

A Reaction to “Church and State Throughout the Centuries: Tales of Conflict and Confusion”

Dr. Wade Johnston

September 18, 2023

I giggled when the front page of the paper came rolling off my office printer. “Typical Johnston,” I thought. Where else could one expect to see an image of Constantine, a copy of Magdeburg’s 1550 *Confessio*, and a copy of *Forward in Christ*’s grandfather? Byzantine script, Latin block letters, and German fraktur all formed a delightful alphabet soup—an alphabet soup that spells trouble in the area of church and state relations. The cover page is an important visual reminder that church and state troubles are no respecter of century or continent, nation, kingdom, or constitution, denominational identity or political party. From cover page to closing paragraph, Dr. Johnston clearly demonstrated that, “The church has always lived in times of confusion or conflict regarding the two kingdoms, whether many of its members recognized it or not. There has been no golden age where everyone figured it out and got it all right” (2). It is bound to be a messy business when a church militant interacts with a fallen world where reason is darkened, consciences are deadened, and where nature itself is “red in tooth and claw.”

The relation of church and state is a messy business. As one travels the arc of Dr. Johnston’s historical narrative, one might be led to wonder: “Instead of almost all right some of the time, the relationship between church and state has been mostly wrong most of the time.”

In reading Dr. Johnston’s paper, the observable phenomenon of historical *reversal* becomes evident. Constantine gladly used the bishops to adjudicate in matters of state. But who could have guessed at the time that in elevating the civic status of bishops, that, just a century later, it would be a bishop that went out to negotiate with Attila the Hun? That in giving bishops a privileged status in the state, he would eventually be exponentially enhancing the power of Antichrist in the church? Who would have thought it? The same could be said for the Ottonians and Salians that followed Charlemagne in the German Reich. From Charlemagne to Henry V, German emperors invested bishops. (The bishops were about the only members of the ruling class that were governable much of the time.) Who could have dreamt that the emperors who invested bishops would eventually become the emperor in the snow begging for his kingdom at Canossa? (Blumenthal’s calling Canossa a pastoral event, by the way, is akin to calling the Crusades a mission trip.) Or that the pope who crowned Charlemagne because he needed German protection in northern Italy would eventually morph into a pope excommunicating emperors and claiming the power of *two* swords across Europe? Or who could have dreamt that Althaus’s mediating position, which tried to preserve elements of the Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms but then elevated the German *Volk* to a source of Christian truth, would end with the vast majority of the German *Volk* leaving the church in the years that followed WWII? The great reversals of history are often more fascinating than fiction could ever be.

What strikes me is the matter of good intentions that the church has for the state and the state for the church. Well, some of the time. Indeed, there has been a never-ending queue of Lamechs throughout history where the state utterly dominated. These tend to be special moments of metaphorical hell on earth. I would encourage the seminary’s students to read Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* for some special insight into life lived in a country where atheism is the religion, collectivization is the sacrament, lie becomes truth, and gulags the chapels. It was no accident that Russian monasteries were often the Bolsheviks’ preferred places to imprison, torture, and kill. The very places that were once used to mortify the flesh were now being used as mortuaries for the faithful. This was a political system so twisted that even Adolf Hitler hated it—for reasons that were twisted... Rinse. Repeat.

But what about the good intentions? Where is the injustice in bishops providing access to impartial justice more often for more people? What is so bad about Europe's primary priest crowning an emperor after more than 300 years of political chaos when life was nasty, brutish, and short? Who can argue with the teaching of biblical morals along with the subjects of reading, writing, and 'rithmic? Or against American children learning to speak American? What is so wrong with trying to carve out a continuing role for the church amidst the neo-paganism of Hitler's new-fangled Reich? The problem is that good intentions don't necessarily make a thing good. And legalism in the interest of the gospel is legalism of a most wicked sort, a confusion of law and gospel of the most fundamental sort. No, really. It is. Good intentions are usually a creative effort at compromise. And in those compromises the gospel, eventually, loses. Luther: "Yet the ministry of the Word, which is the only office the bishops really have, is the office they neglect most" (*LW* 14:331). Who knows what masterworks of theology were left unwritten by St. Augustine because he was too busy hearing cases on Hippo's property disputes!

A final thought struck me as I read Dr. Johnston's amazing work—that of historical *perspective*. After 1,700 years of subsequent history, we would all make fine advisors to Emperor Constantine and the bishops of Nicaea. "You'll never believe how this is going to shake out. I wouldn't do that if I were you!" It is easy to see why Althaus's mediating position toward fascism vs. Bonhoeffer's role in the Bekennende Kirche (Confessing Church) kept Althaus alive but saw Bonhoeffer hung with piano wire in a concentration camp in Flossenbürg. It's easy to critique the mediating position of the Wittenberg party toward the Interims and see where Flacius got it right. We are, after all, required to swear that Flacius got it right in FC X in our confessional oath! Time passes, and perspective is gained.

But this is where it gets difficult: When we are faced—squarely in the present—with an issue, and suddenly brothers that share a unity in confession have a divergence of opinion on a matter that Scripture has not decided. Dr. Johnston's section on the Bennett Law got me thinking about our LES system in WELS. In my first parish, I met the parents of a member. They and a few other families had been excommunicated from their WELS church. They continued to worship together in their basement for over twenty years. The issue? It was over whether federal milk money could be used at the parish school. They maintained that it was a sin against the separation of church and state. The church maintained that they were sinning by maintaining that the church was sinning by accepting federal milk money for the school. This one seemed cut and dry to me. I am for children with strong teeth and bones. I also confess that it is wrong to make something a *sin* that Scripture does not identify as such.

But what about my dear childhood Pastor John Brenner who served as secretary of a Michigan District committee that proposed the following back in 1978, "WHEREAS there will be a referendum in November of 1978 to amend the State Constitution of Michigan which would provide a voucher system for the financing of all forms of public and private education; and WHEREAS we have always sought to uphold the principle of the separation of Church and State; and WHEREAS state aid may result in state control... Therefore, be it RESOLVED, That our congregations warn their members of the inherent dangers which are in this proposed change by disseminating this report" (Michigan District Proceedings, 1978, pp. 63–64). But what about my dear friend who is president of a WELS high school that receives voucher monies in WI that never became law in MI? He sees the voucher system as a tool to enable his school to serve children with Christ that otherwise would never be served. I know he believes in the two kingdoms. I also know that he is not blind to the potential dangers. So, big question: Who's right?

I don't know.

I don't know. And I need to be content with that. And we confessional-flavored Lutherans often struggle mightily with that grey field of mines that surely lies at the intersection of the two spheres. Where Scripture has not spoken, we are certainly free to offer our opinions that are seasoned with the wisdom that God gives. But my heart-felt opinions are certainly not the Spirit's dictions. Presently, we are often left with the mess of divergent opinions within the church—let alone over what one sees on CNN or FOX. Subsequent history has a certain knack for revealing where my cultural, political, and ecclesiastical blind spots were.

So would you have been an Althaus or a Bonhoeffer? We are quick to answer in the here and now. Then? I'm not so sure. I have a feeling I could have been rather eloquent in stating my reasons why a one-way ticket to Flossenbürg wasn't in the Third Reich's best interest or why I was simply a man misunderstood. But at what cost to the church are those excuses spoken? And at what cost to my soul? A dreadful thought.

So, what should we do? We should serve God with faith and our neighbor with acts of love according to our vocation. In the 2016 election, in the most significantly Republican county in America, I had a member who made President Obama look politically conservative. She voted Democratic because she was convinced that the party's concern for the poor best reflected her Christian faith. I also had a member who was convinced that President Trump, divorced three times, was the great savior of the Christian nuclear family. And I, according to my vocation as an evangelical Lutheran pastor, gladly communed both. And then I prayed—just a little more earnestly—that the Lord Jesus would come. And that right soon!

Prof. Aaron Christie
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
September 17, 2023