States of America, now met and sitting in the city of Richmond, in the State of Virginia, respectfully showeth :

That this Assembly is the supreme judicatory of those Presbyterian churches in the Confederate States which were formerly under the jurisdiction of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States ; that it comprises — Presbyteries, — Synods, and — members ; that it represents a people devotedly attached to the Confederate cause, and eminently loyal to the Confederate Government. The changes which your honourable body has made in the Constitution of the United States, and which have been ratified and confirmed by the various States of the Confederacy, have received the universal approval of the Presbyterian population of these States ; and none have been more grateful to God than themselves for the prudence, caution, moderation, and wisdom which have characterized all your counsels in the arduous task of constructing the new Government. We congratulate you on your success. But, gentlemen, we are constrained, in candour, to say that, in our humble judgment, the Constitution, admirable as it is in other respects, still labours under one capital defect. It is not distinctively Christian. It is not bigotry, but love to our country, and an earnest, ardent desire to promote its permanent well-being, which prompts us to call the attention of your honourable body to this subject, and, in the

way of respectful petition, to pray that the Constitution may be amended so as to express the precise relations which the Government of these States ought to sustain to the religion of Jesus Christ.

The Constitution of the United States was an attempt to realize the notion of popular freedom, without the checks of aristocracy and a throne, and without the alliance of a national Church. The conception was a noble one, but the execution was not commensurate with the design. The fundamental error of our fathers was, that they accepted a partial for a complete statement of the truth. They saw clearly the human side—that popular governments are the offspring of popular will; and that rulers, as the servants and not the masters of their subjects, are properly responsible to them. They failed to apprehend the Divine side—that all just government is the ordinance of God, and that magistrates are His ministers who must answer to Him for the execution of their trust. The consequence of this failure, and of exclusive attention to a single aspect of the case, was to invest the people with a species of supremacy as insulting to God as it was injurious to them. They became a law unto themselves; there was nothing beyond them to check or control their caprices or their pleasure. All were accountable to them; they were accountable to none. This was certainly to make the people a God; and if it was not explicitly expressed that they could do no wrong, it was certainly implied that there was no tribunal to take cognizance of their acts. A foundation was thus laid for the worst of all possible forms of government—a democratic absolutism, which, in the execution of its purposes, does not scruple to annul the most solemn compacts and to cancel the most sacred obligations. The will of majorities must become the supreme law, if the voice of the people is to be regarded as the voice of God; if they are, in fact, the only God whom rulers are bound to obey. It is not enough, therefore, to look upon government as simply the institute of man. Important as this aspect of the subject unquestionably is, yet

if we stop there, we shall sow the seeds of disaster and failure. We must contemplate people and rulers as alike subject to the authority of God. His will is the true supreme; and it is under Him, and as the means of expressing His sovereign pleasure, that conventions are called, constitutions are framed and governments erected. To the extent that the State is a moral person, it must needs be under moral obligation, and moral obligation without reference to a superior will is a flat contradiction in terms. If, then, the State is an ordinance of God, it should acknowledge the fact. If it exists under the conditions of a law superior to all human decrees, and to which all human decrees behove to be conformed, that law should be distinctly recognized. Let us guard, in this new Confederacy, against the fatal delusion that our government is a mere expression of human will. It is, indeed, an expression of *will*, but of will regulated and measured by those eternal principles of right which stamp it at the same time as the creature and institute of God. And of all governments in the world, a confederate government, resting as it does upon plighted faith, can least afford to dispense with the supreme Guardian of treaties.

Your honourable body has already, to some extent, rectified the error of the old Constitution, but not so distinctly and clearly as the Christian people of these States desire to see done. We venture respectfully to suggest, that it is not enough for a State which enjoys the light of Divine revelation to acknowledge in general terms the supremacy of God; it must also acknowledge the supremacy of His Son, whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds. To Jesus Christ all power in heaven and earth is committed. To Him every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. He is the Ruler of the nations, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Should it be said that the subjection of governments to Jesus Christ is not a relation manifested by reason, and therefore not obligatory on the State, the answer is obvious—that duties spring not from the manner in which the relation

is made known, but from the truth of the relation itself. If the fact is so, that Jesus Christ is our Lord, and we know the fact, no matter how we come to know it, we are bound to acknowledge it, and act upon it. A father is entitled to the reverence of his son, a master to the obedience of his servant, and a king to the allegiance of his subjects, no matter how the relation between them is ascertained. Now, that Jesus Christ is the supreme Ruler of the nations, we know with infallible certainty, if we accept the Scriptures as the Word of God.

But it may be asked—and this is the core of all the perplexity which attends the subject—Has the State any right to accept the Scriptures as the Word of God? The answer requires a distinction, and that distinction seems to us to obviate all difficulty. If by “accepting the Scriptures” it is meant that the State has a right to prescribe them as a rule of faith and practice to its subjects, the answer must be in the negative. The State is lord of no man’s conscience. As long as he preserves the peace, and is not injurious to the public welfare, no human power has a right to control his opinion or to restrain his acts. In these matters he is responsible to none but God. He may be Atheist, Deist, infidel, Turk or Pagan: it is no concern of the State, so long as he walks orderly. Its protecting shield must be over him, as over every other citizen. We utterly abhor the doctrine that the civil magistrate has any jurisdiction in the domain of religion, in its relations to the conscience or conduct of others, and we cordially approve the clause in our Confederate Constitution which guarantees the amplest liberty on this subject.

But if by “accepting the Scriptures” it is meant that the State may itself believe them to be true, and regulate its own conduct and legislation in conformity with their teachings, the answer must be in the affirmative. As a moral person, it has a conscience as really and truly as every individual citizen. To say that its conscience is only the aggregate of individual consciences, is to say that it is made up

of conflicting and even contradictory elements. The State condemns many things which many of its subjects approve, and enjoins many things which many of its subjects condemn. There are those who are opposed to the rights of property and the institution of marriage, yet the public conscience sanctions and protects them both. What, then, is this public conscience? It is clearly the sum of those convictions of right, that sense of the honourable, just and true, which legislators feel themselves bound to obey in the structure of governments and the enactment of laws. It is a reflection of the law of God; and when that law is enunciated with authoritative clearness, as it is in the Scriptures, it becomes only the more solemnly imperative. And as the eternal rule of justice, the State should acknowledge it. Considered in its organic capacity as a person, it no more violates the rights of others in submitting itself to the revealed will of God, than a Christian, when he worships the supreme Jehovah, violates the rights of an Atheist or idolater. What the State does itself, and what it enjoins upon others to do, are very different things. It has an organic life apart from the aggregate life of the individuals who compose it; and in that organic life, it is under the authority of Jesus Christ and the restraints of His holy Word.

That, in recognizing this doctrine, the State runs no risk of trespassing upon the rights of conscience is obvious from another point of view. The will of God, as revealed in the Scriptures, is not a positive Constitution for the State; in that relation it stands only to the Church. It is rather a negative check upon its power. It does not prescribe the things to be done, but only forbids the things to be avoided. It only conditions and restrains the discretion of rulers within the bounds of the Divine law. It is, in other words, a limitation, and not a definition, of power. The formula according to which the Scriptures are accepted by the State is: Nothing shall be done which they forbid. The formula according to which they are accepted by the Church is:

Nothing shall be done but what they enjoin. They are here the positive measure of power. Surely the government of no Christian people can scruple to accept the negative limitations of the Divine Word. Surely, our rulers do not desire that they shall have the liberty of being wiser than God.

The amendment which we desire, we crave your honourable body to take note, does not confine the administration of the State exclusively to the hands of Christian men. A Jew might be our Chief Magistrate, provided he would come under the obligation to do nothing in the office inconsistent with the Christian religion. He would not be required to say that he himself believes it, nor would he assume the slightest obligation to propagate or enforce it. All that he would do would be to acknowledge it as the religion of the State, and to bind himself that he will sanction no legislation that sets aside its authority. The religion of the State is one thing; the religion of the individuals who may happen to be at the head of affairs is quite another. The religion of the State is embodied in its Constitution, as the concrete form of its organic life.

Your honourable body will perceive that the contemplated measure has no reference to a union or alliance betwixt the Church and the State. To any such scheme the Presbyterians, and, we think we can safely venture to say, the entire Christian people of these States, are utterly opposed. The State, as such, cannot be a member, much less, therefore, can it exercise the function of settling the creed and the government, of a Church. The provinces of the two are entirely distinct: they differ in their origin, their nature, their ends, their prerogatives, their powers and their sanctions. They cannot be mixed or confounded without injury to both. But the separation of Church and State is a very different thing from the separation of religion and the State. Here is where our fathers erred. In their anxiety to guard against the evils of a religious establishment, and to preserve the provinces of Church and State separate and distinct,

they virtually expelled Jehovah from the government of the country, and left the State an irresponsible corporation, or responsible only to the immediate corporators. They made it a moral person, and yet not accountable to the Source of all law. It is this anomaly which we desire to see removed; and the removal of it by no means implies a single element of what is involved in a national Church.

The amendment which this General Assembly ventures respectfully to crave we have reason to believe is earnestly desired, and would be hailed as an auspicious omen by the overwhelming majority of the Christian people of these Confederate States. Is it not due to them that their consciences, in the future legislation of the country, should be protected from all that has a tendency to wound or grieve them? They ask no encroachments upon the rights of others. They simply crave that a country which they love should be made yet dearer to them, and that the Government which they have helped to frame they may confidently commend to their Saviour and their God, under the cheering promise that those who honour Him He will honour. Promotion cometh neither from the East, nor from the West, nor from the South. God is the ruler among the nations; and the people who refuse Him their allegiance shall be broken with a rod of iron, or dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel. Our republic will perish like the Pagan republics of Greece and Rome, unless we baptize it into the name of Christ. "Be wise now, therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth; kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little." We long to see, what the world has never yet beheld, a truly Christian Republic, and we humbly hope that God has reserved it for the people of these Confederate States to realize the grand and glorious idea. God has wooed us by extraordinary goodness; He is now tempering us by gentle chastisements. Let the issue be the penitent submission of this great people at the footstool of His Son.

The whole substance of what we desire may be expressed

in the following or equivalent terms, to be added to the section providing for liberty of conscience:

Nevertheless we, the people of these Confederate States, distinctly acknowledge our responsibility to God, and the supremacy of His Son, Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords; and hereby ordain that no law shall be passed by the Congress of these Confederate States inconsistent with the will of God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.