

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

The Role of the Church in Civil Society June 5 – June 26: 2016 is an election year! We are surrounded by campaign ads, mud-slinging, and talk show opinions. As we witness the decline in the moral fabric of our society, many Christians wonder what role the church is called to play in this saga. Are we called to pursue legislation that upholds the values of our faith or are we to withdraw from the political and civil process in the firm belief that the realms of Church and State are separate? This four-week class is designed to seriously engage these questions and others as we learn together the role of the church in civil society.

The objective of this class is: to develop a biblical understanding of the various roles of the Church and State and sustain a kingdom-focused perspective of civil engagement. Our perspective should be shaped by eschatological revelation, and not disillusioned expectations of social progress.

Introduction: The previous two weeks we explored the foundational topics of defining both the church and state. We will now shift our focus away from these definitions to address the issue of the relationship between the two. By way of review, the Biblical definition of a state is: ... *part of the created order invested by God with the responsibility of maintaining and upholding the divine moral law of God under which all mankind shall be judged.* Likewise, the church can be defined as ... *the people of God, is an organism (a living body) consisting of the redeemed both visibly and invisibly for whom, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God is proleptically present.* Using these definitions, we will attempt to explain both the historical view of the interaction between the two as well as the biblical view. Remember that it is our objective to allow our view of the role of the church in civil society to be shaped by a biblical perspective instead of a historical or cultural one.

How do the church and state relate to one another? – This question is in and of itself a loaded one laced with assumptions. These assumptions should be carefully examined in light of history and scripture in order to arrive at a correct answer. One such assumption is that the two are separate entities or spheres, therefore enabling each to have a mutual ability to relate to the other. The other assumption is that the state somehow plays a superior role in the created order, being more divinely endowed than other aspects of creation (such as marriage or natural law). Both of these assumptions along with their counterparts (the belief that the church and state are one or that one derives its legitimacy from the other and the belief that the state (or government) is separate from the rest of the created order, and therefore not an area where Christ's kingdom comes to bear) are equally erroneous. They are the proverbial ditches flanking either side of the prescriptive path identified in scripture. To understand how they have been lived out in the life of the church, we will now turn to the record of the past for clarification.

Part One: *The Church & State in History* – After the decline and fall of the Roman empire in the fourth century A.D., there evolved an understanding of the role of the church in civil society that was more in line with the pagan world than the world of divine revelation. With the conversion of Constantine to the Christian faith in 333 A.D. and then the formal proclamation that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman empire in 380 A.D., the relationship between the two became quickly cemented in an unprecedented manner. Before we explore the impact such an event had on world history, we must first make two things clear: 1) since God is sovereign over time and eternity, and Christ is the purpose of history, we cannot honestly say that the past has not glorified Christ even if wrought with the failings and misgivings of mankind. To the contrary, we know that our ability to understand the manner in which all things glorify God and exalt the preeminence of Christ does not detract from the reality of them

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doing so. God's providence is such that nothing happens in all of creation that is outside of his sovereign care and attention, and without him ordaining it to come to pass. As the Westminster Confession teaches, he often chooses to use secondary causes to further his will. The events of world history manifest such causes as well as attest to the fact that God is in control of world affairs. 2) The role the church increasingly began to play in the life of the average European during the early Medieval period was such that their seemed to be a natural fit between the governing of society and the rule of the church. The degree of influence the church purportedly had on Medieval man, was second to none other than nature itself. This is to say that it would be easy for modern man, generations removed from the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, to reflect critically on the degree of authority assumed by the church after Constantine's declaration. To do so, would be unfair and even considered a portrayal of our arrogance.

Nevertheless, since it is the responsibility of each generation to examine the events and ideas that led to the creation of the social and environmental settings that make up the present, we should approach the subject with humility and a degree of trepidation knowing that a future generation might well look upon our own meager efforts and condemn us for them. The relationship between the church and the state in the early part of the fifth century was one of complete interdependence. As R.W. Southern states, *"The identification of the church with the whole organized society is the fundamental feature which distinguishes the Middle Ages from earlier and later periods of history. At its widest limits it is a feature of European history from the fourth to the eighteenth century – from Constantine to Voltaire. In theory, during the whole of this period only orthodox and obedient believers could enjoy the full rights of citizenship. It was not just a government, however grandiose its operations. It was the whole of human society subject to the will of God. It was the ark of salvation in a sea of destruction. How far there could be any rational social order outside the ark of the church was a disputed question, but at its best, it could only be very limited. It was membership of the church that gave men a thoroughly intelligible purpose and place in God's universe. So, the church was not only a state, it was the state; it was not only a society, it was the society – the human societas perfecta."*¹

The above understanding of the church is what gave birth to the Holy Roman Empire. The vacuum that was soon left in the organized affairs of men with the collapse of the Roman republic could only be filled by the institution that exerted the greatest amount of influence in people's lives from cradle to grave: the church. When this reality was embraced by power-hungry Popes, the church gained the upper hand over the state by nature of its eternal calling. Ironically, the very thing that made the church unique – its citizenship in another world, became the means of control that allowed power-hungry papal bulls to coerce kings and emperors into kissing the sacred ring. The keys of the kingdom became a carrot that was dangled before the faces of all would-be challengers. Should a nations or state refuse there was always the threat of an interdiction that lay completely at the disposal of the Pope, a supreme governor. Interdiction was the act of excommunicating or forbidding the sacraments of the church from being offered within a specified state, diocese or community. This was the death sentence for a community. To be cut off from the church, meant to be cut off from heaven, and there were few who were willing to risk the eternal for the temporal. Consequently, this often meant the Pope had the ability to force kings and emperors into compliance. This power soon became very obvious when a Frankish king known as Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, became the first ruler of a united Western empire.

¹ Southern, R.W. *Western Society & the Church in the Middle Ages*. Pg. 16; 22.

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The reign of the Emperor Charlemagne (768-814) ushered in a new era in which the leader of the united western empire became known as the Holy Roman Emperor, having received this coronation from the hands of the Papal See. Such recognition granted Charlemagne divine authentication in the eyes of the people. This act solidified the supremacy of the Pope (who had power to preside over a coronation) over the king or emperor, addressing a debate that purportedly dated back to the time of Constantine regarding the balance of power between the emperor and the pope.

Prior to the creation of the role of Holy Roman Emperor, in which the right to govern the western half of the Roman empire was delegated to another, a now infamously forged document known as the *Donation of Constantine* was produced in which the emperor Constantine supposedly acknowledged the Pope's right to the imperial power of Rome and all the provinces of the West. However, before 1050, there was no indication that the Pope received the type of notoriety in the West that the forged *Donation* sought to obtain for him. In 1050, under the influence of Leo IX and Gregory VII, the Papal See began to assume the role of supreme leader originally envisioned by the early line of Popes, a tradition that would not cease to exert authority until the time of the Reformation.

The period of the Crusades, beginning in 1096 further demonstrated the degree to which the Medieval church influenced civil society. The sacred rite of citizenship during this time in history was the sacrament of baptism. Any unbaptized person was unable to own land, own property, or hold public office. To be a member of the visible church and a member of the state was one and the same. With the commencement of the Crusades by Pope Urban II, the long-sought after ability to raise an army for the well-being of the church and society was actualized.

The protestant Reformation dislodged the belief that the Pope was the head of the Church, and reestablished the belief in the scriptural teaching that Christ alone is head of the church. It was during this period of time, that the distinction between the church and state once more became pronounced and somewhat muddled. When one considers the fact that Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), one of the Swiss reformers died on the field of battle, a battle that was launched due to competing alliances between the Catholics and the early protestant movement, we see that the perception regarding the role of the state in civil society did not change with the dethronement of the Pope. Rather, the rule of God's law in the affairs of men, was to be upheld even at the point of self-sacrifice. It was the predominant view among the reformers, that God ruled the world through two kingdoms: the state, and the church. This belief, far from being developed solely by the Reformers, dates back to the time of St. Augustine and is set forth in his monumental work, *The City of God*. Two concurrent streams: that of humanism, and that of church reform, capitalized upon the distinction between the two realms and forged an understanding of the relationship between the two that has led to the phrase, "separation of church and state".

For the sake of time, let it suffice to state that the early framers of our own government seemed to have a thorough understanding of the various and distinct role of both church and state inherited from the protestant reformers. This is not to say that they saw no overlap between the two, indeed they saw the foundation of all government being the *certain inalienable rights* and that men are *endowed by their Creator* with these rights. Therefore, the foundation of modern government was common grace (in theological terms) or natural law (in legal terms). Natural law, as it was undeniably understood by the founders of this country, is part of creation and receives legitimacy from the Creator, it is deistic (if not Christian) at its very core. However, the forced confession of a Christian creedal statement or affiliation with an organized church, never played a critical role in the structuring of the American government. It

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is, therefore, misleading to say that the U.S. has ever been Christian in the same sense of the word as the *Christendom* of the past, or the period of church-state governance common within the Middle Ages in which to belong to one meant automatic membership in the other. There may have been a time in the past, that this belief was pragmatically taken for granted by the whole of the American public, but that time is far spent, and I am uncertain as to whether it had any lasting value apart from the restraint of sin and lawlessness in society.

Part Two: Two Realms or One? – We have endeavored to briefly define the history of the relationship between the church and civil society, now we will ask the question whether or not the notion that there are two realms is all that helpful or if there is another way we should look at it. To answer this question, we must rely heavily on the teaching of scripture and then differentiate the various fringe beliefs that have been misunderstandings of scripture.

The first place we see a scriptural hint of governance is in the Creation Mandate (Genesis 1:28). According to this passage, *“And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”* This text, also known as the cultural mandate, explains the original mission given to mankind prior to the fall. The mission is not rescinded as a result of the fall, but renewed (Genesis 9:1-7). We have already established in lesson one that the state is part of the created order. We see how that governance and the care of God’s creation is essential to the mission of man, and God receives glory when that mission is accomplished. Likewise, since the state is part of the created order, it is fallen. The redemptive work of Christ in and through the colony of heaven, otherwise known as the church, seeks to redeem and restore all things. However, even in an unredeemed state, it is the responsibility of man to see to it that the basic rights of man, explicit in natural law or by means of common grace, are upheld within the context of a pluralistic society.

Now, let’s look again at Romans 13:1-4, *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then, do what is good, and you will receive his approval for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, and avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”* The first text (Genesis 1:28) identifies the realm of God’s sovereign rule: all of creation. However, man as a steward of creation, has subjected all things to the enemy of God, i.e. the devil. To understand the historical redemptive work of God, is to see God’s work of redemption, through Christ active from the moment of the fall (Genesis 3:15) onward. His blessing comes to make all things new, *“... as far as the curse is found...”* The second text identifies how God administers this sovereign rule: through government (the state). Implicit in the Romans 13 text is the superior standard of God’s law governing the affairs of man (otherwise, how else could the governing authority be God’s servant for good?).

So, are there two realms of authority or one? It depends on what you are talking about. If we are discussing salvation, and the keys of the kingdom, there is only one: the church whose head is Christ. If we are discussing the governance of man under the just law of God the Creator, there is also one: the state. The identification of the two spheres are only meaningful when living in a society in which there is a consensus that the moral law of God as made plain through God’s common grace is the foundation for

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social government. Since this is no longer the case, we must reexamine our understanding of the intelligibility of the term “two realms”. Think again of the views that have become entrenched in the West regarding eschatology mentioned last week. When one holds to the first view (the view that this world is all that there is and the kingdom, which has come in its fullness, simply awaits the progressive labors of the church), the only realm that matters is that of state because the state and the governance thereof have been given to Christ. Likewise, if one holds to the second view (the view that this world is inconsequential, and is simply a training ground for the next), there are two realms: one good, the other bad, one earthly, the other heavenly, one temporal the other eternal. Is there a more helpful way of viewing the difference that we know is there, but can't seem to aptly describe?

Before we answer this question, let us briefly look at some erroneous ideas that have originated as a result of people's failure to do so. The first is known as *Dominion Theology*. This view seeks to establish a state governed by biblical law without regard to the pluralism of society. The Moral Majority or Christian Right movements of the 1970s and 80s are a good representation of adherents to this belief. This view has two major weaknesses: 1) a gross misunderstanding of the Kingdom, and 2) failure to understand Common Grace.

Another erroneous movement that has sprung out of the attempt to understand whether there are two realms or one is *Christian Reconstructionism*. This theory and that closely related to it, *Theonomy*, seek to establish governing structures that enforce Old Testament law on the populace including aspects of the civil law applicable to ancient Israel. Again, the major weaknesses of this view are the same as those given above for Dominion Theology.

Part Three: An Eschatological Mission – So, if the two realm view is not helpful, how should we see the relationship between the church and civil society? We would all be wise to heed the warning issued by Leslie Newbigin in his book, *Signs Amid the Rubble* when he states, “*Unless the radical otherworldliness of the gospel message is acknowledged, the real role of the church in politics will be hopelessly compromised. Instead of a movement of radical protest, suffering and hope, there will merely be a naïve and ineffectual utopianism. The reign of God which is the subject of the gospel message is not the end product of political development; and every attempt to confuse the two results in disappointment and disillusionment.*” In other words, the question regarding two realms is misleading because it compartmentalizes both spheres that fall under the dominion of the Kingdom. However, the nature of the kingdom is such that it is already and not yet at the same time. It has come, and is coming. The church manifests the reign of Christ and the victory of God, but we do so through the cross. This cross-centered mission of the church is not one of pacifism nor is it one that withdraws from society in hopes of apocalyptic deliverance. The life and ministry of Christ make this point quite clear. Rather the mission of the church is to fight against all the powers that would inhibit the God-given rights of man from being honored and upheld, with the constant understanding that before the battle can truly be finished, the Parousia (return of Christ) and accompanying judgment must come.

Again, Newbigin is helpful at understanding this mission. He states, “... *this mission defined by the scars of the passion, must mean that the missionary church will continue that protest against, that unmasking of, the hypocrisy, cruelty, and greed which infests the exercise of all political power, and yet will accept the fact that the visible end of that road is a cross and that it is only beyond the cross, beyond all earthly programs, beyond death, that the victory of the justice of God will be made manifest.*”² There is a

² Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 100 - 101

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mystery here, an uneasiness with which the statement comes to rest in the hearts and minds of all who read. What Newbigin is declaring is that there is a groaning that is taking place, a mismatch between our heart's true longing and anything we will be able to achieve in this life. This should not be an occasion for pessimism or despair, but for hope, knowing that the God who sovereignly rules over time and history wills it to be so, and will be triumphant in the end. If the victory of God & triumph of Christ is a certain fact (as certain as the resurrection itself), then we have every reason to believe that even our perceived failures will be used of him to accomplish his redemptive purposes.

So, what then is the best way of understanding the relationship between the church and state? Again we will turn to Newbigin, because he states best what we have come to summarize from scripture. He states, *"I want to affirm primarily that the church is a witness to a reality which transcends the present world and its struggles for power, and yet that this witness is always relevant to these struggles."* In other words, the church, as a colony of heaven, is by very definition the champion of a mission that transcends this world, an eternal mission, a mission that is eschatological – living in the shadow of the end. This mission drives the church to seek redemption in every social and civil engagement while offering an explanation for what would otherwise be seen as failure: the world awaits the consummation of all things. The church bears witness to *true truth* by which all other truth claims should and can be tested. At the center of this truth claim is the cross of Christ. To endeavor to make the kingdom a reality without the cross is to miss the whole point of the Christian mission. Any attempt to impose the cross on a pluralistic society in a manner separate from the illuminating work of God's grace is again missing the point of the mission. This naturally creates a sense of ambiguity for modern man who has inherited an over-inflated sense of our importance in this world as a result of the humanistic Renaissance. As Newbigin reminds us, *"... the victory of any cause, however just, is not the victory of God; where we have a sober awareness that our success always contains the seeds of failure, that the powerless and exploited of one generation can become the oppressors of the next. But it also means that this sober recognition in no way diminishes the confident hope with which we act, because we can know that the consummation of all the struggles of human history will be the work of God beyond the grave into which we and our works must descend, to be raised, purged and renewed for a Kingdom more glorious than we can conceive."*³

If we keep before us at all times the eschatological mission of the church – as a colony of heaven living as a citizen in two worlds, two kingdoms, we will not compartmentalize the two by thinking that all that lies in the domain of the Kingdom of Heaven lies outside the domain of the natural, created world. Nor will we synthesize the two and think that we can bring the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven into the modern civil society in which we live. Instead, we will allow the Kingdom that defines us: God's kingdom to govern our lives so that we live in the one as if we are living in the other, because in a true sense we are. To put things more simply, the Papal aspirations of the past that gave rise to the Holy Roman Empire were misguided, but so too were the attempts of the Religious Right to make our nation a *Christian* nation. Equally misguided is anyone who endorses a pacifistic view and claims the role of the church is to withdraw from society and from the political arena. Next week we will ask the question, If our understanding of the state and the church is true, and the relationship between the two is as we claim, "How shall we then live"?

³Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 104-105