



Called to Vote

A Christian's Approach to Elections

KEN SCHURB

Called to Vote

A Christian's Approach to Elections

KEN SCHURB



Copyright © 2016 Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • www.cph.org

All rights reserved. Other than downloading this resource for personal, Bible study, classroom, or congregational use, other usage is prohibited. Unless specified, it is not permissible to make modifications, omissions, or adaptations to this copyrighted resource. No part of this material may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Texts with the abbreviation *LSB* are from *Lutheran Service Book*, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The prayer on pp. 8 and 27 is from *Lutheran Service Book*, p. 310, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The prayers on pp. 13, 18, 23, 31, 34, and 37 are from *Lutheran Service Book*, p. 313, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Hymn text abbreviated *TLH* is from *The Lutheran Hymnal*, copyright © 1941 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The quotations from the Lutheran Confessions in this publication are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition; edited by Paul McCain et al., copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16

Contents

LEADER SECTION

Session 1: Distinguish “Thus says the LORD” from Human Judgments	4
Session 2: Distinguish between God’s Two Modes of Ruling	9
Session 3: Distinguish Yourself as <i>Ruled</i> from Yourself as “ <i>Ruler</i> ”	14
Session 4: Repent When You Don’t Get Involved . . . and When You Do	19

STUDENT SECTION

Session 1: Distinguish “Thus says the LORD” from Human Judgments	24
Session 2: Distinguish between God’s Two Modes of Ruling	28
Session 3: Distinguish Yourself as <i>Ruled</i> from Yourself as “ <i>Ruler</i> ”	32
Session 4: Repent When You Don’t Get Involved . . . and When You Do	35

SESSION 1: LEADER

DISTINGUISH “THUS SAYS THE LORD” FROM HUMAN JUDGMENTS

OPENING

God bless our native land;
Firm may she ever stand
Through storm and night.
When the wild tempests rave,
Ruler of wind and wave,
Do Thou our country save
By Thy great might.

—“God Bless Our Native Land” (LSB 965:1)

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Someone once said, tongue in cheek, that you never know just how much America is the land of *promise* until you’ve heard a bunch of political speeches during an election year!

It’s not a bad saying. For one thing, it encourages a sense of humor about a walk of life in which individuals can take themselves too seriously. Then, too, it suggests a certain healthy skepticism about political promises.

Christians who are citizens of the United States can give thanks to God for our country, for the precious freedoms we enjoy, and for a system of government that involves us. Although we rest assured in God’s promise that is greater than any political one—that bought with the blood of the crucified and risen Christ, we are baptized into His name; He is our Lord—we do have the responsibility to participate in the political process and hold our government up to scrutiny. And we do so through supporting various candidates and causes, and voting in elections, among other ways.

What you have before you does not constitute a voting guide—this study is not intended to lead you to a particular candidate or the sweep of any party platform. The subject at hand is far from that simple. Rather, this study provides congregations and pastors with a tool that is designed to spark a thoughtful biblical conversation about voting in a democracy. Specifically, it addresses ways in which the Lutheran confession of faith may be applied to political situations in which choices must be made. For example, when approaching a complex subject, we can start by taking a cue from the Lutheran Confessions, which urge us to make appropriate distinctions in the proper places (see Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV 16).

This study consists of four sessions. The first three present key distinctions relevant to our topic—the distinction of “thus says the LORD” from human judgments, of God’s two modes of ruling, and of yourself as *ruled* versus “*ruler*.” The fourth Bible study session will, in effect, end the study with prayer by suggesting areas in which we should repent.

SESSION INTRODUCTION

During the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that while many in Europe thought *the king cannot fail*, the feeling in democratic America tended to be that *the people cannot fail*. Since the inception of our country, Americans have placed extraordinary confidence in the collective wisdom of the people.

Christians know, however, that people are sinners. As with any subject, including public policy, the people can be wrong, even a majority of them. You too!

Therefore, the first distinction to observe as you seek to exercise responsible Christian citizenship has to do with your basis for knowing what is right and what is wrong. As a Christian, you unabashedly listen to God’s Word. “Whoever is of God hears the words of God,” says our Lord (John 8:47). And while Scripture is given chiefly to “make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” still, “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:15–16). As the psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Yet Scripture does not address every political question, and certainly not in detail. For example: no matter how much you search the Bible, you will not find a list of names of people who are standing for election. Here your human reason has to enter into your considerations—always subject to God’s Word, though, never above it.

Christian citizens should carefully distinguish what God tells us in Scripture from the judgments that we make, even those at which we have arrived within a general biblical framework. It is important to know the difference between “Thus says the LORD!” and human opinion.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. Does the Lord know what He is talking about only when He says things that might be considered “religious”? Why or why not? How does Luke 5:3–6 help you to understand this matter? Why is this point important to observe?

A1. Of course the Lord knows what He is talking about, whatever He says. When Jesus told Peter to try fishing again (v. 4), notice Peter did *not* say: “You know religion, Jesus, but *I’m* the expert on fishing.” Instead, Peter took Jesus at His word. Faith always wants to do just that, and not only in matters impinging directly on salvation. Not so incidentally, Jesus proved to be right (v. 6)! This is especially important to remember as the world becomes increasingly secular. As many voices as there now are for Christians to listen to, we dare not shrink from ultimately taking

our cues from God. Knowing what the Lord says about public issues can never be irrelevant to us, and following His teaching should never be optional for us. Acts 5:29 says, “But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”

Q2. What does the Lord say when people try to pass off their own thinking as His Word? What results when people do this? See Jeremiah 23:31–32 and Matthew 15:8–9; compare Revelation 22:18–19. Why should Christians bear this in mind with respect to political matters?

A2. When people claim divine warrant but then go on to say more than what God says, their speech misleads people—and they do so in the Lord’s name too! So it was with the false prophets who pronounced a fake peace in Jerusalem and, too, with the Pharisees and scribes who taught mere human precepts as the doctrines of God. No wonder the Lord solemnly warns not only against taking away from His Word but also against adding to it! When people add to the Word, they can miss God’s Law and imagine false Gospel. They fail to hear the Lord’s rebukes and count on themselves, not Him, for their righteousness.

It can be tempting to confuse one’s own political opinions with God’s revealed Word. We must take special care to avoid such confusion and make due distinctions between the two.

Q3. We know we must differentiate carefully between what God says in His Word and what human reason has come up with. Now let’s apply this truth to a political issue: abortion. Read the Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Proverbs 6:16–17; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:41–44; and then compare these to Proverbs 31:8. What should be said about abortion based on God’s Word? Is there anything more to say, based strictly on human judgment? If so, what?

A3. Note the following:

- a) Only God the Creator should take a human life. Therefore, He forbids murder, and He says He finds the shedding of innocent blood particularly abominable (Proverbs 6:16–17).
- b) Unborn babies are human and alive. Already when Jeremiah was in the womb, God set him apart (Jeremiah 1:5). David even noted that he was a sinner from conception (Psalm 51:5). John the Baptizer before his birth was filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped for joy in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:41). And perhaps most important of all, Scripture identifies Jesus as “Lord” and Mary as His “mother” at a very early stage of her pregnancy. Since the “choice” in “pro-choice” is to kill a human person, God’s Word really leaves no choice here. Abortion is not a moral option except to save the life of another person, the mother. Even in that situation, sadly, the child often dies as an indirect result of the attempts made to preserve the mother’s life. Even in that situation, however, every effort should be made to keep the Fifth Commandment.
- c) Christians recognize all these truths on the basis of Scripture. God’s Word is definitive for us. It might be observed, however, that there are other grounds on which the case

for the lives of the unborn can be made, especially when we speak with people who do not accept biblical authority. (More on this in the next session.)

- d) Christians will seek to defend the rights of the helpless unborn. Still, Scripture does not detail the ways to go about making this defense. Christians may well differ about various political options: a human life amendment to the US Constitution, legislation at the state level, litigating cases up to the US Supreme Court to form a basis for overturning previous decisions—or some combination of these or other possibilities. Precisely *how* to best defend the lives of the unborn lies in the realm of human judgment.

Q4. Here's another political issue: poverty and what should be done for the poor. Rather than debate the issue now, focus on what God's Word says. See the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:17–18; Luke 10:27–37; Proverbs 14:31; James 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:10. What does God's Word say about what we should do for the poor? What else can be said based on human judgment?

A4. Note the following:

- a) The Seventh Commandment is about not only refraining from stealing but also giving. One way we love God is by loving our neighbors in need, toward whom we should show generosity rather than oppression. This includes paying fair wages. All this is biblical teaching, applicable to everyone. Christians recognize its applicability to themselves and others. We cannot be unconcerned about the poor. We are strangers and pilgrims in this world, not tourists who cannot be bothered with those around us.
- b) However, the Bible does not specify how to show generosity, or for that matter, what precisely a fair wage might be, and Christians may well disagree among themselves or with others on specifics or on strategies. In these matters, reason must come into play.
- c) Also, do not overlook that the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:15) implies that there is such a thing as private property that should be respected. Moreover, people should be held responsible for their (in)action (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Yet how to do this is also a matter of human judgment.

Q5. Think broadly about your own participation in past elections. For whom did you vote? This is not to ask, *For which candidate did you cast your ballot?* but rather *On behalf of whom did you vote?* See Matthew 22:35–40; Philippians 2:3–5; and Romans 12:9–10. What does God's Word say on this matter?

A5. God does not need anyone's vote, but our neighbors do. All voters should love their neighbors and so vote in service to their neighbors, not strictly to get their own way or to safeguard their own interests. With the mind of Christ, Christians are especially equipped to vote in this way. This does not, however, mean giving people whatever they want. Also, as we vote, we abhor evil

and hold to the good. Christians regard voting as an act of love. God's Word does not tell us *who* to vote for, but it does tell us *how* we are to vote: in love.

CONCLUSION

American Christians who participate in the political process do so as a result of being moved by the love of Christ, who first loved us. Christians go to the polls informed by God's Word and our own best thinking. But we should never forget to distinguish between the two.

What is the role of the church? There's another distinction, for next time.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty and ever-living God, You make us both to will and to do those things that are good and acceptable in Your sight. Let Your fatherly hand ever guide us and Your Holy Spirit ever be with us to direct us in the knowledge and obedience of Your Word that we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SESSION 2: LEADER

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOD'S TWO MODES OF RULING

OPENING

The powers ordained by Thee
With heavenly wisdom bless;
May they Thy servants be
And rule in righteousness.
O Lord, stretch forth Thy mighty hand
And guard and bless our Fatherland.

—“To Thee, Our God, We Fly” (TLH 580:4)

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin was disappointed in one Philadelphia pastor's preaching.¹ He mused that the preacher seemed to aim at making members for that church rather than making good citizens. Franklin wished for the latter.

In America, roots run deep and come from more than one direction for the notion that churches should be about creating civilization and refining society. Besides moralists who were at best reserved toward the Christian message like Franklin, churches in the Reformed tradition believe that the kingdom of God comes to expression wherever order is brought to the world.

What can happen if churches are supposed to be about creating civilization and refining society? They are tempted to play some role in government, regardless of “separation of church and state.”

By contrast, the Augsburg Confession, the basic sixteenth-century confessional statement of Lutherans worldwide, maintains that “the Church has the authority to grant eternal things and exercises this authority only by the ministry of the Word. So it does not interfere with civil government anymore [*sic*] than the art of singing interferes with civil government” (Augsburg Confession XXVIII 10). The Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession adds: “Neither does the Gospel offer new laws about the public state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathens or by others” (Ap XVI 55).

Nowadays, God's will for such basics as respect for life and for marriage is being recognized less and less in our country. God's Law is disobeyed, and His creative intent is disregarded. In such situations, the church might seek to step into responsibilities to which she has not been called. But

¹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1964), 147, as cited by H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (Doubleday, 2000), 142.

this impulse should be resisted. As we recognize the authority of God's Word (see session 1), it is important also to recognize *to whom* He gives various instructions. As the Augsburg Confession put it, on the basis of Scripture: "the Church's authority and the State's authority must not be confused. The Church's authority has its own commission to teach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. . . . Let it not break into the office of another. . . . As Christ says, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Also, 'Who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?' (Luke 12:14)" (AC XXVIII 12–15).

From the foregoing, we can begin to see that God rules in this world in two ways. His two modes of ruling should be distinguished from each other. He remains Lord in each, yet He does exercise His rule in two distinct ways. These two ways correspond to the two basic messages of His Word: Law and Gospel.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. In session 1, we noted that there is more than one way to make the case for the lives of the unborn. Besides biblical arguments mentioned in session 1, what else can be said in defense of the unborn? Why is this an especially important point in our nation today?

A1. Legal arguments can be made. For instance, how can a supposed right to abortion be teased out of the US Constitution? Perhaps even more striking, though, is the remarkable knowledge of embryology gained by medical science since the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision, and resulting treatments for children at early stages of gestation. Even if majorities in America prove stubborn about listening to much else, they can learn from experience.

Thank God that since 1973 many people in our country have refused to take abortion as a permanently settled matter "now that the court has decided," and, therefore, a robust pro-life movement exists today. But this movement would probably not be nearly so strong if it could oppose abortion only on biblical grounds. Not everyone accepts the Bible! Yet there are even "atheists for life" due to God's natural law² and the common sense He imparts through it.

Attempts to set up some sort of Christian theocracy, where the church leads the government in basing law on biblical teachings, would fail to distinguish between God's two modes of governance. Furthermore, such attempts are not necessary. Nor are they even desirable for New Testament Christians. God calls for no theocracy on the pages of the New Testament.

Q2. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," said our Lord, "and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Jesus did not prohibit submitting to Caesar because Caesar did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Take a quick look, on one hand, at Romans 13:1–7 and, on the other, at Matthew 28:18–20 and Ephesians 2:19–22. In this session, we are observing

² Natural Law: The "primitive natural revelation of God in man's heart, the innate knowledge of right and wrong" (*Lutheran Cyclopedia*, ed. Erwin L. Lueker [St. Louis: Concordia, 1975], 567).

God's "left-hand" rule chiefly as exercised through government and God's "right-hand" rule exercised through His Church. What differences do you find between them as to (a) their respective purposes; (b) their respective tools; and (c) what makes for a "model person" in each?

A2. First, each of the two modes of rule is *God's*. He instituted government as well as church. Both are responsible to Him. Yet there are differences between them. A partial list follows:

- a) **Purpose:** *Left-hand*—order, civil peace, justice; *Right-hand*—forgiveness of sin, salvation.
- b) **Tools:** *Left-hand*—reason, force, power, also promotion of morality; *Right-hand*—humble, biblical proclamation of Law and Gospel and administration of the Sacraments.
- c) **"Model person":** *Left-hand*—one who is not perfect yet does what is good according to laws and has what has been called "civil righteousness"; *Right-hand*—not one who tries, but who has by faith received Christ's forgiveness for all sin and is a fellow citizen with the saints. Imagine a prison inmate, converted while on death row through the ministry of a chaplain, who may be baptized one day then executed the next day. Government's reach is limited to this life, but what the church gives is good for eternity.

Distinguishing between God's two modes of rule "keeps the church from acting like a state, and government from being run like a church. A confusion of the elements in the two relationships to God in which we live as Christian citizens will in time result either in tyranny or anarchy."³

Q3. While we distinguish between God's two modes of rule, there is another distinction to observe. In Old Testament times, God had a specific nation, Israel, to which He gave not only moral laws but also ceremonial and civil laws. But in the New Testament, He no longer specifies such a nation. Laws He gave particularly to Israel do not apply to New Testament believers—e.g., prohibitions on eating pork (Deuteronomy 14:8), on plowing with an ox and a donkey together (Deuteronomy 22:10), on fabrics made with a mixture of wool and linen (Deuteronomy 22:11), or of working on Saturdays (Sabbaths). Even the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. St. Paul wrote: "Let no one pass judgment on you . . . with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Colossians 2:16; also, see Large Catechism I 80–82). We distinguish within Scripture between laws that God gave particularly to Israel and His moral Law. (God's moral Law, basically identical with the Ten Commandments, sums up the natural Law that He built into creation for everyone.) Why is this distinction important for Christian citizens in America?

A3. In the New Testament, God does not expect the state, and certainly not the church, to make Old Testament ceremonial or civil laws incumbent on anyone. (Moral Law remains, though.) Still a general acknowledgment of God, based on natural knowledge of God (Romans 1:18ff.), is good in society and also for government. Yet no government should require worship based on its

³ Martin H. Scharlemann, "God and/or Caesar" in *Sermons for Special Occasions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), 84.

best guess as to who this God may be. And even if governments overstep and require worship, Christians are to render to Caesar only what is Caesar's.

Q4. Christian citizens do best to champion in society various biblical moral teachings that can be shown to be necessary for society. (Think back to what your group said in response to the last two questions, and notice: Christians should do this as *citizens*, not churches as churches, and these Christian citizens should not try to legislate details of Old Testament law.) Why is it important for us to concentrate on matters of social necessity—for example, defending the unborn?

A4. Several points can be made. For example, lying is wrong (Eighth Commandment), but would it be good to *criminalize all* lying? In any case, do not overlook this: concentrating on matters of social necessity does as much as possible to keep Christians from being portrayed as trying to seize power and foist their religion on others. It can help to highlight Scripture as bearing the liberating Gospel and keep the church positioned as an evangelical—not a legal—institution. Also, arguing for biblical morals on nonbiblical grounds (e.g., using arguments based on law or medicine to defend the unborn) not only assists in winning the battle for such morals but also helps prevent people from dismissing the Gospel out of hand. We want to make it clear to everyone that the Christian message ultimately proclaims the “yes” of the Gospel, not the “no” of the Law.

Q5. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, teaches that marriage is the union of a man and a woman (see Genesis 2:24–25 and Mark 10:6–9). Are there also nonbiblical arguments that can be made in support of this position? If so, what might they be?

A5. Some arguments from reason in favor of marriage's nature and importance:

- a) What could be better than a family with a married father and mother for protecting and nurturing people who are weak and in need of protection and guidance (children)?
- b) Until recently, marriage has been considered a male/female union, not simply an intense emotional bond akin to friendship. If marriage amounts basically to the latter, then why limit marriage to only two people? Why should it be permanent? Exclusive?
- c) Marriage is not a mere human invention. But consider: Would people have invented it if they reproduced without sex and if their offspring were self-sufficient starting at birth?

See *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* by Sherif Girgis, Ryan Anderson, and Robert George (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).

We Christians are subject to both of God's modes of governance. We therefore equip ourselves to make the case for marriage, as for the lives of the unborn, with tools appropriate for both—not just one or the other.

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the Reformation differently. Luther noted that, yes, he taught the Word of God, but the Word did its work of reaching hearts and overthrowing works-righteousness while he was sleeping or drinking beer with his friends.⁴ By contrast, Calvin on his deathbed reportedly recalled that when he first came to Geneva the Reformation was not yet there; the Genevans were just preaching the Gospel.⁵ To Calvin, “just” preaching the Gospel was not a bad thing, but it was not enough—God’s Law was not yet being obeyed as much as it could be. For Luther, the preaching of the Gospel stood out as all-important. To Calvin, though, there was no Reformation until reform had occurred in society, too, including the government. This difference illustrates what happens when God’s two modes of ruling are not carefully kept distinct. In Calvin’s view, human works can come to have a place in bringing about God’s kingdom, and, as a result, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ becomes obscured. We should distinguish between God’s two modes of ruling, above all, for the sake of the Gospel.

Yet while we *distinguish* these two modes of ruling, we cannot *separate* them, especially not in the person of the Christian citizen. The Christian who is a citizen wears two hats simultaneously. It is not for the church as church, but rather for Christian citizens as citizens to put moral principles into practice in the public square. Session 4 of this course will address how this can be done.

Understanding the distinction between God’s two modes of governance equips Lutherans particularly well to function within a “separation of church and state.” We heed Scripture as the standard for faith and life, for it is God’s Word. At the same time, as citizens of our nation we use reason and natural law to defend moral standards.

In America, citizens are not only under the government but also in certain senses above it. To that distinction we will turn next time.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, volume 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 77.

⁵ *Corpus Reformatorum: Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by W. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke et filius, 1863–1900), 37:891–92.

SESSION 3: LEADER

DISTINGUISH YOURSELF AS *RULED* FROM YOURSELF AS “*RULER*”

OPENING

Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal;
Earth-born they are and soon decay.
Vain are their counsels at life's last portal,
When the dark grave engulfs its prey.
Since mortals can no help afford,
Place all your trust in Christ our Lord.
Alleluia, alleluia!

—“Praise the Almighty” (LSB 797:2)

INTRODUCTION

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” said our Lord, “and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). But who, exactly, is “Caesar” in the United States of America?

This country has never had a leader quite like a Roman emperor. Of course, we have government at federal, state, and local levels, with legislative, executive, and judicial powers separated. This overall apparatus is “Caesar” in a sense, and we Christians should duly submit to our government. Should our government require us to do something sinful, we as Christians are to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Nonetheless, the government is still to be recognized; we as citizens are “ruled” by it.

Yet in another sense, in the United States, citizens are also “rulers”—not individually, but corporately. Ours is a constitutional republic in which those who hold public office are sworn to submit to a governing authority higher than themselves. The body politic holds government officials accountable in several ways—one being when we cast our ballots during election years.

This lesson’s distinction simply would not apply to many nations. American citizens have the privilege of being “*ruler*” as well as *ruled*, and for that Christians can thank God. With privilege comes responsibility, though, on both sides of this distinction.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. To whom does 1 Peter 2:13–14, 17 say Christians should be subject, and why? See also Proverbs 24:21 and John 19:11. Apply these passages to your role as a Christian citizen who is *ruled* by the government.

A1. We Christians should be subject to (that is, take our place in order under) every human governing institution, such as the emperor or governors. (The Greek word translated *institution* in 1 Peter 2:13 in the ESV most often means “something created” when it appears in other passages. Its use in this verse may be to emphasize that governing authorities get their power from the Creator.) This subjection is “for the Lord’s sake,” not that of the government as such, or even for our own sake. Governing officials are placed in office through other human beings, yet their positions and their authority come from God. (Such positions and authority are derived ultimately, we might note, from God’s institution of the family. See Genesis 9, in which Noah, after the flood, served both as head of his family and head of the government).

Jesus said that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had power over Him, given from above. Fearing both “the Lord and the king” entails *honoring* the emperor—even the infamous Nero, the probable Roman emperor when Peter wrote his epistle. But government officials are not in charge because they are pious, or upright, or even fair. Whether they know it or not, they are serving God. Christians should delight to respect them and obey them unless they require us to sin. David respected murderous Saul. He did not excuse Saul’s wrongs, but he honored the king. (See 1 Samuel 24 and 26; compare LC I 150–57.) Challenge your group to make concrete applications. How, specifically, can Christians show themselves to be subject to governing authorities? For instance, what about bumper stickers that are rude and insulting toward government and its officials? To display such signs is NOT to “honor the emperor.”

Q2. In the last session, we examined Romans 13:1: “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Those institutions Paul is referring to include not only monarchies and aristocracies but also republics such as ours. Here, in addition to *being ruled*, the people also *rule* through elected officials. However, from God’s Word we know better than to think of the people as the ultimate source of political power. We recognize that God has authorized our government. In countries like ours, He has entrusted power, so to speak, to people such as ourselves who are in positions to vote and exercise other legitimate forms of influence. It might be said, then, that we the people “commission” the government, but we do not *create* it. Why is this an important fact for Christians in America to keep in mind?

A2. Note the following:

- a) Recalling the last session, we must not forget that it is *God* who rules in both His “left hand” and “right hand” modes. It can be a little misleading to call these the “two kingdoms,” which might suggest that there are two kings. There are not. The Lord God is Lord of all. He is at the same time Lord of governments, along with other powers in this world, and also Lord of the Church.
- b) Over the last couple of centuries or so, God’s natural law has been overshadowed by the sovereignty of nations. In other words, the idea that a nation can make its laws anything it wants them to be has grown in currency during this time. In a nation that is a republic, this premise can lead to the conclusion that the people are sovereign over

their laws. However, the ancient Roman statesman Cicero already knew better when he indicated that no one can make robbery, adultery, or falsifying wills just and right simply by getting enough people to vote for such things! An American president, Calvin Coolidge, aptly commented that people do not *make* laws. What they do is *discover* laws. The majority in the electorate, even the totality of the electorate, remains accountable to God—whether these people acknowledge it or not.

- c) Putting this personally: When you consider yourself a “ruler,” you, too, are responsible to God. How will you use the authority and power that He has given you in the government of this country?

Q3. List the personal qualities you need as a Christian who is a “ruling” citizen, especially as you vote. See Proverbs 20:28; 25:2, 4–5; 29:4, 12, 14; Romans 12:19; Galatians 5:22–23.

A3. Proverbs mentions the *king*, but the points it makes also apply to you as “ruler” in US government. Do not let your head be turned by wicked people and false statements. So:

- a) Be willing to do your homework. Learn about the issues and the individual candidates. Do not rest content with surface impressions. Search out facts. A now-retired radio talk show host used to end his programs on election days by observing that others were urging everyone to get out and vote. For his part, though, he asked his listeners *not* to vote if they had not informed themselves.
- b) You need integrity. Vote based on principles and issues. Do not allow yourself to be swayed by personalities or emotion, since personal preferences and fleeting feelings never form foundations for good governing. Then justly follow through and hold candidates responsible for their positions and promises.
- c) You need compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness. As noted in session 1, voters should love their neighbors and so vote in service to their neighbors, not simply to get their own way or to safeguard their own interests.
- d) You need humility. Even acting in concert with others in a world-power nation, you cannot right every wrong or condemn every misdeed. The coming Final Judgment will address everything that government and voters cannot. Vengeance remains the Lord's.

Compare the above, or similar responses, with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23.

Q4. The previous question was about *personal* qualities of a Christian voter. Now consider: as a Christian, what *outlook* do you bring as you vote and otherwise participate as a citizen? See Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:4; 1 Peter 2:11–12, 15–16, 19–20.

A4. Note the following:

- a) You have a clear view of what government is to do—act as God's servant for the good of people and the punishment of evildoers—and what it is not to do. Caesar is not God.

He should not expect to hold the place of God in the hearts of people, or for them to obey him rather than God.

- b) God is God. Governments remain responsible to Him. His moral truth abides. Nothing is right simply because we think it “works.” The ends never justify the means.
- c) As “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11), you can think long-term. People often have a problem seeing beyond the mess of the moment. But a Christian is “a new man living in a new world, a citizen resident in a spiritual kingdom whose ruler is Jesus Christ Himself. No longer is he just another fellow fretting out the life of this world.”¹ You can see things in proper proportion.
- d) You know that there is more at stake than life in this world, which forms another reason to keep your conduct honorable. “The witness of the holy life in the midst of such rank unholiness as is sometimes found in political circles can be significant.”²
- e) You know that it is quite possible for you to suffer unjustly, even over political matters, and you also know it is a gift from God (1 Peter 2:19; in the ESV this is translated “gracious thing”) to endure patiently. But, continuing to live as the kind of people St. Peter called free in this world yet the slaves of God (see 1 Peter 2:16), you, as an American citizen, can make every effort to influence the climate of opinion even after the election results and court rulings have been declared.

Q5. Both being *ruled* and “*rulers*,” Christians who are citizens of the United States consider religious liberty important. Why? How should we use our religious freedoms?

A5. A number of responses are possible. Especially note that Christian concern to protect religious freedom should not be strictly for the sake of our own selves.

- a) Under God’s left-hand rule, Christian citizens can recognize that religious freedom for everyone is massively preferable to the alternative: government repression of religion.
- b) In God’s right-hand rule, we value religious freedom because it enables us to get the Good News out far and wide. But let’s not rest on our laurels if we have simply done our bit for religious freedom. Let’s spread that saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!
- c) A particular threat to religious liberty can come in the form of people insisting through political means that others not only tolerate, but also approve of, them and their behavior that is contrary to God’s Word. See David W. Loy, “To Be Known as I Know Myself: Identity, Politics, and the Gospel,” *Issues in Christian Education* 48 (Summer 2015), available online at the Concordia University, Nebraska website. This article explains the spiritual roots of this political issue.

¹ Paul G. Elbrecht, *The Christian Encounters Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 67.

² Elbrecht, 79.

- d) Government has “a general duty to be concerned about the church as *a social unit within the state*. Without demanding from the government any special privileges for the church, we do want the government to provide us with the same freedoms and rights that all other social units within the state enjoy.”³

CONCLUSION

In 1965, a seminary professor who also held a political office wrote that a life of merely paying taxes, obeying laws, and keeping out of trouble really stands opposed to democracy as well as to Christianity. He explained, “Only in a totalitarian state can a man be satisfied with a negative view of citizenship which calls for obedience and nothing else.” Then, too, “A negative view of citizenship violates Christianity because Christianity calls men to a life that not only avoids evil but also is dedicated to doing good.”⁴

“Rulers,” as well as ruled, we need to repent if we are not involved. Interestingly, we also need to repent when we *are* involved! This will be the subject of our final session.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, You have given us this good land as our heritage. Grant that we remember Your generosity and constantly do Your will. Bless our land with honest industry, truthful education, and an honorable way of life. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion, from pride and arrogance, and from every evil course of action. Grant that we, who came from many nations with many different languages, may become a united people. Support us in defending our liberties, and give those to whom we have entrusted the authority of government the spirit of wisdom, that there may be justice and peace in our land. When times are prosperous, may our hearts be thankful, and in troubled times do not let our trust in You fail; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

³ C. F. W. Walther, *Walther's Works: All Glory to God* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 475.

⁴ Elbrecht, 68–69.

SESSION 4: LEADER

REPENT WHEN YOU DON'T GET INVOLVED . . . AND WHEN YOU DO

OPENING

Before You, Lord, we bow,
Our God who reigns above
And rules the world below,
Boundless in pow'r and love.
Our thanks we bring
In joy and praise,
Our hearts we raise
To You, our King.

—“Before You, Lord, We Bow” (*LSB* 966:1)

INTRODUCTION

Christians “have a positive contribution to make to political life, but through aloofness and scorn of involvement their potential for improvement goes unrealized. They cannot make politics Christian, but they can serve God by serving their fellow men in efforts to bring order where there is chaos, justice where there is injustice, meaning where there is pettiness and poverty of purpose, comfort where there is sorrow, and direction where there is . . . aimlessness.”¹

What a pep talk! *Let's do it*, you might think. Let's get involved. Then we will have nothing to be sorry for.

Think again.

Those who get involved in the rough and tumble of political affairs will come away with their share of bumps and bruises, maybe more. Disappointments lie in store.

There will be sin. And not just the sins of others, either. Yours too.

So, repent—but not only when you aren't involved; repent also when you are.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. Before getting too far in discussing *your* involvement in government, let's not forget *God's* involvement. He remains Lord of all, including governing officials. “The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He [that is, the LORD] turns it wherever He will” (Proverbs 21:1).

¹ Paul G. Elbrecht, *The Christian Encounters Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 59.

See Proverbs 28:16a; 29:2; Isaiah 3:1–4; Hosea 13:11. What do these passages indicate? Then see 1 Timothy 2:1–7. What does this passage direct regarding government, and why?

A1. Bad government and governors oppress people and make them groan. This is no accident. God takes away rulers and/or sets up incompetent ones as judgment on nations and discipline for His people within those nations. (On such discipline for God's "sons," see Hebrews 12:4–11.) If you have a bad government, the first thing to do is not to complain but to confess—that is, confess your own sinfulness.

While you are in prayer, don't forget to ask God for what you and others lack, particularly remembering "kings and all who are in high positions" (1 Timothy 2:2). Pray for them, even the overtly wicked ones. Pray *against* their wickedness, so "we may lead a peaceful and quiet life" (1 Timothy 2:2) and the saving Gospel of Christ may be announced boldly by preachers who proclaim like St. Paul. And don't forget to give thanks for God's good gift of government too.

Really, we *have* begun to focus on your involvement after all. It starts with prayer.

Q2. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession states: "Our churches teach that lawful civil regulations are good works of God. They teach that it is right for Christians to hold political office, to serve as judges, to judge matters by imperial laws and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take oaths when required by magistrates, for a man to marry a wife or for a woman to be given in marriage" (AC XVI 1). Even in sixteenth-century German lands, at a time and in a place that had no elections like our country holds today, people still had an array of ways to be involved in government or in activities that government led or regulated. An even wider variety stands open to Christians who are American citizens today.

So the question arises, *Why don't we Christians do more to get involved?* Read Matthew 5:13–16 and Romans 12:1–2. Then, consider these words: "The Christian cannot afford to fracture his spiritual life. Christianity is not only a pious attitude a person puts on only on a Sunday morning like a Sunday suit. It is a life. It is significant that the early Christians were known as people of 'the way.' For Christianity is a way of life."² So, why don't we Christians do more to get involved?

A2. There could be a variety of responses to this question. People may not get more involved in public affairs because they do not want to risk offending others. Or they figure someone else will do it. They might plead that they are too busy even though they try little to better reorganize their time and energies. Or they could simply be lazy. It turns so easy for us to deprive our neighbors of the "salting" and "lighting" that we Christians as citizens can bring to matters in the governmental sphere (Matthew 5:13–16). "Christian participation in politics can help create an atmosphere in which the Gospel may have free course, men may live at peace with one another, and all human beings may receive full justice."³

² Elbrecht, 70.

³ Elbrecht, 91.

The apostle wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2). Whenever we are so conformed, our sinful nature rears its ugly head and reaches out to meet the world, threatening to squeeze out our life in Christ. Repent. Be “transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2) by the Lord who loved you, gave Himself for you, and now lives to plead the blood that He shed so you would be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. His is a way of life indeed.

Q3. *How might you get involved? And what kinds of things might you get involved in? Think of issues on which you see potential for yourself as a Christian to make a contribution, and consider ways (besides voting) in which you could contribute.*

A3. Again, there may be a range of responses, perhaps as many as the participants.

Consider this, however: Alexis de Tocqueville observed already in the nineteenth century that while democracy in some ways brings people together, it can also lead them to wall themselves off by themselves or within their small circles of associates. One avenue out of being walled off, which lay open to Americans already during the 1830s, was the voluntary association. De Tocqueville mentioned both political associations and civic associations. To this day, such organizations, often devoted to a single issue or cause, can serve as a vehicle for you as a Christian citizen to influence opinions of those around you. Think, for example, of the work done over the last forty years or so by National Right to Life or Lutherans For Life, which are only two of the many organizations that have maintained concern for the unborn in a persuasive way after the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision.

There are still more overt roads to political involvement. Join a political party, or a non-partisan effort for voter education. Write to elected officials. Contribute money to candidates. Work on a campaign. Stand for election yourself.

As to the public issues that can claim the attention of Christian citizens, the list has almost no end. Here are a few, besides those already mentioned in this course: the environment, terrorism and security, the war on drugs, fair housing practices, improvement of education, and immigration. Such issues, and many more, can be addressed via the ballot box, to be sure, but much more can be done on each in the time between elections.

You might let a few participants speak briefly about why certain subjects particularly interest them. There will not be time to *explore* these issues in this session, but remind participants about the pertinence of the distinctions observed previously in this study. And amid everything else we may end up doing as citizens, let none of us forget: “The Christian’s ultimate objective always must be as salt of the earth and light of the world to guide men from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.”⁴

Q4. Elections sometimes involve fairly straightforward issues or proposals such as ballot initiatives or state constitutional amendments. More often, though, you vote to support—or not

⁴ Elbrecht, 71.

support—someone's candidacy for office. What should Christian citizens think about as they choose candidates for whom to vote? See Proverbs 16:12; 20:26; 28:15–16a; 18:2; 25:3–5; 29:12. Yet you won't find a perfect candidate. Why not?

A4. Note the following:

- a) Look for candidates you can support on the issues. These will be people with whom you see eye-to-eye concerning matters of human judgment, but especially who oppose what the Lord calls evil. So look for candidates who have not only knowledge but also understanding, including moral understanding, even if they themselves are not Christians. Such candidates will not surround themselves with wicked and lying people.
- b) Alas, no candidate is perfect. All are sinners. A candidate may stand out in your mind not for having no negatives, but rather for having fewer negatives than other candidates. Then, too, remember what Proverbs says: "the heart of kings is unsearchable" (25:3). You cannot know with complete certainty what lies in the hearts even of those who are candidates for office.

Q5. Why do you need to repent even as you vote?

A5. A couple of reasons were implicit in the answer to the previous question. First, you might have to choose between, as it were, the lesser of two (or more) evils as you consider for whom to vote. If you decide not to vote for any candidate for some office, there will be downsides to that decision that must be carefully weighed. After all, one or another of the candidates will win the election, with or without your vote. In such a situation, ask yourself: can you in good conscience vote for *someone*? Or is it better under the circumstances to withhold your vote from everyone in a particular race? None of these choices will be perfect.

Second, while you cannot know what lies in the hearts of others, you know more about what lies in your own. Especially with guidance from Scripture, you know what comes out of the heart (see Matthew 15:19; Romans 7:18). You are not a perfect voter. Like all selfish sinners, you can act from mixed motives.

Moreover, you do not know the future. Candidates you help to victory with your vote today may go awry in office tomorrow, and you will have been partly responsible for putting them in positions of authority, even of temptation. "The very nature of politics does in fact encourage evil."⁵ There can be deceit and bribery, profiteering and oppression, to say the least.

CONCLUSION

Enter the voting booth with prayer. Include a prayer confessing your own limitations and sin—also your sin as you vote. Here, as in every aspect of life in this fallen world, there is no getting away from iniquity. Even "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6).

⁵ Elbrecht, 61.

“But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to who believe” (Galatians 3:22). You are not perfect, except in this extremely important sense: “True Christian perfection is to fear God from the heart, to have great faith, and to trust that for Christ’s sake we have a God who has been reconciled [2 Corinthians 5:18–19]” (AC XXVII 48). This true Christian perfection “means to ask for and expect from God His help in all things with confident assurance that we are to live according to our calling in life, being diligent in outward good works, serving in our calling” (AC XXVII 49).

The arena of government provides, for Christians who are citizens, opportunities to serve the Lord who bought us and to serve our neighbor. As we serve, we continue to pray fervently: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, keep this nation under Your care. Bless the leaders of our land that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to the other nations of the earth. Grant that we may choose trustworthy leaders, contribute to wise decisions for the general welfare, and serve You faithfully in our generation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SESSION 1: STUDENT

DISTINGUISH “THUS SAYS THE LORD” FROM HUMAN JUDGMENTS

OPENING

God bless our native land;
Firm may she ever stand
Through storm and night.
When the wild tempests rave,
Ruler of wind and wave,
Do Thou our country save
By Thy great might.

—“God Bless Our Native Land” (LSB 965:1)

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Someone once said, tongue in cheek, that you never know just how much America is the land of *promise* until you’ve heard a bunch of political speeches during an election year!

It’s not a bad saying. For one thing, it encourages a sense of humor about a walk of life in which individuals can take themselves too seriously. Then, too, it suggests a certain healthy skepticism about political promises.

Christians who are citizens of the United States can give thanks to God for our country, for the precious freedoms we enjoy, and for a system of government that involves us. Although we rest assured in God’s promise that is greater than any political one—that bought with the blood of the crucified and risen Christ, we are baptized into His name; He is our Lord—we do have the responsibility to participate in the political process and hold our government up to scrutiny. And we do so through supporting various candidates and causes, and voting in elections, among other ways.

What you have before you does not constitute a voting guide—this study is not intended to lead you to a particular candidate or the sweep of any party platform. The subject at hand is far from that simple. Rather, this study provides congregations and pastors with a tool that is designed to spark a thoughtful biblical conversation about voting in a democracy. Specifically, it addresses ways in which the Lutheran confession of faith may be applied to political situations in which choices must be made. For example, when approaching a complex subject, we can start by taking a cue from the Lutheran Confessions, which urge us to make appropriate distinctions in the proper places (see Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV 16).

This study consists of four sessions. The first three present key distinctions relevant to our topic—the distinction of “thus says the LORD” from human judgments, of God’s two modes of ruling, and of yourself as *ruled* versus “*ruler*.” The fourth Bible study session will, in effect, end the study with prayer by suggesting areas in which we should repent.

SESSION INTRODUCTION

During the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that while many in Europe thought *the king cannot fail*, the feeling in democratic America tended to be that *the people cannot fail*. Since the inception of our country, Americans have placed extraordinary confidence in the collective wisdom of the people.

Christians know, however, that people are sinners. As with any subject, including public policy, the people can be wrong, even a majority of them. You too!

Therefore, the first distinction to observe as you seek to exercise responsible Christian citizenship has to do with your basis for knowing what is right and what is wrong. As a Christian, you unabashedly listen to God’s Word. “Whoever is of God hears the words of God,” says our Lord (John 8:47). And while Scripture is given chiefly to “make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” still, “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:15–16). As the psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Yet Scripture does not address every political question, and certainly not in detail. For example: no matter how much you search the Bible, you will not find a list of names of people who are standing for election. Here your human reason has to enter into your considerations—always subject to God’s Word, though, never above it.

Christian citizens should carefully distinguish what God tells us in Scripture from the judgments that we make, even those at which we have arrived within a general biblical framework. It is important to know the difference between “Thus says the LORD!” and human opinion.

QUESTIONS

Q1. Does the Lord know what He is talking about only when He says things that might be considered “religious”? Why or why not? How does Luke 5:3–6 help you to understand this matter? Why is this point important to observe?

Q2. What does the Lord say when people try to pass off their own thinking as His Word? What results when people do this? See Jeremiah 23:31–32 and Matthew 15:8–9; compare Revelation 22:18–19. Why should Christians bear this in mind with respect to political matters?

Q3. We know we must differentiate carefully between what God says in His Word and what human reason has come up with. Now let's apply this truth to a political issue: abortion. Read the Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Proverbs 6:16–17; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:41–44; and then compare these to Proverbs 31:8. What should be said about abortion based on God's Word? Is there anything more to say, based strictly on human judgment? If so, what?

Q4. Here's another political issue: poverty and what should be done for the poor. Rather than debate the issue now, focus on what God's Word says. See the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:17–18; Luke 10:27–37; Proverbs 14:31; James 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:10. What does God's Word say about what we should do for the poor? What else can be said based on human judgment?

Q5. Think broadly about your own participation in past elections. For whom did you vote? This is not to ask, *For which candidate did you cast your ballot?* but rather *On behalf of whom did you vote?* See Matthew 22:35–40; Philippians 2:3–5; and Romans 12:9–10. What does God's Word say on this matter?

CONCLUSION

American Christians who participate in the political process do so as a result of being moved by the love of Christ, who first loved us. Christians go to the polls informed by God's Word and our own best thinking. But we should never forget to distinguish between the two.

What is the role of the church? There's another distinction, for next time.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty and ever-living God, You make us both to will and to do those things that are good and acceptable in Your sight. Let Your fatherly hand ever guide us and Your Holy Spirit ever be with us to direct us in the knowledge and obedience of Your Word that we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SESSION 2: STUDENT

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOD'S TWO MODES OF RULING

OPENING

The powers ordained by Thee
With heavenly wisdom bless;
May they Thy servants be
And rule in righteousness.
O Lord, stretch forth Thy mighty hand
And guard and bless our Fatherland.

—“To Thee, Our God, We Fly” (*TLH* 580:4)

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin was disappointed in one Philadelphia pastor's preaching.¹ He mused that the preacher seemed to aim at making members for that church rather than making good citizens. Franklin wished for the latter.

In America, roots run deep and come from more than one direction for the notion that churches should be about creating civilization and refining society. Besides moralists who were at best reserved toward the Christian message like Franklin, churches in the Reformed tradition believe that the kingdom of God comes to expression wherever order is brought to the world.

What can happen if churches are supposed to be about creating civilization and refining society? They are tempted to play some role in government, regardless of “separation of church and state.”

By contrast, the Augsburg Confession, the basic sixteenth-century confessional statement of Lutherans worldwide, maintains that “the Church has the authority to grant eternal things and exercises this authority only by the ministry of the Word. So it does not interfere with civil government anymore [*sic*] than the art of singing interferes with civil government” (Augsburg Confession XXVIII 10). The Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession adds: “Neither does the Gospel offer new laws about the public state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathens or by others” (Ap XVI 55).

Nowadays, God's will for such basics as respect for life and for marriage is being recognized less and less in our country. God's Law is disobeyed, and His creative intent is disregarded. In such situations, the church might seek to step into responsibilities to which she has not been called. But

¹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1964), 147, as cited by H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (Doubleday, 2000), 142.

this impulse should be resisted. As we recognize the authority of God's Word (see session 1), it is important also to recognize *to whom* He gives various instructions. As the Augsburg Confession put it, on the basis of Scripture: "the Church's authority and the State's authority must not be confused. The Church's authority has its own commission to teach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. . . . Let it not break into the office of another. . . . As Christ says, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Also, 'Who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?' (Luke 12:14)" (AC XXVIII 12–15).

From the foregoing, we can begin to see that God rules in this world in two ways. His two modes of ruling should be distinguished from each other. He remains Lord in each, yet He does exercise His rule in two distinct ways. These two ways correspond to the two basic messages of His Word: Law and Gospel.

QUESTIONS

Q1. In session 1, we noted that there is more than one way to make the case for the lives of the unborn. Besides biblical arguments mentioned in session 1, what else can be said in defense of the unborn? Why is this an especially important point in our nation today?

Q2. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," said our Lord, "and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Jesus did not prohibit submitting to Caesar because Caesar did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Take a quick look, on one hand, at Romans 13:1–7 and, on the other, at Matthew 28:18–20 and Ephesians 2:19–22. In this session, we are observing God's "left-hand" rule chiefly as exercised through government and God's "right-hand" rule exercised through His Church. What differences do you find between them as to (a) their respective purposes; (b) their respective tools; and (c) what makes for a "model person" in each?

Q3. While we distinguish between God's two modes of rule, there is another distinction to observe. In Old Testament times, God had a specific nation, Israel, to which He gave not only moral laws but also ceremonial and civil laws. But in the New Testament, He no longer specifies such a nation. Laws He gave particularly to Israel do not apply to New Testament believers—e.g., prohibitions on eating pork (Deuteronomy 14:8), on plowing with an ox and a donkey together (Deuteronomy 22:10), on fabrics made with a mixture of wool and linen (Deuteronomy 22:11), or

of working on Saturdays (Sabbaths). Even the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. St. Paul wrote: “Let no one pass judgment on you . . . with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Colossians 2:16; also, see Large Catechism I 80–82). We distinguish within Scripture between laws that God gave particularly to Israel and His moral Law. (God’s moral Law, basically identical with the Ten Commandments, sums up the natural Law that He built into creation for everyone.) Why is this distinction important for Christian citizens in America?

Q4. Christian citizens do best to champion in society various biblical moral teachings that can be shown to be necessary for society. (Think back to what your group said in response to the last two questions, and notice: Christians should do this as *citizens*, not churches as churches, and these Christian citizens should not try to legislate details of Old Testament law.) Why is it important for us to concentrate on matters of social necessity—for example, defending the unborn?

Q5. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, teaches that marriage is the union of a man and a woman (see Genesis 2:24–25 and Mark 10:6–9). Are there also nonbiblical arguments that can be made in support of this position? If so, what might they be?

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the Reformation differently. Luther noted that, yes, he taught the Word of God, but the Word did its work of reaching hearts and overthrowing works-righteousness while he was sleeping or drinking beer with his friends.² By contrast, Calvin on his deathbed reportedly recalled that when he first came to Geneva the Reformation was not yet there;

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 77.

the Genevans were just preaching the Gospel.³ To Calvin, “just” preaching the Gospel was not a bad thing, but it was not enough—God’s Law was not yet being obeyed as much as it could be. For Luther, the preaching of the Gospel stood out as all-important. To Calvin, though, there was no Reformation until reform had occurred in society, too, including the government. This difference illustrates what happens when God’s two modes of ruling are not carefully kept distinct. In Calvin’s view, human works can come to have a place in bringing about God’s kingdom, and, as a result, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ becomes obscured. We should distinguish between God’s two modes of ruling, above all, for the sake of the Gospel.

Yet while we *distinguish* these two modes of ruling, we cannot *separate* them, especially not in the person of the Christian citizen. The Christian who is a citizen wears two hats simultaneously. It is not for the church as church, but rather for Christian citizens as citizens to put moral principles into practice in the public square. Session 4 of this course will address how this can be done.

Understanding the distinction between God’s two modes of governance equips Lutherans particularly well to function within a “separation of church and state.” We heed Scripture as the standard for faith and life, for it is God’s Word. At the same time, as citizens of our nation we use reason and natural law to defend moral standards.

In America, citizens are not only under the government but also in certain senses above it. To that distinction we will turn next time.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

³ *Corpus Reformatorum: Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by W. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke et filius, 1863–1900), 37:891–92.

SESSION 3: STUDENT

DISTINGUISH YOURSELF AS *RULED* FROM YOURSELF AS “*RULER*”

OPENING

Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal;
Earth-born they are and soon decay.
Vain are their counsels at life's last portal,
When the dark grave engulfs its prey.
Since mortals can no help afford,
Place all your trust in Christ our Lord.
Alleluia, alleluia!

—“Praise the Almighty” (LSB 797:2)

INTRODUCTION

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” said our Lord, “and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). But who, exactly, is “Caesar” in the United States of America?

This country has never had a leader quite like a Roman emperor. Of course, we have government at federal, state, and local levels, with legislative, executive, and judicial powers separated. This overall apparatus is “Caesar” in a sense, and we Christians should duly submit to our government. Should our government require us to do something sinful, we as Christians are to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Nonetheless, the government is still to be recognized; we as citizens are “ruled” by it.

Yet in another sense, in the United States, citizens are also “rulers”—not individually, but corporately. Ours is a constitutional republic in which those who hold public office are sworn to submit to a governing authority higher than themselves. The body politic holds government officials accountable in several ways—one being when we cast our ballots during election years.

This lesson’s distinction simply would not apply to many nations. American citizens have the privilege of being “*ruler*” as well as *ruled*, and for that Christians can thank God. With privilege comes responsibility, though, on both sides of this distinction.

QUESTIONS

Q1. To whom does 1 Peter 2:13–14, 17 say Christians should be subject, and why? See also Proverbs 24:21 and John 19:11. Apply these passages to your role as a Christian citizen who is *ruled* by the government.

Q2. In the last session, we examined Romans 13:1: “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Those institutions Paul is referring to include not only monarchies and aristocracies but also republics such as ours. Here, in addition to *being ruled*, the people also *rule* through elected officials. However, from God’s Word we know better than to think of the people as the ultimate source of political power. We recognize that God has authorized our government. In countries like ours, He has entrusted power, so to speak, to people such as ourselves who are in positions to vote and exercise other legitimate forms of influence. It might be said, then, that we the people “commission” the government, but we do not *create* it. Why is this an important fact for Christians in America to keep in mind?

Q3. List the personal qualities you need as a Christian who is a “ruling” citizen, especially as you vote. See Proverbs 20:28; 25:2, 4–5; 29:4, 12, 14; Romans 12:19; Galatians 5:22–23.

Q4. The previous question was about *personal* qualities of a Christian voter. Now consider: as a Christian, what *outlook* do you bring as you vote and otherwise participate as a citizen? See Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:4; 1 Peter 2:11–12, 15–16, 19–20.

Q5. Both being *ruled* and “*rulers*,” Christians who are citizens of the United States consider religious liberty important. Why? How should we use our religious freedoms?

CONCLUSION

In 1965, a seminary professor who also held a political office wrote that a life of merely paying taxes, obeying laws, and keeping out of trouble really stands opposed to democracy as well as to Christianity. He explained, “Only in a totalitarian state can a man be satisfied with a negative view of citizenship which calls for obedience and nothing else.” Then, too, “A negative view of citizenship violates Christianity because Christianity calls men to a life that not only avoids evil but also is dedicated to doing good.”¹

“Rulers,” as well as ruled, we need to repent if we are not involved. Interestingly, we also need to repent when we *are* involved! This will be the subject of our final session.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, You have given us this good land as our heritage. Grant that we remember Your generosity and constantly do Your will. Bless our land with honest industry, truthful education, and an honorable way of life. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion, from pride and arrogance, and from every evil course of action. Grant that we, who came from many nations with many different languages, may become a united people. Support us in defending our liberties, and give those to whom we have entrusted the authority of government the spirit of wisdom, that there may be justice and peace in our land. When times are prosperous, may our hearts be thankful, and in troubled times do not let our trust in You fail; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

¹ Paul G. Elbrecht, *The Christian Encounters Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 68–69.

SESSION 4: STUDENT

REPENT WHEN YOU DON'T GET INVOLVED . . . AND WHEN YOU DO

OPENING

Before You, Lord, we bow,
Our God who reigns above
And rules the world below,
Boundless in pow'r and love.
Our thanks we bring
In joy and praise,
Our hearts we raise
To You, our King.

—“Before You, Lord, We Bow” (*LSB* 966:1)

INTRODUCTION

Christians “have a positive contribution to make to political life, but through aloofness and scorn of involvement their potential for improvement goes unrealized. They cannot make politics Christian, but they can serve God by serving their fellow men in efforts to bring order where there is chaos, justice where there is injustice, meaning where there is pettiness and poverty of purpose, comfort where there is sorrow, and direction where there is . . . aimlessness.”¹

What a pep talk! *Let's do it*, you might think. Let's get involved. Then we will have nothing to be sorry for.

Think again.

Those who get involved in the rough and tumble of political affairs will come away with their share of bumps and bruises, maybe more. Disappointments lie in store.

There will be sin. And not just the sins of others, either. Yours too.

So, repent—but not only when you aren't involved; repent also when you are.

¹ Paul G. Elbrecht, *The Christian Encounters Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 59.

QUESTIONS

Q1. Before getting too far in discussing *your* involvement in government, let's not forget *God's* involvement. He remains Lord of all, including governing officials. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He [that is, the LORD] turns it wherever He will" (Proverbs 21:1). See Proverbs 28:16a; 29:2; Isaiah 3:1–4; Hosea 13:11. What do these passages indicate? Then see 1 Timothy 2:1–7. What does this passage direct regarding government, and why?

Q2. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession states: "Our churches teach that lawful civil regulations are good works of God. They teach that it is right for Christians to hold political office, to serve as judges, to judge matters by imperial laws and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take oaths when required by magistrates, for a man to marry a wife or for a woman to be given in marriage" (AC XVI 1). Even in sixteenth-century German lands, at a time and in a place that had no elections like our country holds today, people still had an array of ways to be involved in government or in activities that government led or regulated. An even wider variety stands open to Christians who are American citizens today.

So the question arises, *Why don't we Christians do more to get involved?* Read Matthew 5:13–16 and Romans 12:1–2. Then, consider these words: "The Christian cannot afford to fracture his spiritual life. Christianity is not only a pious attitude a person puts on only on a Sunday morning like a Sunday suit. It is a life. It is significant that the early Christians were known as people of 'the way.' For Christianity is a way of life."² So, why don't we Christians do more to get involved?

Q3. *How* might you get involved? And what kinds of things might *you* get involved in? Think of issues on which you see potential for yourself as a Christian to make a contribution, and consider ways (besides voting) in which you could contribute.

² Elbrecht, 70.

Q4. Elections sometimes involve fairly straightforward issues or proposals such as ballot initiatives or state constitutional amendments. More often, though, you vote to support—or not support—someone's candidacy for office. What should Christian citizens think about as they choose candidates for whom to vote? See Proverbs 16:12; 20:26; 28:15–16a; 18:2; 25:3–5; 29:12. Yet you won't find a perfect candidate. Why not?

Q5. Why do you need to repent even as you vote?

CONCLUSION

Enter the voting booth with prayer. Include a prayer confessing your own limitations and sin—also your sin as you vote. Here, as in every aspect of life in this fallen world, there is no getting away from iniquity. Even “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6).

“But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to who believe” (Galatians 3:22). You are not perfect, except in this extremely important sense: “True Christian perfection is to fear God from the heart, to have great faith, and to trust that for Christ's sake we have a God who has been reconciled [2 Corinthians 5:18–19]” (AC XXVII 48). This true Christian perfection “means to ask for and expect from God His help in all things with confident assurance that we are to live according to our calling in life, being diligent in outward good works, serving in our calling” (AC XXVII 49).

The arena of government provides, for Christians who are citizens, opportunities to serve the Lord who bought us and to serve our neighbor. As we serve, we continue to pray fervently: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, keep this nation under Your care. Bless the leaders of our land that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to the other nations of the earth. Grant that we may choose trustworthy leaders, contribute to wise decisions for the general welfare, and serve You faithfully in our generation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.