



# THE SUPERNATURAL END OF GOVERNMENT

**STIVEN PETER** / AUGUST 23, 2023

Press play to listen to this content



## A Case Study of Bucer's De Regno Christi

There are few topics as heated in current Reformed circles as the relationship between Church and State. Interest in magisterial political theology, Christian Nationalism, and even neo-Calvinist political teaching in recent years point to an overall dissatisfaction with the current evangelical conception of politics. Two vital questions surrounding this discussion are: “What is the role of the State?” and “What is the role of the Church?” The common answer to this question is something along the lines of a “two-kingdoms” doctrine, where the Church has authority over spiritual matters and the State has authority over matters of civil justice. However, while there is agreement over a temporal-spiritual distinction, the implication of these widely varies. One notable

position takes the two-kingdoms doctrine to exclude the possibility of a “Christian” society by limiting the role of the government to uphold matters of temporal, not spiritual, good. Notably, John Piper, in an [article](#) earlier this year, argues from this distinction that while, “The civil government may rightly pass laws that make the spread of the Christian faith (and other faiths) easier, for example, laws protecting free speech and free assembly,” followers of Christ should not use the sword of civil government to enact, enforce, or spread any idea or behavior as explicitly Christian.” Piper explicitly encourages the passing of laws in conformity with protestant social teaching, the types of laws that belong in the second table of the Decalogue, which govern our relationship with each other (you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, etc) However, his understanding of the Kingdom of Christ leads him to exclude the State from passing laws in line with enforcing the first table of the Decalogue, which concern our relationship with God (No false gods, no graven images, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, etc). In fact, the State engaging in the defense and promotion of the Christian faith risks obscuring the spiritual nature of Christ’s Kingdom. Piper writes, “When the state encourages external forms of righteousness in the name of Christ and as an expression of the ‘Christian’ way, it... does harm to the cause of Christ.” Instead, the state should concern itself with maintaining the social and civil conditions amenable to the flourishing of the Churches, ranging from the strong support of marriage to a robust economy. Jonathan Leeman, in [9Marks](#), calls this a “protectionist” view of justice since it limits the affairs of the government to protecting its citizens from injustice, instead of promoting their perfection, which is proper worship and obedience to Christ. Leeman’s analogy cuts to the heart of the matter:

You might say that the Bible approaches governments like parents do a babysitter. “You’re not responsible for teaching our kids to love and obey us,” they instruct the sitter. “You just need to keep them fed and safe and prevent them from fighting.” The babysitter is entirely “under” the parents, but the sitter’s jurisdiction is limited. The babysitter knows the parents’ return is imminent and will seek to fulfill the parents’ will. Still, the

babysitter has been given a modest job: “Your job isn’t to teach the kids to love us or worship God.

Thus, Piper and Leeman take a two-kingdom distinction between Church and State to imply the promotion of a pluralistic society where the State acts as a fair referee, using its force to minimize harm among others, and the Church operates freely using the means of persuasion to bring its citizenry to their heavenly perfection in Christ.

However, this configuration misunderstands the historical intention of the two-kingdoms doctrine in magisterial political thought. The two-kingdoms doctrine seeks to encourage, not minimize, the government’s promotion of the virtue of their citizens, including their worship. Whereas most popular treatments of two-kingdoms limit themselves to the origin of this distinction in Luther and Calvin, Martin Bucer’s, *De Regno Christi (The Kingdom of Christ)*, promotes a symbiotic vision of the Church and State, casting a vision for a properly Christian society. By exploring Bucer’s conception of the similarities and differences between the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Man, along with their mutual submission to each other, and examining the underlying assumptions behind his vision, Piper’s and Leeman’s vision emerges as more of an artifact of classical liberalism instead of classical Christian thought. Specifically, Bucer clarifies the dissection between the two kingdoms as following the dissection between law and gospel, where the differences lie in the method of enforcement instead of the object of the kingdom, which is the promotion of the good. Second, Bucer clarifies that the function of the state is to promote virtue, the substantive good of its citizens, instead of merely protecting its citizens. Finally, Bucer argues that there is no State that can be just without acknowledging its subordination to the Triune God and its responsibility to buttress the Church. For Bucer, the two kingdoms, far from implying the State’s ‘neutrality’ towards religion, provides the grounds for its involvement in promoting true religion.

# The Kingdom of Man and the Kingdom of Christ

## Mirror the Difference between Law and Gospel.

**B**ucer's treatise establishes a distinction between the Church and the State by highlighting their shared ultimate goal while acknowledging their differing means to achieve it. Bucer begins by elucidating the biblical differentiation between the Kingdoms of God/Heaven/Christ and the Kingdom of Man. First, the various names for God's kingdom provide insights into the nature and perfection of His reign. The Kingdom of God, as the embodiment of God's goodness, wisdom, and power, represents the pinnacle of perfect rule (177). The "Kingdom of Christ" emphasizes the humility of Christ's reign. Despite humbling Himself to the point of death, Christ retains universal authority over all things (178). However, the central focus of Christ's kingdom lies in the flourishing of the Church, as Bucer affirms, "The Kingdom of our Savior Jesus Christ is that administration and care of the eternal life of God's elect" (225). Lastly, the "Kingdom of Heaven" signifies the fundamentally spiritual and eternal nature of Christ's reign. From these names, Bucer comes to this definition of the Kingdom of Christ:

"The Kingdom of our Savior Jesus Christ is that administration and care of the eternal life of God's elect, by which this very Lord and King of Heaven by his doctrine and discipline, administered by suitable ministers chosen for this very purpose, gathers to himself his elect, those dispersed throughout the world who are his but whom he nonetheless wills to be subject to the powers of the world. He incorporates them into himself and his Church and so governs them in it that purged more fully day by day from sins, they live well and happily both here and in the time to come." (225).

Bucer's definition locates the Kingdom of Christ in His care for the Church, in their spiritual and temporal conditions. This Kingdom has at its end the eternal

life of the Church, and the names of this Kingdom highlight the effective, perfect, and wholly just reign of Christ over His elect. This reign does not just guarantee the eternal life of God's elect through the sanctification of their souls, but also the sufficient material conditions to live well and happily in this life as well. Thus, spiritual and temporal concerns are not divorced, but the latter is ordered towards the promotion of the former. For Bucer, for Christ to will our good as such, which is blessed communion to Him, also means for him to will the means to that, which include concrete temporal goods.

Likewise, for Bucer, the Kingdom of Man also will the goods of its citizens. In fact, the virtues of the Kingdom of Man are derived from God's reign: "Whatever good properties exist in any human kingdom exist and are found in fuller perfection here, inasmuch as God is above all men" (177). Any good kingdom desires the well-being of its citizens, such that everyone is formed to a virtuous and responsible way of life. The Kingdom of Christ does this in a most excellent manner, while good kings imitate the virtues in God's reign.

For this delineation, Bucer intends to explain the difference between these two kingdoms primarily in the methods of their reign, as opposed to the show the difference in the purpose of their reign. In fact, Bucer acknowledges the common purpose of both kingdoms. He writes "that the kings of this world also ought to establish and promote the means of making their citizens devout and righteous who rightly acknowledge and worship their God and who are truly helpful toward their neighbors in all their actions." (180). The true earthly kingdom is ordered towards making its citizens flourish, which, by revelation and reason, is the love of God and love of neighbor. The good for every citizen, of both kingdoms, is the same. However, each kingdom has different methods of leading citizens to this good. For example, both kingdoms seek to provide their citizens with life's necessities (182). Earthly kings can employ external power and resources to ensure that none of their subjects lack the essentials (183). Christ, however, accomplishes this through the transformation of His subjects' inclinations, particularly within the Church. As Bucer describes it, "Our King...the dispenser of true love and

patience, by His Word and Spirit renders the minds of His subjects as willing and strong as possible for this salutary sharing of their wealth and patience in poverty” (184). The king can use external power to ensure not a single citizen is needed, while Christ can simply move the hearts of his subjects to provide their resources willingly and cheerfully. In other terms, the Kingdom of Man can use the threat of force to coerce obedience, while Christ uses the words of the Gospel to effect obedience out of gratitude. The divergence in methods between the two kingdoms derives from the contrast between law and conscience. While the law can teach what is good and coerce right behavior, it cannot change the heart. However, Christ, through the Word and the Spirit, can demand obedience by renewing the natures of His subjects, representing a more perfect form of governance. The “kings of the world...use, by God’s command, beatings, whippings, prison, exile, and various forms of execution,” while the Kingdom of Christ guides its citizens through “the chains of repentance” (181). Nonetheless, the end of both kingdoms remains the same—promoting a love of God and neighbor: “The governance of the kingdoms of the world and of Christ have this in common, that the kings of this world also ought to establish and promote the means of making their citizens devout and righteous who rightly acknowledge and worship their God and who are truly helpful toward their neighbors in all their actions” (180). But, just as Christ came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, so the kingdom of Christ came to perfect the imperfect laws of kings. The two-kingdoms are distinguished, thus, not by protectionist v.s. perfectionist accounts of justice or by the scope of reign, but by the method of leading their citizens to their good.

## The End of the State: The Promotion of Virtue

**B**y making the division on the basis of imperfect coercion, v.s. perfect, personal obedience, Bucer paves the way for the State to involve itself in not just preventing harm, but promoting the good, which includes right worship of God. Bucer supports this idea by citing Isaiah 49:23 and Psalm 72:11 as evidence that all kings must acknowledge Christ as Lord. Additionally, the kings

of Israel serve as examples of magistrates who prioritized proper worship (188). To confirm the conclusion of these authorities, Bucer offers this argument:

It is the duty of all good princes to take every precaution to prevent any one of their subjects from doing injury to another... How much more, then, is it necessary to see to it that all governors of commonwealths, when they realize that all their power is from God alone and that he has appointed them shepherds of his people, govern and guard those subject to them according to his judgment (190).

This demonstrates the inadequacy of a state solely focused on harm prevention/protectionist justice. The magistrate understands his responsibility to prevent harm as entrusted to him by the Lord. Furthermore, the magistrate should recognize that the same Lord appointed him as custodian of his people. Consequently, he is obliged to promote right worship and suppress false worship, just as the kings of Israel were instructed to do. The king's mandate to promote the common good originates from his recognition of a law-giver above him, who should be acknowledged and revered by him and the citizens of the land. In short, the king's ability to enforce obedience from the second table of the law, stems from acknowledgment and adherence to the first table. There can be no love of neighbor, without first love of God. The State cannot promote secondary goods, without first acknowledging the ultimate good.

In fact, the king's concern over his citizens' piety gives him broad abilities to reform the Church and suppress false worship. Bucer praises kings who punish blasphemy and false worship, stating, "When pious kings are thus guarding against wrongs against God, the impiety of many is not indeed eliminated, but it is suppressed, lest it is an outrage before God or a stumbling block for the weak" (190). The magistrate suppresses false religion because it contradicts the common good, as it ultimately harms his citizens by leading them astray. The ultimate good for human beings lies in their flourishing, which is realized through the proper worship of God. If the king is mandated to suppress false religion because it

obstructs his citizens from attaining the good, then he is also authorized to promote true religion to enable others to attain the good. Therefore, the magistrate can take positive action to rejuvenate the Church. Here, Bucer appeals to historical and biblical examples wherein kings appointed sound priests for the benefit of the Church and the polity. He states, “When true religion had seriously fallen apart in their times and the priesthood was perniciously corrupted, these men [Asa, Hezekiah, Josiah, and Nehemiah] personally undertook the task of the renewal of religion as a matter of royal right and duty” (266). He instructs King Edward VI to appoint faithful clergy to reinforce the fundamental teachings of the faith, identify potential clergy, provide rigorous training, and send them out into the State to renew their moral character (273). In Book II of *De Regno*, Bucer outlines the laws of the Commonwealth, with the first law emphasizing the catechizing of children. He suggests, “Your Royal Majesty will make a law that orders parents to educate and establish their children in Christ’s faith and obedience with great care, with a just penalty appointed for those who themselves infect their children with either false doctrine or bad morals” (280). This law serves the purpose of building up the Church by providing it with a solid foundation in early childhood, and it benefits the Commonwealth by nurturing citizens to readily accept the precepts of the faith and live as good citizens in the Commonwealth. The magistrate, under the mandate to use the law for the welfare of the commonwealth, possesses the authority to renew and invigorate the Church.

## The Fundamental Subordination of the Kingdom of Man to the Kingdom of Christ

**A**t the same time, the Kingdom of Man stands under the Kingdom of Christ. Bucer writes, “Every true kingdom of the world ... subjects itself to the Kingdom of Christ, and the kings themselves are among the first to do this” (17). Bucer employs the distinction between a true kingdom and a tyranny to show that the only truly legitimate rule is one that acknowledges Christ



as Lord. A kingdom that does not acknowledge Christ lacks accountability and is, therefore, a tyranny. By acknowledging Christ as Lord, the king legitimizes his rule and is obligated to cultivate piety within himself and his subjects. Moreover, the baptism of the king binds him to the authority of the Church. Hence, “all true kings and princes humbly hear the voice of Christ from the ministers and respect in them the majesty of the Son of God,” (19). Therefore, the king stands under the Kingdom of Christ insofar as he adheres to the Word of God. In other words, as a Christian, he is bound by the Word and, in his temporal authority, is duty-bound to support and strengthen the Church. As a believer who listens to and submits to the Word, the king becomes the guardian of the Church and his citizens.

## Conclusion

**B**ucer’s concern with the piety of the State, the welfare of the Church, and the well-being of citizens underscore his assumption that the purpose of the government is to lead people to virtue. Here, Bucer calls us from the modern understanding of government as a set of enforced rules to the classical conception of the highest form of community. Politics is about living well with your neighbor and sharing a common way of life. Ultimately, disagreement over the final goods of human life makes for divergent ways of life. Liberalism, as a political project, claims that such a society is, in fact, possible, and the role of the State is to act as a referee that minimizes harm among competing parties in the country. Piper and Leeman, and those sympathetic to their understanding of two kingdoms, are really sympathetic to liberalism. Within their exegesis of biblical texts on civil government, their reading of Israel’s governments, and their theology of political engagement lies a fundamentally liberal view of government superimposed onto the biblical text.

In contrast, Bucer believes that the goal of politics is to make a beautiful society. The Kingdom of Christ is the most perfect/beautiful form of government because of our King’s immediate and effective rule. The Kingdom of Man is an imperfect derivative of this perfect rule, modeling God’s perfect government through the

right laws, the upbuilding of their citizens, and the flourishing of the Church. The laws in a Christian society teach the citizens what is good and prepare them for the persuasion of the Gospel to reform their hearts. This is neither ‘moralism’ nor hypocrisy, but a valid understanding of the purpose of the law: to teach and promote the good. The charges of hypocrisy or the dismissal of cultural “Christianity” deny the preparatory work of law of leading people to heartfelt worship.

Herein, the true stakes between the competing visions of the two kingdoms emerge. While Leeman and Bucer would agree on enforcing and upholding the second table of the Decalogue, Leeman’s divergence on upholding the first table means that he fundamentally believes that a State can pass laws and govern its people while being agnostic towards God, the ultimate good. But this position is itself a judgment on the ultimate good, namely its irrelevance for a functioning society and Christianity’s other-worldly aims. However, the Lordship of Christ is an objective fact. Bucer understands His Lordship as a claim upon reality, a truth that bears on the life of all people, and conformity to it as the best conditions for human flourishing. The State and the Church are both under this reality and govern in their respective ways to bring each person to love God and their neighbor. Above all, Bucer calls us out of political liberalism and acknowledges the priority of not-blind freedom, but the good, the true, who is ultimately God.

Print article



**STIVEN PETER** is an M.A. student at Reformed Theological Seminary-NYC. Previously, he graduated from the University of Chicago with a double major in economics and religious studies. He currently lives in NYC.