

The Kingdom and the Powers

The Church and Politics

Review

- Politics: The activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power.
- Nation of Israel: Called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (set apart)
- Babylon: Representative of all earthly empires
 - Those kingdoms are controlled by Satan
- Jesus didn't fit any of the political categories of his day (or today)
 - He came to usurp and destroy the kingdoms of this world
 - He does this through the "upside-down" means of the Kingdom of God
 - Power "under" vs. power "over"
- The Church belongs to the Kingdom of God, not any kingdom of this world
 - Therefore, we live as exiles and sojourners in the world

The Rise of Christendom

Christendom = the time and place where Christianity has the power "over."

For most of Christianity, we have identified the Kingdom of God with a "Christian" version of the kingdom of the world.

- Not true for the first 300 years
- During this time, followers of Jesus saw themselves as "resident aliens"
- They were members of an illegal religion throughout this period. At best, they were tolerated; at the very worst they were very severely persecuted.
- They grew at an amazing pace
 - AD 100 – Estimated 25,000 Christians
 - AD 310 – Estimated 20,000,000 Christians (Stark, *Rise of Christianity*)
 - Not by fighting for their rights, but largely by dying for their faith

Conversion of Constantine

- According to Eusebius, a contemporary historian of Constantine, in 312 AD, Constantine saw a vision in the sky with a message, "By this symbol you will conquer."
- The symbol was a cross and the Chi-Rho (the first two Greek letters of Christ's name.) Constantine
- In a later vision, Jesus appeared with the same sign and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign and use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies
- Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of Rome, but he did permit it as an allowable religion within the Empire, thus stopping the persecution
- He also outlawed infanticide, the abuse of slaves and peasants, and crucifixion, and he made Sunday a day of rest.

- “He was the chief instrument for raising the church from the low estate of oppression and persecution to well-deserved honor and power. (Schaff & Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*)
- Within 70 years it became the official religion of the empire, making it illegal not to be Christian. (“Convert or die.”)

The Problem of a Christian Nation

1. Jesus was abundantly clear he did not come to establish an earthly kingdom
 - “My kingdom is not of this world”
2. Christianity is a universal religion
 - It is for all people, in all places, at all times
 - No nation can claim this
 - Disdain for a “Christian nation” becomes disdain for Christ, all based on a false presupposition
3. No nation or government system is without sin
 - No earthly (worldly) government is holy or perfect – including America
 - We might think we are right or just in our actions, but we know there is sin involved
4. It inclines kingdom people to view their nation as divinely ordained
 - Theocracy of Israel was unique, temporary and conditional
 - It was abandoned first by Israel
 - Later by God when Jesus refused to establish himself as an earthly king
 - God doesn’t play favorites with kingdoms of the earth – all will be judged
 - We may want to believe that God is on our side, supports our causes, protects our interests, etc., but that doesn’t make it true
5. Christianity bears the cross, not the sword
 - Christianity requires love for our enemies, forgiveness, self-sacrificial love
 - Nations can’t operate this way
 - No coercion to convert
6. A Christian nation leads to cultural Christians
 - Jesus sent us to make disciples, not “Christians”
 - A Christian nation does harm to local missions as most believe they are Christian simply by living in a country that identifies as Christian.
 - Examples include Nazi Germany, Europe and America in the mid-late 20th century
7. Government and Laws do not change people – they control people
 - “Chief sinners become moral guardians”
 - Only the Gospel transforms people

The Two Kingdoms

There are two realms – the Spiritual and the Earthly – and God rules over both

- Sacred and Secular
- The Church is the intersection of these two kingdoms
- The Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms at once

Christians are free to engage culture and politics, but not uncritically

The Wrong Approach

- Withdrawal from the world (separatists)
- Christianity must change to the culture (syncretism)
- Culture must change to Christianity (Christian Nationalism, Christendom)

Two Kingdom Approach

- The Christian is in, but not of, the world
 - John 17:14-18
- God rules the church through grace and the Gospel
- God rules the world through vocation and the Law

*Our relationship to God is based on the Gospel
Our relationship to each other is based on the Law*

The Church can't wage war

- Inquisition
- Holy wars

The Government can't rule the church

- Tell it what to preach
- Create a state church

Scripture teaches that another cosmic force exists, one that is hostile to God and influences governments to accomplish evil

- This means no single government or nation is exempt from evil influence or is completely on God's side
- Bottom line: no government or nation or leader or party is "ordained by God."

*Participants in the KOW trusts the power of the sword to control behavior
Participants in the KOG trusts the power of self-sacrificial love to transform hearts*

Christian is a citizen of both kingdoms simultaneously

As citizens of KOG – we imitate Jesus

As citizens of KOW – we serve through vocation

Prophetic Witness

- Suspicious of teaming up with Babylon to achieve the things God cares about
- No partisan politics
- Speak truth, act in love
 - Racial Justice
 - Care for Poor and Marginalized
 - Pro-life (and all that means)
 - Sexual ethics/marriage
 - Identity

“[The Church] seeks to influence the world by being the Church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be.” (Willimon and Hauerwas, 62)

“If the church has the opportunity to reform the state, work with the state to pursue good, or establish justice in society, it must do so as the church—as imitators of the crucified Lamb, whose power is derived from sacrifice and self-giving love.” (Sprinkle, 135)

What we can do at present is ‘seek the welfare of the city’ in whatever city or village we sojourn, direct institutions such as government towards their God-given tasks of administering justly as Paul taught, lead wisely like a Joseph when called to serve, give advice to power like Daniel when asked, deliver words of prophetic warning and encouragement to rulers, and pray for our political leaders so that we might lead a peaceable life and be known for our godliness. We can colonise earth with the redemptive power, life, beauty and joy of the kingdom to come, yet always with the sober realisation that we’ll only ever be an outpost, a signpost, or a billboard of how God intends humans to be his covenant partners in the magnificent display of his sovereignty over the new creation. (Wright and Bird, 98)

Objections/Questions

Wasn’t America founded as a Christian nation?

- Problem #1 - the European conquest of the Americas was a power over move that used violence to expand the “kingdom”
- Problem #2 – Settlers came to America for religious freedom, not religious homogeny
- Problem #3 – Founders were more deistic than Christian
- Problem #4 – Supposing the Founders intended America to be a Christian nation, established on Christian laws and exemplifying Christian morality, Christianity is not a law-based religion; it is grace-based.
- Problem #5 – There is a difference between being a “Christian nation” and a nation made up predominantly of Christians.

What’s wrong with America, or anyone else, or even the whole world, following God’s law?

- It would be great if everyone followed God’s law... but nobody does (including Christians.)
- The other problem is related to how God’s law is enforced – coercion, violence, etc.