

Christian Citizenship

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Christian And Government

I. The Creator instituted government as a means whereby He wills to preserve and order life in community among fallen men. It is an interim structure, designed to direct and regulate the political relationships among men during the interval between the Fall and the Lord's return. (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17)

II. The institution of government belongs to God's kingdom of power. Its symbol therefore is the sword (Romans 13:4). Its work is to be distinguished from that of the church. (Cf. Mark 12:17 and Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVIII: ". . . the power of the church and the civil power must not be confounded.")

III. The institution of government was created to uphold order and to provide justice. Our Scriptures assign to it the twofold task of rewarding the good citizen and punishing the evildoer. (Romans 13:3-5; 1 Peter 2:15)

IV. The primary ingredient in the Christian's attitude toward government is expressed by the New Testament term "subordination" (Romans 13:5; 1 Peter 2:13-14). This word signifies the responsibility of ranking one's own needs under those of others. Its practice in one's attitude toward government is a specific manifestation of the general stance of Christians toward their fellow-men. (Cf. Ephesians 5:21; Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3-4)

V. The opportunities for carrying out the responsibilities of Christian citizenship vary according to the strength of the church in a given society. (E.g., before the publication of the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, Christians were declared to be followers of a forbidden religion; accordingly they had very few opportunities to influence the direction of government. Their situation changed when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. A current illustration might be the difference between the position of the church in India, where Christians constitute a minority, and its opportunities in the United States, where Christianity is a majority religion.)

VI. These opportunities also vary according to the form of government under which Christians live (e.g., the difference between living in a totalitarian nation and in a society that is reasonably open).

VII. Christian citizens have maximum opportunities for service in an open society, which is here understood to be that kind of nation whose citizens have some meaningful control over their political destinies. Such opportunities for service may be broken down into two categories: those that confront individual Christians as citizens and those which they undertake as members of the church.

As individual citizens

1. They share in the responsibility (cf. Jeremiah 29:7) of government, especially where it operates as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

2. They seek political office, pay taxes, and exercise their right to vote as ways of manifesting their conviction that government is the servant of God. (Cf. the Augsburg Confession, Article XVI, **in extenso**)

3. They participate in the life and work of voluntary associations, such as service clubs, political parties, civic improvement organizations, in the awareness that they contribute to the presentation of an open society. For the chief characteristic of such a society is to be found in the influence of the work of such associations on the direction taken in the exercise of political authority.

4. They help to shape the content and activity of the "marketplace." That is to say, they make known their own views in community discussion and activity with a view to influencing public opinion in such a way as to reflect a concern for the application of moral principle to political issues. They do so on the conviction that only where the political climate is infused with ethical standards can justice and freedom be presented and extended.

As members of a church body

1. Christians engage in public prayer for government. (Cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 and the General Prayers given in **The Lutheran Hymnal**)

2. They contribute to the strengthening of the two foundation principles of an open society: respect for the individual citizen as a person and the limitation of political power by means of various checks and balances. This they do by:

a) teaching the specific content of the Moral Law and so preventing the concept of a "higher law" from becoming a mere abstraction;

b) alerting themselves and others to the role of the "higher law" in the process of preserving and extending justice and freedom on the basis of the moral principle;

c) sharpening consciences to respect law and so strengthening the bases of civic order;

d) encouraging respect for persons in positions of authority (Exodus 22:28; Acts 23:5);

e) furthering justice by serving as responsible critics of the social order;

f) preserving the proper distinction between the things of Caesar and those of God (Mark 12:17; 1 Peter 2:17);

g) reminding rulers that they are under God and the Law and that they too must give an account of their stewardship (Romans 13:4-5);

h) reminding all men that governments belong to those arrangements which will prevail only until the return of our Lord and that therefore the pursuit of justice and freedom is properly interested in establishing certain manifestations of the destiny God has in mind for His creation;

i) exhibiting and encouraging the practice of that kind of self-discipline which proceeds from concern for the welfare of one's neighbor (Philippians 2:4) and nation; actively engaging in the extension of justice by advocating the passage of just laws, the rescission of unjust laws, and the responsible enforcement of all law.

Christian And Civic Order

I. Like the rest of fallen creation, political structures work in a dialectical situation. By virtue of their being situated between God's yes and Satan's no, they find themselves involved in the cosmic conflict between good and evil (Luke 4:6; Ephesians 6:12). They often deal therefore in matters which on their surface manifest a large degree of ambivalence.

II. God created order out of primordial chaos (Genesis 1:1-2) and so brought about the conditions which make life in community possible despite the ambiguities of human existence which derive from the Fall. (Genesis 3:1-8)

III. Civic order is a gift of this sustaining God, whose will it is to check and control the demonic forces which at all times threaten society with anarchy. (Cf. Luther's explanation of the Fourth Petition as contained in his Large Catechism:

This petition is especially directed also against our chief enemy, the devil. For all his thought and desire is to deprive us of all that we have from God, or to hinder it; and he is not satisfied to obstruct and destroy spiritual government in leading souls astray by his lies and bringing them under his power, but he also prevents and hinders the stability of all government and honorable, peaceable relations on earth.)

IV. Civic order is not to be thought of in static terms. It is rather to be conceived of as that condition of society in which the many and varied tensions inherent in any kind of community life are kept in creative balance to provide opportunity for fulfillment in terms of both personal life and group enterprise. These are the conditions which constitute that "quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" to which the apostle refers in 1 Timothy 2:2.

V. Civic order is an essential ingredient of community life. At the same time it is a minimal element, whose function it is to provide the opportunity for men to work together in the task of expanding justice and freedom; for men were created to be persons, and as such they are expected to exercise that dominion which is an inherent part of the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), even though it has been debased by the Fall. (Genesis 3:1-7)

VI. In its proper sense civic disobedience consists of violating a specific law in the interest of justice and freedom, particularly as these relate to the needs of

others. Such disobedience is a responsible expression of citizenship when it is undertaken after all other means of obtaining justice have been exhausted and in full awareness of the demonic and disruptive forces present in any given social order. Under these conditions testing a specific law occurs as a way of determining whether the law at issue conforms to the demands of the "higher law" and the principles set forth in other legal documents, directives, and decisions. This responsibility is perverted and abused when disobedience and resistance are undertaken out of disrespect for law and for the purposes of inducing violence or creating discord and disorder. (Cf. the document on "Civil Obedience and Disobedience" issued by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations)

VII. The maintenance of civic order at times requires the responsible application of force to the solution of social and political problems. It is the task of police forces and military establishments, as arms of government, to serve in this capacity; hence they deserve the support and encouragement of Christian citizens.

The Christian, Violence, And War

I. Violence within nations and warfare among countries are potent reminders of the tenuous nature of order in society. Both have their source in man's rebellion against his Creator (cf. James 4:1). Both are vivid manifestations on a massive scale of the demonic aspects of existence.

II. The Scriptures remind us that the tempo and fury of disorder, calamity, and warfare will increase as the end of history approaches (cf. Matthew 24:6-7 and parallels). Such developments are there described as harbingers of our redemption. (Cf. Matthew 24:32-33 and parallels)

III. The responsibility of taking up arms against other human beings, either as part of a police force or of a military establishment, is to be carried out without hatred of one's fellowman; for such animosity and anger constitute the most serious violations of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (cf. Matthew 5:21-22)

IV. The word used in this commandment for "killing" is one that implies malice and hatred. It is nowhere used in the Old Testament for taking life in battle. This would suggest that the tragic task of taking up arms for combat under orders from legitimate

authority is not by itself a violation of the Fifth Commandment. (Cf. Johann Stamm, "Sprachliche Erwaegungen zum Gebot, 'Du sollst nicht toeten,'" **ThZ**, Aug. 1945, pp. 81-90)

V. The one-to-one relationship between individuals is changed during hostilities by the interposition of a set of divergent loyalties on the part of persons opposing each other in combat. Under these conditions a hierarchy of relationships is created, requiring the application of justice in the practice of love.

VI. Christian love expects the one-to-one relationship of individual to individual to return and to be applied even during times of hostility in a personal confrontation with an enemy who is wounded or is in need of some other personal service.

VII. The destructive potential of modern weaponry and the impersonality of contemporary techniques of warfare lay upon the Christian citizen the special burden of reminding himself and others that human life is a sacred trust from man's Creator and that the temptation to rely on and resort to the kind of massive violence made possible by these inventions has introduced into the human situation a new factor of incalculable moral magnitude. It is therefore imperative for him to work together with all men of goodwill for the responsible limitation of armaments, the eradication of sources of conflict, and an aggressive interest in the preservation and expansion of the conditions of peace.

VIII. The requirements of justice and love apply in much the same way to service with police forces.

The Christian And Conscience

I. The word "conscience" may mean man's faculty to respond to such moral principles as transcend human existence. It is so used, for example, in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (Article One).

II. In the New Testament it is used as a term to signify moral response in depth on the basis of conclusions reached by evaluating the ethical aspects and implications of a given issue or situation (cf. Acts 23:1; Romans 2:15; 1 Corinthians 8:7, 10; etc.; cf. also C. A. Pierce, **Conscience In the New Testament**, London: SCM Press, 1955). In other words, it stands for more than strong feeling and emotional reaction to an issue or a task.

III. A Christian is bound in conscience to disobey an order or a law which violates God's will. (Acts 5 :29)

IV. When a Christian is persuaded that he faces a choice in conscience, he must be certain in his own mind that his conscience is informed by principles which conform to God's will. For he has the burden of not violating his own conscience.

V. When he is inclined, for example, to claim for himself the right of conscientious objection to a particular war, he will first need to give serious consideration to the following matters as they relate to his responsibilities as a citizen of a particular nation.

A. The role of government in the maintenance of order and in the defense and extension of justice and freedom;

B. The role of military establishments in the life and tasks of a nation;

C. The purposes of the war in question as these relate to the foreign policy of a nation;

D. The significance and applicability of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill";

E. The ideological ingredients of the war under evaluation;

F. The principle that the government of a nation in its dealings with other nations has an a priori, though not unquestioned, claim on the trust of its

own citizens as a source of information and direction.

VI. The Lutheran Confessions operate with the concept of a just war (cf. The Augsburg Confession, Art. XVI, and the Apology, Art. IV, 191). Before a Lutheran can rightly become a conscientious objector, he will need to formulate answers to the following questions that have been developed in the course of the history of Christian theology as a way of determining whether a war is just or not:

A. Is a war being fought under legitimate authority?

B. Is it being conducted within the framework of international agreements?

C. Is it being waged in the interest of vindicating some obvious right that has suffered outrage?

D. Have all peaceful means of achieving a settlement been exhausted?

E. Is the destruction incurred excessive in terms of the goals to be achieved?

F. Is it being waged with good intentions, or has it been undertaken for purposes of aggression?

G. Will the results achieved by engaging in hostilities provide greater opportunity for justice and freedom to prevail than if such a war had not been entered into?