

Of the Swords of the Two Kingdoms:
An Essay on Christianity and Politics

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Dialectic

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Christians hold that there are two distinct kingdoms. The first is the kingdom of the church, and the second is the kingdom of the world. But what is the difference between these two kingdoms? It is simply this, that the kingdom of the Church is ruled with the Gospel, whereas the kingdom of the world is ruled with Law. But this must be discussed more fully.

Christianity, the doctrine of the Church, is concerned with the eternal salvation of the soul. Politics, the doctrine of the world, is concerned with the temporal salvation of the body. Both the Church and the government, in which is the power of politics, bear a sword. The Church bears the sword of the Spirit and the government the sword of the Law. Let us view the uses of each sword individually.

First is the sword of the Spirit. This is the weapon of the Gospel. It pierces the heart of the sinner and from the gaping wound pours forth repentance. The sinner desires forgiveness for His sins and Christ gives him this forgiveness in His body and blood. And just as a sword of steel can be used not only for attack, but also for defense, so too can the sword of the Spirit defend the Christian and keep him strong in the faith. This is the power of the sword of the Spirit.

But the government wields the sword of the Law. To the government has been given the right to execute justice upon the criminal. The sword of the Law crushes; it does not convert as does the sword of the Spirit. The sword of the Law is the sword of punishment. Criminals fear it, but the one who does good is not afraid of its power. For as the Scripture says, “Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same” (Rom. 13:3). So the sword of the Law has power only over those who trespass God’s command. Yet even over these, it has no power to save, but only to destroy. Though the Law can protect the innocent and save their bodies from harm, it cannot save the soul. The sword of the Spirit, in

contrast, does save the soul and it can rescue both the innocent and the guilty. It grants eternal life.

Of the two kingdoms it is obvious to see that the kingdom of the Church is of the most importance. For the sword of the Spirit saves us eternally from the fires of hell and the wrath of God, but the Law provides only temporal safety from man. As the poet Longfellow says, “Stronger than steel is the sword of the Spirit; swifter than arrows the light of the truth is, greater than anger is love, and subdueth!”

Should we as Christians then disregard politics entirely or not bother to pray for our earthly authorities? Absolutely not, and for two reasons. The first is that God tells us through the Apostles to honor the government. Paul says, “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all goodness and reverence” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). And Saint Peter likewise says, “Honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:17).

The second reason is that a good government that tolerates the preaching of the Word is among the greatest blessings in the world. For with such a government Christians can confess their faith without any fear of those who would oppose the truth of Christ’s Word. In this we see that God has created the government to work in unison with the Church.

But though the government and the Church can thus work together, the two kingdoms must not be muddled. Nevertheless man has often tried to do just this. The Roman Catholic Pope is a perfect example. The Pope is said to hold both swords, the sword of the Spirit, that is, the sword of the Church, and the sword of the law, which is the sword of politics. But this is a wrongful unification. For politics abides by the Law of justice but the Church by the Law of love, and these two must not be muddled. For the Pope can no longer simply be a pastor, or, as

the Papists would have it, a pastor of pastors, but must also be a politician. And it is inevitable that the desire for political power, in such a circumstance, would soon corrupt the preaching of the Word. For our sinful human nature, in its foolishness and stupidity, wishes rather for worldly power and renown than for the salvation of our fellow man.

It is true that some of the earlier Popes, such as Gregory the Great or Leo I, did not allow their desire for authority to contaminate their preaching of the Word, but what have we seen since then? We have seen the Pope claim inerrancy and we have seen him despise the Gospel which Martin Luther preached to him, because to accept it would be to lessen his power. This is the fruit of muddling the two kingdoms.

Now this is not to say that there cannot be Christian politicians. It is to say rather that politics and the sword of the Law cannot and must not rule the Church of Christ.

And so what is the great difference between Christianity and politics? It is the difference of Love and Justice. Justice is what Christ took for us and bore himself. Love is what Christ gives freely to us. Just as the sword of the Law was coming down on our necks, Jesus turned away its blade and thrust it into himself, at the same time handing us the sword of the Spirit with which we defend ourselves against the power of hell. Justice is Christ who, having become sin, suffered the wrath of God upon the cross because God saw Him as sin. And yet from that same cross Jesus pours out love. Where is the ultimate reconciliation of Justice and Love? Where is the unification of Christianity and the judgment of politics? It is not the Pope, but it is Christ Jesus bleeding and dying on the cross for the salvation of the world. There is justice, there is love, and there is He who truly wields both the sword of the Spirit and the sword of the Law.

The sword of the Law still strikes, even though Christ has suffered its fatal thrust for us all. Its blow is the blow of justice and thus only the unjust need suffer. We are not just, yet Christ

has justified us by His blood. And with the sword of the Spirit in our hands, we stand unafraid, free from the Law of Justice and citizens of the Law of Love. Praise be to Christ who has given us politics and the government to punish the sinner, and, as we are sinners, praise be to Christ all the more for saving us from the judgment of the Law and raising us up to life and eternal salvation.