

## Article: The Three Estates

We are all familiar with the two categories of **church** and **state**. We call the church and the state the ‘right’ and ‘left-hand’ kingdoms. If you can recall, Jesus also makes this distinction between these two with His famous words, “*Render to Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (Matthew 22:21).

While we are somewhat familiar with the terms of church and state, we are not quite as familiar with the “three estates.”

According to Martin Luther, all human lives are ordered across these three spheres. You cannot escape these three spheres because they provide structure to all our relationships and interactions. They are how God gives, orders, and protects life! They are a part of the fabric of life.

So, what are these three estates specifically? You know two of them already—the church and the state. However, the third is the family. And so, the three hierarchies that are overseen by God are the family, the state, and the church.

At its most basic level, the family consists of parents and children (obviously, we can think of the family a bit more broadly to include grandparents, uncles, and aunts as well). And so, with parents and children, the family is where husbands, wives, and children are loved, provided for, and shown mercy. For example, when a parent goes to work to earn a living, this occurs within the estate of the family. When a parent cooks a good meal to fill a hungry stomach, this occurs within the estate of the family. When a father disciplines his son or a mother teaches her daughter, this occurs within the estate of the family. Even when a worker puts in an honest day of work for his boss, this too occurs within the estate of the family. The family is the one place where individuals—like you and me—should give and receive mercy, love, care, food, drink, housing, clothing, shoes, home, an honest day’s work, and so forth. The family is where mercy is granted and care is provided.

Secondly, the state, at its most basic level, consists of rulers and citizens (obviously, we can think of kings, queens, prime ministers, judges, senators, state officials, citizens, and taxpayers as a part of this estate as well). Now, between citizens and rulers, the state is the place where anarchy is kept at bay, order is upheld, lawlessness is punished, justice is upheld, and peace is maintained. So, for example, when a judge sends someone to gaol for a crime, this occurs within the sphere of the state. When you are picked up for speeding, this is the state keeping good order. When police are called in to keep civil rest, this is the state fulfilling its calling. The state enforces order, justice, and peace.

And finally, the church. The church, at its most basic level, consists of clergy and laity (obviously, we can think of pastors, elders, Sunday School teachers, and parishioners as a part of this estate as well). For example, when pastors preach the Word, administer the Sacraments, and parishioners receive—this is happening in the estate of the church. When you are sick in the hospital, and a fellow parishioner comes to visit you, and then a pastor comes and serves you communion, this is the estate of the church. The church is where morals and forgiveness are given.

Again, we have three separate estates, three spheres. They are different, distinct from each other, and should not be mixed, as they work to bless us in different ways. The family is about mercy and care. The state is about order and justice. The church is about morals and forgiveness.

But, as you know, life is not perfect. Families fail. Pastors fail. And the state fails. They often drop the ball, which results in one of the other estates trying to pick up the slack. Or, sometimes, one of the estates will swerve out of its lane into another estate’s lane, which will bring about further confusion and conflict.

So, for example, when a family fails, sometimes the government steps into the family’s sphere to try to fill the void of failing parents. The state becomes mum and dad.

And let us not let the church off the hook so easily. Pastors are often tempted to want to rule their churches and society like politicians. Pastors will get bored with the Word and Sacraments and will want to swing the sword of the state to wield power and effect immediate change.

Politicians too, instead of seeking to keep order and justice, well, they would rather pontificate from podiums about morals, as if they were pastors. Politicians love the drama of trying to be a messiah while also being a parent as well.

The point is that when the government attempts to shape the church ethically, conflict erupts. When the family stops giving mercy, love, and care to family members, the government begins to meddle in the estate of the family, and conflict erupts. And instead of pastors casting forgiveness into the ears of parishioners, when they instead swing the government’s sword, well, conflict erupts.

And it is just not those who are in authority that mess this up. Too often, parishioners run to politicians to tell them what they want to hear. In other words, parishioners will not like what they hear from the church, so they will go to the state to be affirmed in things that the state has no business weighing into. And tragically, bad things will happen in the family, which will result in family members blaming the church for failures in the family, when the church is not the same estate of the family.

The point being, there are three estates. These estates are not curses. They are not against each other. They are not ways in which the Lord wishes to imprison us. But instead, God desires to bless and provide for His creation through families, the state, and the church.

Clergy in the church are called to tend, shepherd, and feed the people entrusted to their care. Politicians are called to protect, keep order, and maintain justice for their citizens, and parents are called to care for, provide for, and raise their children.

So, whether you are a parent, pastor, or prime minister, never forget that these are separate spheres—different estates with different functions. And as family members, parishioners, and citizens, remember that you belong to all three estates. Your whole life is ordered by these spheres, as the Lord God provides mercy, order, and grace to you through these estates.