

Study Guide for *Good and Bad Ways to Think About Religion and Politics* by Robert Benne (Eerdmans, 2010)

## Introduction

The advent of a national election in a few months intensifies the question of how Christians should be involved in the political sphere. It is a good time for Lutherans to think more deeply about this question in light of Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms. It is a distinction not a separation or a confusion. But it is a distinction that makes a profound difference for the sake of both the Gospel and Christian life lived out in the world.

In one of his last sermons, a sermon on Psalm 8 preached in 1545, Luther observed that the kingdom of Christ is one of hearing while the kingdom of the world is one of seeing. Discussions of the place of the church in the public square inevitably lead us to reflect on how the Triune God is active in His creation. Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms does not segregate God's activity into the holy sphere of church leaving the world to its autonomous devices. God is a work in the world in two different ways, with different means, and with different ends. Hence Luther can use the imagery of the ear to indicate God's right hand governance whereby He causes His Gospel to be preached to bring sinners to faith in Christ and through faith inherit eternal life. On the other hand, the left-handed work of God is identified with the eye, with seeing. In this kingdom, God uses law to measure and curb human behavior so that His creation is not plunged into total chaos and this world subjected to futility is preserved until the Last Day. Authorities in the kingdom of God's left hand evaluate on the basis of evidence that is observable. Here distributive justice is the order of the day. But in the kingdom of His right hand, God's verdict is the absolution, the proclamation of a forgiveness of sins not achieved by merit or worth. When the two kingdoms are mixed or muddled, law and Gospel are confused.

Lutherans are concerned to keep the teaching of the two kingdoms straight and clear for the sake of the Gospel which alone gives forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. Luther fumed that the devil is incessantly seeking to "brew and cook" the two kingdoms together. Satan would like nothing better than duping folks into believing that salvation comes through secular government or conversely that the church is the institution to establish civil righteousness in the world. Either confusion displaces Christ and leaves sinners in despair. In a fine treatment of the two kingdoms, Gerhard Ebeling observed "The gospel is deficient, if the two kingdoms is deficient" (G. Ebeling, "The Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of the World" in *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, Fortress Press, 1970, p.189).

The teaching of the two kingdoms is necessary for the sake of the Gospel. This teaching guards us from turning the Gospel into a political ideology. The Gospel works eschatologically not politically as it bestows pardon to sinners and establishes peace with God. It is a faith creating word of promise heard with the ear, trusted in the heart, and confessed with the tongue. Christians, who live by faith in this promise, also live in this world where we use our eyes to see, to discern, to evaluate. The realm of the political is not to be dismissed as ungodly or unworthy of the Christian's involvement. God is at work here too. But He is at work here to protect and preserve His creation, making it a dominion where life can flourish. God's left-handed work is not to be confused with salvation but it is a good gift of daily bread to be received with thanksgiving by those who know the truth. So Lutherans neither put their trust in political processes nor do they eschew political involvement.

The teaching of the two kingdoms is an indispensable gift in an age beset by temptations both to secularism and sectarianism. Robert Benne's little book, *Good and Bad Ways to Think About Politics* (Eerdmans, 2010) would be an excellent text for personal reading or group discussion. The following study questions are offered to facilitate such reflection and study.

Chapter 1- Introduction: Why Another Book on Religion and Politics? (1-6)

1. Has religious influence in America become weaker as result of "modernization"? Why or why not? (3)
2. How has North American culture privatized religion? (3)
3. How was the election of Jimmy Carter representative of a shift toward politicized religion in the United States? (4)
4. What was the effect of Roe versus Wade (1973) on the place of religion in the public arena? (4)
5. Benne notes the increasing visibility of American evangelicalism. How would you assess the influence of this broad movement in the political sphere? (4-5)
6. How has political activism characterized the so-called "mainline" denominations? (5)
7. What is the place of Roman Catholicism on the landscape of American political life? (5)
8. What modes of religious involvement are harmful both to religious institutions and society? (6)
9. How does Benne define "critical engagement"? (6)

Chapter 2 "The Separationists" (7-24)

1. Benne identifies the first bad way to think about religion and politics is to sharply separate them. How is this done by "both militant secularists" and "ardent religious people"? (7)
2. Who are the "selective separationists"? (7)
3. How would you explain the difference between "separation of church and state" and "the interaction of religion and politics"? How does the First Amendment apply here? (8)
4. How would you respond to the claims of militant atheists like Richard Dawkins who assert that religion must be completely sequestered from politics?
5. Does religion in the public square inevitably become "political theology"? (9)
6. What is "liberal totalitarianism"? (10)
7. Benne writes "'Selective separationists' are so bothered by conservative religion's influence that they seem blind to the ongoing role of liberal religion's efforts in political life" (11). Name some examples of this blindness to theological liberalism's intrusion into the political realm.
8. How did the Founders of our nation understand "the free exercise of religion"? (13-14)
9. Give examples of how religion has been influential in our nation's history? (14)
10. Discuss Benne's statement: "Serious religion inevitably has a public dimension" (15). Also see Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession.
11. What are the theological reasons for theocracy not providing an attractive option for classical Christianity? (16)
12. How does Benne describe the teaching of the two kingdoms in contrast with theocracy? (17)
13. Benne describes a second way of separating religion from politics as keeping religion free of politics as a force that might contaminate faith. How does Benne critique this "sectarian" approach? (18-20)

14. What are some historical examples of the sectarian approach? How does Stanley Hauerwas represent a newer form of the sectarian approach? (20)
15. What was Luther's response to sectarianism? (21)
16. Why does Benne criticize the stance of Christian Luthhardt? (22)
17. How does Lutheran theology hold faith and worldly life together so as to avoid segregating the two into separate categories? (23-24)

#### Chapter 3 "The Fusionists" (25-38)

1. What happens when religion and politics are brought together so closely that they meld together? (25-26)
2. How does the political use of religion lead to cynicism? (27). Can you cite recent examples from American life?
3. How did both Stalin and Hitler attempt to use religion politically? (28)
4. Do you see the fusion of religious identity and national identity as helpful or harmful? (29-31)
5. Paul Tillich wrote "Socialism is the only possible economic system from the Christian point of view" (31). What kind of "fusion" does Tillich's thinking represent? Do you see this as problematic?
6. How is this "straight-line thinking" (intentional) exhibited in the so-called Religious Right? (33-34)
7. What is unintentional "straight-line thinking"? (35-38)

#### Chapter 4 "Critical Engagement: Moving from Core to Public Policy" (39-80)

1. How does Benne define the "core" of the Christian faith? (39)
2. In what sense does Jesus radicalize God's law? (40)
3. How do the Ten Commandments reflect the love of God? (40-41)
4. What does it mean that God's law "is built into creation"? (43)
5. How has Christianity "pervasively conditioned political life" in the West? (44)
6. Christian anthropology, the doctrine of man, understands human beings as both "exalted and fallen" according to Benne. How does this insight shape the way that human dignity is recognized? (46-47)
7. What are the political implications of the doctrine of sin? (49-50)
8. Benne writes "When the God-man (Jesus Christ) is rejected, the man-god rushes into take his place" (51). What are current examples of this enactment of idolatry? (51-53)
9. How does Christian faith keep politics in the world where it rightly belongs? (52)
10. Government exists for the purpose of preservation not salvation. (53). How would Romans 13:1-7 affirm this?
11. What are "the concrete places of responsibilities" that God has given His children? (54). See "The Table of Duties" in the Small Catechism. How is God working "incognito" in these places? (55)
12. How does the state properly allow the "free exercise of religion" without fusing church and state? (55-56)

13. Benne says “Luther famously declared that a good cobbler makes good shoes, not inferior ones with little crosses on them” (56). How does this help us understand the power of the doctrine of vocation?
14. How do Christians bring the virtues of “faith, hope, and love” into their callings in the political realm? (58-59)
15. What are the factors that condition our move from the Christian core to issues of public policy? (60-71)
16. How would you define “civil religion”? (63-64) Do you see civil religion as positive or negative? Why?
17. How are arguments for autonomy used to banish religion from public life? (65)
18. How is “secular moral philosophy” a useful tool in moving from “religiously based moral themes to public policy? (66)
19. What is the role of “broad and narrow self-interest” as Christians seek to participate in forming public policy? (70)
20. How does Benne’s description of the process of engaging religion and politics as concentric circles help us avoid the twin dangers of separation and fusion? (71-75)
21. How does this model work with life issues such as abortion and marriage? (75-77).
22. How does this model work with issues of religious liberty? (77-78)

#### Chapter 5 “The Practical Engagement of Religion and Politics” (81-113)

1. If religion should generally “avoid identification with specific public policies, political parties, or ideologies” (81), how should it engage with the political realm in the United States?
2. How is “indirect and unintentional influence” or an “ethics of character” fundamental in shaping Christians for political influence? (82-88)
3. Why is “indirect and unintentional influence” insufficient as the sole means of Christians exerting political influence? (88)
4. How do “the ethics of conscience” interject an element of intentionality into the Christian’s involvement in politics? (88-89)
5. Should churches endorse particular political candidates? Why or why not? (89-90)
6. How might churches play a “mediating role” for serious discussion of a variety of Christian responses to political issues? (92-94)
7. What are the two kinds of “direct” involvement described by Benne? (94-95)
8. Benne describes one kind of direct involvement as “the church as a social conscience” (94) and the other as “the church with power.” (94). How does each of these modes of direct influence function? Why are they controversial?
9. What are some examples of the church functioning as “social conscience”? (96-98)
10. How can the social service organizations founded and supported by the churches provide a persuasive voice in the public arena? (98-99)
11. What might be done to counteract the loss of the specifically Christian character of the church’s social service agencies? (99-100)
12. What factors should guide church bodies in crafting and issuing social statements? (100-104)

13. How does Benne identify the “promiscuity” of liberal mainline Protestant churches in making social pronouncements? What effect does it have on the laity? On the general public? (102-104)
14. What guidelines does Benne offer for well-crafted social statements? (104-105)
15. The “direct and intentional” mode of action is controversial and risky (106) as it marshals the use of power by the church. Should it ever be used? Why or why not? (109-112). Also see Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession as you reflect on this issue.
16. How does the use of “advocacy” illustrate the ambiguity of “direct and intentional action”? (109)
17. Benne concludes “Religion and politics must be rightly connected for the good of both” (113). After reading Benne’s book, how do you see the challenges to articulating this connection?

#### For Further Reading and Study

- Baker, Robert (editor). *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011
- Bayer, Oswald. “Spiritual and Temporal Rule: God’s Two Realms” (pp. (pp. 309- 325) in *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* translated by Thomas H. Trapp. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008
- Benne, Robert. *Reasonable Ethics: A Christian Approach to Social, Economic, and Political Concerns*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005
- Benne, Robert. *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995
- Ebeling, Gerhard. “The Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of the World” (pp. 175-191) in *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, translated by R.A. Wilson. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977
- Green, Lowell C. *Lutherans Against Hitler: The Untold Story*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007
- Paulson, Steven D. “Temporal Authority and Its Limits” (pp. 244-264) in *Lutheran Theology*. London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011
- Sasse, Hermann. “Church Government and Secular Authority According to the Lutheran Confessions” in *The Lonely Way Volume I: 1927-1939*, edited by Matthew C. Harrison. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002, pp. 173-245

-Prof. John T. Pless  
 Concordia Theological Seminary  
 Fort Wayne, IN  
 12. 21. 2011