

Civil Government: A Christian Perspective

Why?

Why the church?

Genesis 3

Why the government?

Genesis 6:(11-13)

Israel's Government

Theocracy – 1 Samuel 12:6-24

3 Types of Law

Moral Law – Deuteronomy 5

Ceremonial Law – Colossians 2:16,17

Civil Law – Deuteronomy 17:8-13

Why would Israel have such a special type of Government? What purpose did it serve?

Why all the harsh laws in the Books of Moses (consider Matthew 19:8)?

Which of the three types of Old Testament laws for Israel apply today?

(Colossians 2:17 / Matthew 5; Galatians 5:14-26; Ephesians 5)

The Moral Law

Who alone can truly keep the moral law (Romans 14:23; Hebrews 11:6)?

What is the difference between moral and civil law?

Consider this from our Lutheran Confessions (Apology XVIII, 74):

Therefore we may profitably distinguish between civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness, attributing the former to the free will and the latter to the operation of the Holy Spirit in the regenerate. This safeguards outward discipline, because all men ought to know that God requires this civil righteousness and that, to some extent, we can achieve it. At the same time it shows the difference between human righteousness and spiritual righteousness, between philosophical teaching and the teaching of the Holy Spirit; and it points out the need for the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ This distinction is not our invention but the clear teaching of the Scriptures. Augustine discusses it too, and more recently William of Paris has discussed it very well. But it has been criminally suppressed by those who dream that men can obey the law of God without the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is given to them out of regard for the merit of this obedience.

Dilemmas in Exile

Consider the situation of Daniel and apply today.

Church and State in the New Testament

Read Romans 13:1-7 and discuss.

Who established government?

What was the government like at that time?

Why do we owe obedience to the government?

What are the duties of the government according to this passage?

Read 1 Peter 2:13-25 and discuss.

Why was 1 Peter written?
Why is ironic, then, that Peter urges obedience?
Apply this to our day.

Read Mark 12:13-17 and discuss.

What is Jesus' point?
How does it apply in our day?
How did Jesus deal throughout His life with respect to the authorities?

Read Matthew 23:1-12 and discuss.

Is Jesus talking about ecclesiastical or civil power here? Explain.

Read Acts 5:17-42 (especially verse 29) and discuss.

How does this apply to the passages above? How do we apply it today? Situations?

Church and State in our Lutheran Confessions

Consider Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession:

It is taught among us that all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order, and that Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc.

Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection requires the forsaking of house and home, wife and child, and the renunciation of such activities as are mentioned above. Actually, true perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. The Gospel does not overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life. Accordingly Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Consider Article XXVIII (paragraphs 1-29) of the Augsburg Confession:

Many and various things have been written in former times about the power of bishops, and some have improperly confused the power of bishops with the temporal sword. Out of this careless confusion many serious wars, tumults, and uprisings have resulted because the bishops, under pretext of the power given them by Christ, have not only introduced new forms of worship and burdened consciences with reserved cases and violent use of the ban, but have also presumed to set up and depose kings^(tr-85) and emperors according to their pleasure. Such outrage has long since been condemned by learned and devout people in Christendom. On this account our teachers have been compelled, for the sake of comforting consciences, to point out the difference between spiritual and temporal power, sword, and authority, and they have taught that because of God's command both authorities and powers are to be honored and esteemed with all reverence as the two highest gifts of God on earth.

Our teachers assert that according to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins,

and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

This power of keys or of bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments (to many persons or to individuals, depending on one's calling). In this way are imparted no bodily but eternal things and gifts, namely, eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These gifts cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching and of administering the holy sacraments, for St. Paul says, "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Inasmuch as the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal gifts and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with government or temporal authority.¹¹ Temporal authority is concerned with matters altogether different from the Gospel. Temporal power does not protect the soul, but with the sword and physical penalties it protects body and goods from the power of others.

Therefore, the two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused, for the spiritual power has its commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Hence it should not invade the function of the other, should not set up and depose kings, should not annul temporal laws or undermine obedience to government, should not make or prescribe to the temporal power laws concerning worldly matters Christ himself said, "My kingship is not of this world," and again, "Who made me a judge or divider over you?" Paul also wrote in Phil. 3:20, "Our commonwealth is in heaven," and in 2 Cor. 10:4, 5, "The weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God."

Thus our teachers distinguish the two authorities and the functions of the two powers, directing that both be held in honor as the highest gifts of God on earth.

⁽¹¹⁻⁸⁷⁾ In cases where bishops possess temporal authority and the sword, they possess it not as bishops by divine right, but by human, imperial right, bestowed by Roman emperors and kings for the temporal administration of their lands. Such authority has nothing at all to do with the office of the Gospel.

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears me." On the other hand, if they teach, introduce, or institute anything contrary to the Gospel, we have God's command not to be obedient in such cases, for Christ says in Matt. 7:15, "Beware of false prophets." St. Paul also writes in Gal. 1:8, "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed," and in 2 Cor. 13:8, "We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." Again Paul refers to "the authority which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." Canon law requires the same in Part II, Question 7, in the chapters "Sacerdotes" and "Oves."

St. Augustine also writes in his reply to the letters of Petilian that one should not obey even regularly elected bishops if they err or if they teach or command something contrary to the divine Holy Scriptures.

Whatever other power and jurisdiction bishops may have in various matters (for example, in matrimonial cases and in tithes), they have these by virtue of human right. However, when bishops are negligent in the performance of such duties, the princes are obliged, whether they like to or not, to administer justice to their subjects for the sake of peace and to prevent discord and great disorder in their lands.

Consider the Small Catechism's Explanation to the Fourth Commandment:

We should fear and love God that we do not dishonor or anger our parents and others in authority, but honor, serve and obey them, and give them love and respect.

Church and State Throughout History

Rome and the Early Church

The early church found itself under sporadic and often brutal persecution. The reason was that they were viewed as traitors for refusing to participate in emperor worship and for making exclusive religious claims (angering the gods that protected Rome). Ridiculous claims were made about Christian worship and the Sacrament of the Altar in particular. Greed (idolatry was big business and informants got the Christian's property when the Christian was martyred) fueled much of the persecution. Christians were also great scapegoats when calamity struck.

Constantine and the Rise of Christian Empire.

Before the monumental battle of Milvian Bridge (312 AD) Constantine had a vision in which he saw a cross with the words written around it "In this sign you will conquer." He credited his subsequent victory to Christ. The Church became the unofficial official religion of the Empire. Political ambition led many to be baptized. There was a severe shortage of pastors (many had been martyred). The level of catechization fell and many pagan customs entered the Church. The government began "hosting" councils to solve theological disputes. This relationship continued for a millennium in the East.

The Papacy and Temporal Power

With the waning power of the emperor in the West and the rising threat and occurrences of barbarian invasion, the pope began to fill a political vacuum. With time, he became a temporal and spiritual power. As new forces rose to power, he played the game well and aligned himself in ways so as to maintain influence and property. The crusades and the constant threat of Muslim invasion spiritualized war and brought the pope a general's hat to go with his tiara. The investiture controversy demonstrated the power of the pope over that of kings and emperors. The interdict was also a powerful tool in political power plays. Consider *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* in our Lutheran Confessions.

The Church and the Reformation

Zurich – Church state (by design)

Geneva – Church state (by design)

Germany – State Church (by default)

Roman Catholic territories – State/Church (by demands)

America

Bill of Rights, Amendment I:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

There we find the “Establishment Clause.” What does it say? What doesn’t it say? It forbids a state church and establishes a secular government. Significance? Apply.

Church and State Today – Application

Consider a portion of AC XVI again:

It is taught among us that all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order, and that Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc.

The Christian can serve in government in a God-pleasing way. A Christian should serve in government in a God-pleasing way. Our government is “we the people.” When we vote, we are governing. Since this is the case, how will we approach voting?

Rank the following issues from 1 (most important) to 2 (least important):

Abortion _____
National Security/War _____
Economy _____
Euthenasia _____
Gay Marriage _____
Welfare _____
School choice _____
Gun Control _____
Education _____
Enviornment _____

Because we have a secular government, we argue our view based on reason and natural, not divine law. How would you argue these issues then?

Will Lutheran Christians want to join the ranks of the Christian Coalition? Explain

What are the dangers of having a Christian Right or Christian Left?

What are the dangers of school choice and faith-based charities? Considerations?

What then is the narrow Lutheran middle road in the relationship between Church and State?