

### ***Church and State***

In the name of him who rules over all Creation, dear friends in Christ: When attending a social event or a family gathering, conventional wisdom tells us that the two subjects you ought to avoid in conversation are religion and politics. So, here we are at a public worship service, which could be considered both a social event and a family gathering, and what do you suppose I've chosen to talk about today? That's right: religion and politics. Why would I do a thing like that? Maybe it's because whatever wisdom I have is unconventional. Or maybe it's because I'm just conventionally stupid. (This, by the way, is where you are supposed to strongly disagree with me.)

No, the reason I'll be talking about these two normally taboo subjects is, on one hand, because it's my sacred calling to talk about religion. You expect that of me. At least I hope you do. And the simple truth is that we are religious people living in a very political world – so the two subjects often overlap. Especially now as we're coming up on a major election, we're hearing all kinds of voices around us, the voices of pundits, politicians, and media personalities that are talking about the interaction of religion and politics, and sometimes also the interference and confusion of the two. And this raises a number of questions for us as believers in Jesus. What is the proper relationship between our faith and politics? What are the spheres of responsibility of church and state respectively, and how do they differ? What authority does each of them have? What are the limits of that authority? And what do we do when the two come into conflict?

You probably know that various faith traditions answer these questions differently. In classic or fundamentalist Islam, for example, the church and the state are the same thing. The religious leaders *are* the political leaders. And the law of the land is called Sharia, that is, Islamic law drawn straight from the Koran. It would be like us using the biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy as the basis of our nation's system of justice. So for Muslims, there are no lines between church and state or between religion and politics. Something similar went on within Christianity in the Middle Ages when popes and bishops frequently had powers that extended well into the civil realm. They collected taxes, waged wars, and judged criminal cases. In other places kings were made the head of the national Church. And even today there are people who want to blur the lines between church and government. On one side you've got some right-wing Evangelicals who are fond of saying that this was once a Christian nation, and they'd like to make it one again. They'd like to see mandatory prayer and Bible readings as part of every public school's curriculum. On the left you've got folks like Jesse Jackson and Jeremiah Wright, who, though supposedly pastors of churches, focus most of their time and energy pushing legislation and government programs designed to correct societal ills. In all these cases, we've got people who think that church and state should be deeply intertwined.

And then on the opposite end of the spectrum, you've got those who think the two should be held entirely apart. Some nonreligious people seem bent on wanting to erase from public view any sign of religious faith. They tell us, "Believe what you want in private; but we don't want to see it or hear about it, nor do we want what you believe to influence any of your decisions or how you vote." And then you've got religious people

like Amish Christians and members of the Jehovah's Witness cult who believe that the work of government, because it pertains to worldly matters, is inherently evil and therefore is off limits to a person of faith. Members of these groups are prohibited from serving in public office or in the military. For people who think this way, whether they are religious or not, the so called "wall of separation" between church and state is absolute. Participation in one excludes participation in the other.

Well, where do we stand in all this? To find the answers we want to seek the Lord's wisdom in the Holy Scriptures. And it just so happens that today's Epistle lesson is one of the primary texts that treat the subject. So, delving into it and some other pertinent texts, let's spend a few moments discovering what the Lord has to say about a Christian's duties with respect to the state and its governing authorities.

But first, as sort of an overall backdrop, it's important to know that as Lutherans, we understand that the Lord operates in the world through his appointed means. For example, we would all agree that the Lord provides food for the world's people. And if he wanted to, he could just make it miraculously appear on the plate of everyone who was hungry. That would be feeding them *without* means. And he could do that; but that isn't how he usually operates. Instead, he's given us the tools and know-how to grow our food from the plants and animals he's given us. So, we've got farmers who till the soil and plant the fields and harvest the crops. We've got ranchers who raise the livestock. And the Lord sends the sunshine and the rain that make the crops grow and ripen. Then too you've got merchants, transporters, and food preparers that do their work on the food you eat before it gets to your table. So yes, God feeds you; but he uses all these people and processes as the instruments *or means* to accomplish the job.

So, it is also in the Church. He could just zap Christian faith into people directly, I suppose, and make them believers; but that isn't how he works. Instead the Lord brings people like you and me to true knowledge of him and to saving faith in Jesus – and preserves us in the same – through his appointed means; namely through his Holy Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Through these means, and the servants he calls to administer them in his Church, God's Holy Spirit works to bring sinners to repentance and faith. Through these means the merits of Christ's atoning work on the cross are proclaimed to sinners to assure them of God's forgiveness, to strengthen them in the faith, and to work in them both the will and the power to amend their lives and do works that bring honor and glory to God's name.

Okay now, in a similar way, God rules over the entire world and all the nations of men; but he doesn't do it directly. We don't see Jesus sitting in some kind of divine throne room at the United Nations dictating laws and solving world problems. Instead, the Lord's authority is apportioned to heads of state and to national governments who, whether they know it or not, exercise his authority to maintain law and order, capture and punish criminals, and provide for the safety and security of citizens and promote their welfare. These human leaders and governments are God's agents, the *means*, through which he rules the world – specifically in an external, legal sort of way. This is precisely what Paul is saying in the Scripture we heard from his letter to the Christians in Rome. Submit to the rule of law and the authority of the government because that government rules on behalf of God. To resist or to rebel against the appointed leaders is to rebel against God who appointed them and gave them their authority.

But wait a minute, you might be inclined to think, what if the leaders are unbelievers? What if they are wicked people who make mistakes and rule unjustly? Well, what if they are? Does it make any difference to you what god the people who grow your food worship? Does it make any difference to you how they behave or what immoral choices they make? No. And yet the Lord uses them to feed you. Or here in the Church, the Lord uses these sinful hands to Baptize and distribute Christ's body and blood. He uses these sinful lips to declare his forgiveness in Jesus to you. Does the fact that I am a sinner who (now hold on to your hats because some of you might not believe it) sometimes makes mistakes; does that in any way diminish the truth of God's Word or the forgiveness he declares to you through me? No. Nor would it if I didn't believe a word of it myself. God's truth is God's truth regardless of who declares it.

In the same way, God's authority is God's authority regardless of who wields it. And when you think about it, since the Lord has chosen to use human leaders and governments to rule on his behalf, he really has no choice but to use wicked sinners who can and often do make mistakes. That does not negate the fact that they are God's servants to whom we, as Christian citizens, owe our obedience, the respect due their offices, and, as St. Paul reminds us, our taxes. They deserve to be paid for what they do. And things like roads and bridges for public transportation, national defense, law enforcement, public schools, and all that other stuff that the government does on our behalf costs money. We owe our share.

And I hasten to add that this is true regardless of what kind of government we have or how it's organized. Some American Christians seem to think that the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution were handed down at Sinai along with God's Word. It didn't happen that way. They are not divinely inspired documents. And while we may prefer our form of government over other forms, the truth is that on this earth there is no perfect government, and the Lord can rule equally well through hereditary monarchs, despots and dictators, and elected presidents, parliaments, and congresses – which is why too you can have faithful Christians who are submissive to their respective governments in every nation on earth. Interestingly enough, when Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he was telling them to be submissive to the Emperor, who, at the time, was the tyrannical and near psychopathic Nero – the same guy who began the first state sponsored effort to stamp out Christianity because he mistakenly believed it to be a dangerous cult of rebellion against Rome.

And that leads us to ask what exactly is the authority of the state and where does it end? Paul says that it is the bearer of the sword. That is to say the state is given the authority to use force, deadly force if necessary, to maintain peace and order in the nation. It's God's authority to arrest people who break laws, imprison or otherwise punish them, and in capital cases put them to death. It's also the authority to wage war in the defense and best interest of the nation. So, the police officer who shoots an armed bank robber, and the executioner who flips the switch on a convicted murderer, and the soldier who kills enemy combatants on the battlefield are acting on God's authority and doing his will. And a Christian citizen can perform any of those roles – or any other valid government role like serving in office, collecting taxes, judging legal cases, what have you – with a clean conscience.

The authority of the state ends, however, precisely where it comes into conflict with God's Word. Since the authority of the state comes from God, it is manifestly obvious that it oversteps its authority when it dictates and attempts to enforce laws that

contradict God's Word. At that point a Christian citizen must refuse to obey even while remaining submissive to all the other laws that do not contradict God's Word. The book of Daniel gives us some clear examples of this. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, all of whom were government officials in Babylon, were commanded by the king to worship an idol, they refused. It would have violated a command of God. Similarly, when Daniel, who was a chief advisor to the king of Persia, was commanded not to pray to the Lord, he had to disobey. In the New Testament, the political and religious leaders of the Jews commanded the disciples to stop preaching Jesus. Though they were in every other way obedient, taxpaying citizens, they had to refuse to comply. They had been given the command to preach the Gospel by Jesus himself. The law of God supersedes the law of men. And incidentally, all these people were punished for their refusal to obey. They submitted even to an abuse of government authority.

That informs us as well. Paul's whole point is that we, as Christians, ought to be model citizens. That's because we recognize the divinely derived authority of the state and a higher set of laws. We are simultaneously citizens of two kingdoms: a physical one on earth and the spiritual kingdom of heaven – which is the Church of Jesus Christ. Normally, there's no conflict between the two; but if rulers or human governments attempt to force us to do what's immoral or to comply with orders that violate God's law, we must decline – even if it means we'll be punished for it. So, a Christian soldier ordered to execute prisoners of war, or a Christian doctor told that he must perform abortions, or a pastor told that he must officiate at immoral wedding services – in such cases the answer is, "No." And if we are punished for doing what is right, well, we are to commend the matter and our well-being to the Lord.

And while we're speaking of the limits of the state's authority, it needs to be said that it's not the government's job to proclaim the Gospel. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." It may be tempting for well intentioned Christians to use the state's power of coercion to ... what, shall we say, "encourage" people to become Christians? Negatively this might be done at gunpoint. Positively it might be done by giving tax breaks or other benefits. Sadly, such attempts have been made by some in the past; but this is an abuse of the state's power and a violation of God's Word. Besides, it doesn't work. People don't come to faith in Christ by the carrot or the stick. The Lord builds his kingdom by his Word and Spirit alone, not by any kind of external force.

All this having been said, we know that we are very blessed to live in a nation that allows us the freedoms we enjoy, and in particular our religious freedom. We are right to be thankful for it. But whether or not we continue to enjoy these freedoms, and regardless of who is elected to rule over us, it's appropriate that we pray for the security and prosperity of the nation, and ask the Lord to bless its leaders. And we should be model citizens, serving others in whatever capacity we're called to even as Christ our Lord served us. And too, because we do live in a democracy, it's incumbent upon us to use the right we have to vote to support leaders and policies that reflect our Christian values. What we don't want to do is look to the state for our ultimate security, well being, or salvation. That we already have in Christ alone. So, let's give the state its due and keep asking God to bless America. Even more, let's give Christ his due, ascribing all honor, glory, and power to him forever. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***