

The People's Bible Teachings

CIVIL GOVERNMENT

God's Other Kingdom

Daniel M. Deutschlander

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Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

The kingdom of God. Most readers of this book are familiar with that phrase. Jesus uses it repeatedly in the gospels, and the rest of the New Testament also makes frequent reference to it. Most simply defined, the kingdom of God is God's gracious rule in the hearts of believers through his Word. That kingdom is not in any one place. It is everywhere God's Word is proclaimed and his sacraments are administered according to his Word.

Closely connected to the phrase *kingdom of God* is the word *church*. In fact, the two are inseparable. The kingdom of God is God's ruling activity. The church is the sum total of all who believe the gospel.

By the preaching of the gospel, the kingdom of God is brought to people, and people are brought into the kingdom of God. Being a member of Christ's holy Christian church and being a part of the kingdom of God are one and the same thing. For by the gospel message of forgiveness won by our Savior's work, we are brought to faith; by faith Christ's kingdom is within us; and by faith we are members of his church.

Kingdom of God, church, gospel, Word and sacraments, faith in Christ: It is impossible to think of one of these without thinking of all the others. So closely are they connected that as soon as we hear the phrase *kingdom of God*, we automatically think of all the other terms as well.

But God also has another kingdom. Christ rules not only in the church but also in the world. All of history is under his feet. All kingdoms and earthly powers ultimately bow to his commands and yield to his purposes. Before his

ascension Jesus himself summed up his rule: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). Paul sings the praises of the ascended Christ, who rules over all things for the benefit of his church: “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22,23).

Thus the rule of Christ over everything in the world, in time, and in history can be called his other kingdom. But most commonly when we talk about Christ’s second kingdom, we are referring especially to civil government, to the state. That is how we will be using the term in this book.

God has placed us Christians in and under that kingdom. We have, so to speak, a dual citizenship. We are citizens of the kingdom of God through faith in the gospel promise. We are also citizens of this other kingdom by virtue of our living in this world. In the one kingdom, God rules by his Word. In the other kingdom, God rules through governments. The first kingdom gives us our permanent home in heaven and focuses our attention on spiritual matters. The second kingdom deals with our temporary but still important home on earth.

Even though the first kingdom is by far the more important one, we cannot ignore the second kingdom. God himself stands behind government and has given it power over us. God’s Word tells us about the blessings he wants to give us through government. It also tells us about our responsibilities toward government.

Lutherans traditionally have taken their God-given responsibilities to the family and the church very seriously. But they have a reputation—not always undeserved—of abandoning civil government concerns to others. That

frequent lack of concern is not difficult to understand. Involvement in government seems so “unspiritual,” so often riddled with compromise, so subject to corruption that some Christians want nothing to do with it.

Besides that, it is often difficult to sort out the relationship between the two kingdoms. Do church and state have anything in common? Should they work together? Should they stay as far apart from each other as possible? What about prayer in public schools? What about government aid to church schools? What is the duty of someone in the kingdom of God toward the other kingdom when the state supports abortion?

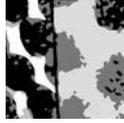
Connections between church and state are close in some matters, confused in others, and at loggerheads in still others. For example, there is a “Christian Right” with one political agenda and a “Christian Left” with a very different agenda. Nor are those outside the church silent on church-and-state relationships. The noise and confusion is so great that Christians may be tempted to turn their backs on the whole discussion and wash their hands of the problem.

We, however, want to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Therefore let us search the Scriptures. There we will find what God has to say about his other kingdom, about civil government. There God himself will give us not a manual that answers every question but principles to guide and motivate our attitudes and actions.

With the prayer that God will bless our study of his Word, let us then ask him: What about the other kingdom? What about civil government? What about my life as a Christian citizen? What about the proper relationship between church and state?

Part I

The Bible on Civil Government



1

The Beginning of Government and Israel

Given the importance of the two kingdoms, church and government, it may come as a surprise to discover that God does not tell us exactly how or when he established the two kingdoms. But God nevertheless stands behind both of them. He invests them with dignity and power and honor. To reject them is the same as rejecting him.

How do we account for the fact that there are no words from God that set in concrete the forms of church and state? As we observe God's ways with us, one simple truth appears again and again: God either creates a need or allows a need to arise before he meets it. We see that even in the creation account. God brought the animals to Adam *in pairs*, each with its mate. "But for Adam no suitable

helper was found” (Genesis 2:20). God first made Adam aware of a need. And then, so that Adam might offer appropriate thanks, God met the need in the creation of Eve. Having satisfied the need of each for the other, God decreed how families should begin (Genesis 2:24).

The church begins

The church begins her work on the basis of a need that had already emerged in Genesis 3. There we read of man’s fall into sin and of God’s great grace in the first promise of the Savior. Genesis 3:15 says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The promise of the Savior created faith in Adam and Eve. The promise, however, did not put an end to sin. It is perfectly clear by the end of Genesis 4 that sin was not going to go away. It is equally clear that the promise of the Savior was not going to go away either.

The continuing presence of both sin and God’s gracious promise made a need obvious. The faithful children of Adam needed and wanted to worship, to offer sacrifice. Sin needed to be addressed by God’s Word of law and gospel. Heathens, even among the children of Adam, needed to hear the message of the law and the promise of the Savior. So by the end of Genesis 4, the church was functioning as believers publicly called on the name of the Lord. In public worship they confessed their faith, offered sacrifices, and proclaimed the gospel promise.

Government begins

But what about the other kingdom? What about civil government? How soon did people realize the need for civil order in their sin-corrupted society? The need for

external order became more and more obvious from Genesis 4. There we read of Abel's tragic murder by his brother. God himself decreed the punishment for Cain and found a way to enforce it (verses 10-16). But murder did not stop with Cain, in spite of the punishment. Disorder increased and so did murder. Lamech murdered someone and went on to boast about it (verses 23,24)!

Genesis 6:11-13 tells us that by the time of Noah, the earth was full of violence. Order had collapsed. Open corruption was so great that only the destruction of the flood could cure it. An institution for promoting civil order was needed—if such an institution existed, it needed drastic reform.

After the flood, when God spoke to Noah, God seemed to assume the emergence of government: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). There God expressed his will that a murderer's blood should be shed by someone. Why? Because God created us in his own image. To be sure, the essence of that image was destroyed by the fall into sin. To be sure, the poison of sin is passed down from generation to generation. But God had already promised the cure, the Savior, who would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

By the work of the woman's offspring, our brother and Savior, innocence and holiness would again be restored. Through the proclamation of the promise, God had already begun to restore his image in Adam and Eve, Noah, and all those who called on him on the basis of the promise. And it is God's will that those who trust in him have his image perfectly restored in heaven.

Murder robs the victim of time to hear the promise and share it. Murder is so monstrous that those who com-

mit it deserve to lose their own lives and the important time for hearing and sharing the promise. Notice, however, that God does not tell us who should shed the blood of murderers. He does not entrust the work to the victim's family. He does not give it to the church either. He never sanctions vigilante justice. Nevertheless, someone has to do it. Who will that be? The task will fall to civil government, to God's other kingdom.

In the opening chapters of Exodus, the government punishes murderers (Exodus 2:11-15). We know from both Genesis and Exodus that early governments did more than track down murderers for execution. In Genesis 41 to 50, for example, God used the Egyptian government to save his people from famine.

Unfortunately, governments often have not been the blessing God intended. Often they have been models not of justice but of injustice, not of peacekeeping but of violence and cruelty. That should not surprise us. The fall in the Garden of Eden had consequences that spread through all the institutions by which God intended to bless the human race. It brought tragedy to the family life of Adam and Eve. It destroyed any possibility of unity in the church, for most people rejected the promise of the Savior and set up their own forms of worship in direct opposition to the Word of God. But human perversions of God's intentions do not cancel out those intentions. God calls government to serve as a blessing for his people and so rules history that in spite of human perversions, God's will is done.

Civil government in Israel

The Old Testament has much more to teach us about government than what is contained in God's words to Noah. In the last four books of Moses, Exodus through

Deuteronomy, God himself established a government for Israel.

Israel's government was unlike any other. It had a special role to play in the history of our salvation. It was *not* a government that God gave for the whole world. It was not a government that God ever said should be imitated in all its forms and functions by other nations. It was established only for Old Testament Israel so that Israel would remain the vessel of God's gracious promise of the Savior.

God repeatedly commanded the people of Israel not to intermarry with the people of other nations because if they intermarried, they would soon fall into the idol worship of their neighbors. Such idolatry would certainly bring destruction to them, as it ultimately brings destruction to all who practice it. But something even more important was at stake. If the nation of the promise disappeared on account of intermarriage and idolatry, what would happen to the promise of the Savior? It too would disappear. How then would anyone recognize him when he came?

To keep the promise alive and to unfold it ever more clearly from generation to generation, God established a nation for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From the time of Moses until the time of Christ's appearing, God showed special grace to that nation.

Through special acts of protection and help, God showed himself as the only true God. Through prophets and plagues, he called Israel to repentance. In spite of unfaithfulness and stubbornness in Israel, he preserved the nation. Nevertheless, wickedness and unbelief in Israel became so stubborn that God finally destroyed the nation, Jerusalem, and the temple.

But after 70 years of exile, God brought the Jews back in accord with his promise. He restored their city and

temple worship. God would not let the promise of the Savior perish.

Israel's constitution

What can we say about the government God created for Old Testament Israel? To answer that question, we turn to Deuteronomy, Moses' farewell address to the nation, which summarizes the whole law of God to Israel. As such it is really Old Testament Israel's constitution.

In that constitution we find basically three types of laws, with a high degree of intermingling among the three types. There was first of all *moral law*. The moral law, itself summarized in the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, is an expression of God's will for all people of all time. We see that from the repetition of the basic principles of the Ten Commandments in the words of Jesus and the apostles (Matthew 5; Galatians 5:14-26; Ephesians 5).

The second type of law given to Israel was *ceremonial law*. The ceremonial law regulated the worship life of Israel with circumcision, sacrifices, holy days, priestly rituals, and the like. Most of these ceremonies pictured the coming Savior and his work, as the epistle to the Hebrews beautifully points out. Once Jesus had come and fulfilled all the pictures of him in that law, it was abolished; it does not apply to us. Paul declares in Colossians 2:16,17: "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

The third type of law in Israel was governmental law, or *civil law*. The civil law established a system of courts for the people (Deuteronomy 17:8-13). It provided for pun-

ishments that judges and elders would impose for crimes (16:18-20). It even had provisions for the protection of someone guilty of an accidental murder: the cities of refuge (19:1-13). It had draft laws for the army (20:1-9), economic laws about charging interest (23:19,20), and laws on marriage and divorce and inheritance (24:1-5; 25:5-10). All in all, the civil law served as a fairly comprehensive legal code.

The unique purpose of Israel's government

Again, the nation of Israel and its God-given government served a unique function in history: the preservation of the gospel promise first given in Genesis 3:15. Precisely because that function was a religious one, the government God gave to Israel mixed religious and civil functions to a very high degree. Idolatry was punishable by death (Deuteronomy 13). So was the behavior of rebellious children (21:18-21). Judges were both secular and religious (17:8-13). Unsolved murders required a religious as well as a civil resolution (21:1-9).

Because of the unique function God gave to the government of Israel, we cannot take every detail of law in Deuteronomy and apply it to governments now. Nevertheless, we can learn some things about government in general from Israel's constitution and history.

Lessons for us from Israel's government

We notice first that government and civil law assume that people are sinful and that society, therefore, will never be perfect. In fact, the assumption is that even in God's chosen nation, many, if not most, would be unbelievers. The repeated rebellions of Israel in Old Testament times amply demonstrate the accuracy of that assumption.

God wore no rose-colored glasses when he gave the civil law to Moses and Israel.

We notice second that government and civil law address *outward* behavior, not the heart. Those who hear of another's punishment may be moved to *outward* virtue; fearing punishment, some may act at least outwardly in obedience to the law (Deuteronomy 17:13).

Jesus' commentary on Old Testament civil law

Jesus commented on the purpose of Israel's civil law when the Pharisees asked him about divorce. For the sake of civil order, the law of Moses permitted divorce on relatively easy terms.

The very fact that such a law was needed to regulate outward behavior showed that many of the people were unbelievers. Jesus said, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard" (Matthew 19:8). If hearts were pure before God and other people, there would be little need for governmental laws regulating outward behavior.

The difference between civil law and the moral law

Although God wants people to obey civil law, such obedience is not enough to make us holy before God. In Matthew 5 Jesus tells us that righteousness before God comes only through perfect obedience to a much higher standard. That standard is set by the moral law, not by civil law.

The moral law calls for perfection of the heart and then perfection in behavior. But since we lack that perfection, the moral law more than anything else shows us our sin and our desperate need for the Savior. The moral law

shows us our need for help, pardon, and peace, which are found only in Christ.

Once God has shown us that no law can save us, once the gospel has shown us forgiveness in the merit of Christ alone, then God has yet another use for the moral law. It shows Christians the goal of our Christian lives as we live with one another. Our Christian lives will reflect our love to God for his grace and pardon on account of our Savior's death and resurrection for us. The first commandment of the moral law is love to God. The second flows from the first: love and service to others that reflects our love to God and our desire to serve him.

Would that all people were Christians! Would that all Christians were perfect in their love for God and knowledge of God's Word! Would that we all kept the moral law perfectly! Then there would be little need for civil law. For all the outward order that government seeks to provide would be present in a heaven of love and harmony in families and communities and even among nations. But we know that not all are Christians. We know that Christians do not always act in accord with the moral law—even though they know it. Therefore government, the other kingdom, is necessary.

Why government is necessary

Although some people may conduct their lives with outward decency, others will not. Others will cheat whenever they can. They will steal and take unfair advantage on every hand. They will strike out and even kill to get their way. For such people and such *outward* behavior, God gives power to civil government. The government with its civil law controls and curbs evil at least to some extent.

Thus God gave Israel its government and civil law to meet the needs of that nation at that time. He gave them to preserve a degree of order in the *outward* behavior of that particular mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers. He gave them as an aid to the preservation of that nation and society from which the Savior would come.

Why God gave certain penalties for crimes that we might think were not all that serious is not for us to judge. On the other hand, there is no call in the New Testament for us to campaign for the return of such penalties as those called for in Deuteronomy 19:21: “Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

It is enough to note that this law and its penalties were all part of a government and civil law. The purpose of this law was not salvation; its intent was not to establish righteousness before God. Its purpose and intent were to maintain outward order and control over the outward behavior of people when love to God did not motivate them.

We should note at least in passing that there is no contradiction between the moral law and the civil law in Deuteronomy. Many point to the above-cited passage, Deuteronomy 19:21, and boldly declare, “See—the Bible contradicts itself; for elsewhere the moral law tells us to forgive and love; but here the civil law tells us to get even!”

People who say such things are forgetting that the moral law and the civil law of Israel each had a different purpose and a different audience. The moral law is directed chiefly at the heart. Luther saw that very clearly and expressed it well in his Small Catechism. He begins the explanation to each of the Commandments with the words “We should fear and love God that . . .” That is the essence of the moral law: an attitude towards God that is reflected in

behavior. But the civil law aims only at the outward behavior regardless of whether the person loves God.

Think of it this way: Parents tell their children to love one another and to forgive one another's slips and faults. If children always did that, there would never be any need for a parent to say, "Sam, if you don't share with Sarah, I'll have to take that toy away!" Is there any contradiction there? Not at all! The first law is addressed to the heart and behavior that flows from it; the second speaks to behavior alone after the heart has gone astray. If the first were kept perfectly, there would be no need for the second.

Thus God gives to Christians the moral law and the command to love and serve one another. But he also stands behind government and civil law, which threaten both Christians and non-Christians when behavior is loveless to the point of violence against another's life or property.

