Practicing What We Preach

The church can't ignore the state. But it has to take care when it does address the government.

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How should church and state relate to each other? How directly should Lutheran churches address the government?

These aren't simple questions to answer. In this century alone, we've seen two opposite answers that have had largely negative results: (1) uncritical acceptance of the state, and (2) political lobbying.

The first answer was given in Germany after World War I, when many German Protestants supported the rise of Adolf Hitler. Because Hitler at first brought renewed vitality to German life, many German Lutherans simply ignored the early, ominous signs of catastrophe. More importantly, their traditional view of church and state simply did not provide for a church that opposed the government.

The Bible's distinction between spiritual and temporal (or political) authority is known by Lutherans as the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Lutherans today agree that we must not apply this teaching as German Lutherans had learned to do. Most Lutherans now affirm the need to prevent Two-Kingdom theory from merely legitimating the state.

Since World War II, however, some U.S. Lutheran church bodies have done what most other church bodies have done: establish a Washington lobby. As Charles Colson has noted, "Both liberals and conservatives have made this mistake of aligning their spiritual goals with a particular political agenda."

"Why don't the churches just shut up?" Lutheran sociologist Peter Berger once asked. He was expressing the exasperation of many Americans who are faced with a flood of social and political statements from church bodies and church leaders these days. It is becoming clear that churches, if they wish to preserve their credibility, will have to be more careful with their speaking than they have been lately.

It's not a question of whether the church should be involved with politics, or whether it can even avoid being involved with politics—but "how church and politics ought to be related" and "how each kind of political involvement affects the nature and mission of the church." So, let's look at what the church says (the message), who says it (the messenger), and how it's said (the means).

The Message

It's tempting to say that the church's public message is simply the Word of God. But because God's Word is both Law and Gospel, with both spiritual and earthly concerns, we must evaluate exactly what the church has to say.

First, is the message focused on sin and grace, or on our neighbor and social justice? Is it grounded in the revelation of God in Christ, or in human reason and natural law as well? When speaking to different audiences, the church's message must be sensitive to the Biblical principles that are most appropriate to each audience.

Second, we must discern the purpose of the church's message. When God's law convicts the sinner and prepares the way for forgiveness through faith in Christ, it also seeks to restrain harmful behavior and enhance our life in a fallen world. Talking to government about sinful behavior is less appropriate than talking about the consequences of sinful behavior for society.

Third, there must be pri-
orities. The church must never let its witness to faith in Jesus Christ be overshadowed by the enormity of human temporal concerns. The church simply cannot speak with equal effectiveness to all human concerns.

Finally, our Lord has advised us to “count the cost” before we begin (Luke 14:28). The church may well find it prudent to heed the words of Richard John Neuhaus: “When it is not necessary for the church to speak, it is necessary for the church not to speak.”

The Messenger

Who speaks for the church?

Well, what do we mean by “church”?

We confess with Luther: “Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” This spiritual church asks publicly for the freedom to proclaim the Word and to administer the sacraments.

But the church is also a social organization—congregations, districts and Synod. These usually incorporate, adopt constitutions and bylaws, and conduct business according to Robert’s Rules of Order. This church is subject to civil law. It can be created and abolished, it can sue and be sued, and it can address other legal entities, including government, about its institutional interests or concerns.

The institutional church will be concerned about zoning laws that affect the location of church buildings and church schools. It will be concerned about legislation that may encourage or discourage the work of the church. The church as an institution has as much right as any other institution to make its concerns known to those who enact legislation.

Between these two understandings of church lie individual Christians—also the church. Here there are numerous social concerns: for civil and human rights, for economic and political justice, for world peace, and so on. This understanding of “church” actually involves an intersection of the Two Kingdoms, because it is the individual Christian who lives at the same time in both kingdoms—spiritual and temporal.

Individual Christians can, and must, learn to translate the concerns of God’s Word into arguments that are appropriate for civil government. And the institutional church needs to provide opportunities for believers to study and discuss the application of their faith to the issues that confront them in daily living.

Also helpful to the Christian in performing the duties of citizenship are voluntary associations (such as public-interest groups and para-church ministries). The beauty of it is that Christian citizens can work together on common social concerns with non-Christians and with Christians outside their church body—and can even work against fellow Christians of the same denomination—without their church body itself entering into such potentially destructive conflict.

The Means

Let’s also look at how the church relates to the state—via four “possible connections” between the institutional church and politics described by Robert Benne.

Take a look at the illustration (Page 7) titled, “Pyramid Approach to the Means of Speaking,” which lists these four connections. The illustration shows that the church may use more than one “means” of speaking to the state on any given issue. It also shows that the church cannot effectively speak directly to the state without already speaking effectively (and persuasively) to its own members.

Each step up the pyramid increases the risk of politicizing the church, because it is increasingly hard to achieve consensus. So, it’s wise to stay with the lowest level of speaking that will accomplish what is necessary.

Indirect and Unintentional Influence

Benne’s first connection is indirect and unintentional influence. This means that the church as an institution does not get involved in public, political decision-making. Its influence on politics is indirect, through the members of its congregations.

Its influence is also unintentional. The church simply preaches and teaches the Word of God and trusts the Holy Spirit to work through that Word to shape the lives and characters of individual Christians. These Christians will, in turn, have a transforming effect upon the society in which they live. It is a powerful connection with great potential.

For example, a pastor leads a Bible study on “the sanctity of life” that touches participants in a variety of ways. One person understands for the first time what Scripture teaches about the value of the human persons affected by abortion and euthanasia. Another is moved to write letters to key political leaders urging support for specific legislation. Still another decides to help form a local Lutherans For Life chapter, and yet another volunteers at a crisis pregnancy center.

Many other examples could be
given, but the point is that none of these are part of any direct or intentional "plan" of the pastor, congregation or Synod to change society or to influence government policy.

The great advantage of this approach, of course, is that it allows the pastor to focus on his primary responsibility of proclaiming Law and Gospel, sin and grace, and faith and love. His purpose is not to change society, but through Word and sacraments to transform sinners (2 Cor. 5:17-19). This helps pastors and congregations keep their priorities straight by focusing on “the one thing needful” and avoids politicizing the church. It emphasizes that the church is a spiritual body in which individual members pursue their God-given vocations. And, it is a highly potent means of influencing the state, since it is rooted solidly in the power of God's own Spirit to change the hearts and lives of the people who make up society and state.

But there are also dangers associated with using only this approach. The most obvious is the potential for “quietism.” There are times (such as during the Nazi era in Germany) when concrete issues must be addressed by the church in one way or another.

One more point: Individual Christians equally committed to the same Word and moved by the same Spirit may respond to God’s Word in different—and even conflicting—ways in the political arena. Christians who share the same Christian beliefs must learn to tolerate—even welcome—some differences and disagreements when it comes to convictions about social and political priorities, positions and strategies. Disagreements over specific political issues do not necessarily imply theological disagreement.

**Indirect and Intentional Influence**

There will be issues and situations in society about which the church will feel the need to influence its members intentionally.

Indirect and unintentional influence is the connection between religion and politics that has predominated among Lutherans. Yet, no one supposes that the institutional church is bound to merely reading God’s Word, as if it were not to explain or apply it to practical problems and issues of everyday life.

So, Benne’s second possible connection between the church and politics, indirect and intentional influence, has also been an important part of the Lutheran Two-Kingdom model. Here, the church’s influence remains indirect; it does not seek a public role for itself. Nor does it presume to speak for its members. But, it does presume to speak to its members on the basis of its religious and moral traditions. As with the first connection, the church relies primarily on the power of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel for motivation to deal with social issues (faith active in love).

In this case, the church must “do its homework” on the problems to be addressed, consulting with church members who have expertise in the areas of concern. The church also should not dictate specific means for achieving goals, since selecting the means is often the most difficult and controversial political task.

One way in which the Missouri Synod speaks intentionally to public issues is through resolutions adopted by conventions.

A 1986 convention resolution, for example, urges LCMS congregations “to seize every available opportunity to minister to total human need through intentional social ministry activity.” The Synod here intentionally urges “intentional” action in response to human-need problems, but its urging is directed to its congregations (not to politicians or political entities) and does not push any specific social or political program.

The Synod has also declined to take a specific public position on some issues. In 1983, for example, a number of proposals asked the convention to take a position on the issue of nuclear arms. One wanted the Synod to “urge our government to invite the Soviet Union and other nations to join us in a [nuclear] freeze...” Others urged the Synod not to take a partisan position on this issue. The convention’s response was addressed to congregations and members, not directly to government. And, it opposed binding the consciences of members by trying to speak for them instead of to them about an issue on which Christians may in good conscience disagree.

Indirect, but intentional, influence is not limited to convention resolutions. A wide variety of programs and resources have been developed within the Synod (and with other Lutheran churches), for example, to address the problems of poverty, human suffering, settlement of immigrants and refugees, and “war and
peace" issues. Such resources let members study these issues on the basis of Scriptural principles, while leaving room for individual Christians to form their own opinions about specific government policies and to make decisions about personal involvement in these areas.

Direct and Intentional Influence

Benne's third possible connection is direct and intentional influence. There may be some social issues about which the Scriptures speak so clearly that the institutional church deems it necessary to speak directly on the basis of God's Word.

But there are great risks here. Direct speaking often is not appreciated, let alone heeded, by those outside the church. Moreover, it always carries the risk of politicizing the church. And so, from a practical standpoint and from the standpoint of the Gospel, direct speaking should be done infrequently, only on the basis of clear and unambiguous teachings of Scripture, and where the church's most fundamental concerns are at stake.

The Synod has chosen to engage in this type of speaking on a limited number of occasions regarding issues deemed of critical importance for the church's life and work, its witness, or its own moral responsibility (as church) to seek and promote the welfare of the state and its citizens.

In 1986, for example, the Synod adopted a resolution on "racial discrimination" that expressly "denounced" a specific political system—apartheid in South Africa.

Was it necessary for the Synod to speak directly to this issue and to speak not only to its members, but for them? Was such speaking worth the risks? There are no easy answers. But, let's try to discern the Synod's reason(s) for using such direct speech in this case.

The Bible doesn't specifically address the political system called "apartheid." But it does speak clearly about the sinfulness of racial discrimination and the "moral responsibility" of Christians to speak and act in behalf of the victims of such discrimination. Government itself also has a responsibility to act justly and impartially.

The focus of the 1986 resolution is not so much on apartheid as a "sin," but on the social consequences of the racism perpetuated by this form of government. So, the purpose of this resolution is not to call South Africa to "repentance," but to make clear the Synod's concern for those victimized by an inherently unjust system of government.

The Synod also no doubt saw that if it did not speak on this issue when challenged to do so, it would also send a clear message, accurate or not: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod tolerates or does not care about racial discrimination. Confronted with this, delegates apparently felt that racism was indeed a "priority issue" requiring direct speech, and that it was more "prudent" to speak than not to speak in this specific instance.

(Strictly speaking, the "state" to which the Synod was speaking here was not its own government. But by speaking publicly on this issue, the Synod was also, in effect, communicating its concerns to anyone who might be interested—including other church bodies, businesses and politicians.)

Direct and Intentional Action

The fourth possible connection between the church and politics is highly controversial and risky. It is direct and intentional action. The church no longer relies on persuasion, as the three other connections do. The church now acts to change policy or reshape society. It commits funds and applies political leverage—perhaps even supporting particular candidates.
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has rarely, if ever, ventured into taking “direct and intentional action” to change or effect public policy. Not only can such action divide, politicize and even corrupt the church, it also runs the risk of undermining the unique and primary mission of the church as defined by Scripture—and thus undermine the Gospel itself.

Still, the Synod has at times taken actions that (perhaps) go beyond “direct and intentional influence.”

One of the few social issues on which the Synod has been willing to take a (more or less) “activist” role is abortion. The Synod has concluded that the abortion issue is addressed so clearly by Scripture, that it is such an extraordinary social problem, and that it is so tied up with what Scripture says about the God-given duty of the state, that failure to speak—and sometimes to act—would be like the failure of the German church under Hitler.

Since even before the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, the Synod has issued reports, passed resolutions and stated its position that abortion is “not a moral option, except as a tragically unavoidable by-product of medical procedures necessary to prevent the death of another human being, viz., the mother.” It has laid a strong foundation for direct action.

When the Synod’s speaking on abortion has been intended to influence political decision-making, it is an example of “direct and intentional influence.” But in 1988, the Synod went so far as to file a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court to support the Missouri law at issue in Webster v. Reproductive Health Services. Depending on how we define “action,” it could be argued that the Synod, for one of the few times in its history, determined that “direct and intentional action” was appropriate, or even necessary.

Note, though, that while the brief began with the Synod’s “profound belief that human life begins at conception” and its opposition to willful abortion, it continued with arguments grounded in American constitutional principles. The so-called “right of privacy,” argued the brief, “should not be considered sufficient, absent the need to save the life of the mother, to outweigh the state’s interest in protecting life from its early stages through laws prohibiting abortion.”

In other words, the Synod’s speaking was grounded firmly in its beliefs based on the clear teachings of Holy Scripture about abortion. Yet its action recognized that it had to address the government on its own terms—as a temporal, not a spiritual, kingdom.

The clear teachings of God’s Word were not the only reason the Synod decided to act. The critical, “life or death” nature of this issue and awareness of the state’s own God-given and self-professed responsibility to ensure the “right to life” of its citizens also played a central role. It’s also clear from the brief’s careful wording and reasoning that the Synod was extremely sensitive to the potential dangers of this action.

Even with an issue as “clear-cut” as abortion, the church cannot avoid the serious consequences of direct political action. This connection between church and state must be regarded as a “last resort” when all other forms of influencing the state have clearly proven inadequate, and when it is clear that direct action in a particular situation is necessary. Even then, such action will very likely not have the intended effect unless the other “means” of influence are also being used effectively. Finally, such action must always be taken with great restraint, prudence and readiness “to give an answer” to those who will question the need or propriety of such action.

A Final Word

Who speaks for the church? When? And on what basis? We have seen what complicated questions these are. The answers, though, involve these elements:

- The primary concern of the church must always be the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, for Christ’s sake, through faith alone.
- The church reaches out with the love of God for a suffering world primarily through the work of its members. So, the church speaks most appropriately through the voices of Christian citizens as they participate in the political pursuit of liberty and justice for all.
- The church participates as an institution of the society in which it exists. It has a legal existence and is directly affected by a wide variety of civil legislation. So, the church speaks appropriately when it informs civil authorities of its concerns and the impact of legislation on its work.
- Who should make decisions regarding appropriate public speech? It is tempting to point to such democratic assemblies as congregational voters’ meetings and district and Synod conventions. But there is great danger in turning these assemblies into political conventions that, finally, are not accountable for the political solutions they propose.

It may very well be that, in such a cumbersome process, the institutional church will miss many opportunities to say important things. But the day-to-day political process does not depend upon the church. If The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is to avoid the failures of those church bodies where the advocacy agenda is so full that their voices are simply dulled by overuse, it must be willing to accept such limited speaking and the cumbersome process of checks and balances that produces it.

That the church must speak the Word of God to the various crises of contemporary human existence is self-evident. But Christians must pay close attention to their choice of message, messenger and means. Failure to do so will only compromise the deep moral conviction that emerges from the timeless Word of our eternally faithful God.