

Theonomy and the 1788 American Revision of the Westminster Standards

Lee Irons

Historical Background of the 1788 Revision

Philip Schaff describes the historical background of the statements in the original Westminster Standards concerning the civil magistrate, as follows:

The principle of intolerance has been charged upon Chaps. XXIII (Of the Civil Magistrate), XXX (Of Church Censures), XXXI (Of Synods and Councils), and the last clause of Ch. XX (Of Christian Liberty, viz., the words “and by the power of the civil magistrate”). The same charge applies to a few words in the 109th question of the Larger Catechism, where “tolerating a false religion” is included in the sins forbidden in the Second Commandment with reference to some passages of the Old Testament and of the Book of Revelation (ii.2, 16, 20; xvii.16, 17).

There is no doubt that these passages assume a professedly Christian government, or the union of Church and State as it had come to be established in all Christian countries since the days of Constantine, and as it was acknowledged at that time by Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. It is on this ground that the Confession claims for the civil magistrate (of whatever form of government) the right and duty not only legally to protect, but also to support the Christian Church, and to prohibit and punish heresy, idolatry, and blasphemy.

The power to coerce and punish implies the principle of intolerance and the right of persecution in some form or other, though this right may never be exercised ... All acts of uniformity in religion are necessarily exclusive, and must prohibit the public manifestations of dissent, whatever may be the private thoughts and sentiments, which no human government can reach.

It is a fact, moreover, that the Westminster Assembly was called for the purposes of legislating for the faith, government, and worship of three kingdoms, and that by adopting the Solemn League and Covenant it was pledged for the extirpation of popery and prelacy and all heresy.

The few Independents demanded a limited toleration, and were backed by Cromwell and his army, which was full of Independents, Baptists, Antinomians, Socinians, New Lights, Familists, Millenarians, and other “proud, self-conceited, hot-headed sectaries” (as Baxter calls them). All these sectaries, who sprung up during the great religious excitement of the age, but mostly subsided soon afterwards, were of course tolerationists in their own interests. But for this very reason the prevailing sentiment in the Assembly was stoutly opposed to toleration,

as the great Diana of the Independents and supposed mother and nurse of all sorts of heresies and blasphemies threatening the overthrow of religion and society ... The advocates of toleration were defeated, and could only exact from the Assembly the important declaration that God alone is Lord is the conscience.¹

As Schaff states, it cannot be denied that the original Confession contains certain theocratic principles when it argues that the civil authority has the duty of ordering and settling the church, calling synods, enforcing true worship, and preventing idolatry. Schaff goes on to explain that ...

the objectionable clauses in the Confession and Larger Catechism have been mildly interpreted and so modified by the Presbyterian Churches in Europe as to disclaim persecuting sentiments. The Presbyterian Churches in the United States have taken the more frank and effective course of an entire reconstruction of those chapters, so as to make them expressly teach the principle of religious freedom, and claim no favor from the civil magistrate but that protection which it owes to the lives, liberties, and constitutional rights of all its citizens ...

The changes consist in the omission of those sentences which imply the union of Church and State, or the principle of ecclesiastical establishments, making it the duty of the civil magistrate not only to promote, but also to support religion, and giving to the magistrate power to call and ratify ecclesiastical synods and councils, and to punish heretics.²

Following Schaff, my thesis is that in 1788 the American Presbyterian church as a corporate body decided self-consciously to reject its theocratic/establishmentarian heritage, and to move in the direction of religious liberty and pluralism. The very fact that the Confession itself was revised, rather than merely continuing the tradition of allowing non-theocratic views of the civil magistrate (as had been done for the first eighty years of the colonial American Presbyterian church's existence prior to the revision), suggests that this new, American, non-theocratic tradition was a unanimous, corporate conviction. The church was saying, in effect: "We not only allow non-theocratic views of civil power with

¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 796-798.

respect to religion, but we reject the theocratic views of our forefathers as unbiblical and erroneous.” In the providence of God, the eighteenth century Presbyterian church in America came to realize the error of her predecessors, and determined corporately to denounce those errors and to confess a more biblical approach.

The Importance of the Proof Texts, both Original and Amended

To appreciate the full impact of the amendments to the text of the Confession, the removal and/or amendment of many of the original *proof texts* must be carefully weighed. The vast majority of them are from the Old Testament and deal with the suppression of idolatry and the execution of blasphemers and seducers to idolatry. The American revision sedulously avoids citing the judicial law of the Israelite theocracy, and quotes primarily from the New Testament, or, if the Old Testament is cited, it is usually a text that does not involve theocratic principles.

Charles Hodge explains the significance of this:

All those laws ... in the Old Testament, which had their foundation in the peculiar circumstances of the Hebrews, ceased to be binding when the old dispensation passed away ... Deplorable evils have flowed from mistakes as to this point. The theories of the union of Church and State, of the right of the magistrate to interfere authoritatively in matters of religion, and of the duty of persecution, so far as Scriptural authority is concerned, rest on the transfer of laws founded on the temporary relations of the Hebrews to the altered relations of Christians. Because the Hebrew kings were the guardians of both tables of the Law, and were required to suppress idolatry and all false religion, it was inferred that such is still the duty of the Christian magistrate. Because Samuel hewed Agag to pieces, it was inferred to be right to deal in like manner with heretics. No one can read the history of the Church without being impressed with the dreadful evils which have flowed from this mistake.³

² Ibid., pp. 799-800, 807.

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 268.

When reasoning from the word of God, we are not authorized to argue from the Old Testament economy, because that was avowedly temporary, and has been abolished; but must derive our conclusions from the New Testament.⁴

Although Hodge was writing a century after the amendments were made, he gives expression to the general consensus of the American Presbyterian position on religious tolerance in the civil arena. That consensus had emerged during the Revolutionary era and was rather uncontroversial until the rise of theonomy in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Bahnsen's Interpretation of the American Revision

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation of the American Revision. Those who have a personal stake in securing ecclesiastical tolerance for their theonomic views of the civil magistrate, do not interpret the American Revision as a repudiation of theonomy but as a mild corrective against church-state establishments, or what is sometimes (inaccurately) called Erastianism. Erastianism, as it was understood and debated at the time of the Westminster Assembly, was the position that the civil magistrate has ultimate control over the ecclesiastical realm, in particular, over the exercise of the power of the keys of the kingdom. This position is clearly rejected both by the original Confession and the American version:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (WCF XXIII:3).

The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate (WCF XXX:1).

⁴ Charles Hodge, "Relation of the Church and State," in *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), p. 117.

Nevertheless, in spite of these clear affirmations that Jesus Christ (not Caesar) is the king and head of the church, Caesar was recognized in the original Confession as having certain *supervisory duties* over the ecclesiastical realm (see WCF XXIII:3 and XXX1:2). This was due to the traditional church-state establishment of the Church of England prior to the Reformation. The Solemn League and Covenant sought not to overthrow this establishment but to reform it in doctrine, worship, and church government. The Westminster Assembly itself was essentially a sub-committee of Parliament erected for the purpose of advising it how to reform the church. Yet the manner in which Parliament expected its sub-committee to function was not crassly Erastian in the sense of making the Assembly a mere tool of the state. The ordinance of Parliament, dated June 12, 1643, which called the Assembly into existence instructed the divines “to deliver their opinions and advices ... as shall be most agreeable to the Word of God.”⁵

⁵ Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), p. 69. The Parliament and the Assembly appeared to have had different conceptions of the relationship between church authority and civil authority. This is illustrated by one tense moment in April, 1646 when the Assembly, influenced by the strong leadership of the Scottish commissioners, began pushing for *jus divinum* (divine right) Presbyterianism. The House of Commons responded by declaring the Assembly to be guilty of “breach of parliamentary privilege,” a fairly strong assertion of its authority over the Assembly. Yet the House did not simply reject the Assembly’s position, but issued Nine Queries requesting the Assembly to demonstrate its case for *jus divinum* Presbyterianism from Scripture. Although Parliament claimed to be willing to submit if the case could be made conclusively from Scripture, Parliament demanded that the case be made “by clear, practical and express scriptures, not by far-fetched arguments,” thus practically putting themselves in the position of making the final determination concerning the teaching of Scripture. The fact that Parliament was ultimately not convinced by the Assembly’s exegesis may be inferred from the fact that in 1648 Parliament struck out of the Confession the debated clause affirming *jus divinum* Presbyterianism: “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate” (WCF XXX:1). The Assembly’s own view of its role in relation to Parliament may perhaps be detected in an important qualifying clause at the very end of the Confession’s chapter on synods: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, *for satisfaction of conscience*, if they be

Bahnsen argues that the vestiges of this history of the close interaction between church and state (loosely called “Erastianism”) were what the American Presbyterians singled out and sought to remove from the Confession in light of the process of disestablishment that took place at the federal level after the American Revolution. Since “the American revision pertained *only* to a subsection of the chapter on the civil magistrate, aiming to reinforce disestablishment and the rejection of Erastianism,” claims Bahnsen, it did not release the civil magistrate from the obligation of suppressing idolatry and false religion in the public/civil sphere.⁶

The difficulty with this interpretation is that Bahnsen himself spends more than ten pages arguing that the original Confession was not Erastian in *any* sense and that it “rigorously separated” between the church and the state. This forces him into the odd position of claiming that the original Confession “did not need alteration from the standpoint of its actual teaching,” thus making the American version “not significantly different” from the original. He does note, however, that the American revision “did not bring over the statement of the civil magistrate’s obligation to observe all the ordinances of God,” but he interprets this as an oversight rather than as an intentional repudiation.⁷

Bahnsen concludes his evaluation of the 1788 revision by moving in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, Bahnsen wants to argue that the revision was

thereunto required by the civil magistrate” (WCF XXXI:5). For more on this famous “breach of privilege” episode, see S. W. Carruthers, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. by J. Ligon Duncan III (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), pp. 21-37. Also Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord*, pp. 506-13.

⁶ Greg L. Bahnsen, “M. G. Kline on Theonomic Politics: An Evaluation of His Reply,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 6:2 (Winter 1979-80), p. 201.

⁷ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), pp. 542-43. The ten pages defending the original confession against the charge of Erastianism are found on pp. 527-37.

unnecessary and left the Confession still theonomic, but on the other hand, he is clearly unhappy with the revision and would greatly prefer the original:

In evaluation of the revised version of 23.3, then, we can see how it was, and was not, necessary; also we can see how it helped to clarify the original teaching, but also failed to clarify it. The implicit separation of church and state could have been more clearly expressed in the latter portion of 23.3 in the original version, but the rewriting done by the American church did not result in the all-around improved statement that should be expected when someone puts his hand to revising the Church's doctrinal standards. The American revision did stress the separation of church and state in a clear fashion, but it failed to include the important statement of the orthodox version to the effect that the magistrate must govern in accord with God's law. Hence there was some gain, but a significant loss in the rewritten form of 23.3.⁸

Bahnsen's interpretation is flawed for several reasons. First, if the American revision was merely a clumsy and unnecessary attempt to clarify something that was already clear in the original Confession, Bahnsen is left with the problem of explaining why the American church ever "put their hand" to revising the Confession in the first place. This is a question that he does not address.

Second, Bahnsen both laments and downplays the failure of the American revision to include the statement that the civil magistrate has the authority and duty of seeing to it that "all the ordinances of God [be] duly settled, administered, and observed" (Bahnsen interprets "the ordinances of God" here to include the Mosaic judicial laws). Again, he never explains why this statement was removed. Was it merely an oversight? If so, how does this comport with his claim that the American Presbyterians "were insistent on consistency and were precise regarding details ... and left nothing to the imagination"?⁹

⁸ Ibid., pp. 543-44.

⁹ Bahnsen, "M. G. Kline on Theonomic Politics," p. 201.

Third, he fails to address the significance of the most critical revision of all – namely, the removal of “and by the power of the civil magistrate” at the end of WCF XX:4. In his zeal to explain the more obvious revisions to chapter XXIII, this less obtrusive revision seems to have literally escaped his notice. But though less obtrusive, it is by no means less significant. The removal of this phrase, in conjunction with the removal of the large number of proof texts that were appended to it (see above), is devastating to Bahnsen’s benign interpretation of the American revision. It shows that the American Presbyterian church was not content merely with affirming the disestablishment of the church in light of the new arrangements in church-state relations being enacted in Constitutional Congress at the time. When interpreted in light of the removal of “tolerating a false religion” in the sins forbidden in the second commandment, it seems evident that the American Presbyterian church wanted to go much further. Not only were they clarifying the separation of church and state, they were positively repudiating the theonomic conception of the civil magistrate. The changes made at WCF XX:4 and WLC # 109 have nothing to do with clarifying the distinction between church and state. They are directed solely at correcting a theonomic (or theocratic) conception of the duty of the civil magistrate to suppress idolatry in the public/civil sphere.

Bahnsen’s claim that the 1788 revision “pertained only to a subsection of the chapter on the civil magistrate, aiming to reinforce disestablishment” is thus glaringly out of accord with the historical facts. It is puzzling that Bahnsen would engage in detailed exegesis of the changes at WCF XXIII, without examining the changes at WCF XX:4 and WLC # 109, which have nothing to do with Erastianism or church-state establishments, and everything to do with the civil enforcement of the Decalogue’s prohibition against

idolatry. This lacuna is so puzzling to me that I wonder whether Bahnsen was aware of these other revisions. At the very least, he does not seem to have given them much thought.

What about General Equity (WCF XIX:4)?

In its treatment of the Law of God, WCF XIX:4 affirms that the general equity, that is, the underlying moral principles of the judicial law, remain in force, even though the laws themselves have expired:

To them also [i.e., to the people of Israel], 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 is tempting to quote only the first half of the statement: the Confession says that the judicial laws have “expired” and are thus “not obliging any other [state] now.”

However, we may not ignore the qualifying statement, “*further than the general equity thereof may require.*” The hermeneutic by which they ascertained this “general equity” is illustrated in their extensive appeals to the Mosaic judicial laws in support of their doctrinal statements concerning the civil magistrate (see above). It must be candidly acknowledged, then, that the divines regarded the Mosaic judicial laws as a significant source of biblical instruction to the civil magistrate, informing him of his duties and responsibilities, not only in the common affairs of governance, but specifically with regard to the public enforcement of religion.

Although it could be argued that modern theonomists tend to have a more extensive, detailed, case-law approach to the civil law than the Puritan authors of the Confession, it cannot be denied that both the modern theonomist and his Puritan forebears shared this much in common: both agree that promoting true worship and suppressing

public expressions of idolatry, are important duties entrusted to the civil magistrate by Scripture. The traditional language describing these duties in connection with religion, is that the civil magistrate is the custodian of both tables of the Decalogue (*custos utriusque tabulae*). Meredith G. Kline acknowledges that “in its original intent, WCF 19:4 must also have placed the ‘four first commandments containing our duty towards God’ (19:2) under the jurisdiction of the state.”¹⁰

Theonomists appeal to the original intent of the “general equity” clause of WCF XIX:4 in support their claim that the American revision is just as theonomic as the original, often citing Kline himself in support of this interpretation. For example, in a glowing review of Martin A. Foulner’s *Theonomy and the Westminster Confession* (1997), Kenneth Gentry writes:

Here is the book I have longed for – the book I myself long yearned to compile. Martin Foulner provides for us a remarkable compendium of statements from the Westminster divines (and others) showing without doubt that they were theonomic in their political and social ethic. Page after page, quote after quote, the evidence mounts: Like it or not, the theologians who wrote the Westminster Standards – including WCF 19:4 – held strong convictions about the continuing applicability of Mosaic Law in the modern world. This book single-handedly stops the debate over the historical and confessional nature of theonomy ... Unfortunately, for those who detest theonomy, theonomists wrote the Confession! And as Meredith Kline noted twenty years ago: The American revisions of the Confession did not remove what he called “the Chalcedon error” from the Standards ... Opponents of theonomy ... argue that the WCF 19:4 clearly disallows theonomy ... not realizing that this is the theonomic principle ... Kline admits that the original Westminster Confession actually taught theonomy and that the American revised version continues many of those strands.¹¹

Gentry’s boast that Foulner has proved theonomy to be confessional (and by implication a view that must be tolerated) may be applicable for those theonomists who are

¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *WTJ* 41 (Fall 1978), p. 174.

operating in churches that have adopted the original Confession. But even if all the original divines were found to be theonomists to a man (which is quite unlikely), it would have no bearing on the question of theonomy's acceptability for Presbyterians operating under the American revision. Theonomists' facial reading of WCF XIX:4 can succeed only by ignoring the significant hermeneutical implications of the 1788 revision, bypassing the unique constitutional history of the American Presbyterian tradition, and appealing directly to the original intent of the seventeenth century divines.

While admitting that the original Confession placed the first four commandments under the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate, Kline's perceptive and probing question about the status of theonomy in churches that have adopted the American version must be raised:

The question that would have to be faced today is whether WCF 19:4 retains its original sense. Did the 1788 revision of the Confession in explicitly modifying 23:3 implicitly modify the meaning of the unchanged wording of 19:4? It is sound hermeneutical policy in interpreting the Word of God to follow the analogy of Scripture.¹²

The original intent appears to lend support to a theonomic interpretation of general equity, but is that original intent part of our Confession today? When interpreting the force of XIX:4, should we not give priority to "the true intent and meaning" of the divines meeting in Philadelphia in 1788? Picking up on Kline's "analogy of Scripture" analogy, I would argue that, though the words of XIX:4 have not changed, their constitutional meaning has changed in light of the new context in which they now function.

¹¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "Theonomy and the Confession: A Review and Report," *Chalcedon Report* (November 1997), pp. 12-16.

¹² Kline, "Comments on an Old-New Error," p. 174.

A serious objection may be raised at this point. It may be objected that it is illegitimate to regard those parts the Confession that were not explicitly modified as having been implicitly modified. Bahnsen, for example, takes this position:

The American Presbyterians were insistent on consistency and were precise regarding details; had they meant for 19:4 to be altered, they would have directly altered it and left nothing to imagination.¹³

This approach seems to be the only objective basis we have for determining changes of meaning. Appeals to unstated, tacit, or implicit amendments, it might be argued, would open up a Pandora's box of "postmodern" hermeneutical license.

Tensions in the Westminster Standards as Revised in 1788

As sympathetic as I am with these concerns, there are at least four examples where it is possible and, I would argue, even necessary to employ "an analogy of faith" hermeneutic when interpreting the Confession. Unless we are prepared to employ such an analogical hermeneutic, the revised Confession will have to be set aside as hopelessly self-contradictory in its doctrine of the civil magistrate.

(1) The duty of the civil magistrate "to maintain piety" (WCF XXIII:2)

In the paragraph immediately preceding the third paragraph that was extensively revised, the Confession states that it is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a civil magistrate. It further gives some directions in the exercise of such office: "they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth." In the 1788 revision the duty of the civil ruler to "maintain

piety” was retained. However, the proof texts were slightly edited. (See my companion paper, “The 1788 American Revision of the Westminster Standards.”)

Why did the American church remove Psalm 2:10-12 and 1 Tim. 2:2? Because these texts had been appealed to by the Westminster divines in support of a theocratic interpretation of “maintaining piety.” Psalm 2 was interpreted theocratically, since the kings and judges of the earth are commanded to “kiss the Son” (that is, to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ) upon threat of perishing under the Son’s wrath. The divines apparently did not interpret the warning of Psalm 2 eschatologically, as the NT does. According to Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15, those who do not kiss the Son will perish when Christ returns in visible glory at the end of history to rule the earth with a rod of iron. The de-eschatologized exegesis of the Westminster Assembly was applied as a warning that magistrates who do not “maintain piety” and recognize the Lordship of Christ in the exercise of their civil power, will be removed “from the way” in this age through temporal judgment.

1 Timothy 2:2 was also interpreted theocratically. At first this does not seem to be a very theocratic text, but consider the part of the verse that was highlighted. Paul commands us to pray for kings and for all who are in authority in order “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” In our modern, democratic context we read the “in order that” clause in a “hands off” way. We pray for civil authorities *that they may permit us* to voluntarily lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty.

But the divines had a much more “hands on” interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:2. They apparently read the text as commanding us to pray that civil authorities would exercise their rule in such a godly manner *in order to ensure that* the citizens under their authority

¹³ Bahnsen, “M. G. Kline on Theonomic Politics,” p. 201.

led a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty. The piety of the ruler, not merely in his personal life, but the way in which he publicly maintained piety, was to strengthen the religious fabric of society as a whole.

Evidence that this was how the divines read 1 Tim. 2:2 is close at hand: this verse was cited as one of the proof texts in support of the (subsequently amended) statement in XX:4 that those who publish opinions or maintain practices that “are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness . . . may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the church, *and by the power of the civil magistrate.*”

It is clear that the Westminster divines of 1646 and the Synod of 1788 had somewhat different notions of what was involved in the civil magistrate’s duty to “maintain piety.” Presumably, the Philadelphia divines believed that even in a democratic nation like the United States, with its freedom of religion, elected officials ought to be pious, even professing some sort of Christian or theistic belief. Their difference with the original Confession arose over the degree to which magistrates were required by the Word of God to “maintain piety” in the land, to enforce godliness among the citizenry. All that the Westminster divines intended by that one word “maintain” (which appears again in WLC # 191: “the church . . . countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate”), with its implied use of coercive legal authority in the name of Christ, should not be read into the amended Confession. The hermeneutical implications of their amending the proof texts, and completely rewriting the immediately following paragraph (WCF XXIII:3), cannot be ignored. The meaning of “maintain piety” in the revised Confession has changed, even though the words have not.

(2) “Waging war upon just and necessary occasions” (WCF XXIII:2)

Another example comes from the same paragraph, which states that the civil magistrate may “wage war upon just and necessary occasions.” The original divines cited Rev. 17:14, 16, where the “ten kings” turn against the harlot that had ruled her and destroy her and burn her flesh with fire. Notice that this proof text appeared at several key points in the original Confession as justification for the civil magistrate to enforce true worship and to remove idolatry – see proof texts at WCF XX:4 and WLC # 109.

At the time of the English Civil War, the book of Revelation was interpreted by many Puritans as holding the key to church history. Puritan exegesis of Revelation at this time was influenced to a large degree by Joseph Mead’s *Clavis Apocalyptica, or The Key of the Revelation*, originally published in 1627. Mead’s volume was republished in 1643 with a preface by “Dr. Twisse now prolocutor in the present Assembly of Divines” (so states the advertisement on the front page). Although widely known today for his premillennial/chiliastic exegesis of Revelation 20, the popularity of Mead’s work in the seventeenth century is to be attributed, not primarily to Mead’s minority position on the millennium, but to his setting forth a coherent system of interpretation that enabled a religio-political application of the book of Revelation in support of the progress of the Protestant Reformation in both the ecclesiastical and civil arena.

Michael Walzer describes the political implications of Mead’s interpretation of Revelation for the Puritan Revolution:

What finally made men revolutionaries, however, was not only this secret preparation, but an increasingly secure feeling that the saints did know the purposes of God, a more open and direct reinforcement of their pride and contentiousness. This new, aggressive, and self-confident mood took hold of Puritan ministers and gentlemen only when the idea of warfare was brought into a fairly specific system

of historical reference and prophecy. Beginning at some point before 1640, a group of writers, including Joseph Mead of Cambridge University, began the work of integrating the spiritual warfare of the preachers with the apocalyptic history of Daniel and Revelations [sic]. The religious wars on the continent and then the struggle against the English king were seen by these men as parts of the ancient warfare of Satan and the elect, which had begun with Jews and Philistines and would continue until Armageddon ...

The shift to a more optimistic and historical theory of Christian warfare can probably be dated from the appearance of Mead's *Clavis Apocalyptica* in 1627. This long and scholarly work was translated in 1643 by order of Parliament, with a "compendium" of world history added at the end for the use of less educated enthusiasts. It thus became the chief authority for the apocalyptic writers of the revolutionary period ...

Thus the Presbyterian minister Francis Cheynell, speaking before the House of Commons in 1643: "... when the kings of the earth have given their power to the beast, these choice-soldiers [that is, the elect] will be so faithful to the King of kings, as to oppose the beast, though armed with kinglike power." ...

Stephen Marshall, the greatest of the parliamentary preachers, described the transition from just war to revolution in a sermon delivered before both houses in 1644. Abruptly turning to the soldiers present, he said, "Go now and fight the battles of the Lord ... for so I will not now fear to call them ... although indeed at the first nothing clearly appeared but only that you were compelled to take up arms for the defense of your liberties ... all Christendom ... do now see that the question of England is whether Christ or Anti-Christ shall be lord or king." ...

As satanic lust was overcome in their inner wars, so in the revolution, as one of them said, "the Whore of Babylon shall be destroyed with fire and sword."¹⁴

¹⁴ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 291-96. Mead's actual comments on Revelation 17:16, several decades before the Civil War, are not as explicit as the sermonic applications of the parliamentary preachers. Nevertheless, the equation of the Whore of Babylon with the papacy is clear, as well as the present historical fulfillment of these things ("which partly we perceive to be fulfilled"): "That State, or Commonwealth of Nations over which Rome now reigneth, and long hath reigned, is that government which John foresaw should bear the Whore ... For truly out of the same ten horns, or kings they shall be, who at length shall hate the Whore, whom they have so long borne (which partly we perceive to be fulfilled) shall make her desolate, and naked, shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God by whose providence it cometh to pass, that with so marvelous a consent they should grow together into this Beast of the last head, until his appointed time: he even the same will sometime put into their hearts, that they shall execute his will also upon their Metropolis the Whore: these things the Angel hath interpreted" (pp. 110-11).

The reference to the whore of Babylon being destroyed is taken from Revelation 17:14-16, one of the proof texts cited by the Westminster divines as biblical justification for the civil magistrate's duty of waging war "upon just and necessary occasions." Revelation 17 was thus interpreted as a prophetic mandate for godly magistrates of properly constituted Reformed nations to wage war on behalf of the cause of the Protestant Reformation.

In the 1788 revision, this proof text was removed from the Scriptural basis of just war, while the other texts from the NT were retained. Yet the Confession itself remains unchanged at this point, because American presbyterians also affirmed that civil authorities may "wage war upon just and necessary occasions." What has changed is that now American Presbyterians do not include *religious* war for the sake of advancing the Protestant faith to be one of the just and necessary occasions. Were we bound to follow the original intent of the Westminster divines at this point, the amended Confession would contradict itself.

(3) Removal of idolatry "according to each one's place and calling" (WLC # 108)

When we turn to the Larger Catechism, which was revised in 1788 by the removal of a mere four words in question 109, we find that there are two significant theocratic statements that were not revised explicitly, but which must be reinterpreted to avoid incoherence within the amended standards.

The first instance occurs in question 108, which states that one of the duties required by the second commandment is "the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it [viz. false worship],

and all monuments of idolatry.” The qualifying phrase “according to each one’s place and calling” is crucial. There can be little doubt that the original intent of the Westminster divines was to affirm that heads of households were required to enforce true worship in their households, that church officers were obligated to remove false worship and idolatry in the church, and that civil magistrates must remove false worship from the civil sphere.

Greg Bahnsen makes significant use of the fact that the final clause of WLC # 108 was left unamended in 1788:

We must note that when the American presbyterian church amended the wording of the Westminster Confession with respect to the civil magistrate as he relates to the church, they *did not* see the amendment as opening the door to equal civil status for all religions of the world. They left in tact the teaching of the Larger Catechism on the second commandment.¹⁵

The erroneous assumption underlying Bahnsen’s reasoning is that the American amendments only changed “the civil magistrate as he relates to the church,” not as he relates to the *state*. All that the original Confession envisioned concerning the duty of the civil magistrate to remove false worship from the public sphere is regarded as continuing unchanged, on Bahnsen’s interpretation. But the American revision is far more sweeping than that. As we have seen, American presbyterians not only rejected the idea that it belongs to the power of the civil magistrate to call synods and to order worship and doctrine in the ecclesiastical arena, they also rejected the notion that the civil magistrate has the duty to suppress blasphemy, idolatry, and false worship in the *civil* arena. They removed *all* biblical citations in which rulers were commended for suppressing public expressions of idolatry as part of their theocratic responsibility. Bahnsen is simply

¹⁵ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 186.

mistaken when he argues that this duty was not taken away from the civil magistrate by the 1788 revision.

In light of the American revision, the removal of false worship “according to each one’s place and calling” can no longer be applied to the civil magistrate. The duty of removing false worship in the first two spheres of authority, viz., in the church and in the family, certainly continues for American Presbyterians. But the application of these words to the civil magistrate, as envisioned in the original Confession, has been implicitly amended. An explicit amendment was not necessary, because the words “according to each one’s place and calling” do not explicitly include civil magistrates, and are capable of being construed in strictly familial and ecclesiastical terms.

(4) The church “countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate” (WLC # 191)

The second instance in the Larger Catechism where implicit hermeneutical ripple effects of the 1788 revision can be detected, is found in the answer to question 191. This case is particularly relevant, since it is one that Bahnsen himself would want to acknowledge. In the second petition of the Lord’s prayer, which is “Thy Kingdom come,” we are to pray that “the church ... [would be] countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate.” These words have a very definite meaning in the context of the original Confession, with its Erastian leanings. Recall, according to the 1646 Confession, the civil magistrate “hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses of worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.” To

“countenance and maintain” the church must necessarily include all of those activities with respect to the church if the original intent is strictly followed.

But this would contradict the intent of the divines seated in Philadelphia in 1788. Although they chose not to remove these words, they apparently determined to put upon them a different construction and interpretation, which they have made abundantly clear by their explicit amendments. Thus, the civil magistrate’s responsibility of countenancing and maintaining the church is not understood by the American Presbyterian church in an establishmentarian sense of giving preference to one denomination over another. To “countenance and maintain the church” is now understood in the manner defined in the revised language of WCF XXIII:3: “Yet as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest.” The meaning of WLC # 191 in the American Presbyterian context is different than the meaning of WLC # 191 in the original Westminster Standards (the Confession and Catechisms taken as a hermeneutical unit). The hermeneutical implications of the changed context in which the Larger Catechism now functions must be reckoned with.

Import of the 1788 Revision for the Meaning of “General Equity”

Although it is theoretically possible that the American revisers simply missed certain theocratic vestiges in the original Confession, and would have revised them if they had been aware of their existence, it is more likely, as Kline suggests, that the Synod intended their *explicit* modifications to have an *implicit* affect on the portions that were left unamended.

Indeed, this is the approach that Bahnsen himself would have to take to WLC # 191, in which the original Erastian (or establishmentarian) language was reinterpreted by the American church in a non-Erastian manner. The unamended statements were retained because the original wording, in and of itself, does not necessarily endorse religious intolerance or Erastian principles. Even if such ideas may have been originally intended, they could not now be fairly read into those statements *when read in the context of the amended document as a whole*. The fact that the proof texts were amended at several points, where the text of the Confession itself was not, is a good indication of this.

So we return to Kline's question: "Did the 1788 revision of the Confession in explicitly modifying 23:3 implicitly modify the meaning of the unchanged wording of 19:4?" In view of the examples above, we must take this suggestion seriously. Kline is not arguing for an implicit modification of some totally unrelated doctrine. Apart from additional argumentation or evidence, it would be unacceptable to argue that the revisions of 1788 implicitly affected the Confession's teaching on, say, the doctrine of predestination. But WCF XIX:4 is directly related to the sweeping modifications of WCF XX:4 and XXIII:3 because these passages address the civil magistrate, specifically, the application and enforcement by the civil magistrate of the Old Testament judicial laws against idolatry and false worship.

Recall that the Westminster divines extensively cited passages from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Kings, Chronicles, etc., passages which refer to the responsibility of Israel's theocratic officers to root out idolatry and blasphemy, and to generally promote and enforce true worship. The divines also cited Ezra 7:23-28, where the pagan ruler Artaxerxes is praised for his enforcement of Israel's judicial laws, a favorite text of Bahnsen's. All of

these proof texts concerning the judicial laws of Israel, were simply *removed* by the American Presbyterian church. They are no longer interpreted as legitimately supporting a theocratic understanding of the present duties of the civil magistrate in the church age.

Furthermore, consider the original and amended proof texts at WCF XIX:4:

ORIGINAL	AMERICAN
<p>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 [1].</p> <p>[1] See Exod. 21:1—22:29. Gen. 49:10. <i>The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come: and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. With 1 Pet. 2:13. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Ver. 14. Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. Matt. 5:17. Think not that I am come to <u>destroy the law or the prophets: I am come not to destroy, but to fulfil.</u> With Ver. 38. Ye have heard, that <i>it hath been said</i>, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: Ver. 39. <i>But I say unto you</i>, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. 1 Cor. 9:8. Say I these things as a man? Or <i>saith not the law the same</i> also? Ver. 9. For <i>it is written in the law</i> of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Ver. 10. Or <i>saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes</i>, no doubt, <i>this is written:</i> that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thrasheth in hope should be partaker of his hope.</i></p>	<p>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 [1].</p> <p>[1] See Exod. 21:1—22:29. Gen. 49:10. The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come: and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Matt. 5:38, 39. Ye have heard, that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil. 1 Cor. 9:8, 9, 10.</p>

I am not sure why 1 Peter 2:13-14 was removed, but it might have been due to the phrase “for the Lord’s sake,” which may have been interpreted by the original divines as a qualifier limiting which ordinances of man were to be submitted unto (i.e., only those in

accordance with the Lord's Word). Whatever the case may be, is it not significant that Matthew 5:17 – the text upon which Bahnsen rested his whole case – has been deleted in the American version? Not only did the American Presbyterians leave out this crucial text, they left in Matthew 5:38-39, where Jesus specifically sets the Mosaic *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye) aside, and calls his disciples to the path of patient endurance in the face of persecution.

The implications of this profound sea-change for our interpretation of the general equity clause at WCF XIX:4 are enormous. For even if the general equity of the Mosaic judicial laws may have been interpreted by the Westminster divines as requiring civil magistrates to enforce true worship, the Philadelphia divines have clearly rejected that particular interpretation of general equity as a misapplication of the Word of God. The original wording of XIX:4 was retained because they found no need to change it. They agreed that the judicial laws “expired together with the state of that people.” They agreed that these judicial laws were “not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” Where the American Presbyterians differed from the Westminster divines was in their understanding and application of “general equity.” The removal of proof texts citing Mosaic judicial laws in support of a presumed theocratic responsibility on the part of the civil magistrate, and the explicit amendments to the Confession, were, in the minds of the American Presbyterians, sufficient to indicate their rejection of a theocratic interpretation of “general equity.”