

**Theology for Life**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church**  
Lesson 14: Church and State

**Discussion Questions:**

Should the church engage politics (if so when) and should the church endorse certain political candidates? Why or why not?

Should a Christian be involved in politics? How is that different from the church's involvement?

**God Ordained Institutions**

Scripture makes clear that God has established **three institutions** that humans have a **moral responsibility** to obey. God is the head of each but has appointed human vice-leadership in each sphere.

- Family (*Ephesians 5:21-6:5ff, and especially the promises attached*) c.f. WCF 24
- State (*Romans 13:1-7, especially vs. 2-4*) c.f. WCF 23
- Church (*Hebrews 13:7ff, especially vs. 17*) c.f. WCF 21, 25-31

18th century Presbyterian, Samuel Davies, described the nature and relationship of these three institutions.

*"The great Author of our nature, who has made us sociable creatures, has instituted various societies among mankind, both civil and religious, and joined them together by the various bonds of relation.*

*The first and radical society is that of a family, which is the nursery of the church and state. This was the society instituted in Paradise in the state of innocence, when the indulgent Creator, finding that it was not good for a man, a sociable creature, to be alone, formed a helpmeet for him and united them in the endearing bonds of the conjugal relations.*

*From thence, the human race was propagated; and when multiplied, it was formed into civil governments and ecclesiastical assemblies."*

How is the family a unique blend of church and state? What advantages does this blend provide? How might the blend create confusion to those in the family?

**The State (Civil Magistrate)**

**WCF 23.1** *God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under him, over the people, for his own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers.*

Why did God create the State? What benefits does it provide?

What role does the State play in relation to human sin?

## **The Common Grace of the State**

1. Meredith Kline has argued that the *institutional* separation of church from state grew out of the mercy shown to Cain in Genesis 4:11-17. The basis of the state was non-redemptive common grace. This is undeserved kindness shown to all people. Kline summarized it this way:

*Common grace was introduced to act as a rein to hold in check the curse on mankind and to make possible an interim historical environment as the theater for a program of redemption.*  
Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*.

### Nature of Church and State Clarified

The **nature of the State is remedial**. It restrains sin. It cannot change the heart. The State can use force to punish and correct behaviors.

The **nature of the Church is redemptive**. It offers forgiveness of sins through Christ. The gospel alone can transform the heart of a sinner into someone who obeys God. The authority of the church is always spiritual, and church power is always for building up and never for destruction.

**Romans 13:1-7** *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] 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. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*

What responsibilities do Christians have toward the State?

What in general, can we observe about the extent and limits of the state according to Romans 13?

**WCF 23.3a** *Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger.*

Why should the State not administer the Word of God? Should a public school teacher teach the Bible in class? Why or why not?

According to WCF 23.3a, is the State a secular institution?

**23.3b** *And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.*

Does WCF instruct the state to have nothing to do with the church?

**23.4** *It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, much less hath the pope any power and jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or over any of their people; and, least of all, to deprive them of their dominions, or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretense whatsoever.*

What is the duty of every Christian to the state?

What should a Christian do if a non-Christian or atheist is elected to civil office?

**WCF.2** *It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the new testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.*

Is it acceptable for a Christian to participate in and/or lead a nation into war? Is it appropriate for a church to wage war?

What is the difference between “separation of church and state” and “separation of Christian and state”?

### **The Spirituality of the Church**

*"History establishes no truth more clearly than this, that when the Church has engaged in any manner in political difficulties, its best interests, its influence for good, and its religious character have suffered. Individual members of the Church have their responsibilities as citizens and as politicians and their duties are of a totally different sort from those of the Church collectively. Their religion should, indeed make them better citizens; but their*

*citizenship in this world is one thing, and their citizenship of the great Church is another thing.*

*The Church, as such, has absolutely no concern with those works in which it is the highest worldly duty of the man to engage. The church owes no allegiance to any earthly power; it owes no fealty to any monarch or government. For there is no divided loyalty in the church, and no part of the Church, in Jerusalem or Antioch, in England or America, on earth or in heaven, that owes any allegiance which all the other parts do not equally owe. The mistake of confounding the duty of the individual citizen and church-member, with the duties of the church, has led to the most fatal errors.*

Stuart Robinson, May 22, 1862

What is the danger of the church overstepping its bounds?

What happens when the church takes up the task of the State or the methods of the State?

This concept will be confusing if you resist the concept of the **church as institution**. If your view of the church is just an informal collection of believers, it will be difficult to distinguish the State from a Christian's duty.

For example, how does this quote from John Howard Yoder envision the church's identity? What is the "good news" that the church bears?

*"The church must be a sample of the kind of humanity which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted. Only then will it have anything to say to the society that surrounds it about how those difference must be dealt with."*

Thomas Peck provides a good summary of the relation of "church" to "state" from his *Notes on Ecclesiology*:

**1. In relation to God:** *the state is an ordinance of God considered as the creator, and, therefore, the moral governor of mankind, while the church is an ordinance of God considered as the saviour and restorer of mankind. The state is ordained for man as man; the church for man as a sinner in a condition of inchoate restoration and salvation. The state is for the whole race of man; the church consists of that portion of the race which is really, or by credible profession, the mediatorial body of Christ. (275)*

What stands out about this quote?

**2. In relation to constitution:** *The next point of difference between church and state is in the rules by which they are to be respectively regulated in the exercise of their functions. The rule of the church is the word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is the statute book of the visible kingdom of Christ. The rule for the state is the "light of nature," or the human reason.*

Why does Peck claim that the rule of the state is the "light of nature" and not scripture?

**3. In relation to power:** *The power of the church is, strictly and only, “ministerial and declarative”; the power of the state is magisterial and imperative. The church has no power to make laws, but only to declare the law of God. All her acts of government are acts of obedience to her Head and King. The state has the power to make laws as well as to declare them; has a legislative as well as a judicial power.*

**4. In relation to Form:** *Hence, the form of government for the church, the regulative and the constitutive principles of her organization, are not matters to be determined by human reason, but to be derived from the Bible as the constitution and statute-book: while, in the state, these are matters to be settled by the history and condition of political communities. The life of the state is natural, and it is left to assume an organization for itself. The life of the church is supernatural, and God prescribes an organization for it. (281)*

How does each institution derive its governmental form?

**5. In relation to sanctions:** *church and the state differ in their sanctions, as well as in their authority and their rule. The sanction of ecclesiastical government is moral, appealing to the faith and the conscience, a parental discipline, designed for the good of the offender. Its symbol is the “keys.” The sanction of civil government is force, appealing to the bodily sensibilities of the subject or the citizen; a penal administration, designed to vindicate the majesty of justice and the supremacy of law, with a very incidental, if any, reference to the good of the transgressor. Its symbol is the “sword.” (287)*

What would be the danger if these institutions switched “keys”?

**6. In relation to scope of power:** *“The scope and aim of civil power is only things temporal; of the ecclesiastical power, only things spiritual. Religious is a term not predicable of acts of the state; political and civil, not predicable of acts of the church.”*