

(Matthew 22:20,21, NIV) and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Just barely in the office, and President Bush is already under fire for having a distinctly Christian prayer at his inauguration. This raises the question of separation of church and state. Where is the line for a Christian?

The Matthew passage above is the basis for the Lutheran doctrine (“teaching”) of Two Kingdoms. We believe, teach, and confess that there is indeed a distinction between the church and the state. Both are given as gifts of God, and both deserve our respect, but each has a different role.

The central role of the state is Law. The government keeps good order and establishes justice. The church, on the other hand, is responsible for mercy and grace: undeserved love, not justice. A judge should not say, “I know you killed someone, but I forgive you.” At the same time, the church should not retain the sins of penitent sinners.

So where is the line? The answer is not always easy, but once we understand that the state is instituted by God, we understand that it ought to operate under God’s Law, our conscience, the Law written on the heart of every human being, what we call “Natural Law.”

The responsibility to interpret the constitution of this country rests with the Supreme Court, and the responsibility to interpret Scripture rests with the church. The responsibility of every Christian is to live by both. Ben Franklin was not a Christian as far as we know, but he said that so far as he could see, whenever you mingle religion and politics, it is to the detriment of both—that true religion does not need politics to support it, and that when they mingle, the mixture is corrupting to both.

Franklin’s observation was correct. And this distinction is one reason that vouchers for private schools may not be such a good idea. If the government gives money to a Christian school, they have some right to dictate curriculum, so they could force the teachings of evolution, “multiculturalism/tolerance,” and other abominations. At the same time, the church shouldn’t try to dictate public governmental policy, like prayer in public schools.

At the same time, there is overlap. When the government goes against the “Natural Law” of God and legalizes things like euthanasia/physician-assisted suicide, abortion, and homosexual marriages, a Christian must stand up against it, not because it’s a religious issue, but because it’s a basic moral issue.

Yet as we, the “Church Militant,” continue to fight for purity and truth, there is comfort. God assures us that He will one day come to restore all things, that He has forgiven us because of Jesus’ sacrifice for us on the cross, and that all we do for God and each other, for church, for state, for our families, and even for the benefit of our own health and well-being, is, because we are His new creation, done to His glory. He is the King, not because He is sovereign, as the state, but because He is merciful, as the church.