

Church & State: Luther's 2 Kingdoms

Titus 3:1-8

A little history. Article Six of the United States Constitution (September 17, 1787) specifies that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

Over a decade later (December 15, 1791), the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution. Here is the full text of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Nevertheless, the Danbury Baptists found themselves struggling as a minority religion. They liked what Thomas Jefferson had said about keeping the government out of the church. So when he was elected the 3rd president in 1801, they sent a congratulatory letter. It is in Jefferson's reply on January 1, 1802 we find the famous “wall of separation between Church and State” of his first in writing.

The Supreme Court has further defined Jefferson's idea. In *Reynolds v. United States (1879)* the Court wrote that Jefferson's comments “may be accepted almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect of the [First] Amendment.” Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, in *Everson v Board of Education (1947)*, built Jefferson's metaphor into a high and impregnable wall meant to keep the Church out of the state. He wrote, “In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and state.”

When is it a good idea to keep the Church out of the state's God-given business?

In what areas is it healthy for the Church to have influence on the government, especially in a self-governing country like the United States?

Where might it be beneficial for the state to be able to step into religious affairs?

Martin Luther's Two Kingdoms Theology

Founding fathers such as James Madison were deeply indebted to Martin Luther's "Two Kingdoms Theology." According to this teaching, God is active in both the realm of the state (the left-hand kingdom) and the realm of the Church (the right-hand kingdom). Through the state God brings law and order to society (Romans 13:1-7); through His Church He brings forgiveness and faith through Jesus Christ His Son (Luke 24:44-48). Neither "kingdom" can function well without the other. However, the "kingdoms" should never be co-mingled; nor should the state try to be the Church, nor the Church try to be the state.

Why is it important to remember that God is active in both the Church and the state?

Why is it important for Christians to be active members of both Church and state?

What might happen if the "kingdoms" were to be co-mingled? Or the state tries to be the Church? Or the Church tries to be the state?

Read Titus 3:1-8.

What benefits does it bring to society when Christians follow these reminders?

What are some ways Christians can bring godly living into public debate?

People have strong opinions when asked the question, "Is America a Christian nation?" Some cite the motto on our currency, "In God We Trust," and the words of our Pledge of Allegiance, "one Nation under God," to argue we are. Others argue those terms were incorporated much later in the Civil War (currency) and the 1950s (Pledge). They appeal to the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli to argue that from the start we never considered ourselves a Christian nation: "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion"

What pros and cons come out of America's freedom of religion?

If we argue America is a Christian nation, and we recognize the freedom of religion allowed by the First Amendment, how do we “make room” for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists, etc.?

In Jesus’ day, Rome was fairly tolerant of different religions. It only set itself in opposition to those religions that attacked social values or Roman law. Paul never asked Roman officials to help spread the Christian faith, but he wasn’t afraid to use his Roman citizenship to open doors to share the Gospel.

Standing before King Agrippa II, Paul only asks for the ability to share the Gospel and for all people to be able to hear him so that they might become believers (Acts 26).

Throughout U.S. history, the U.S. Supreme Court has made many rulings favorable to Christianity. Still, sometimes it’s wiser to keep government separate from church affairs and not involve it in religious matters.

How might government best assist Christianity in America today?

What risks do we take when we seek government intervention on behalf of Christianity?

Over the years, there has been a lot of debate on whether the state should be involved in meeting social needs, or if that effort should stay with churches, where it once solely resided. It is seen by some as pulling down the “Wall of Separation”, a co-mingling of Luther’s “Two Kingdoms” for the state to become involved in such matters.

Why is it often better for churches to provide for people’s social needs than for the state?

What resources might the state offer that churches can’t?

Is there a way for both to live and work in harmony, as Luther envisioned?

It's often been said that the best way for the Church and state to work in unity is on the local level. This is probably closer to what Luther's intentions were for his "Two Kingdoms Theology." During his day, princes and kings ruled. And while his teachings could be implemented by the ruling class, much of the day-to-day governance was local. The same is still true for us in America today. While we have a say in who our "king" will be, much of the day-to-day governance is local. This is where the Church and state intersect for most of us.

What are some opportunities and needs we, as St. Paul, can meet to help improve life in our community?

How might our local "state" and our local "church" work in harmony?

In closing, regardless of how the state is doing, God urges us to pray continually for them. As Paul writes to Timothy, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

That is the reason we pray for good government; so that the Church can peacefully and freely do her work of proclaiming the Gospel so that all people can be saved. If the state (left-hand kingdom) does her job in a godly manner, then the Church (right-hand kingdom) is able to do her job in a godly manner. But even if the Church and state are not working in harmony, as is usually the case, God's Will will still be done.

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Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State, by Daniel Dreisbach, Copyright © September 1, 2002, NYU Press.