

## Two Realms, One Creator

Do politics and religion share anything? Do they have anything in common? If so, what? If not, is it *ever* appropriate for the Church to say anything with respect to the secular world? Should the secular world say *anything* to the Church? What are the rules of engagement?

There are many different answers to these questions. In what follows below, I suggest a way for Christians to *think about the interface between politics, culture and the Church*, as well as *an approach for engagement that is rooted in Scripture and faithful to our Lutheran confession*.

### God is the Creator of...All of IT

Most anybody reading this believes that God is the Creator of all things. Most reading this confess that the Genesis account of creation is historical and not allegorical. However, what is often lost on many faithful Christians **is that God's work of creation is both total and ongoing**. Total in that God created *all of it*. Everything that exists is a creation of God. Consider Psalm 148:3-6:

Praise him, sun and moon,  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!  
Let them praise the name of the LORD!  
For he commanded and they were created.  
And he established them forever and ever;  
he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

It is astounding that the very stars in the sky and moons above are **creatures of God**, and they give Him praise! How? *By doing the thing they were created to do*. We often think of creatures being merely human (or even sub-human!), but even the sun is a creation of God. And as such, it is beholden to Him and operates within His sphere and control. He commanded and directs them unto eternity.

This also means that God has particular interest in how things continue to go in His world, galaxy, and universe. He *sustains* His creation that it endure. God *works* in His creation for the good of it. He is not some cosmic clockmaker Who winds it up and lets it go! He is an all benevolent Lord, Who in His supreme majesty *preserves* the work of His hand. The fact that it is broken is due to the fall and the sin of humanity, infecting every aspect of God's good creation.

But God in His Son Jesus Christ, redeems not just His people, but creation itself. “For God so loved *the cosmos*<sup>1</sup> that He gave His only Son...” The endgame is not only humans, but the entire world.

### “Politics” is Downstream from “Culture”

So, if God is Creator over all, **this means that there are operative rules and boundaries.**

There are ways the creation is to function (despite its fallen condition). *Sin does not negate God’s design*, but it does pervert or upend it.<sup>2</sup> It has corrupted what was once good and perfect, and also infects our minds and hearts with our own ideas of what and how this world is to run. *But it is God’s world and He makes the rules—we don’t.*

With<sup>3</sup> that said, we can turn to the muddy topic of culture and politics. We first need to define our terms. Both words are hard to do so because people have so many disparate concepts. For my thesis it is necessary to operate with broad definitions commonly shared. Instead of thinking of politics as “things we vote on” or “things that politicians engage in”,<sup>4</sup> we might expand a bit. Politics is *the discourse of the organization of society (the polis) around a set of principles and standards*. It is the right-functioning of the people in a place. Culture, then, relatedly *is the symbols and norms that order life or a community*.<sup>5</sup> It is the collective experiences and shared values that animate people in a polis, or an organized society. **There is a connection between the two.** Culture gives us the standards and norms, conventional and acceptable behaviors, while politics is the implementation of such things. Culture is reflected in music, literature, sports, movies, religion...things that reflect but also shape our common experience. Politics discusses how culture should be governed, limited, cultivated, monitored and implemented.

But here’s the thing: *politics is downstream from culture*.<sup>6</sup> This means that what is going on in the world—the ideas, values, experiences, expressions of art—all inform and animate the political discourse and ultimately policy. So, whatever world view is winning “the culture war” gets ensconced in policy and codified in law. Take the trans-gender bathroom issue. The cultural shift *in the belief that gender is a construct and fluid* (an idea held by an infinitesimal amount of people!) has driven some municipal governments and world-wide corporations to institute changes in law, infrastructure, and public policy. But it starts with culture. Whatever currents are flowing from those who have influence end up being a political topic and then an issue at the ballot box.

### The Two Realms of God’s Creation

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<sup>1</sup> A transliteration of the Greek.

<sup>2</sup> We might think of Satan’s role this way—he can’t create, but he can pervert!

<sup>3</sup> Much of this paragraph has been informed by James Davison Hunter and *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> I also cynically think people would add, “Things which the Church has no say in!”

<sup>5</sup> I am primarily talking about *public* culture versus the variety of sub-cultures we find within many, many groups.

<sup>6</sup> I cannot take credit for this aphorism, but was first coined by Andrew Breitbart.

So, the question is asked again, “Does God have any interest in what happens in our culture?” **If** God is the Creator of all things, **if** He is the redeemer of the world, **if** He is the sustainer and sanctifier of all things, does He, should He, have any say so in what happens in our culture? Indeed, is God the creator of culture?<sup>7</sup> Does He then have an interest in “politics”? Even if you are resistant to my argument, if you are a Christian who confesses the truth of the Creeds and Holy Scripture, you would have to at least concede *the relevance of the Church being an observer and commenter in the affairs of the world.*

A helpful Lutheran distinction that can be used to see **the different ways in which God works** in His creation is the two hands or two realms of God.<sup>8</sup> The right hand realm is that of **the Gospel**. The work in this realm is done by the Church in the preaching and teaching of Christ and the administering of the Sacraments. This is done for the sake of Christ and by His authority here on earth. The left hand realm is the **realm of the world**, what we might call **the secular realm**. Work in this realm is seen to be done by the civil authorities, but is enacted by many more institutions. And while many of us were raised on the Jeffersonian notion of the so-called separation of Church and State,<sup>9</sup> the bald truth is: **it is all God’s!!!** The left and right hand realms both belong under the control, sphere and power of God. While the working in the two realms is different (Gospel versus sword), the fact is that God is very interested in His entire creation and everyone and thing in it. He preserves it in different way using different means.

### **God’s Truth is Operative Unless He’s Silent**

This means that God’s truth runs the show, whether people acknowledge Him or not. This means that His will and design is operative at all times. His desire for human sexuality between biological man and woman is a universal truth. His desire for right relationships between the sexes is efficacious and fundamental. His truth with respect to marriage endures. The protection for the unborn is governed by His love for all people, especially the most vulnerable. How those things get discussed, expressed in our culture and then implemented in the political process *matters to God*. **Because we don’t get to set aside His truth for the sake of convenience or ignore it because it’s not currently popular in segments of society.**

So, where does one go to find out God’s truth? On one hand, there is much we can learn from the study of God’s creation. The natural sciences can tell us a lot about how things function and fit together. God has written His laws on the universe. If you stand on top of a roof and throw off a softball, it will fall down every single time. This is also why an atheist can speak God’s truth with respect to the very good biological differences between man and woman. But explicitly, *when we want to know what God says we go to His Word*. The Holy Scriptures, rightly

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<sup>7</sup> We must remember, again, that God creates and Satan, sin and the world pervert what is good.

<sup>8</sup> I provide an incredibly brief synopsis of this dynamic topic. For a tremendous discussion of this Lutheran distinction, see Joel Biermann’s *Wholly Citizens: God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> One of the most misunderstood and ill-used phrases in American history.

interpreted and applied are the location for God's truth, His will, and His Son. So, when school boards across the country are trying to employ curriculums that deny God's desire for man and woman, the Church has something to say about it. If a local government tries to force a church to marry a same-sex couple, the Church has something to say. If the federal government tries to force people to accept medicine developed and tested on aborted fetal stem-cell tissues, does the Church take a position? You bet.

This means that we are to be *informed citizens of our local, national, and global affairs*. We have to know what is going on. Increasingly, it is harder and harder to know "the truth", in part due to the pervasive hostility to Christianity in the industrial media. But it is our responsibility to be aware of a whole host of issues that conflict or bump up against the Word of God in the Scriptures. Even if we have to go to alternative places for "news".

This also means that there are a whole host of issues that the Bible does not speak about. There are a lot of political debates that involve matters of best-practices, opinions, and points of view, *and are not issues of "thus saith the Lord"*. In those cases, the Church should stay silent. There are many, many big-time political debates (health care or economic policy) that are passionately discussed that can be settled through winsome arguments, human reason,<sup>10</sup> and appeals to the common good. But God's truth is operative always, unless He's silent, and even then, we must conduct ourselves as Christians in accordance to the standards of behavior God expects.<sup>11</sup> We are called to speak the truth, but in love. We are to articulate the manifold wisdom of God, wherever He has put us, and whomever He has given us to care for. A pastor's job is narrowly to deliver the goods. Proclaim the good news of Jesus and administer the sacraments faithfully. More broadly though, a pastor is to teach his people, to encourage his people, to hold to account his people to God's truth, and try to help them live faithfully in God's creation. To walk with them and bear their burdens through prayer and service, but also to admonish, exhort, rebuke, correct, and enlighten. And as he does so, *he always does so as a sinner in need of the forgiveness of Jesus, and as a called servant of the Word, who has been given a task and duty*.

Should the Church be a voice and comment on politics? **Absolutely**. Should the Church listen to and obey the secular government?<sup>12</sup> **Absolutely**. Can and should both realms—the right and left—inform and help each other?<sup>13</sup> **Absolutely**. Because it's all God's world. He created it. What He says, goes. We in the Church must give voice to His truth, both in witness to the Gospel and His will and design for His creation.

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<sup>10</sup> Another gift of creation!

<sup>11</sup> In other words, people, get off social media! Seriously!

<sup>12</sup> The caveat is when a government commands an expressly forbidden action revealed in God's Word or tries to silence the Gospel proclamation. See Acts 5:29.

<sup>13</sup> I don't argue it here, but it would be appropriate for the State to hold the Church accountable if they stopped doing their work of delivering the Gospel!