



Church and State

UNDERSTANDING THE TWO KINGDOMS



Opening Discussion

- ✘ What does it mean to be a dual citizen? What are some of the benefits of dual citizenship? What are some of the challenges?

- ✘ How are Christians “dual citizens” in this world? (see John 15:19, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 11:13-16) How do we experience tension within this dual citizenship? How can we navigate this tension?

- ✘ What is the job of earthly government? What duties and responsibilities should it fulfill? How far should the government’s power extend?

- ✘ What is the job of the church? Should the church exercise power? How or why not?

A couple of definitions*:

- ✘ The Church: “The church is the assembly of God’s people in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. The church has, and does, exist throughout the world, regardless of the political system in which local congregations are found. The church is the invisible body of all believers across all time and space, the communion of the saints. The church is about the salvation of souls for all eternity. God provides salvation for all mankind through the ministry of the church, which His Son has commissioned to preach the Gospel to everyone, everywhere, for all time, until He returns again. (cf. AC VII, VIII).”

- ✘ The State: “The state is the visible, earthly institution that regulates a nation and constitutes its government. God instituted the government as an extension of the Fourth Commandment, which establishes parents as authorities. The state is an extension of the original authority of the family, granted for the protection of the neighbor. However, states can become corrupt and act in unethical and unchristian ways. Christians are called to obey their earthly authorities, so long as these authorities do not command them to sin.”

* Definitions taken from *A Simple Explanation of Church & State* from Concordia Publishing House, 2020.

The Two Kingdoms

Sometimes called “The Two Realms,” this is the teaching that God rules over His creation both through the church (His right hand) and the state (His left hand). Let’s take a look at what the Scriptures have to teach us about worldly authority and how the church has interpreted and implemented this in some significant ways throughout the centuries:

The Scriptures

In the Fourth Commandment (the first commandment that deals with our relationships with others) God makes clear that He has instituted authority, and that honoring that authority is beneficial to us:

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” - Exodus 20:12*

Jesus affirms the 4th Commandment when He teaches that earthly authority is to be obeyed:

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.” – Matthew 22:15-22

Paul reiterates the same teaching, explaining the God-given role of earthly authority:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” - Romans 13:1-7†

Peter also highlights the importance of submitting to the governing authorities:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” - 1 Peter 2:13-17

* For other Old Testament references to God establishing human authority, see Proverbs 8:15-16; Isaiah 45:1; Daniel 2:21, 4:17

† For other statements of Paul on human authority, see also 1 Timothy 2:1-3; Titus 3:1-2

- ✘ In the Small Catechism’s explanation of the Fourth Commandment, Luther writes: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.” Is Luther right to include “other authorities” in this commandment? Why or why not?

- ✘ What is this significance that the Fourth Commandment is the first command with a promise attached to it? (see Ephesians 6:2)

- ✘ Based on the above passages, what is the purpose for which God establishes government?

- ✘ What is the significance of Jesus’, Paul’s, and Peter’s instructions when understood in the context of Roman rule?

Augustine’s *City of God*

Augustine’s magnum opus was written in the wake of the sack of the city of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410 AD. In this great work, Augustine offers perspective and comfort to those suffering from the city’s fall, and he also lays out a doctrine of “two cities,” Rome symbolizing the earthly city and Jerusalem the heavenly city. The world in which we live is a complex mixture of these two cities, and Augustine provides guidance in how to understand and navigate this reality.

First, human government would not have been necessary if not for the Fall:

“He did not intend that His rational creature, made in His own image, should have lordship over any but irrational creatures: not man over man, but man over the beasts.”

But, since we need government in our sinful state, God has instituted it:

“In a word, human kingdoms are established by divine providence.”

“The power of lordship is given even to such men as (Nero) only by the providence of the supreme God... the divine voice is clear on this matter.”

A specific form of government is not mandated by God:

“What difference does it make under what rule a man lives who is soon to die, provided only that those who rule him do not compel him to do what is impious and wicked?”

We benefit from the peace and order brought about by government, but the best governments are those in tune with God’s justice and righteousness:

“While the two cities are intermingled, we also make use of the peace of Babylon.”

“If all (rulers) were to hear and embrace the Christian precepts of justice and moral virtue, then would the commonwealth adorn its lands with happiness in this present life and ascend to the summit of life eternal, there to reign in utmost blessedness.”

- ✘ Do you agree that human government would be unnecessary if there were no sin?

- ✘ What might be a modern equivalent to the fall of Rome during Augustine’s time? How might an experience like that shape our understanding of the two realms?

Martin Luther's *On Temporal Authority*

In today's social and political climate, there is a lot of disagreement and confusion on the roles of church and state. Luther wrote *On Temporal Authority* to address such confusion and disagreement in his time. Written to Prince John, Luther's goal was to **“to write about temporal authority and the sword it bears, how to use it in a Christian manner, and to what extent men are obligated to obey it.”**

God has established two governments, or realms, through which He rules and leads His people:

“For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace... one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain.”

Like Augustine, he views human government as necessary because of our fallen nature:

“Hence, it is certain and clear enough that it is God's will that the temporal sword and law be used for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the upright.”

The role of government is faithfulness toward God, love for those being governed, good judgment, and the carrying out of justice:

“A prince's duty is fourfold: First, toward God there must be true confidence and earnest prayer; second, toward his subjects there must be love and Christian service; third, with respect to his counselors and officials he must maintain an untrammled reason and unfettered judgment; fourth, with respect to evildoers he must manifest a restrained severity and firmness. Then the prince's job will be done right, both outwardly and inwardly; it will be pleasing to God and to the people” (126)

Though the Christian does not need government's laws and coercion personally in order to do right, we submit to the governing authorities by God's command and for the good of others:

“Because the sword is most beneficial and necessary for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear.”

- ✘ Do you find Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms to be in accord with God's Word? Why or why not?

- ✘ Do you agree with Luther's conception of government's fourfold duty? Would you add or subtract anything?

- ✘ Do you agree that a Christian doesn't need government personally? Then why should we obey?

The Lutheran Confessions

In the Lutheran Confessions, the Reformers made clear their position on the role of the church and how it differs from that of the state.* In those days, confusion about the two kingdoms primarily took the form of the church stealing away temporal authority from the state:

“Some have terribly confused the power of the Church with the power of the State... they have also tried to transfer the kingdoms of this world to the Church by taking the Empire away from the emperor.”

Both the church and the state are instituted by God and are worthy of honor:

“...both of them are to be held in reverence and honor, as God's chief blessings on earth, because they have God's command... (our teachers) command that both be honored and acknowledged as God's gifts and blessings.”

The power of the church consists of the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins:

“Our teachers' position is this: the authority of the Keys [Matthew 16:19], or the authority of the bishops--according to the Gospel--is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments...”

“Our churches teach that one holy Church is to remain forever. The Church is the congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.”

- ✘ How are our circumstances today similar to those of the Reformers in the 16th century? How are they different?

- ✘ Why did the Reformers hold both the church and the state in such high regard? From the above quotations, do you think the Reformers believed one was more important than the other?

- ✘ How does the power given to the church differ from the power given to the state?

- ✘ What is the purpose for which God has established the church? How well do we fulfill this purpose at Trinity? How does focusing in on this purpose bring all that we do here at Trinity into proper perspective?

* Quotations taken from the Augsburg Confession, Article VII on The Church and Article XXVIII on Church Authority. For a more robust treatment from the Confessions of the role of the church and its relation to the state, see “The Power and Primacy of the Pope.”

Wrapping Up

- ✘ Based on what we've learned today, how has your understanding of the role of government changed or grown? What about the role of the church?

- ✘ What is the goal of the church? What are the means by which the church is to fulfill this goal?

- ✘ What is the goal of the state? What are the means by which the state is to fulfill this goal?

- ✘ How does the doctrine of the two kingdoms relate to law and gospel? Are they the same thing?

Next Week

Today we have gained a basic understanding of the two kingdoms and how God rules and leads through both the church and the state. Next week we will spend some time considering how these two kingdoms are often confused and misappropriated, looking at Scriptural and historical examples and discussing some modern case studies as well. In the meantime, feel free to revisit the Scriptures and quotations above.