HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

THE CHURCH & THE STATE

How should spiritual and civil authority relate?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Tertullian: Pray for the Emperor, Worship God Alone

Tertullian, Apology, chapters 30-33 (late 2nd century) - condensed reading

Tertullian defends Christians against the charge of political disloyalty. Christians pray for the emperor, the stability of the empire, peace, and good government. They can honor rulers without worshiping them.

The limit is idolatry. The emperor is not divine and must not receive the worship owed to God. Christian loyalty is therefore real but not absolute.

This early apologetic position establishes a durable Christian pattern: civil rulers possess legitimate authority, Christians can seek the common good under them, and obedience stops where the state demands what belongs to God.

Reading 2 - Augustine: The Two Cities and the Use of Coercion

Augustine, City of God, especially Book XIX, and anti-Donatist letters (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine distinguishes the City of God from the earthly city not by drawing a simple institutional line between church and state, but by different ultimate loves. In the present age the two communities are intermingled, and Christians share temporal goods and political life with their neighbors.

Political order is therefore a real but limited good in a fallen world. Governments restrain disorder and preserve a measure of peace, but no earthly regime becomes the kingdom of God.

In the Donatist controversy Augustine also came to defend limited civil coercion against schismatic Christians, believing coercive laws could sometimes correct people and return them to truth. That development became enormously influential and also deeply troubling in later church-state history.

Augustine thus leaves two legacies: a profound distinction between God's eternal city and every political order, and an argument that the state may sometimes assist the church through coercion.

Reading 3 - Gelasius I: Two Authorities

Pope Gelasius I, Letter to Emperor Anastasius, Famulae vestrae pietatis / 'Two Powers' (494) - condensed reading

Gelasius tells the emperor that the world is governed principally by two authorities: the sacred authority of priests and the royal power. Each has a God-given sphere and responsibility.

Emperors govern temporal affairs, but in divine matters they should receive instruction from ecclesiastical leaders. Clergy, in turn, remain subject to imperial law in ordinary civil matters.

The formula does not describe modern separation of church and state. Instead, it imagines two differentiated authorities within a Christian society. The question of which authority is superior when their claims overlap would dominate medieval politics.

Reading 4 - Boniface VIII: Spiritual Power Above Temporal Power

Pope Boniface VIII, Unam Sanctam (1302) - condensed reading

Boniface presents the church as one body with one head and uses the image of two swords. The spiritual sword is wielded directly by the church, while the temporal sword is exercised for the church by civil rulers.

Because spiritual realities are higher than temporal ones, the spiritual authority may judge the temporal when it departs from God's order. The document culminates in an exceptionally strong assertion of the necessity of submission to the Roman pontiff.

Unam Sanctam represents a high-medieval model in which ecclesiastical and political authority are distinct but hierarchically related, with the papacy claiming final superiority.

Reading 5 - Martin Luther: Temporal Authority Has Limits

Martin Luther, Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523) - condensed reading

Luther teaches that civil authority is ordained by God to restrain outward evil and preserve public order. Christians therefore should not despise government and may serve in civil office.

Yet temporal rulers govern bodies and outward affairs; they cannot create faith or command the conscience to believe. Attempts to compel faith by force exceed the office God has given the magistrate.

This distinction is often associated with Luther's two-kingdoms teaching. God rules through both the gospel and temporal authority, but in different ways. The sword cannot do the work of the Word.

Reading 6 - John Calvin: The Christian Magistrate

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chapter 20 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin treats civil government as a necessary and honorable vocation under God's providence. Magistrates should protect peace, punish wrongdoing, uphold justice, and defend the vulnerable.

Unlike modern secular models, Calvin also expects magistrates to care about public religion and the honor of God. His Geneva context assumes a Christian commonwealth in which civil and ecclesiastical institutions are distinct but cooperate.

Christians owe obedience even to imperfect rulers unless commanded to sin. Calvin also leaves room for lesser magistrates lawfully to resist tyranny in certain constitutional circumstances. His model became influential in Reformed political thought.

Reading 7 - Roger Williams: Liberty of Conscience

Roger Williams, The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience (1644) - condensed reading

Williams argues that civil government should not punish people merely for religious belief or unbelief. The sword can address civil wrongs, but Christ did not authorize magistrates to compel faith or enforce the true church.

He supports a broad liberty of conscience that extends beyond disagreements among Protestants. Forced religion produces hypocrisy and bloodshed, while genuine faith must arise from conviction rather than coercion.

Williams therefore develops a more radical separation between ecclesial and civil jurisdiction than most magisterial Reformers. His argument becomes a major source for Baptist and American traditions of religious liberty.

Reading 8 - Westminster and the Baptist Confession: Two Protestant Political Models

Westminster Confession, Chapter 23 (1646, original form), and Second London Baptist Confession, Chapter 24 (1689) - comparative reading

Both confessions affirm civil government as ordained by God for public good and permit Christians to hold public office. Both require lawful obedience, taxes, honor, and prayer for rulers.

The original Westminster Confession gives the magistrate a more active role in preserving religious order and in relation to church synods than later American Presbyterian revisions would retain. It reflects the assumptions of a seventeenth-century Protestant commonwealth.

The 1689 Baptist Confession is notably more restrained regarding direct civil authority over church affairs. This fits the broader Baptist trajectory toward liberty of conscience and institutional distinction between church and state.

The comparison shows that Protestant rejection of papal supremacy did not automatically produce modern religious liberty. Several competing Protestant political models developed.

Reading 9 - John Stott: Christian Social Responsibility without a Political Gospel

John R. W. Stott, writings on Christian social responsibility and public life - summary of copyrighted material

Stott argues that Christian mission cannot be reduced either to private evangelism or to political activism. The gospel creates a people who proclaim Christ and also seek justice, mercy, peace, and responsible social engagement.

He resists identifying any political program with the kingdom of God. The church has a distinctive message and must retain freedom to criticize every ideology and party rather than becoming the religious wing of one political movement.

At the same time, Christian discipleship has public consequences. Believers enter civic life as citizens, voters, workers, neighbors, and sometimes officeholders, seeking the common good while recognizing that no state can accomplish the church's spiritual mission.