

Grace MacPherson, Rhetoric, 1,247 words

The Two Kingdoms:

Moral and Civil Law in Church and State

We Lutherans love the Gospel. We love *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, and solus Christus*—but our love for the Gospel does not mean that we forget about the Law that always accuses. Living in a broken world as we do, we need the Gospel to pardon our sins and the Law to keep them in check. However, more than one kind of law exists; the two explored in these pages are civil and moral law. The Church and State cannot be synonymous because they uphold different kinds of law in different ways; to give the State authority over the Church or the Church authority over the State obstructs the proper administration of both civil and moral law.

Civil law is summarized by Paul in Romans 13:1-7:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ... Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

In other words, the State has a specific vocation—to punish evil and protect good, administering justice in the realm of civil law.

Moral law, on the other hand, belongs to the realm of the Church. Much of moral law is also seen in natural law—the law Paul refers to in Romans 2:14-15 when he says, “For when Gentiles, who

do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, [they] are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness.” Even in societies that have not received the revelation of Scripture, some sense of morality exists. Two individuals cannot always agree on what is right and what is wrong, but every human being, whether he will admit it or not, knows that there are such things as right and wrong, because God has written that on his heart.

Moral law, however, does not rely on natural law as revealed in the human conscience. Human judgment can err, even when an individual makes a sincere effort to do what is right, and so God has given us moral law in Scripture as well. This law is given in part as a mirror—to show us that we are unable to please God by our own works—but it also serves as a guide, a template to follow in living our lives. Although we cannot earn salvation by our God-pleasing actions, our lives will generally be safer and happier if we follow God’s moral law. A chaste life is likely to lead to a happy family; kindness to others will typically result in friendship and happiness instead of loneliness and depression.

Moral law and natural law are the driving force behind civil law, which serves as a curb against outward lawlessness. Even if a civil government rejects Christianity, that government will still have laws against theft, perjury, and murder. Even seemingly arbitrary civil laws, like speed limits that vary from city to city, have their basis in moral law—in this case, caring for one’s neighbor.

While the State’s end goal is to protect law-abiding citizens and punish criminals, the Church’s end goal is very different—to bring the Law to the unrepentant and hardened sinner, and to bring the Gospel to the repentant and despairing sinner. The Church’s goal is of primary importance, but there are few Christians—or people of any religion—who would wish to live in a society overrun by crime and vice. Because the Church and the State have distinct tasks, they are each able to carry out their own vocations more fully and efficiently, and benefit each other in so doing. The moral law of the Church teaches Christians to be good and law-abiding citizens, and the civil law of the State leaves the Church free to focus its attention on preaching God’s Word and administering the Means of Grace.

However, civil law never follows moral law perfectly, especially in a State that has rejected God. In such a situation, the State hinders rather than helps the Church, sometimes altogether forbidding its mission. Civil law is an imperfect copy of moral law, and whenever the two come into conflict, moral law must be obeyed over civil law.

One example of this dates from the earliest days of Lutheranism—1550, in the city of Magdeburg, Germany. After Luther's death, the Holy Roman Emperor demanded that Lutherans return to the Catholic Church, thereby compromising their doctrine. The Lutheran church refused. The city of Magdeburg was put under siege, and its citizens wrote the Magdeburg Confession, a document explaining their decision. The article "The Magdeburg Interpretation of Romans 13" from the website *Hausvater* summarizes this document as follows:

The Magdeburg Confession of 1550 closely tracks both Luther's own writings and the Torgau Declaration [stating that the emperor does not have unconditional or absolute authority]. Whenever possible, citizens were to obey the state. The church was not to meddle in civil affairs, nor the state meddle in theological matters, but rather each should respect what Lutherans call the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, or the divinely established distinction between church and state. The Magdeburg theologians were by no means eager for revolt. That being said, Romans 13 was not to be interpreted as a *carte blanche* endorsement of the current ruler, nor as an unqualified demand that citizens obey the ruler's every whim. The "authorities ... appointed by God" (Romans 13:1) and "every ordinance of man" (1 Peter 2:13), to whom people were subject, referred not so much to individuals who held an office but rather to the constitutionally defined office itself. (Hausvater.org)

When civil law goes against moral law, it must be resisted. Civil law that contradicts moral law is not proper civil law at all; it fails to punish evil and protect good, as the State is called to do. This is

the ultimate reason that the Church and the State must remain separate—because if they become synonymous, the moral law of the Church cannot correct the flawed civil law of the State.

Such a situation is not Church and State as God intended. Scripture, as later explained in documents such as the Magdeburg Confession, has given us the template for a proper relationship between Church and State. This template is one that will never be perfectly followed as long as we are on this earth. But thanks be to God that He did not end with the Law! He has given us the Gospel as well—the Gospel to comfort us when we fail to uphold His Law, the Gospel to strengthen us when we cannot uphold an ungodly civil law. Though we Lutherans love the Law, we do not forget about the Gospel; like the citizens of Magdeburg, we put our hope in Christ alone.

Works Cited:

All Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

MacPherson, Ryan. "The Magdeburg Interpretation of Romans 13: A Lutheran Justification for

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