

The Issue of Gun Control and the Church, Again

The issue on gun control is an important test case on how clear Lutherans are about the correct distinction between church and state. For example, the Queensland District of the LCA is circulating a petition that urges the government to proceed with legislation to restrict the ownership of semi-automatic guns. Apparently the argument runs: “The church rightly opposes abortion and euthanasia because that opposition saves lives. Restricting availability of automatic weapons will also save lives. Therefore the church should urge the government to restrict the availability of automatic weapons.”

Those who are foggy about when the church has the duty to speak out to the state would probably fall for such an argument. However, the state has the duty of protecting people’s lives, from guns and whatever else. Indeed, whether limiting guns will save lives is a political question that should be debated by citizens, and the issue may be clearer to some than to others. The church’s real task is to save people’s eternal souls from the weapons of Satan, with spiritual weapons, the Word of God and the sacraments. Ultimately the church does not justify its opposition to abortion simply because it thinks that such opposition “saves lives.” The church ought to speak to the state when one of God’s commandments is being grossly ignored. Then the church tells the state, in a prophetic role, “Don’t. If you violate that command of God, God will punish you. Abortion and euthanasia violate God’s command, ‘You shall not kill.’” Of course, this commandment of God is meant to protect human lives. However, the church’s voice comes across in the negative on abortion and euthanasia, and rightly so. The church is, strictly, appealing to the Law of God as a curb. The church should not advocate specific positive measures, like gun control. When the church opposes abortion, every one of its members ought to agree with the church’s voice. It cannot be like that on the issue of gun control. Besides, if the church advocates a policy in a political area, it is likely to alienate a number of its members who take a different political viewpoint. For example, that there is likely to be a black-market trade in automatic weapons, and when criminals get guns in such a way, and citizens are prevented by law from defending themselves, there may in fact be more killing! This latter view is one that Christians might advocate as citizens. The church has no right to advocate a political view, for or against.

Those who want to read an excellent treatment of the Lutheran doctrine of church and state should consult: “The Church’s Responsibility for the World: A Study in Law and Gospel”, by Henry P Hamann, in *Theologia Crucis*: Lutheran Publishing House, 1975, R 71-87. Some parts of it read as follows:

“There is another way in which the church as a collective unit can and should directly exert its influence for the good of society, but it is not easy to define this activity very clearly, as it is quite difficult to indicate accurately the limits of such activity. This activity is pointed to when the church is called the ‘conscience of the state’ or when it is described as having a ‘prophetic role’ in society. Both of these ways of speaking are open to misunderstanding. To use terminology that is traditional in the Lutheran Church, we are here speaking of the first use of the Law, its use as a curb or restraint. The government, according to the teaching of the New Testament, has its authority from God... The Old Testament prophets did not fail to warn their kings. When injustice became too rampant and kings failed too obviously to do their God-given duty, we find them denouncing these rulers. So Elijah condemned Ahab for his treatment of Naboth and announced the judgment of God for his evil actions... We see less of this activity in the New Testament, and this for the obvious reason of different circumstances, chiefly the insignificance of the Christian movement in the Empire at the time, when any protest would have been purely academic and powerless. Still the principles are there: ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ (Mt 22:21)... So today when governments pass measures that flout flagrantly the law of God, e.g., the passing of legislation making legal abortion on demand, and thereby creating a climate of opinion that looks on abortion as a good thing, surely the church has the right to point to the Fifth Commandment...

“It must be made quite explicit that in this sort of activity the church is not recommending to the government specific policies and programmes nor acting as a political lobby. It is acting strictly as the advocate of the absolute, it is reminding of the absolute, lest the absolute, the will of God, be forgotten or neglected or despised altogether...

“However, the church has no call to propose, support, promote, agitate for specific government programmes, whether new or old, even if they seem to be eminently good and wise and full of promise for the benefit of many people.”