



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.9 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Difference between Church and State

God has given governments great authority in this world – the authority to make laws and enforce them. But God has not given the government authority over the Word of God. When the authorities in Jerusalem tried to interfere with the preaching of the Gospel, Peter and John immediately objected to these restrictions. They said they would disobey the rulers' command regardless of the consequences. The Jerusalem authorities **“commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’”** (Acts 4:18-20). When they then were accused of disobeying government orders, **“Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men’”** (Acts 5:29).

In this world the followers of Jesus Christ have a higher Head than any governmental authority. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. God **“gave Him (Jesus) to be head over all things to the church”** (Ephesians 1:22). Christians are called to obey every governmental regulation, even those that are clearly foolish or unreasonable, except those that involve disobedience or disgrace to their Lord and Savior. In the days of the early Christians the governmental authority was the Roman Empire. When a question concerning Christianity came up before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, he handled it wisely. He said: **“If it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves, for I do not want to be a judge of such matters”** (Acts 18:15). He did not want to get involved in governing religion.

When Jesus was questioned by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, concerning His kingdom, Jesus replied: **“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here”** (John 18:36). Jesus did not deny that He was a king, but He denied that He was an earthly king. He did not rule over His kingdom by physical force. Jesus' kingdom functions through the speaking of spiritual truth.

When Jesus was questioned concerning the payment of taxes to the Romans, Jesus' response astounded His listeners: **“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's”** (Luke 20:25). Clearly church and state are two separate spheres and should remain that way in our thinking and practice.

The government rightly makes and enforces laws in order to accomplish its purpose: the punishment of criminals and the protection of the law-abiding. But Christ's Church does not make laws and enforce them by any type of physical punishment. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). God does His work through His Word. Through His word He converts, strengthens, rebukes, and comforts. The working of Christ's kingdom is compared to the sowing of good seed, which is the Word of God (Matthew 13:18-23).

Christians gather together and form organizations of various kinds with one chief aim: the preaching of the Word of God. It is not the Church's business to make rules for the world. The apostle Paul said:

“What have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). When those who are inside the Church – fellow-believers and fellow-confessors of Christ – go astray, the only weapon the Church has at its disposal is the Word. The farthest the church can to recover a straying Christian is exclusion or excommunication. This is taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-18 and practiced by the congregation in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

There are many different forms of government in this world. As Christians we should support whatever government is over us by respecting government officials, paying the taxes that are due, obeying all the laws that apply to us, with one big exception: we cannot put governmental authority above God and His Word. We must not let government intimidate us into disobeying our God and quieting our Christian witness. This does not mean that we should ever rebel against the government. It means that we should respectfully disobey human law in order to obey God, and respectfully submit to any punishment imposed on us for our disobedience, even to the point of death. But, no matter what our government does, God wants us always to pray **“for kings and all who are in authority”** (1 Timothy 2:2).

There have been times in history when Christ has blessed His Church with wise governments that have permitted the free preaching of the Gospel. At other times and places Christ has allowed governments to persecute or allow the persecution of Christians, even over many years. Since God works all things together for good to those whom He has called into His Church, we know that God uses both good governments and evil governments for the benefit of His believers. In the early years of Christian persecution under the Roman Empire, one Christian leader stated: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” That has proved to be true in the past, and it is still true today in many places. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome because of his Christian testimony, he wrote to his Christian friends in Philippi: **“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel”** (Philippians 1:12).

In the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the preaching of the Gospel was supported by many leaders in civil government. Nevertheless, Martin Luther and his associates clearly taught the Biblical truth of the distinction between church and state. But in the years that followed, the Lutherans in various European countries allowed the government to wield too much control over church affairs. When Lutherans migrated to the United States and other countries, however, they were able in many cases to enjoy the blessings of separation between church and state. Whether such blessings will continue is in God’s hands. We know there are many countries in the world today that persecute Christians to one degree or another. We need to support such Christians in whatever way we can.

The *Augsburg Confession* discusses the distinction between church and state in Articles XVI and XXVIII. We print a small portion of Article XXVIII here: *“Our people have been compelled, for the sake of comforting consciences, to indicate the difference between spiritual and secular power, sword, and authority. They have taught that, for the sake of God’s command, everyone should honor and esteem with all reverence both authorities and powers as the two highest gifts of God on earth. Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power of God and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sins, and to administrate and distribute the sacraments... Secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 92).

Questions

1. Why did Peter and John deliberately disobey the Jerusalem authorities?
2. Why did the proconsul Gallio refuse to give judgment on the matter before him?
3. How did Jesus distinguish between His kingdom and earthly kingdoms?
4. What does Jesus use to rule in His kingdom?
5. Which weapons should the Church refuse to use in its work?
6. What is the function of Christ's Church?
7. What is the function of secular government?
8. What did Paul mean when he talked about those inside and those outside?
9. What is the strongest discipline the Christian Church can use?
10. Are there any forms of secular government that have been ordered by God? Explain your answer.
11. What kind of secular government is in power in your locale?
12. To what extent should you obey this government?
13. How should a Christian react to persecution from the government?
14. What should secular government do when Christians are being persecuted?
15. What should secular government do when Muslims are being persecuted?
16. What mistake was made by European Lutherans regarding the distinction between church and state?