



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 13.13 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

#### Church and State

In the Old Testament the descendants of Jacob (Israel) were not only the people of God (the Church) but were also a nation, a government, a state. The nation of Israel was a *theocracy* in which God Himself was the ruler who gave the people not only the moral law, but also civil laws for the state, and ceremonial laws for their worship. At first God appointed Moses as their leader, followed by Joshua. In the period of the judges there was often disorder in the land, because **“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”** (Judges 21:25). From time to time God sent them deliverers (the judges) who saved them from their enemies and exercised authority in the land. The last of the judges was the prophet Samuel.

When the people asked for a king to be their ruler, God told Samuel to anoint Saul as king. When Saul failed to listen to God’s orders, God told Samuel to anoint David as king, and from that time on, David and his descendants ruled under God as kings in Jerusalem. Even then there was a kind of division between church and state, for the high priest was God’s appointed head in matters of worship, and the king was God’s appointed head in matters of civil government.

The Jewish priesthood continued until the time of Christ and beyond, until the Roman government destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. There was also a seventy-year period when the priesthood did not function normally, because of the Babylonian captivity. The royal government under David’s family continued until the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem around the year 600 BC. After that time the royal family of David still existed, but it did not wield any earthly authority until the great Son of David, Jesus Christ, came into the world. The angel Gabriel informed His mother Mary before He was born: **“You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end”** (Luke 1:31-33). Jesus is now the Head of His Church, and the King of His people and all peoples, having **“all authority ... in heaven and on earth”** (Matthew 28:18).

Since Jesus was the Son of David, who had been an earthly king, many Jews, including His own devoted followers, expected Jesus to be an earthly king and restore Israel’s earthly power, as in the days of David and Solomon. But Jesus testified at His trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate: **“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). Because Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, we should not expect to find the same system in the New Testament that prevailed in the Old Testament. In the New Testament there is a distinct division between state and church. There are two kinds of authority, and it is important to distinguish them from one another.

Civil government gets its authority from God. When Pilate said to Jesus: **“Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?”**, **“Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above’”** (John 19:10-11). All earthly government gets its power from God.

The apostle Paul explained this at length to the Christians in Rome. **“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. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:1-7).

God gives the ruling government, whatever kind it may be, the authority to punish evildoers and reward those who are obedient. There is no specific type of government that has been established by God. The ruling authorities are "**the authorities that exist**", that is, those authorities that actually have the power in the land. This may be a dictatorship, a kingdom, a republic, a democracy, or any other type of government. It is the Christian's duty to honor whatever government they are under, pay taxes, obey the laws, and accept punishment if they have broken the laws. The only exception is when the government's commands conflict with the plain Word of God. In that case the Christian says with Peter: "**We ought to obey God rather than men**" (Acts 5:29), and the Christian accepts the consequences, even to the point of death.

The Church of Christ has an altogether different job from the secular state. Its assignment is to work with the Word of God: to preach law and Gospel, administer the sacraments, spread the Gospel to other places, and strengthen and train the believers in doing the will of God. The civil government makes laws, enforces them, and punishes the disobedient. But the Church has no such authority to punish the disobedient. Paul says: "**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). In other words, the only weapon the Church has is the Word of God and the spiritual resources listed in Ephesians 6:13-18. The Church also needs to obey the laws of the state, unless the state forbids what God has commanded or commands what God has forbidden.

In the history of the church the proper separation of church and state has rarely been practiced. At some points in history the church has exercised power over civil government or asked the government to enforce the resolutions of the church. Roman Catholicism claims that the Roman pope has power over both church and state. On the other hand, it has often happened that the state has controlled the church, having both civil and religious authority. The United States has been one of the only countries in the world where a kind of separation has been attempted and has existed over a long period of time, to the benefit of both church and state. At the present time, however, the separation that has prevailed in the past is being threatened by powers that do not understand the right distinction between church and state.

Martin Luther and some of our Lutheran fathers understood this distinction very well. For example, the *Augsburg Confession* states in Article XXVIII: "*Inasmuch as the power of the church or of the bishops bestows eternal benefits and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with public order and secular authority. For 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. That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular. For spiritual power has its command to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs. ... Our people distinguish the offices of the two authorities and powers and direct that both be honored as the highest gifts of God on earth*" (Book of Concord, Kolb- Wengert Edition, p. 92).

The Lutheran churches in Europe, however, were unable to fully put into practice a separation between church and state. The government gradually took over more and more of the duties of the church. When the leaders in the state were themselves confessing orthodox Christians, the Lord used them for the benefit of His Church. However, throughout history, the concept of a state church has largely proved detrimental to the Lord's kingdom.

In many countries today Christians in general and Christian churches in particular are persecuted and hindered in their Christian work in one way or another. But our Lord Jesus is in control of all world events and all governments and promises to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

### Questions

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1. What is a theocracy?
2. In the Old Testament who was in charge of the ceremonial worship?
3. Why was King Saul rejected by God?
4. What happened to the royal family of David?
5. How was God's promise to David of an eternal kingdom fulfilled?
6. What did Jesus say about His kingdom when He was on trial?
7. What is the main duty of the government?
8. If there is civil war, how do we know which government to honor?
9. How does the duty of the church differ from the duty of the state?
10. Has any form of civil government been commanded by God? Explain.
11. What is the main duty of the church?
12. What do Lutherans confess in the Augsburg Confession concerning the distinction between church and state?
13. What form of civil government is in power in your locale?
14. What is the relationship between church and state in your locale?