

Living in Two Kingdoms: Peace or War? Order or Chaos?

by Mark E. Sell

...for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. —Romans 13:4

Christians live two lives at the same time. We have a life in the community and a life in the Church. Although they may be one life, the purpose of and how we make decisions in each life is different. Through the community and its government, God brings order and peace (Romans 13:4). Through Christ's Church, God calls us to proclaim sin (Romans 5:12ff.) and forgiveness (Romans 5:16ff.).

All earthly authority for the community flows from parents ("Honor your father and your mother" [Exodus 20:12]). As an earthly citizen, God calls us to be good members of the community. God uses citizens, politicians, and all civil offices to maintain order in the world. These offices are so important that St. Paul calls them "ministers" or "servants" of God who keep order on His behalf (Romans 13:4, 6).

The government uses tools of creation to keep the peace: reason or common sense (Romans 1:19ff.), laws, and force. St. Paul writes that governmental ministers do not "bear the sword in vain" (Romans 13:4). Rather, the government is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). In their communal life, people are measured according to their moral character. Bad actions are punished. Good actions are rewarded. Individuals can be better people in this life. It's as simple as the painted lines and directional arrows in a parking lot. Which way do you go and where do you park? Could you imagine the mall parking lot at Christmas without lines and arrows?

Christians also live as part of the Church. The purpose of the Church and, therefore, of the Christian life is to reveal sin (Romans 3:20), to bring people to repentance, and to forgive sin. The Christian is holy by faith. Christians trust the work of Jesus (Romans 3:22ff.) who lived the holy life in our place (Ephesians 2:15ff.). Jesus suffered the wrath of God for sin instead of us. Jesus went to hell instead of us. Jesus rose from the dead instead of us. Therefore, when we believe in Jesus, He gives the result of His work to us. That's why we can say that we are holy by faith in Christ.

The Christian tools to proclaim sin and forgiveness are God's Word (Ephesians 6:17) and the sacramental life (Romans 6:2ff.). God's Word brings God's Law into our lives to show us our sin. It also brings the Gospel into our lives, which is the very work of Jesus and His life in our lives today.

In the community, morals and well-reasoned law rules, not forgiveness. The society does not call wrong deeds sin. Certainly, Christians are called to love their neighbors and to witness to them. But what if society was governed by forgiveness? Imagine a murderer standing before a judge and saying that he is now a Christian and repents. If forgiveness ruled society, the judge must respond: "Murderer, you are forgiven; go and sin no more." Then, the murderer would be released.

When forgiveness rules society, chaos, destruction, and death end up governing the community. Thugs and murderers would inevitably take advantage of any power or force they could gather and would end up ruling the community. The inmates would run the prison. Therefore, reason, moral people, order, and force are used to maintain peace in the community. In the community, the authorities are called on behalf of God to reward good and to punish evil (Romans 13:3).

The civil and the Christian life work together. They are separate but dependent on each other. The government keeps order in the world so the Church can freely proclaim sin and grace, Law and Gospel. The Church influences the community through faithful people who work hard at living moral lives. Yet Christians know that the real witness to the community is not the individual who lives a moral life but the Christian who repents of sin and counts on the forgiveness God gives by faith in Christ's work.

War. Terrorism. Chaos. What should Christians do? God calls Christians to live a moral and orderly life in the community. God also calls Christians to identify sin and to forgive it. However, God gives civil authorities the "sword" to maintain order and peace in the world. When governmental authorities can make the case that military force is needed to keep order in the community (or even in the world), Christians are called to support order and the government. This is called a "just war." God expects His governmental servants to keep order in the world.

Terrorism is worse than war. Terrorism by definition brings fear and chaos to a community. Terrorism follows no rules of engagement. Terrorists do not wear uniforms. Terrorists use lawlessness to rule people by fear. Terrorism is the opposite of what God intends in Romans 13. A just government responds to terrorism with justice and civil order, even if it must force the lawless into being lawful. Terrorism requires a just punishment for its evil. God desires order in His creation.

The Church responds differently. The Church does not seek revenge, justice, or punishment in society. Instead, Christians as members of society may seek justice as they function and participate in the community. The justice of the Church is the justice of Jesus from the Cross through His Word to forgive sin. The Church's responsibility is to call people to repentance and to pronounce forgiveness. The government does not have the answer to sin. The Church does. Christians do.

Christians thank God for the gifts of government and Church. They pray. They teach. Each one of us can be thankful for a peaceful and orderly country. We also give thanks for God's mercy and forgiveness because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Christians Pray

We thank God for His gifts: order through good government and the forgiveness of sins through the tools of the Church, namely, God's Word and Sacraments. Life is good in the United States: We eat regularly, attend schools, and receive paychecks.

We thank God for the wise, patient, and determined governmental leaders who address evil without responding in a fanatical manner. We thank God for our civil freedom, especially the freedom the Church enjoys to preach, to baptize, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

We pray that God would provide the president and all in authority with wisdom. We pray that our leaders would respond in such a manner that justice and order would prevail. We pray that punishment for evildoers would be appropriate yet fair in the eyes of the world community.

We pray for our military personnel. We pray that God would protect our soldiers, and we give thanks for His angels who watch over them. We pray that God would give spiritual strength to the soldiers so they might know Christ, the true God who brings eternal forgiveness, strength, hope, and peace.

We pray for all that suffer. We pray for the families who mourn and who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We pray for those throughout the world that lives in fear of terrorism.

We pray that our Lord would find opportunities for His Word to be preached, both Law and Gospel. It alone brings Christ, the true God, the light amid darkness (John 1:5). Christians, even amid death and destruction, can truly rejoice in Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil.

Christians Teach

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:16ff.) commanded the apostles to baptize and to teach. In times of war,

we learn about sin and its manifestations. We learn to thank God for good government and for peace. We learn of Christ's comfort.

"Peace be with you" (John 20:19) were the victorious words of the resurrected Christ to His disciples. His peace is different from the world's peace. The world keeps peace through force. Christ gives eternal peace through His Word, through Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. These bring forgiveness to believers. These bring the resurrected presence of Jesus to the world. Faith receives these gifts. Christ's peace cuts through a world of chaos, war, and bloodshed. The world's bloodshed is devastating, but the blood of Christ is sustaining. Christ spilled His own blood for our sins at the Cross. Now He comes to us through the word and sacraments. There, He grants us peace. This comfort and strength allows us to continue on with life daily. God's mercy showers down on us (Isaiah 45:8) and strengthens us to wake up and return to work, school, and our daily routine. That is God's will.

Christians take God's Word into their daily lives. We can teach our families, neighbors, and friends. We are called to teach about Christ's promises. Christians say "Thy will be done" (Romans 6:10) in the face of suffering, death, and destruction. Christians trust God's Word when it teaches that all things will work out for the best (Romans 28:18ff.). Christians know that in their weakness, God is strongest (2 Corinthians 12:9). God Himself tasted death and destruction. God Himself suffered eternal death and hell and defeated them. This same God—amid terror, war, and destruction—grants us peace.

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