

# Is There a Relationship Between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism?

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It is characteristic of confessional Lutherans that they find their answers to questions such as our theme question in the Word of God. The question before us is not a speculative one; it is rather one which requires of us that we “search the Scriptures.” Jesus himself points us to the answer in the testimony he gave before Pontius Pilate. “My Kingdom is not of this world.” If we understand what Pilate failed to understand in those words, we have the answer to our question.

Confessional Lutherans recognize two uses of the word “kingdom,” one with a capital “K” and one with a small case “k.” If we understand well the difference between Kingdom (capital K) and kingdom (small k) we need not hesitate in answering the question: Is there a relationship between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism? At this point we profit by recalling what Luther says in his inimitable way about the two kingdoms. He says,

It takes great skill to distinguish clearly between these two kingdoms and very few strike it right. As a rule, temporal rulers want to direct the church and the clergy wants to rule in the city hall. Under the papacy mixing the two was and still is considered good ruling. But in reality this is ruling very badly. When the bishops were still pious they observed the difference, minded their own business in the church, and let the emperor do his ruling in the world. But their successors mixed the two, took the sword, and became worldly lords. Today the nobles and squires want to rule the consciences and direct the church. If the clergy gets back on their feet they will again take the sword from the secular authorities as happened under the papacy.

But the kingdom of Christ and of Caesar must be kept apart thus: The kingdom of Caesar is a worldly kingdom. He judges and decides earthly matters, administers justice, wages war and uses the sword. Christ has nothing to do with such worldly affairs. His kingdom and office is to deliver souls from sin and death and so give the help the world cannot give.

Anyone who would be a preacher or teacher or even a common Christian should direct his doing toward eternal life and know that the final aim of the spiritual kingdom and kingdom of heaven, where Christ is King and Lord, is the life in yonder world. How are we to live in this world is left to Caesar. He is to maintain worldly peace and orderly government, judge and punish evildoers, make marriage laws, train children, build, plant, and divide goods; but Christ has and gives eternal peace, eternal life, and everlasting salvation.

So one must note the difference well: The ultimate aim of secular rule is temporal peace. The ultimate aim of the Christian Church is not peace and security in this life, good houses, riches, power, and honor, but eternal peace. (St. Louis, 13b, 1442ff.)

What Luther says is so typically Scriptural, and because it is, it breathes the spirit of confessional Lutheranism which is also typified by its Scriptural orientation. It ought also to settle for us the question as to whether or not there is a relationship between contemporary political conservatism and 16<sup>th</sup> century confessional Lutheranism. But some of our brethren have felt a need for an inquiry to be made into this question, and so we shall attempt to make it. We think we understand what lies behind the suggestion of this

question as a topic-study for a conference essay, we agree that the inquiry needs to be made and that it can serve a useful purpose.

The need for the inquiry, I think, is rather obvious to anyone familiar with the state of politics as well as the state of the church in our times. Politics has its right wing and its left wing, both moderate and extreme, and the church has its liberals and its conservatives, also both moderate and extreme. In this parallelism, some see a relationship between conservative theology and conservative politics. Consequently they seek membership in churches which espouse a conservative theological position and then also expect that their churches will bless, sanction and promote the cause of conservative politics. They assume that by virtue of one's adherence to the Gospel he must therefore be pro-right and anti-left. There are some in fact who contend that the Gospel endorses the free-enterprise system while at the same time it opposes socialistic systems.

However, those who would answer our question in the affirmative thereby reveal that they fail to distinguish between the two kingdoms as Scripture does and as Luther did. Embodied in a "yes" answer is the spirit of the Schwaermer or Enthusiasts of Luther's day. It suggests also an affinity for legalistic Calvinism rather than confessional Lutheranism. There is, therefore, a need for an inquiry into and a study of this question in the light of God's Word and Lutheran confessional theology.

Now, to demonstrate that any relationship between confessional Lutheranism and political conservatism is tangential rather than essential requires that we begin by defining our terms. When we speak of confessional Lutheranism in our circles, we have something very specific in mind. Confessional Lutheranism is that brand of Lutheranism which subscribes wholeheartedly and without reservation or qualification to the confessional documents of the Lutheran Church. They are contained in the Book of Concord of 1580 and specified in the Constitutions of our congregations in the article which lays down the doctrinal position of our churches--and of our Synod too, by the way. The difference between a confessional Lutheran and a non-confessional one is the difference between the Latin words *quia* and *quatenus*--the one meaning "because" and the other meaning "insofar as." Confessional Lutherans uphold the confessions *because* they set forth correctly the teachings of God's revealed Word. Lutherans who have abandoned the confessional principle subscribe to the confessions only *insofar as* they agree with the teachings of God's Word. That leaves them free to teach what they please and makes it impossible to bind them to any definite doctrinal position. They contend for the wholesome and allowable latitude of theological opinion idea. Subjective opinion characterizes their theology, and an air of uncertainty pervades their teaching of Christian doctrine.

Confessional Lutheranism, on the other hand, finds in the Bible a source of absolute Truth objectively revealed. Inherent in the Word of Scripture is a divine power capable of making its truths understood. When Paul tells the Corinthians, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of" the Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment," he isn't indulging in a bit of wishful thinking. He isn't speaking about an unattainable goal toward which we should all be aiming in the hope of attaining a sufficient degree of unity to make fellowship and union possible. He is talking about that blessed unity of mind and Judgment created by the Spirit of God--a unity made possible because it rests upon the absolute authority of the Word of God in Scripture, a unity made possible because the Scriptures are perspicuous or clear, a unity made possible because the Holy Spirit is at work to "guide us into all truth," as Jesus once promised. It is this kind of unity about which Article VII of the Augsburg Confession speaks when it defines the true unity of the church. It is this kind of unity which is given expression in the Book of Concord and which underlies what we call confessional Lutheranism.

Confessional Lutheranism, then, is not the product of man's enlightened thinking. It is the product of the Holy Spirit's enlightening activity in the minds of men. It is, therefore, devoid of all humanistic subjectivism. It is truth in the sense that Jesus used the word when He said, "Thy Word is truth." Its purpose is to teach us to know our God and His will for our eternal salvation. Its object concerns itself, not with our temporal welfare, but with our eternal destiny. To be a confessional Lutheran means to uphold and conserve the truth that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. It is in that sense and that sense only that we can be classified

properly as conservative. We are conservative in that we want to conserve the Truth and are opposed to change in Scripture doctrine.

Now when it comes to defining the term “political conservatism” I am not so sure I qualify to give an acceptable definition. And for that matter, who does qualify to define the term? Political conservatism obviously does not mean the same thing to all who classify themselves as political conservatives. President Eisenhower called himself a political conservative, and in comparison to his election opponent, he surely was. Barry Goldwater was and perhaps still is the chief spokesman for political conservatism. Robert Welch also qualifies as a political conservative. But unquestionably all three of them would define their conservatism in different terms. And herein lies a suggestion as to the essential difference between political conservatism and confessional Lutheranism. There are no two definitions possible of confessional Lutheranism, for there is but one divinely revealed Truth. Political conservatism is a political philosophy which has its origin in the mind of man and in his experiences in ordering the society of which he is a part. Political conservatism is an attempt to state the principles which guided our Republic in its early years, and which served to make us a great nation, and then having stated these principles, to apply them as a proven philosophy to the problems of government in our own time. What the principles are is determined by the subjective eyes of students of political philosophy while the truths of confessional Lutheranism are determined by the revelation of God.

Mr. Goldwater, in the Foreword of his book, “Conscience of a Conservative,” offers a summary definition of political conservatism which I should like to quote here.

The principles on which the Conservative political position is based have been established by a process that has nothing to do with the social, economic and political landscape that changes from decade to decade and from century to century. These principles are derived from the nature of man, and from the truths that God has revealed about His creation. Circumstances do change. So do the problems that are shaped by circumstances. But the principles that govern the solution of the problems do not. To suggest that the Conservative philosophy is out of date is akin to saying that the Golden Rule, or the Ten Commandments, or Aristotle’s *Politics* are out of date. The Conservative approach is nothing more or less than an attempt to apply the wisdom and experience and revealed truths of the past to the problems of today. The challenge is not to find new or different truths, but to learn how to apply established truths to the problems of the contemporary world.

It is easy to see why such a definition of political conservatism would cause people to find a relationship between conservatism in politics and conservatism in theology. Goldwater asserts that conservative principles are derived “from the nature of man and from the truths God has revealed about His creation.” Then in his first chapter he states: “Surely the first obligation of a political thinker is to understand the nature of man.” But what he then says about the nature of man sounds more like John Locke than it does like St. Paul. Goldwater’s concept of the nature of man and the Scripture’s and Confession’s concept of the nature of man are two totally different things. In the key sentence of his definition, Mr. Goldwater states: “The Conservative approach is nothing more or less than an attempt to apply the wisdom and experience and the revealed truths of the past to the problems of today.” Goldwater doesn’t say it, but it is easy to see how some would read into his words that he is talking about truths revealed in the Bible since in the previous sentence he makes reference to the Ten Commandments. Such people are just a step away from equating their concept of the teachings of the Bible with their concept of the principles of political conservatism. Once that step is taken, government becomes to their way of thinking an agency to implement “Christian” beliefs or ethics. And that is Calvinism, pure and simple. Confessional Lutheranism does not try to be the conscience of the State, or to use the State to promote Christianity. We seek to avoid Calvin’s confusion of the rule of Christ with the rule of secular powers in the world.

In establishing our definition of confessional Lutheranism, we traced its root back to Scripture. We emphasized that our confessionalism is grounded upon the revealed knowledge of God, the Bible in other

words. Basic to an understanding of the essential difference between political conservatism and confessional Lutheranism is an understanding of the fact that the religious element of political conservatism is based, not on the revealed knowledge of God, but rather on the natural knowledge of God which is common to all men. Thus when political conservatives make statements about God's place in their philosophy, and about the moral law of God underlying the entire structure of their conservative philosophy, they are not thereby demonstrating that the Bible subscribes their thinking. They are rather demonstrating that what nature and conscience reveal about God must be taken into account in ordering a free society.

Political conservatives must, therefore, beware of the temptation of suggesting that the Bible underwrites their political point of view. It doesn't. It doesn't underwrite any political point of view. It isn't interested in politics. It is interested in men's souls and their destiny in eternity. The argument from silence in Scripture is an overwhelming one. Where do you find Jesus advocating an overthrow of the existing social order or the autocratic government of his day? Oh the one occasion when he was asked to make a comment on matters politic, he neatly sidestepped the trap set for him. And where do you find St. Paul or St. John lodging any kind of protest against the pagan dictatorship which constituted the government under which they lived and under which they served God and the cause of the Gospel?

The notion that there is a relationship between confessional Lutherans and political conservatives may also result in part from a reaction common to both. We see what liberal church leaders are seeking to promote in the name of the church: civil rights, welfare programs and other aspects of a materialized social gospel, and we react to what we see. Political conservatives likewise see what liberal politicians are seeking to promote in the form of a program of benevolent, governmental paternalism and they react to what they see. Since conservative Lutherans and political conservatives are both reacting to the same sort of thing, the conclusion is drawn that there must be a relationship between the two. But the conclusion is a false one. Our opposition to the welfare emphasis of the social gospel is rooted in Scripture while their opposition to socialistic paternalism is rooted in their political philosophy. They see it as something which deprives man of his freedom while we see it as something which beclouds the precious truth of the saving Gospel.

It is time for some recapitulations and a few quick conclusions. Is there a relationship between confessional Lutheranism and political conservatism? The answer has to be an emphatic "No." Confessional Lutheranism is based upon a source of absolute truth. Political conservatism is based upon conclusions men reach on the basis of their experience and their study of the past. Political conservatism concerns itself exclusively with man's temporal welfare, confessional Lutheranism's concern is for man's eternal security. Whatever of a religious element is a part of conservative political philosophy is traceable to the natural knowledge of God. Confessional Lutheranism, on the other hand, is rooted and grounded in the revealed knowledge of God.

One may be a political conservative without being a Christian, (e.g. Ezra Taft Benson and John Roussetot), and one may also be a Christian without being a political conservative. Obviously there were throngs of thousands of Christians who believed and confessed as we now do before there was ever such a thing as a free society, free enterprise, democracy or disciples of Edmund Burke. Therefore, if we identify confessional Lutheranism with Biblical Christianity, the answer we give must be an unequivocal "No".

In saying what we have said, we do not wish to be understood as saying that there are no parallelisms between conservative Lutheranism and political conservatism. There are parallels, but we hesitate to say that these parallels establish a relationship. To assert that a definable relationship does exist is to imply something about Lutheranism which we do not want implied.

The parallels are rather obvious. Conservative Lutherans and conservative politicians are both seeking to preserve something of value and importance. Both represent a minority opinion. Both tend to be suspicious of what someone has called establishmentarianism. Both are in a position that requires them to be polemical and apologetic (in the proper sense of that term). Both see and recognize the importance of individualism. Both are concerned with the evils of materialism, we because a materializing of the Gospel underlies

psuedo-Lutheranism, they because a material, mechanistic view of life underlies socialism, submerging individualism and curbing our freedom.

While these parallelism do not establish a relationship between conservative theology and politics, yet there is value to us in a conservative church in an awareness of the parallels. We *do* have certain things in common with political conservatives, and in our work as Gospel witnesses that fact affords us a point of contact. I suppose we could say conservatives are more approachable with a message such as is ours. We are not implying that the power of the Gospel is hampered more by a liberal philosophy than it is by a conservative one. We are only saying that just as a hospital patient seriously ill is more approachable than the man riding atop the material bubble of affluence, so people conservative in their political thinking are more approachable than their counterparts. They are more ready to hear what we have to say, and that affords us the opportunity to say something about Jesus Christ and about absolute truth of a kind that they may never have heard or thought about. In their search for answers to issues, many of them have come to the realization that the answers to the real issues of life are not to be found as an end result of the quest for truth. The product of such a quest must always be just another form of humanism. That realization leaves a vacuum within which only God's revealed truth can fill. Confessional Lutherans have a privilege, a responsibility, and an opportunity to do that filling with a testimony which centers in Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Politically conservative thinkers emphasize individual responsibility in their conservative thinking. We can tell them who it is that makes men responsible creatures, or better yet, to whom they are responsible, and for what they are responsible, namely whether they eat or drink, or whatsoever they do, to do it all to the glory of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

The following editorial was read at the conclusion of the essay. Since the essay asserts that an affirmative answer to the theme question reveals an affinity for Calvinism, and since this assertion is not substantiated in the essay, the editorial below was read for the purpose of presenting a summary analysis of Calvinism to offer substantiation for the point made in the essay. The editorial is re-printed with the consent of the author, Pastor Winfred Schaller. It is taken from "The Lutheran Spokesman," Vol. 7, No. 1, June, 1964.

### **Who Are the Followers of John Calvin?**

"John Calvin died 400 years ago on May 27, 1564. While Luther worked at Wittenberg and Zwingli in German Switzerland, Calvin was the outstanding reformer in French Switzerland. Geneva was the place of his most important work.

"In 1964 John Calvin is the most influential of the three. This will be disputed since his followers have been divided again and again by controversy, and most Protestant groups have rejected what is called strict Calvinism. By this is meant his extreme doctrine of predestination, which places all the responsibility on God for man's salvation and also for man's damnation. Yet we contend that the main principles of Calvin are accepted by all Protestant churches, and in 1964 by most Lutheran churches.

"Calvin systematized his theology around his central principle, the glory of God. Calvin was never free of the rationalism of Zwingli and the Humanists. His reformation was also affected by his radicalism which determined his attitude toward Rome. His Geneva Order of Service allowed only the sermon, prayers and the singing of Psalms. Organs, pictures, crosses, altars, folding of hands, kneeling and festivals were all banned. Sunday worship was made a divine law. His extreme legalism made the visible church with its organization extremely important. Calvin has little to say about the Holy Christian Church, but devotes 200 pages of the *Institute* to the "visible church." The Lutheran confessions do not even employ the term, but speak of the Church in a strict and in a wide sense- (If Lutherans had remained with this terminology and not adopted Calvin's expressions we would be far better off today.) For Calvin the establishment of the visible church is God's ordinance, and the visible church is the means through which God speaks to the world. The members of this church must constantly prove their holiness by living strictly in accordance with the code of laws from Scripture, as laid down by the church.

“In order to compel all citizens to live to the glory of God, Calvin introduced a strict system of church discipline. These ordinances were made the civil law for Geneva. The Church was viewed as the conscience of the State. The secular and spiritual authorities were viewed as the two arms working jointly to establish Christ’s lordship in every area of life. The Church established the standard of ethics, and the State was there to force the Genevans to conform to this standard. They did, too. In two years 58 persons were condemned to death for infractions of the Ecclesiastical Ordinances; 34 women were burned at the stake for sorcery, 400 people were punished for laughing during the sermon or for dancing.

“Because Calvin’s reformation was so radical people usually think of Lutheranism as being half-way between Calvinism and Catholicism. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Though externally Calvin banned everything that looked or smelled Romish, he actually shares with Rome its legalism, its externalizing of the church, and its confusion of Church and State. Rather than in between, Lutheranism is entirely separated from both Romanism and Calvinism, having a totally different Way of Salvation, the Christ-centered truth of Holy Scripture.

“Nowhere can his influence be seen more strongly than in the civil rights issue. One reads and hears of convocations of churches and church leaders making statements that “the religious forces of the nation must work with all Americans loyal to the constitution to make effective its provisions of liberty and justice. In a Lutheran church in Washington services are being held every day until the Senate acts on the civil rights bill. The religious organizations are vigorously reminding everybody, including the Senators, that civil rights is essentially a moral issue and one which cannot be put off or compromised as has been for 100 years.”

“This church activity for the civil rights bill is based squarely on John Calvin. It demonstrates the legalism of Calvin, the this-worldliness of his ‘gospel,’ and his confusion of the ruling of Christ and the rule of secular powers in this present cursed world.

“Our American democracy is secular, a secular experiment in government of the people, by the people, and for the people. It is a great experiment and a highly successful experiment. It has had many difficulties and many conflicts. It has not been perfect. Sometimes it improves and sometimes it has setbacks. It has provided better justice and more freedom for more people than any other society in the history of the world. There are still areas where there is a lack of justice and infringement of liberty and freedom. Many of its citizens are cruel, unfair, evil. When these citizens harm society we pass laws to stop their evil activity.

“The Church is made up of followers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Church has nothing to do with democracy, monarchy, or totalitarian government. It is sent to all nations, to people living under all governments. It is sent to first-class citizens, second-class citizens, serfs, slaves, rich, and poor. And it is sent to baptize them and open the door of heaven to them through the forgiveness of sins. In all nations a few people believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. They try to live a godly life in love to God, and they try to love their neighbor. They know they are to lay down their life for their neighbor. As such, they are good citizens and constitute a good influence on society.

“When the behavior of society conflicts with their Christian principles there is one thing the Church does not do. It does not try to be the conscience of the State and use the State to implement Christian beliefs or ethics. That was the error of John Calvin. His influence extends to churches beyond those classified as Calvinistic. In fact the three large Lutheran synods have rejected their heritage and are seeking a share in the inheritance of Geneva. They are ashamed of Luther’s failure to support the Peasant’s War.”