

The Separation of Church and State, Two Realms and Lunch with the Governor

An assertion that almost every American citizen dogmatically makes is “the separation of Church and State.” People invoke it to decry government overreach into a religious matter or when the Church wades into a civic issue. People from the right and the left ardently employ this assertion for their own convenient political purposes.

From where, though, does this principle come? What is the basis for the so-called “separation of Church and State”? An answer involves something we have very little use for anymore, history. The fact is the phrase is **not** in our constitution. However, the “establishment clause” in the First Amendment intended to distinguish Church from State.¹ The clause acts as a hedge against the federal government *from establishing control over religion*. It was Thomas Jefferson who coined the phrase in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, interpreting the establishment clause *as building a wall of separation between Church and State*. By 1833, all states had *disestablished* religion from government in order to provide protection to any church. While it is true that there can be no state religion (such as The Church of England), the founding fathers’ concern was to provide protection for the citizenry to practice the religion of their choice, even none at all.

But over the years, the Jeffersonian wall of separation has taken on a life of its own, coming to mean something like, “the church has no business in the public square”. It is used as a convenient rationale to engage in any kind of behavior, no matter how gross or boorish, as long as it “doesn’t hurt anybody” or “break any laws”. The Church’s attempt to speak against such behavior that violates the natural law or a clear word of Scripture has been stifled again and again by “the wall”. Even Christians have adopted this posture, including pastors, who are afraid to enter into politics because it’s not the “church’s business”. The end result has been silence from the Church on a whole host of issues such as marriage, human sexuality, creational differences between man and woman, life issues, and pornography.

The fact is this: the establishment clause, and even Jefferson’s interpretation, **does not divorce religion from public life and politics**.² Individuals, including those in the Church, *are free to bring their convictions and faith to the public square*. And I would argue, we are compelled to do so. We as children of God, ones who acknowledge Him as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, are to live in accordance with His will and desire. This also means that His Law, which is written on the hearts *of all men*, governs and directs all things and **is a total good**. And while our constitution prohibits any requirement of faith or church membership, it does not prohibit the Church from speaking on issues regarding God’s truth.

¹ The relevant constitutional text for the establishment clause states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

² It is of note that he attended several worship services inside the Capitol Building during his term in office.

A few weeks ago I was invited along with 11 other clergy to attend a luncheon at the Governor's Mansion, hosted by Governor Mike Parson and his wife Teresa. I jumped at the chance.³ It's rare for a parish pastor to gain audience with the state's top executive. However, as the day grew near, I became a bit nervous. Would this be some "dog and pony show"? Would it be a photo-op, with six "conservative" pastors and six "liberal" ones? Would I be allowed to talk or ask questions openly? I had been assured that the governor simply wanted to hear from pastors and what has going on in the churches in his state. What I knew of Governor Parson led me to believe that this would indeed be a meeting in good faith.⁴

The day came and I dressed in my clergy collar and a suit. As I went into the building, I expected to see...I don't know what. But there were no photographers, no press, no fanfare or podiums. I was greeted warmly by the liaison and ushered into a sitting room with the other arriving clergy. We chatted for several minutes. I could sense some diversity (a wide variety of ministry contexts) but also some commonality (I suspect we all voted the same way on the same issues). There was a university president of a Baptist college, a woman whose ministry works to get girls out of sex-trafficking, another who works promoting the National Day of Prayer, another who serves in the area of family ministry and marriage, and several Baptist preachers. And me.

The governor and his wife greeted us warmly and we were ushered into the dining room for lunch. It was soon apparent, despite the formality of the setting, that the environment was to be collegial and conversational. The governor very intently listened to what we had to say, and responded in kind. We went around the table, as each had an opportunity to speak to our specific challenges. Much of the discussion revolved around Covid, and doing ministry in such a time. The governor also spoke at length and in specifics.⁵ He was congenial and engaging, but not in a "politician's way". It was clear that he and his wife are people of faith in Jesus, that they are active in their church, and that he really wanted to know what the pastors thought.⁶ It was, in a word, *refreshing*.

Why do I share this? Well...it was a cool experience. I was greatly honored to be there. It was through no accomplishments of my own, mind you...just a case of knowing a guy who knows a guy. But more importantly, *it is shared as an encouragement and instruction*. For too long, we have become used to the Church (and Her servants) staying in their lane and civil servants staying in theirs. To be sure, the Church and State are distinct realms, with different goals. But what this bi-furcation has caused is deafening silence in the Church while the culture and our society has imploded. So, this lunch was a model of how people of different areas of service in

³ The story of how I came to receive this invitation is long and involves working out at the YMCA with a Baptist preacher.

⁴ Pun intended.

⁵ And not soundbites.

⁶ The point isn't that government officials must be Christians. In fact, a capable civil servant could be a non-Christian, provided they follow the natural law. But a Christian in government service can and should use doctrine and Scripture to guide their vocation. They don't have to "set it aside" to do their job. It is also true that Christians civil servants can and do rely on their faith and prayer to sustain them in their work.

God's world *can come to together and mutually encourage and inform one another*. Because, here's the thing: **everything in this world falls under God's concern and domain**.

There is a classic distinction in Lutheran theology called the "two realms". One realm is God's work in the world, sometimes called His "left-hand" kingdom. The Law of God runs the show in this realm, where the goal is *to preserve and protect His creation*,⁷ and the responsible institution is the government. The other realm is God's work in the Church, where the Gospel is the *raison d'être* and the goal is the restoration of His creation. The left-hand realm uses "the sword" and the right-hand the Word and Sacraments. These two realms are distinct, for they use different means and have different ends. But they are both God's! Indeed, His sovereignty extends over all things, for Jesus Christ is Lord over all, to the glory of God the Father. These two realms come together *at the end of all things*, as Jesus returns and brings all things to completion. But in the meantime, God works through different means in His creation and His Church. However, we err greatly if we think that God "doesn't care about the world" or **only** cares about the Church.

So, the two guiding axioms between these two kingdoms is *distinction without divorce* and *cooperation without confusion*.⁸ This means that it is wholly appropriate and salutary for the Church and State to interact and even break bread together. It is necessary that the Church follow the law of the land, insofar as that law does not directly violate the expressed will of God. This also means that politicians can and should allow their faith to guide them into making good decisions. It is also acceptable for the Church to pray for the State, and given the opportunity, preach God's truth to it.⁹ It is also a fine practice for the State to encourage the Church to do Her duty by granting Her freedom to meet and worship. The State should listen to the Church on matters involving God's will for His creation.¹⁰ And if the Church is doing Her job, She is helping the State stay informed of just what God says about matters concerning life, marriage, and family.

I close with an anecdote from the lunch. I was informed that one of the things we would do would be to "to pray for the governor." I didn't know what this meant *exactly*...so I was a bit wary. So, when the time came, the liaison of the lunch said, "Pastor Heaton, would you mind saying the prayer?" All these Baptists around and he picks the Lutheran?¹¹ We gathered around the governor and his wife as I led us in prayer. What do you pray *for* a governor? Well, I prayed for his protection and safety. I prayed that he would be strengthened in his task and duty. But I chiefly prayed that *he would boldly act in accordance with God's enduring will for His creation*. And I prayed that he might govern in a way that upholds the design and desire of God for all people, and that we the Church be able to proclaim Jesus Christ our Lord. I don't guess it was a

⁷ We might say promote "justice", but that word and concept have become ill-used in 2021.

⁸ For a great resource on this, see Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God's Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017). I have drawn on it extensively, particularly the diagram on p.110.

⁹ Practically, this might happen most often as members of congregations serve in the State.

¹⁰ This could include the field of ethics in science and medicine, immigration, life issues, and many others.

¹¹ The Governor and First Lady are unapologetically Baptist.

particularly eloquent prayer, but I sincerely used the language fitting for a governor in office. And most importantly, my prayer was based on the reality of the reign of Christ over all things, and the firm belief that we all are given jobs to do in God's good creation. The State has its job and the Church has Hers. And while distinct, it is a very good thing when *both realms can interact, inform, and encourage the other*. For it is all God's creation.