

The Theology in President Bush's Fifth Anniversary "Sermon" for Nine-Eleven (But all in vain)

Colleagues,

Just minutes ago this was ready to go. Or so I thought. I had just gone back to the Crossings webpage for one more tidbit—to copy in the following reference to Lincoln's actually pulling off a National Day of Repentance from the ThTh archives

– <https://crossings.org/thursday/2004/thur112504.shtml> "Proclamation Appointing a "National Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation"

Washington, D.C.

March 30, 1863

I copied it, came back to my intended posting piece, put the cursor in the right spot, pressed "paste" and it all went poof. Even though I'd saved it as I went along, that was poofed too. I hollered for Marie, x-times more computer-savvy than I. She tried all the tricks she knew. No luck.

So it wasn't sposed to be. You weren't s'posed to see it. So what was it? I'd taken Bush's core kerygma in his 5th anniversary address to the nation, called it a sermon remembering Teddy Roosevelt's notion of the "bully pulpit" of the American presidency, and then with verbatim quotes laid it alongside contrary quotes of Luther's two essays—"War Against the Turks" and "On Secular Authority: to What Extent it Should be Obeyed." Granted, I also did some glosses of my own. To

juxtapose one of the president's claims I even quoted "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht" [World history is the world's tribunal for judgment.] by a famous German historian of yore, whose name I can't remember. Well that's exactly what happened to me, I got my Gericht! So I shouldn't be surprised. Weltgeschichte right at my desk passed a sentence on my work and "gerichtet" it. Poof.

It was longish. I don't have the gumption (and it is 9 p.m. Thursday evening) to try to reconstitute what took all day to concoct. And I might not be able to do it, even if I did have that gumption. Marie is into conspiracy theory. It's Patriot Act surveillance finally infiltrating our condo. Forget about the Rio Grande border! Apparently a long arm extends from the Oval Office right to Russell Blvd. to dissuade, to guarantee what this bully sermon calls for: "put aside our differences, [create] a unified country. [Then] we will defeat our enemies." Big brother IS watching.

However, I can't be content with just telling you this tale of woe, and then signing off. So second prize is a 4 pp. condensation of Luther's 40-page treatise "On Secular Authority" that I was using in what went lost. I was asked to prepare that for the Adult Ed class at our congregation this coming Sunday. It's the middle piece of a three-week series about "Luther on the Secular World." Last Sunday it was war. Final Sunday it's marriage. Key texts, his letters to Katie.

Here the Readers Digest version of "Secular Authority."

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Secular Authority (*Weltliche Obrigkeit*): To What Extent it Should be Obeyed

Martin Luther 1523

[Dedicated to John, Duke of Saxony, next in line to become the Elector of Saxony. "Elector" = one of the 7 princes in the Holy Roman Empire who elect the emperor.]

The Argument

1. "Secular law and order (the coercive authority of the "sword"). . . is in the world by God's will and ordinance. Ever since the beginning of the [fallen] world." There is a long string of Bible passages . . . that say so, from the OT and NT.
2. But "there seems to be a powerful argument on the other side. Christ says: Don't engage in retribution at all." Many NT passages say that. "It appears as though in the NT there should be no secular sword among Christians." Now what? Don't resolve the dilemma the way the medieval church did: Christ's no-no words apply only to perfectionist Christians (monks/nuns); the retribution-is-OK passages are for run-of-the-mill Christians, who can't achieve perfection. Christ's words are "counsels" for super-achievers. The retribution-is-OK passages are "commandments" for all the rest.
3. That's the wrong way to resolve the dilemma. Right way is this: Divide all the children of Adam into two classes: the first belong to the kingdom of God [K/G], the second to the kingdom of the world [K/W]. Those belonging to the K/G "are all believers in Christ taking their orders from him." He's "king" in that kingdom. His "Gospel . . . teaches, governs, contains the K/G." K/G folks need no

secular coercion or law. "If all the world were composed of real Christians, no prince, king, lord, sword, or law would be needed." They wouldn't "find any work to do among Christians, since of themselves they do much more than secular authority can demand."

How so? A good apple tree needs no instruction, no coercion, to bear apples instead of thorns. An interior "program" in the tree produces the fruit. Thus Christians, with Christ's spirit and faith as their "interior" program, "need so far as they are concerned no commandment or law."

Why then all God's commandments? Answer: "No one is by nature Christian, but every one sinful and evil, so God places the restraints of the law upon them all, so that they may not dare give rein to their desires & commit outward, wicked deeds." St. Paul says: "The law is given for the unrighteous, that those who are not Christians may be externally restrained from evil deeds."

That's job #1 for God's law. Restrain innate human wickedness, preserve life on the earth.

Job #2 for God's law. "Paul also gives the law another function: "To teach everyone to recognize their sin, that they may be made humble unto grace & unto faith in Christ." Christ does that [job #2] also "when He teaches that we should not resist evil, and thereby He glorifies the law and teaches how a real Christian ought to be." [Even as Christians, when our knee-jerk response is to "get even," God's law "humbles" us. We need to run back to "grace and faith in Christ."]

4. God's other Kingdom, K/W.

Christians are scarce throughout the world—even in 1523

Europe where (almost) all are baptized. God manages that vast majority of the human race—the “world”—with his other kingdom, the regime of law, coercion, restraint. So God has two regimes going: God’s “spiritual regime” where Christ’s Holy Spirit animates Christians. [Note: “spiritual” does not mean nebulous, immaterial, spooky, but wherever Christ’s Spirit operates. Nitty-gritty down-on-the-ground “new” apple trees, bearing new fruit.]

. . . and God’s “secular [“welt-lich” in German, “worldly”] regime. . . which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they must needs keep the peace outwardly, even against their will.” So Paul interprets the secular sword: “not a terror for Christians, but for evil-doers.” St. Peter says the same.

Suppose you attempted to rule that world with the Gospel of the spiritual regime—no coercive restraints. Chaos would result. Want to try this? OK, first fill the world with real Christians. “But this you will never accomplish; for the world & the masses are and always will be unchristian, although they are all baptized & are named Christians. Real Christians are few and far between.”

Both of these regimes must be sharply distinguished, and both be permitted to remain. One to produce faith and its fruits, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. The “program” of one regime won’t work in the realm of the other. Many Bible texts document this “right” way to resolve the dilemma of the Bible’s conflicting “Yes & No” on retribution.

5. Should Christians pull out of the secular regime with its law, sword, coercion? No. You don’t need it for yourself,

but your neighbors need it for their preservation—and need you there to implement it on their behalf. “Because the sword is a very great benefit and necessary to the whole world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays tax, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to further the government. . . . Although he needs none of these things for himself and it is not necessary for him to do them, yet he considers what is for the good and profit of others.”

6. *But can a Christian actively “bear the sword and punish the wicked?” Yes, not for yourself, “but only for the good of your neighbor and for the maintenance of the safety and peace of others. . . . In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the Gospel and suffer injustice for yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns others and belongs to them, you govern yourself according to love and suffer no injustice for your neighbor’s sake; this the Gospel does not forbid, but rather commands.” Then comes a hypothetical situation. May I, a Christian, in some matter where I’ve been wronged use the sword with the intention of “not seeking my own interest, but just the punishment of evil?” Luther: “Such a miracle is not impossible, but quite unusual and hazardous.” Self-deception is almost inevitable. The Bible says Samson was able to do that—no self-interest, just God’s agent of retribution—when he pulled down the temple on the Philistines. Says Luther: “OK, first become like Samson, and then you can also do as Samson did.”*

PART TWO

How far does Secular Authority Extend?

“Here’s the main part of this treatise. Secular authority . . . we must learn how far does its arm extend, lest it extend too far & encroach upon God’s kingdom and rule.” Remember the “two classes of Adam’s children, one in the K/G under Christ, the other in the K/W under the state.” They have two different kinds of “laws and regulations.” Two different jurisdictions. Worldly government is limited to “life & property & what is external upon earth.” But not the soul. That’s the K/G turf. When world-rulers do go beyond their rightful jurisdiction, “what fools they are seeking to coerce the people with their laws & commandments into believing one thing or another.” In “soul” matters (=our God-relationship) “nothing but God’s Word shall have jurisdiction.”

Everyone is responsible for his/her own faith or unfaith. That cannot be delegated to any other authority to decide for you. Besides that, external authority has no access to the human heart, conscience, soul. No levers of coercion can touch that. Augustine: “No one can be coerced to believe.” Lots of biblical texts show how to distinguish jurisdictions between K/G and K/W.

That is, however, the opposite of what is happening in 1523. Both churchly and worldly “princes” are coercing people to believe what they prescribe. Scripture has many passages indicating that such days will come. “If your prince commands you to believe this or that, you should say: ‘Dear Lord, I owe you obedience with life and goods; command me within the limits of your power on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, I will not obey; for in this case you are a tyrant and overreach yourself and command where you have neither right nor power.’ If he takes your property for this, and punishes you, blessed are you. Thank God that you are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine Word, and let him rave, fool that he is. He will meet his judge.”

“From the beginning of the world a wise prince is a rare bird indeed; still more so a believing prince. They are usually the greatest fools or the worst knaves on earth.”

What about heresy? It cannot be stopped by any sword or coercion. “Here God’s Word must do it; if that does not accomplish the end, it will remain unaccomplished through secular power. It is a spiritual matter. God’s word alone avails here. In fact both true faith and heresy are never so strong as when men oppose them by sheer force, without God’s Word.”

“But should you ask: Since there is to be no secular sword among Christians, how are they to be ruled outwardly? There certainly must be authority also among Christians.” Not at all. Paul & Peter tell us: “Each shall count the other his superior” (Romans 12:10) and “All of you be subject one to another” (1` Peter 5:5). “What kind of authority can there be when all are equal and no one desires to be the other’s superior, but each the other’s inferior?” “But where there are no such people, there are no real Christians.”

How about clergy and bishops, aren’t they authority figures? “Their governance is not one of authority or power, but a service, as Christ’s envoys; they are neither higher nor better than other Christians. They should not impose anything on others without their consent. Their ‘rule’ is to work with God’s Word, leading Christians by it and overcoming heresy by its means.”

PART THREE

Now that we know the limits of secular authority, how should a Christian prince—of whom there are very few—use it? [Remember, Duke John, for whom ML is writing this—himself a Luther-fan—is going to be the next “Elector” of Saxony. It happens 2 yrs

later in 1525.]

- A. "Normal" are princes who rule to serve their own self-interests. Not so a Christian prince. He governs "in love," not for his own profit, but for the "profit, honor and welfare of others."
- B. That means he must be wiser than the "jurists and the law-books." "It is not sufficient only to follow the written law or the legal advisers; more than that is required." "A prince must have the law in hand as firmly as the sword, decide in his own mind when & where the law must be applied strictly or with moderation, so that reason may always . . . be the highest law & rule over all laws."
- C. But if you are not that wise, then you have only the jurists and the law books to go by. That is perilous. How to proceed? Follow Moses and Solomon. Ask God for "a right understanding, above all books and masters, wisely to rule their subjects." I can't add anything to that. "But will simply counsel a Christian prince what the attitude of his heart & mind ought to be . . . so that God will empower him to carry out all laws, counsels, and actions in a proper and godly way."

Counsel #1. Land and people do not belong to you. You belong to the land and people. "Your concern is how they may be protected and defended in good peace." Authority for a Christian prince does not mean privilege, but service to the governed, just as Christ exercised his authority.

"Who then would want to be a prince? That's the worst job on earth, full of trouble, labor & sorrow." Where is all the dancing, hunting, racing, gaming etc.? Remember, I'm not talking about a worldly prince, but a Christian one, "It is enough for me to point out that it is not impossible for a

prince to be a Christian, though it is a rare thing and surrounded with difficulties. If princes did "conduct their work in love toward their subjects," God would not begrudge them some of their frolicking. But if they did attend to serving others, there wouldn't be much time for all that.

Counsel #2. Beware of the high and mighty and of your counselors. Don't despise any of them, but don't trust anyone to leave everything to him. "One must not implicitly trust any man—unless he be filled with the Spirit and be a good Christian." Beware of flatterers. David learned that the hard way. His best and wisest counselor betrayed him and plotted his death. You have to trust and take risks with your subordinates, but do not expect perfect loyalty. "You must watch with unflinching vigilance."

Counsel #3 "Deal justly with evil-doers. Be wise & prudent. Mete out punishment without injuring others. Where wrong cannot be punished without greater wrong, waive your rights."

How about going to war? First of all for the prince "That's a tough one." My thought: A Christian prince will not wage war against his overlord, e.g., the emperor. But if your opponent is your equal, your inferior, or of a foreign government, then: Step one: offer him justice and peace. Step two: if that fails, defend yourself by force against force—not for the sake of your own interests or to keep yourself in power, but the interests of your subjects, their safety & protection to whom you owe this deed of love. When your entire land is in peril, "you must make the venture, so that by God's help all may not be lost. As a consequence some will become widows and orphans. Yet you must prevent it that everything go to ruin and there be nothing left but widows and orphans."

How about for the subjects?

When your prince is in the right, "you are in duty bound to follow & risk life & property for the sake of others." In such a war it is a Christian act to kill the enemy. Only, one must beware of sin, not violate wives and virgins & when victory comes, offer mercy & peace to those defeated.

But when the prince is in the wrong, then don't go to war. God commands no one to do wrong.

If the subjects can't tell whether their prince's war is right or wrong, "they may obey without peril to their souls." In war God brings judgment on both sides—regardless of who was right, who wrong. If you do win, don't take pride in your righteousness "but leave the matter to God."

Counsel #4. Finally what's really foremost is a Christian prince's relation to God. Subject yourself to God in confidence and pray for wisdom to rule well.

Conclusion. *"Christian prince's duty is fourfold: 1) to God it's faith and trust, plus sincere prayer 2) to his subjects it's love and Christian service; 3) to his counselors and governing agents it's an open mind and unfettered judgment; 4) to evil-doers it's proper zeal & firmness that justice be done. "Then his state is right, outwardly and inwardly, pleasing to God and to the people. But he must expect much envy and sorrow. The cross will soon rest on the shoulders of such a ruler."*

Footnote. *Adjudicating cases of restitution—recompense for the injured. If one or both parties in a case are Christians, it's easy. A Christian deserving restitution will forego it. A Christian owing restitution will not hesitate. In all cases, decide it this way: If the debtor is poor & the plaintiff not poor, let love prevail and acquit the debtor. If the debtor is not poor, then let him restore as much as he can, provided you leave him enough to assure economic welfare for himself, wife &*

children.

If neither party will settle in this way—following the “law of love and the law of nature” [for Luther those two are the same. God’s Love commandment, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” is identical with the law of nature: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”]—then “ask them to call in another judge, and announce to them that they are acting against God and the law of nature, even though they may obtain absolute justice through existing legislation.”

“Love and the law of nature” often contradict the “law books and the jurists.” When they do conflict, go with the former. The latter “will only cause you to err, the more you depend on them. A good and just decision must not and cannot be given out of books, but must come from a free mind. Such a free mind is given by love and by the law of nature.” A concluding example: Duke Charles of Burgundy’s brilliant use of “love and the law of nature” as he by-passed “law books and the jurists.”

“A certain nobleman took an enemy prisoner, whereupon the prisoner’s wife came to redeem her husband. The nobleman promised to give her back her husband provided she would lie with him. The woman was virtuous . . . so she went and asked her husband what to do. The husband desired to be set free and to save his life, and gave his wife permission. After the nobleman had lain with the wife, he had the husband beheaded the next day and gave him to her a corpse.

She put the whole case before Duke Charles, who summoned the nobleman and commanded him to marry the woman. When the wedding was over, he had the man beheaded, put the woman in possession of his property, and raised her again to honor. Thus he punished the crime in a princely way.”