

## **Whether Secular Government Has the Right to Wield the Sword in Matters of Faith**

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(before 17 March 1530)

There is simply no end to executions and banishments for reasons of faith. Lutheran governments will not tolerate Anabaptists or Sacramentarians. Zwinglian governments also refuse to tolerate Anabaptists. Then come the papists, who burn, hang, or banish evangelicals, Lutherans, Zwinglians, Anabaptists and everyone who is not of their faith.

The papists have, I believe, no other grounds for such behavior than their worthless [canon] law. If they persist and refuse to heed God's word or even reason and justice, then one must let them go their way as long as God permits it.

But from those governments that are evangelical, Lutheran, Zwinglian, and claim to hear God's word, to follow it, and in no way to act contrary to it, even though papal law, as well as imperial laws made under the papacy, demand something else (as indeed all laws, ordinances, and customs should rightly yield before God's word): from those governments, I say, I would very much like to hear where they get the right to control faith either by executing those who do not wish to be of their faith or else by tearing them from property and goods, wife and children, and banishing them from the territory.

So far as I know, the only justification that has been offered for this is the opinion of some people that since it is the duty of every government to protect its subjects in temporal matters pertaining to body and goods, so that no harm befall them, it behooves government to an even greater degree to do the same in spiritual matters, since these things have to do with faith and the highest good, in order that its subjects not be contaminated or led astray.

But if you ask them to cite scripture in support of this opinion, either no one is at home or else they refer us to the Old-Testament record of the Jewish kings who supported true worship, abolished idolatrous worship, and destroyed idols. If you reply that the Old Testament and Jewish law are no longer binding, and that they should show where in the New Testament the secular government is commanded to be responsible for faith or to punish unbelievers with force or with the sword, then they are stuck.

Now it is certainly true that the Old Testament no longer binds anyone, and if we are bound in one matter on the ground that it is commanded in the Old Testament, how shall we avoid being bound in other such matters? If one thing were necessary, they would all be necessary, as Paul clearly concludes in Gal. 5[:3] and says against those who wanted to make circumcision obligatory that whoever has himself circumcised is obliged to fulfil the whole law. Therefore we must not be bound by anything in the Old Testament but rather give heed to the New Testament.

But the New Testament speaks of two kingdoms on earth, namely the spiritual and the secular. The spiritual kingdom is the kingdom of Christ in which Christ is king. Similarly, the secular realm also has its king, namely the emperor and other authorities. Just as each kingdom has its own distinct king, so each has its own distinct scepter, goal, and end. The scepter of the spiritual realm is the word of God; the goal and end to which this scepter

should attract and move us is that men turn to God and after this life be saved. The scepter of the secular realm, on the other hand, is the sword; the goal and end toward which it should drive and force men is that external peace be maintained.

That this is the proper division and distinction between the two kingdoms is powerfully demonstrated in the New Testament, where Christ and his agents, the apostles, observe the order of his kingdom most precisely, ruling in no other wise than with their scepter, the word of God. With this word they teach, admonish, and censure men, and proclaim that he who accepts and believes it will be saved, while he who does not will be damned. This is their method of government; they leave it at that and thereby their office is fulfilled. Nowhere does one find that if someone did not adhere to their doctrine and preaching but rather believed or taught some other faith, that they appealed to the secular government either to force such a person to accept their faith or else not to tolerate him. Nor does one find anywhere in the New Testament that any government that did this of its own accord was praised for it. On the contrary, Christ forbids it, as can be especially well observed in his explanation of his parable of the good seed and the tares, Matt. 13[:24-30, 37-43], where he says that the good seed are the children of the kingdom, sown by the Son of Man; the tares are the children of evil, sown by the devil; the harvest is the end of the world, the reapers the angels. He concludes that the tares should not be rooted up but rather allowed to remain, lest the wheat also be rooted up with them. For just as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the world: the Son of Man will send his angels, who will gather out of his kingdom all those that offend and cast into the furnace all those that work iniquity.

From this it is clear that Christ does not wish the sword of the secular government to be used to root anything out of his kingdom, but wishes rather to do combat there solely by his word until the end of the world. As the prophet Isaiah proclaims and says, Christ will do battle “with the breath of his mouth and with the rod of his lips,” not with the sword of secular government. Here it is clearly stated that Christ himself will fight, not the secular government for him, with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips, not with the sword of secular government. The prophet Daniel agrees with this and says that Antichrist (that is, all that sets itself against Christian faith and doctrine) shall be destroyed “without hand.” Whoever, then, seeks by secular power to defend true faith and doctrine or to drive out false faith and doctrine does nothing else than despise and mock the entire New Testament and the prophets as well. And, contrary to what Isaiah and Daniel say—that Christ will do battle in his kingdom by the breath of his mouth and that Antichrist will be destroyed without [human] hand—he also falsely maintains that the breath of Christ’s mouth does not do it and that one must accomplish it with one’s hand.

Furthermore, Christ and his apostles not only observe the order of his kingdom, they also leave the secular government completely unhindered in the possession of its kingdom. For when a man appealed to Christ to make his brother divide an inheritance with him, Christ refused in serious words saying: “Man, who made me a judge over you?” And before Pilate he said: “My kingdom is not of this world.” He also taught his disciples, saying: “The secular kings exercise lordship and the mighty are called gracious lords. But ye shall not be so!” etc. From this one sees how God wishes to have the two kingdoms distinguished from one another. And since Christ remains in his kingdom and lets the secular kingdom go its own

way, even though he is far mightier than all emperors and kings, it is all the more proper that the secular government should take care of its own kingdom and not attempt to govern that which belongs to Christ.

Therefore, the sum and substance of the whole matter is this, that a government that wishes to discharge its office and not claim more than has been entrusted to it should and must leave it entirely to Christ the king to determine and judge, by means of the scepter of his divine word, whether any teaching about faith, how man may come to God and be saved, be true or false. Just as one clearly sees that in his kingdom Christ does both things, namely, teaches the true faith and condemns the false, pours the holy spirit into the heart and drives the devil out, doing both through his scepter, the word, and calls on no secular authority to assist. Hence it is not proper for secular authority to do this. Rather it should use its scepter or sword in the secular realm against external misdeeds, so that no one may be harmed in his body or goods. In such matters the secular sword is effective and God has established it for that reason. But the sword is of no use in forcing people to adhere to this or that faith. In the final analysis, whether you hang or drown them, the choice must still be left to those who do not want to go to heaven to go down to hell to the devil or his mother instead. . . .

Moreover, the fact that some sects gather together in secret places is obviously not the fault of the sects or their members but of the government that will not tolerate them. Why do the secular authorities not leave faith to the spiritual realm and its king, Christ, and abandon their imprisonments, executions, and banishings on account of true or false belief? Then every sect would prefer to speak of its faith publicly and freely rather than secretly. Thereafter, if someone who had no cause to fear to speak openly of his faith nevertheless desired to practice it in secret, a government would have all the more right to forbid this and say to such a person: since you will not proclaim your faith openly so that one may test it to see if it is true, you must also leave off doing so in secret or else leave the country. But wherever public speech or teaching about faith is banned by the sword, people are thereby forced underground. As a result, there is added to the teaching of their faith the fact that the evil persons become hostile to the government that persecutes them and begin to plot moves designed to secure the free teaching of their doctrine, safe from persecution, so that the government thus to a certain extent causes and promotes secret conspiracy. It might well be argued that if anyone is certain of his faith and doctrine, he ought to bear witness to it in public and not conceal it, even though he were on that account executed. That is true and ought to be so. But not everyone is so perfect that he can die for the sake of his doctrine and faith, even though there are many whose consciences impel them not to remain silent in secret either. Indeed, we see every day that many of our people who adhere to the true faith teach people secretly and do not make much noise within earshot of the government when they find themselves in a place where their doctrine meets resistance. However, one must not despise the doctrine on account of their weak will but rather acknowledge it nevertheless to be true and have patience with the weak until they become stronger.

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