

THE BODY OF CHRIST AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

“The Meeting of the Two Kingdoms and the Unfortunate Assumptions”

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I. Introduction – Why hold a Conference on Religious Liberty?

To begin, it is necessary for us to understand why a church which calls itself “Confessional” might hold such a conference (this being our fifth in three years) that treads within the borderlands of the political sphere even in light of the sometimes subtle and other times obvious criticisms of a small number of clergy and lay leaders from both within and without of the fellowship.

Speaking as a Confessional Lutheran pastor—which means that I am one who holds to the historic rites and ceremonies of the Church of all ages as the best, most Biblically sound model for Holy Worship; one who confesses the Word of God as the “Norma Normans,” that is, the normative standard and the only infallible rule for faith and practice; one who holds concretely to the “Norma Normata,” that is, the normed norm of the Lutheran Confessions, as a true exposition of the Word of God—as a Confessional Lutheran pastor, it is troubling to me the fortitude of opposition against holding such an assembly.

“You, pastor, preach and teach the Word. Administer the Sacraments. Never mind such subjects as abortion, homosexuality, religious liberty. And whatever you do, don’t hover too closely to politics. God is in charge. He will sort those things out.” This sounds good. And in a sense, it is true. Pastors are to preach and teach the Word of the Gospel rightly and to administer the Sacraments according to Christ’s command. And yet, there is a tendency that may be observed. I refer to it as “Confessional Apathy.” It is easy enough to preach and teach the Gospel as well as administer the Sacraments according to Christ’s command without recognizing the gravitational pull of the need to carry forth into the world where these divine actions matter, that is, where they create and sustain a people prepared to interface with sin, death, and the power of the devil. It is, quite simply, foolishness to assert that it is not tolerable for a pastor (or a church) to engage on particular fronts deemed “political” because it would be to assume that even as the preaching of Christ and His forgiveness is the primary concern of the pulpit, it is somehow the property and therefore the duty of the Kingdom of the Left to determine which topics fall within the

boundaries of the life of faith produced by the Gospel and the need for its preaching. The Church's pulpits are not to be filled with (as Reverend Mark Surburg has asserted) "Soft Antinomians"—that is, those who preach the Good News of forgiveness but do not preach, foster, encourage, urge, or teach the fruits of faith produced by such forgiveness—whether or not they be associated with a popular political agenda. Soft Antinomians regularly fall short of carrying the listener forth and into the practical substance of the statement that it is only by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel that the fruits of faith are able to sprout and grow.

II. The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms

Therefore, in order to further grasp the reasoning for maintaining such a heading and the importance of continuing such a conference as this, it is, of course, necessary to understand the Lutheran doctrine (actually, I should say Biblical, universal, and objective doctrine—which is also to say that it is an abiding truth whether or not a Christian church acknowledges it by way of their public confession), it is first necessary to apprehend what a majority of Americans may consider as "The Wall of Separation of Church and State" but what the Church actually knows more accurately by way of the Holy Scriptures as "The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms."

First, it is important to know that this truth is abiding dogma first and foremost because it is established by the Word of God. Second, it is Christological. And third, if Christological, then it deals with salvation—which means that it dwells within the systematic framework of all that Christ has given to His Church by way of His Holy Word in order that the world and all who dwell in it would know, first, the inescapable contours of the fellowship of human depravity, and second, would know the person and work of the One, Jesus Christ, the Holy Son of God sent by the Father full of grace and truth to redeem the world.

Now, to a definition.

The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, that is the Kingdom of the Right Hand and the Kingdom of the Left Hand, is easily understood in the following way:

The Kingdom of the Right Hand is the power and command of God given to the Church to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments for the forgiveness of sins. It is by the rule of this Kingdom that Christians are made. It is by the rule of this Kingdom that mankind is offered the forgiveness of sins. It is by the rule of this Kingdom that the Church is nourished with unearthly sustenance—Word and Sacrament—for standing against the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh. It is by the rule of this Kingdom that Christians are recreated to exist as citizens of a heavenly Kingdom and yet recognize and are found concerned for the rule of another Kingdom—the Kingdom of the Left Hand.

The Kingdom of the Left Hand is the domain of the temporal or secular government (Romans 13:3-4). Its purpose is to enforce and maintain order for the general welfare of humanity. Our Lutheran Confessions, for example, the Augsburg Confession, Article 16, rightly teaches that “all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order...” This temporal power, as Article 28 continues, is not in place to “protect the soul, but with the sword and physical penalties it protects body and goods from the power of others.”

Both kingdoms are gifts of God. Both are undeniably under the supreme rule of Christ, the One who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father as ruler over all things. Both are distinct in their purposes. The Right Hand Kingdom flexes the Gospel muscle of Christ’s mercy in order that, as has been stated already, the world might know Him and be rescued from sin. God has established the Left Hand Kingdom as it flexes the muscle of the Law in order to provide order, curb sin in this fallen world, and to stem chaos.

But this isn’t the end of the story as it meets us today. Dogma carries forth into practice, and so, for example, our Lord by His Holy Word given through the inspired writer, Saint Paul, speaks of an interfacing borderland of these two Kingdoms in which the Christian Church and the individual Christians that comprise her, are not only encouraged, but also mandated to dwell.

An example for this may be found In 1 Timothy chapter 2, where the Apostle Paul writes:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions (*ὑπεροχῆ*—*eminence or authority*), 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 to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. (vv. 1-6)

Here in this text, Christians have been given instruction by God to pray, intercede and give thanks “for kings and all who are in high positions” of authority within the Kingdom of the Left.

And why is this? Saint Paul answers our question: So that the Christians “may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (V. 2B). Paul continues that this “is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior” (V. 3).

With this, we are taught to pray and to intercede (*ἐντεύξεις*—*appeal through dialogue, discuss by interview*) on behalf of those who hold seats of authority within the Kingdom of the Left. The action is both vertical and horizontal—vertical as it relates to God, and horizontal as it relates with those holding earthly authority. Neither Christian nor non-Christian ruler is specified in the engagement.

Paul continues that the purpose for doing this is in order that something in particular might be secured among us: peacefully led, Godly and dignified lives.

But to what end does it please God that His Christians live in peace and Godly dignity while working to maintain Godly government, as Saint Paul notes in Romans 13? Again, Paul answers the question in the text. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” And then Paul proclaims that truth with precision in the final verse of the text: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...”

By way of this example, we learn that that the Church and her members are to engage in the public square; that is, we actively intercede in the midst of the Kingdom of the Left, horizontally mindful in our work toward encouraging legislation and governance that is in alignment with the will of God revealed in the Scriptures. In our present form of government this takes the legitimate form of elections, lobbying, and the like. We do not do this work because we are seeking to be “Dominionists”—that is to say that we believe that only Christians are capable of holding office and ruling faithfully. Time and time again we see how this is simply not true. Instead, we actively interface with the Kingdom of the Left in order to do exactly as Saint Paul has instructed: to establish and maintain a public context that provides for the Christian Church to exist peacefully so that the field remains set for the Gospel to be given freely—whenever and to whomever we choose—and without fear.

This is why the Church engages in the public square. We pray and we labor for Christian religious liberty—a context where Christ’s message is given room to dominate as the Lord allows, not for the rising domination of the ones who bring the message. We rise up from prayer as servants, emboldened by the promise of the Lord that we will always have His care, and by the power of the Holy Spirit alive in us by the Gospel, we strive actively to do what we can as we meet in the public square and accomplish and maintain what the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul has given as our Christian duty in the Kingdom of the Left. We actively work to serve and support government toward the maintaining of its ordained purpose while praying and working for the repentance and amending of those in authority who violate the government’s ordination when they brazenly work to stifle the Church’s freedom to proclaim Christ and live in peace according to His mandates.

In summary, then, Christians are not seeking to take control of the government, but rather are showing themselves to be prayerful, mindful, and actively concerned. And it is a concern for the Kingdom of the Left that arises from our citizenship in the Kingdom of the Right. Christians desire public servants—Christian or otherwise—who most closely parallel the Word of God, or at a minimum, work with eyes set upon governance which serves to provide for the Christian Church to exist in peace and quietness while enjoying an unhindered freedom to communicate the Gospel truth to all.

III. The Tragic Assumptions

Now, even though I am the orchestrator of this conference, my time on stage is the most limited of all and I must get to my next point without much of a transition.

Pastors, teachers, lay leaders: You are on the forefront of this effort and I encourage you to consider the following.

By way of a practical example, I received a phone call from a former member of this congregation a little over two years ago. This member was not necessarily regular in her attendance, but she did attend often enough that I never found myself in a concerned conversation. She left a message on my voicemail, but it was one of those types of messages that when you hear it, even though nothing is spoken precisely with regard to the reason for the call, you know it isn't going to be good. I returned her call right away. Although she couldn't tell me exactly why, in a general sense, she wanted me to know that she considered me to be a rotten pastor and that ever since the departure of my predecessor, she hadn't appreciated anything about this church or my efforts to serve her. But eventually, after listening for a little while and asking some questions, I discovered a window into the room that housed the innards of her tightly-locked concern. And what she so unabashedly revealed was so much more devastating than the personal attacks.

She let loose her cannons and told me that she didn't appreciate hearing about what she called "politicized topics." Although I never preach topical sermons (that is I don't come to the sermon process with the intention of writing a sermon on stewardship, or faith, or whatever), I do spend time wrestling with those topics as they arise from whichever text is prescribed by the lectionary. Again, in other words, if for example the text is Luke 7, then I preach on the contents of Luke 7. If there are obvious indicators in the text for particular avenues such as stewardship, or pro-life, or homosexuality, then I will speak to them. Nothing is forced. It is an exegetical exercise. It is always in the text and never imposed upon it from the outside.

In her words, she didn't want to hear a sermon, read a letter, or sit in a study that discussed the Church's positions on political topics like abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism, most especially if they were being presented as sinful. In her mind, by speaking to these issues, not only was I politicizing her church, but she wanted me to know

that if indeed the Bible and the Church understood these ways of life as sinful, she happened to have contrary opinions and it offended her greatly to hear otherwise. It would seem that a congregational letter I'd recently sent which merely relayed information presented by our Synodical President regarding the topic of religious liberty and its infringement by more liberal forces was the final straw and she was now asking to be dismissed from church membership. I urged her to reconsider and asked to meet with her in person to talk it through in more detail. She refused. I encouraged her to retain her membership at least until she found another LCMS congregation to which she might transfer. Although she hinted at possibly joining the "other synod" (meaning ELCA) where they, by their official confession, publically affirm homosexuality and claim a position as pro-choice, she did ultimately decide that retaining her membership until she could find another LCMS church to her liking would be the better course. And so, as the conversation came to an end, she once again affirmed her dislike for me, reminded me that I am nothing like my predecessor, and then pressed again that she wanted nothing more to do with this congregation in which she had held her membership for over 25 years. Then she hung up.

I share this interaction with you for a reason.

Just like everyone else, Pastors get into routines. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but in the context of the scenario I shared, I came to the realization that I'd been approaching the preaching and teaching task making some tragic assumptions about the people in my care. There are at least three mistakes in particular that I can share with you as they relate to the topic of the Two Kingdoms and Pastors and the efforts of churches to engage in the public square.

The first mistake is to assume that the person in the pew is actually an "objective" listener who sees and hears the preacher as one called and sent by God. Not that I expect everyone to agree with everything I say all of the time. In fact, there are people in this room right now who disagree with me often, and it is the duty of every Christian to listen carefully and to discern. Nevertheless, the faithful pastor understands that he is tasked with giving a message, a full message, an objective truth, one that comes from outside of himself, one that comes from something other than his opinion and is an expression of Divine import. It is possible that pastor's grow somewhat indolent in a sense, assuming that the listener is one who recognizes and admits unquestionable alignment with the objective truth being preached and is not necessarily as affected or influenced by his own subjective opinion. I had taken it for granted that the listener is actually able and willing to bend his subjective opinion to align with the objective truth he is hearing from the pulpit, in congregation letters, and Bible study. In other words, I am admitting to going about my work mistakenly assuming that the listener is in fact able to ask "What is God saying to me through His servant by way of His holy Word?" as opposed to actually asking "How will I assimilate what God is saying to me through His pastor into what I already believe to be

true so that I can continue to do what I am doing and believe what I believe?” Being someone in a profession established by God to meet face to face with the sin-nature on a regular basis, it is probably better for me to assume that a whole lot of my listeners are predisposed to the latter rather than the former.

The second tragic assumption is to think that because the listener is a regular, longtime “church-goer” in an LCMS church, he is most likely a “Biblical conservative” and relatively aligned with the public confession of the church body in which he has held his membership for so many years. Yes, on paper the LCMS holds a very different public confession than that of, say, the ELCA, but to assume that the members of my congregation systematically believe what the LCMS believes as opposed to the ELCA is very dangerous. In so many ways, postmodernism appears to be blurring these types of distinctions, and as a result, the Biblical “givens” that we often take for granted—texts that shape our positions on topics like abortion or homosexuality—are not only unknown, but already muddled by the cultural ethos and considered out-of-bounds. Being associated with a particular synod or fellowship may not necessarily mean all that much anymore to most folks, at least not as much as it used to. A pastor’s vigilance is required here, too, and it is closely connected to my third observation.

Although as a pastor I do a lot of teaching, the third tragic assumption is to think that outside of the many opportunities for study offered in this place, the listener actually reads his Bible on his own and holds enough familiarity with the contents that certain topics, no matter how controversial they are to everyone else, are no-brainers for Christians. For example, it would seem to be a no-brainer that issues of religious liberty infringement, or abortion, or the homosexual agenda are ungodly, and yet I began this particular portion of my paper by sharing with you a startling phone conversation with a veteran LCMS Lutheran in a Confessionally conservative congregation admitting that she doesn’t necessarily believe that the Bible presents God as “pro-life.” In fact, she doesn’t really think that the Bible has anything to say about the topic at all. She did not learn this from the Bible, but rather the culture.

IV. Valid Assumptions

Now, to make my way toward a conclusion. Pastors may very well be accused of politicizing the Church, as stewards of the mysteries of God in the Kingdom of the Right, for becoming engaged with the religious liberty issues at the podium of the Kingdom of the Left. Knowing this, if we LCMS pastors are to assume anything about the people in our care, perhaps we should be assuming that it is more than likely they truly are postmodernists—they are affected by politics, culture, and generational biases, and as church-goers, may very well be conservative in name only.

With regard to identity, especially here in America where we have a strange mixture of culture and Church that matches the same strange mixture of culture and patriotism – in the sense of culture and Church, we see entire denominations claiming Christ as preeminent and yet doing whatever they can to speak and act and be indistinguishable from the world around them—whether it be through laser light rock shows in worship that work deliberately to rival popular entertainment venues or the ordination of homosexual priests, both have begun down a treacherous slope of becoming indistinguishable from a world in which they are to shine brightly with distinction as lights in an otherwise dark place. It is the same, in a sense, with regard to culture and our patriotism. The Christians sitting in our own pews call themselves Christians while simultaneously subscribing to a rather conflicting liberalism of “freedom”, “destiny”, and “choice” ideology. To highlight the point, consider Stanley Hauerwas’ words in his book *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching*. Hauerwas argues that it is the subjective notion of liberalism to develop “arrangements without memory.” He writes:

Thus my claim that modernity names the attempt to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they chose when they had no story. This is called “freedom,” and it is assumed that such an account of freedom is necessary to sustain an account of morality that cannot acknowledge that we live by gift.

William H. Willimon speaks similarly in his book *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*:

(A)ll our talk of “freedom” is but the rattling of the chains binding us to the authoritarianism of a liberal, democratic culture, a culture that, whether it is intended to do so or not, destroys human community by fragmenting us into a herd of isolated units, each detached from tradition, community, history, and one another, all the while telling us that we are free (*individuals*). Ironically, in such conditions, detached from sources of true meaning, we have not gained our individuality but have lost it, for true individualism comes only for someone who knows and can name who he is. Of course, the democratic Empire now knows what the monarchs of old did not: detached, rootless, historyless individuals are more easily managed than people in groups, people who have names, stories, histories, and a home.

Both Hauerwas and Willimon are onto something here.

First off, those in the secular world and who are largely at the helm in American politics can win their case against the Church in the minds of people simply by making sure that each congregant carries the ideas of individual liberty into and imposes them upon the Church. In other words, if you don’t like the doctrine, if it offends you, then it must be against all that we are as Americans and must be crushed.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Hauerwas and Willimon show that within the Kingdom of the Right, the Body of Christ—the Church—is our name, story, history, and home. And as believers, we know that whether or not you are one of us, if you are human, you already have a story and you are bound by it to others around you whether you believe it or not.

But Hauerwas and Willimon are also inferring a troubling unfortunate—that whether you are Christian or even just human, living in the current age, it may be likely that you not only don't believe any of this, but you don't "want" to believe it and you are inclined to struggle against it as a Freedom loving American.

These are our listeners—a huge group of "individuals" sitting in the pews disconnected from one another and perfectly content with devising their own truths and politely giving room for the truths of others, no matter what the collective narrative may actually be, no matter what the objective truth may be.

If we as pastors are not teaching our common narrative in order that it would stand firmly in the ever-encroaching advance of forces desiring to consume religious liberty, we are failing our people.

And so, what is the solution? Well, rest assured that it hasn't changed since the beginning of man. Teaching. The solution for this is to be well grounded in the Word of God, in the Lutheran Confessions (or the public confessions of your particular denomination) in order that catechesis may remain constant and full, and while this catechizing is happening, it is necessary for us to be more mindful of the cultural undertow and the political pulse, while actively urging the catechumens toward the truth that they are actually blessed to be slaves to a narrative that comes from outside rather than from within, the Biblical narrative, the Word of God that shapes them and not the other way around. It's easy for us to be Confessionally apathetic and assume that our listeners understand the Two Kingdoms doctrine and the importance of rightly interfacing with the world around us because they already agree with everything that comes out our mouths, but in reality, unless our listeners communicate otherwise, we must be preaching and teaching according to the assumption that this is less and less likely to be true. And with that, we must urge them as pastors—as leaders—to stand firm, to engage, to get in the game because not only are the stakes high, but because it is a freedom accounted to the Christian to do so, and as Paul highlighted for the young Pastor Timothy—it is pleasing to God.