

“The Christian Citizen” (Part I)

Liturgical Date: Proper 18 A

Primary Text: Romans 13:1-10

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, is the Epistle Lesson from Romans, the 13th chapter. The past two Sundays we have been looking at what this portion of Romans teaches us about living as Gospel-centered Christian people. God instructs us how we are to treat and interact with others. Two weeks ago we heard specifically what this means as we live and worship together as the Body of Christ. Then last week the main focus was on our approach toward those outside of the Church, even those that are openly hostile to us. Finally, we now enter the third aspect as we examine the teaching of the Scripture in how the Christian is to act in accordance with being under the authority of civil government. So the title of the sermon is, “The Christian Citizen.” EARTHLY GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN INSTITUTED BY GOD SO THAT WE MAY LIVE IN A SOCIETY OF SAFETY AND ORDER.

If you read the blurb in the bulletin “In Preparation Before Worship” it brought in the fact that this is Labor Day weekend. According to the official Department of Labor website Labor Day, “*is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of workers*” and it has been celebrated nationwide on the first Monday in September since 1894. So perhaps on the eve of holiday officially established by law, it would be a good time to hear about the authority of government. But I would guess many of our questions and concerns about the role of government are flowing from other things that have been swirling

throughout 2020. The intersection of government power, the rights citizens, and even the church has certainly been a big part of the debate in how to respond to the Coronavirus Pandemic. And this summer we have also seen both peaceful protests and violent riots by many people who are upset about things that are related to governmental authority. Then, in case you haven't heard, there is a Presidential election in the near future- featuring a campaign that has seen strong accusations made by both sides. So what is the Christian to do?

Well, as I sometimes say there is no way all of this could be covered in one sermon. And in fact I have been led to divide this sermon which was originally one, into two (in fact just last night!). But even two weeks would not be nearly enough times to go into detail about all of the aspect of this. However, as I also like to say, we can examine what the Bible tells us are the big principles at play here and we can take that and apply it as we go forth as His people in the world.

The first big thing we need to understand is, what exactly does it mean to be a Christian citizen? The Bible uses the word "kingdom" often, around 370 times. Jesus preached in announcing that His kingdom was at hand. He told Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world. He stressed eternal citizenship and that one becomes a member of that kingdom at the point of conversion (John 3:5). Philippians 3:20 says, "*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*" So the Christian is a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

But we also know that we are citizens of a nation. There are political rulers who have authority, make laws that govern us, and administer consequences when those laws are broken. This is the type of system that

Romans 13 is referring to. We here today are citizens of the United States of America, Georgia, and whatever county and community we live in.

So which is it? As Christians, are we citizens of the kingdom of God or the state? Consider these celebrities for a moment: What do Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson, Jim Carrey, Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, and Natalie Portman all have in common? They all have dual citizenship by being American citizens as well as citizens of another nation. All Christians, in effect, are dual citizens. This is what Lutherans have called “The Two Kingdoms Doctrine” and understanding it is very important to grasping the proper role of the Christian as both a citizen of the Kingdom of God and the secular state. In understanding this it guides the Christian in areas where the Church and State intersect. Conversely, it is when the roles of these two kingdoms are misapplied that many problems develop.

Take a look at the chart that was included as an insert in your bulletin today for a good summary. We will hit some of the highlights on it today, and you can take it with you for further study and reference. The state is known as the “left hand kingdom” and the Church the “right hand kingdom”. The symbol of the left hand kingdom is the sword as seen in verse 4 of Romans 13 and also as we see in that passage its main function is maintain order, punish evildoers, and make and enforce civil law. This is what we call the “First Use of the Law” in action as it acts as a curb on bad behavior.

The right hand kingdom is the kingdom of grace, represented by the Means of Grace through which the Holy Spirit works: Word and Sacrament. The role of the Church is *not* to make civil law and put people in jail for violating the law. The Church is not be a tool in the hand of a particular political party or ideology. There may be certain issues that Body of Christ addresses and individual Christians are certainly free to be politically active,

but we do not see Jesus nor the Apostles calling believers to political solutions and certainly not for violent rebellion against authority. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod may issue positions on particular issues that have a political aspect, but we do not from either our denomination structure or pulpits endorse individual candidates (and it can be kind of “fun” when you have a pastor whose political opinions don’t match that of his congregation!). The proper role of the Church is to, on behalf of our Lord Jesus, administer forgiveness to the repentant and withhold it from the unrepentant. The left hand kingdom is needed at present time, because this is a wicked world filled with self-centered and wicked people. But is only temporary because civil government will no longer be needed once Jesus returns on the Last Day and the devil, sin, and death are cast into the Lake of Fire forever.

Now that we understand that the Christian at present is a “dual citizen” of both the right and left hand kingdoms, we need to understand that while having different functions both of these kingdoms are under the authority of God. Even if a wicked ruler believes they are in control, even shaking their fist at God-they are not. They only have power because God has put them there to serve His purpose. Just as Jesus told Pilate in St. John 19:10-11 when he held the threat of his authority over Jesus, Jesus responds by telling him that he had no authority that God had not given him. God is the King, Lord, and ruler of the entire universe-nothing happens that is beyond His power. This is made clear in Romans 13. Read again the second part of verse 1 and then the first part of verse 2, *“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.”*

But what about wicked rulers? What about when the people who we didn't vote for win elections and maybe we even see those leaders as bad? When you read the Bible you see that God used wicked pagan rulers to accomplish His purposes. Of course we think of the Romans carrying out a death sentence against Jesus. But we also see it in the Old Testament as judgment and exile came upon Israel at hands of pagan governments. A leader could also be morally corrupt, but still used by God to accomplish His purposes. This does not mean that God endorses all of the actions of wicked rulers, but it does mean that that ruler would not be in power if God had willed them to be in that position.

And this left-hand kingdom is a gift from God in that as our text tells us they maintain order. This may sound a little radical, but think about the worst possible government you could live under, here are a few examples: Nazi Germany, Mao's China, Stalin's Russia, present day North Korea. I would not want to live in those places, but I would rather live there than in a place with no government at all. This is because since people are sinful and wicked, anarchy and chaos would reign unrestrained without government. Only the strong, or those with the most weapons, would prosper. Read *The Lord of Flies*. What we see throughout history as well as happening in our world today is that when there is void of leadership and an inability or unwillingness of a government to protect life and property, then people take matters into their own hands. And that seldom ends peacefully or well. The bottom line is that even a bad government that maintains order is better than no government at all.

Today, we have established that a Christian is a dual citizen of two kingdoms, both under the authority of God: the left hand kingdom the state and the right hand kingdom of the Church. We have also learned that in this

fallen world, the existence of the left hand kingdom is a gracious blessing from God to protect people and maintain good order. But I am sure that there are still some unanswered questions. How does a Christian respond if the government is hostile to the faith? What can we learn from Romans 13 in regards to that? Are we to obey the governing authorities in *every* case? And if not, when do we disobey? Next Sunday we delve into the Biblical principles that inform us as to answering these questions.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

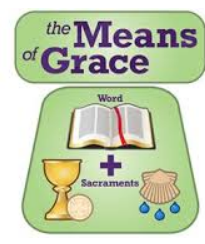
The Two Kingdoms Chart



GOD
(Rules over all: Psalm 47:8, 103:19)



Left Hand Kingdom (State)



Right Hand Kingdom (Church)

God appointed political leaders (Romans 13:1-5, John 19:10-11)	Who Leads?	Jesus, Lord of the Church (Ephesians 1:22-23)
Civil: maintains order, punishes evildoers (Romans 13:1-7)	Purpose?	Spiritual: Distributes Grace through the Gospel-Word and Sacrament (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8)
Enforcement of Civil Law	Means?	Office of the Keys, forgives and retains sins (Matthew 16:18, John 20:22-23)
All people	Citizens?	Christians, members upon conversion (John 3:5, Philippians 3:20)
Good citizens follow the law, only exception is if this causes us to sin (Acts 5:29)	Obedience?	To God as He is the perfect Ruler/Lord/Master (John 14:15, 23; 1 John 5:2)
Temporal: the left hand kingdom will no longer be needed after Christ's return (Luke 21:33, 1 Corinthians 15:23-27)	Duration?	Eternal: Jesus returns as King on the Last Day and all believers live eternally in the Kingdom (Revelation 21:5-6, 22:1-5)