

6-1-1969

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Recommended Citation

Schoene, Jobst (1969) "The Gospel and Political Structures," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 40, Article 48.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/48>

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The Gospel and Political Structures

JOBST SCHOENE

The situation which suggests this theme is unique in more than one respect. Hardly ever in the history of theology has there been such intensive and impassioned questioning and contention concerning the relations between the gospel and political structures as today. That this is true also of the discussion within the Lutheran churches becomes evident the moment one investigates the problems posed by the concepts "gospel" and "political structures." The rapid change of the political structures all over the world renders the answers from the Lutheran tradition, which have only too often been identified with the statements of Scripture and of the Confessions, out of date, obsolete, or in need of revision. This much at least seems certain: mere repetition of those formulas by which Lutheran theology has come to grips with the relation between gospel and political structures, including the "two-kingdom" doctrine of the Reformer, no longer suffices in the present world. One cannot with impunity either ignore this doctrine or eliminate it. It calls for a statement specifically aimed at the modern situation, its demands and questions. No consensus, however, has so far been reached in defining this specific relationship.

The following discussion attempts to introduce us to the circumstances thus sketched here. They arise from reflections on Christian existence in a city where two

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political structures that are basically in opposition constantly confront each other geographically and existentially. The political unrest that is characteristic for Berlin, however, only reflects global unrest in the political structures of our present-day world with which Christianity has to deal.

History refutes the opinion that one can keep gospel and political structures apart because they have validity for incompatible spheres of human existence and make demands that have no inner relationship. The concepts "gospel" and "political structures" rather have an affinity which is, however, marked by tension. Debate centers only on the question of how this relationship is to be determined, where the distinction must be made, how faith determined by the gospel is to react in concrete situations, which position the church (as the creation of the gospel) and the state (as a concrete form of political structure) should take in this framework.

All of this could be answered quite easily when the Christian and the church lived under a political system that was theologically justified and remained unchallenged and which on its part was willing to respect the church and its message. This is no longer the case. Our century has experienced in full measure the disintegration of out-of-date political structures and the formation of new and different ones. Some thought must be given to the relationship of the gospel to them, so that the task of Christendom can be performed; that is, "to preach the gospel on the world's

agenda" (Uppsala, 1968). First of all we must clarify the concepts "gospel" and "political structures."

I. THE CONCEPT "GOSPEL"

On the basis of the theme it follows that the systematic-theological-linguistic usage of the gospel strictly speaking in distinction from the law will not do. In the context of our theme we do not need to discuss the relation between the two basic forms of the revelation (i. e., law and gospel), but we have to make clear the relation that exists between the revelation on the one hand and a structure that is not determined by revelation on the other hand. Therefore one must speak of gospel in a broader sense, that is, one must include that word of God against whose background gospel first becomes gospel, namely, the law.

At the same time the total extent must be included of that to which gospel in the narrow sense gives birth: faith, service, church. The gospel is not merely to be known as a gracious promise to the individual. At the same time it awakens the faith that accepts this gracious promise of God, it works sanctification (Luther: *Fides sola justificat, sed nunquam est sola*, that is, without the thankoffering of works). It creates the congregation of those who are grasped by the gospel; it places one in the places where it is proclaimed and used and from which it shines forth into the world, namely, the church as the creation of the gospel. Finally, the proclamation of the gospel includes the proclamation regarding the new creation of this world: "We wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (1 Peter 3:13). This gospel prepares man for that future.

New Testament language already in-

cludes this entire fulness of meaning of the concept "gospel." Within the limits of our discussion the differences in the usage of the concept in the synoptics, by John, and in the Pauline letters are of no decisive importance. Only individual aspects are here to be noted.

Historically and linguistically the concept "gospel" has gone through a long development. In this connection, it is noteworthy that in the ancient emperor worship this term had already taken on a specific coloring. The emperor is a bringer of salvation whose decrees (even as the news of his birth or of his accession to the throne) are therefore called "gospel" and mark the beginning of a time of salvation. Gospel and political structures are here congruent.

No direct line, of course, can be drawn from this profane Greek linguistic usage to that of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is part of the background of the New Testament understanding of gospel, for it already includes those messianic-eschatological components that we constantly meet wherever the gospel is under discussion.

The New Testament concept of the gospel is based on the Old Testament. There the prophecy of Isaiah had proclaimed the dawn of the eschatological time of salvation with the announcement of God's royal reign (Is. 52:7-10). Psalm 96 reflects this thought. Jahweh's kingdom — a "political" term — guarantees righteousness, truth, salvation, rescue, and peace. This event (Ps. 96:10) affects all mankind.

The synoptics make it clear that for Jesus His activity is fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Matt. 11:5; Luke 4:18f). He proclaims the gospel of the royal reign

(Matt. 4:23), thereby establishing it. In Him it becomes a reality. He is "the Lord of all lords." Thus the concept "gospel" is used in an exclusively messianic-eschatological sense that indicates a merely formal similarity to the profane-Greek linguistic usage; in substance the meaning is wholly different.

For in view of the actual state of affairs in the New Testament understanding of the gospel, all worldly political structures acquire a totally new position in the scale of values. Such political structures are now of only a temporal, temporary, provisional, relative value. Indeed, whenever a secularized Messianism emerges from them, whenever they make claims of leading into the time of salvation, they come up against the gospel, against God's act of salvation. The New Testament thus unmasks them as demonic and perverted. God Himself alone claims total dominance over the world and man. This claim as the New Testament proclaims it, includes proof that man is a fallen creature in need of salvation and dependent for salvation not on himself but on the act of Christ.

II. THE "POLITICAL STRUCTURES" AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

For the development of our thesis the gospel must be asserted in its entire complex fullness of meaning. It must not be too quickly restricted to the usage of dogmatic language and yet it must be stated with sufficient clarity. But in clarifying the concept "political structures" one meets considerably greater difficulties. What are political structures? How should we understand them? Research in the history of languages does not help a great deal in finding an answer to this question. "Poli-

tics" in contemporary everyday language has taken many different meanings. Frequently nothing is left of the original connection with *polis*, public life. Even in instances where this connection is still retained, political philosophy, political thinking, and political concepts are basically different. Aristotle prepared the way for all later thinking and provided the conceptual political structures. Since then, the West has known an abundance of contradictory political ideologies (*Leitbilder*), systems and orders, each one replacing its predecessor.

In contrasting "political structures" with the "gospel" we must count on a certain lack of precision in the concept from the start. One must keep in mind that political structures always appear where people conduct their external, political life together in orderly forms. Political structures regulate and determine this community life, the social togetherness of the people whom it controls. They are expressed by fundamental concepts that designate basic phenomena of political life such as authority (arrangement between the ruling and the ruled), nation, office, legitimacy, commonweal, and others. Beyond these, however, political structures can be expressed in concepts that belong to such specific historical constellations as state, sovereignty, separation of powers, public opinion, parties, and so forth.

Since men produce and shape political structures, these are subject to human contingency, change, and imperfection. They are also subject to the danger of ideologizing and of becoming sacrosanct and absolutely binding. This insight can be learned only to a degree from mere historical observation. For a full understanding, it is

necessary to assume that man is a fallen creature. Any analysis of the progress of political structures without this perspective can only point to an awareness of the fact that they are subject to historical development and that they have had varying values in society. But whether or not such a historical development will lead to their attainment of perfection (at least to a degree) can ultimately be judged only on the basis of anthropology. If the biblical declaration that man is a sinner is valid, this judgment will be negative. Thus political structures constantly reflect the fact that fallen man erects them and that they belong to a world that is evil and does not anticipate perfection but does wait for judgment and new creation. The importance of this state of affairs will be clarified later on.

Historical development of Western political thought went through two important changes. The first occurred in the middle of the 17th century. From that time on the political community with its structures was no longer regarded as a primitive condition of life conformable to man's natural state, but as a state differing from it, as a civil state. According to this view the state is a product of later human agreement born of man's freedom to create for himself the conditions and structures in which he lives. The second break occurred after the French Revolution and is the result of the first. For the unified sphere of life that heretofore was denoted by the concept "politics" was now divided into two spheres, that of society and that of the state. Society and state were no longer viewed as identical, even though they impinge on each other and sometimes overlap.

The new situation indicated by these two changes, namely, that the order of state is

thought of as a product of human agreement and that state and society are different, are consistent with a view of man that prevailed at that period. The view accorded full autonomy to the human individual. This rationalism denied the total depravity of man, viewed him as capable of perfect political structures, that is, of building ever more perfect political structures, in which human dignity could reach ever fuller development. Though on the basis of the biblical picture of the *fallen* human being, such a view cannot be maintained, there is no doubt that this conception has been extremely fruitful for the political thinking of modern man and the development of political structures and to this day continues its influence with undiminished power. The ideals of the French revolution, which are unthinkable without the view of man which developed out of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, have decisively promoted the rise of modern democracy. The way was opened for a totally new evaluation of political structures. The idea of an order established "by divine grace," that is, of being divinely established and sanctioned in its extant structure, received the *coup de grace*. The political community as such was secularized, its value relativized. Room was made for the criticism of political structures—and so also for criticism from the perspective of the gospel!

The historical development did not stand still. With the progressive democratizing of society most of the basic political orders became unstable, in part even questionable. In the 20th century the events and experiences of the world wars and revolutions, the extension of secularism into the "normal" vital consciousness (*Lebensge-*

fühl), drew into the wake of relativism the convictions of the abiding value of certain community regulations which had still existed at the turn of the century. A generally accepted political ethics no longer exists. New political ideologies (*Leitbilder*) have emerged and created new political structures. These new political ideologies are on the one hand characterized by a future-thrusting energy (so, for example, that of Marxism or that of extreme nationalism) or are on the other hand directed toward the endorsement, preservation, and completion of an attained cultural level (such as liberal democracy). Between these two are countless attempts to combine both basic trends and to fuse them with a variety of emphases. Finally, as the most recent, the political ideology of the permanent revolution is added, to which the Chinese cultural revolution gave impetus and which, formulated by Herbert Marcuse and his followers, became the mainspring of the student unrest in America and Western Europe. It has already outstripped the political ideology of classical Marxism.

All of these ideologies are marked by a kind of missionary zeal and are advanced with a specific consciousness of mission. Karl Marx stated in his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have merely interpreted the world differently; the important thing is to change it." Thereby he showed Marxism its primary task (and in his philosophy pointed the way to achieve it). Basically, however, the political ideologies competing with Marxism—for example, liberal Western democracy—also call for the change of world and for the exportation of their political ideas (even if, true to their own principles, much less aggressively than

Marxism). Practical political activity in our world—on both sides of the Iron Curtain—is strongly determined by an empty pragmatism and a soulless technocracy that casts men into their peculiar form of hopelessness. This does not weaken the assertion that the modern political ideologies are not designed for interpreting but for changing the world. Hence they apply not only to the compass of political activity in the narrow sense but beyond that to all forms of social life, culture, business—man in every aspect of his life. Indeed, they aim at man's liberation for the sake of his true dignity. In Marxism they admittedly aim at the creation of a new human type. The political structures that have been developed on the basis of such ideologies are therefore inextricably interwoven with definite sociological and economic structures. That makes their delimitation difficult.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOSPEL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES

In speaking about the relationship between the gospel and the political structures, one must first determine the point of intersection where the two meet and confront each other. One must then inquire about the boundary that is to be drawn between them. "Boundary" does not however mean reduction to a point where the gospel would remain irrelevant and have nothing to say concerning the political structures. Rather, out of the establishment of boundaries the development of the critical function of the gospel over against the political structures will follow as a third pattern of relationship. Thus we finally come to the concluding assertion regarding the service that the gospel should render

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for and in the political structures of our time.

A. The point of intersection

With the conclusion reached above that the political ideologies of our time and the political structures developed on this basis are aimed at changing the world and the liberation of man for the sake of his true dignity, we are already near the point of intersection where gospel and political structures meet. This point lies in man himself, who as a political animal is bound into political structures and can never be viewed apart from them. In his concrete situation the gospel directs itself to him and calls him into liberty. But for the duration of his life this will not be liberty from political obligations as such, but rather from their absolute claim upon him and freedom of redemption from this world. The gospel exists because of the limitations of the human condition that is designed to make it possible truly to be man. It explains man's threatened existence in terms of his defection from God and his being delivered to the activity of satanic powers. For that reason it wants to give man redemption through the gift of a new communion with God that is initially realized in the church as the divinely instituted congregation, the gathering or congregation of the Christians around Word and Sacrament.

Political activity also derives its justification from this same threatened condition and from the same goal of making possible for man a life of unlimited development, and the guarantee of his human dignity. It does not, however, view man from the perspective of eternity like the gospel, but comprehends him only in his temporal existence. From that point of view man eval-

uates his situation and his goal of achieving a free existence on a completely different principle which is inner-worldly and rational without any metaphysical and religious reflection. The formal analogy assures no material congruence. Perhaps I can make this clearer by pointing out that the ideals of the French Revolution — liberty, equality, fraternity — despite the similar sound of the words, are not at all identical with what Paul has in mind, when he says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3.:28). The conclusion that "you are all one in Christ Jesus" presupposes that for which political activity and political structures provide no place: that a man has been gripped by the gospel.

The gospel's claim on man and the claim that political structures make on him can, if circumstances are favorable, exist side by side without rivalry. The Christian can at one and the same time acknowledge and endorse both as God's will. He regards himself as a citizen of both realms, as Luther expressed it in his doctrine of the two kingdoms. This model distinguishes between the kingdom of the world and the spiritual kingdom, but does not, however, separate them. Rather it dovetails them theocentrically and views them together in God, who is Lord and King of both kingdoms. The tension between the two then resides in the Christian's heart and is there concretized when he occupies a political office. It is the tension between law and gospel, punitive justice and mercy, legitimate claim and forgiveness, force and Word.

However, the antinomy between the city of God and the earthly city does not as

a rule remain limited to the individual Christian who has to endure them in his heart. The gospel deprives all political structures of their autonomous, exclusive claim to ultimate validity; they are only interim arrangements until the Last Day and belong to a transient world that is under the curse of sin. This limitation of the power of political structures and consequent relativising can, however, be achieved by the Christian only on the basis of the gospel. Whenever man seeks to live his life apart from God, he will exalt himself above God and ideologize his political activity. Here is the point where gospel and political structure will become rivals. If as in Marxism, the welfare of man, or even more the creation of a new type, is thought of as being achieved through the construction of a new political structure, the claim of the gospel can no longer be upheld. For tactical reasons a Marxist can tolerate it temporarily, but must in fact challenge its absolute validity. Such a condition of rivalry arises likewise wherever the gospel is no longer considered valid as gospel but is put into the service of political purposes. For them one does not understand the salvation proclaimed by it as eschatological but secular and temporal. Thereby the gospel is perverted into law; it is used illegitimately as a political ideology and is perverted by this effort to procure validity for it by force.

B. The boundary between the gospel and political structures

Making room for the gospel as gospel depends specifically on the proper demarcation between it and the political structures.

On the basis of present political struc-

tures and the political ideologies underlying them, one can quickly determine the influence Christianity has had on their origin. The ideal of liberal democracy cannot be imagined without the presuppositions that were created for it out of the sphere of Christian thinking. Marxism cannot be understood without the background of Old Testament prophecy and a secularized eschatology. Modern nationalism could not have been developed without the undercurrents from the realm of ideas about a chosen people. Jurisprudence, culture, business, indeed nearly all spheres of society, are subject to similar influences.

It would nevertheless be fatal to conclude that in the political sphere the aim of the gospel could be attained even approximately with an increased or exclusive application and penetration of principles that are derived from the gospel. The essential difference between the gospel and political structures and its proclamation and political activity cannot be invalidated. It furnishes no political ideologies and is misused whenever it is asked to serve that purpose. It can never be identified with a socio-political or state-political program, a specific form of government, political aim or order, nor can it sanction them as such or declare them binding. That would mean, contrary to the clear statement of Scripture, the attempt to establish the kingdom of God through human endeavor and not through the direct action of God. It would at the same time pervert the gospel into its opposite, because no political order can be established or endure without the use of the law, of force, and of compulsion. A gospel that is proclaimed as law and applied with force and imposed upon man is no longer gospel.

As the gospel proclaims the royal rule of Jesus Christ—not by force but by the word alone—and announces to man freedom from the power of sin and of Satan and opens to him the way to a life of the future world, it is essentially removed from political structures and it relativizes all secular obligation of man. It claims absolute preeminence over any secular structure of order. The kingdom of God is established only by means of the gospel, never through the attainment of political aims. That does not exclude the fact that the gospel acknowledges the political structures in a relative manner. They also manifest one side of God's rule over the world. Christ's directive is valid: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:2); and Paul's admonition in Romans 13 likewise imposes on the Christian the duty of obedience. This, however, finds its limitation in the Petrine principle, "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29; 4:19). With this stipulation the validity and authority of political power is not challenged as such but limited only by a refusal to obey in concrete situations. It is not one's own discretion based on a rational judgment, but rather the theological reason which determines the application or non-application of the principle.

The recognition of the relative value of political structures takes into consideration the fact that they serve to provide bodily sustenance and to preserve from chaos (Romans 13). They are necessary for these purposes because the "world is in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19) and is threatened in its very existence. Of course, where the political power becomes autocratic and emancipates itself from the ethical norms that are secured by the

divine law, such a recognition must be derived in each individual concrete case (Revelation 13). The drawing of the boundary does not therefore mean that political structures are spared the criticism of the gospel, or to deny God's sovereignty over political structures, or to exclude the gospel from wielding any influence on the "political" life of man in this world.

C. The critical function of the gospel over against the political structures

This critical function of the gospel follows from the content of the gospel proclamation. With its universal offer of divinely effected and assured salvation, it identifies man as being in need of salvation, that is, it addresses him as sinner, as sinner also when he acts and thinks politically or argues political principles. But it does not abandon him as a sinner, but instead places him under divine grace and forgiveness.

Thus the gospel, wherever it is truly proclaimed, will free man from the illusion that political structures (whether present or still to be achieved, makes no difference) could offer a substitute for divine salvation. It will oppose political structures where those no longer are content to be means to an end, but the end themselves and thus assert a total claim on man. With its message the gospel wards off man's imprisonment by this world. Whenever a secularized Messianism appears in the political structures, it will unmask it as ungodly with its message of the future world and the kingdom of God.

Does this mean that the entire function of the gospel over against the political structures is limited to negative assertions and is incapable of producing any positive stimulations toward the formation of po-

litical orders? That has not infrequently been the conclusion. Especially where political ideologies and thought have changed, some have (quite often rightly) charged that the church (and particularly the Lutheran Church with the idea of the two kingdoms) inclined toward political conservatism. This is a correct description of the position which many Christians have taken over against inherited political structures, but the doctrine of the Lutheran Church does not favor such a standpoint. Church bodies often condemned the necessary political restructuring and, by emphasizing the separation between gospel and political structures, church and state, and faith and political thinking, approved an emancipation of political power from ethical norms and thus excluded the political structures from Christian responsibility and surrendered them to their autonomy.

For this reason, particularly in the most recent times, a strong demand has been made to revise basically Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, to proceed toward a political engagement of the churches (and not merely of the individual Christian), and to develop a theology of revolution. A pioneer in this endeavor (after preparatory endeavors from various directions which began already in the 19th century) was Karl Barth, who, rooted in Calvinism, created the theological basis with his inversion of the relation between law and gospel. If one considers the expressions of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, one will see how widely the influence of his thinking has spread. Harvey Cox has found a favorable response also in Europe with his demand that the development of a "theology of revolution" should today be the first subject on the

theological agenda. Carl E. Braaten has very pointedly advocated changing the slogan "The church must always be reformed" into the maxim "Society must always be reformed," and he sees in that the primary current task of the church.

In fact, these endeavors are justified at least to the extent—and this can no longer be overlooked—that the church's silence about political developments, political ideologies, and the forms of demonic political activity is tantamount to its approval.

By its mere existence in this world the church has become a political factor. In Germany that was experienced at the time of the Hitler regime. At that time the church, by being largely silent, if not even partly approving the totalitarian regime, burdened itself with a large measure of guilt. Self-satisfaction and convenience got it involved in injustice and neglect of its duty. But the Lutheran Church (although not it alone!) had failed in its political duty not only under the Nazi regime but long before that. Church history furnishes an abundance of examples to show how the church only too often entered upon an agreement with the current political and social power only to be misused by that power and to suffer harm.

Is that due to Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and its basis, the biblical conception of law and gospel? This one must rightly deny. Certainly the doctrine of the two kingdoms can be and is misunderstood. But correctly understood, it frees the Christian precisely for political thinking and acting without illusion. By adhering to the essential difference between God's kingdom and the world's kingdom and between gospel and political struc-

tures, it rejects the fatal position that political or social world peace is identical with the kingdom of God. It likewise rejects every form of Christocracy and every mingling of law and gospel. By exposing human limitations, the gospel prevents a new legalism, or an ethics of achievement that no longer seriously considers the possibility that man will fail. Whoever has truly absorbed the Reformation's understanding of justification, will for the sake of man's salvation become suspicious of every legalizing of the gospel. This is a danger wherever the doctrine of the two kingdoms is abandoned.

D. The gospel's service to political structures

How then is the gospel's service for and in political structures to be determined? It must be emphasized initially that ethics conformable to the gospel and its proclamation can no longer be merely individualistic ethics as in former centuries. The neighbor who is the object of concern in our world is — as Karl Marx rightly saw — not merely one individual person, not an isolated thing, but "an ensemble of social situations." He can be met only in the structures in which he lives. There, in his place, he needs the service of the gospel. But must this service in itself and everywhere change the social and political conditions? Must and can love for the neighbor always be only "love in structures"?

The gospel renders its decisive service by opening for man the eschatological perspective and by relativizing all political structures as interim orders. It restrains the fatal absolutizing of the political ideologies that develop within political structures, the virulent currents of class hatred

or race discriminations, of extreme nationalism and of the perversion of the right ("Right is whatever serves the nation, the state, the party"). Through the gospel it becomes evident that before the throne of God no one will be asked about his race or the color of his skin, his nationality or his social rank, or his value to the political community. All of these difficulties and contrasts that we — positively or negatively — regard as very important do not determine the final meaning or worth of our life. That, however, cannot be made intelligible to political thinking, but only to the conscience that has been grasped by the gospel.

But on the basis of such a conscience the church will and must (in her totality through its responsible organs as well as in her individual members) render the service of the gospel to political structures and within political structures. This extends in concrete situations from prayer for the politically responsible to opening its mouth for those politically condemned to silence and to social action. For the gospel's sake and for the sake of its own commitment, the church will sharpen consciences, take a position in specific political situations, and also insist on changing existent structures under certain circumstances precisely because these are neither given nor received by fate. Rather, they are subject to change and open to planned intervention and regulation. The church will direct attention to needs and problems that are crowded out of awareness by public opinion. It will be believed only if it will within its own domain be ready to do as an example whatever it expects of others in public life and to which it urges them. It

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is necessary in all these cases to distinguish conscientiously between faith and matters committed to reason. The gospel compels the church to maintain peace in her own ranks, as also with the political opponent, since it does not espouse the cause of the party of a specific political or social group but the party of sinners as such (and that will precisely also be its political leadership). Therefore one sees that God calls the church as a creation of the gospel to the service of all mankind. Thus the church, if it is ready to hear the gospel itself, re-

mains secure against the temptations to become a political "pressure group" and to wrest for itself temporal power and to use it. Its confidence must be based on the power of the Word and on truth alone. The gospel will make it fearless of man and in case of need ready to suffer. For on the basis of the gospel the church learns:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever." (Rev. 11:15)