

Luther: The role of the Christian in the governments of this world

From Martin Luther's Small Catechism:

The fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer

Give us today our daily bread.

What does this mean?

In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to see what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving.

What then does "daily bread" mean?

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment of our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors and the like.

The Fourth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother.

What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents or others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

Luther saw all ordering dynamics of life as parts of God's good creation, "kingdoms of the world", ordained by God. Nevertheless, they all had the potential, due to human sinfulness, of becoming corrupt, unjust, contrary to God's purpose for government:

To keep order in society, protect human rights, assure justice is done,
and see to the needs of all.

Luther's general view of secular government:

"The Christian ought to be particularly thankful to God for the gift of government, through which God graciously preserves human life." Luther's Works, 31, p. 78

Some of Luther's thoughts, summarized by Paul Althaus in The Ethics of Martin Luther:

"In instituting government, God has given it a specific task. It is to protect people committed to its care against exploitation by the brutal selfishness and violence of their fellowmen. The government does this by making laws and using its power to enforce them. It preserves law and order by using the power of the sword to punish the criminal who breaks them.... 'It is the function of and honor of worldly government to make men out of wild beasts and to prevent men from becoming wild beasts.' The government preserves the precious gift of peace. 'Where peace is, there is half a heaven.'

God gives us government in order to place a tool of responsible service into our hands; this is true no matter how much human injustice may have been at work in the history of human government. All this makes government 'the most precious treasure and jewel on earth.' However, secular government still does not have the rank and value of the lordship of Christ for the Christian, and the office of ministry - the relationship between these two is that between eternal and temporal life. Eternal life stands above this temporal life. 'God preserves the world only so that the gospel can be preached.' The secular government exists, not least of all, in order to provide a situation in which the gospel can be preached. After the office of preaching, however, secular government is the most useful and most necessary function on earth, the highest worship of God, the highest good. 'It is the grace of God that gives government to men.' Althaus, pp 114-116

A Christian gladly serves in a Governmental Position:

"Since St. Paul says here (Romans 13:1) that governmental power is God's servant, we must admit that it is to be exercised not only by the heathen but by all. What does it mean that it is God's servant but that governmental authority is, by its very nature, such that one may serve God by it? Now it would be very unchristian to say that there is any service of God in which a Christian should and dare not take part, when serving God befits no one so much as Christians...it should be good and desirable that all princes were sincere and good Christians...." Luthers Works, 11, P. 257

"Therefore should you see that there is a lack of hangmen, church officials, judges, lords, or princes and should you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and apply for the position..." Luther's Works 11, p 255

Governmental Rulers:

Of course, it must be remembered that in Luther's time, the primary form of government was princedoms and empires, not democracies. In that patriarchal system, rulers stand in the place of parents. "Thus rulers act in the capacity of fathers and ought to have fatherly hearts toward their people."

At the same time, Luther had a dim view of most political leaders of his time:

"It is also true of temporal rulers, that the majority of them use that which has been entrusted to them for pride, vanity, pleasure, mischief, and all manner of wantonness, without any awe or fear of God. Nevertheless, government remains God's good and useful gift and is a blessing in itself." Luther's Works 14, P. 56

In Luther's view, "political office provides the opportunity for the noblest kind of helping activity. It also carries with it great dangers. The greatest danger is that the ruler, instead of serving the people as God intended in giving him his office, will use his subjects to achieve his own selfish purposes and exploit his might and power for personal gain. Not only is unredeemed

humanity itself corrupt, but it also corrupts and misuses God's gifts and offices. This is particularly true of political offices. There is far greater temptation for those who have great power than for lower officials. As a result, 'it is quite unusual for a prince to be both a Christian and to administer his office according to God's intention.' Luther's Works 45, p. 121, and Althaus, p121

The limits of obedience to secular governments:

The key limit in Luther's mind to the authority of government is that government is concerned with maintaining order, general well being, justice and care for members of society. But when government tries to legislate spiritual matters, it has definitely violated its purpose. So when the government tries to set laws for spiritual life, it encroaches on the Kingdom of God, and misleads souls and destroys them. Luther demanded the right of freedom of faith and conscience - not only for Christians but also for "heretics". "For faith is a free act, to which no one can be forced. Indeed, it is a work of God in the spirit, not something which outward authority should compel or create." LW 45, p. 125

And humans are to obey human authorities only if nothing that is stated is "contrary to God, for no one can promise anything against God. Let all obedience to government, father and mother, and even the church that is disobedience of God be cursed to the depths of hell. I do not recognize the authority of mother, father, friends, government, or the Christian Church even, if they forbid me to hear and obey God's word. In that case, the fourth commandment is set aside and I have no duty to obey. For obedience to God takes precedence over all other obedience." LW 5, 113-114 One illustration is soldiers in war situations, as stated next.

Government and Authority to Wage War - Luther's "Just War" theory

While Christians are to resist violence and pursue peace in their daily lives, to "turn the other cheek", forgive, and reconcile with those we are at odds with, the role of secular government is different. Luther believed that there are "just wars" - these are wars to be fought for defense only - when one's country is attacked, causing danger to one's citizens, where government's responsibility is to "protect and defend its subject against injustice and violence." Althaus, p. 137. "Thus in this way, even waging war is a work of love, and a soldier can be blessed, that is, he can be and remain a Christian." LW 46: 121. However, act of aggression for selfish gain and acquisition of other lands is unacceptable in his view. If soldiers are ordered to fight in a war initiated by a prince for aggressive purposes, it is the responsibility of the soldier to refuse to obey the prince. "Whoever fights to achieve an obviously evil goal shares in the guilt." LW 45, p 125. Luther here quotes Acts 5:29, "But Peter and his apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'"

What is to happen to Rulers who abuse their power?

Luther said that even when a government is corrupt or unjust, it should generally be respected. Even if princes and emperors break God's commandments, "their sin does not put an end to government and the obedience due it." When princes are challenged, it is to be non-violent, and not for one's own rights but only for the well being and love of our neighbor who is being oppressed. Christians are called to patient endurance of suffering for themselves, but challenging authority where it is contrary to God's word. The solution to corrupt and unjust rulers in his view was that they would be removed by elections. In his day, it was the princes who elected the emperor. Of course, in our government, we are the electors, responsible for deciding what to do about unjust use of power by public officials. For even ruling authorities are subject to the natural law of God.

Administration of Justice - "Love is the mistress of all laws"

As part of God's good purpose for government, keeping order requires laws and consequences for illegal actions. "Who can doubt that law is a good thing and a gift of God? Law is a good thing because no country and no community can survive without it." LW 21, p 335 Luther says that the law is God's gift, implanted in human reason, leading to just treatment for all. Thus is both human and divine, based on human reason and divine wisdom. Another term for this is "natural law". Out of natural law, love of God and neighbor, law codes are developed. So just as the ten commandments are given out of love of God for God's people, all laws must meet the standard of love, even when punishments and other consequences, including capital punishment, are the result of applying the law.

At the same time, Luther demanded that judges not be mere slaves of the written law, applying it rigidly. While the written laws are to be adhered to by judges, there is also the element of reason, of judges having to discern and decide not just on the letter of the law but on the overall goal of administration of justice - taking particular circumstances into account. "A judge acts wisely when, as often as possible, he does not render a decision strictly according to the law, but rather moderates his decision in terms of what is just and equitable. The law must leave room for love. For love is the highest authority and stands above both natural and positive law. And justice administered according to the law without love becomes a plague and a disaster for men: the greatest calamity, the greatest injustice, the deepest misery imaginable on this earth...God gave his commandments in order to help men, not to injure them." LW 45, p 104. Luther recommends punishing too little rather than too much.

Summary

There is a very important role for Christians in governments of the earth:

"Having been justified by grace, we then do good works, yes, Christ himself does all in us."

LW 34, p 111