

Covenanter Theonomy

By Vindiciae Legis

Note: Some portions of what follows were taken verbatim from the draft of a much more comprehensive article currently entitled “Christian Magistracy in the RPCNA—Then and Now.” The present piece is intended to serve as an introduction to that article which hopefully, D.V., will be released later this year (2014).

The *killing time*¹ was a period of intense persecution of the Scottish Covenanters lasting approximately from 1680-88. It began in the reign of Charles II, spanned the entire reign of James VII (James II of England) and was brought to a close by the revolution of 1688 and the accession of William of Orange.

Many atrocities occurred during this period not the least of which was the execution by drowning of the *Wigtown Martyrs*² in the rising tide of the Solway Firth, an estuary forming part of the border between South-West Scotland and Northern England. The martyrs were two godly women, sometimes referred to as “The two Margarets.” The younger Margaret was Margaret Wilson aged 18 and the elder was Margaret McLachlan aged 63. It was falsely alleged that they had been at the battles of Bothwell Bridge (June, 1679) and Airds Moss (July, 1680). Their other “crimes” were attending conventicles—field or house meetings held for worship—and refusing to abjure the Covenants. The date of their drowning was May 11, 1685, early in the reign of James VII. The younger Margaret was just a child when the battles took place.

Early in this period of persecution two Covenanters, Henry Hall and Donald Cargill, were discovered at an inn in South Queensferry where an attempt was made by the Governor of Blackness Castle³ to apprehend them. Donald Cargill escaped but Henry Hall was wounded and

¹ The term “killing time” was current during the actual period of persecution. Alexander Shields in a book published in 1687 speaks of “this *killing time*, as the Country calls it.” [Alexander Shields], *A Hind Let Loose* (n.p., 1687), 200. Some sources limit the phrase to the years 1684-87. It is often pluralized as the “killing times.” See also, Wikipedia, s.v. “Killing_Times,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Killing_Time.

² *The Covenanter Encyclopedia*, comp. Dane Love (Ayr, Scotland: Fort Publishing, 2009), s.v. “Wigtown Martyrs.” See also, Wikipedia, s.v. “Margaret_Wilson_(Scottish_martyr),” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Wilson_%28Scottish_martyr%29.

³ Wikipedia, s.v. “Blackness_Castle,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackness_Castle.

taken prisoner. Sadly, Henry Hall died while being taken to Edinburgh. Found in his possession was a Covenanter manifesto which became known as the *Queensferry Paper*. Johannes G. Vos in his concise but excellent history, *The Scottish Covenanters*, informs us:

On June 4th, 1680, a paper was found on the person of Henry Hall, a strict Covenanter who was apprehended at South Queensferry, from which fact the paper was afterwards known as the Queensferry Paper. It was an unsigned document, but is regarded as having been produced by the joint labors of Hall and Donald Cargill. The document was long, comprising about 6,000 words... it was the first formal statement of the distinctive principles of the group which later became known as Cameronians, MacMillanites and Reformed Presbyterians.⁴

Alexander Smellie in his book *Men of the Covenant* suggests that Richard Cameron, often viewed as the most influential leader of the Covenanters at the time, may also have played a part in the composition of the Queensferry Paper.⁵ It expresses the firm commitment of the Covenanters to appoint godly civil magistrates who will rule theonomically, according to the judicial laws of Scripture excluding—of course—those parts that are “ceremonial or typical.”

Moreover we declare, that those men whom we shall set over us, shall be engaged to govern us principally by that civil and judicial law (we think none will be so ignorant as to think, by the judicial law we mean that which is ceremonial or typical) given by God to his people of Israel, no man, we think, doubting, but it must be the best so far as it goes, being given by God.⁶

In a lecture⁷ on 2 Chron. 19:1-2, Donald Cargill reaffirms the duty of the Christian magistrates to enforce the judicial law; the laws they “ought to Rule by, ought to be according to the *Word of GOD*.” Then, with more than a hint of irony, he adds “let *Heathens* and *Turks* go to the *Law* that *Nature* finds out.” Evidently, he considered natural law to be of little value to the Christian magistrate.

We shall say this one word more, there is one Great Thing Folk stumbles at in that *Paper* [the *Queensferry Paper*] that *Kings* ought to Rule or Judge according to the *Judicial Law*; and that these *Laws Kings* ought to Rule by, ought to be according to the *Word of GOD*, And think ye this

⁴ Johannes G. Vos, *The Scottish Covenanters* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 1980), 98-99. Vos (1903-1983) had the middle name *Geerhardus* and it is worth noting that he was the son of the Princeton theologian, Geerhardus Vos. He was ordained into the ministry of the RPCNA in 1929 and spent several years in the run up to World War II as a missionary in Manchuria until expelled by the Japanese in 1941.

⁵ Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant: The Story of the Scottish Church in the Years of the Persecution*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell, [1903]), 278, <http://archive.org/details/menofcovenantsto00smel>.

⁶ John C. Johnston, *Treasury of the Scottish Covenant* (Edinburgh, 1887), 138, <http://archive.org/details/treasuryofscotti00john>. This work gives the complete text of the *Queensferry Paper*. The text is also available online at “Welcome to the Covenanted Reformed Presbyterian Church Homepage,” True Covenanter, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.truecovenanter.com>.

⁷ In this context a lecture was an informal sermon.

a Great Wrong? The *People of GOD* was ruled Two Hundred Years and upwards by this *Law* only, and can any be fitter to be a *Law-Giver* than *GOD*?...So the *Law* of GOD should be our *Law*. Where the *Law* of GOD is received [is] where *Christians* are; Let *Christians* go to the *Law* which GOD has found out; And let *Heathens* and *Turks* go to the *Law* that *Nature* finds out (italics and capitalization as in original).⁸

This echoes the teaching of the earlier Covenanter, Samuel Rutherford, who makes it clear that “Arbitrary governing hath no alliance with God.”⁹ Kings and by implication lesser magistrates are under the “regulating law of God” in every exercise of their office. They must live by and enforce the laws of his Word, only commanding and punishing as warranted by “the King of kings...the Supreme Judge of all the earth.”

As the king is under God’s law both in commanding and in exacting active obedience, so is he under the same regulating law of God, in punishing or demanding of us passive subjection, and as he may not command what he will, but what the King of kings warranteth him to command, so may he not punish as he will, but by warrant also of the Supreme Judge of all the earth.¹⁰

Covenanter Theonomy continued well into the 19th century in the United States. A good example is given by James Renwick Willson (1780-1853), a leading Pastor and Professor in the Reformed Presbyterian church. Under the subheading, “There are laws enacted and revealed in the Bible, which civil rulers only can execute,” he writes:

These are all the penalties of the law, in which indemnity for wrong is made by property, and in all corporeal punishment. Everyone knows that the Old Testament abounds with such penalties. Such are all the laws respecting theft, damage, gross idolatry, blasphemy, the desecration of the Sabbath, rape, incest, adultery, assaults and batteries, manslaughters, and murders. *That these penalties remain under the New Testament in full force is evident*; for they were neither ceremonial nor judicial; they were no better adapted to Israel than to other nations; they do not expire by their own limitation; the crimes against which they were enacted are as aggravated now and as mischievous to society as of old, and men are now as prone to commit them as they were in Judea (italics added).¹¹

⁸ “A Lecture upon 2 Chronicles 19th Chapter, First and Second Verses,” *A Lecture and Sermon Preached at Different Times by that Faithful and Painful Minister of the Gospel, and now Glorified Martyr Mr. Donald Cargill* (n.p., n.d.), 10. Online at: “A Lecture and Sermon...” True Covenanter, accessed February 15, 2012, http://www.truecovenanter.com/cargill/cargill_lecture_and_sermon_re_unlawful_association.html.

⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex: Or, The Law and The Prince* (Edinburgh, 1843), 15, <http://archive.org/details/lexrexorlawprinc00ruth>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹¹ James R. Willson, *Political Danger: Essays on the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ over nations and their political institutions 1809-1838*, ed. Gordon J. Keddie (Pittsburgh PA: Crown & Covenant, 2009), 422-23.

Note carefully that Willson sees the laws and penalties “respecting theft, damage, gross idolatry, blasphemy, [etc.]” to be “*in full force*.” He uses the term “judicial” slightly differently from Cargill and by it he means strictly Jewish judicial laws, with largely cultural, geographical, ceremonial or typical elements.¹² He clearly recognized that there were other judicial laws in Scripture just as applicable to Christians in his own day as they were to the Israelites of old. They belong to the moral law.

It would have been vastly more encouraging to finish this article on a more triumphant note. But regrettably, during the later 19th century and certainly through most of the 20th century, there was a significant decline in the theonomic commitment of the RPCNA. Nevertheless a few fine pastors do hold to this position and the rediscovery of Theonomy by R. J. Rushdoony and Greg Bahnsen—in spite of some deficiencies—has probably helped to slow or even reverse the decline. Perhaps, therefore, the best that can be said about the RPCNA’s current stance on Theonomy is that “officially” it is not against it.¹³ However, “unofficially” and more positively, it has produced good men such as the late Raymond (Ray) Joseph (1927-2006), who worked hard in attempts to restore the church’s theonomic outlook and undoubtedly influenced succeeding generations of pastors, both inside and outside of the RPCNA.¹⁴ Hopefully the recently republished collection of James R. Willson’s works in the aforementioned volume, *Political Danger*, will make a major contribution towards moving the RPCNA back to its theonomic and establishmentarian roots.

¹² Hopefully none of my readers will think that just because the words “judicial” and “Judaic” look and sound slightly similar, I am confusing categories here. “Judicial” has to do with law and justice. In itself it bears no suggestion of Jewishness, or for that matter, non-Jewishness. Willson is using the term “judicial” to apply only to the expired subset of judicial laws which were of *particular equity*—applying only to biblical Israel—such as those concerning gleaning of the fields at harvest time. Even then, the expiry was only partial because the duty still remains to help the destitute. He clearly regards the biblical penalties for “theft, damage, gross idolatry, blasphemy, [etc.]” to be of *common* or *general equity*, i.e. belonging to the moral law and binding on all men, everywhere.

¹³ The “Report of the Corresponding Clerk of Synod” in the 2009 *Minutes of Synod* of the RPCNA states: “To other questions regarding the position of our church on versions of the Bible, Christian Zionism, *Theonomy* and the observance of Christmas, I gave an overview of our practice and attitudes indicating that we have no officially stated position (italics added).” *Minutes of the Synod of the RPCNA*, Session 178 (Pittsburgh, PA: RPCNA, [2010?]), 9. The Synod approved the Corresponding Clerk’s report.

¹⁴ Ray Joseph was instrumental in the republication of William Symington’s *Messiah the Prince* which emphasizes our Lord’s Mediatorial Dominion. William Symington, *Messiah the Prince or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, 1884; repr., Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990). A fairly recent RPCNA publication reports that “a modern-language version of *Messiah the Prince* by J. K. Wall” is “in production by Crown & Covenant Publications.” J. K. Wall, “This Changes Everything,” *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, November/December 2012, 6n.