

The Blue Banner

A Publication of First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, Texas / Vol 2 #6-8 June-August 1993

No Neutral Ground

Why We Need Commitment to Christian Education

The word that strikes the eye as one scans the titles of books on education in any public library is *crisis*. *Crisis in the Classroom* is the title, not of one book, but in substance at least, of several. That is remarkable, because according to the writers of these same books, schools occupy neutral ground. They carry out their business in a supposedly trouble-free area where partisans on all other issues — like the religious, political, social, economic — can join in a common effort for the education of tomorrow's adults. This neutral ground of common facts and a common future is declared, in the next breath, to be sacred ground, for here everyone can get together, indeed must get together with complete understanding and support. Still crisis? Yes — a dollar crisis, a learning crisis, a human crisis. For exactly what must we be doing in these schools?

@SMALL HEAD = The Crisis of Reason and Personality

A century ago the champions of secularism said, "Let us teach children the undoubted results of science and scholarship. Let us discipline them into accepting a body of facts." The teachers proceeded to force concepts into the heads of little children, concepts that could be hooked together in logical fashion. The concept began to dominate the thing. Live leghorns were brought into the classroom to illustrate the concept "chicken." The producer of eggs was then analyzed in terms of bones, muscle, fat and feathers to yield the further notion of "bird." You see what happened. Children were not introduced into God's highly diversified world of fascinating creatures; but God's creatures were used to illustrate the abstract classifications of men. It was human thought that was glorified. It was the human power of conceptualization the children were being asked to adore, not God and his creation.

The result was a colossal bore. Spartan discipline had to be used to keep the youngsters in line. Silence was the rule and rote memory the method. School was a prison house and the inmates became an intellectual slave-gang. Natural interest in the world around the children was systematically destroyed and their minds mutilated.

In this stultifying world of the schools a reaction was bound to set in. Academic theorists came forward to champion the freedom of the child. Let the child do his thing. Let him develop his own projects. Let him progress at his own pace.

Let the school be child-oriented rather than curriculum centered. Let the teacher be the stimulator and helper of the learning child rather than the domineering force-feeder of a mass of facts and concepts. So the pendulum swung here and there from the ideal of comprehensive knowledge of the world to the ideal of the freedom of the child; from a heavy handed emphasis on the content of the curriculum to anxious concern about the progress of the individual child.

There can be no doubt that the swing from the body of facts to be mastered to the liberation of the child's mind was, in fact, a release from bondage. Initially the innovators were more successful than the traditionalists. Educators were amazed to see the results of a method which allowed children to follow the bent of natural curiosity. To think that a child would investigate a period of history of his own accord or make his own natural-history collection of eggs, or leaves, or shells! Unheard of!

A universal characteristic of nearly all schools, Christian and secular, past and present, seems to be a heavy preoccupation with order and control. One of the severest

and most impartial means of control is, of course, the clock to which the bell is wired. It insures that things happen not because the teacher wants them to happen or because the students want them to happen but because it is time for them to happen. A scholar examining the curriculum of a given school arrives a few minutes early to discover a cluster of children are standing with intense fascination around a turtle. The bell rings. "Now children, put away the turtle," says the teacher. "We're going to have a science lesson." The lesson is on crabs. Inflexible order prevails over the learning process.

A similar incident took place in my Senior year in high school. It occurred just after lunch on November 22, 1963. Teachers everywhere were registering the same complaint: "I can't get the children to concentrate on their work; all they want to do is talk about the assassination of the President." The idea that children might learn more from discussing this event or that, like

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most adults, they were simply too obsessed with the horror of it to think of much else, did not occur to these teachers. It simply wasn't in the lesson plan. The lesson plan, logical, unemotional, compulsory, overruled the convulsions of a stunned nation in mourning. The children were shut off from the humanizing influence of this awful event in God's lesson plan.

Combine this concern for order as an end in itself with the secular pretense of religious neutrality in the classroom, and you have the perfect formula for failure. Lightning and thunder are simply and exclusively natural phenomena to be reduced to scientific equations. Let no one think that God's majesty is revealed in the voice of thunder or the flash of lightning. With a bit of high school science equipment you can make your own thunderstorm. Hooray for science, for man's control over nature, for his reduction of all things to that which is rational and conceptual. You are an emotional fool if you let go with "ooh's" and "aah's" over the turbulence and fireworks in the sky. Until reality outside is streamlined into data you can feed into the sum total of human knowledge, it isn't fit to wonder at.

The secular humanist's dilemma is always and forever that their humanism must oscillate between the pride of human reason and the pride of human personality. For if you shift from sacrificing the child to the sovereign curriculum to sacrificing the curriculum to the sovereign child, you will be not much farther ahead. As Christian people we shall have to learn to see through this educational impotence of secular humanism. It leads inevitably to the dullness and apathy that characterizes so many graduates of the public schools. They seem to have missed completely the fascination and excitement of living and learning as God's creatures in this world. The end is intellectual death, a total blackout of the goals of life, which are, in a unique fashion, the goals of education.

It was a sad, sad student who wrote for a fine arts magazine published by a junior college the poem called "Insignificance." It goes like this:

With little trace this body fades to death
No revelation comes to meet this end.
The throat, so dry, belabors parting breath,
Blood spurts from wounds it failed to defend.
The dimming eyes and leaden hands will try
No more to seek deceptive sanctity.
The body stills; its mouth so dry, awry,
A corpse to fertilize eternity.
This minute precedent in Laws of Things,
Is produce raised in sixty years of toil
While those who preach had cried for rights and wrongs,
The fact stood . . . ideologies to foil.
The rule of nature has no consciousness,
So change from life to death is meaningless.

It is this profound pessimism that comes out, not uncharacteristically, at the end of the process of an education on which the nation spends billions of dollars. But may I ask, what else can secular humanism produce with its cult of human science and human personality? What but a world empty of God, a world made anxious by confrontation after confrontation between sovereign individuals and sovereign nations none of whom wish to be subject to laws not of man's making?

The Crisis of Individualism

Secular humanism confronts us in our day with two major educational philosophies — collectivism and individualism. The first is the system the Marxists are "perfecting." It is completely at the service of an atheistic state that seeks in every way to produce men and women who will carry out policies without openly asking questions. Conformity to the ideology of the state is the sole guideline for educators, and individual initiative among students is regarded as deviationist. The aim of the system is mass manipulation and the result, for all but a few heroic non-conformists, is intellectual slavery.

In the West we have the individualist version of secular humanism. "In our society," said Sterling McMurrin, "education concerns first the well-being of the individual pupil and student, his capabilities for a productive and happy life in which he can pursue an interesting and satisfying vocation" (*The Schools and the Challenge of Innovation*, p. 7). The student must be equipped to make a living and to take part in the social, political, and cultural activities of the nation. Any goals beyond this are up to himself. The system must ignore such first-order questions as the nature and destiny of man, problems of authority and freedom, the place and task of the church in society, the absolutes of Christian morality, the possibility and reality of the forgiveness of sins. Its highly prized religious neutrality (in fact, it is an unblushing secular humanism) forces it to abstain from taking positions considered controversial. Meanwhile, many teachers in the public school system surreptitiously or openly scorn Christian answers to society's needs and have no sympathy whatsoever for a plurality of schools.

The Biblical Necessity of Nurturing

It is in this context that we are asked to listen to the Word of the Lord. The Bible puts things in perspective. In numerous ways it posits the necessity of nurturing our children. The heart of Christian education, in biblical language, is education of the heart. The prayer of the saint is consistently, "O Lord, give me a heart of wisdom." It does not hesitate to say that the fear of the Lord, awe and reverence ("trembling in your trousers") before our Creator, Lawgiver, and Redeemer, is the first principle in gaining any real wisdom (Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 111:10). Wisdom has to do with the practical insight that can guide human conduct, with the goals of living, the perils of life, the behavior of a believing man as a member of a community of believers. Wisdom, certainly, rather than the mere accumulation of theoretical knowledge, must be the goal of Christian education.

To understand the child, the Christian school is concerned, rather more than other schools, with opening his eyes to the world in which we live. That world is both the product of, and stage for, the works of God. These works of God form the basic materials for the testimony of Scripture. The Bible, therefore, consistently turns our attention outward to that world which God created. It directs our mental processes, not first of all to conceptual activities of other people, but to the creative activities of God. It points outward and upward and all around to what God in his wisdom is doing, for example, in nature. A Psalm like Psalm 104 is filled with "ooh's and

aah's" over the diversity of God's creatures. "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures" (verse 24). Nor are the Psalms infected by a narrow pietism that sees only the works of God, but they celebrate in the same breath the cultural achievements of man. The composers gaze in awe at the sea around them and the Leviathans that cruise and tumble through its waters for their amusement; but no less at the human creations that sail over its surface (verses 25-26).

One of the most remarkable compositions in the Bible is Psalm 8. This is not the place nor the time to offer a detailed introduction to the Psalm, but I cannot help showing you the unity of its theme. The Psalmist is struck by a paradox of sorts. On the one hand man is but a thing of dirt — why should He who made the splendors of the skies bother with this little fellow? On the other, this tiny dirt-man occupies a unique position in the world. He has been given (note, he did not usurp it) the job of being the cultural architect and manager of this planet! Talk of trust! The paradox of man's misery and majesty, so important to the business of education, would seem to threaten the unity of the Psalmist's witness. But have no fears. The Psalm opens with the same "ooh's and aah's" before the marvelous name of God which we heard before. Skyscrapers and hydroelectric systems do not for a moment obscure the name. They serve rather to enhance the name of the One for whom human beings work. It is the privilege of the Christian school to articulate the unity of the theme, and to express the wonder of it, in its day-by-day association with the children of the covenant. Secular humanism might be attracted to the contents of that Psalm; in fact, it can neither grant the derivative status of man nor the beauty of the name expressed in the combination of divine and human works.

I come now more explicitly to the scene of human history — that to which our social and historical studies provide an introduction. Again, neither the fixed curriculum can be the norm before which all else in the school must bow, nor the sovereign pupil in his freedom. But both curriculum and child have their focus in the works of God in history. After Psalm 104 comes Psalm 105 with its even deeper and more full-throated appreciation of the accomplishments of the Redeemer-Creator. In Psalm 105 we are confronted with a double sequence of events, in all of which the God of Israel is the chief actor. There are, on the one hand, God's judgments which strike down the self-inflated opposers of His will. These enemies may be the Egyptians or the Canaanites. But His judgments also come down on Israel itself. When Israel breaks faith with its Lord, He pours out His anger on His own people. On the other hand, there is the record of His saving acts by which again and again, Israel was rescued from its enemies. The two-sided history of judgment and mercy is not a matter of good fortune and bad, but a drama shaped by the interaction between a holy partner and an unholy one. The character of God shines out in the midst of human effort and human failure. History itself is education — "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. So you shall keep the commandments of

the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him" (Deut. 8:5-6). "And consider. . . the discipline of the Lord your God, his greatness, his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm, his signs and his deeds" (Deut. 11:2-3).

Just as history itself disciplines God's people, so the telling it educates their children. Again and again in Scripture, monuments are erected at historical sites to instruct later generations. The environment itself was made into a means of education. From these givens we may infer the importance of history for the Christian school as a subject of instruction; certainly the importance of the history of redemption which is the core of world history.

This concern brings me to the church. A field that is almost totally neglected in the public school is the church in its day-by-day struggles, services and mission. What opportunities for education the Christian school possesses in its close association with the Christian church! Every Sunday most of its pupils attend worship; every Monday the children come back to school with a whirl of new impressions in their heads. A baptism occurs — can the children explain this sacrament to each other in Bible class the next day? A sermon is preached — can youngsters write essays on the impressions they received of the service?

The glory of the Christian school is its freedom to explore the works of the Lord in nature, history, human culture, and in the world about us. Its importance lies in the fact that this exploration and the nurture that goes with it have a goal — the goal of preparing students, in the manner of the school, for living a full-orbed Christian life.

Now what of that Christian life that the school teaches?

1. It is first of all a life of faith. Not a life which includes faith as an element, but a life which as a whole expresses faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not a life composed of religious activities alongside of non-religious activities, but a life in which God is gratefully served and honored in all activities. It is a life with the style of a steeple — it points away and beyond itself; it is a life in which discipleship, self-denial and cross-bearing are expressed in a cultural context; a life of trust in the Lord in all circumstances, of joy in the Lord in all situations. For this kind of life, the school is the training ground.

Of course this life is much easier to describe than to live, in school or outside of school. Who of us, parents, teachers, or pupils, is equal to this religion with so many "all's" in it? Who of us is prepared to give up everything when the call comes? Yet this is the life called Christian; and for this we train our students.

2. But there is more. That Christian life is also a life in community. All schools, make no mistake about it, all schools induct their trainees into some kind of community. The public school under government direction is concerned with inducting students into the life of the nation. Our schools induct, or ought to induct, their pupils into the life of the Christian community. That community is not limited to one ethnic group; it cuts across ethnic lines. It includes people of many national backgrounds. Nor is it limited to the members of one denomination. It includes the members of many denominations. It includes all those whose allegiance is to Jesus Christ as Lord and whose life is aimed at service for His kingdom. That community is called the communion of saints. One of the reformed catechisms teaches us that its members are sharers in all of Christ's gifts, including the gifts of knowledge and wisdom He bestows; it also teaches us the

obligation of employing these gifts readily and cheerfully to the advantage and salvation of the other members of that community. The Christian school trains its students for this kind of sharing, a sharing that goes far beyond the boundaries of a single family or congregation or denomination.

3. There is more. The Christian life is life-in-community that works at culture in the name of the Lord. Christians do not isolate themselves from society in ethnic or cultic ghettos. Nor do they immerse themselves in their national society as if it were already sanctified. But they work at the renewal of that culture, its use of natural resources, its literature and art, its politics and economics, in the spirit of anticipation, not negativism — the spirit of those who anticipate a new heaven and a new earth. What alternative do such people have but to operate schools that serve as the training ground for the children who will, in some fashion and by the grace of God, have a share in reshaping the culture in which they live?

Training children, in the manner of the school, for living the Christian life; this life lived as a life of faith and in Christian community; this life as a life of community that toils at the transformation of culture, the whole of it governed by a vision, no doubt a partial vision, of the Kingdom of God — this is the purpose of a Christian school.

It is my hope that in the coming decade, more and more Christians will become convinced that there is no neutral ground with the secular humanist. We do not take the necessary steps to educate our children apart from the state schools because we wish to have a ghetto. We have seen the bankruptcy of the myth of neutrality. We have seen that those who maintain that there is neutrality in education or any other field have already surrendered the ground to the enemy. We will educate the children God has given us in the manner of the Christian school — and we invite all farsighted parents to join with us in this sacred task. REB.

J. Gresham Machen on Public Education

Recognizing that “like it or not” we live in a society which is constitutionally committed to pluralism, J. Gresham Machen referred to public education as a necessary evil. As a Christian people, we must be committed to Christian Education. Yet state-run education in a pluralistic society cannot be specifically Christian (much less specifically reformed). So what do we do until that time that Jesus is declared rightful King of the United States? Dr. Machen made some suggestions regarding the public schools that might be called “modest proposals.” None would disrupt society, yet each would detract from the evil of the system.

“1. The function of the public school should be limited rather than increased. The present tendency to usurp parental authority should be checked.

2. The public school should pay attention to the limited, but highly important function which it is now neglecting — namely, the impartation of knowledge.

3. The moral influence of the public school teacher should be exerted in practical rather than in theoretical

ways . . . the only true grounding of morality is found in the revealed will of God; but at least [this way] the school will avoid doing harm.

4. The public-school system should be kept healthy by the absolutely free possibility of the competition of private schools and Church schools, and the State should refrain from such regulation of these schools as to make their freedom illusory.

5. Uniformity in education . . . should be avoided as one of the very greatest calamities into which any nation can fall.

6. The reading of selected passages from the Bible, in which Jews and Catholics and Protestants and others can presumably agree, should not be encouraged, and still less should be required by law Even the best of books, if it is presented in garbled form, may be made to say the exact opposite of what it means.

7. Public-school children should be released at certain convenient hours during the week, so that the parents, if they choose, may provide for their religious instruction; but the State should refrain both from granting school credit for work done in these hours and from exercising any control whatsoever either upon attendance or upon the character of the instruction.”

Excerpted from *Reforming the Government Schools* © 1925 Trustees u/w J. Gresham Machen.

Sermons by Richard Bacon on 1 Thessalonians

Pastor Bacon completed preaching through the book of 1 Thessalonians in February, and the following tapes are available. Any one tape is \$2.50 postage paid. Please write for pricing if you want the whole set. Write checks to First Presbyterian Church of Rowlett.

When Pastor Bacon finishes preaching through Ecclesiastes (on Lord's Day evenings) we will print the list of available tapes. He is currently preaching through the Westminster Larger Catechism in the morning worship service.

1. 1:1. The Source of Grace and Peace.
2. 1:2. Thanking God for One Another.
3. 1:3. The Church's Engagements.
4. 1:4. The Church's Election.
5. 1:5. How the Gospel Comes.
6. 1:6-7. Trembling at the Word I.
7. 1:6-7. Trembling at the Word II.
8. 1:6-7. Trembling at the Word III.
9. 1:6-7. Trembling at the Word IV.
10. 1:6-8. The Results of Right Hearing I. Models and Imitators.
11. 1:7. The Results of Right Hearing II. Receivers Become Models.
12. 1:8. The Message Rang Out.
13. 1:9-10. Nature of True Conversion I. Turning From Idols.
14. 1:9-10. True Conversion II. Serving the Living and True God.
15. 1:9-10. True Conversion III. Perseverance.
16. 1:10. The Centrality of the Resurrection I.
17. 1:10. The Centrality of the Resurrection II.
18. 1:10. The Centrality of the Resurrection III.
19. 1:10. Deliverance from God's Wrath.
20. 2:1-7. Like a Nursing Mother.
21. 2:14. Enemies of the Gospel.
22. 2:17. Paul's Desire to Stay.
23. 2:19. Paul's Hope, Joy & Crown.
24. 2:19. The Church, Paul's Joy.

25. 2:19. The Church, Paul's Boasting.
26. 3:1-3. The Appointment of Afflictions.
27. 3:10. Praying for the Church.
28. 4:1-2. Pleasing God
29. 4:3-8. The Place of Sex.
30. 4:9-12. Quietly Working.
31. 4:13-18. Overcoming Death.
32. 5:9. The Problem of Judgment.
33. 5:12-13. Christian Community I: The Pastorate.
34. 5:14-15. Christian Community II. The Congregation.
35. 5:17-21. Christian Community III. A Lifestyle of Worship.
36. 5:23-24. Paul's Concluding Remarks.

Calvin's Return to Geneva

Calvin's program of reform was disrupted by his banishment along with William Farel in April 1538. He appealed to the Synod which met at Zurich, compromised on a number of points, but held fast to two. First, communion should be administered more frequently. Second, the singing of Psalms should be made a part of public worship. His return to Geneva was contingent on the acceptance of these two principles. "It excites a certain surprise," says Louis Benson, ". . . that at such a crisis in church affairs he should make the inauguration of Psalmody the *sine qua non* of his return to Geneva." For Calvin, the singing of the Psalms was an essential element in the life and health of the church. [Reprinted from the February 7, 1993 bulletin of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, GA.]

What Calvin Says, by W. Gary Crampton.

Dr. Crampton undertakes to explain John Calvin's views in this short (104pp) overview. This is a readable introduction to the thought of one of the most influential of the sixteenth century reformers.

An appendix giving scriptural support for the "five points of Calvinism" was added by John Robbins. A glossary of terms has also been supplied as an appendix to the book.

This book would be useful for either homeschools or Christian academies as an introduction to Reformed thinking on a wide variety of subjects from epistemology to anthropology to ecclesiology. It could also be used in a Sunday School or new members class. Available from Trinity Foundation, P O Box 700, Jefferson, MD 21755. \$7.95.

1. *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* is the most important book, given the decline of biblical worship in the church today (particularly the Presbyterian churches).

2. Rev. William Campbell, Phd., D.Litt., "George Gillespie," *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, volume X. – Part II. 1949.

3. "Appendix. Extracts From Wodrow's *Analecta*," *Works: A Presbyterian's Armoury*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1844), pp. xxxviii.

4. The general subject of the proper relation of Church and State, and the particular question of whether or not the State has a role in advancing the interests of the Church, have been treated admirably by William Cunningham ("Relation between Church and State;" "The Westminster

Presbyterian Bibliography

GEORGE GILLESPIE, PART THREE
 WHOLESOME SEVERITY RECONCILED WITH
 CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

While perhaps the most significant work by George Gillespie which has particular importance to the Presbyterian churches today, was dealt with in Part Two of this series, others of his books have an abiding interest (see *The Blue Banner*, vol. 2. #3-4.).¹ Of more than a passing interest is his *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty, or, the true resolution of a present controversy concerning Liberty of Conscience* (London: for Christopher Meredith, 1645). This was reprinted in full in *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, volume four (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 1991).

Authorship

This tract was published anonymously at the height of the tension between the Independent and the Presbyterian Commissioners at the Westminster Assembly. Because of Gillespie's position as a Scottish Commissioner it was probably the prudence of policy which dictated that he not affix his name to the piece.² Robert Wodrow, on the authority of Patrick Simson, Gillespie's cousin, writes "He wrote a 'Dialogue between a Civilian and Divine;' a piece against Toleration, entitled 'Wholesome Severity reconciled with Christian Liberty.'"³ Although this reference is included in the appendix to the introduction by Hetherington in Gillespie's *Works*, it is interesting that the above two pieces were not included in that collection.

Subject Matter

Gillespie's reason for writing this piece was "to vindicate the lawful, yea necessary use of the coercive power of the Christian Magistrate in suppressing and punishing heretics and sectaries, according as the degree of their offense and of the Church's danger shall require," against the position advocated by some for the broad toleration of all sorts of differing beliefs among Christian sects which had arisen before and during the English Civil War.⁴

Gillespie opens the tract in his epistle to the reader this way:

It cannot be unknown to any, except such as are ignorant of Satan's devices, and altogether strangers to the histories of former times, that when the Church comes out of idolatry, and out of bitter servitude and grievous pressures of conscience, all her storms are not over her head,

Confession on the Relation between Church and State," *Discussions on Church Principles*; reprinted in *Anthology*, v. 2 #1) and by Thomas M'Crie ("Brief View of the Evidences for the Exercise of Civil Authority about Religion". *Anthology*, v. 3 #4; *The Unity of the Church*, [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989], Appendix.). Charles Hodge gives a respectable overview of this subject in his article, "The Relation of Church and State" (*The Reformation of the Church, a Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues*. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965; 1987], p. 107-119, where he ends by advocating the view adopted by the American Presbyterian Church in 1788, when it modified the Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism.

but she begins to be assaulted and afflicted more than before with heresies, schisms, and home-bred disturbances. Which through the manifold wisdom and over-ruling dispensation of God, who works all things according to the counsel of his will, is England's lot this day, that this may be to those in whom the Lord has no pleasure, *a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, that they may go and fall backward, and be broken; and snared, and taken: that others, who are approved, may be made manifest; yea, that many may be purified, and tried, and made white;* and that in the issue God may have the greater glory in making a sovereign remedy out of poisonous ingredients, and his people may say, *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel who only doth wondrous things.*

After presenting in a fashion the defense of the sectaries for a toleration of their positions, he continues by saying:

Under these fair colors and handsome pretexts do sectaries infuse their poison, I mean their pernicious, God provoking, truth defacing, Church ruining, and State shaking toleration. The plain English of the question is this: whether the Christian Magistrate is keeper of both tables: whether he ought to suppress his own enemies, but not God's enemies, and preserve his own ordinances, but not Christ's ordinances from violation. Whether the troublers of Israel may be troubled. Whether the wild boars and beasts of the forest must have leave to break down the hedges of the Lord's vineyard; and whether ravening wolves in sheep's clothing must be permitted to converse freely in the flock of Christ. Whether after the black devil of idolatry and tyranny is trod under our feet, a white devil of heresy and schism, under the name of tender consciences, must be admitted to walk up and down among us. Whether not only pious and peaceable men (whom I shall never consent to persecute), but those also who are as a pestilence or a gangrene in the body of Christ, men of corrupt minds and turbulent spirits, who draw factions after them, make a breach and rent in Israel, resist the truth and reformation of religion, spread abroad all the ways they can their pernicious errors, and by no other means can be reduced; whether those also ought to be spared and let alone.

A Controversial Aside

This is a stout article by any measurement, (maybe this is why it was not included in the author's *Works*). Established religion (at least what Gillespie was familiar with) has

been on the wane since his time. While the Scottish church and all subsequent Presbyterian churches reaped the benefits of what was achieved at the Westminster Assembly, one need only look at the religious scene in the United States to see the full result of this prevailing doctrine of toleration against which Gillespie wrote. James Walker says, "It is not easy to find a theoretic ground for toleration . . ." Obviously so, since Gillespie, as well as Samuel Rutherford, have a great deal to say against it.⁵

It is clear that the main tenet of *Wholesome Severity* is the advancing of the proper role of the Civil Magistrate in preserving the true religion by punishing heretics and schismatics if necessary. As controversial as that tenet is today, the debate over the degree of that punishment is just as controversial. One short aside Gillespie makes concerning the Old Testament capital punishments is interesting because of the level of importance that has been recently assigned Gillespie in the debate over the meaning of the *general equity clause* in WCF 19:IV:

To them also, as a body politick, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

It has been contended by Dr. Greg Bahnsen that his interpretation of general equity is the true historical meaning of the Confession of Faith. He supports this by appeals to the language of the Confession, the scripture proofs attached, and to the writings of Gillespie.⁶ Dr. Sinclair Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, has written an historical study dealing with the Westminster Assembly and the Law of God,⁷ wherein he counters Dr. Bahnsen's assertions of support from the wording of WCF 19:iv, and the attached Scripture proofs. Additionally, by citing *Wholesome Severity* and the works of other authors, he presents a compelling argument for the view that the *general equity clause* is a consensus statement embracing a range of views.

Dr. Ferguson does point out that Gillespie makes some remarks very similar to Dr. Bahnsen's concerning the civil magistrates following the Old Testament capital punishments. While having similar conclusions, he contends that it would be erroneous to figure that they reached them in the same way. He believes the Confession allows practical theonomy, by which he means these conclusions that theologians and Gillespie have in common. He denies that the Westminster Confession of Faith allows theoretical theonomy, the reasoning process by which theologians reach these similar conclusions.

The following passage from *Wholesome Severity* shows Gillespie holding the more rigorous view of the range

5. James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 1560-1750*, (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982), p. 11. Walker says this in reference to Rutherford's *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*. In reference to Gillespie, he says, "There is a tract or pamphlet of Gillespie's, very little known, on the subject of toleration. It is decidedly against toleration, and in the worst cases of heresy almost pitiless; but, upon the whole, it is wonderfully sober and mild – far more generous and kindly than Rutherford's *Liberty of Conscience*." Of course, Rutherford wrote at ten times greater length on this subject than Gillespie, which might explain the greater fault found in him.

6. *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Expanded Edition (New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1977). pp. 529, 538.

Bahnsen cites Gillespie's One Hundred Eleven Propositions and Aaron's Rod Blossoming.

7. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, edited by William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990). This is a collection of articles against theonomy of which Ferguson's contribution is the only one I'm necessarily recommending. It is entitled "Chapter Fourteen. An Assembly of Theonomists? The Teaching of the Westminster Divines on the Law of God." Also, it is at least interesting that in Gary North's *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, as refutation to *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, Ferguson's article and findings are not so much as mentioned; Rutherford mentioned only in passing (and not on this subject); Gillespie not at all.

represented at the Assembly.

It will be asked, "But how does it appear that these or any other judicial laws of Moses do at all appertain to us, as rules to guide us in like cases?" I shall wish him who scruples this, to read Piscator's appendix to his observations upon the 21-23 chapters of Exodus, where he excellently disputes this question, whether the Christian Magistrate is bound to observe the judicial laws of Moses, as well as the Jewish Magistrate was. He answers by the common distinction, he is obliged to those things in the judicial law which are unchangeable, and common to all nations: but not to those things which are mutable, or proper to the Jewish Republic. But then he explains this distinction, that by things mutable, and proper to the Jews, he understands the emancipation of an Hebrew servant or handmaid in the seventh year, a man's marrying his brother's wife and raising up seed to his brother, the forgiving of debts at the Jubilee, marrying with one of the same tribe, and if there be any other like to these; also ceremonial trespasses, as touching a dead body, etc. But things immutable, and common to all nations, are the laws concerning moral trespass, sins against the moral law, as murder, adultery, theft, enticing away from God, blasphemy, striking of parents. Now that the Christian Magistrate is bound to observe these judicial laws of Moses, which appoint the punishments of sins against the moral law, he proves by these reasons.

(1.) If it were not so, then it is free and arbitrary to the Magistrate to appoint what punishments he pleases. But this is not arbitrary to him, *for he is the minister of God*, (Rom. 13:4) and *the judgment is the Lord's* (Deut. 1:7; 2 Chron. 19:6). And if the Magistrate is *keeper of both tables*, he must keep them in such manner as God has delivered them to him.

(2.) Christ's words (Matt. 5:17), *Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill*, are comprehensive of the judicial law, it being a part of the law of Moses. Now he could not fulfill the judicial law, except either by his practice, or by teaching others still to observe it; not by his own practice, for he would not condemn the adulteress (John 8:11), nor divide the inheritance (Luke 12:13-14). Therefore it must be by his doctrine for our observing it.

(3.) If Christ in his sermon (Matt. 5), would teach that the moral law belongs to us Christians, in so much as he vindicates it from the false glosses of the scribes and Pharisees; then he meant to hold forth the judicial law concerning moral trespasses as belonging unto us also; for he vindicates and interprets the judicial law, as well as the moral (Matt. 5:38), *An eye for an eye*, etc.

(4.) If God would have the moral law transmitted from the Jewish people to the Christian people; then he would also have the judicial laws transmitted from the Jewish Magistrate

to the Christian Magistrate: there being the same reason of immutability in the punishments, which is in the offenses. Idolatry and adultery displease God now as much as then; and theft displeases God now no more than before.

(5.) *Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning* (Rom. 15:4), and what shall the Christian Magistrate learn more from those judicial laws, but the will of God to be his rule in like cases? The ceremonial law was written for our learning, that we might know the fulfilling of all those types, but the judicial law was not typical.

(6.) *Do all to the glory of God* (1 Cor. 10:31; Matt. 5:16). How shall Christian Magistrates glorify God more than by observing God's own laws, as most just, and such as they cannot make better?

(7.) *Whatsoever is not of faith is sin* (Rom. 14:23). Now when the Christian Magistrate punishes sins against the moral law, if he does this in faith and in assurance of pleasing God, he must have his assurance from the Word of God, for faith can build upon no other foundation; it is the Word which must assure the conscience: God has commanded such a thing, therefore it is my duty to do it; God has not forbidden such a thing; therefore I am free to do it. But the will of God concerning civil justice and punishments is no where so fully and clearly revealed as in the judicial law of Moses. This therefore must be the surest prop and stay to the conscience of the Christian Magistrate.

These are not my reasons (if it be not a word or two added by way of explaining and strengthening), but the substance of Piscator's reasons. Unto which I add, 1. Though we have clear and full scriptures in the New Testament for abolishing the ceremonial law, yet we no where read in all the New Testament of the abolishing of the judicial law, so far as it did concern the punishing of sins against the moral law, of which heresy and seducing of souls is one, and a great one. Once God did reveal his will for punishing those sins by such and such punishments. He who will hold that the Christian Magistrate is not bound to inflict such punishments for such sins, is bound to prove that those former laws of God are abolished, and to show some Scripture for it.⁸

One need look no further than the views of Samuel Rutherford, Gillespie's good friend, for a different viewpoint.⁹

But surely Erastus errs, who will have all such to be killed by the magistrate under the New Testament, because they were killed in the Old. Then are we to stone the men that gather sticks on the Lord's day; the child that is stubborn to his parents, the virgins, daughters of ministers that commit fornication are to be put to death. Why, but then the whole judicial law of God shall oblige us

8. George Gillespie, *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty, or, the true resolution of a present controversy concerning Liberty of Conscience* (London: for Christopher Meredith, 1645). See *Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, v. 4, pp. 182-183.

9. Samuel Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church Government Vindicated* (London: 1646), p. 493-494. I again refer you to Dr. Ferguson's article for other authors, such as David Dickson, Anthony Burgess, Samuel

Bolton. Comments on Paul Baynes and Thomas Cartwright are interesting. Cartwright is quoted as saying, "To say that any magistrate can save the life of a blasphemer, contemptuous and stubborn idolaters, murderers, adulterers, incestuous persons and such like, which God by his judicial law hath commanded to be put to death, I do utterly deny." He does allow that some elements in the judicial laws were temporary. Ferguson, pp. 328.

Christians as Carlstadt and others teach? I humbly conceive that the putting of some to death in the Old Testament, as it was a punishment to them, so was it a mysterious teaching of us, how God hated such and such sins, and mysteries of that kind are gone with other shadows. *But we read not* (says Erastus) *where Christ has changed those laws in the New Testament.* It is true, Christ has not said in particular, I abolish the debarring of the leper seven days, and he that is thus and thus unclean shall be separated till the evening; nor has he said particularly of every ordinance and judicial law, it is abolished. But we conceive, the whole bulk of the judicial law, as judicial, and as it concerned the republic of the Jews only, is abolished, though the moral equity of all those are not abolished; also some punishments were merely symbolical to teach the detestation of such a vice, as the boring with an awl the ear of him that loved his master, and desired to serve him, and the making him his perpetual servant. I should think the punishing with death the man that gathered sticks on the Sabbath was such; and in all these the punishing of a sin against the moral law by the magistrate, is moral and perpetual; but the punishing of every sin against the moral law, *tali modo*, so and so, with death, with spitting on the face: I much doubt if these punishments in particular, and in their positive determination to the people of the Jews, be moral and perpetual. As he that would marry a captive woman of another religion, is to cause her first pare her nails, and wash herself, and give her a month or less time to lament the death of her parents, which was a judicial, not a ceremonial law; that this should be perpetual, because Christ in particular has not abolished it, to me seems most unjust; for as Paul says, *He that is*

circumcised becomes debtor to the whole law, surely to all the ceremonies of Moses' law; so I argue, *à pari*, from the like, he that will keep one judicial law, because judicial and given by Moses, becomes debtor to keep the whole judicial law, under pain of God's eternal wrath.

Conclusion

It is interesting that this rare pamphlet by Gillespie has become a key piece of historical information on how we should understand the general equity clause; not that it is a key to the one right meaning of the clause, but that it proves that men of differing views all could adopt the Confession without taking exception, and abide in one church without any division or strife over this point. Because we live in a day where "Presbyterians" feel free to take exception to the Confession of Faith at many points where the language is not controverted, it would be counter productive to narrow this part of the Westminster Confession of Faith to one decisive meaning, particularly since 19:iv appears to have been a consensus clause.

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The Blue Banner

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