

Lutheranism and the Religious Right

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Introduction

When I was a child, I was fascinated with Lutheranism. I was adopted into a family where we did things because we were Lutheran Christians. We were very aware of the church year¹; we were well-instructed in the liturgy; our daily home devotions made terrific use of the Lutheran church's rich resources. Today I work hard to bring all of the positive aspects of my fascination with things Lutheran into my preaching and teaching.

When I was a child, I was also fascinated with politics, although not necessarily with the Religious Right. I worked for the McGovern presidential campaign in 1972 (I was nine years old) and watched Nixon resign on TV a short time later. My school allowed me a week off to work for Mo Udall against Jimmy Carter in Wisconsin's Democratic presidential primary in 1976.² In the past few years I have helped the presidential campaigns of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. But today I work hard not to bring all of the negative aspects of my fascination with things political into my work as the president of one of our synod's preparatory schools.

Why the difference? The decisions I have made about my life as a called worker in the WELS and a citizen of the United States are based to a great extent on the biblical principles and historical applications I'm about to tell you in this paper. I believe that the issues presented in this paper and at this conference are critical to the future life and health of our church body and its individual members.

Some Quick Definitions

Let's narrow the issues of this paper with some quick definitions of the words of the assigned theme, "Lutheranism and the Religious Right."

What's Lutheranism? Rather than opening up the paper to include the views of every church body with the name "Lutheran," I'm going to work on the rather broad assumption that we in the WELS believe, teach and confess the biblical doctrines of mainline, historical Lutheranism. Lutheranism in this paper is the "ism" we know as our religion, traceable back to Martin Luther or, said another way, based on the Bible as the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God, and the Lutheran Confessions as a correct exposition of the Bible.³

What's the Religious Right? The terms "right" and "left" for political views come from the legislative assembly in France at the time of the French Revolution. Delegates in that National Assembly were seated according to their political beliefs, with more conservative groups on the right and more liberal groups on the

¹ After lunch every day we prayed and then sang a Lutheran chorale, correct for the season of the church year. As a young child I knew from memory the hymn verses that the Lutheran Church had designated to be sung for each Sunday of the church year. We gave up desserts for Lent, but knew that we could eat them on Sunday, since that is a celebration day in the Lenten season, not really part of the 40 days. We even knew that we could stretch the dessert rule by eating them after 6 pm on Saturday, so long as we were willing to start the "fast" again after 6 pm on Sunday.

² I remember the thrill of going to bed knowing that Mo Udall had won that primary, carrying all thirteen of the precincts in Janesville, Wisconsin, and then the disappointment of getting up the next morning to find out that the rural vote had come in so heavily for Carter that he had pulled out a state-wide victory.

³ Making the same point in a paper called "Is There A Relationship Between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism?" delivered to the California Delegate Conference on January 18, 1966, Pastor Joel C. Gerlach identifies real Lutheranism with a *quia* rather than a *quatenus* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. He writes, "Confessional Lutherans uphold the confessions *because* they set forth correctly the teachings of God's revealed Word. Lutherans who have abandoned the confessional principle subscribe to the confessions only *insofar as* they agree with the teachings of God's Word."

left.⁴ The Religious Right in those days supported the divine right of kings. They believed that the Roman Catholic Church had a role to play in the philosophy of governing that nation. In the United States today, the title “Religious Right” is most often given to politicians and voters who believe that Reformed Christianity has a role to play in the philosophy of governing our nation.

That leaves the word “and” in the theme. I am taking that conjunction as my excuse to spend most of this paper in talking about the relationship between Lutheranism and the Religious Right. If that’s not at all what the steering committee intended, it’s too late now!

The Bible Spells Out the Relationship Between Religion and Politics

When the Bible speaks of the relationship between church and state, religion and politics, we call it the doctrine of the “Two Kingdoms.”⁵

In Old Testament Israel, God chose to mix church and state. Leaders in the one area were most often leaders in the other (1 Samuel 12:12-15). As with all things relating to that ancient society, God’s reason for that arrangement was Christ (Psalm 2). When Christ came into this world, one anointing made him prophet, priest and king. He was in charge of both the church and the state whether those were one kingdom or two. Even today he rules as head of both church and state (Ephesians 1:22,23, Romans 13 :1).

While he walked the earth, Jesus told his disciples that in the New Testament era, church and state were not to overlap so closely any more. In fact, in what must have been a startling statement for those who still wanted a theocracy, Jesus divided very clearly: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

Even with that dramatic announcement, the Jewish church/state did not immediately wither in the weeks and months following Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The fact that there was a new arrangement of church and state while the old political and religious institutions still existed made for some interesting situations for the early Church. For example, when women who left the Jewish faith were widowed, that mixed Jewish church/state would not take care of them, and the responsibility fell to the new Christians. Although the apostles after Pentecost knew that they were responsible for the Word of God and prayer, not for waiting on tables, they still had sympathy for the widows, and organized other Christians to help them (Acts 6).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul carefully distinguishes between the Two Kingdoms. They have different purposes and different tools. The purpose of the church is to bring souls to faith in Jesus and keep them in that faith until death. The tool of the church is the gospel. In the church, the law works in service to the gospel (Romans 15:15-18; 2 Corinthians 3:5,6). The purpose of the state is to promote civil order, that is, to reward those who do good and punish those who do bad. The state’s tool is the law, working in service to the human conscience and intellect. The state does not use the gospel (Romans 13:1-7).

The Two Kingdoms in Historical Development

Despite Paul’s careful warning to the church in Rome, confusion developed already in the fourth century when the secular leaders of the Roman Empire began to embrace religious power and dally with the gospel as a political tool. From that caesaropapism arose the Antichrist, an office in Rome that fulfilled biblical prophecy (Daniel 11:36-39, for example) by mixing church and state.⁶

Martin Luther gave voice to the biblical doctrine of the Two Kingdoms as a necessary step of the Reformation. Separating allegiance to the pope in Rome, to the Holy Roman Emperor, and to God was very important for the Reformation-era German princes in whose heart the gospel took root.⁷ Unfortunately, the

⁴ “The royalists, who supported the king, were seated on the right. Moderates, who favored a limited monarchy, sat in the middle. The radicals, who wanted a republic, sat on the left. Among the radicals were the extremists, who demanded a republic in which all males could vote, whether or not they owned property” (*World History: The Human Experience*, Glencoe: New York, 1994, p. 518).

⁵ A beautiful presentation of this doctrine can be found in Northwestern Publishing House’s publication, *Civil Government. God’s Other Kingdom*, by Daniel M. Deutschlander (1998), a volume from the People’s Bible Teachings series.

⁶ This is certainly not unknown in world religions. “Islamic states” and national religions like Japan’s Shinto are classic examples.

⁷ The princes confessed in the Augsburg Confession (Article 28): “The power of the Church and the civil power must not be confounded.” Martin Luther wrote (LW 46:69f), “Now he who would confuse these two kingdoms—as our false fanatics do—would

Peace of Augsburg (1555) did some damage to good application of the biblical doctrine when it promoted the idea that a citizen should be the same religion as the ruler of his or her particular state (*cuius regio, eius religio*, that is, if you live in someone's region, you must be his religion).

A lot of damage was also done in Reformation days by John Calvin, who instituted in Geneva a very muddled mixture of church and state, introducing a strict system of church discipline as civil law for Geneva. The state enforced the morality of the church. In the first two years of this new society in Geneva, 58 people were condemned to death by the state for infraction of these ecclesiastical ordinances.⁸

When Lutherans came to the United States they were suddenly free of the automatic European assumption that one's state and one's religion had a close relationship. Nevertheless, they named their synods after the states they were living in.⁹ It wasn't long before our forefathers were being asked to take sides in one of the great political struggles of our nation, the Civil War. Other political events and national moral questions caused American Lutherans to sound out how the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was to be applied in their new freedom.

In the middle 1900's Lutherans in Germany were challenged by the Religious Right movement called National Socialism.¹⁰ We should be aware that past collaboration between Nazis and the German State church colors the way that Lutherans—and especially our Two Kingdoms doctrine—are viewed by other Christians around the world.

In the 1950's and 1960's, WELS Lutherans were confronted by the Religious Right in the guise of Billy James Hargis and the Christian Crusade. Virulently anti-Communist, the Christian Crusade clearly set the stage for Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign with such rhetoric as:

There is no need to fear. God is guiding us... I am convinced that this is the time for God's conservatives across the nation to step up their attacks against liberalism and communism... We accept the challenge of God. We are conscious of his leadership.¹¹

It is commonly accepted that Barry Goldwater's unsuccessful presidential campaign sowed the seeds for Ronald Reagan's later successes. Mr. Goldwater was very clear on the point that political conservatism was exactly the same as religious conservatism. In the foreword of his famous book, *Conscience of a Conservative*, he makes the case that the principles on which we ought to solve problems never change; they are "derived from the nature of man and from the truths that God has revealed about his creation." Under attack by those who said the conservative philosophy was out of date, he wrote, "To suggest that the Conservative philosophy is out of date is akin to saying that the Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments...are out of date."

It is not so commonly accepted, however, that the Christian Crusade of the 1960's grew into the Moral Majority of the 1980's and the Christian Coalition of the 1990's.¹²

put wrath into God's kingdom and mercy into the world's kingdom, and that is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell."

⁸ Statistic from an editorial by Pastor Winfred Schaller in *The Lutheran Spokesman* (vol. 7, no. 1, June, 1964), entitled "Who are the Followers of John Calvin?"

⁹ Does the last frame of the cartoon from *The New Yorker*, printed on the back of this paper, indicate that there may be some disadvantage in naming our church body after a political organization (the state of Wisconsin)?

¹⁰ Herman Sasse, a confessional Lutheran in the middle of the struggle, wrote afterwards, "No, it was not Lutheranism as such, but a sick Lutheranism that gave National Socialism an open door into the church. It was a Lutheran Church that was no longer capable of standing guard over the souls of its people because it had fallen asleep itself . . . We have noble families in which the grandfathers were conservative and confessional Lutherans, the fathers were German nationalists and members of the union church, and the sons joined the S.S." (quoted by Dr. Laurence L. White in a paper presented to the Association of Confessional Lutherans on 4/17/98 and entitled, "The Cultural Crisis and Lutheran Social Ethics," and by Stewart W. Herman in his book, *The Rebirth of the German Church* (Harper: New York), 1946, pp50,51.

¹¹ From the magazine, *Christian Crusade* (January 1963, p13), quoted in *The American Far Right: A Case Study of Billy James Hargis and Christian Crusade* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 1968, page 13.

¹² There remains a great deal of sensitivity on this issue. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe write in *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (1988): "When Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority first began to gain some visibility in 1980, it was

Today's American Religious Right

Regardless of its exact parentage, today's mainstream Religious Right is conjured up by the simple mention of the names Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. We should probably also know the names James Dobson, Gary Bauer (often mentioned as a Republican presidential candidate this year), the Family Research Council, and the Christian Coalition well enough to identify them as part of the group.¹³

But do you know who Paul Weyrich is? He is one of the founders of the Moral Majority movement of the 1980's along with Jerry Falwell, and he's been in the news recently because of a public letter he sent to colleagues suggesting that social conservatives should admit defeat and drop out of politics.¹⁴

You might also recognize the name of columnist Cal Thomas, who has been a speaker at WELS Lutherans for Life presentations. With a Rev. Ed Dobson, he has authored a new best-selling book called *Blinded By Might*, in which he, like Weyrich, advocates working with individuals in the church arena rather than the masses in the political arena to boost spiritual values in America.

Yes, the Religious Right is sincerely interested in morality. According to their websites and publications, the American Religious Right believes that pornography is wrong, that homosexuality is wrong, and that abortion is wrong except to save the life of the mother. It also believes that there should be prayer in public schools, not sex education, and that United States participation in the United Nations should be lessened or abandoned, since the U.N. conferences on women and children encourage abortion and feminism, among other evils. The American Religious Right supports political candidates and office-holders who espouse these positions, and invites voters to do the same.

When it quotes the Bible, the American Religious Right often uses passages like Proverbs 14:34, "Righteousness exalts a nation," that originally encouraged the mixed church/state of Israel to pursue God's righteousness as a nation. Ignoring New Testament Two Kingdom distinctions, the movement claims that America has always been a Christian nation, founded on Christian morals.¹⁵

Institutional Reaction to the Religious Right

I suspect that most of you listening to this paper have a clear enough understanding of the Bible's doctrine of church fellowship and our practice of it to distinguish that we ought not rush out and declare fellowship with the Christian Coalition or Focus on the Family. But they don't really want us to declare fellowship. When they recruit member church bodies, they don't have the goal of harmony in doctrine and practice. They only want support for their current agenda, and in exchange for that support, the church body can have a place at the table where future agendas are formed.

assumed that he and his televangelist associates were genealogical blood brothers to the fascistic radical right of the 1950s. The emphasis here is on the word *assumed*. There does not exist, even today, a single scholarly work that genealogically links the New Christian Right with the 'Old Christian Right'" (page 165).

¹³ The website <http://www.infidels.org/activist/current/rrr/orgs.htm> monitors what it calls "Radical Religious Right" organizations, and includes: American Center for Law and Justice; American Family Association; Christian Coalition; Concerned Women for America; Eagle Forum; Family Research Council; Focus on the Family; Promise Keepers; Rutherford Institute; and Traditional Values Coalition.

¹⁴ He is quoted in *The Christian News* (March 29, 1999, page 2) as saying, "I no longer believe there is a moral majority. If there were, Bill Clinton would have been driven out of office months ago."

¹⁵ Here are some common Religious Right quotes (generally undocumented):

"The entire expedition to America was undertaken for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith."—the Mayflower Compact

"On September 11, 1777, the Continental Congress voted an expenditure of \$300,000 to buy copies of the Bible to be distributed throughout the colonies of these United States."

"America was born a Christian nation."—Woodrow Wilson

"The same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God."—John F. Kennedy

"The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related."—Ronald Reagan

Still, declarations of fellowship are not imminent. But what about para-church organizations in our fellowship? Can Wisconsin Lutheran College invite leaders from the Religious Right to speak on its campus without violating the Bible's fellowship principles? Can WELS Lutherans for Life participate as an organization in the annual march on Washington D.C. to protest *Roe v. Wade* without causing confusion in the WELS and in other Right To Life organizations? Can it invite speakers from outside the fellowship to its national conventions so long as they are also against abortion?

The answers to such questions lie in how such organizations view their roles as institutions with one foot in each Kingdom. In the Kingdom of the State, good administration demands that we use all of our resources, including strange alliances, to get legislation against evil enacted and enforced. In the Kingdom of the Church, good ministry demands that we put the interests of souls ahead of expediency, avoiding even the appearance of false doctrine.

The solution I have adopted as president of an institution that has one foot in each Kingdom is to take every avenue of good administration and every avenue of good ministry, but when they conflict, to choose the avenue of good ministry above good administration, being ready to articulate clearly the reasons for the choice I have made.¹⁶ I have adopted that solution because I believe that the gospel is more important than anything else in this life. When the Two Kingdoms conflict, I must act as a citizen of the Kingdom that preserves the gospel. The apostles put it, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Individual Reaction to the Religious Rite

Having grown up in a home where one parent voted Democratic and the other Republican in most elections, I understand that a New Testament believer, a citizen of both the Church and the State, has a few more freedoms than institutions which operate in one or both Kingdoms. I also understand that as a public minister of the gospel, I may forego some of the freedoms I have in order not to offend the weak.

Jesus speaks directly to the issue of foregoing freedoms in Matthew 17. How did he use the freedom he had as Lord of both Kingdoms? When the tax collectors inquired of Peter whether Jesus paid his taxes, Peter assured them that he did (verse 25). Soon after, Jesus asks Peter, "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?" When Peter answers, "From others," Jesus explains why a citizen of both Kingdoms may give up exercise of some freedom: "Then the sons are exempt. But *so that we may not offend them*, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours" (verses 26,27).

Still, I make my decisions in the freedom of the New Testament not as a "loose constructionist," arguing that since the Bible does not ban my behavior, neither may any man. Instead, as a "strict constructionist," I know that everything is permissible for me, but in the light of God's Word, some things are not beneficial, some things are not constructive (edifying), and I will not be mastered by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23). I believe that Lutheranism should view association with the Religious Right in just that way.

¹⁶ Examples abound. When two students sin in the same way, and one is penitent while the other is impenitent, I often enforce two different disciplines for them. Such "partiality" is bad administration—so far in my work as president of MLS I have left myself open to the charge of favoring pastor's kids, teacher's kids, prof's kids, dorm students, commuting students, athletes and musicians. But I am convinced that dealing with the heart of the student is more important than preserving my own reputation as a good administrator, so long as I can articulate the distinctly ministerial reasons for my decision.

At the same time, because I administer an institution that lives in both Kingdoms, I can say in good conscience to a penitent student who has been caught driving while intoxicated (an automatic expulsion on my campus), "You're forgiven. You're expelled."

THE NEW YORK REBELLION

WHEN THE NATIVES DECIDED TO TAKE BACK THE STREETS!

The East 47th Street Uprising

10,000 people jaywalk-
and no one can stop them!



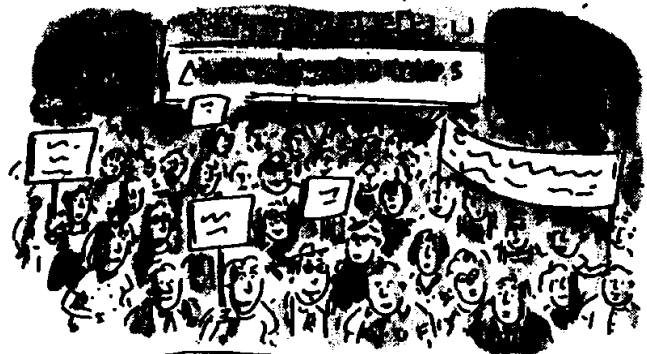
The Anti-Trump Rally

300,000 New Yorkers actually lie down
in front of bulldozers to prevent Donald
Trump's complete and utter
destruction of the Upper West Side.



The Old Bookstore Riot

A greedy landlord decides to septuple
the rent of a beloved neighborhood
bookstore- until the people say NO!



The Days of Rudeness

City dwellers get real snippy
with the tourists- and send them
scurrying back to Wisconsin.

