

SESSION 2: STUDENT

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOD'S TWO MODES OF RULING

OPENING

The powers ordained by Thee
With heavenly wisdom bless;
May they Thy servants be
And rule in righteousness.
O Lord, stretch forth Thy mighty hand
And guard and bless our Fatherland.

—“To Thee, Our God, We Fly” (TLH 580:4)

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin was disappointed in one Philadelphia pastor’s preaching.¹ He mused that the preacher seemed to aim at making members for that church rather than making good citizens. Franklin wished for the latter.

In America, roots run deep and come from more than one direction for the notion that churches should be about creating civilization and refining society. Besides moralists who were at best reserved toward the Christian message like Franklin, churches in the Reformed tradition believe that the kingdom of God comes to expression wherever order is brought to the world.

What can happen if churches are supposed to be about creating civilization and refining society? They are tempted to play some role in government, regardless of “separation of church and state.”

By contrast, the Augsburg Confession, the basic sixteenth-century confessional statement of Lutherans worldwide, maintains that “the Church has the authority to grant eternal things and exercises this authority only by the ministry of the Word. So it does not interfere with civil government anymore [*sic*] than the art of singing interferes with civil government” (Augsburg Confession XXVIII 10). The Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession adds: “Neither does the Gospel offer new laws about the public state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathens or by others” (Ap XVI 55).

Nowadays, God’s will for such basics as respect for life and for marriage is being recognized less and less in our country. God’s Law is disobeyed, and His creative intent is disregarded. In such situations, the church might seek to step into responsibilities to which she has not been called. But

¹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1964), 147, as cited by H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (Doubleday, 2000), 142.

this impulse should be resisted. As we recognize the authority of God's Word (see session 1), it is important also to recognize *to whom* He gives various instructions. As the Augsburg Confession put it, on the basis of Scripture: "the Church's authority and the State's authority must not be confused. The Church's authority has its own commission to teach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. . . . Let it not break into the office of another. . . . As Christ says, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Also, 'Who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?' (Luke 12:14)" (AC XXVIII 12–15).

From the foregoing, we can begin to see that God rules in this world in two ways. His two modes of ruling should be distinguished from each other. He remains Lord in each, yet He does exercise His rule in two distinct ways. These two ways correspond to the two basic messages of His Word: Law and Gospel.

QUESTIONS

Q1. In session 1, we noted that there is more than one way to make the case for the lives of the unborn. Besides biblical arguments mentioned in session 1, what else can be said in defense of the unborn? Why is this an especially important point in our nation today?

Q2. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," said our Lord, "and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Jesus did not prohibit submitting to Caesar because Caesar did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Take a quick look, on one hand, at Romans 13:1–7 and, on the other, at Matthew 28:18–20 and Ephesians 2:19–22. In this session, we are observing God's "left-hand" rule chiefly as exercised through government and God's "right-hand" rule exercised through His Church. What differences do you find between them as to (a) their respective purposes; (b) their respective tools; and (c) what makes for a "model person" in each?

Q3. While we distinguish between God's two modes of rule, there is another distinction to observe. In Old Testament times, God had a specific nation, Israel, to which He gave not only moral laws but also ceremonial and civil laws. But in the New Testament, He no longer specifies such a nation. Laws He gave particularly to Israel do not apply to New Testament believers—e.g., prohibitions on eating pork (Deuteronomy 14:8), on plowing with an ox and a donkey together (Deuteronomy 22:10), on fabrics made with a mixture of wool and linen (Deuteronomy 22:11), or

of working on Saturdays (Sabbaths). Even the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. St. Paul wrote: “Let no one pass judgment on you . . . with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Colossians 2:16; also, see Large Catechism I 80–82). We distinguish within Scripture between laws that God gave particularly to Israel and His moral Law. (God’s moral Law, basically identical with the Ten Commandments, sums up the natural Law that He built into creation for everyone.) Why is this distinction important for Christian citizens in America?

Q4. Christian citizens do best to champion in society various biblical moral teachings that can be shown to be necessary for society. (Think back to what your group said in response to the last two questions, and notice: Christians should do this as *citizens*, not churches as churches, and these Christian citizens should not try to legislate details of Old Testament law.) Why is it important for us to concentrate on matters of social necessity—for example, defending the unborn?

Q5. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, teaches that marriage is the union of a man and a woman (see Genesis 2:24–25 and Mark 10:6–9). Are there also nonbiblical arguments that can be made in support of this position? If so, what might they be?

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the Reformation differently. Luther noted that, yes, he taught the Word of God, but the Word did its work of reaching hearts and overthrowing works-righteousness while he was sleeping or drinking beer with his friends.² By contrast, Calvin on his deathbed reportedly recalled that when he first came to Geneva the Reformation was not yet there;

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 77.

the Genevans were just preaching the Gospel.³ To Calvin, “just” preaching the Gospel was not a bad thing, but it was not enough—God’s Law was not yet being obeyed as much as it could be. For Luther, the preaching of the Gospel stood out as all-important. To Calvin, though, there was no Reformation until reform had occurred in society, too, including the government. This difference illustrates what happens when God’s two modes of ruling are not carefully kept distinct. In Calvin’s view, human works can come to have a place in bringing about God’s kingdom, and, as a result, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ becomes obscured. We should distinguish between God’s two modes of ruling, above all, for the sake of the Gospel.

Yet while we *distinguish* these two modes of ruling, we cannot *separate* them, especially not in the person of the Christian citizen. The Christian who is a citizen wears two hats simultaneously. It is not for the church as church, but rather for Christian citizens as citizens to put moral principles into practice in the public square. Session 4 of this course will address how this can be done.

Understanding the distinction between God’s two modes of governance equips Lutherans particularly well to function within a “separation of church and state.” We heed Scripture as the standard for faith and life, for it is God’s Word. At the same time, as citizens of our nation we use reason and natural law to defend moral standards.

In America, citizens are not only under the government but also in certain senses above it. To that distinction we will turn next time.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

³ *Corpus Reformatorum: Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by W. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke et filius, 1863–1900), 37:891–92.