

The Judicial Rôle of the Church

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The church has a judicial rôle to play because the church is an instrument of the Kingdom.¹ The Kingdom is the rule of God, rule according to His will. The Law of God is the expression of that will. God rules according to law, law that is not arbitrary but the transcript of His own divine character.

Law thus lies at the heart of the Kingdom. Obedience to that law is the claim put upon all creatures, because they are subjects of the King who created them. His rational creatures are expected to obey Him out of their own free will. As they have a choice in the matter, they have the potential for being more than blindly obedient, but to be willingly obedient. Obedience from the heart is the essence of life in the Kingdom.

The institutional church has a special rôle to play in this Kingdom. The institutional church is the body of citizens who share public authority, who in gathering together in their official capacity participate in the rule of the King.² The King is God's Son; since His resurrection the Son is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This Son, Jesus Christ, has chosen fellow priests and kings to reign with him, to sit on thrones alongside His throne. They are His body, He is their head. This body, this group of selectmen, He set apart as His church. The church owes her calling to Him. The church is also His bride, He is her bridegroom. She is thus His Queen, sharing in His rule.

How does the church actually participate in the administration of Christ's Kingdom? By exercising the *keys* He has bestowed upon her. "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16: 18-19).

1 Major disputants of the judicial rôle of the church include (though are not restricted to) dispensationalists who oppose law and grace, and Lutherans such as Rudolph Sohm who follow the early Luther's Two-Kingdom teaching.

2 See my article "Church, Kingdom, Liturgy: The Political Language of the New Testament" in *Contra Mundum*, Summer 1994.

Here is the title deed. The keys of the Kingdom are the peculiar possession of the church, her glory and her duty. By exercising them, she brings the decrees of God to bear on earth. By binding and loosing, she opens and shuts the Kingdom of heaven to men.³

Binding and loosing in this passage refers to the preaching of the gospel. Peter proclaimed the gospel when he answered Jesus' question, "Who do you think I am?" by responding "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." This gospel binds and looses by bringing men to the point of decision for or against belief in the Christ.

Jesus also discussed the power of binding and loosing in Matthew 18: 15-20. There it refers to the power to admit someone into, or to exclude someone from, the fellowship of the church, in terms of their obedience otherwise to the commandments of God. It thus denotes a judicial authority, an authority to pronounce judgement in terms of God's law.

Binding and loosing is thus of two kinds, preaching and discipline.⁴ These two together comprise the power of the keys. In exercising her power to bind and loose, the church exercises the power of the keys. People come under God's judgement, or they are released from it. The church has the power to do this. The church can bind sinners to the power of sin, delivering them over to Satan (I Corinthians 5:5; I Timothy 2:20) or she can release them from it. She can leave people under the curse of Adam, or free them from it. She can do this because Her Lord, Jesus Christ, has given her the power to do it on His authority (John 20:22-23), by the forgiveness He has obtained for all mankind, which He extends only unto whom He will.

The church, then, has a crucial rôle to play in the functioning of God's Kingdom. For the church stands at the gate of the Kingdom, opening and closing that gate in terms of obedience to the law of the King, a law which she proclaims and expounds. As far as that Kingdom extends, so far must the church extend her oversight, for she it is who sees to it that the law of the King is obeyed, who bears witness when that law is flaunted, who calls down His judgement upon those who refuse to submit to His authority, but who extends His pardon to those who will give up their rebellion and submit to His royal authority.

The church is thus the steward of the Kingdom. Now this Kingdom is a heavenly kingdom; it serves spiritual ends; it has man's eternal life in view. These ends are superior to earthly ends, just as the eternal is superior to the temporal, the sacred to the profane; but they are not divorced from them. The spiritual is not sundered from the natural. God created the natural, in service to the spiritual; life on earth is meant to lead to eternal life in heaven. The goods of this life are meant to serve the goods of heaven.

It is precisely in accomplishing this that our calling on earth consists. We are called to bring our earthly lives into line with our eternal destinies. Earthly activities are to be conducted so as to harmonize with, to reflect, even to be an extension of, the heavenly

³ Heidelberg Catechism (H.C.), Q. 83.

⁴ H.C., Questions 84-85.

Kingdom.

This is done by obedience, obedience to God's law. Ethics are the connection between heaven and earth. Not the bare facts of work, business, leisure are what's important so much as how those activities are conducted. God's law is clear: earthly activity cannot be conducted in terms of itself but only in the light of His eternal Kingdom and the claims that His Kingdom puts on earthly activity. We cannot do as we please, we cannot do as seems right and fit to us, we must look to Him for wisdom and repattern our lives accordingly, unnatural though that may seem at times—*un* natural because *super* natural.

Far from being out of touch with this earthly existence, therefore, God's law covers every area, dimension, and aspect of it. It does so insofar as those areas require ethical conditioning. There is no area of life which can be entirely divorced from this conditioning. Every area of life is a battlefield between good and evil. There is not one created object which cannot be bent to evil ends. And the battle is to wrest the elements of life, the culture which our hands have molded, to wrest those elements out of the grasp of the Evil One and put them to service in the Kingdom.

The task of the church is to see to it that this effort is conducted, that it is conducted properly, and that it is conducted thoroughly. She it is who has received the Law of God—was not the Ark of the Covenant placed in the midst of the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could enter?—and is called to preach that law, to disciple the nations in terms of that law, until obedience is complete. She baptizes members into her fellowship when they profess submission to Her king; she provides the food and drink of the Lord's Supper to strengthen and encourage the members in their task of bringing their lives into concordance with the Kingdom.

Her jurisdiction extends only to those who submit to her authority. By the same token, the blessings of the Kingdom extend only so far as her jurisdiction. For those who do not submit to her authority, the curse of Adam remains. For those who are expelled from her midst, there remains only weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Everyone who has a mind to do so can be accepted into the church, and so into the Kingdom. But the claims of the Kingdom go beyond individuals, even though individuals are the focus of its concern and its activity. Corporate bodies are also brought under the Kingdom insofar as their activity is of concern to the eternal destinies of their members.

This holds true first and foremost of families. Households receive baptism, not just individuals. “And when she was baptized, and her household...” (Acts 16:15); “And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway” (Acts 16:33). “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy” (I Cor. 7: 14). “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39).

It also holds true of nations. The Great Commission makes this abundantly clear: it is nations who are the object of the command to go and preach. Paul's ministry was a ministry to the nations.

Jesus's preaching often focused on collective public entities, as in the case of cities which did not believe in Him. "Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Mt. 10:14-15). "Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgement, than for you" (Mt. 11:21-22).

The Kingdom of God thus extends beyond individuals to public, collective entities. Man in all dimensions of his earthly existence come under the claims of the Kingdom. The church announces those claims and procures obedience to those claims.

The binding and loosing performed by the church consists in preaching the Word of God and in the conditional administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the case of individuals, this takes the form of church discipline. The same holds true in the case of collective bodies, especially the state. The church holds collective bodies accountable to the Law of God in the same way she does individuals, only she does so by disciplining the individuals who represent those collective bodies. Representatives are allowed to partake of the sacrament or are barred therefrom.

By virtue of the ministry of justice bestowed on it by God, the state holds a special place in the Kingdom, and has a special relationship with the church. The state is sovereign, meaning that no earthly authority exists over it; if there were such an earthly authority, the state could no longer carry out its mission, which is to administer final justice, against which there is no recourse. But the state does not carry out its ministry in isolation. It must submit to the law of God or be tyrannical; it therefore must yield to the teaching of the church insofar as that bears upon its ministry, the administration of justice. And have no doubt: justice is the primary concern of the Law of God, and in fact, justice apart from the Law of God is an impossibility. The state cannot fulfil its calling without the Law of God; that Law is extended to it, just as to any other earthly institution, by the ministry of the church. The church thus has a constitutional rôle to play in the life of nations.

In summary:

1. The church is the body of Christ; in her institutional expression she uniquely represents Him in the administration of His Kingdom.

2. The church proclaims and upholds the Law of God, enforcing it on those who submit to her authority. By doing so she opens and shuts the Kingdom to men. This authority was vested in her by Christ, who bestowed the keys to His Kingdom upon her.

3. The church administers the Law of God insofar as it touches on the eternal end of man. She does not legislate every detail of life; she simply oversees cultural activity to ensure that it conforms to the Law of God, which is primarily ethical in content.

4. The church's jurisdiction extends to all who submit to the authority of Christ. This includes not only individuals but collective bodies, including the state, insofar as the interests and activities of these bodies intersect with the eternal end of their members.

The state, as the servant of God to administer justice by way of the sword, holds a special place in His Kingdom. The state is sovereign; nevertheless, the church has the task of overseeing the ministry of the state so that it does not exceed its bounds.