

# THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

## *Introduction*

**PRIMING PUMP:** Does the church have a political responsibility? If so, what is it?

### CRITIQUE OF TWO SPHERES THINKING

1. Tendency in Christian tradition to think in two spheres
  - a. Divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian
  - b. Worldly, profane, natural, and un-Christian
2. Examples
  - a. Medieval: realm of nature subordinate to realm of grace
  - b. Pseudo-Lutheran: autonomy of world orders in opposition to law of Christ
  - c. Enthusiasts: congregation of elect battles hostile world in effort to establish God's kingdom on earth
  - d. Modern: independence of secular from spiritual<sup>1</sup>
3. Reformation emphasis on two kingdoms
  - a. Church <> world
  - b. Preached word <> sword
  - c. Spiritual office <> secular government
4. Challenge
  - a. Distinct tasks
  - b. Serve same Lord
  - c. Same sphere of action

### THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT

1. Protect the basic rights of the people
  - a. By making laws
  - b. By enforcing the law
2. Provide for the well-being of the people
  - a. Opportunities to thrive
  - b. Goods and services
  - c. Safety net
3. Invest in the abilities of the people
  - a. Education
  - b. Resources

### THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

1. Proclaim the reconciliation of God and the world in Jesus Christ
  - a. That proclamation not by the sword but by the word
  - b. Grounded in scripture
  - c. Attentive to the world
2. Warn human beings of sin

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, volume 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 56–57.

3. Guide followers of Jesus in living out their faith in the world
4. Comfort people in their affliction

### **THE ECCLESIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT**

1. Provide well-ordered, just society in which church is able to do its work
2. Supports the practice of faith without enforcing one particular faith
  - a. Ought not become the founder of a new religion or faith community
  - b. Not responsible for proclamation or confession of faith in Jesus
3. Proclamation never enforced by sword

### **THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH**

1. To fulfill primary responsibility of proclamation of the reconciliation of God and the world in Jesus Christ the church must attend to the realities of the world and institutions influencing those realities.
2. Ordinary times: discern relationship of its proclamation to the government, economy, and so on
  - a. Through direct, respectful speech make government aware of its failure to fulfill its office<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Name government sin/injustice by name
  - c. Followers of Jesus in public office/work have special responsibility to discern God's intentions for their particular institutions
  - d. Goal is a not to establish Christian government, Christian economy, and so on, but to participate in formation of a responsible government, responsible economy, and so on
3. Current context in the United States
  - a. Any attempt to make idol of nation must be challenged (Ex: make America great again)
  - b. Expose attempts to scapegoat groups of people (immigrants, protestors, Muslims, etc.)
  - c. Engage in pursuit of racial justice, economic justice, ecojustice, etc
  - d. Government every right to insist on churches not gathering in large groups to protect well-being of people

### **FINAL COMMENTS**

1. Separation of church and state in the United States a misnomer
  - a. Church tax breaks from government
  - b. Churches responsible to name sin/injustice
  - c. Church and state in healthy tension
2. Church and government distinctive tasks, but same field of action
  - a. Humanity
  - b. New awareness: ecological context
3. Silence of the church in the face of state injustice is sin

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Position Paper on State and Church," Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945, volume 16 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 524–25.