

John Whitteker

Church and State



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Church and State

A Thanksgiving Sermon Delivered in Trinity Lutheran Church,
Lancaster, PA., November 26, 1908

By J. E. Whitteker, D. D.

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Contents

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[About The Lutheran Library](#)

[Contents](#)

[Preface by Lutheran Librarian](#)

[Church and State](#)

- [1. The Primitive Church Accepted The Civilization Into Which It Came](#)
- [2. The First Age Past, A New One Came – New In Kind And Tone](#)
- [3. A New Period Came, With New Potencies To Mold It](#)
- [4. The Dark Ages Were The Outcome](#)
- [5. And Today, We Acknowledge The Fundamental Character Of This Principle](#)
- [6. I Have Tried, Without Prejudice, To Develop My Subject Along Historical And Scriptural Lines](#)

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[How Can You Find Peace With God?](#)

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Preface by Lutheran Librarian

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Church and State

“Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God, the things that are God’s.” Matt. 22:21.

THE CALL that comes to us this morning is a reasonable request on the part of the State: as loyal citizens, therefore, we are here in response to it. The mercies of God: the loving-kindness with which He has crowned our lives; the blessings in the product of farm and shop, of office and store, as well as in the health and happiness of our homes – these should quicken gratitude in our hearts. The mercies of God: our trials have been tempered by His loving providence; our sorrows have been soothed through His compassionate care, His blessed assurance of comfort and peace. If we look to ourselves, we are constrained to confess, “Lord, I am not worthy of all the mercies and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant.” If we dwell upon the merciful kindness of God, we cannot but lift up our voice in songs of praise. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name: bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” Let this, then, be a day of grateful remembrance: let this be an hour of thankfulness and praise. Let the nation be glad and sing for joy.

It seems but proper, at this meeting of Church and State, to take a subject kindred to its spirit. And what could better engage our thought than the principle underlying the text, “*Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God, the things that are God’s.*” Jesus draws a distinct line, here, between Church and State; and in all His teaching and practice, He kept close to it. In precept and example, therefore, we have His undoubted estimate of their relation and place.

1. The Primitive Church Accepted The Civilization Into Which It Came

It was absolutely separate from State and all State life. While the Apostolic Church was free from all state alliances, it did not disregard state enactments: its spirit was one of humble obedience. And if State law and Christian conscience came into conflict, its members submitted to the imposed penalties and thanked God for the grace which enabled them to suffer for righteousness' sake. The early Church had no revolutionary principles: the rule, was, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for the powers that be are ordained of God." And then came the inevitable logic, "He that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." The law of the Christian life was a simple one: an acceptance of governmental rules, a quiet endurance of whatever hardships they placed upon the followers of Christ, an adaptation to existing conditions wherever it could be done with good conscience, and a careful teaching and close adherence to that Word which is spirit and life. The conquests of the Church were conquests of peace: the renewal of heart and life which, by the life-energy within it, would renew the State in heart and life. The beauty, the sublimity, the Christ-like spirit of it! Moreover, these were the days of persecution: the State, at every point, was meddling with the Church – its offices of peace among the people. The Church was the State's surest support; and yet, the State tried to crush it.

2. The First Age Past, A New One Came – New In Kind And Tone

Constantine had become master of the Roman Empire. He was tolerant toward the religion of Christ, even favorable to it. But he retained the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, the High-priest of the heathen State. At last, he openly espoused the Christian cause, and encouraged it by conferring special privileges on those who embraced it. He had sprung, however, from heathen source, with heathen antecedents and heathen inheritances and heathen proclivities. And so, his empire was a patch-work of heathen policies and Christian practices. It was a new piece of cloth on an old garment: it could not hold its shape.

In heathen lands, each nation had its special gods, with their own peculiar rites. Constantine would make the Christian's God the God of the Roman State: His worship must be supreme. He, therefore, was Head of the

Church and State – this Constantine. And so, Church and State were joined under one crown – the crown of Constantine. The sword of Church and State was one: the conquests of Church and State were one: the glory of Church and State was one. The *Pontifex Maximus* of the heathen Empire stretched his shield of power over the Church of the Prince of Peace.

3. A New Period Came, With New Potencies To Mold It

The Church now became a factor in world politics: it thus was made the beneficiary of royal favors. Legacies and donations from the crown not only put the Church under obligations to the State, but furnished it with those sinews of war by which it was enabled to render sterling service to the State in keeping back barbarian foes. The Church, as yet, exercised no imperial rights it was but a helpmeet for the State.

And now came the time when Charlemagne succeeded to empire and the Pope sought the protection of the throne. And, in return, the Emperor received special recognition from the Pope, who on that memorable Christmastide, as if by the impulse of the moment, crowned Charlemagne and made him sovereign of a vast theocratic Empire, his power reaching over all the globe. The spheres of Church and State were yet distinct; but they were combined in the person of the Emperor as their chief executive. The entering wedge, however, had been set: the crown of universal empire had been placed on the imperial head by the Pope! That was enough for the present.

Meantime, Charles the Great died. The real purpose of the papacy soon became manifest; and in the struggle for supremacy, the power swayed, now to the Emperor's side, now to the side of the Papal See. In course of time, all empire rested in the Pope: he crowned and uncrowned kings; the Church and State were one, the Pope supreme. Satan at last had gained his point: the empire he had laid at Jesus' feet – who scorned it – was grasped by the Pope: and now he ruled both Church and State in Jesus' name.

4. The Dark Ages Were The Outcome

But dawn broke with the Reformation light. Back to the Apostles; back to Christ: such was the cry that wakened Europe: and to waken Europe meant to wake all earth besides. The view of the Lutheran Reformers looked both ways: it excluded the Church from the sphere of civil life; it claimed the supremacy of the Emperor over all classes, pope and people – and that, too, by divine right. Their words are specific, “The Pope and Clergy,” they say, “are subject to the civil authorities.” They were not slow to declare that the supreme sway of the Pope was the sway of Anti-Christ. The line, therefore, was distinct: the secular sphere belongs to the domain of the civil authorities; it is the spiritual sphere in which the Church lives and moves.

And these were the principles taught by Christ and His Apostles. The dispute as to the tribute money brought the subject fairly before Jesus. And His decision was, “Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God, the things that are God’s.” He paid tribute to heathen Rome: surely pope and prelate are not exempt from obedience to the decrees of the State. When Peter came to the rescue at the gate of Gethsemane, the rebuke came sharp and swift, “Put up thy sword: they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” And when Christ stood before Pilate and acknowledged Himself a King, He said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” The Apostle Paul is equally specific, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.” The primitive Church followed exactly the commandment of Christ; while the Reformation took up and emphasized the same eternal principle.

5. And Today, We Acknowledge The Fundamental Character Of This Principle

But do we carry it out into all our practice? It is a remarkable fact that, consciously or unconsciously, we reverse the order of Charlemagne: he carried the Church into politics; we carry politics into the Church. I do not refer to fanatical pulpit rantings along reformatory lines: I refer to the best, the soberest thought of the age.

The late Civil War furnishes an example. The Church, North and South, dabbled in it. And the disastrous effects are still felt. There was slavery in

the days of Christ: but He never raised His voice against it as a system of State. He did what was infinitely better. When He said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," He laid the axe at the root of the tree. Put the principle of Christian love into the heart, and slavery will come to an end without strife. And the Church dare not hurry the process by an appeal to the strong arm of the State. It must sow the pure seed – not the husk of it; you cannot raise corn from husks: the Church must sow the pure seed, the very inward principle of Christian love; and civil equality must be the outcome. St. Paul recognized the same principle and adopted it.

There is nothing more difficult, these times, than to keep the Church out of politics. And this difficulty is intensified where a Christian principle is at stake. The Church, in some of its branches, has been knocking at the door of State and clamoring for the name of God in the Constitution. This is not the Church's work: it is the province of the Church to knock at men's hearts and get the name of God written there – written there by the blood of the New Covenant; and the Constitution will take care of the Church's interests. Imagine Christ calling upon Caesar to change his coin and put God's name on it. Imagine Him calling upon Caesar to tear down the heathen temples and set up an altar to the God who dwells in the circle of the skies. He did not touch a single heathen rite; He did not interfere with a single heathen sacrifice; He planted principles. And with what result? The whole host of Roman deities have gone down to the dust, and Jesus Christ reigns supreme.

The Church, in some of its branches, is knocking at the door of State and demanding a place for the Bible in the public schools. It should be there, but the Church must not enter politics to get it there. The Church must get the Bible into men's hearts; and when men everywhere are moved by the Bible spirit and are built up on Bible principles, so that they know the Bible as the only true maker of manhood, then the State, made up of men with deep religious convictions, and strong in their spiritual lives, will give the Bible its proper place. A religious policy that is forced has no vital energy in it. It is a letter without life; it has no power to bring substantial results. And it is the province of the Church not to force a political issue, but to inculcate and implant principles that will be irresistible and inevitable in their outcome. Truth never makes haste; truth is a growth; and the growths of God lead up by slow, steady processes.

The Church, in some of its branches, is knocking at the door of State and demanding laws to prohibit the manufacture and sale of intoxicants. That is not the sphere of the Church; that belongs absolutely to the State. The Church must preach moderation in all things; it must preach against debauchery of every sort. Temperance is a Christian principle, and because it is a Christian principle the Church must preach it. But prohibition is a policy; it is a political issue, not a spiritual one; it is, therefore, outside the sphere of the Church. If I believed in a prohibitive policy I would not preach it, for it is a question of State; it has no more place in the pulpit than the tariff or any other political issue. It would be dragging politics into the Church, which is as bad as the method of Charlemagne, who dragged the Church into politics. The outcome was most disastrous then; it would be equally so now.

Let us not be deceived by the moral quality of that which engages public thought; we must decide every issue – our policy with respect to it – not by the moral end to be reached, but by the avenue through which we should reach it. And in the decision we should bear in mind that there must be no mixing up of Church and State; the mixing up of Church and State, as in that elder day, is the process that crucifies Christ. The Church is never so weak as when it leans on the State; the Church is never so corrupt as when it usurps the offices of State. Their spheres are distinct; their modes must be equally distinct.

6. I Have Tried, Without Prejudice, To Develop My Subject Along Historical And Scriptural Lines

The Church of the early age drifted into politics: the condition of our age is quite the reverse – politics is worming its way into the Church. Let us not be deceived by any loftiness of aim: let us not be carried away by any Utopian pictures of promised results. When the principles of Christianity must be protected by civil power, the Dark Age of spiritual life will have come. When the manhood of the nation must be policed by sumptuary laws [pertaining to expenditures], the virile quality will have gone. Let us draw the line where Christ draws it: the Church will be safe: so will the State.

The rule of the Church is a spiritual rule: the weapons of the Church are spiritual weapons: the work of the Church is a spiritual work. The Church's activities must center upon the pure preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the Sacraments. If we men of the pulpit would spend our strength in stirring the hearts of our people into newness of life, awakening their consciences and making them sensitive to the deep soul-needs of men of every class and kind: Truth in the inward parts – if we could but plant it there; then every State policy would have the Christian principle within it and back of it. Let the Church give its loftiest effort, not to little outside policies, but to the great essential principles; and Christian manhood will be the result. And then, it will not only command the respect of men in political life: it will be the real mold of political life. And then, too, the Church will be in the State, not as a promoter of specific policies, but as the vital power of eternal principles, to shape, to ennoble, and to bless.

This is no theory of mine: it is involved in the principles of Christ and His Apostles, the principles of the best men of every best age. It should, therefore, command our thoughtful respect: it should lead us to inquire where we stand on this great question of Church and State; and if we have been wrong-set, to change our course and get in the true path of the pure principles of Christ. The Church must not be in politics: politics must not be in the Church. But manhood in the Church means manhood in the State; and manhood in the Church comes from the proper use of Word and Sacrament.

J. E. WHITTEKER. D. D.

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144 – v5

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How Can You Find Peace With God?

The most important thing to grasp is that no one is made right with God by the good things he or she might do. Justification is by faith only, and that faith resting on what Jesus Christ did. It is by believing and trusting in His one-time *substitutionary* death for your sins.

Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions](#) by Pastor George Gerberding

Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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