ON CHURCH AND STATE

Not in Vain

The Sword, the Word, and a Solution God Did Give

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com

A post from the Wretched Network made the rounds this week, seen well over a hundred thousand times in its first few days:

> "It is easy to be frustrated by moral decay, but forcing unregenerate people to behave more morally is a solution God never gave us."

It is the kind of sentence that sounds pious and collects nods. Half of it is true, and the true half matters. The other half is not true, and the error is not a small one. It is the precise error Lutherans have a doctrine for.

We call it the doctrine of the two kingdoms, though it is better described as the two ways God rules his world. With his right hand he rules through the gospel, creating faith and forgiving sins. With his left hand he rules through the law and the sword, restraining evil and preserving order among people who may never believe. The post sees God's right hand clearly. It seems to forget that he has a left.

What the Post Gets Right

Nobody is regenerated by legislation. "Consequently, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). A statute can change what a man does on Saturday night. It cannot change what he loves, and it cannot give him a new heart.

Civil righteousness, even if it were perfectly kept, justifies no one before God. A city full of law-abiding unbelievers is still a city full of unbelievers. Their outward decency is real, but it is not faith, and it does not save.

The church was also never handed the sword. The Augsburg Confession is blunt about this. The power of the keys, the authority Christ gave his church, works only through preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. It does not depose rulers, write civil laws, or command obedience by force, and the two authorities are not to be mixed or confused (AC XXVIII). When the church tries to win by coercion what only the Word can give, it gets hypocrites in the pews and a corrupted gospel in the pulpit. History is not short on examples.

So if the post's target is Christians who expect an election to do what only preaching can do, or who treat cultural moral reform as the mission of the church, the warning is fair. It is even needed. The trouble is that the sentence does not stop there.

The Solution God Did Give

"A solution God never gave us." But God gave exactly that solution. He simply gave it to a different hand.

> "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which is from God. The authorities that exist have been appointed by God. … For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. … For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not carry the sword in vain. He is God's servant, an agent of retribution to the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:1, 3-4)

Paul wrote that under Nero. The magistrate he had in view was unregenerate, ruling a population that was overwhelmingly unregenerate, and Paul calls him God's servant. What is that servant for? He makes people who do not love the good behave, at least outwardly, as though they did. He does it by the fear of punishment. That is the whole job of the sword.

Paul says the same of the law itself. It is laid down "for the lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinful" (1 Timothy 1:9). The Formula of Concord lists this civil use first among the law's purposes: to maintain outward discipline and decency among unruly and disobedient people (FC Ep VI.1). The Confessions do not treat it as a regrettable compromise. They put it at the head of the list.

Luther made the point most plainly in his 1523 treatise *Temporal Authority*. If the whole world were made up of true Christians, he argued, there would be no need for prince, king, sword, or law. But the world is not, and never will be. So God ordained two governments. The spiritual government produces Christians and righteous people through the Holy Spirit under Christ. The temporal government, in Luther's words, "restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace" (LW 45:91).

Read that next to the post. "Forcing unregenerate people to behave more morally" is very nearly Luther's definition of what temporal government is for. It does not save anyone. It preserves the world, so that the gospel has a world to be preached in. That is why Paul urges prayer "for kings and all those in authority" in the first place: "so that we may lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity" (1 Timothy 2:2). In the next breath he ties that civil peace to the God who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. The left hand serves the right.

Two Ditches, One Road

Luther fought on two fronts at once, and it helps to remember both.

On one side stood those who mixed the kingdoms by putting the sword in the church's hand. Rome claimed that the pope held both swords, the spiritual and the temporal. The enthusiasts went further. Thomas Müntzer believed the godly should take up the sword and bring in the kingdom of God by force, and in 1525 he led peasants to a slaughter at Frankenhausen trying. Both made the left hand do the right hand's work.

On the other side stood the Anabaptists. They taught that the sword lay outside the perfection of Christ, and that a Christian could not serve as a magistrate or use force against evildoers. The Schleitheim Confession of 1527 said so in its sixth article. Christians were to withdraw, and leave the restraining of evil to the world.

The Augsburg Confession answers that second error directly. Lawful civil ordinances are good works of God. Christians may hold civil office, serve as judges, punish evildoers with the sword, and wage just wars. The article condemns the Anabaptists who forbid Christians these duties, and those who place Christian perfection in forsaking them (AC XVI).

Today's theonomist or Christian nationalist slides toward the first ditch. The post, as worded, slides toward the second. That is not a charge that the Wretched Network is Anabaptist. But a sentence that treats the restraint of the unregenerate as something outside God's provision is speaking with an Anabaptist instinct, whether it means to or not. The two kingdoms doctrine is not a midpoint between those ditches. It is a road with God's hand on both sides of it.

Who Is "Us"?

"A solution God never gave *us*." Which us?

If it means the church gathered around pulpit, font, and altar, the statement holds. But Christians are not only the church gathered. On Monday morning they are sheriffs and deputies, judges and jurors, legislators and county commissioners, school board members, employers, parents, and voters. In those callings they are God's left hand. Luther called them his masks: God hiding behind ordinary offices to do his work of preserving the world.

A Christian police officer who arrests a drunk driver is forcing an unregenerate person to behave more morally. He is not freelancing. He is doing exactly what Romans 13 describes, in the office God placed him in. A Christian father who tells his rebellious son no, and means it, is doing the same thing. The Table of Duties in the Small Catechism cites Romans 13 for precisely this reason.

If Christians absorb the idea that restraining evil is no part of God's plan, the result is not a purer church. It is an abdication of vocation. The offices do not stay empty. They are simply left to people who do not fear God at all. Love for the neighbor sometimes looks like a locked cell, and the neighbor being loved is the family the drunk driver did not hit on the way home.

The Worth of Outward Righteousness

Lutherans are careful here, and we should be. Civil righteousness does not justify. But that does not make it worthless.

The Augsburg Confession teaches that the human will has some freedom to produce civil righteousness, to choose among the things reason can grasp (AC XVIII). An unbeliever can keep his contracts, stay faithful to his wife, and refrain from theft. The Apology goes further. Melanchthon says the Reformers gladly give this righteousness of reason the praise it deserves, because God requires it and honors it with temporal rewards (Ap IV). It is not the righteousness that avails before God. It is still a real good among men.

A town with fewer assaults, less fraud, and honest weights at the market is better than one with more, whatever is going on in the hearts of its people. Despising that good because it does not save is its own confusion of law and gospel. It judges the left hand by the right hand's standard. The law in its civil use was never meant to regenerate anyone. Faulting it for failing to regenerate is like faulting a fence for not being a vineyard. The fence was never supposed to bear grapes. It was supposed to keep the boars out.

What Then Shall We Do?

Frustration at moral decay is not a sin. Peter tells us righteous Lot was tormented day after day by the lawless deeds he saw and heard in Sodom (2 Peter 2:7-8). The question is what we do with that frustration.

The church does what it was given. It preaches the law in its full force, so that sinners see themselves for what they are. It preaches the gospel in its full sweetness, so that those same sinners hear that Christ died for them. It baptizes, absolves, and gives the body and blood of the Lord. It prays for those in authority, unbelievers included, as Paul commands. And then it sends its people back out into their callings, where some of them will carry badges, sign ordinances, sit on juries, and tell their children no.

That is not theocracy, and it is not withdrawal. It is both of God's hands doing what each was made to do. If I could offer the Wretched Network one edit, it would be this:

> Forcing unregenerate people to behave more morally will never make them Christians, and the church was never given the sword to try. But God did give the sword, to the magistrate, precisely to restrain the unregenerate. Don't confuse the two hands, and don't despise either one.

The magistrate does not carry the sword in vain. Neither does the preacher carry the Word in vain. God has two hands, and both of them are his.

Sources

- Scripture quotations from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain: Romans 10:17; Romans 13:1, 3-4; 1 Timothy 1:9; 1 Timothy 2:2. Romans 13:4 checked against the BSB at Bible.com; 1 Timothy 1:9 and 2:2 against Bible Hub.

- Augsburg Confession XVI, XVIII, XXVIII; Apology IV; Formula of Concord, Epitome VI.1. Cited from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Fortress, 2000).
- Small Catechism, Table of Duties.
- Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Fortress, 1962). Quotation at 45:91.
- Schleitheim Confession (1527), article 6.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain. Identified translation and textual-variant comparisons retain the readings discussed.