

The Presbytery of Philadelphia, which met in the late eighteenth century, revised chapter twenty-three, section three of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It appears that the Presbytery intended to bring the Presbyterian Confessional Standards in sync with the new U. S. Constitution. Undoubtedly the theological views concerning the civil magistrate among American presbyters had shifted since the Westminster Assembly. The presbytery crafted a paragraph to replace the old, which was more at ease with the pluralistic denominational environment that existed in the United States.

Specifically the Presbytery which met in Philadelphia deleted the Confession's statements that pertained to the civil magistrate's duty to aid the doctrinal purity and unity of the church while suppressing heresies and corruptions in worship or discipline, and his power to call synods. The substituted paragraph has more to say about the limitations of the civil magistrate's power in religious or ecclesiastical matters. It states that the civil magistrate may not give preference to one denomination above the others, and that he must protect all "religious" and "ecclesiastical" assemblies, as well as protecting all of his citizens in general in their rights and persons. I cannot tell from the wording of the revised paragraph what the framers had in mind as far as "religious" or ecclesiastical assemblies. I do not know whether they used the term "religious" in a broad sense to apply also to Jews and Muslims or only in the sense of those who profess the true religion. It is clear from first glance that the revised paragraph has more to say about the limitations of the civil magistrate than the original. The original paragraph mentions that the civil magistrate must not take upon himself the power of the keys or administer the sacraments, without elaborating in detail.

The original paragraph of the confession cites proof texts from the Old Testament which recall the relationship between the Kings of Judah and the priesthood or prophets. King Hezekiah's reformation in 2 Kings 18 is cited as an example of a King who purged idolatry and heresy from the church by force. It seems that the revisers of the Philadelphia Presbytery did not see these histories as a godly example for the modern magistrate in such cases. The clearest difference between the two paragraphs is that the original version was clearly establishmentarian. In keeping with the purpose of the Westminster Assembly itself, the Westminster divines saw the ideal magistrate as one who supported and established one unified church in preference to all other bodies. The revisers at the Philadelphia Presbytery favored the modern American model where the state remains neutral when it comes to religious bodies and organizations. I do not know exactly what the biblical justification for this model is.