



# Church and State

## CONFUSING THE TWO KINGDOMS



### *Opening Discussion*

- ✘ What was something new you learned in our study last week? What's something we talked about last week that is still unclear for you?
  
- ✘ What is the purpose of the state? What is the purpose of the church? Who is in charge of them both?
  
- ✘ How does the doctrine of the two kingdoms relate to law and gospel? Are they the same thing?
  
- ✘ When have you seen confusion about the two kingdoms in others? When have you found yourself confused?

### *Confusing the Two Kingdoms*

Imagine walking along a narrow balance beam carrying a tray full of plates, bowls, and glasses. Each step must be taken with care, each movement considered and thoughtful. If you begin to lean too far to one side, it can be difficult to regain your balance. Little mistakes are quickly amplified, and before you know it you can come crashing down, glass and fine china shattering all around you.

Good theology can be like this. As Lutherans, we recognize that the Scriptures are rife with tension (and even paradox). Am I a saint or a sinner? Faithful Christians know the answer to be yes! But within the saint/sinner tension, we can easily overemphasize the one to the point of downplaying or even denying the other. Leaning too far to one side can cause us to lose the whole thing.

Like any intentional tension, the two kingdoms can be hard to keep straight. When one is given too much weight, the whole thing can collapse. In a 1995 report called "Render unto Caesar... and unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State," the LCMS's Commission on Theology and Church Relations wrote this: "There is a persistent human tendency to blur the distinction between church and state, a tendency that has also afflicted Christians throughout the history of the church. At times this has resulted in a tyranny of the state, at other times in a tyranny of the church. It is a danger that must be diligently monitored by Christians."

- ✘ Do you agree that there is a persistent human tendency to blur the distinction between church and state? Can you think of any examples?
  
- ✘ Why is it important that we diligently monitor the potential danger of confusing the two kingdoms? How can we go about doing this?

## *When the State becomes our god*

Let's first take a look at when a tyranny of the state results from confusing the two kingdoms.

Following the exodus from Egypt, Israel found themselves without a centralized government. Judges ruled the land and "...everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25).

- ✘ What might be the benefits of such a form of government? What could be some drawbacks?

After a long, devolving cycle of the people's sin and God's rescue, Israel had had enough. In 1 Samuel 8, the people demanded of Samuel, "*Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations*" (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel was displeased, but God told him, "*Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them*" (1 Samuel 8:7).

God then gave Israel fair warning, telling them how human rulers would complicate their lives and how much they would require:

*He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves."* – 1 Samuel 8:11-17

- ✘ How did God bless His people through their kings? How did the kings become a hindrance to the people's peace and wellbeing?
  
- ✘ How do we see these warnings end up playing out throughout Israel's history? How do we see them in our own day and our own country?

Israel stubbornly refused to heed God’s warnings. They only considered the benefits of earthly government and not its demands on them or the possibility of its overreach:

***“And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” – 1 Samuel 8:18-20***

At times we can be tempted the same way Israel was—to look to the world and not to God for good things, prioritizing trust in government or political positions over trust in God and submission to His Word.

- ✘ Read 1 John 2:15-17. How does John warn us away from seeking the wrong things from the world? How might this apply to our expectations of our rulers?
  
- ✘ Are we as Americans particularly at risk of succumbing to this temptation?\*
  
- ✘ Read Psalm 20:7. Are “horses and chariots” a bad thing? Is it wrong to expect our rulers to provide us with protection and safety? Then what is the point of this verse? In whom must we ultimately place our trust?

A recent article in *The Atlantic*<sup>†</sup> asserts that “the aggressive, disruptive, and unforgiving mindset that characterizes so much of our politics has found a home in many American churches.” The article contends that American Christians have, by and large, allowed their politics to dictate their words and actions rather than the Word of God. One pastor quoted in the article describes our “idolatry of politics.” He says he’s heard of many congregants leaving their church because it didn’t match their politics but has never once heard of someone changing their politics because it didn’t match their church’s teaching.<sup>‡</sup>

---

\* “In the Middle Ages the clergy spoke of nothing but a future state; they hardly cared to prove that a sincere Christian may be a happy man here below. But the American preachers are constantly referring to the earth, and it is only with great difficulty that they can divert their attention from it. – Alexis de Tocqueville

† Wehman, Neil. “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart.” *The Atlantic*. October 24, 2021. Accessed January 5, 2022. <https://apple.news/AtU-o9vU2TrKnPvg5thH1bw>

‡ Other thought-provoking excerpts from the article: “Even those pastors who really are committed to catechesis get to spend, on average, less than an hour a week teaching their people. Sermons are short. Only some churchgoers attend adult-education classes, and even fewer attend Bible study and small groups. Cable news, however, is always on. ‘So if people are getting one kind of catechesis for half an hour per week,’ Jacobs asked, ‘and another for dozens of hours per week, which one do you think will win out?’... when people’s values are shaped by the media they consume, rather than by their religious leaders and communities, that has consequences... the reality, however, is that a lot of people, especially in this era, will leave a church if their political views are ever challenged, even around the edges.”

- ✘ What should the faithful Christian’s response be when the church’s teachings come into conflict with his/her personal political convictions?
  
- ✘ Have you experienced the “idolatry of politics” in your own life? In your own heart? How can we avoid this?\*

Of course, sometimes the state claims authority for itself beyond that which is given it by God. In Genesis 11, we read about people organizing to build a society apart from God’s loving authority.

*Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” – Genesis 11:4*

In fact, it is often the case that political powers think they can take the place of God, setting themselves against Him and devising plans contrary to His will.

*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” – Psalm 2:1-3*

- ✘ What biblical examples can you think of where the state attempted to take authority away from God? What historical or modern examples come to mind?

## *When the Church becomes king*

It’s not just the state that can claim too much authority for itself. The church has committed the same kind of overreach throughout human history. Let’s first refresh our memories on the nature and scope of the power given to the church:

*So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have*

---

\* Charles Colson: “Both liberals and conservatives have made the mistake of aligning their spiritual goals with a particular political agenda... Because it tempts one to water down the truth of the gospel, ideological alignment, whether on the left or the right, accelerates the church’s secularization. When the church aligns itself politically, it gives priority to the compromises and temporal successes of the political world rather than its Christian confession of eternal truth.”

*come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”*  
– John 18:33-37

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* – Matthew 28:18-20

*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* – Colossians 1:13-14

The kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. It is a kingdom based in the redemption and forgiveness He won for us on the cross. Jesus exercises His heavenly and earthly authority through Word and Sacrament, and therefore the church’s authority is found in proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments. Its purpose is not to dictate civil law, and it especially must not command anything not clearly commanded in Scripture:

**“Christ’s kingdom is spiritual; it is the knowledge of God in the heart, the fear of God and faith, the beginning of eternal righteousness and eternal life. At the same time it lets us make outward use of the legitimate political ordinances of the nation in which we live, just as it lets us make use of medicine or architecture, food or drink or air. The Gospel does not introduce any new laws about the civil estate, but commands us to obey the existing laws, whether they were formulated by heathen or by others, and in this obedience to practice love.”** – AP XVI, 2-3

**“The Church's authority has its own commission to teach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments [Matthew 28:19-20]. Let it not break into the office of another. Let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world to itself. Let it not abolish the laws of civil rulers. Let it not abolish lawful obedience. Let it not interfere with judgments about civil ordinances or contracts. Let it not dictate laws to civil authorities about the form of society. As Christ says, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Also, 'Who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?' (Luke 12:14). Paul also says, 'Our citizenship is in heaven' (Philippians 3:20). And, 'The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.' (2 Corinthians 10:4).”** – AC XXVIII, 12-17

**“The church commands nothing unless it knows for certain that it is God’s word.”** – Martin Luther, *On Temporal Authority*

**“What, then, are the priests and bishops? Answer: Their government is not a matter of authority or power, but a service and an office, for they are neither higher nor better than other Christians.”** – Martin Luther, *On Temporal Authority*

✘ What are some of the ways the church has violated these principles throughout history?\*

✘ The CTCR writes, “Christians must resist the temptation to resolve America’s church-state problems by attempting to make the state ‘Christian.’” Do you agree?

---

\* Consider the impact of Constantinianism, the rise of the papacy, the theocracy of Calvin, etc.

- ✘ Does the church in America today ever seek to overstep its bounds? Have we seen this happening during the current COVID-19 pandemic in any ways?

## *Next Week*

Last week we sought to gain a basic understanding of the two kingdoms through which God exercises His authority and rules over His creation. Today we have considered the various ways in which we often confuse these two kingdoms and the consequences that can come about as a result of that confusion. Many questions remain, but perhaps one of the most provocative is this: “When, if ever, is it right for me to disobey civil authorities?” Is there a place for civil disobedience in the life of a faithful Christian? Next week we will examine this question biblically, confessionally, and historically, and we will discuss some of its most pressing implications for our lives today.