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Martin Luther on Church and State

Separation of church and state is often regarded as a modern American invention. In reality, separationism is an ancient Western teaching rooted in the Bible. Christ commanded believers to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). Paul warned believers that they should "not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2), but remain "separate," knowing their "true commonwealth lies in heaven" (2 Cor. 6:17; Phil. 3:20). St. Paul spoke literally of a "wall of separation" between Christians and non-Christians set by the law of God (Eph. 2:14).

Such passages inspired Martin Luther's famous doctrine of the two kingdoms. God has ordained two kingdoms in which humanity is destined to live, Luther argued, the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. The earthly kingdom is the realm of creation, of natural and civic life, where a person operates primarily by reason and law. The heavenly kingdom is the realm of redemption, of spiritual and eternal life, where a person operates primarily by faith and love. These two kingdoms embrace parallel forms of righteousness and justice, government and order, truth and knowledge. But the earthly kingdom is distorted by sin, and governed by the Law. The heavenly kingdom is renewed by grace and guided by the Gospel. A Christian is a citizen of both kingdoms at once and, as sinner and saints, invariably comes under the distinctive government of each.

For Luther, the earthly kingdom featured three forms and forums of government: the family, the church, and the state. These three estates stand equal before God, each called to discharge complementary tasks in the earthly kingdom. The family is called to rear and nurture children, to teach and to discipline them, to cultivate and exemplify love and charity. The church is called to preach the word, administer the sacraments, offer spiritual care, discipline, and education. The state is called to protect peace, punish crime, and promote the common good.

Of these three estates, said Luther, only the state has formal *legal* authority -- the authority of the sword to pass and enforce human laws for the governance of the earthly kingdom. The church is not a law-making authority, Luther insisted after burning the church's canon law books in 1520. The church has no sword. It has no business involving itself in daily legal and political life. It must remain "separate and distinct" from the state in its makeup and mission.

Luther was more concerned with the function than with the form of the state. Every magistrate, he wrote -- from the highest king to the pettiest judge -- is God's vice-regent in the earthly kingdom, called to elaborate and enforce God's Word and will, to reflect God's justice and mercy on earthly citizens. The magistracy is, in this sense, "an image, shadow, and figure of the dominion of Christ" on earth.

Every magistrate is also God's instrument of judgment and wrath against human sin. "Princes and magistrates are the bows and arrows of God," Luther wrote, licensed to hunt down God's enemies. The hand of the Christian magistrate, judge, or soldier "that wields the sword and slays is not man's hand, but God's; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, slays, and fights. All these are God's works and judgments."

And every magistrate, Luther wrote, is the "father of the community." He is called to care for his political subjects as if they are his children, and his political subjects are to "honor" him as if he is their parent. Like a loving father, the magistrate must keep the peace and protect his subjects in their persons, properties, and reputations. He must deter his subjects from abusing themselves through drunkenness, sumptuousness, prostitution, gambling, and other vices. He must nurture and sustain his subjects through the community chest, the public almshouse, the state-run hospice and hospital. He must educate them through the public school, the public library, the public lectern. He must see to their spiritual needs by supporting the ministry of the locally established church, and encouraging their attendance and participation through the laws of Sabbath observance, tithing, and holy days. And he must set an example of virtue and piety in his own home and private life for his faithful subjects to emulate.

In all this, the Christian magistrate must complement the God-given responsibilities of parents and family members for their children and dependents, without intruding on the paternal office. And he must support the preaching and sacramental life of the local church without trespassing on church offices.

These metaphors of the Christian magistrate -- as the lofty vice-regent of God and as the loving father of the community -- described the basics of Luther's and Lutheran political theory. For Luther, the state is divine in origin, but earthly in operation. It expresses God's harsh judgment against sin but also his tender mercy for sinners. It communicates the Law of God but also the lore of the local community. And the state depends upon the church for prophetic rebuke but removes from the church all power to rule by law. Either metaphor standing alone could be a recipe for abusive tyranny or officious paternalism. But both metaphors together provided Luther and his followers with the core ingredients of a robust Christian republicanism and budding Christian welfare state.

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