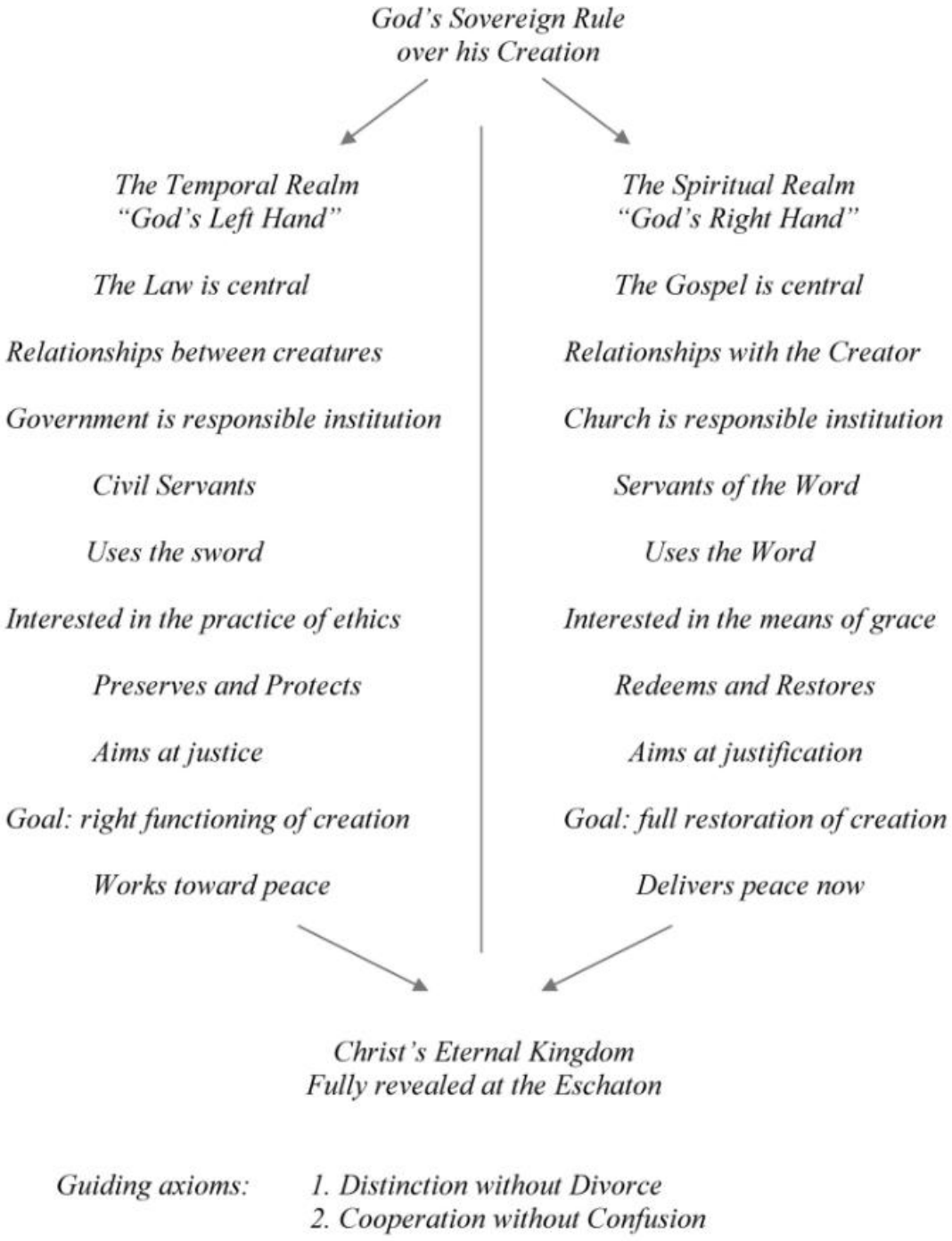
“Wholly Citizens: *God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World” by Joel D. Biermann*

Presentation notes from Pastor Nelson



1. The Legacy of Luther

Justice, peace, and the ruler's vocation

- The best remedy for poverty is steady justice for all, especially the marginalized. Good laws protect people and allow them to pursue their lives without fear; preventing someone from becoming a beggar is also a good work. (p. 11)
- Peacemaking means protecting people against violence and force. Peace safeguards bodily life, family, home, health, and liberty. (p. 12)
- Luther places special importance on rulers securing justice for those who fear God and restraining the wicked. (p. 12)
- Luther hoped rulers would support orthodox Christian teachers and preachers and hinder false teaching. (p. 13)
- A good ruler advances God's Word, administers just laws, suppresses violence, and punishes wrongdoing. (p. 19)
- Bad rulers neglect the advancement of God's Word, fail to provide the poor and vulnerable with legal protection, and use office for personal profit, honor, pleasure, pride, and selfish desires rather than service. (pp. 20)

Holy offices and the two realms

- The offices established by God are holy even when the people occupying them are sinful or unworthy. This applies to family, household, work, and church offices. (p. 21)
- God establishes the office; fallible human beings can dishonor it. This is part of the tension of the two realms. (p. 21)
- Christ fulfills the divine virtues: He advances God's Word, establishes justice for the poor, and protects and rescues the miserable. His kingdom brings justice, peace, righteousness, life, and salvation. (p. 29)
- The two realms operate side by side, both instituted and directed by God and both administered by fallen human beings. Neither realm is superior to the other; both are good, important to God, and part of His work. (p. 31)
- The temporal realm preserves the world and promotes peace and justice through government. The spiritual realm proclaims the Gospel and delivers justifying grace through the Church and her pastors. Both offices have responsibilities, both can fail, and Christ's kingdom will triumph over and complete God's work through earthly structures. (p. 34)

2. The Two Realms: Interpreters of Luther, Faithful and Otherwise

Against a simplistic separation of church and state

- Treating the two-kingdoms doctrine as a strict separation of church and state is, in Biermann's judgment, a dangerous misreading that harms Christian discipleship, the Church's mission, and the pursuit of justice. (p. 38)
- Absolute separation of church and state denies the Christian community's calling to be salt and light in the world. (p. 48)
- The Gospel frees Christians to engage the messy realities of public and political life without fear of losing God's grace. (p. 49)
- The Church serves the state by proclaiming God's Word, warning of sin, and reminding Christians that public life also offers opportunities for service. Christians should be realistic without cynicism and principled without naïveté. (p. 49)
- The Church should resist government's attempt to ignore God or to displace God by claiming authority over the whole of human life. (p. 55)
- The idea that the Church must remain ideologically neutral is, for Biermann, self-deceptive and contrary to Lutheran and biblical teaching. The Spirit enables Christians to discern God's will in concrete situations. (p. 68)

3. Two Realms for Today: Suitable and Wholly Relevant

Christian life in the world

- Biermann argues that Christian faith enables a true understanding of the world and the Christian's place within it. (p. 79)
- Christians are fully engaged in the world's affairs, structures, and institutions to serve God's purposes and bring life into greater harmony with the Creator's will. (p. 83)
- The realities of life in the world and life under God are united in Jesus Christ, giving coherence to Christian living. (p. 84)
- A Christian is wholly involved in worldly affairs and, at the same time, centered in God's will. (p. 84)
- The Church does not exist for itself alone. Even its distinctly spiritual words and actions are for the sake of the world. (p. 88)
- Preaching, absolution, and the Lord's Supper are central ways the Church serves the world. (p. 88)
- The Church is the assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. (p. 88)
- A sound understanding of the Church is incarnational, sacramental, and Christ-centered. (p. 90)
- The Church has both visible, material, institutional life and an invisible, spiritual life in Christ; these are not opposed to each other. (p. 90)
- The Church is earthly and involved in the world's messiness, yet it is also the delivery and enactment of Christ's Gospel for His people. (p. 90)
- The Church's visible life includes worship, preaching, fellowship, and public life; its invisible reality includes union with Christ, forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. (p. 91)

The four divine mandates

- God wills work, marriage, government, and Church, each in its own way, through Christ, toward Christ, and in Christ. (p. 95)
- Every person participates in all four mandates. (p. 95)
- Work belongs to human flourishing: human activity develops the world and its values for the glory and service of Jesus Christ. (p. 96)
- Labor that serves the world—advancing beauty, wisdom, health, fellowship, and human flourishing—fits within God's purpose for creation, regardless of the worker's motives. (p. 97)
- Marriage participates in God's creative work; children are to be raised for Christ's glory and service and for the growth of His kingdom. (p. 98)
- Parents have the responsibility to form and educate their children in obedience to Jesus Christ. (p. 99)
- Government preserves rather than creates: it protects what has been created by establishing and enforcing justice. (p. 99)
- Government does not create marriage or administer work; it witnesses to and protects marriage and supervises the conduct of work. (p. 99)
- Because government serves the reality of Christ, even through its coercive authority, obedience to government is owed according to Christ's will. (p. 99)
- The Church's distinctive mandate is to make the reality of Jesus Christ present through proclamation, church order, and Christian life. (p. 100)
- The mandates have a progression: labor cares directly for creation; marriage gives labor an arena and support; government protects the conditions in which labor and marriage function; the Church fills all the mandates with Christ's reality. (p. 100)
- The Church's concern is the eternal salvation of the whole world. (p. 101)
- Every person has responsibilities within all four mandates. Biermann argues that these mandates cannot be rightly realized apart from orientation to the Creator through Christ and the Church. (p. 101)

4. Applying the Teaching to the Church and Her Pastors

The purposes of the two realms

- The temporal realm concerns relationships among creatures, including human relationships across all four mandates. The spiritual realm concerns the relationship between the Creator and His creatures. (p. 111)
- Each realm has a particular institution charged with overseeing its work, and the two realms are meant to work together for the good of creation. (p. 111)
- Peace in the temporal realm remains a worthy but elusive goal; in the spiritual realm, peace is declared and delivered here and now. (p. 112)
- Both realms serve God's plan to reclaim and finally restore creation. They are distinct but complementary ways God works for the world. (pp. 112–113)
- God accomplishes His purposes through—and sometimes despite—the failures and distortions of leaders and institutions in both realms. (p. 113)
- When functioning properly, the two realms encourage and exhort each other to fulfill their distinct responsibilities. (p. 114)
- Christians live simultaneously in both realms, receiving their gifts and carrying out responsibilities in each. (p. 114)

The Church's unique calling

- The Church alone is charged with making known and offering the forgiveness and restoration accomplished by Jesus for the world. The Church must deliver the Gospel. (p. 116)
- The Church is doing its God-given work when it gathers around God's Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, forgiveness, discipleship, and care for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of people. (p. 116)
- "The church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic." The Church's own life embodies a public witness. (p. 117)

Church, state, and public issues

- "Cooperation without confusion" may support certain forms of state support for the Church, including tax exemption. (p. 120)
- Dependence on government tax benefits can damage the Church if it makes the Church timid, compliant, or protective of its privileges—or arrogant and defiant in defending them. (p. 120)
- The Church should be cautious about worship practices that celebrate the institutions of the temporal realm rather than the spiritual realm. (p. 123)
- Biermann argues that the Church needs no flag; the cross and creed are not enhanced by a Christian flag or pledge. (p. 124)
- The Church's confession is different in nature from the state's identity; confusing them in worship or the chancel does not advance patriotism. (p. 124)
- Political questions can matter deeply to members of a congregation and therefore cannot simply be ignored by the Church or its pastor. (p. 125)
- Pastors should guide congregations in thinking and acting faithfully about political questions because these issues matter to people and to God. (p. 125)

- The Church should not remain silent about issues such as abortion, immigration, military intervention, euthanasia, or taxation merely because they are political. What Scripture says should be spoken to God's people. (p. 126)
- Teaching about public questions helps Christians understand God's rule over the world and consider political life within the context of His Word and will. (p. 126)
- A pastor should speak with authority only where Scripture and the Church speak with authority; issues addressed from the pulpit should involve compelling moral questions. (p. 127)
- The pastor's first and driving task is to preach Christ and the forgiveness of sins. (p. 128)
- When political concerns arise naturally in preaching, the pastor may and should address them. (p. 128)
- Pastors should extend charity and respect to fellow pastors facing difficult, immediate decisions, even when they disagree with the conclusions reached. (p. 130)
- A pastor may participate in temporal work for its own good: upholding God's law, calling officials to justice, and advocating for what is right without making every such occasion a proclamation of justification. (p. 133)
- In civil settings, the pastor speaks of God as Creator and Judge, declares His standard of justice, and upholds the worth of every human creature. In the Church's divine service, the pastor proclaims the full Gospel of forgiveness in Christ. Each setting should reflect the extent of God's revelation there. (p. 134)

5. Applying the Teaching to the Individual Christian Believer

Vocation and service to the neighbor

- Using good works to justify oneself before God dethrones Christ and pushes the neighbor aside; works are then performed for self-justification rather than for the neighbor's sake. (p. 153)
- Ordinary work does not need Christian branding or explicit religious packaging to be good. (p. 155)
- The neighbor's need is sufficient reason for Christian service. Creation and the people within it are the object and end of vocation. (p. 155)
- Knowing the Gospel, Christians serve their neighbors and fulfill their vocations. Their work can please God by serving His creatures, but it does not save them. Christians see the world's needs and serve amid both its joys and sorrows. (p. 155)
- A ruler, police officer, or soldier who performs his work obediently and justly is carrying out a good and God-pleasing vocation. (p. 156)
- Because the material world comes from God and is approved by Him, vigorous participation in the world and its orders is genuinely Christian. (p. 157)

Voting, rights, and public responsibility

- The world changes, but God's truth does not; all authority comes from God, including the government with which Christians must engage. (p. 165)
- Biermann describes voting as a holy obligation rather than merely an optional privilege. (p. 166)
- Christians should assess candidates and ballot measures according to whether they are likely to advance God's normative will and extend His law into public life. (p. 167)
- Biermann argues that basic human rights, as commonly framed, are not a distinctively Christian teaching. (p. 170)
- Christians shaped by grace received rather than rights deserved approach public life as followers of Christ. (p. 170)
- Christians should work for the life and liberty of people who are denied them, using legal protections and political advocacy for the sake of vulnerable neighbors—not for self-interest or merely to protect the Church's own status. (p. 170)
- Resistance to governing authority is not to be carried out by force but through confession of the truth; every Christian is bound to speak God's will faithfully. (p. 174)
- Submission to God's will and active resistance to evil can coexist. Faithfulness may cost popularity, comfort, possessions, peace, or even life. The Church must speak God's truth plainly even when the world least wants to hear it. (p. 176)

6. An Essay Grounded in the Two Realms: “Story Time in America”

The Church’s story and the surrounding culture

- The Church’s task is not merely to establish a foothold in the world’s culture, but to insist that the world be understood within the story of Christ at work among His people. (p. 187)
- Christians must translate the Church’s proclamation so people can understand it without capitulating to cultural assumptions. Translation makes the faith intelligible; capitulation changes or abandons Christian confession. (p. 189)
- Examples of translation include Scripture in the people’s language, appropriate musical instruments, and dialogue with those who disagree. Examples of capitulation include suggesting other paths of salvation besides Christ, changing Communion fellowship to fit cultural expectations, or turning chapels into generic spiritual centers. (p. 189)
- Christian life means receiving God’s gifts through His living Word and the Church’s means of grace. Conflict between God’s story and the world’s false stories is inevitable; the Church must not censor its confession to avoid offense. (p. 191)
- Confessing our dependence as creatures within God’s plan produces humility rather than tolerance as the world commonly defines it. (p. 192)
- The Church’s weapons are Word and Sacrament. Christians proclaim the story, receive its gifts at Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and live it in their homes, relationships, goals, habits, and daily lives. (p. 194)