

Gotta Keep'em Separated – But where's the Line?

Matt 16:13-20, Matt 28:18-20

Well brothers and sisters, as we wrap up this Pandemic Theology 2.0 series today, I'm struck by the fact that normally a sermon about the relationship between church and state would be irrelevant to us – however this has become a big issue with how various church communities have responded to public health restrictions.

As we are all well aware there are pastors and churches who are convinced that the civil gov't has overstepped its authority by limiting or restricting the church's ability to gather together for worship during this pandemic.

They are contesting the civil gov'ts authority to order them to stop gathering for public worship. So that raises the question, Is this something outside of gov't jurisdiction? What is gov't able to require of the church? And if cooperation is not given, are they allowed to take measures to force a church into compliance?

Now last week Sunday we looked at how our reactions to such gov't orders flow out of our overall beliefs and attitudes about authority – especially with how civil authority is connected to God's authority. So, we've already dealt with our heart matters on this issue, and how the Lord is working through these circumstances to make us aware of how our reactions to civil authority can show us areas where we are struggling to submit to His authority.

So now we can ask the questions about what sort of jurisdiction the State can exercise over the Church, and what are the limitations of that authority and what ought our response to be if the State oversteps its authority? What is the relationship between the Church and State?

Most Christians and most Canadians would instinctively respond with saying there needs to be some form of separation between Church and State, by which they mean that the Gov't should not favor one particular religion over another or make civil laws based on matters of religious observances – because we don't want to see the practice of

religion enforced by the power of the State. We realize this does not encourage the true practice of religion and it has the potential to be misused to force religious practices upon us that we might not believe in.

That is typical of the way most people today would see the relationship between the Church and State, its a contrast between sacred and secular, public vs. private, or legal restrictions vs. personal freedoms, or... nature and grace; and I'll say more on that later on.

But the basic understanding is that these two institutions are the opposite of each other, almost antithetical to each other and they shouldn't be mixed because to do so would distort the essence of what the State or Church is supposed to be.

Case in point – if a politician wants to acknowledge a religious holiday, they are bound to make sure they acknowledge ALL religious holidays, they can't say Merry Christmas without saying Happy Hannukah lest they be accused of favoring one religion over another and mixing religion and politics. And

when people want to describe how a Church goes off the rails, they characterize what has been going on as “church *politics*” And if Christians believe this is the nature of the relationship between Church and State then its pretty easy to see that things are already set up for the kinds of conflict that we've seen right?

Any time the State deals with or touches on something that can be defined as religious or is concerning for a religion, it sets off a reaction among those who see this interaction as antithetical – the same way that it does whenever the religious teachings of the Church are seen to be influencing matters of the State. Tensions run high, lines are drawn, power struggles begin, situations escalate and conflict ensues.

This is what we've seen this play out during the pandemic as gov't health restrictions have to address church gatherings for worship services.

But brothers and sisters, is this biblical way to view the relationship between the Church and State? And does it

reflect an accurate scriptural understanding of the true nature of the Church and God's created purpose for the State?

I don't believe so – it actually more of a pragmatic solution to the challenges of balancing competing interests in a pluralistically religious society, it is based on the philosophical ideas of Immanuel Kant that there is “scientific, factual, public knowledge” which needs to be separated and remain unaffected by “personal, private, religious feelings” and it was motivated by the religious wars which ravaged Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries, and it was solidified politically in the establishing of religious rights and freedoms for European settlers seeking a new life and country in North America.

It is part of our cultural heritage in the West, so it is highly likely that this is how we frame and understand the relationship between the Church and State - however... not only have we seen the kind of problematic conflict it leads to over the past year, its also not biblically correct.

So, let's take a look at what we can glean from the scriptures to gain a proper understanding of what Church and State are and how they ought to relate.

We start with the comments about Gov't that we read last week from Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 and how they come from the broad knowledge which Peter and Paul had of the Old Testament and God's working with His people.

That's what allows them to make statements like “*there is no authority except that which God has established*” (Rom 13:1) and “*governors... are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*” (1 Peter 2:14)

So let me give you just a few OT references which help to form a biblical view of the State and it's God intended purpose.

We start with Genesis 1:26 where God says “*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule...*” and Genesis 2:15 where “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*”

Here we see that is God delegating some of His divine authority as the Creator and Sovereign God in who He creates human beings to be and what He intends for them to do.

To be created in the Image of God is a positional statement which means that we are under God's authority and thus we are authorized to rule over His creation. In this authorization, we are expected to continue God's creating activity – not out of nothing – but with the Creation that God gives to us.

So, there is an intention for growth and development and that includes that creation and development of how God's authority eventually comes to be expressed in the formation of the State and those who govern in it. This is why Paul can say all authority is established by God.

Then we turn to Genesis 9:5-6, after the flood, when God establishes the Covenant of Promise with Noah, the original covenant with Adam gets slightly modified to account for and respond to how sin had brought murder into the world - and

God clarifies the responsibility that being made in His image requires from those who bear it.

God says to Noah and his sons *“from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed”* God is commanding that a murderer's life must be taken for their crime by the society they lived in and it would be satisfactory retribution – not only for God, but also for the victim's family in order to prevent blood feuds.

So, we start to see the development of society having a governing responsibility for its members and their actions, and this underlies why Peter speaks about of governors *“punishing those who do wrong.”*

It's also significant that once God clarifies this responsibility, He then repeats to Noah what He said to Adam and Eve *“As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.”* This offers the reason **why** God wants gov't to punish wrong doing and authorizes them to

take a life for a life in doing so. It is so that humanity can have space to flourish and fulfill its God-given purpose because gov't is restraining the destructive aspects of sin and evil.

This is also the basis for the biblical concept of justice. Justice is rooted in who we are as image bearers of God and what we are created to do in ruling over the creation and developing it and stewarding it.

The scripture indicates this is another part of the responsibility which gov't has to help humanity flourish. Prov 29:4 says *“By justice a King gives a country stability”* and Prov 29:14 say *“If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will be established forever.”*

So with these selections of scripture passages, we have enough to give us a basis upon which we can develop a biblical understanding of the role and nature of gov't. So a basic biblical understanding of the State would be: It is how God delegates His divine authority to human beings to facilitate the fulfilment of our purpose as Human beings; to fill the

earth, develop and care for and rule over His creation, in an organized, orderly, harmonious, caring and just way. After the fall gov't has the additional responsibility of restraining sin and evil with the power of the sword to minimize the effect sin and evil warp and twist and impede our pursuit of our God-given Creational purpose.

That's a very different understanding of the State compared to the pragmatic secular notion that gov't is a social construct for attempting to balance out everyone's competing personal and private interests alongside group interests while not favoring anyone one person or group over and against the other.

And if we start with a biblical view of the State its actually much easier to hold to a biblical view of the Church, in part because God created the State before He created the Church, but also because if you hold to a secular pragmatic notion of the State that you live your everyday life in - then it forces you to categorize the Church in an unbiblical way to find a place to fit it in.

So, for all practical purposes, in how they understand the relationship between Church and State many believers view the Church as some sort of voluntary organization which they have the right to choose to associate with, gather with, and worship with in a manner of their choosing - or not... but no one else can determine that for them or interfere with this.

And if you look at the arguments against the legality of health restrictions levied on churches - it's all about how the gov't is infringing on these rights and freedoms.

But is this what Scripture reveals the Church to be? I think you already know the answer to that right?

Scripture calls the Church the Body of Christ and in 1 Cor 12 Paul fleshes out how each of us is connected to each other because of this – and its not just a cute way to talk about group dynamics. There is a real spiritual bond between us that unites us to Jesus Christ and to each other, that makes us the Church. We say we believe in this in the Apostle's Creed when

we say we believing the Holy catholic Church and the Communion of Saints.

And that means we belong to each other as well as Christ - Romans 12:5 Paul says *“so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member **belongs** to all the others.”*

And we don't choose to belong to the Church – Christ chooses us. John 15:16 Jesus says *“you did not choose me – I chose you...”* and in John 17:9 Jesus thanks the Father for *“those you have **given** me, for they are **yours**.”* And that's why Paul reminds the Corinthians in 1 Cor 6:20 *“You are **not your own**; you were **bought** at a price.”*

So, we're not a part of Valleyview by accident or coincidence or solely because of our own decision. This is not a voluntary organization like a hockey team or a gym membership or a Community Association – this is a Church... and in that respect its similar to the State where you are born into your citizenship – In the Church we are re-born into our membership.

And this Body has a purpose and responsibilities and our passages from Matthew this morning help to further define these for us in ways that also help us understand how Church and State are to relate to each other.

So in Matthew 28:18-20 which we have up the wall behind me, Jesus says to the disciples *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

This is the great commission – our task as a Church, it is the responsibility given to us by the head of the Church – Jesus Christ. And its important that we notice this commission is possible because Jesus has been given ALL authority, and thus He is able to over-ride any other sin twisted authority from the gov’t of any other nation, or even from God’s own people, that would attempt to stop the Church from making disciples through preaching the gospel, baptizing and teaching obedience to Jesus Christ.

This is why in Acts 4:18-19 when the Jewish Sandhedrin tells Peter and John to stop preaching in Jesus’ name they refuse to comply and say on this matter *“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him?”*

And then Matthew 16:18-19 where Jesus says *“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

And we’re working backwards in the chapter order here because most of us already know that the Church’s mission and role in society is to make disciples, but we often forget that the Church has authority to do this through the keys of the kingdom and the authority to bind and loose spiritually.

We tend to think that making disciples is a voluntary matter of trying to convince people to want to be disciples, by selling them on discipleship as attractive or beneficial, and that’s all

fine and dandy – but Jesus words in Matt 16 gives the Church Authority that we are to use in making disciples as well.

After all – are we really being obedient if becoming a disciple is something we’re persuaded to do because its pleasant or attractive?? No - you can only be obedient to authority – and the Church has that authority.

This is why Hebrews 3:17 says to Christians *“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.”*

Now if you are wondering *“what are the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven?”*

I can’t answer that any better than the Heidelberg Catechism does in Answer #83 *“the keys to the kingdom of heaven are the preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened (loosed) to believers and closed (bound) to unbelievers.”*

Which leads to the next two questions – *How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel? And How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?* Again... I can’t answer better than the Catechism, so here’s what it says;

According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come. (H.C. Q&A 84)

And According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-christian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or

wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment. (H.C. Q&A 85)

So brothers and sisters, from these two verses we have plenty of basis on which to form not so much a definition of the Church but an understanding of who we are and what we do that fits with a biblical understanding of the State and how Church and State ought to relate to each other.

The Church's God-given responsibility and area of authority is concerned with disciple-making through preaching the gospel message, correct teaching of the scriptures, administering the sacraments, leading worship and exercising church discipline in the Body.

When the Church is faithful in this task of ministering God's Grace in these ways the Holy Spirit produces new people, who are transformed and empowered to fulfill God's creational purpose and calling for our lives. We are saved from sin – but more importantly we are saved **for** our purpose.

And that is how Christians ought to understand the relationship between Church and State from a biblical perspective. The State is a structure of God's good Creation that is currently prevented from fulfilling its intended purpose – it is under a curse and it is additionally tasked with restraining and mitigating that curse in society and upon itself, the Church is an instrument of God's grace that comes to bring restoration and points to the fulfillment to God's creation.

They are not intended to be antithetical to each other but complementary. Grace is not the opposite of Nature or Creation, Grace is not superior to Creation – with Creation there is no need for Grace... Grace brings about the redemption and restoration of Creation for God's purposes.

And so, any separation of Church and State that we speak of is not about avoiding polluting one with the other, but rather it has to do with respecting the different spheres of their God-given responsibilities and authority.

It is not right for the Gov't to deal with matters of the gospel and disciple-making – that belongs to the Church. And it is not appropriate for the Church to attempt to speak authoritatively on matters of public health – that belongs to the gov't.

It is helpful for the Gov't to extend religious rights and freedoms in a recognition of the Church's areas of authority and it is respectful for the Church to encourage everyone by their example to be subject to the governing authorities.

And if we have a solid biblical understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of Church and State then it becomes much easier to determine when either one is out of line and needs to be called to account and what measures need to be taken to do that. Now there is a whole lot more that can be said to flesh this out – but we have to wrap this up

So I'll conclude by stating I pray those pastors and churches who had to be taken to task by the gov't for overstepping their own authority are convicted of this and have a change of heart and will submit to the gov't on health matters.

And I'm praying that the Lord will give us gov't in Canada that recognizes the limits of its authority and does not pass legislations that would put us in a position where we must engage in civil disobedience and risk fines or jail time because they are overstepping their limits and interfering in the responsibilities and teachings of the Church.

And I pray that may we have the courage and conviction, in spite of how our society views church and state, to hold fast to the biblical truth instead and speak it out and share it! May we be effective witnesses to the real reality where Church and State are both heading – the new Creation.

So come Lord Jesus – King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Head of the Church AND Head of the State, may your Kingdom Come and your Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.