

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

Memory passage: Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Mark 12:17. This was written as a week of devotions 9-30-2012. It is offered as a brief explanation of the complicated and difficult relation between church and state in the United States. This topic is getting lively discussion in these times. It is really a part of the Great American Experiment in democracy. How does it work to govern a free people? The functions of church and state are distinct. In our land there is no established national church. It's the first time in history, and we have to keep learning how it works.

What is the relationship between church and state? This question is more important than asking about the separation, or even the wall (attributed to Thomas Jefferson) between church and state. For we Christians live in both realms. The answer to this question is quite complicated. However, we start with some clear and simple principles.

Day One. Different roles of church and state. Government is a gift God has given to his world. It is not really a human invention, even though humans have put their God-given ingenuity to create what seems to work. (Or not.) God has given government the power to keep law and order that we may live in peace and safety (1 Timothy 2:2). It shall promote the common good (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2:13-14). It sets up laws that citizens must obey. It prosecutes those who break the laws and do wrong. It sets up services necessary to life of the citizens. For example, police and fire protection, the military for national defense, the judicial system, various kinds of infrastructure.

The church preaches the Gospel of salvation by faith, by the grace of God, and the sacrificial death of Jesus and his resurrection triumph over sin, death and the devil. People of the church gather for worship and nurturing the faith. Members of the Christian church live out the faith and do good in their families, at work and school, and as citizens of a community and a country.

The church is fundamentally spiritual. The government is secular. The church applies God's law to bring sinners to repentance and relief from their sins. The government passes laws that it uses to judge and punish violators of those laws. These laws are based on reason and justice. When God forgives, he forgives fully. Justice in the secular world is not always accurate, or adequate, for it is always subject to human failings and shortcomings. Let us thank our loving God for giving us the services of state and church!

Day Two. Two different kinds of righteousness. There is spiritual righteousness and there is civic righteousness. This was a critical insight of the Reformer Martin Luther. The sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary's cross atoned for sin. Our Father in heaven forgives our sin and accounts us righteous. We do not have to earn God's favor. Indeed, we cannot. We could never do enough good to please God. Jesus came to

redeem us and to give us life. It's perfect. We can add nothing to it. If we try, then it's like Jesus did not do enough for us. As redeemed Christians, we will do good works. We know that Jesus lives, and we want to serve him. We want to do good. To do good is natural expression of our faith and love. The good that we do is the fruit of our faith, it does not add to our favor with God. God, though, is pleased when we do good. God loves it when we do good willingly and when we are not forced to do so.

In the secular world people are expected to do good works. People are admired and rewarded for the good they do. The more good anyone does, the higher regard that person is awarded. We have to earn the respect and honor, even love, of people. Indeed we feel better about ourselves when we accomplish the things that we set out to do. In the secular world it does not matter what our motive is. We have to obey the laws or face the punishment for not doing so. This is the difference between living under the

Law and living under the Gospel. The law operates by rewards and punishments, the carrot and the stick. Faith, hope and love motivate the redeemed heart. The world may not care about our motivation. It demands results. The apostle asserts that it is the duty of government to reward good behavior and punish the bad (1 Peter 2:14-15).

We need to know the distinction between the two kinds of good works, but you will of course say that we live both the spiritual life of the Christian and the life of a citizen under the laws of the land. More about that later. Let us resolve to do good as Christians and as citizens of this wonderful land where the Lord has set us to live!

Day Three. We live in both worlds. We are citizens of this wonderful land, and we enjoy a number of freedoms. As citizens we are bound to obey the laws of the land. We are devoted to our home and family. We make a living for ourselves and all who depend on us. We do our civic duties of voting, paying taxes, and working as citizens for the common good. We may serve public office. We are subject to civil authority.

As Christians, we have Jesus as our Lord. We are his subjects. We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We worship God freely here. We live our lives in community with others, motivated by faith, hope and love. Christians make good citizens. We live by what God teaches us in his Word. Christians are humble, patient, and dedicated to doing good. Christians will look out for the good of others more than their own. We are more inclined to suffer wrong than to seek our rights. As we teach at Immanuel Lutheran School, we value servant leadership. We give bold and robust witness to our faith in the grace of God and in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our Lutheran heritage this is the concept of two kingdoms or realms. We believe in the rule of God in Christ by grace. We call it God's rule of the right hand. We believe in the secular rule of God by law and by force. We call it God's rule of the left hand.

How do we fit it together? Christians may be better citizens, motivated by love rather than fear of the law. Christians brought up on God's Word may be more honest, more diligent, more joyful, more trustworthy. When people of faith encounter the injustices and unfairness of life in this sin-damaged world, we are prepared to suffer as Jesus did. Christians accept the law of the land with willing

hearts, and are ready to go beyond what the laws demand. Christians are ready to forgive as we live by the forgiving grace of God. However, for us Christians God's rule goes before the secular rule. Should there be a conflict between what we are answerable to God for and what government demands, we "ought to obey God rather than man." (Acts 5:29) This must be done carefully after searching God's Word and our conscience.

Day Four. Athens and Jerusalem. There was an experiment of democracy for a time in ancient Athens. From there came the dream that fired the will for the "Great American Experiment" that started two hundred years ago with the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the American Constitution of 1787. We keep learning to live this experiment of a democratic republic. How do those basic principles of governing apply to our situation? We are ever learning anew. The same is true of understanding how a few principles, drawn from God's holy Word, apply to our life in a land where secular government and God's church have been set apart and do each their own work more or less freely? Jerusalem is the center of the Old Testament Scriptures and where the church of Jesus was launched at Pentecost. Athens and Jerusalem are good symbols for us for church and state.

State and church have the freedom to collaborate. Indeed, they must, for the common good. How to do that is learned by ongoing trial and experiment. We look in the Sacred Scriptures for lessons and models. However, there we find life under God's direct rule (theocracy) or chaos. They lived as a tribal league (Book of Judges), or under kings, emperors and tyrants. Prophets and apostles taught people to live as good citizens, faithful to the Lord, in any of these situations. We do not find a model or direct word for our life in America, where church and state are separated, and we are free and claim the "right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The modern world understands this from the work of 16th century reformers.

"As we turn now to the problems of practical application, it is important to keep in mind that there is in fact a Lutheran perspective - and that the Lutheran theological model can and will make a practical difference....

"On the other hand, the reader should also be cautioned to understand that American Lutherans are still struggling to apply their theology - created and nurtured in a culture of emperors and princes - to the challenges of the modern American democratic 'experiment.' It is not surprising that there should be changes in thinking as this application progresses, although not all such changes finally can be viewed favorably." See reference to the CTCR document below.

Day Five. Relationship of church and state. As said before, we keep learning how to apply Lutheran principles to this relationship. We do not have the final answer. Here at Immanuel we have been given two opportunities to try cooperation. When we were moving to Sunview, an invitation came from Stansbury Elementary School to partner with them in KidsHope USA. We provide mentors for students considered at risk. To make this work demands trust and careful cooperation of equals. Neither Immanuel or Stansbury gives the orders or has authority. Since then we have

entered into a partnership with the Loveland Housing Authority at Orchard Place. We try to help the residents with community life and personal advancement. It's a partnership with a government agency. As we work, we engage with other publicly funded and also non-governmental organizations. This requires trust and friendly collaboration. In former President George H. W. Bush's famous "thousand points of light" speech he urged religious organizations and community caring agencies to step in and collaborate with the state. Let us thank God for the freedom that allows such experiments. We can do much good together!

Day Six. How may the church influence the government? The Lutheran principle of the distinction between the two kingdoms needs to be applied. We would like to call down God's word and expect the state to heed it. However, God's Word is for those "who have the ears to hear it." The church operates with God's Word. The state must work with reason, justice and commonly held standards. The church is not to Christianise the government, and the government cannot save us. So, how do we influence secular government?

The most common and natural way is that Christians live out among family, friends and community what we believe. In this way commonly held standards can be raised among the citizens. So we exert our influence powerfully in the public square.

Another way is to hold public forums to discuss issues and justice. Churches can invite the public to hear discussion and learn about issues. The church could provide a neutral ground for a public debate about a matter that holds strong public interest and concern, and that involves strong emotions.

A more direct approach was taken by the president of our Synod, Dr. Matthew Harrison, when he joined a large number of religious representatives to appeal for freedom of conscience regarding sanctity of life. An extreme example of direct approach was the work of German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The churches of Germany yielded to Adolph Hitler and Naziism. Pastor Bonhoeffer came in time to involve himself, indeed as a leader, in efforts to defeat that movement and ultimately to assassinate Hitler. It cost him his life.

We Christians should let our voice be heard and our example seen. It's our calling!

For further reading see what our church has said about the relation between church and state. The Synod in Convention called on the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to offer a study. Look up LCMS.org, Church and School Resources, CTCR Documents and Articles, *Render Unto Caesar...Unto God*.

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