

# The Function of the Church and State Regarding Moral Issues

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We look out our windows and see a society coming apart at the seams. Without question these waning days of history are terrible, as Paul said they would be (2 Timothy 4:1-4). In his catalogue of the vices of the dying aeon, he mentions several which to me typify life in these United States.

The horror begins with the fact that many in our society reject the proposition that they are accountable to God for their actions, or that they will be judged according to any transcendent moral code. Self has replaced God in the heart as the object to whom the highest love is owed. Many reject the authority of parents, and indeed any authority which might restrict them from doing what they want whenever they want to do it. Thus they run headlong in pursuit of their own pleasure, seeking worldly wealth as a means to their selfish ends. One result is a moral sense in them so dulled it cannot even produce natural affection any more.

We see the spillover of this in our offices as the walking wounded come in and tell us how their lives have been marred by rape, abortion, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, divorce and materialism.

While we see this happening as a fulfillment of prophecy, still the question remains: shouldn't we do something? Even though we know that the hidden God is still working out his purposes in history, can this confidence be used as an excuse to do nothing? And who is "we"? The church? The state? We, the people of God or we, the people of the United States? If we ever figure out who "we" is, what precisely is it we ought to do? And what should we do first? What means ought we employ? To what purpose?

The simplest answer is, of course, we are Christians. We approach these questions as Christians and not as political theorists. While we don't belong to the world, nevertheless we still live in the world (John 15:19; 17:11). We know Jesus left us here for a reason: to love others as he loved us. And while we may be perplexed at times, we do not lose heart. We own as our King the one who declares, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We follow his reasoning on this matter, and know that we live in the in-between time, the "little while" of waiting and watching as the kingdoms of this world dissolve into the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (John 16:16; 1 Corinthians 15:24).

Since this is so, we can expect constantly to be struggling with this question of how to live as citizens of the hidden kingdom of heaven within the visible kingdoms of this world. In a sense we will never solve it conclusively. That is God's work and remains for God to do when our King comes again.

There are few Scriptural doctrines so helpful in puzzling out these questions as the doctrine of the two kingdoms. We begin there, then, in our study of what the function of the church and state is to be regarding moral issues.

First, it is useful to remember that the word "*basileia*" as it is used in the New Testament does not ordinarily refer to a discrete patch of real estate with recognizable borders such as "the Kingdom of Great Britain". Especially in expressions like "the kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom of God," etc., it refers to God's **royal rule**. As such it is both a hidden reality now, present to faith (Luke 17:22; Matthew 13:11; Romans 14:17) and a future hope to be revealed in glory (Matthew 25:31, 35; 2 Timothy 4:1 and Revelation 11:15). As a reality for believers now, the kingdom of God is an expression denoting the way Jesus the King rules in our hearts through his gospel of grace and forgiveness.

The **means** by which Jesus maintains and extends his rule now is not by an outward display of power, nor the force of compelling logic, nor the power of law. Jesus rules by the power of truth alone. Those who love the truth will rally to his side (John 18:37). In this connection, he contrasts his kingdom from those in which soldiers fight with arms to serve their king (John 18:36). This truth is the gospel of forgiveness to all in the name of Jesus. So closely connected are the kingdom, the gospel and the name of Jesus that the expressions can be used interchangeably (Luke 18:29; Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:29).

Speaking of the centrality of the message of forgiveness in God's kingdom, Luther writes,

The kingdom of Christ does not consist in condemnation. “I have not come to condemn but to forgive sins. For no one can enter my kingdom unless his sins are forgiven. All who are called and have entered it are sinners. And as they are sinners, they cannot live without the forgiveness of their sins.” Such is the kingdom of Christ. He admits no saint. And if anyone wants to be a saint, he thrusts them out of his Church. But if sinners enter his kingdom, they do not remain sinners. It is true that sin is present, but the Lord of this kingdom does not look upon it. He rather covers it over, forgives it and does not count it against you. (W.A. 33. 509)

Since proclaiming forgiveness presupposes a proclamation of sin that needs forgiving, the servants of truth will announce God’s wrath as well as his favor, and preach repentance as well as forgiveness of sins. It is this message—and no other—which creates, preserves and extends the kingdom of God on earth (Luke 24:47, 48; Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). Apart from this message, the people of God have nothing to say to the world and no command to speak to the world. However when we use this message, we are employing the spiritual power of God and are exercising the full authority of the truth (John 16:8-10; Matthew 7:29; Romans 1:16; Matthew 16:19).

By means of the gospel, the church has as its goal to “make disciples” of Jesus, “call from darkness to light,” “make alive in Christ by faith” (Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:5,8). We might sum up these passages by saying that Jesus has given his church the gospel in order to assemble from every doomed nation the new people of God. They become such when by grace they come to believe in Jesus as their Savior and King. Those assembled will offer their lives in service of Him who loved them and gave Himself for them (Galatians 2:20; Romans 12:1).

Since the kingdom is a spiritual and hidden reality existing in the hearts of men, the **sphere** in which the church legitimately operates the soul of the individual. The *Apology* says, “The kingdom of Christ is spiritual...therein Christ inwardly rules, strengthens and comforts hearts, and imparts the Holy Ghost and various spiritual gifts” (Ap. Art. VII VIII *Concordia Triglotta*, page 231).

So we convict, we persuade, we appeal, we proclaim so as to commend ourselves to the consciences of individual people. We do not manipulate, coerce or dazzle people into going along with us. However outwardly successful such tactics might be, they would be nothing to God since God does not use such tactics to build his kingdom (John 16:8, 2 Corinthians 5:11, 20; 4:2-5; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

While the kingdom is a hidden reality now, we know that it is destined to be revealed in glory when Jesus comes again. For this reason we have the confidence that the church’s **destiny** is eternal, founded as it is on the promise of Christ (Matthew 24:35; 16:18).

In conveying his vision of the people of God as they exist in world, the writer of the second-century Epistle to Diognetus said,

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by locality or speech or custom. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they take their share in everything as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them and every fatherland is foreign...Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom of God is God’s rule in the hearts of believers by the gospel. While it cannot be directly equated with the church, the characteristics of the kingdom are shared by the church. As the people of God, we exist as a hidden reality now, to be revealed in glory at Christ’s coming. The church use the gospel (**means**) to call people to faith (**goal**) and thus seeks to operate on the individual souls of men (**sphere**). The future of the church (**destiny**) is everlasting.

When we speak of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, we are using terminology Luther coined (so far as I know) to distinguish the two-fold rule of God in this world. The one we have already discussed above. Luther

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Martin Scharlemann in *Church and State Under God*, Albert G. Huegli, ed. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964, p. 17.

called this “the kingdom of God’s right hand.” God also rules in this world in another way, a way which Luther referred to as “the kingdom of God’s left hand.” The following quote is typical:

This is what the law means. It is also truly the kingdom of our Lord God, but it is a temporal law and government, but he wishes that one support it all the same and it is the kingdom of the left hand. But the kingdom of the right hand is where he reigns himself, since he does not appoint parents, magistrates, judges, but he himself preaches the gospel to the poor (WA 36, 385).

We are more familiar, with the concepts of “church” and “state”. One of the reasons I prefer Luther’s terminology is that it clarifies the following point both church and state are spheres in which God operates and rules. The distinction between them is not whether God is in charge or not, but rather **how he exercises his rule**.

In examining the biblical description of “the kingdom of the left hand,” we see that Scripture prefers to use the term *exousia* to refer to it. Derived from *exestin*, it denotes the freedom or right to act in a given situation or sphere. Thus it comes to mean “authority” or “power”. As such it is the ideal word to use to describe the right which God has given to earthly rulers to act in this world. In the classic confrontation of the two kingdoms, Pilate asserted that he had the ultimate control over Jesus’ fate. Jesus replied “You would have no power (Greek: *exousia*) over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). God was still in charge. Pilate’s power came ultimately from God.

In the same vein, Paul can speak of the governing authorities (*hai exousiai*) as all having been set in place by God. Those who disobey governmental authority are rebelling against God’s ordinance. In a very real sense a ruler is a servant of God (Romans 4:1-4). Christ himself submitted to God’s authority exercised through Pilate in letting himself be crucified, though he could very easily have done otherwise.

Christians who recognize God at work behind and through governmental authorities will pay their debt of obedience not merely in a slavish fear of punishment, but willingly for conscience’ sake (Romans 13:5). This is true even when men in government exercise authority in ways which are manifestly unjust. What could have been more unjust than the sentence of death passed on Jesus? Yet Jesus submitted to it willingly, in spite of its injustice, recognizing that a higher Justice was still at work. The only exception to this principle is when governmental authority commands us to do what God forbids, or not do what God commands (Acts 5:27-29). And even in this case, Christians submit to governmental authority by willingly suffering the consequences of such disobedience. More will be said on this later. For now, it is enough to establish the principle.

Lest there be any doubt that Scripture sees the governments of this world as being set in their place by God, we also have the words of Peter urging Christians to submit to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13). Peter uses a word for institution (Greek: *ktisis* = creation) which clearly presupposes that such institutions are not merely human,” but also divine in their origin. In the New Testament, the verb *ktizw* is used exclusively of God’s work in making things. Since the good God gives only good gifts, an earthly ruler is God’s servant for good (Romans 13:4).

In the Romans 13 passage referred to above, Paul describes the essential **means** by which those authorities rule as being that of “the sword” (v. 4). This is government reduced to its essence: the exercise of power. God rules through governmental authorities by means of power. The sword represents the ultimate right of the state to take away life—to wage war and inflict capital punishment. And if the state has that ultimate right given to it by God, who will deny its legitimate rights in lesser exercises of power? These would include the right to make and enforce laws, and the right to set up any apparatus it needs to do these things.

Since Scripture speaks of the kingdom of God’s left hand in such basic terms as authority and power, it is clear enough that God does not specify what form that authoritative power should take. Those who find democracy delineated in Scripture as a divinely instituted form of government are seeing things which aren’t there. One might argue democracy’s case on the basis of natural law and human reason, but not on the basis of revelation.

In fact, it is right in these Scriptural concepts of natural law and human reason that we find the practical glue God has provided to bind human societies together. The mere exercise of power leads inevitably to tyranny. The state that sees power flowing “from the barrel of a gun” will wind up murdering millions. Power corrupts, as the saying goes, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. But Paul says that quite apart from any revelation, man knows from creation that there is a God to whom he is accountable. God has also implanted a moral sense in man to which the conscience gives witness (Romans 1:20; Romans 2:14-15).

The sense of accountability keeps governments from ruling by caprice. It also keeps the governed in check, since it teaches them to see governments as more than human arrangements. The moral sense gives force to positive laws made by governments, since it leads people to see criminal activity as not simply illegal, but wrong in an absolute sense. Human reason, whether implicitly or explicitly, operates and fashions laws at least partly on the basis of this moral deposit. It argues over what is right, what is far, what is just. All these arguments would lose their force in our minds if we didn’t at least recognize the possibility of an absolute standard by which we could decide.

Since these concepts have a bearing on the responsibilities of church and state on moral issues, we will be talking more about them later. For now it is enough to say that they exist as God’s endowment to all men as they live under the kingdom of the left hand. Jesus met Pilate on this common ground when he said, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11). Though he was no believer, Pilate recognized the force of what Jesus was saying: God would call him to account for the justice he dispensed. Small wonder, then, that this remark induced Pilate to redouble his efforts to set Jesus free (John 19:12).

No one who believes the truth of original sin has to guess as to why God has instituted governing authorities. If original sin is a “deep, wicked, horrible, fathomless, inscrutable and unspeakable corruption of the entire nature” (FC, S.D. *Concordia Triglotta*, page 863, para. 3), then the only bulwark between mankind and complete moral chaos is God’s institution of government. Anyone who has lived in a society where governmental authority is breaking down knows this is true from experience as well. To preserve outward order in society, the God of peace has ordained governments so that “we may live peaceful and quiet lives” (2 Timothy 2:2). Every time we see a policeman, we should give thanks to God for his goodness to the fallen sons of Adam.

The **goal** of government, then, is save us from chaos by maintaining public order. Governmental authorities punish wrongdoers for open crimes they commit and praise those who do right for the public good they accomplish (Romans 13:3). Thus the state will not only jail criminals, but will promote the public good in any way that seems reasonable. This is called “civil righteousness” in our Confessions. It is a good gift of God and the government has legitimate interest in fostering it.

Naturally the peace Paul talks about in 2 Timothy is not the peace of God in the heart, but external peace in the world. The righteousness which the government promotes is not the righteousness of faith seen only by God, but righteous deeds seen by men. Government does not concern itself with the spiritual quality of a good work before God. But it is very much concerned about people doing things which serve the common good. When it does this, it is serving the function God intended it to serve. Thomas Jefferson was delineating the proper **sphere** of government in writing, “The legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinion.”<sup>2</sup> Government operates in the public arena, not in the souls of men.

Governing authorities share the same destiny that all orders in this world face: “This world in its present form is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31. See also 1 John 2:17; 1 Corinthians 15:24). Every government is provisional, every secular city will crumble. The only permanent city is the one “with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). This does not mean Christians despise the city of their exile, or will fail to pray and work for its good (Jeremiah 29:7). It simply means we do not seek to build the kingdom of God from the order of this world. We rather wait joyfully to hear the shout, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever!” (Revelation 11:15).

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Martin Scharlemann, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Governments all belong to the old world order, as mentioned already. Since they do, we recognize another truth about them. Every order of this world which God gave for our good also lies within the scope of the Devil's corrupting influence. As Jesus said in several memorable passages, the Devil is the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He corrupts the relationship between the sexes. He corrupts the home and the family. He also corrupts governing authorities into thinking of the exercise of power as an end in itself. He blinds them so that they no longer see themselves as holding their right to power "under God".

St. Augustine spoke of the earthly city as "a city which aims at dominion...but is itself dominated by that very lust of domination."<sup>3</sup> In his blind arrogance Pilate said, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" (John 19:10). Jesus had to remind him where his authority came from. It was this same blind arrogance of power which made it impossible for the rulers of this world to recognize the Lord of glory in the face of that weak and suffering Man (1 Corinthians 2:9). It is this same blind arrogance which still leads governments to forget they hold their authority under God, and to assert their power as something absolute. So the dragon turns government into a blasphemous beast which men worship as the ultimate power (Revelation 13:1-5).

Nonetheless, we believe the Risen Christ when he tells us "All authority (*pasa exousia* = every (category of) authority) in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). No matter what the Devil may do, he is still under the control of Him who loves us. The Devil's power will soon be completely destroyed so that God rules openly through Christ over all. Together with Paul we see the history of the world as the process by which Christ destroys every other power that still holds man in its sway until He reigns supreme. When the process is complete, history is at an end (1 Corinthians 15:24 ff).

To sum up the kingdom of God's left hand, then, we may say that God rules this world through governing authorities. God has provided these authorities with the proper **means** to carry out their **goal** of maintaining public order. He has given the state the sword, or the power of force to maintain that external order. The state will exercise that power according to natural law and human reason, both of which presuppose the existence of a God to whom we are accountable. When human reason excludes God from its calculations, it ceases to be human reason and becomes demonic insanity instead. The **sphere** of this kingdom is the public arena: men's outward actions, not their inner motives. Its **destiny** is temporary; it will pass away along with the rest of this world. Yet that is not to say it is unimportant, or a Christian need not concern himself with it. It is still God's good gift "for now".

The following table may prove helpful:

Kingdom	Means	Goal	Sphere	Destiny
Of God	Gospel	Call to faith	Individual soul	Eternal
Of World	Power, natural law, human reason	Maintain outward order	Public arena	Temporary

### The Importance of Keeping the Two Kingdoms Distinct

Each kingdom has a legitimate claim on our conscience. Those claims need not conflict, since they are distinct kingdoms each with their own distinctive purpose under God. Jesus clearly taught this to us when he said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17).

It is vitally important that the distinctiveness of each kingdom be clearly recognized. Otherwise there will be a hopeless confusion of law and gospel, and neither kingdom will carry out its proper function under God. This is true not only of the church as church and the state as state, but also of the Christian as he lives under both forms of God's rule.

Our Confessions say,

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by John O'Meara. New York: Penguin Classics, 1984, p. 5.

Therefore, since the power of the Church grants eternal things, and is exercised only by the ministry of the Word, it does not interfere with civil government...for civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrains men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace. Therefore the power of the Church and the civil power must not be confounded...Let it not break into the office of another. (CA, Art. XXVIII, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 85).

It should be noted that the Confessors were speaking from a context in which both the church and the state had for centuries tried to intervene directly in each other's affairs, with disastrous results.

When the church speaks attempts to advise the state on the best way to regulate morality in society, or it if seeks to promote moral causes for their own sake, it is forsaking its God-given goal of converting the lost to Christ. It substitutes in its stead the spurious goal of creating some form of the kingdom of God here on earth. History is littered with the wreckage of such misguided attempts. Two recent examples are the social gospel of the early 1900's and the theology of liberation in vogue in the last two decades.

There are some who urge the church to carry out its "prophetic" function in society by advocating specific actions the state should take in the area of morality. We must remember, however that when someone rises in the church to speak, he must do so as "one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). When therefore, the church makes public pronouncements on specifics of public policy, those statements—if they are indeed "prophetic"—take on an aura of "thus saith the Lord." This is true not only in our own minds, but in the minds of those to whom the message is directed.

It is right here where the problem lies in advocating specific actions and laws. If those statements are later proved to be false, inadequate or simply out of date, then the church has rendered all its preaching open to criticism, even when drawn directly from Scripture. I call as my witness the odd and prolix pronouncements made by American Catholic Bishops on economic affairs during the Reagan years. Even at the time they seemed to owe more to Marx than to Jesus. Now, in view of the latest developments in Eastern Europe and Russia, they are simply absurd. What does that do to the authority of the church? Those that take the sword will perish by the sword!

The fact is, God simply does not give us the details as to what shape his moral will must take in society. We cannot say with absolute certainty, "This is what the government must do on this moral issue." We know how God has expressed his moral will in Scripture. We also have a moral sense and, by diligent application of human reason, seek to apply God's immutable will to specific cases in society. But can we say that our human reasoning is without flaw? Can we say that we have taken all factors into account? Since we live in a world which by Scripture's definition is "passing away," can we say that specific conclusions with respect to this world's issues are anything more than tentative? Can we point to a specific passage in Scripture which will enable us to say, "Law 'x' now before the Congress must/must not be passed. It is God's will!" If we cannot, then we must speak as Christian individuals who are giving our best opinion on the subject, not as the church speaking God's Word.

Take, for example, the thorny issue of abortion. As a church we have restated God's moral will as He has revealed it in Scripture: abortion is murder. So far, so good. The church is merely using God's Word as it should to call all men to repentance. But would it be right, let us say, in our next convention to pass the resolution: "It is God's will that the Congress of the United States or the legislatures of individual states pass laws immediately outlawing abortion. Every Christian citizen is conscience-bound to work for that goal." I think not.

What if such a law would pass, but then be largely ignored? What if a large segment of society would hold that law in such contempt that they would do everything they could to help others break it? Would not one law held in contempt bring all law into question? Could not a Christian legitimately argue, "I hate abortion, and I know God will judge this society for its callous murder of the unborn. But since hearts are so hard in our society, better an evil which is regulated and controlled by law, than laws trampled upon and held in contempt

by evil.” I think so. I also believe a Christian could hold the opposite opinion, namely that our society **should** pass laws outlawing abortion. There are plenty of reasonable arguments to back up that position. My point here is: since a person can argue both sides of the question, since we are dealing in probabilities and possibilities, not certainties, we cannot speak as the church with the authority of God’s Word on the issue.

If the church seeks through the passage of laws to make this world a better place, it is not only forsaking its proper goal, it is also picking up the wrong weapon. Laws have their proper place in compelling men to do good in the kingdom of God’s left hand. They do not have any such function in the kingdom of God’s right hand. Even if the church would succeed in extending God’s rule by compulsion, it still would have accomplished nothing so far as the rule of Christ in grace is concerned. Even if there would be no more abortions, divorces, child abuse or drug abuse in America, men’s souls could still be in darkness and bound for hell. God has given us the sword of the Spirit to change people’s hearts. For the church to pick up the sword of the state is like David trying on Saul’s armor before facing Goliath. The armor just doesn’t fit.

History demonstrates that not only the church has been guilty of confounding the two kingdoms. The state has often presumed to meddle with ecclesiastical authority as well. At the outset we might mention that the church cannot simply expect the state automatically to recognize its sphere. Right now we live in a democratic country which has built the so called “wall of separation”. It was not always so. It may not always be so. As in the time of Luther, the church still has an obligation to articulate this biblical teaching:

I must always drum in and rub in, drive in and hammer home such a distinction between these two kingdoms...For the cursed devil does not cease to cook and brew these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil’s name the secular lords always want to teach and instruct Christ how He should run His church and the spiritual government. So also...factions spirits (from within the visible church) want to teach and instruct how one should order the secular government.<sup>4</sup>

If the state attempts to regulate our conscience, our doctrine, or the practical application of that doctrine to our action in life, we must resist by refusing to obey. In a democratic society with a “wall of separation,” one would hope it would never come to that extreme. Short of the refusal to obey would be to confess our Scriptural position to the governing authorities, to appeal to our representatives, to take the matter before the court and the like.

We also will resist when the state steps out of its role and attempts to control not only men’s outward actions, but their thoughts and motives as well. It is particularly in the twentieth century that we have seen the development of a number of regimes which laid claim to power not their own. Hitler’s Germany, Mao’s China and Stalin’s Russia come to mind. In totalitarian systems, the state becomes its own god and thus takes on the quality of the blasphemous beast spoken of in Revelation thirteen.

It is not just totalitarian regimes, however, which are tempted to rule beyond their God-ordained limits. All states have that tendency. Jesus recognized it in Pilate’s arrogant claim to power. Augustine described it in Rome as the “lust for domination”. We have already said that America is less and less willing to hear the news that there is a God over all. Our society is more and more resistant to the idea that there are moral laws which transcend the specifics of our law code. As that trend continues, the temptation will increase for our state to assume godlike authority. Richard Neuhaus observes:

There is in store a continuing and deepening crisis of legitimacy unless a transcendent moral purpose is democratically asserted by which the state can be brought under critical judgment...transcendence abhors a vacuum...The vacuum will surely be filled, as has so tragically happened elsewhere, by the pretensions of the modern state.<sup>5</sup>

If he is right and our state begins to claim more than its due, then we must resist the state at that point.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Lewis W. Spitz in *Church and State Under God*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1984, p. 259.

Again, the word “resistance” must be carefully defined to avoid misunderstanding. It would mean a refusal to accept such regulation of our thoughts by the government. We would simply disobey the statute, and suffer whatever consequences might result. Again, in our democratic state, one would hope it would not have to come to that point. We have other means at our disposal: alerting our people to the danger, writing our congressional representatives, voting for people who represent our views, articulating our position before the executive branch, appealing our case to the judicial branch of government. Early and vigorous protests might well avoid bringing us to the point where we, as an act of confession, would have to obey God rather than men.

I suppose we have been speaking of extreme cases of meddling by the state in the kingdom of God, matters of conscience and thought control. There are, of course, lesser “meddlings”. State support for churchly functions is one. We all recognize the danger of establishing a state church by tax money. As public education becomes more of a political issue, the issue of tax-credits and vouchers to parents sending children to religious schools will increasingly come to the fore. I wonder if we’re thinking things through now, before laws are passed. It remains to be seen whether the state can arrive at a formula for giving out vouchers which permits both church and state to remain in their respective roles using their respective means.

As wrong as it is for the state to use the sword either to regulate the church’s conscience or to advance the church’s cause, it is equally wrong for the state to use the gospel of forgiveness as an organizing principle behind its actions. If a judge would say to a convicted but contrite rapist at the time of sentencing, “Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more,” he would be sinning against God by failing to carry out his proper function in God’s rule of the left hand. If America would say to Iraq, “You have signed a cease-fire document. You have confessed your sin. We will forgive you immediately and remove all sanctions from you,” we would literally have hell to pay. If a president would announce, “The Bible says we should not resist evil, but overcome evil with good. Therefore I am announcing an immediate and unilateral disarmament of the United States,” that president would be putting all our lives into jeopardy.

The sin would lie in using the means of the church to work in the sphere of the state. But the state has been given other means for good reason:

If it were not for force, one man would devour the other, since all the world is evil and there is hardly one true Christian in a thousand; one could not marry and have children, earn a livelihood and serve God, and in the end the world would become a desert.<sup>6</sup>

May God preserve us from jurists, legislators and governors who fail to recognize the reality of original sin!

As was previously mentioned, not only ought the church and state remain within their respective spheres, but the individual Christian needs to keep the distinction between the two kingdoms in mind as he serves God within both. It is at this point where we can make some summary statements on the function of church and state with regard to moral issues, and also from this point proceed to show how a church can truly serve society in the area of morality.

The most basic “moral” function of the state is to preserve outward order. Let no one doubt the value of this! The state is to punish the evil and reward the good, as natural law and human reason enables it to identify them. It is to promote civic order, civic peace, civic righteousness. The state carries out its responsibilities under God. If it succeeds in its tasks, God will reward it. “Righteousness exalts a nation” (Proverbs 14:34). If it fails, God will punish it. “Sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34).

We have also noted what the church’s function is on moral issues, mostly in negative terms. The church has no prophetic function in the sense that it is to promote in public specific laws to regulate morality. The church is not the guardian of the morals of society. It is not the church’s concern to advance the goals of the kingdom of the left hand. The church has nothing to say to society as a whole except, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!” The church will also resist and instruct its members to resist in the ways mentioned above when the state attempts to regulate the church’s message or the individual’s conscience.

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Heinrich Bornkamm in *Luther’s World of Thought*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965, p. 245.



But is that all we in the church can do? Here we return to the questions raised at the beginning. Can we just sit idly by as we watch society coming apart at the seams? Is there not something more the church can do to advance and promote morality in an immoral world?

First, let everyone recognize the assumptions underlying the question: 1. Preaching repentance and remission of sins is not enough for the church to be doing. 2. There must be something more effective we can do in the church to reach society. Let us firmly reject both assumptions. Christ gave the church the gospel to preach. The gospel is the power of God for saving people. I didn't say that. A church hierarchy didn't decide that. God said that. If the church fails to value the gospel, God help the church and God help the world! There will be no one left to announce the news the world most needs to hear. And the church will once again be filled with the foolish jabber of men. Preaching the gospel is the most important thing we can do to promote moral order in the world.

Let us not forget, however, that the message of repentance and remission of sins is a **public** message. The call to repent is a **public** call. The gospel is to resound "to ends of the earth" (Ro 10:18). It is not to be mumbled in furtive whispers in church basements, but "proclaimed from the roofs" (Mt 10:27). Why should we hold back, then, from speaking out in public—from our pulpits, in our writings—about the spiritual bankruptcy of this "corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). Not so as to reform morals, but to cut people to their hearts.

In writing his *City of God*, Augustine had a larger audience in mind than those already in the church's fold. Page after page is filled with scathing critique of Roman mores and perceptive analysis of the shortcomings of current philosophy. Consider these ancient words as to their applicability to our generation:

But (pagan worshippers) are unconcerned about the utter corruption of their country. 'So long as it lasts,' they 'so long as it enjoys material prosperity and the glory of victorious war, or better, the security of peace, why should we worry? What concerns us is that we should get richer all the time, to have enough for extravagant spending every day, enough to keep our inferiors in their place...It is a good thing to have the din of dancing everywhere, and theatres full of fevered shouts of degenerate pleasure and of every kind of cruel and degraded indulgence. Anyone who disapproves of this kind of happiness should rank as a public enemy; anyone who attempts to change it or get rid of it should be hustled out of hearing by the freedom-loving majority.'<sup>7</sup>

In our circles we have Carlton Toppe's excellent editorials to our credit for this same type of analysis. But in my view, we could be doing more as a church and as individual Christians. That we do not strikes me as more due to fear, cynicism and intellectual laziness than due to a desire to keep church and state distinct.

The goal of public proclamation of the gospel is always to save individuals from this corrupt and dying world. Preaching the gospel is the most important thing the church can do to promote morality since one effect of the gospel is that Christians live sanctified lives. Sanctified living means that Christians will be functioning as salt and light in a dark, dying world. Indirectly, then, the church promotes the overall morality in society through promoting sanctified living in its members. However, this implies the church will be instructing its members concerning the whole counsel of God as it pertains to their sanctified life. This would include giving our members some specific instructions about the two kingdoms. I believe there are some areas here where we can improve and sharpen up our message, especially in view of the decay in society we see around us.

Sometimes we bandy about the expression "Separation of church and state," as if everyone within earshot understood what we meant. It is capable of many false understandings, and we owe it to our members to dispel them and to clarify the Bible's teaching. The two spheres are different ways in which God rules: one in which God rules over both the regenerate and unregenerate in power, the other in which He rules over only the regenerate in grace. It is not as if the state is the kingdom of the devil and the church is the only place where God has any control.

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

Failure to understand this can severely compromise both the church's message and the Christian's personal witness to the world. Part of our preaching of repentance is telling the world that God is in charge. He holds men accountable for their actions. He still acts in history rewarding good. He still punishes evil not only in eternity, but also in time. His goal in either case is to lead men to repentance (Luke 13:1-5; Romans 2:4). This teaching—especially with respect to God's punitive justice—is increasingly ignored today. August Pieper wrote in 1919:

Pastors and preachers have a special duty to reestablish this knowledge among the Christians of our day. It is not some one man, but the LORD who brought the World Wars upon those nations that had rejected the Gospel and devoted themselves to self-deification and to the service of mammon and the flesh.<sup>8</sup>

We today might add: the LORD brought on us Desert Storm, AIDS and a dozen other plagues for the same reason!

Furthermore, the two spheres are not separated in such a way as if they operated on two completely different groups of people, or as if activity in one sphere did not vitally affect activity in another, or (and this is probably my chief point) as if one sphere belonged to pagans and unbelievers, and the other to Christians. Christians "live" in both spheres. Just as they have responsibilities in the kingdom of God's right hand, so they have responsibilities in the kingdom of God's left hand. Jesus did not call us to abandon the world to its fate; he set us up as salt and light within it.

In this connection, Bornkamm comments,

Luther did not lay claim to (the office as a political/juridical go-between) for the church. But when it was offered to him, not in his capacity of a teacher and a leader of the church but as a Christian individual, he did accept it for the purpose of rendering a simple civic duty. And thereby he emphasized the other side of the clarified relationship between church and politics, which dare not be overlooked when contemplating the principle of separation of their spheres. The Christian has been called to lend an active hand in the upbuilding of human society as reason and love, not canonical law, prompt him to do.<sup>9</sup>

Within our own circles, Pastor John Vogt has identified as a problem the fact that "our sensitivity for keeping the church out of politics has probably communicated to our people: Christian, don't bother with that corrupt world out there."<sup>10</sup>

One specific way to counteract this misunderstanding of the doctrine of the two kingdoms would be to recapture in all its fullness the Scriptural concept of a Christian's *Beruf* or calling in life. As the Augsburg Confession so eloquently puts it:

(Man-made) traditions were placed far above the commandments of God. Christianity was thought to consist wholly in the observance of certain holy-days, rites, fasts, and vestures...(which) won for themselves the exalted title of being the spiritual life. Meanwhile the commandments of God, according to each one's calling, were without honor; namely, that the father brought up his offspring, that the mother bore children, that the prince governed the commonwealth...And this error greatly tormented devout consciences, which grieved that they were in an imperfect state of life...in the office of magistrate and other civil administrations (CA, Article XXVI. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 71).

<sup>8</sup> August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> John F. Vogt, "An Evaluation of the Moral Majority in the Light of Scripture," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 79, No.4, p. 305.

If our people do not see the connection between Christian faith and the Christian life as carried out in these callings, they have fallen prey to the modern malaise of “dichotomizing,” as Paul Kelm says.<sup>11</sup> May we not be guilty of fostering it, if we give the impression that Christian service begins and ends at the church door? We may not do that intentionally, but let us each examine our applications of the truth, “You are the salt of the earth.” If we never mention governmental service in connection with it, if instead we talk about evangelism or acts of love done within the body of Christ, if we leave the rest under a vague “*et cetera*,” aren’t we doing it by omission?

In Luther’s Germany, a prince was born into his calling. Governmental authority was received by heredity. In our country, each citizen participates in his own rule by voting. He also may engage himself in the political process by participating in community service, or by campaigning for positions in government ranging from the smallest local groupings to the national level. The church needs to encourage engagement, and fight against the cynical spirit of “what’s the use!”

If the way to receive authority is by campaigning for it politically, then surely Christians gifted with leadership capabilities can be encouraged to seek office. More sickening than what the politicians do in office is the sickening contempt people hold in their hearts for politicians. We need not be blind to individual politician’s moral failings. Luther felt the majority of the princes in Germany were “rascals” and said so. We need not refrain from public comment about public figures. But the pendulum has swung the other way in our country and it is high time the church declared to its people the truth that public office is a high calling from God, requiring the best gifts. Luther even said that, though the office of the public ministry was a higher office, the office of ruler required someone with higher gifts. “In the ministry Christ does everything through His Spirit. But in the kingdom of the world one must use reason...Governing is, therefore, the more difficult task.”<sup>12</sup>

In order for them to function in their calling under God’s left hand, we also have to help our people grasp the distinction between the two kingdoms. Christians need to know how marriage, family and the state serve in God’s order of things. This will lead us to utter urgent prayers for God to bless our marriages, bless us in our roles as husband and wife, mother and father, bless those in governmental authority with wisdom. We will confess our sins and seek God’s forgiveness for despising these good gifts, and ask for God’s grace to hold all these earthly orders in high regard, discharge our duties faithfully in them, and to obey those set over us from the heart.

In grasping the distinction between the two kingdoms, Christians need to know that God uses different means in each. We have said enough about the means God has given to the church. We move on now to the means God has given to Christians as they move in the sphere of God’s left hand. We use force, discipline, rules for conduct, praise for good deeds and punishment for bad—in short, the law! Where and when to apply discipline or praise, how to form those rules for conduct—answers to all these questions proceed from natural law, our moral sense and our human reason. Naturally a Christian sharpens his moral reasoning through the law as God reveals it in Scripture. Especially in his personal relationships will God’s revelation in Scripture play a major role. But in public affairs, a Christian may not and need not refer to Scripture as validation for his reasoning.

This is an important distinction to make even in my more personal calling as a father. My son said to me the other day, “It’s not good to spank. Jesus doesn’t want you to spank.” In his own childish way, he was confusing the two kingdoms. As adults, we still fall prey to confusion on that same point. As a Christian, it is my duty to suffer all things, to tolerate, to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to love and serve even those who hate me. But in my role of father, I am serving as a Christian under the kingdom of God’s left hand. There it is my office to punish evil. There it is not only good to spank, I must spank or neglect my office. God grant I also speak of Christ’s forgiveness to him. But then I deal with him not so much in my calling as father, but in my calling as a priest of God.

In a comment on Matthew 5:38-42, Luther said,

<sup>11</sup> Paul Kelm, “Renewing Our Spiritual Growth,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* Vol. 78, No. 17. October 1st, 1991, p. 329.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted by Ewald M. Plass in *What Luther Says*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, Vol. II, p. 582.

What kind of crazy mother would it be who would refuse to defend and save her child from a door a dog or a wolf and who would say: “a Christian must not defend himself”? Should we not teach her a lesson...and say, “Are you a mother? Then do your duty as a mother, as you are charged to do it. Christ did not abrogate this but rather confirmed it.”<sup>13</sup>

If this is a necessary distinction to grasp in our personal roles under God’s left hand, how much more necessary in our public roles as citizens in a democratic country! Here we need to instruct our people about natural law, and urge them to give witness to it and reason from it in their lives as citizens. Natural law is “not in the slightest degree severed from the thought of God...it is the will of a very personal God.”<sup>14</sup>

Natural law declares that there is a God to whom we owe worship and obedience. “No people has ever been so reprobate as not to institute and observe some divine worship” (Large Catechism, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 585). Further, it declares that this God expects us to live our lives according to moral precepts, that he will punish our failures and reward our successes. Governments will fashion laws from this moral deposit, using human reason to apply it to specific circumstances and society’s needs. All this man can know and carry out apart from any Scriptural revelation, since a natural knowledge of God and a moral sense are part of our Creator’s endowment to us as human beings.

Thomas Jefferson was no Christian. Yet he argued eloquently on the basis of natural law that a just society could not continue to keep slaves:

Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the idea of natural law is firmly embedded in the Declaration of Independence, and thus also part of the our national self-concept. Richard Neuhaus has persuasively argued that if we ignore the “self-evident truths” of being “endowed by our Creator” with “certain inalienable rights,” we are denying who we are as a nation.

If some reply that we find no such ideas in our Constitution, we can simply point to the words of a man who was much closer to its writing, and hence its conceptual underpinnings:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.<sup>16</sup>

John Adams was the author of those words.

It is right here that we must recognize that we are dealing with something new on the American scene: the belief that moral values are essentially private and that the mention of God has no place in public life. This is the concept of the “naked public square” Neuhaus refers to in his book. We are told that we cannot “legislate” morality, and that when a person takes a moral stand in public life, he is trying to mix church and state. This is pure baloney, and Christians need to recognize it as such. More than this, as salt and light we need to reiterate again and again, “There is a God. He does hold us accountable. There are moral principles applicable to all people and by those principles a nation and its laws will be judged by God.” When we say this, we are not arguing religion. We are not reasoning from revelation. We are reasoning from the natural knowledge every person has in him. We are not speaking of the righteousness of God, we are speaking of civil righteousness.

<sup>13</sup> “The Sermon On The Mount,” *Luther’s Works*, Volume 21, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> John T. McNeill, “Natural Law In Luther’s Thought,” *Church History*, Vol 10, 1941, p. 228.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted by Richard Neuhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted by Neuhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

If people will not accept this, then there really is no hope left for our society. If people no longer want to see the connection between God, common moral values and specific laws, then there is no curb left on man's evil will. "If laws are not seen to be coherently related to basic presuppositions about right and wrong...they will be condemned as illegitimate."<sup>17</sup>

If law and polity are divorced from moral judgment, then the apocalypse proclaimed by Nietzsche and his imitators is upon us...all things are permitted and. . .all things will be done. When in our public life no legal prohibition can be articulated with the force of transcendent authority, then there are no rules rooted in ultimacies that can protect the poor, the powerless, and the marginal, as indeed there are now no laws protecting the unborn and only fragile inhibitions surrounding the aged and defective.<sup>18</sup>

God is not a private God. He is "God of all or else God not at all."<sup>19</sup> Morals are not private matters. They are over every one or else they are over no one. It is not only unbelievers who are affected by the destructive drive to remove morals from public life, our own people are buying into these ideas as well. We need to equip them to recognize the problem.

As we urge our people to enter the public square and contend for morality on the basis of natural law and reason, we also need to help them understand that they are contending for a worthy, but limited good. The kingdom of God's left hand has definite limitations which we dare not forget. Even if we succeed in making Americans a more moral people, moral people are not yet God's people. We will not neglect our responsibility as the church in calling men from darkness into light because of our concern to work as individual Christians for greater morality in the state. In addition, the moral solutions we seek in society are merely temporary, provisional. They will not outlast the world, and may not even outlast the decade. This does not teach us to abandon the search for just solutions to society's problems. It does teach us not to rest our hopes in the earthly city.

This temporary quality of any specific solution to a societal problem helps us understand another truth about the kingdom of God's left hand. It, too, is worth teaching our people. The choice in this kingdom is often between an evil and a lesser evil. We may accommodate ourselves to some evil that a still greater evil might be avoided. It cannot be otherwise in a world corrupted by sin and under God's wrath. Divorce is surely a moral evil. Yet to keep it a regulated evil, God permitted divorce under Moses "because of the hardness of men's hearts" (Matthew 19:8). It takes keen insight and reason to know when to apply this. And perhaps when we do apply it, we will be making a mistake. But we can all recognize that it is a fact of life in the rule of God's left hand.

### Some Concluding Remarks

I do not pretend to have given the definitive answer to this complex issue ("But an **exhausting** one," I can hear you say after nineteen pages.) I do hope I have at least given some food for thought and a Scriptural framework for you to continue puzzling out your own answers.

Our society is falling apart. No question about it. But this comes as no surprise since we live in a world where things fall apart. We know why. As strangers in a strange land, yearning for the perfect city and our permanent home, we still find it useful to build temporary shelters along the way. To encourage us in our efforts, Jesus once told a parable. With it, I'd like to close:

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them they should always pray and not give up. He said, "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was

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<sup>17</sup> Neuhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Neuhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Neuhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

Even so, come, Lord Jesus! **Before** we lose faith.

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