

A Social Statement on Church and State: A Lutheran Perspective

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The relations between church and state in the United States and Canada are profoundly affected by significant changes which have been emerging in recent years in the organization of society. For one thing, in the pluralistic structure of both nations all religions, and the various secularistic philosophies, are claiming and receiving equal status socially and before the law. Furthermore, there have been dramatic changes in education and welfare and in concepts of the role of national government in these fields. Consequently, religious bodies, through their agencies of education and social service, are being invited to participate more fully than ever before in publicly sponsored programs and in the acceptance of public financing.

These essentially new circumstances require the churches of the United States and Canada to state in terms which are contemporary and relevant the distinctive functions of church and state, areas of common concern, and the possibilities and boundaries of mutual co-operation.

In response to this situation the Lutheran Church in America affirms both institutional separation and functional interaction as the proper relationship between church and state. We hold that both church and state, in their varied organized expressions, are subject to the will and rule of God, who is sovereign over all things.

Institutional Separation

By "Institutional separation" we mean that church and state must each be free to perform its essential task under God. Thus we reject those theories of relationship which seek the dominance either of church over state or of state over church.

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church manifests itself in the world through organized communities of Christian believers. The church militant is both a divine organism related to Christ and a human organization related to society. Its distinctive mission as an ecclesiastical institution is to proclaim the Word of God in preaching and sacraments, worship and evangelism, Christian education and social ministry.

"Civil authority," according to the New Testament, is divinely ordained. This does not imply that every particular government or governor enjoys God's approval; it means rather that "civil authority" which is manifested in the state is to be respected and obeyed as an expression of the sovereign will of the Creator. This forbids any state from deifying itself, for its power is not inherent but is delegated to it by God to be employed responsibly for the attainment of beneficial secular goals. A government is accountable to God for the way in which it uses, abuses, or neglects to use its powerful civil "sword." The constant need of the state, therefore, is not for the church's uncritical loyalty and unquestioning obedience but for the prophetic guidance and judgment of the law of God, which the church is commanded to proclaim, in order to be reminded of both its secular limits and potentialities. The distinctive mission of the state is to establish civil justice through the maintenance of law and order, the protection of constitutional rights, and the promotion of the general welfare of the total citizenry.

Functional Interaction

"Functional interaction" describes a process which takes place in areas in which church and state, each in pursuit of its own proper objectives, are both legitimately engaged. We believe that such interaction is appropriate so long as institutional separation is preserved and neither church nor state seeks to use its

type of involvement to dominate the other. We, therefore, reject theories of absolute separation of church and state which would deny practical expressions of functional interaction.

The church, solely through the free exercise of its divine mandate, relates to the interests of the state in such ways as 1) offering intercessory prayers on behalf of the state and its officials; 2) encouraging responsible citizenship and government service; 3) helping the state to understand and holding the state accountable to the sovereign law of God; 4) contributing to the civil consensus which supports the state in fulfillment of the duties of just government; and 5) championing the human and civil rights of all citizens.

The state, on the other hand, by fulfilling the duties of just government, relates to the interests of the church in such ways as 1) guaranteeing religious liberty for all; 2) acknowledging that the rights of humanity are not the creation of the state; 3) maintaining an attitude of "wholesome neutrality" toward church bodies in the context of the religious pluralism of our culture; 4) acting on a non-preferential basis if providing incidental benefits in recognition of the church's civil services which also make a secular contribution to the community; and 5) acting on a non-preferential basis if offering financial aid for educational or social services which church agencies render for the secular benefit of the community.

Conclusion

In summary, we affirm the sacredness of the secular life of God's people as they worship, witness, and work in God's world. We advocate the institutional separation and functional interaction of church and state. This position rejects both the absolute separation of church and state and the domination of either one by the other, while seeking a mutually beneficial relationship in which each institution contributes to the common good by remaining true to this own nature and task.

This statement, addressed particularly to the situation of the church in the United States and Canada at the present time, is not intended to provide guidance with regard to all the issues arising from church-state relations. Its purpose, rather, is to set forth a basic theological stance within the context of which discussion may continue, policies may be formulated and specific actions may be taken.