

What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Luther's Doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms"

What Lutherans Believe Regarding Human Government, and the Individual Christian's Engagement with it

In this lesson we discuss from a Biblical perspective what the Lutheran/Christian attitude toward government should be, and to explore together the responsibility of Christians to participate (or not!) in the political process.

Lutherans are generally known for shying away from becoming "political", especially in election years. In that the Great Commission is focused on spiritual matters and not secular ones, this is a reasonable – even if not commanded -- tendency. After all, we would not want someone to not hear the Gospel because we turned them off with political messaging. Our calling is to proclaim Christ Crucified for our sins, and to preach the Good News. We know that our salvation lies not in government or secular leadership, but in the power of the Word of God. We seek not to make bad people good, but instead to make dead people alive!

But we live in a secular world that needs to hear all this. The Bible reminds us to be *in* the world, but not *of* it. We should bring our Christian influence to our everyday life, and to engage the people God has put in that life in constructive and merciful ways to the extent we can. So can it be God-pleasing to be "political"? Is it possible that God wants us to engage the powers of the present age, even if those powers are unchristian or even antichrist? Should we do what we can to influence, change, or improve the secular lives of people who don't even believe in Jesus?

The way we answer such questions says much about how we read the Bible, and about how we believe God engages all of mankind, not just His followers.

The Two Kingdoms ¹

Martin Luther recognized that Christians are situated in a struggle between the sacred and the secular. As a result he developed the idea of the "Kingdom of the Left" and the "Kingdom of the Right". This model reflects Biblical principles, and teaches us Luther's understanding of how God interacts with the world.

The two kingdoms are not about Law & Gospel per se, though at times it might seem like that. Rather, the distinction Luther drew between the two kingdoms explains how God is sovereign over *both* the spiritual and secular realms, *because He instituted both*. Each kingdom has a distinct purpose and function.

The Kingdom of the Left:

- **What is it?** The "Kingdom of the Left" refers to the secular realm, where God's rule is exercised through natural laws, governance, and societal structures. This includes the enforcement of laws, the administration of both civil and criminal justice, and the maintenance of social order. The Kingdom of the Left deals with "worldly" matters that are largely external to the Church and common to all men, as well as the maintenance of order in human society.
- **Why did God institute it?** The purpose of the Kingdom of the Left is to provide a stable and orderly society. It helps to curb sin and protect the innocent, but it does not necessarily address spiritual or eternal matters, even if it at times intersects with those things.

¹ <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/mercy/life-ministry/library/two-kingdoms>

You could think of the Kingdom of the Left as being how God guides the “here-and-now”, rather than our salvation.

- **How does it work?** God uses earthly authorities like kings, presidents, and governments to maintain peace and order, and to prevent chaos. These authorities do not always know God or even understand that they are being used by Him. This is the arena in which we see human reason and “natural law” being applied to maintain orderliness in our corporate lives.

The Kingdom of the Right:

- **What is it?** The "Kingdom of the Right" pertains to the spiritual realm, where God's rule is exercised through the power of the Gospel, which He conveys to the world via the church and sacraments. The Kingdom of the Right deals with spiritual matters internal to the Church, the salvation of souls, and keeping and preserving us, His saints.
- **Why did God institute it?** The purpose of the Kingdom of the Right is to maintain the presence of God’s Word of life and hope, and to offer salvation and eternal life to mankind, as long as man lives on Earth. It is how God communicates and nourishes faith, offers grace and redemption to all people, and is His mechanism for guiding believers as they live and grow in the Christian faith.
- **How does it work?** God works through the Holy Spirit to bring people to faith, by which they are afforded forgiveness of sins, and ultimately eternal life. The Kingdom of the Right is concerned with inner transformation of individuals (justification), and their continuously growing relationship with God (sanctification).

It’s interesting to contemplate how profound this was for Luther, who desired to completely separate himself from the world via the monastic life, which he joined in no small part out of fear. He despised his sin, and thought the only way he could overcome the world was to effectively

leave it. Ultimately, with the help of his father confessor, he grew out of the attitude of fear and isolation, to the benefit of all of us!

So with this background and understanding, let us not isolate from the secular, but consider how best to engage and constructively influence it.

The Biblical Foundation for Government

Read Romans 13:1-7:

Be Subject to Government

13 Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. **3** For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; **4** for it is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. **5** Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. **6** For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. **7** Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

It's not always easy to accept or admit that "governing authorities" are ordained by God to maintain order and justice, because we often don't like **how** the government does that.

Read 1 Peter 2:13-17:

Honor Authority

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, **14** or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. **15** For such is the will of God, that by doing right you silence the ignorance of foolish people. **16** Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for

evil, but *use it* as bond-servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the ¹⁸king.

Submission to governing authorities is a function and reflection of our faith. The balance between respecting authority and standing for righteousness is not always easy to maintain, but this is God-pleasing, and in accordance with His will for our lives. ***Darn it!*** 😊

But what about Unjust Governments or Laws?

The Old Testament offers several accounts of the people of God being in terrible circumstances, yet having influence and success in both the secular and spiritual realms. Let's look at two of them.

A familiar story that exemplifies this is the story of Joseph. Read Genesis 41. Joseph used his influence for ***both*** the common good of the foreign people he lived amongst, and the furthering of God's plan to the extent he was able.

Another impressive example is Daniel, whose life serves as a striking and remarkable model for living one's life in the midst of a decided ungodly nation and governmental system (Babylon!) Read Daniel 3 and Daniel 6 to learn how Daniel remained faithful in the face of extraordinarily unjust laws, and how he balanced being obedient to God's ordinances while at the same time providing remarkable levels of civic duty amongst an unbelieving nation.

What did Jesus say?

Read Matthew 22:15-22:

Poll-tax to Caesar

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and ¹⁵plotted together how they might trap Him ¹⁵in what He said. ¹⁶ And they *sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and ¹⁶do not care what anyone thinks; for You ¹⁶are not partial to anyone. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what do You think? Is it ¹⁷permissible to pay

a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show Me the coin *used* for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. ²⁰ And He *said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" ²¹ They *said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He *said to them, "Then pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." ²² And hearing *this*, they were amazed; and they left Him and went away.

This rather well-known command, often quoted per the KJV as "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's", tells us it is God's will that we understand -- and live out -- our civic responsibilities. We are to recognize God at work via the Kingdom of the Left. ***Darn it!***

We are also to understand that Jesus often talked of the Kingdom of the Right. For example, in **John 18:36**:

³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

Here we hear Jesus distinguishing between spiritual and earthly realms. The two kingdoms are both in evidence!

The Christian's Role in Society

Why can't we just be like monastic Luther, and avoid all this unpleasantness?

Read Matthew 5:13-16:

Disciples and the World

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by people.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor do *people* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Your light must shine before people

in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

We are called by God to be **Salt** and **Light**. We have Influence, and impact both our secular and sacred worlds by what we believe, teach, and confess, and by how we treat and serve all people. We are to conduct ourselves with integrity, kindness, and mercy. Speaking of which...

Read Micah 6:8:

He has told you, mortal one, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love [a]kindness,
And to walk [b]humbly with your God?

Read Isaiah 1:17:

Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Rebuke the oppressor,
Obtain justice for the orphan,
Plead for the widow's case.

Isn't it interesting that these passages seem to deal more with the Kingdom of the Left than the Right? Maybe by honoring God in one, we ultimately honor Him in both!

What about Voting?

We should do what we can to promote the selection of good people into leadership positions. Solomon recognized both the positive and negative results that arise from the quality of the nation's leaders:

Read Proverbs 29:2:

When the righteous [a]increase, the people rejoice,
But when a wicked man rules, people groan.

We find in Esther's story that speaking up for what is right is a godly thing. Mordecai reminded her that there are times when the decision-making process is critical to those affected!

Read Esther 4:13-14:

¹³Then Mordecai told *them* to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. ¹⁴For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"

Read Matthew 25:14-30, The Parable of the Talents

This parable is about using one's resources, intellect, and influence – all given to us by God, our Master -- wisely.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7:

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. ⁶There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*. ⁷But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

The diversity of gifts and responsibilities given to the body of Christ are to be used for "common good". It is not exclusively for the household of faith, but for all. Spiritual gifts definitely apply here, and those include discernment, generosity, and so on. We can and should apply those to both the Kingdom of the Left and the Kingdom of the Right. Just as we take seriously the governance of our congregation, we should also take seriously any opportunity we have to influence our government, and voting is perhaps the most fundamental way to do that short of running for political office ourselves.

And if you are gifted in administration, leadership, etc., perhaps God will call you to do just that! Be open to it!

Christian Voting Practices

Practice Informed Decision-Making. Learn what you can about candidates, their policies, and their past performance. Researching candidates and understanding platforms is something we can all do easily with the resources available to us on the Internet.

Pray and Practice Discernment - Seek God's guidance in voting decisions, and use the intellectual gifts He has given you to make the best decision(s) you can.

Be salt and light – in BOTH Kingdoms!