

Mark D. Reichert

Pentecost 18 – Romans 13:1-7 – A Mutually Beneficial Separation  
9/30-10/4/20 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That section of the First Amendment of the US Constitution not only guarantees our right to freedom of religion, but it’s also been historically understood to draw a separation between church and state so that no one religion will be singled out by our government, whether for good or for bad.

But isn’t there something that just rings a little strange about that? A lot of American Christians might be tempted to believe that the separation of church and state is really an un-Christian principle, if not an outright anti-Christian principle. I mean after all, if this really is a Christian nation, or if ours is the only true religion and the only true God, then shouldn’t we be trying to keep him a part *of* everything, rather than apart *from* everything?

Actually no. In this case, that’s the way God always intended it to work in the real world. See, when we talk about a separation of church and state, we’re not talking about keeping God out of anything, as such. What we mean is that God has assigned to both the church and to the state their own distinct purposes and tools, and so these two establishments, these two kingdoms should never be mixed or confused. Neither church nor state should try to do the work of the other, neither should ask the other to do its own work, and neither should seek to accomplish its own unique purposes by using the other’s tools. And in our lesson for today from Romans, Paul makes it clear exactly how God established government to work in this world. We’re going to see here that God’s two Kingdoms, the Church and the State, are separate from each other so that they can be blessings to each other. No, this isn’t a harmful or ungodly separation; it’s actually a mutually beneficial separation that’s based on God’s Word.

So maybe the most helpful thing we can do to understand why this separation of church and state is necessary is to go over what the differences and distinctions are between those two kingdoms. We’re going to see differences in who is a part of them, who leads them, what their mission is, and what tools they use to accomplish that mission.

So Paul starts out, “*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*” The first question is who is a part of each kingdom, Church and State. Well, the word “Church” means those who are “called out” of the darkness of this unbelieving world into the wonderful light of faith in Jesus Christ. So believers in Jesus are the ones who make up the Church. But when it comes to the State, Paul says, “*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities.*” In the State, there are believers and unbelievers all mixed together – people from every religion and

background and perspective there is. Some of those people recognize the true God and the Bible as authorities in their lives, but not everybody does.

So then that brings us to the next distinction between Church and State: who leads them. The Church is where *Christ* rules in human hearts by the Gospel; he is our head who shed his blood to bring us into his heavenly kingdom, he is our leader by faith in him as our Lord and Savior. But in the State, in a society where not everyone believes in Jesus, they need a different head to lead them – one that everyone will be subject to. And so Paul says here that that’s the *governing authorities* – king, emperor, Caesar, President, Governor, Mayor, you name it. In a world where not everyone see the true God’s power and authority over their lives, God provides representatives that they can see in the form of civil government. In a world where not everyone will do what’s right out of faith-filled love for God and their neighbor, then maybe at least they’ll do what’s right – or at least not do what’s wrong – because of possible rewards or punishments.

And that’s the difference between the way a believer looks at the law and the way an unbeliever looks at the law. We see God’s Law as a *guide* for how we can show our gratitude back to our Savior who has done so much for us first. But for an unbeliever, the law acts as a *curb*, as a restraint or deterrent to keep their behavior in line so that it preserves peace and order and prevents harm and danger. And that really gets at the third distinction between Church and State: what their mission is. The Church’s mission is to save souls by bringing them to faith in Jesus – it’s primarily an internal and eternal mission. But the mission of the state isn’t about what you think or believe or feel – no, it’s external and it’s temporal; it’s really only concerned about what you *do* here and now. As Paul says, “*Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good.*”

The Church’s mission is concerned with inward faith; the government’s mission is concerned with outward behavior and peace and order. So then the final distinction between Church and State is what tools they each use to accomplish those missions. As Paul said just a little earlier in the book of Romans, “*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ*” (10:17). The Gospel message that God shares with us through his Word and Sacraments is the only thing that has the power to work faith in Jesus in our hearts. Those are the tools of the Church – the Means of Grace: Holy Scripture, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. But again, since not everyone in the State is Christian, the State needs different tools to accomplish its purposes – it needs to find common ground for everyone, needs to speak a language that everyone can understand, and so basically the tools it uses to reach everyone are Reason and the Sword. The State uses Reason as one of its tools, because think about it: if you’ll be blessed by doing good but punished for doing bad, or if it’s clear that one course of action would be better than another for you and others in the long run, doesn’t it make sense that you should do what’s right, avoid what’s wrong, and make decisions that would be the most beneficial for the most people? I mean, even unbelievers can understand that!

But there are some who need a little more compulsion than just doing what's reasonable. And that's where the sword comes in. As Paul says, "*If you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*" In those days the sword was a symbol of authority and a weapon of death. It was used by soldiers to kill anyone or anything that posed a threat to their country or society. So when Paul says that rulers bear the sword, he's saying the government has a God-given right to carry out capital punishment and to wage just war if that's what it takes to protect the peace and safety of its people and the order and interests of society as a whole.

So hopefully it's becoming clear why a separation of Church and State is actually a mutually beneficial separation. Could the two kingdoms be more different? Put simply, Church and State are like oil and water. They're better apart; they aren't meant to be mixed, and when people try to force them to, it usually only causes trouble and difficulty. For example, in the Middle Ages and the Reformation period when the Roman Catholic Church or the followers of John Calvin tried to put the Church in charge of State affairs, what happened? Lots of people died because they didn't believe like they were "supposed" to believe, and the work of the Gospel suffered because it lost its proper focus. Or turn that around and think about State churches in Europe or how life works under Communism, for example. With State churches, the civil government required that all sorts of different churches work together, worship together, and abide by a certain set of teachings that was mandated by the ruler, rather than by faithfulness to the Bible. And under Communism, we all know too well how religion itself is outlawed and again, LOTS of people died. History shows us that nothing good happens when Church and State are mixed and confused, and normally it's the Church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ that take the biggest hit.

But what about closer to home in our lives right here and now? The principle of the separation of Church and State is pretty clear, but applying it isn't always easy in real life. So how can we do that in our school system, or in the military, or in matters of marriage and family? Well, public schools can't teach religion, can't teach Biblical morality, can't hold joint prayers, can't teach Creationism – and honestly, we shouldn't expect them to or want them to. God has given that work to the Church, and we carry it out in Worship and Bible study and Sunday School and Confirmation Class and family devotions at home. But just as surely, we carry out that work and we avoid those difficulties by operating our own school system. We operate Good Shepherd Preschool, we support St. Stephen's Elementary School, and we feed into our WELS high schools and colleges because we believe that learning about the creation around us can only be fully, truly done when we learn about the Creator and his Word right along with it.

So then what happens when the government offers a chaplaincy program to serve the spiritual needs of its military? That sounds like a noble cause, and it is – except that these government representatives are doing the work of the Church, and are required to do it only in a very general way that cannot be faithful to all the truth of the Bible. So what do we do? We call and send our

own chaplains who can be real pastors to our military personnel in the fully faithful way that our God wants for his people. And what happens when the Government starts to redefine what constitutes a marriage or the beginning of life and sanctions making and breaking relationships in a way that is anything but godly? The Church doesn't just roll over or give in. The Church preaches the truth about marriage and family, just as it always has – no matter how vehemently the rest of society objects – and it testifies to that truth publicly to help the Government and its people understand (as they do their *own* work!) that not only God's Word, but also even reason and natural law show that marriage and family is best and is blest when one man and one woman unite together for a lifetime and thereby provide a solid, loving home to raise their children.

Yes, the separation of Church and State is an important principle for life in a stable society. But it's not just mutually beneficial because bad things happen when it's ignored. No, this separation is mutually beneficial because God intends Church and State to be blessings to each other. The Church is a blessing to the State because we teach – as Paul does here – that our people should honor and obey their governing authorities as God's representatives, because our Biblical teaching promotes a morally upright and responsible citizenry, and because our people pay taxes to help support the government's vital work. All that will only help to benefit the welfare and security of our land and its leaders.

But then the State is also a blessing to the Church first of all for the basic fact that government is always better than anarchy. (And who could argue with that given the kind of unrest going on around our country lately?) Even if it's bad or unjust, functioning government always provides at least some measure of law and order in a society. And when a government is just and acts as God intends it to, it provides the kind of stability and freedom in society that allows us to live peaceful, pleasant lives and to faithfully worship and share Jesus that much more easily. In fact, the State's whole purpose is to do us good here in this world, Paul says! When the Church carries out its role properly, it bolsters up the authority of the State. And when the State carries out its role properly, the Church can fulfill Jesus' Great Commission that much better as well.

No, there is no shortage of cautionary tales in our history books that warn us about what happens when the separation of Church and State isn't maintained. It's nothing good – the mutual benefit fades away quickly, and sometimes painfully and violently. So hopefully that can help us appreciate all the more the blessings we've experienced here in America for the last 200+ years, where real, Biblical Christianity has been allowed to freely flourish and spread more than virtually anywhere else in world history. Friends, that's not *in spite of* a separation of Church and State. It's *because of* a separation of Church and State. That's the way God intended the real world to work best from early on, and that's the way it's truly most mutually beneficial. So let's honor our governing authorities as God's servants for our good, and let's be thankful most of all to God for our freedoms and for all the separate blessings he gives to us through Church and State, for now and forever. Amen.