

CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT

*For the Participants of the
Wednesday Evening Bible Study at
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Spring Lake Park, Minnesota
Summer 2023*

CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it
Should be Obeyed*

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FOREWORD

Recent events within the world have once again raised the question as to the relationship of Christians to the governments of the countries in which they live. The coronavirus pandemic (2019-23) occasioned the government-mandated reduction of the number of people who could assemble in one place, effectively bringing Christian worship in churches in many places to a standstill. Regulations having to do with the vaccine produced in response to the pandemic also raised concerns of conscience, with individual Christians refusing to allow themselves to be vaccinated. And in the midst of the general confusion and concern in the consideration of these matters, election challenges that followed the presidential election of 2020 resulted in some Christians taking part in the events at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, as the prevention of the certification of the results of that election was attempted. Also of note is the killing of George Floyd (May 25th, 2020) by a police officer in Minneapolis, setting off world-wide protests, and calls for the abolishment of policing. And not to be forgotten: Already in June of 2015, the Supreme Court had made same-sex marriage legal across the country (*Obergefell v. Hodges*).

So how should Christians think about the government? Does it really have authority over individuals? What about

if it acts wrongly or creates a law promoting or allowing evil? Must it always be obeyed? Can it be legitimately overthrown? These were the questions being asked throughout the pandemic and its accompanying events.

And yet these are not new questions. Those growing up in the Viet Nam War era in the United States (ca. 1964-73) grappled with the question of the legitimacy of a government-mandated draft of men. Governmental authority over women was also challenged via the supreme court decision *Roe vs. Wade* (1973). The legal structure of marriage was altered as divorce laws were relaxed. And government-regulated racial discrimination in the South was condemned and abandoned. Most ignominiously government corruption at the highest level came to light with the Watergate scandal (1972-74). Then as now questions were raised as to the role of government and its authority.

But where does government actually come from? Isn't it simply a creation of man? Of man's reason? And what about authority? Who really has the right to do anything to anyone else? Is government even needed? Can't people police themselves?

And what about Christians? Must they be obedient to government or can they simply ignore it? Can they follow Christ by humbly serving as government officials or in the military? Or should Christ's example lead them to avoid government or military service altogether? Should Christians simply take over the government?

These are the questions that Martin Luther tackles in the following work.

Paul Strawn

1

GOD ESTABLISHES LEGAL ORDER

Legal order and its authority within the world exist by God's will and command. So Scripture: "Let everyone be subject to authority and government. For there is no authority except from God. But authority everywhere is ordained by God. So those who resist authority resist God's order.

And those who resist God's order will bring condemnation upon themselves" (Romans 13:1-2).

Likewise 1 Peter 2:13-14: "Be

subject to every human order, be it the king as supreme, or the governors as those sent by him to visit vengeance on

***Be subject to every
human order***

evil and praise the good.”

Such legal order and its authority have been in the world from its very creation. When Cain killed his brother Abel, Cain feared that he would be executed.

But God stayed Cain’s execution, overriding the authority of the legal order, so that no one would kill Cain. Cain would not have had such fear of punishment if he had not learned from Adam that murderers should be killed.

God expressly instituted and confirmed the authority of the legal order of the world once again after the Flood when he said: “If you shed the blood of someone, by someone will your blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6). This should not be understood to refer to some sort of plague or punishment that God pours out upon murderers. For many murderers continue to live by repentance or grace and die without the authority of the legal order being used against them.

Rather Genesis 9:6 refers to the authority of the legal order. That a murderer is indeed guilty of death. And that he can be lawfully executed by means of that authority.

Holy Scripture does not err if the authority of the legal order is somehow hindered. Or if that authority acts so slowly that a murderer dies a natural death. For Scripture still says: “If you shed someone’s blood, by someone will your blood be shed.”

So people themselves are to blame if such a law, commanded by God, is not carried out. For other commandments of God are broken in just the same way.

This legal order within the world was confirmed later by the law of Moses, Exodus 21:14: “You are to tear away from my altar those who intentionally kill someone in order to

kill them.” Likewise in Exodus 21:24-25: “Pain for pain, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, foot for foot, hand for hand, wound for wound, blow for blow.”

Christ also confirmed such a legal order when he said to Peter in the garden: “Those who take the sword shall die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). These words are to be understood according to Genesis 9:6: “If you shed someone’s blood” etc. Without a doubt, Christ refers to Genesis 9:6 by what he says to Peter, thereby introducing and confirming this verse.

***Christ also
confirmed such
a legal order***

John the Baptist also taught the same thing. When soldiers asked him what they should do, he said to them: “Do not inflict violence and injustice on anyone and be content with your pay” (Luke 3:14). If the usage of the authority of the legal order within the world was not divinely established, John would have told those soldiers to stop using their authority. John’s purpose, after all, was to make the people perfect and instruct them in a truly Christian manner.

So it is sufficiently certain and clear that God’s will is to use the legal order of the world and its authority to punish evil and to protect the good.

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-
1. Who established legal order on the earth?
 2. Who do those who resist authority actually resist?
 3. Has legal order always been within the world?

4. Why was Cain fearful after killing Abel?
5. Is it God's will to use the authority of the legal order to punish evil and protect good?

2

CHRIST DID NOT ABOLISH THE LEGAL ORDER

Obviously what Christ says in Matthew 5:38-39 clearly confronts the authority of the legal order within the world: “You have heard that it was previously said: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you: Do not resist evil. So if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek to him also. And if someone wants to take you to court to take your shirt from you, give him your coat as well. And if someone forces you to go with him for a mile, go two miles with him.” Paul likewise in Romans 12:19 asserts: “My friends, do not protect yourselves, but make room for God’s wrath, because it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine; I

want to repay, says the Lord.” Similarly in Matthew 5:44 Christ says: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.” And Peter declares (1 Peter 3:9): “Do not repay evil with evil or abusive language with abusive language” etc.

***Do not repay evil
with evil***

These verses and others overwhelmingly suggest that New Testament Christians should not use such legally-ordered authority within the world. This is why the theologians of the pope taught that Christ abolished the law of Moses. Those same papal scholars also turned these commands of Christ into guidance for those already perfected in the Christian faith.

In so doing, they divided the Church into two different classes of Christians. The first is the perfected class. To them apply only the words of Christ. The second is the imperfect class. To them apply the Ten Commandments.

Basic Christian doctrine itself was thereby split into two pieces! And those theologians of the pope did this out of pure wickedness and intention, without any basis in Scripture. For they did not comprehend that Christ commanded that his teachings be so stringently followed. Christ did not want even the smallest part of them to be abolished, condemning to hell those who do not love their enemies.

So obviously we must speak about the words of Christ in a different way. For Christ’s words remain applicable to all Christians, whether they are perfected or not. For perfection and imperfection are not based on works, and do not cause such special classes of Christians to be created.

Rather, perfection and imperfection are found in the

heart, in faith and love. The perfected are those who believe and love more, whether they are men or women, rich or poor, pastors or laymen. For love and faith do not create any classes of Christians.

***Perfection and
imperfection are
found in the heart***

-
-
1. What did Jesus and Paul and Peter say about Christians having some sort of legal authority to punish?
 2. Did Christ abolish the law of Moses?
 3. Can Christianity be divided into those who are perfect and those who are not perfect based on what they should do?
 4. Is Christian perfection based on outward works of the law?
 5. Where is perfection and imperfection actually found?

3

THE TWO KINGDOMS WITHIN THE WORLD

Still, Adam's descendants must all be divided into two groups of people. The first group belongs to the kingdom of God. The second to the kingdom of the world.

Those who truly believe in Christ are under Christ and belong to the kingdom of God. For in God's kingdom, Christ is the King and Lord, as it says in Psalm 2:6, and in all of Scripture.

For Christ appeared in order to establish and maintain the kingdom of God within the world. This is why Christ said before Pilate (John 18:36-37): "My kingdom is not of this world, but he who is of the truth hears my voice."

And Christ constantly points to the kingdom of God by the gospel, saying (Matthew 3:2), “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Likewise in Matthew 6:33: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

Christ also calls the gospel itself a gospel of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; 24:14). He does so because the gospel teaches, governs, and contains the kingdom of God.

***The gospel teaches,
governs, and contains
the kingdom of God***

So the people within the kingdom of God do not need the legal order of the world with its authority. And if the whole world consisted of true Christians, that is, true believers,

there would be no need for legal order, authority, or public officials of any type.

For what use would such things be for true Christians? They have the Holy Spirit within their hearts.

It is the Holy Spirit who teaches them and causes them to be just continually, to love everyone, and to put up with injustice, even death, gladly and joyfully. Where there is nothing but toleration of injustice and the doing of good, there is no need for quarrels, arguments, judgment, judges, punishment, legal order, or authority.

It is therefore impossible that the worldly authority of the legal order should find anything to do among Christians. For they do more on their own than all rules and regulations might demand of them, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:9: “The law is not given to the righteous, but to the unrighteous.”

Why is this so? Because the righteous person, all on

his own, does everything and more than all laws demand. But the unrighteous person does not do anything right. Therefore he needs laws to learn, to be coerced by, and to be urged to do good.

A good tree does not need the law and teaching to bear good fruit. Its nature causes it to bear its proper fruit without any law or teaching.

You would have to be a fool to write a book that is full of laws and legal norms for an apple tree, instructing it as to how it should bear apples and not thorns. For the apple tree bears apples based on its own nature better than you could ever command it to do with countless books.

Christians are likewise so natured by the Spirit and faith. They do what is good and right more knowingly than anyone could ever teach them with laws. They themselves need neither the law nor legal norms.

But you say: Why, then, did God give so many laws to all mankind? And why did Christ in the gospel teach us to do many things?

I have addressed this already in detail in published sermons and elsewhere. Now therefore only briefly: Paul says that “the law is given for the sake of the unrighteous,” 1 Timothy 1:9. That is, so that those who are not Christians are forced to abstain outwardly from evil acts.

But no one by nature is good or a Christian. Rather, all are sinners and evil. So God restrains them with the law so that they may not put their evil nature into outward action—which is exactly what they want to do.

***So God restrains
them with
the law***

Paul adds to this another purpose of the law in Romans 7:7 and Galatians 3:20, that is, to recognize sin. The law does this in order to humble mankind so that he seeks the grace of God and faith in Christ.

Christ teaches similarly in Matthew 5:39 where he asserts that “you should not resist evil.” There Christ explains the law and teaches how a true Christian should and must act.



1. What are the two kingdoms of this world?
2. Who are citizens of the kingdom of God?
3. Why is the gospel the gospel of the kingdom of God?
4. Would there be a need for legal order if the world were only Christians?
5. Do Christians do more than the law requires?
6. Why does God resist those who are not Christians with the law?

4

WORLDLY AND SPIRITUAL GOVERNMENTS

So those who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world. They are under the law.

Since few believe, and fewer still act in a Christian manner by not resisting or even being evil, God prepared for them a different government. God placed them under the authority of the legal order outside of His kingdom and Christianity.

As a result, they cannot outwardly express their evil nature. Although they would like to. And if they do evil, they cannot do so successfully in peace without fear.

So the use of the authority of the legal order is nothing

other than the tying down of a vicious beast with chains and ropes so that it is unable to bite and tear people apart—which according to its nature, it would definitely like to do.

By contrast, a tame and gentle animal does not need to be tied down. It is harmless and so needs no restraints.

Without this divinely established legal order one human being would devour the other. For the whole world is evil and there is not even one among a thousand who is a true Christian.

As a result, no one would be able to have a wife and child, to eat, or to serve God. The world would be utter devastation.

This is why God has instituted the two governments:

***This is why God has
instituted the two
governments***

The spiritual government and the worldly government. The spiritual government creates Christians and good people by the Holy Spirit under Christ. The worldly government resists non-Christians and evil people so that they must live an outwardly peaceful and quiet life against their will.

This is how Paul explains the worldly government—the legal order with its authority—when he says in Romans 13:3, “It is not given to terrify good works but evil works.” And Peter says in 1 Peter 2:14: “It is given to execute vengeance against the evil.”

Now if someone wanted to govern the world only according to the gospel and so abolish the legal order with its authority, insisting that since everyone is baptized and a Christian and lives by the gospel they do not need the legal

order or its authority, what would that person accomplish? He would remove the ropes and chains from the vicious beasts, allowing them to tear everyone into pieces.

Of course, he would claim that such vicious beasts are, in fact, delicate, tame, and gentle pets. My own wounds, however, would tell a different story!

This is the way evil people abuse the freedom of the gospel while claiming to be Christians. Even while they are doing evil, they continue to insist that as Christians they are not subject to any legal order or authority—as some already now foolishly claim.

***Evil people abuse
the freedom of
the gospel***

One would have to say to them: “It is true that Christians are not subject to, and do not need, any legal order or authority for their own sakes. But before you start governing the world in a Christian way by the gospel—which you will never accomplish—first see to it that the world is filled with true Christians.”

For the world and its majority are, and remain, non-Christians—even if they are all baptized and are called Christians. But the true Christians live far away from each other, as the saying goes.

This is why it is impossible for a Christian government to extend over the entire world. Or even over one country. Or a significant number of people. There are always more evil people than good people.

So what would trying to govern the entire world, or even one country, by the gospel, actually be like? It would be like a shepherd who would put his sheep into a barn with

wolves, lions and eagles and then say to them: “Go ahead and feed yourselves. Be kind and good to each other. The barn is open. There is enough food. There is no need to fear dogs and clubs.”

In this situation, the sheep would certainly remain peaceful and allow themselves to be shepherded and governed. But they would not live long. Nor would any animal remain.

This is why you must diligently distinguish between these two governments and allow both to remain. The one government creates good. The other government resists evil and so establishes outward peace.

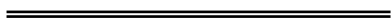
Neither one by itself is enough in this world. For no one can become good by means of the worldly government without also Christ’s divine government.

Accordingly, Christ’s government does not include all people. Christians are always in the minority as they live among the non-Christians.

And where worldly government or law governs by itself alone, there must be sheer hypocrisy. Even if the law consisted of God’s commandments.

For without the Holy Spirit in the heart, no one becomes truly good. Even if he does the best of works.

And where a Christian government governs a country and its people by itself alone, there evil becomes unbridled and all sorts of abuse occurs. The world cannot accept or understand such a Christian government.



1. Who belongs to the kingdom of the world?
2. Why does God place such people under the law?

3. What is the purpose of God's spiritual government?
4. What is the purpose of the worldly government?
5. Why is it impossible for a Christian government to extend over the entire world?
6. So why make the distinction between two governments?

5

CHRISTIANS ARE GOVERNED SOLELY BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now you can properly understand the words of Christ, mentioned above, from Matthew 5:39, that is, that Christians should not file lawsuits nor exercise worldly authority among themselves. Christ is saying these things only to his beloved Christians.

They are also the only ones who accept these words of Christ and act accordingly. They do not turn them into mere advice as do the theologians in Rome. Instead, such Christians are so natured in their hearts by the Spirit that they do evil to no one. And they willingly put up with the evil done by everyone.

Now, if the whole world were Christian, then these words of Christ would concern the whole world. And the whole world would put these words into action.

But now since the world is not Christian, these words of Christ do not concern the world. And the world does not accept them.

Rather, the world belongs under the other government where one outwardly forces and urges the non-Christians to keep the peace and do good.

This is also why Christ did not institute a legal order and authority within the world. And He did not establish such things in his kingdom.

***Christ rules by
means of his Holy
Spirit alone***

For Christ is a King over Christians and rules without law. Christ rules by means of his Holy Spirit alone.

And although he confirmed the authority of the legal order of the world, he did not use it. For the authority of the legal order of the world does not advance Christ's kingdom in which there are only good people.

This is also why David was not allowed to build the temple in Jerusalem. He had shed too much blood as he wielded the authority of the legal order of the world.

While this was not wrong, David could therefore not prefigure Christ. For Christ would establish his kingdom of peace without the use of the authority of the legal order of the world.

That is why Solomon had to build the temple. In English his name means "peaceful". His peaceful kingdom pointed

to the true peaceful kingdom of Christ, who is the true Solomon.

Likewise, no iron tool was heard when the temple was built, says 1 Kings 6:7. This indicates that Christ would have a willing people, without coercion and force, without a worldly legal order and authority.

This is what the prophets mean, Psalm 110:3, “Your people will be the willing ones,” and Isaiah 11:9: “They will neither kill nor hurt on my entire holy mountain.” And Isaiah 2:4: “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into sickles. And no one will lift a sword against the other, and no one will occupy himself with fighting.”

If you wanted to apply these and similar verses to all people over whom Christ’s name is pronounced, you would utterly confuse the Scriptures. Rather, these verses refer only to the true Christians who certainly deal with each other accordingly.

***These verses apply
only to the true
Christians***

-
1. Does a Christian willingly put up with evil?
 2. With what does Christ rule his kingdom?
 3. Does Christ use worldly authority to advance his kingdom?
 4. Why couldn’t David be an example of the Christ to come?
 5. Why weren’t iron tools heard when the temple in Jerusalem was built?

6

SHOULD CHRISTIANS OBEY WORLDLY GOVERNMENT?

So if Christians do not need the legal order of the world or its authority, why does Paul say in Romans 13:1 to all Christians: “Let everyone be subject to the authority and government”? And why does St. Peter say in 1 Peter 2:13: “Be subject to every human order”?

The answer is worth stating again: Christians do not need a legal order or authority among and for themselves. They do not need it and so have no use for it.

But a true Christian on earth does not live for himself. He lives for his neighbor and serves him.

So according to the nature of his Spirit, a Christian

does that which he himself does not need to do, but which is useful and necessary for his neighbor. Since the authority of the worldly legal order is of great benefit for the entire world to keep peace, punish sin, and resist evil, a Christian submits most willingly to the authority of the government.

A true Christian on earth does not live for himself

A Christian pays taxes, honors the government, serves, helps, and does everything he can that is beneficial to the authority. Why? So that the government remains effective and honored and feared.

Again, a Christian does not need the government for himself. But he looks to what is useful and beneficial for others, as Paul teaches in Romans 13:7. A Christian does all other works of love—which he himself does not need—for the same reason.

So a Christian does not visit the sick in order to become healthy. And a Christian does not feed others because he himself is hungry.

Similarly a Christian does not serve the government because he needs it. But because others need to be protected by it so that the general expression of evil does not become worse.

And since government is so beneficial to the world, the service of a Christian does not put him at a disadvantage. If he did not render this service, he would not be acting like a Christian.

He would also be acting against love. He would set a bad example for others, especially non-Christians, who would

rather not put up with any government at all.

This would be shameful to the gospel. It would be as if the gospel taught rebellion and created obstinate people who did not want to be useful to or serve anyone—although the gospel turns a Christian into everyone’s servant.

So even though he did not need the government, Christ paid the tax in Matthew 17:27 to avoid giving offense. This is also what you see in Christ’s words mentioned above from Matthew 5:39. There Christ clearly teaches that Christians should not have worldly authority or legal order among each other.

***Christ paid
the tax***

But Christ does not prohibit Christians from serving and being subject to those who bear worldly authority within the legal order. Rather, because you do not need it, and should not have it, you should serve those who lack your understanding and still need worldly authority.

Even if you yourself do not need your enemy to be punished, your weak neighbor does. You are to help your neighbor so that he may have peace and have his enemies subdued.

This cannot be done unless the authority and legal order are kept in honor and fear. Christ does not say: You are not to serve and be subject to the authority. He rather says: “You are not to resist evil.” Or in other words: “Let your attitude be such that you put up with everything so that you do not need the authority to help and serve you or to be useful and necessary to you.

Instead, help and serve the authority and be useful and indispensable to it. I want you to be better and much too

noble to need the authority. Rather, the authority should need your help.”

1. So why are Christians to obey worldly governments?
2. What is the benefit of the authority of the legal order?
3. Does a Christian serve the government because he needs it?
4. Into what does the Gospel turn a Christian?
5. So can a Christian serve and be subject to authority?

7

CAN CHRISTIANS WORK IN GOVERNMENT?

So can a Christian use the authority of the worldly legal order to punish evil? This question arises because Christ's words that you are not to resist evil people are so plain, and so simple, that the papal theologians have relegated them to be nothing more than good advice.

The answer? Two points have already been made: The first is that the authority of worldly legal order cannot be wielded among Christians. Why? They do not need it.

So this question really pertains to those who are not Christians. Whether the authority of a worldly legal order can be wielded among non-Christians in a Christian

manner.

The second point? A Christian is required to serve the authority of the worldly legal order and to support it with his body, possessions, honor, and soul. It is a work that he himself does not need. But it is very useful and necessary for his neighbor as well as the world at large.

***A Christian is
required to serve
the authority***

Therefore, when you see there is a need for prison guards, bailiffs, judges, mayors and governors, and you have the ability to fill that need, you should step forward and apply for the positions. Otherwise, that necessary authority will be despised, grow weak, or even cease to exist. For the world cannot function without the authority of the legal order.

So the reason you can work in government as a Christian is that you would be employed by someone else and do works which do not benefit your own possessions and honor, but only those works that would benefit your neighbor.

What is more, you would not serve with the intention of avenging yourself. Or to repay evil with evil. But you would serve within the government for your neighbor's good and to maintain security and peace for others.

You yourself, however, would stick to the gospel and follow Christ's word that if the matter had to do with you and your cause, you would gladly let someone strike you on your cheek. And take your shirt as well as your coat.

This is how both kingdoms are in perfect harmony with each other. How you satisfy the demands of both God's

kingdom and the kingdom of the world outwardly and inwardly. How you put up with evil and injustice while at the same time punish evil and injustice. How you do not resist evil while resisting it.

How do you not resist evil while resisting it?

In the first case, you look to yourself and your possessions. In the second case, you look to your neighbor and his possessions.

As far as you and your possessions are concerned, as a true Christian, you follow the gospel and put up with injustice towards your person. As far as your neighbor and his possessions are concerned, you serve him in love and do not put up with any injustice concerning him.

The gospel does not prohibit this. In fact, it commands it.

The saints such as Adam and his offspring have used the sword in this way from the very beginning of the world. Abraham, although he was a man of the gospel through and through, used the sword when he rescued Lot, his nephew, and defeated the four kings, Genesis 14:14-15.

Likewise Samuel, the holy prophet, killed King Agag in 1 Samuel 15:33, and Elijah killed the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:40. Moses, Joshua, the Israelites, Samson, David, and all kings and princes in the Old Testament did this as well. Also Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, and Joseph in Egypt, and so forth.

-
1. So can a Christian work in government?
 2. For what purpose would a Christian do so?

3. How does a Christian simultaneously resist and not resist evil?
4. Have the saints of God ever enforced the law?
5. What are some examples from the Old Testament?

8

IS THE OLD TESTAMENT STILL IN FORCE?

Now some may note that Old Testament has been abolished. And since it is no longer in force it cannot be used to provide such examples for Christians.

My answer? That is not true.

For speaking of the people of the Old Testament, St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4: “They ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink as we did from the rock that is Christ.” That means: They had the same Spirit and faith in Christ as we have. They were Christians just like we are.

Therefore, where they did right, all Christians do right.

From the beginning of the world until the end, time and outward change cause no divisions among Christians.

It is also not true that the Old Testament has been abolished so that a person no longer needs to abide by it. Or that those who abide by it do wrong, as St. Jerome and others falsely taught.

Rather, the Old Testament is abolished in such a way that you are free to do it. Or not to do it. And it is no longer absolutely necessary to do it as it was at the time.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 6 that “neither foreskin nor circumcision is something, but a new creature in Christ.”

That means it is not a sin to have a foreskin, as the Jews thought. And it is also not a sin to be circumcised as the Gentiles thought. Rather, both are left free. And it is good when you do so without thinking that you become good or are saved by doing either.

***Everything is free
and good to do***

This is how it is with all other parts of the Old Testament. It is not wrong to leave them undone. It is also not wrong to do them. Rather, everything is free and

good to do. And to leave undone.

Indeed, if it were necessary and useful for your neighbor’s salvation you would have to keep them all. For each must do what is necessary and useful for his neighbor—be it from the Old or New Testament, be it a Jewish or Gentile thing. So Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

Love flows through all. And above all. And only looks to what is useful and necessary for others—whether it is

old or new.

Therefore, the examples of the sword from the Old Testament are also free for you to follow or not—unless you see that your neighbor needs the sword. In that case, love constrains you to do what is necessary.

Otherwise, we are free, and it is not necessary to do or not do. Just be careful that you do not think that by doing or not doing you become good or saved. For it is because of their works that the Jews became arrogant.

Rather, leave such becoming good and being saved to faith. It makes you a new creature without any works.

The same holds true throughout the New Testament. Exemplary is John the Baptist, Luke 3:14, who, without a doubt, had to witness to, model, and teach Christ. In other words, his entire doctrine belongs to the New Testament and is about the gospel.

He was the one who was to bring to Christ a perfect people. He is the one who confirms the office of those soldiers saying: “Be satisfied with your pay.”

Now, if it had not been Christian to wield the sword, John the Baptist would have rebuked the soldiers and commanded them to relinquish both their weapons and salaries. Otherwise he would not have properly taught them to be Christians.

***He is the one who
confirms the office of
those soldiers***

Similarly, St. Peter, in Acts 10:34-35, while preaching Christ to Cornelius, did not command that he give up his office—which Peter should have done if Cornelius’ office had gotten in the way of being a Christian. Moreover, the

Holy Spirit came over Cornelius before his baptism, and St. Luke praises him as a good man before St. Peter's sermon, and does not criticize him for being a captain of soldiers serving the Gentile emperor. Now, it is only right that we do not criticize and leave alone what the Holy Spirit left alone without criticism.

We see a similar example in the African Eunuch in Acts 8:39, whom Philip the Evangelist converts and baptizes. And whom Philip allows to remain in his office and return home. Although the Eunuch could not have been such a powerful officer for the queen in Africa without the sword.

It was the same way with the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, Acts 13:7, 12, whom St. Paul converted while allowing him to remain a proconsul in charge of Gentiles. Many holy martyrs did likewise, who—obedient to the Gentile Roman emperors—went to battle under their command. Without a doubt they also killed people in order to protect the populace, as is written of Saints Maurice (d. 287), Achatius (d. 303), Gereon (d. 304), and many others under the emperor Julian.

***The authority
does not bear the
sword in vain***

Additionally, there is the clear, powerful text of St. Paul in Romans 13, where he says: "The authority is ordained by God." Likewise: "The authority does not bear the sword in vain; it is God's servant for your benefit, an avenger against those who do evil."

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1. Has the Old Testament been abolished?

2. Did the people in Old Testament times have the same Christ and Spirit as we do today?
3. What does it mean that we are free to do or not to do the Old Testament practices?
4. What does love look to?
5. How did John the Baptist confirm the office of soldier?
6. Did Peter command that Cornelius leave his government post after becoming a Christian?

9

CHRISTIANS CAN USE GOD'S CREATION

So let's not be so blasphemous as to say that a Christian may not use what is God's proper work, order, and created thing. Otherwise we would also have to say that a Christian should not eat, or drink or get married. For these too are also God's works and orders.

So if it is God's work and created thing, it is good. In fact, it is so good that everyone may use it in a Christian and blessed manner, as St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:4: "Every creature of God is good and not to be rejected for those who believe

***If it is God's work
and created
thing, it is good***

and know the truth.”

But the “creatures of God” are not just eating and drinking, clothing and shoes. They also include authority and subjection, protection and punishment.

In sum, because Paul says here in Romans 13:1 that “the authority is God’s servant,” one must allow it to be of use not just for the Gentiles, but for all people. What does “it is God’s servant” mean other than that the authority has the nature that one can serve God by exercising it?

It would be said in an unchristian manner if there were a service of God which a Christian could not or should not do. For such a service of God is carried out by no one more fittingly than by Christians.

And it would be good and even ideal if all princes were true Christians because the sword and authority, as a peculiar service of God, is proper for Christians above all others on earth.

This is why you should protect the sword or the authority just as you protect the institution of marriage, or farming, or any other craft which also has been instituted by

***A man can serve
God also in
authority***

God. Just as a man can serve God in marriage, or by farming, or by being a craftsman for the benefit of his neighbor—and has to serve God in this way if his neighbor has need of it—so a man can serve God also in authority and should serve God in this way if the neighbor’s need requires it.

Those who punish evil and protect good are God’s servants and craftsmen. But let it be free if it is not necessary,

just as getting married and farming are free where they are not necessary.

1. Can a Christian use God's proper work and order and created things?
2. What are some examples of such work and order of God?
3. What is the relation of authority to God?
4. Is there a service of God that a Christian could not or should not do?
5. How is authority related to marriage, farming, and other crafts?

10

CHRIST DID NOT USE THE SWORD

Understandably some may ask: Why did Christ and the apostles not use the sword? Answer: Tell me, why did Christ also not get married or become a shoemaker or tailor? Should an institution or office not be good just because Christ did not occupy it? Where would all institutions and offices remain besides the preaching office which alone he carried out?

Christ carried out his office and his position. But he did not reject anyone else's position by doing so. It was not necessary for Christ to use the sword, because he carried out that office by which his kingdom is governed and which

properly serves his kingdom.

It does not pertain to his kingdom that Christ be married, or be a shoemaker, or tailor, or farmer, or prince, or executioner, or bailiff. Likewise, neither sword nor the worldly legal order pertain to his kingdom. Only God's word and Spirit. This is how those who belong to Christ are governed inwardly.

***It was not
necessary for Christ
to use the sword***

Christ carried out this office in the past, and he still carries it out today, always giving the Spirit and God's word. And the apostles and all spiritual leaders had to succeed him in this office. For the spiritual sword, God's word, keeps them so busy doing their craft properly that they would have to let the worldly sword go idle and leave it to others who do not have to preach. Although it is not contrary to their position to use the sword, as has been said—because each must mind his business.

Therefore, although Christ did not use or teach the sword, it is enough that he did not prohibit it, but rather confirmed it. Just as it is enough that he did not abolish the institution of marriage but confirmed it—although he neither married nor taught anything about married life.

Christ was required to prove himself with the kind of works that served his kingdom alone. Otherwise, a reason, and necessary example, would have been taken from his actions to teach and to believe that Christ's kingdom could not remain without marriage and sword and similar external matters—for Christ's examples are necessarily powerful. God's kingdom, however, remains only by means of God's

word and Spirit.

Preaching this word was, and had to be, Christ's proper office, as that of the supreme King in that kingdom. But as now not all Christians have that same office—although they may have it—it is fair that they have another outward office by which they also may serve God.

From all this follows the proper understanding of Christ's words in Matthew 5:39: "You shall not resist evil" etc. A Christian is to have the attitude that he puts up with all evil and injustice, does not avenge himself, does not protect himself in court, and that he never needs worldly authority and order for himself.

But for others, a Christian may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help, and do what he can in this regard. Accordingly, the worldly authority should help and protect him, either by itself, or upon the request of others, but without his own complaint, petition, or request.

***The worldly authority
should help and
protect him***

If the authority does not do that, he should allow himself to be tortured and abused. And not resist any evil, as Christ's words say.

And you can be certain that this teaching of Christ is not merely advice for the perfect, as the papal theologians blaspheme and lie, but a common, strict commandment for all Christians. This is how you know that they are utter heathen under the Christian name who avenge themselves and who litigate and argue for their possessions and honor in court.

I tell you, this will not change. And do not be concerned about the masses and what everybody does because there are few Christians on earth—doubt this not. Moreover, God’s word is different than what everybody does.

1. Is any institution or office invalid because Christ did not take part in them?
2. What did Christ use to govern His kingdom?
3. Does Christ still govern His kingdom in the same way?
4. What was Christ’s proper office?
5. When may and should a Christian seek vengeance?
6. Is God’s Word different than what everybody does?

11

CHRIST DID NOT ABOLISH THE LAW

Christ obviously did not abolish the law when he said: “You have heard that it was previously said: Eye for eye, but I tell you: You are not to resist any evil” etc. Rather, Christ interprets the meaning of the law as it should be understood.

It is as if Christ wanted to say: “You Jews think that it is properly done before God if you reclaim what is yours by means of the authority. And you rely on the fact that Moses said: ‘An eye for an eye, etc.’ But I tell you that Moses imposed such a law on those who do evil and do not belong to God’s kingdom.”

Moses did that so that they would not avenge themselves or do even worse. They would instead be forced by such an external legal order not to do evil things. So they had to be subjected to the authority of such an established legal order and government.

***You neither need,
nor seek, such
authority***

You, however, are to have the attitude that you neither need, nor seek, such authority. Although worldly government must have the law according to which it judges non-Christians, and although you may also use the law to judge others according to it, you should neither seek nor use it for yourselves and for your cause.

For you have the kingdom of heaven. You should therefore leave the kingdom of the earth to those who take it from you.

Here you see how Christ does not interpret his words to mean that he somehow removes the law of Moses. Nor prohibits worldly authority. Rather, Christ removes those who are his so that they might not use it for themselves.

Christians should leave it for the non-Christians, whom Christians may serve with the legal order of the non-Christians. For non-Christians exist, and no one can make anyone a Christian by force.

The fact that Christ's words apply only to those who are his is established when Christ later says, Matthew 5:44: "They shall love their enemies and be perfect as their heavenly Father." But whoever loves his enemies and is perfect, leaves the law alone and does not use it to demand an eye for an eye.

But such a Christian does not resist the non-Christians who do not want to love their enemies but want to use the law. In fact, the Christian works in such a way so that the law catches the evil lest they do what is worse.

In this way, I think, Christ's word is united with the verses that institute worldly authority, so that the meaning is as follows: No Christian should wield or invoke worldly authority for himself and his cause. But he may and should wield and invoke it for somebody else in order to regulate evil and protect goodness.

It is just as God says in the same chapter, Matthew 5:35, 37: "A Christian should not swear, but his word should be yes, yes, no, no." That is, a Christian should not swear for himself and out of his own will and desire.

But if swearing is required by need, benefit, and salvation, or God's honor, a Christian should do it. As in this case, a Christian uses forbidden swearing to serve somebody else—just as he uses the forbidden worldly authority to serve somebody else.

***A Christian uses
forbidden swearing to
serve somebody else***

Similarly Christ and Paul swear frequently to make their teaching and testimony useful and trustworthy for the people. One may likewise do so in alliances and contracts, etc. Psalm 63:11 talks about this: "Those who swear by his name are praised."

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1. Upon whom did Moses impose the law?
 2. Since Christians have the kingdom of heaven, do they

need the kingdom of the earth?

3. Do Christ's words apply only to those who are His?
4. Should a Christian wield or invoke governmental authority for himself?
5. When should a Christian swear?

12

CAN CHRISTIANS USE WORLDLY AUTHORITY TO PUNISH EVIL?

So can court officers, prison guards, jurists, lawyers, and other public officials be Christians and live daily in a state of grace? The answer is that if the authority and the sword are a service of God—as demonstrated above—everything that is necessary for that authority must also be a service of God.

For there must be someone who catches criminals, prosecutes them, interrogates them and punishes them. There must also be someone who protects the innocent, defends

***There must be
someone who
catches criminals***

them, excuses them, and rescues them.

Therefore, if Christians do such work thinking that they are not doing so for their own advantage, but only to help to administer the legal order and authority to control evil, then it is not dangerous for them. They may fulfill their duties as somebody else may use a craft and earn their living doing so.

***Love of our
neighbor does not
seek its own***

As it has been said, the love of our neighbor does not seek its own. It also does not consider whether something being done is of great importance or not. But only whether it is useful and necessary for our neighbor or community.

The question should then be asked: May I not use worldly authority for myself and my cause, knowing that I do not seek what is mine, but in order to punish evil? Answer: Such a miracle is not impossible. But very rare and dangerous.

Where there is plenty of Spirit, it may well happen. We read about Samson in Judges 15:11 saying: "I have done to them as they did to me," although it says in Proverbs 24:29: "Do not say: I will do to him as he has done to me;" and in Proverbs 20:22 it says: "Do not say: I will pay him back his evil deed."

But Samson was called by God to harass the Philistines and to rescue the Israelites. Now, although he took them as a reason to present his cause, he did not do it to avenge himself or to seek his own, but to serve others and to punish the Philistines.

But no one will follow this example unless he is a true Christian. And full of the Spirit.

If reason tries to do this as well, it will certainly allege that it does not want to seek its own. But this will be fundamentally wrong because it is impossible without grace.

So first become like Samson. Then you can also act like Samson.



1. What does a love for our neighbor ultimately seek?
2. Shouldn't a Christian simply punish evil when he sees it?
3. Why did Samson harass the Philistines?
4. Can reason be used to figure out when a Christian can act like Samson?
5. What must a Christian do before trying to act like Samson?

13

WHAT IF GOVERNMENT ASSUMES TOO MUCH AUTHORITY?

So we come to the main reason for this book. Now that we have learned that worldly government must exist on earth, and how that government should be used in a Christian and blessed way, we now must learn how long its arm should be. And how far its hand should reach. Otherwise the authority of the government will extend too far and interfere with God in his kingdom and government.

And this is very necessary to know. For if one gives worldly government too much leeway the damage done will be horrific and unbearable. Similarly, when government is given too little leeway, such damage also occurs.

In the latter case, it punishes too little. In the former, it punishes too much. Yet it is more bearable that it sin on the side of punishing too little than that it sin on the side of punishing too much.

It is always better to let a criminal live than to allow an innocent person to be killed. For the world certainly has, and must have, criminals. But there are only a very few good people.

So it must first be noted that the two parts of Adam's children—one part being in God's kingdom under Christ, the other being in the world under the government—have two kinds of laws. Every kingdom must have its own laws and legal order. And without law no kingdom or government can remain—as experience itself teaches.

Worldly government has laws that reach no farther than our bodies and possessions. That is, what is outward on earth.

God cannot, and will not, however, let anyone beside himself govern the soul. So when worldly authority presumes to make laws for the soul, it interferes with God's government and does nothing but seduce and destroy souls.

We want to make this so clear that it is understood by everyone. Our government and church officials will then see how foolish it is to try to force people to believe this or that by their rules and regulations.

For when you impose a human law on the soul, requiring it to believe one thing or another, as a specific human being demands, God's word is certainly not present.

But if God's word is not present, it is uncertain whether God wants such a belief. For if God does not command

something, you cannot be certain whether it pleases him.

In fact, you can be certain that it does not please God because God wants our faith to be built only on his divine word alone, as he says in Matthew 16:18: “I want to build my church on this rock.” And in John 10:27, 5, he says: “My sheep hear my voice and know me, but they do not hear the voice of strangers, but flee from them.”

For if God does not command something, you cannot be certain whether it pleases him

Consequently, worldly government forces souls into eternal death with such blasphemous commands, because it forces them to believe something as rightly and certainly pleasing to God which is uncertain. Better said: It is certain that it displeases God, because no clear word of God is present.

Those who believe as true what is actually untrue, or uncertain, deny the truth that is God himself. They therefore believe in lies and errors, holding as true that which is untrue.

This is why it is utter folly when it is commanded that the church, the fathers of the church, and the councils of the church, be believed, when no word of God supports what is commanded. It is actually the apostles of Satan who command this, and not the church. For the church commands only what she certainly knows to be God’s word, as St. Peter says in 1 Peter 4:11: “Let him who speaks, speak God’s word.”

But they will never manage to prove that the pronounce-

ments of the councils are God's word. It is even more foolish to say that this or that belief should be adopted because it is what the kings and princes and the masses believe.

My friends, we are not baptized into kings, princes, or the masses, but into Christ and God himself. We are also not called "kings," "princes," or "masses." We are called Christians.

So no one should and can command the soul, unless he knows how to show the soul the way to heaven. No human being can do this. Only God can do this. Therefore, nothing but God's word should be taught and accepted in matters concerning the soul's salvation.

***No human being
can kill a soul or
make it alive***

Indeed, even though they are coarse fools, they still must confess that they have no power over the soul, because no human being can kill a soul or make it alive. Or lead it to heaven or hell.

And if they do not want to believe us on this point, Christ's own testimony will be sufficient enough, when he says in Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body and then have nothing left to do; but fear him who, after he kills the body, has power to condemn into hell."

I think that these words clearly take the soul out of all human hands and place it under God's authority alone.

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1. Can a government assume too much authority?
 2. Which is worse: Too much authority or not enough?

3. Can a government exist without law?
4. When does worldly government interfere with God's government?
5. How do we know something is pleasing to God?
6. Who is the only one who can command the soul?

14

WORLDLY GOVERNMENT GOVERNS WORLDLY MATTERS

How intelligent must the mind be that makes laws to govern something over which it has no authority? Who would not consider a person to be mad, who, on a whim, commanded the moon to shine?

How much sense would it make if the city council of Wittenberg wanted to make laws for the citizens of Leipzig, or vice versa? One would certainly respond by sending them medicine so that they could clear their minds and combat their colds.

Nonetheless, our emperor and wise princes still pursue this course of action. They allow themselves to be led down

this path by church officials and theologians of the pope—so the blind are leading the blind. For they command that their subjects believe without God’s word, that is, according to their whim. And they still want to be called Christian princes—which God may prevent!

So simply put: Worldly government should and may act only where it can see, know, judge, assess, do, and make changes. What judge would blindly adjudicate the things he neither hears nor sees?

Now tell me, how can a human being see, know, judge, assess, and change the human heart? Only God can do this, as Psalm 7:9 says: “God searches the minds and hearts.”

***“God knows
the heart”
Acts 15:8***

And in verse 8 it says: “The Lord is judge over the people.” And in Acts 15:8 it says: “God knows the heart.” And in Jeremiah 17:9-10, he says: “Evil and inscrutable is the human heart—who may know it? I, the Lord, search the minds and hearts.”

A court should and must be certain if it is to render judgment and bring everything to the light of day. But the thoughts and reasoning of the soul can be known only to God.

This is why it is in vain, and impossible, to command or coerce someone to believe this or that by force. A different approach is needed. Force cannot do it.

And I marvel at those great fools because they themselves say: “The church does not judge about hidden matters.” But if by its spiritual government the church rules only over worldly matters, why is it that the worldly government dares madly to judge and direct secret, spiritual, and

hidden matters such as faith?

Whatever the case may be, everyone believes at his own risk. And everyone must see to it himself that he believes the right thing.

***Everyone
believes at his
own risk***

Just as no one can go to hell or heaven for me, so no one can believe or not believe for me. And just as no one can open or close heaven or hell for me, so also can no one force me to believe or not to believe.

What you believe or not believe is a matter of your conscience. But this does not diminish worldly authority.

Worldly government should therefore be content and mind its own business. It should let the people believe as they want and will and coerce no one in this matter. Faith is a free work that cannot be coerced. In fact, it is a divine work in the Spirit that cannot be coerced or created by outward force.

Hence the common expression which is also found in Augustine: "One can and should not force anyone to believe."

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1. What things should worldly government govern?
 2. Who alone can judge and change hearts?
 3. Who is the only one who knows the thoughts of the soul?
 4. Over what specifically does the Church with its spiritual government rule?

5. What does it mean that “everyone believes at his own risk”?

15

LAWS CAN ONLY BE FOLLOWED OUTWARDLY

Those blind, miserable, worldly authorities do not see how vain and impossible a matter it is to undertake. For no matter how forcefully they command, no matter how much they rage, they cannot get the people to do more than obey them with their mouths and hands.

For even if worldly authorities did everything they could possibly do, they would be unable to direct the heart. So the truth of the common expression: “Thoughts cannot be taxed.”¹

¹This expression was common already in the 16th century based on ancient Roman law. J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 32, s.v. “zollfrei.”

What are those worldly authorities trying to do by forcing people to believe in their hearts? They know it is impossible to do! They are forcing weak consciences to lie, deny, and to say what they do not believe in their hearts.

Those authorities then burden themselves with the horrible sins of other people. For all the lies and false confessions given by such weak consciences become the responsibility of the one who brings them about by force.

It would be much easier for them to leave their subjects alone in their error—if they were erring—than to force them to lie and to say something they do not believe in their hearts. It is also not right to fend off evil with something that is worse.

Why does God afflict us with such a horrible assault of worldly officials?

And why does God afflict us with such a horrible assault of worldly officials? I will tell you. God has confused their minds and wants to make an end of them. The same is true when it comes to the leaders of the

church.

For those ungracious church leaders—the pope and the bishops—are supposed to be pastors and preach God’s word. But they do not do this.

Instead, they have become worldly officials and rule by laws that only concern the body and property. They have brought about a fine change: They are supposed to rule the soul inwardly by God’s word. But they actually rule castles, cities, lands, and people outwardly, while at the same time, they torture souls with unspeakable cruelty.

Similarly, those government officials are supposed to rule land and people outwardly. But they do not do this.

They do nothing but torture and inflict suffering. One tax is heaped upon another. Interest rates are increased. They release their ravenous officials here and there, while neither justice, loyalty, nor truth are found among them.

***Neither justice, loyalty,
nor truth are found
among them***

They act in a way that would not be tolerated even among criminals. Their worldly government is in a state of chaos.

The government of the spiritual tyrants is as well. This is why God has also confused their minds, so that they want to go ahead senselessly and rule spiritually over souls in the same way as the spiritual tyrants want to rule in a worldly manner over bodies.

In this way, they confidently take upon themselves the sins of others as well as the hatred of God and all people. They will not stop until they and their bishops, priests, and monks are broken into pieces, one villain after the other.

But later they will blame it all on the gospel! Instead of confessing their sins, they will blaspheme God and say that our preaching has done this.

Their perverse malice has deserved this and still deserves this without end. The ancient Romans were doing the same thing when they were destroyed.

So there you have God's counsel regarding the high and mighty. But they themselves are not to believe this lest such serious counsel of God be prevented by their repentance.

1. Can people be forced to believe something?
2. What does "thoughts are tax free" mean?
3. What had the pope and bishops become?
4. How were the princes actually ruling their people?
5. In what way were the princes acting?

16

ONLY GOD HAS AUTHORITY OVER THE SOUL

So what about what Paul said in Romans 13:1 that “Every soul should be subject to the authority and government”? And what about what Peter says in 1 Peter 2:13 that “We should be subject to all human order”?

These are good questions because those verses support my position. St. Paul talks about the government and its authority. And as you have heard, no one can have authority over the soul except God. So St. Paul cannot be talking about an obedience beyond the reach of worldly authority.

So those verses do not address faith—as if worldly authority had the authority to command faith—but apply to

external goods. How they should be ordered and governed on earth.

Paul's words plainly and clearly support this position when he establishes the limit for both worldly authority and obedience to it by saying in Romans 13:7: "Give each his own, taxes to whom taxes are owed; customs to whom customs are owed; honor to whom honor is owed; fear to whom fear is owed."

It is obvious that worldly obedience concerns outward things such as taxes, customs, honor, and fear. Paul likewise says in verse 4: "The authority is not to be feared by good works, but only by evil works." Thereby he again limits worldly authority in that it is not to be in charge of faith or God's word but evil works.

***Worldly obedience
concerns outward
things such as taxes***

St. Peter does the same thing when he uses the expression "human order" in verse 13. Human order cannot extend over the soul and into heaven. It is limited to the earth and extends over the outward actions of the people toward each other. It is only there that human beings can see, know, judge, assess, punish, and rescue.

Christ himself also nicely distinguished and briefly summarized this when he said in Matthew 22:21: "Give the emperor what is the emperor's; and give God what is God's." Now, if the emperor's authority reached into God's kingdom and authority and there were no difference between the two, Christ should not have made a distinction between them.

The soul is not under the emperor's authority. He can

neither teach nor guide it. He can neither kill it nor make it alive. He can neither bind nor loose it. Neither judge nor assess it. Neither hold it nor let it go.

The emperor would be able to do these things if he had authority to command the soul and make laws for it. Instead, he is able to make laws only for the body, possessions, and honor, as those are under his authority.

Long ago, David summarized all this in the following short, excellent verse where he says in Psalm 115:16: "He has given the heaven to the heaven's Lord, but the earth he has given to the children of men." By this he means to say: A human being certainly has been given authority from God over what is on earth and belongs to the temporal, earthly kingdom. But what belongs to heaven and the eternal kingdom is under the heavenly Lord alone.

Moses also did not forget to address this issue. When he says in Genesis 1:26, "God said: Let us make human beings to rule over the fish in the water, the birds in the air," God gives only the outward government to human beings.

Summing up, they all mean what St. Peter says in Acts 5:29: "One must obey God more than men." By these words Peter clearly sets a limit to worldly authority. For if we were required to obey all the commands of worldly authority, it would be meaningless to say: One must obey God more than men.

Now, if a government official commands you to support the pope, to believe this or that, or to surrender religious books, you should say this: "It is not Lucifer's place to sit next to God. Dear government official, I must obey you with my body and possessions. Order me to do anything

within the scope of your authority on earth, and I will follow you. But if you command me to believe and to surrender religious books, I will not obey. Because in doing so, you are a tyrant and reach beyond your authority. You command where you have no authority or might, etc.”

If that government official then takes your possessions and punishes you for disobedience, blessed are you and thank God that you are worthy to suffer on account of God’s word. Just let that fool rage. He will surely meet his Judge. But if you do not object and give in to him so that he takes your faith, or the books, you have truly denied God.

Let me give an example of what I am talking about. In Meissen, Bavaria, Brandenburg, and other places the tyrants have issued a decree commanding that all copies of the New Testament should be surrendered to government officials. In this particular case, their subjects should not surrender a single page, not even one letter of the alphabet, lest they lose their eternal salvation.

For if you obey this decree, you surrender Christ into Herod’s hands. For the government officials are acting like murderers of Christ, like Herod.

You rather should put up with government agents searching your homes and forcefully taking from you books or possessions. You are not to resist blasphemy but put up with it—yet without approving of it, supporting it, or complying with it by taking a single step or lifting a single finger.

You are not to resist blasphemy but put up with it

Such tyrants act as government officials of the world should act. They are officials of the

worldly government, and the world is God's enemy. They therefore also must do what is contrary to God but in conformity to the world. If they don't, they'll still be governmental officials, but lose their honor in the world.

Therefore, do not be surprised if they rage against the gospel. They must do justice to their title and name.

You should know that a wise government official has been a rare bird from the beginning of the world. Rarer still has been a good government official.

Usually, government officials are the greatest fools or the worst villains on earth. This is why one must always expect the worst from them and little good: especially in divine matters that concern the soul's salvation. They are God's jailers and executioners. And his divine wrath uses them to punish evil and preserve outward peace.

***They are God's
jailers and
executioners***

Our God is a great Lord. This is why he also must have such noble, highly-born, rich executioners and bailiffs. This is also why he wants them to have great wealth, honor, and fear from everyone.

It pleases his divine will that we call his executioners "gracious lords," we bow before them, and are subject to them in all humility—so long as they do not extend their craft too far so that the executioners want to become shepherds.

Now, if a government official turns out to be wise, good, or a Christian, that is one of the great miracles and the most precious sign of divine grace over a country. For usually, things go as foretold in Isaiah 3:4: "I will give them

children as princes and babies shall be their lords.” And Hosea 13:11: “I will give you a king of wrath and take him away in disgrace.”

The world is too evil and not worthy that it should have many wise and good officials. Where there are frogs, there must be storks.

1. Who alone has authority over the soul?
2. What are the concerns of worldly obedience?
3. Over what has God given man authority?
4. Should the Christians in Meissen have handed over their Bibles to the government?
5. Why must worldly governments rage against the gospel?
6. What has been a “rare bird from the beginning of the world”?

17

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS WITHIN THE CHURCH

Now you may say at this point: “Worldly authority does not force me to believe. It only ensures outwardly that the people are not seduced by false doctrine. How else could we fend off those teaching falsely about Christ?”

This, of course, is what the church leaders should be doing. They, not government officials, have been given the office of marking who is teaching falsely about Christ.

False teaching is never to be fended off by outward force. A different approach is needed. Why? Dealing with false teaching about Christ is a different conflict and matter than those where worldly authority makes a difference.

God's word is to do battle here. If God's word does not prevail, worldly authority certainly will not prevail, even if it filled the world with blood.

***God's word is to
do battle here***

False teaching about Christ is a spiritual matter. False teaching cannot be killed by iron, burned by fire, or drowned in water. God's word alone overcomes it, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5: "Our weapons are not carnal, but mighty in God to destroy every counsel and power that rebels against the knowledge of God; and to take captive every thought to the service of Christ."

Moreover, faith and false teaching are strongest where they are fought by brute physical force without God's word. Why? People firmly believe that such force is not right. It is even contrary to what is right. For it is applied without God's word. And so it is simply brute physical force, as among the animals in the forest.

Even in worldly matters such force cannot be used unless injustice has first been properly established. How much more impossible is it to act in these lofty spiritual matters without justice and God's word?

Therefore see what fine, smart government officials they are! They want to combat heresy but by their approach they accomplish nothing but strengthen those who are teaching falsely. In so doing, they themselves become suspect and justify the false teachers!

If you want to combat false teaching, you must take the right approach, that above all, rips heresy out of hearts and makes people willing to turn their backs on it.

Physical force will not accomplish this. Rather, it will only strengthen heresy. And what would you gain if you strengthened heresy inwardly in the heart and only weakened it outwardly on the tongue by forcing people to lie?

But it is God's word that enlightens the hearts. And as a result, all heresies and errors fall out of the heart by themselves.

The prophet Isaiah foretold such destruction of heresy in Isaiah 11:4: "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and kill the godless with the breath of his lips." Here you see that it must happen by the mouth if the godless are to be killed and converted.

At the end of the day, such government officials and tyrants do not know that fighting against heresy is fighting against the devil who occupies the hearts with error,

as Paul says in Ephesians 6:12: "We do not battle against flesh and blood but against the spiritual malice, against the princes that rule this darkness," etc.

Therefore, as long as one does not repel the devil and drive him out of the heart, killing the bodies that house those hearts by sword or fire is for him the same as if I were to fight lightning with a piece of straw. Job has testified to all this sufficiently in Job 41:27, where he says how the devil regards iron as straw and fears no force on earth.

Experience confirms this. Even if you burned all Jews and heretics by force, none of them would be overcome or converted this way.

Yet the officials of this world are such that no one minds

***Fighting against
heresy is fighting
against the devil***

his own business. Consequently church leaders abandon the word of God as the means by which they rule souls. Instead, they insist that government officials obey them and so end up ruling by the sword.

Likewise, government officials do nothing about usury, theft, adultery, murder, and other evil works—while actually engaging in these works themselves. Additionally they threaten the leaders of the church with excommunication. Such government officials thereby turn things inside out: They rule the soul by force; and the body by letters.

The end result? Government officials rule in a spiritual way, while church leaders rule in a physical way.

What else does the devil need to do on earth besides play this game and hold this carnival with his people? These are our Christian officials who defend the faith and devour the Turks!

Indeed, they are wonderful men one can rely on. And they will certainly accomplish something by their intelligence: They will break their necks and bring calamity and misery over their lands and people.

I would give people so deceived this loyal advice: Beware of the short verse in Psalm 107:40: “He pours contempt on princes.” I swear to them by God, if government officials do not believe that this short verse applies to them, they are lost. Even if each of them individually were as mighty as the Turks, their huffing and raving will not help them.

The truth of this verse is already apparent as there are very few government officials who are not thought to be fools or villains. This is because they act like fools and villains. And the common man has come to his senses. And the plague

of government officials—which God calls contempt—is strong among the common people.

I am concerned that this contempt of government officials cannot be changed unless they act in a proper manner and begin to govern again with reason and without shenanigans. No one will, no one can, no one wants to put up with their tyranny and malice any longer.

Dear government officials, take note: God no longer wants to have this. These are no longer the good old days where you hunted and chased the people like beasts. Therefore, stop your blasphemy and violence and set your mind on acting rightly.

And let God's word make its way, as it will, as it must, as it should. You will not stop it.

***Let God's word
make its way***

If there is heresy, let it be overcome with God's word, as it should be. But if you frequently draw your sword, beware that there will not be someone who will command you—not in God's name—to put it back into its sheath.

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1. So who is to do battle against false doctrine?
 2. What are they to use in doing so?
 3. What does the devil use to occupy the heart?
 4. In anyone converted by physical force?
 5. What mistakes were the princes making?
 6. What mistakes were the church leaders making?

18

CAN CHRISTIANS BE GOVERNED?

So if there should be no worldly government or authority among Christians, how should they be governed outwardly? Shouldn't government remain even among Christians?

The answer is no. No government should be and can be among Christians. Christians are subject to each other. So Paul says in Romans 12:10, 16: "Let each consider the other his superior." And Peter says in 1 Peter 1:5: "Be subject to one another." Christ also wants this, when he says in Luke 14:10: "When you are invited to a wedding, go and sit down in the lowest place."

Among Christians, there is no superior except for

Christ himself. And what kind of government could there be where all are equal, having the same authority, power, possession, and honor? And where no one desires to be superior to the other but desires to be inferior to the other?

It would be impossible to establish a government among such people. It is contrary to nature to have superiors where no one wants to be, or can be, superior. But where such people are not, there are no true Christians.

***Their government is
not a government of
authority***

But what about church officials and pastors? Answer: Their government is not a government of authority, but an office of service.¹ They are no higher and better than other Christians.

This is also why church officials and pastors should not impose a law or commandment on others without their will and permission. Their governing is nothing other than proclaiming God's word in order to guide Christians and overcome false teaching.

One cannot govern Christians except by God's word. For Christians must be governed in faith, not by outward works.

But faith cannot come by any human word. Faith comes only by God's word, as St. Paul says in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, but hearing comes by God's word."

Those who do not believe are not Christians. They do not belong under Christ's kingdom but under the worldly kingdom where they are controlled and governed by the

¹ "Office of service" here translates "Dienst und Amt." Both *Dienst* and *Amt* mean "service." *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, s.v. "Amt." The Latin *officium*, from which the English "office" is derived, has "service" and "duty" among its meanings. Lewis-Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "officium."

sword and outward government.

Christians do all that is good freely without any coercion. They are satisfied with God's word for themselves. But I have written elsewhere about this often and much.

1. Must government remain even among Christians?
2. To whom are Christians subject?
3. Who is the only superior among Christians?
4. Is the government of church officials and pastors one of authority?
5. What is their governing nothing other than?
6. In what then must Christians be governed?

19

HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN OFFICIAL GOVERN?

In view of the actual extent of worldly government and its authority, the question now becomes how a government official should properly act. I ask this question for the sake of those government officials who would also like to be Christians, and who would like to enter eternal life. Admittedly there are very few of those.

Christ himself describes the manner of government officials when he says in Luke 22:25: “The worldly princes dominate their peoples as lords, and those who are supreme use violence.” This is because they think that when they are born or are elected lords, they are entitled to have others

serve them and to rule those who serve them with violence.

Now, those who want to be Christian officials in the world must truly abandon the opinion that they should be dictatorial as an official and act violently. For cursed and condemned is every life that is lived and pursued for one's own profit and benefit.

Cursed are all works that are not done in love

Cursed are all works that are not done in love. But works are done in love if they are not done for your own pleasure, benefit, honor, convenience, or salvation, but for the benefit, honor, and salvation of others.

This is why I do not want to talk about the worldly dealings and laws of government here. This field is vast, and there are already too many books on the law.

But if an official is no wiser than his lawyers, and has no better understanding than what is set forth in the books on law, that official will certainly govern according to the verse in Proverbs 28:16: "A prince who lacks understanding will oppress many with injustice."

No matter how good and equitable the laws are, they are useless in the face of necessity.¹ This is why a prince must have the law in his hand as firmly as his sword.

And he must decide by his own reason when and where the law must be used strictly. And when and where leniency must prevail.

In this way, reason should govern all laws and remain the highest law and the master of all laws. For the very same reason the head of a household, even after he sets the

¹ See the common expression "necessity knows no law." *E.g.*, LW 36:225.

schedule for work and meals for his servants and children, must retain control over this schedule.

Why? So he can change or alter it if his servants are sick, captive, delayed, deceived, or hindered in some other way. If he doesn't, he is forced to treat the sick and the healthy with the same strictness.

I say this lest anyone think that it is enough to follow the written law or the advice of the lawyers. There is more to governing than this.

How should a government official act if he is not that smart and must allow himself to be governed by lawyers and law books? This is why I said that the position of a government official is a dangerous position. For if such an official lacks the intelligence to rule both his advisors and the law, Solomon's warning from Ecclesiastes 10:16 will apply to him: "Woe to the land whose prince is a child."

***The position of a
government official is a
dangerous position***

Solomon also recognized this. This is why he despaired of all laws that Moses had prescribed for him by God and of all his princes and advisors. This is why Solomon turned to God himself and asked him for a wise heart to govern the people, 1 Kings 3:9.

A government official must follow this example, act in fear, and rely neither on dead books nor living minds. He should turn to God alone, pray to him without ceasing, and ask him for right reason above all books and teachers, in order to govern his subjects wisely.

This is why I do not know what laws to prescribe for a

I do not know what laws to prescribe for a government official

government official but only wish to instruct his heart, what attitude it should have, and how it should be well-versed in all laws, advice, judging, and dealings. If a government official acts in this way, God will certainly grant that he can carry out all laws, advice, and dealings in a good and godly manner.

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1. What opinion must a Christian official abandon?
 2. Which works done by man are cursed?
 3. Must a government official have a firm understanding of the law?
 4. What should govern all laws?
 5. Why is the position of prince a dangerous one?

20

A PREPARATION OF THE HEART

A government official must consider the citizens under him and properly prepare his heart. He does so when his every thought aims to be useful to those citizens and to be at their service.

It would not be right for him to think: “The land and the people are mine. I will do as I please.”

Instead, he should think: “I belong to the land and the people. I should do what is useful and good for them. I should not seek to have a glamorous lifestyle. Instead, I should seek to protect and defend my subjects with a beneficial peace.”

The government official should take a good look at Christ and say to himself: “Look, Christ, the supreme prince came and served me. He did not seek to gain power over me; or how he could gain possessions and honor from me. Instead, he beheld my misery and undertook everything so that I might have power, possessions, and honor in him and by him.”

The government official should take a good look at Christ

“So I will do likewise: I will not seek my advantage from the citizens. Rather, I will seek their advantage and will serve them accordingly in my office by protecting them, listening to them, and defending them. The only goal of my government will be to benefit them, not me.”

In this way, a government official would put power and government out of his heart and take on the needs of the citizens, treating their needs as his own. This is what Christ did for us (Philippians 2:3-8). And these are the actual works of Christian love.

At this point it could be asked: If this is what government officials should do, who would want to be a part of government? If they are to do these things, serving as a government official would be the most miserable job on earth. It would only be work, stress and disappointment.

What about perks? The free state dinners? Free travel? Free tickets to sporting events? VIP passes to entertainment and similar worldly joys?

Answer: We are not teaching how an official in worldly government should live, but how an official within worldly government should be a Christian so that he may enter

heaven. Who does not know that a government official is a rare thing in heaven?

I am also not writing in the hope that officials in worldly government will listen to what I have to say. Still, there might by one of them who would like to be a Christian. Who would like to know what he should do.

I am quite certain that God's word will not change to accommodate government officials. Rather, government officials must change to accommodate God's word.

It is enough for me to assert that it is not impossible for a government official to be a Christian, although it is rare and difficult. If their free travel, free tickets to sporting events and VIP passes to entertainment would not harm the citizens to which they are responsible, and they otherwise exercised their office toward them in love, God would not be so strict as to begrudge them such things.

***It is not impossible for
a government official
to be a Christian***

But it goes without saying that many a trip, sporting event and entertainment would have to be missed if they would use their office to serve and take care of their subjects.

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1. How does a government official properly prepare his heart to serve?
 2. How is a government official to be like Christ?
 3. What should be the goal of government?
 4. Should a government official change to accommodate

God's word?

5. So is it impossible for a government official to be a Christian?

21

ADVISORS ARE NOT TO BE DESPISED - OR TRUSTED

A government official must keep an eye on the high and the mighty of the country, that is, his advisors. His attitude toward them should be to despise no one. But also to trust no one. As God cannot tolerate either.

God once spoke through a donkey, Numbers 22:28. This is why no human being is to be despised, no matter how humble. But God has also let the highest angel fall from heaven, Revelation 12:9. This is why no man is to be trusted, no matter how wise, holy, or great he may be.

Rather, each is to be heard. Then one should wait and see through whom God wants to speak and act.

This is the greatest harm in government: When a government official allows his mind to be captured by the high and the mighty and the flatterers and so stops thinking for himself. This is especially damaging because a government official's failures and follies do not just affect one person, but the entire population of a country.

This is why a government official should trust his advisors and let them act in such a way that he nonetheless keeps the reins in his hands. He should not sleep securely, but do as Jehoshaphat did, according to 2 Chronicles 19: He traveled throughout his land and saw how his officials ruled and judged. By doing so, a government official will see for himself that he should not trust anyone completely.

Such an official must not think that anyone else will work as hard for his country as he does unless he is full of the Spirit and a good Christian.

***He can also not
safely rely on
anyone***

The natural man will not do this. Because a government official does not know whether someone is a Christian—or how long he will remain one—he can also not safely rely on anyone.

And, most of all, he should be wary of those who say: “Mr. Government Official, why do you no longer trust me? Who else will serve you like I do?”

Those who talk this way are certainly not without ulterior motive. They want to rule over the country themselves and turn the elected official into a mere observer.

Now if such advisors were really Christians and truly good, they would like it if the government official for whom

they worked did not trust them. They would praise and love such an official for supervising them closely.

It is just because these Christians act in a godly manner that they want and can tolerate their actions being made public before that official and everyone else. That is why Christ says in John 3:21: “Whoever does good comes to the light so that his works may be seen, because they have been accomplished in God.”

But there are advisors who want to blind a government official’s eyes and act in darkness, as Christ says there as well, John 3:20: “Whoever does evil fears the light lest his works are punished.” Therefore, ***Therefore, beware of them!***

And if they complain, they should be told: “My friend, you are not being done an injustice. God does not want government officials to trust themselves or any other person. Be angry with God for wanting this to be so—or for not having created you to be anything other than a mere human being.

But even if you were an angel, a government official would also not completely trust you, because Lucifer was not to be trusted. We are to trust in God alone.”

So let not a government official think that he will have a better life than David who is the example for all such government workers. David had an advisor, Ahithophel, who was so wise that the text says in 2 Samuel 16:23 that “the advice Ahithophel gave was as if one had asked God himself.” Still, Ahithophel fell so low that he wanted to betray, kill, and utterly destroy David, his own lord, 2

Samuel 17. So David had to learn how one should not trust a human being.

Why, do you think, did God let such horrible events take place and be written down? It was to warn government officials regarding the most dangerous misfortune that may befall them, namely, that they trust someone.

Indeed, it is a miserable thing when flatterers are the ones who truly are governing, or if a government official, who trusts in others, and allows himself to be their captive, lets everybody do as they please.

The obvious question then: If a government official cannot trust anyone, how can they govern a country? Answer: They are to give orders and take risks, but trust in God alone.

They themselves must remain engaged and not sleep

Put differently, they must entrust the work to someone and take a risk with him. But they should trust him only as one who may fail them. Why? So that they themselves must

remain engaged and not sleep.

Think of a wagon driver. He certainly trusts his horses and wagon. But he does not let them drive themselves. He keeps both bridle and whip in his hands and does not sleep.

Take note of the old proverbs that are certain and undoubtedly have been taught by experience: The government official's eye fattens the horse. And: The government official's footprints fertilize the field. These proverbs mean to say that where the government official himself does not look into things and instead relies on advisers and servants,

matters will never turn out well.

God wants it this way and lets it happen, so that government officials are forced by necessity to carry out their office themselves just like every citizen works at his vocation and as each creature must carry out its work. Otherwise, government officials become fat pigs who are not of any use to anyone but themselves.



1. Upon whom must a government official keep his eye?
2. Why is no human being to be despised?
3. Do a government official's failures and follies just affect him?
4. Can anyone be safely relied upon?
5. Should a government official even trust himself?
6. So if there is no trust, how can government take place?

22

PUNISHMENT, CORRUPTION AND WAR

Let a government official take care how to deal properly with evildoers. Here he must be smart and wise so as to punish them without harming others.

And I again know of no better example than David. He had a captain called Joab. Joab deceived and traitorously killed two good captains. By doing so, he definitely deserved to die.

Still, David did not execute him while he was alive but told his son Solomon to do it. David did so, without a doubt, because he could not have done it without greater damage and unrest, 1 Kings 2:5.

This is how government officials must punish criminals, lest they pick up a spoon and break a bowl and bring misery over the country and people because of one single execution, filling the land with widows and orphans. This is why a government official must not follow the advisors and rogues who urge and drive him to start a war by saying: "Should we put up with such words and injustice?" It is a miserable Christian who would risk a country for the sake of a castle.

***If you cannot
ignore evil, you
cannot govern***

In short, one must follow the proverb: If you cannot ignore evil, you cannot govern. Therefore, let this be the rule: If a government official cannot punish injustice without causing greater injustice, let him let go of justice, no matter how equitable the cause may be.

Let him not consider his own loss, but the injustice of others that they endure because of the injustice against him. Do so many women and children deserve to become widows and orphans, just so that a government official can visit his vengeance upon some useless mouth or evil hand who has harmed him?

But you say: Should not a government wage war? Should not citizens heed the call to battle? Answer: This is a pretty broad question.

But in short, the Christian course of action here is this: No government official should wage war against his superior such as a governor or president, or other such officials, but let them take whatever they want to take. Such an official should not resist his superiors by force but only

by making known the truth. If this changes their mind, good. If not, he is excused and puts up with injustice for God's sake.

But if their opponent is their equal or inferior, or if he is subject to some other superior, they are, first, to offer him peace and what is right, as Moses taught the Israelites. But if he does not agree, then they do their best and oppose force by force, as Moses nicely describes all this in Deuteronomy 19. In this matter, they are not to consider what is theirs, and how they can remain in their position, but must consider their subjects for whom they must provide protection and help so that this work may be done in love.

Because their whole land is threatened, they must take a chance to see if God wants to help them lest everything be destroyed. And even if they cannot avoid that some be made widows and orphans, they must prevent that everything is ruined and all become widows and orphans.

In this case, citizens must follow that official, giving their body and possessions, because in this case, one must risk one's possessions and oneself for the sake of the other. And in such a war it is Christian and a work of love to kill, despoil, and burn the enemies confidently, and to do everything to harm them until they are overcome by war.

But let them beware of sin: Let them not rape women and girls. And, after prevailing over the enemy, let them show mercy and peace to those that surrender and humble themselves.

Here applies the expression: God helps the boldest. This is what Abraham did when he defeated the four kings in Genesis 14:14-16. There he killed many and did not show

much grace until he overcame them. One must consider this case as sent from God to sweep the land and drive out all the villains.

***For one must
not act against
what is right***

But what if a government official is wrong? Should his people follow him then? The answer is no. For no one must act against what is right. Rather, one must obey God, who wants what is right, more than men, Acts 5:29.

But what if the citizens do not know whether the official is right or wrong? Answer: Because they do not know and cannot find out by being as diligent as possible, let them follow the official without danger to their souls.

In such a case one must apply the law of Moses in Exodus 21:13 where he writes how a murderer who kills someone in ignorance and against his will should flee into a free city and be acquitted by the court. Those who are defeated will consider it to be a punishment from God, whether they were right or wrong.

But those who are victorious in such ignorance must consider their kills in battle as if someone killed someone else by falling off a roof, and then commend the matter to God.

Finally, a government official should also deal with God in a Christian manner. That is, he should submit to God with complete trust and ask for wisdom to govern well, as Solomon did, 1 Kings 3:9. But I have written about faith and trust in God so much elsewhere, that it is not necessary to talk about it here any further.

This is why we want to leave it at that and conclude with

this summary: A Christian government official must maintain four relations all at once. First, he must relate to God in true trust and heartfelt prayer. Second, he must relate to his subjects in love and Christian service. Third, he must relate to his advisors and the mighty with his reason and free mind. Fourth, he must relate to evildoers with modest earnest and strictness.

In this way, he does the right thing inwardly and outwardly in a way that will please God and the people. But he must expect much envy and suffering on this account. The cross will soon rest heavy on such an undertaking.



1. What is a government official to do with evildoers?
2. Can a government official govern if he ignores evil?
3. Should a Christian follow a government into an unjust war?
4. What if the justness of a war cannot be determined?
5. What must a Christian official expect when doing the right thing?

AFTERWORD

Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote this seminal treatise in 1523, five hundred years ago.¹ Luther described the significance of the work as follows (AE 46:163):

This was the state of things [in 1518]: no one had taught, no one had heard, and no one knew anything about temporal government, whence it came, what its office and work were, or how it ought to serve God. The most learned men (I shall not name them) regarded temporal government as a heathen, human, ungodly thing, as though it jeopardized salvation to be in the ranks of the rulers. This is how the priests and monks drove kings and princes into the comer and persuaded them that to serve God they must undertake other works, such as hearing mass, saying prayers, endowing masses, etc. In a word, princes and lords who wanted to be pious men regarded their rank and office as of no value and did not consider it a service of God. They became real priests and monks, except that they did not wear tonsures and cowls. If they wanted to serve God, they had to go to church. All the lords living at that time would have to testify to this, for they knew it by experience. My gracious lord, Duke Frederick, of blessed memory, was so glad when I first wrote *Temporal Authority* that he had the little book copied and put in a special binding, and was happy that he could see what his

¹ The translation above is based on the German text found in Walch, second edition, 10:378-414. A different English translation is provided in American Edition (AE) 45:81-126.

position was in God's sight.

Luther wrote this work several years after he found himself cast into the role of reformer of the Christian church in 1517. By 1523, Luther had written some of his most important early works, such as his treatise on the Babylonian captivity of the church and his treatise on Christian liberty. But the time was marked not only by increasing theological divides—Protestants against followers of the pope; followers of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525) against followers of Luther—but also by increasing political and social unrest. In fact, 1523 is the eve of the peasant's rebellion in 1524-25 that resulted in many dead rebels, including Müntzer himself.

In the treatise, as he indicated above, Luther outlined the divine origin, dignity, and purpose of civil or political government. But he also distinguished its divine authority from—and limited it in relation to—Christ's kingdom. The former curbs sin by ruling over the bodies of men, and their worldly possessions, by the authority of the sword. The latter frees from sin by ruling over the souls of the believers by the word of God, the sword of the Spirit. Luther thereby established the basic parameters of what later became known as his "doctrine of the two kingdoms."

As the quotation above indicates, this doctrine was eminently practical and fundamental to the Christian life in this world because it enabled Christians to see their lives and service in this world—lived in what Luther elsewhere called God's "three hierarchies" or "holy orders" of family, government, and church—as lives lived in good conscience according God's law and in the orders instituted by God. It was, in fact, so fundamental and practical that Luther included it in his Small and Large Catechisms—not by using difficult technical terminology, but simply by teaching the substance of it based on God's word.

For instance, the First Article of the Creed outlines the scope of the authority of the "kingdom of the world," while the Second and Third Articles outline the scope and nature of the

“kingdom of Christ” as a spiritual kingdom that is found only where the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ by the proclamation of Christ’s gospel in word and sacraments. The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer—“thy kingdom come”—asks God to defend and advance Christ’s spiritual kingdom, while the Fourth Petition—“give us this day our daily bread”—asks God to defend the secular government so that all may enjoy God’s bodily gifts in peace. Finally, God’s Ten Commandments—specified in the “table of duties”—are given to govern the life of man in church, government, and family.

Luther outlined and summarized the “doctrine of the two kingdoms” not only in his 1523 treatise and his catechisms. He frequently expounded the topic and issues and details related to it, often in the form of sermons and other works of biblical interpretation. These key topics will be discussed in detail in the companion volume to this book, *One God, Two Kingdoms, and Three Holy Orders: Martin Luther on Living as God’s Masks in a Fallen World*.

As discussed there, unfolding this doctrine in its proper context provides fresh, even surprising insights into Luther’s teachings and his approach to the preservation of external peace. As popular caricatures of Luther have it, he was a lackey of princes, an unrelenting “law and order” type, or a naïve theologian who was single-mindedly focused on the eternal salvation of souls by the gospel. But the real Luther not only spoke truth to power in his generation. He is also a preeminent teacher of love and equity, providing eminently practical guidance on how to follow Christ faithfully in a fallen world where even the best human efforts amount often to no more than a seemingly ineffective patchwork of good ideas and bad execution.

The half millennium that has passed since 1523 has witnessed major theological, political, social, philosophical changes, most notably the complex and pervasive movement called Enlightenment that prized human reason, freedom, and progress above

all, resulting in the liberal social and political order prevalent in the cultural West today. Scientific advancements enabled man to dominate—and destroy—both men and the remainder of creation to an unprecedented degree. Economic prosperity and population growth are at unheard of levels. Many political revolutions were attempted in the name of reason, justice, liberty, and progress, some succeeded, but not without causing death and displacement at an unprecedented rate. Major wars were waged, again causing death and displacement on an industrial scale. Almost inevitably, these changes clouded a proper understanding of Luther’s “doctrine of the two kingdoms.” While the complex history of the emergence and impact of the Enlightenment cannot be analyzed here, the above-referenced companion volume will outline some of the resulting challenges and perspectives for Christians.

As discussed there, it is critical to keep in mind from a spiritual point of view that, despite these tremendous changes in history, God’s word remains unchanged. Man’s fallen nature remains unchanged. God’s three holy orders remain unchanged. This important reality is perhaps difficult or almost impossible to grasp in a liberal context generated by the Enlightenment where constant change and progress for the better are part of the philosophical mythology undergirding the entire worldview. As a result, the question of “old or new” has by and large replaced the question of “true or false,” so that what is new is what is irrefutably true.

As “progress” is a powerful, and often unrecognized, part of the modern world, it is tempting for Christians to just go with the times to avoid landing in some self-chosen ghetto of irrelevance. But it is important for Christians and the Christian church to remain faithful to God’s unchanging word and his holy orders until Christ returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. That is their holy calling. And it is the only way that sinners will be saved from the coming judgment Christ will

execute according to God's unchanging word.

Luther's teachings on the two kingdoms, properly contextualized and understood, are extremely helpful in this task. Simply put, he engaged the same fallen nature of man with the unchanging spiritual tools provided by God in his unchanging word. To be sure, the Enlightenment as a distinct philosophical movement was still more than a century away. But Luther was very perceptive regarding fallen reason's perennial quest for emancipation and autonomy from its Creator. Whatever else the Enlightenment is, means, or accomplished, it is—considered spiritually in light of God's word—another iteration of that perennial quest.

Christians are, therefore, not unprepared when it comes to engaging the world of today and presenting (and living!) an alternative to today's hopeless "business as usual." Instead, they can draw on Luther's deep biblical insights and truly humane teachings. Luther will prove to be an abundant resource for those who, in this generation, desire to live and serve as God's faithful masks in a fallen world.

Holger Sonntag

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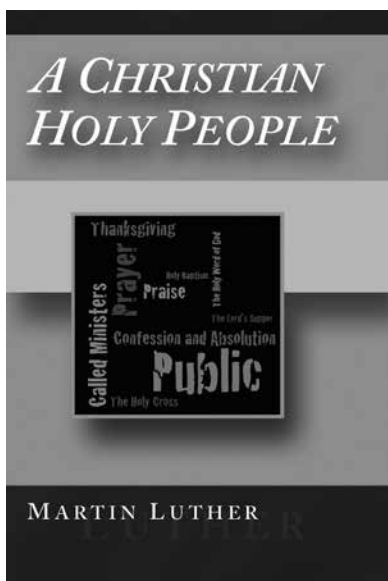
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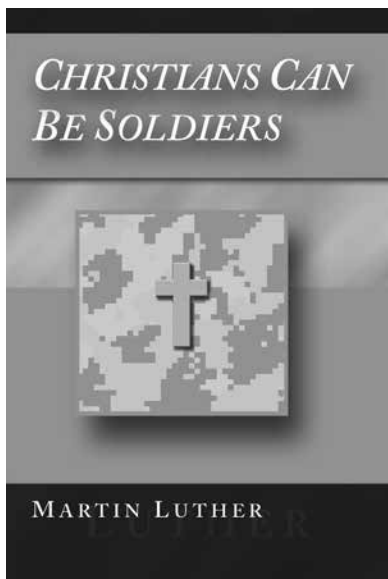
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