

God's Servant for Your Good

In the name of him who rules over all, dear friends in Christ: I don't know if you are aware of it, maybe you haven't heard, but there's an election coming up this November. A hotly contested election. And what with the pandemic threatening lives, and the restrictions it has placed upon us, and the economic downturn it's caused, together with social unrest over perceived injustices, and Black Lives Matter, and rioting in the streets, and looting and burning ... well, I think it's fair to say that there's a lot of confusion and anxiety about the way things are going in this nation of ours. (Did someone say "Amen"?) Anyway, all this being the case, I thought that Christian citizenship is an especially timely topic to address – which just happens to be what St. Paul is doing in today's Epistle. So, what I'd like to do is lay out the general principles involved and then apply them to a couple of specific issues.

But first, as an overall backdrop, it's important to know that as Lutherans, we understand that the Lord operates in this world through his appointed means. For example, we would all agree that the Lord provides food for the world's people. If he wanted to, he could just make it miraculously appear on the plates of everyone who was hungry. That would be feeding them directly *without* means. He *could* do that; but that isn't how he usually operates. Instead, he's given us the tools and know-how to grow our food from the plants and animals he's given us. So we've got farmers who till the soil and plant the fields and harvest the crops. We've got ranchers who raise livestock. And the Lord sends the sunshine and the rain that make the crops grow and ripen. Then too you've got merchants, transporters, and food handlers that do their work on the food you eat before it gets to your table. So yes, God feeds you; but he uses all these people and processes as the instruments *or means* to accomplish the job.

So it is also in the Church. He could just zap Christian faith into people directly and make them believers; but that isn't how he works. Instead the Lord brings people like you and me to true knowledge of him and to saving faith in Jesus – and preserves us in the same – through his appointed means; namely through his Holy Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Through these means, and the servants he calls to administer them in his Church, God's Holy Spirit works to bring sinners to repentance and faith. Through these means the merits of Christ's atoning work on the cross are proclaimed to sinners to assure them of God's forgiveness, to strengthen them in the faith, and to work in them both the will and the power to amend their lives and do works that bring honor and glory to God's name.

Okay now, in a similar way, God rules over the entire world and all the nations of men; but he doesn't do it directly. We don't see Jesus sitting in a throne room at the United Nations dictating laws and solving world problems. Instead, the Lord's authority is apportioned to heads of state and to national governments who, whether they know it or not, exercise his authority to maintain law and order, to capture and punish criminals, and to provide for the safety and security of citizens and promote their welfare. These human leaders and governments are God's agents, or as St. Paul says, "God's servant for your good". They are the *means*, through which God rules the world – specifically in an external, legal sort of way. Therefore we are to submit to the rule of law and the authority of the government because the government rules on behalf of God. To resist or to rebel against the appointed leaders is to rebel against God who appointed them and gave them their authority.

But wait, you might object, what if the leaders are unbelievers? What if they are wicked people who make mistakes and rule unjustly? Well, what if they are? Does it make any difference to you what god the people who grow your food worship? Does it make any

difference to you how they behave or what immoral choices they make? No. And yet the Lord uses them to feed you. Or here in the Church, the Lord uses these sinful hands to Baptize and distribute Christ's body and blood. He uses these sinful lips to declare his forgiveness in Jesus to you. Does the fact that I am a sinner who (now hold because some of you may not believe it) sometimes makes mistakes; does that in any way diminish the truth of God's Word or the forgiveness he declares to you through me? No. Nor would it if I didn't believe a word of it myself. God's truth is God's truth regardless of who declares it.

In the same way, God's authority is God's authority regardless of who wields it. And when you think about it, since the Lord has chosen to use human leaders and governments to rule on his behalf, he really has no choice but to use wicked sinners who can and often do make mistakes. That does not negate the fact that they are God's servants to whom we, as Christian citizens, owe our obedience, the respect due their offices, and, as St. Paul reminds us, our taxes. They deserve to be paid for what they do. And things like roads and bridges for public transportation, and national defense, and law enforcement, and public schools, and all that other stuff that the government does on our behalf costs money. We owe our share.

I hasten to add that this is true regardless of what kind of government we have or how it's organized. Some American Christians seem to think that the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution were handed down at Sinai along with God's Word. No. They are not divinely inspired documents. And while we may prefer our form of government over others, the truth is that on this earth there is no perfect government, and the Lord can rule equally well through hereditary monarchs, despots and dictators, and elected presidents, parliaments, and congresses – which is why too you can have faithful Christians who are submissive to their respective governments in every nation on earth. It's worth noting that when Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he was telling them to be submissive to the Emperor, who, at the time, was the tyrannical and near psychopathic Nero – the same guy who began the first state sponsored effort to stamp out Christianity because he mistakenly believed it to be a dangerous cult of rebellion against Rome.

And that leads us to ask what exactly is the authority of the state and where does it end? Paul says that it is the bearer of the sword. That is to say the state is given the authority to use force, deadly force if necessary, to maintain peace and order in the nation. It's God's authority to arrest people who break laws, imprison or otherwise punish them, and in capital cases put them to death. It's also the authority to wage war in the defense and best interest of the nation. So the police officer who shoots an armed bank robber, and the executioner who flips the switch on a convicted murderer, and the soldier who kills enemy combatants on the battlefield are acting on God's authority and doing his will. And a Christian citizen can perform any of those roles – or any other valid government role like serving in office, collecting taxes, judging legal cases, what have you – with a clean conscience.

The authority of the state ends, however, precisely where it comes into conflict with God's Word. Since the authority of the state comes from God, it is manifestly obvious that it oversteps its authority when it dictates and attempts to enforce laws that contradict God's Word. At that point a Christian citizen must refuse to obey even while remaining submissive to all the other laws that do not contradict God's Word. The book of Daniel gives us some clear examples of this. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, all of whom were government officials in Babylon, were commanded by the king to worship an idol, they refused. It would have violated a command of God. Similarly, when Daniel, who was a chief advisor to the king of Persia, was commanded not to pray to the Lord, he had to disobey. In the New Testament, the political and religious leaders of the Jews ordered the disciples to stop preaching Jesus. Though they were in every other way obedient, taxpaying citizens, they had to refuse to comply.

They had been given the command to preach the Gospel by Jesus. The law of God supersedes the law of men. And incidentally, all these people were punished for their refusal to obey. They submitted even to an unjust application of government authority.

That informs us as well. Paul's whole point is that we, as Christians, ought to be model citizens. That's because we recognize the divinely derived authority of the state and a higher set of laws. We are simultaneously citizens of two kingdoms: a physical one on earth and the spiritual kingdom of heaven – which is the Church of Jesus Christ. Normally, there's no conflict between the two; but if rulers or human governments attempt to force us to do what's immoral or to comply with orders that violate God's law, we must decline – even if it means we'll be punished for it. So, a Christian soldier ordered to execute prisoners of war, or a Christian doctor told that he must perform abortions, or a pastor told that he must officiate at immoral wedding services – in such cases the answer is, "No." And if we are punished for doing what is right we are to commend the matter and our well-being to the Lord.

Okay, those are the basic ideas. Let's apply it to some specifics. As you all know, right now we're experiencing a deadly pandemic. Just exactly how deadly it is as compared to other past outbreaks is the subject of much debate, but that really isn't relevant as far as our duty as Christian citizens is concerned. The simple fact is that in an effort to help prevent the spread of the disease, federal, state, and local governments have issued orders about social distancing, wearing face masks or shields, closing or placing restrictions on certain business, and, what affects us most here in the church, concerning assemblies – how many people can gather, how far apart they have to be, and so on. Some leaders in the Christian community have taken great offense at this, claiming that the government is seeking to stop the church from worshipping the Lord, or that this is a gross violation of our constitutional right as US citizens to freedom of religion. Some have refused to comply with such orders and have openly defied them. Others have claimed that these measures are not effective in doing what they are designed for and have violated them for that reason.

But whether the measures are effective is not the issue. The issue is this: the people whom the Lord has granted authority to guard public safety have determined – in good faith and to the best of their judgment – that these measures should be observed for the good of the community and the nation. They are not telling us we can't worship the Lord. We can. They've only laid down some rules to reduce the risk of contagion and imposed limits on the size of our gatherings. And so we comply, like we did back in April when we met in small groups, or like we are now by spreading out through the sanctuary and not passing the collection plate. To the extent that we are able without violating God's laws, we obey our rulers.

And too, as American citizens we have legal recourse if we perceive that restrictions are being applied unnecessarily or unjustly to churches. Things have been pretty even and fair here in Iowa, but you may be aware that out in Nevada the state was limiting or forbidding assemblies in churches, but not in casinos, because after all, the state takes in a lot of revenue from the latter but not the former. There churches have filed suit to reopen, and rightly so. And the state will have to explain why it is that Covid spreads in churches but not casinos. Good luck with that.

But let me address another specific. As I said at the start of this message, we've got an election this year. And I don't think anyone would disagree that the climate of political debate has become ... what? More contentious lately? Between the steady stream of 24 hour "news" programs on radio and TV that are more propaganda rather than actual news, and the wonders of social media by which rumors, deceitful images and videos, mocking memes, and half truths that turn out to be whole lies can be spread like wildfire through the nation, public discourse has

gone from a quiet conversation to an angry shouting match. As US citizens we have the right to freedom of speech. As Christian citizens we need to remember that the 8th Commandment applies also to politics – and most especially to those we consider to be on the other side of the political aisle. To refer to a candidate you don't like with an unflattering nickname, or to spread unverified facts about them by word or by electronic means, or simply to demonize the other side with broad smears and vile accusations—let's call these things what they are: sins that we need to repent of and steer clear of in the future. Maybe if enough of us were doing that, attempting to douse the flames of political rhetoric instead of pouring gas on them, the situation might improve. I don't imagine the fire will ever go out, but it might burn less hotly.

And since I mentioned the 8th Commandment, I should also bring in the 4th. Since the last presidential election we've been witnessing something unsettling in our nation, and that is a small but vocal portion of the population that insists that because my candidate didn't win, that's not my president. That's not the way it works. And no Christian can say or act like that without sinning. Our system for electing people to offices is what it is. It produces winners and losers. And after this next election we will have a winner. That person, whoever it is, will be our president. As such we will owe him our respect and obedience. That doesn't mean we can't disagree with him or his policies or use proper legal channels to oppose him. He'll be the president of a free people in a constitutional republic, not a dictator. But again, whoever he is, we will recognize him for what he is: God's servant for our good. And we will pray for him and ask God to bless him and to lead him to make wise and just decisions for the good of this land and its citizens. That's good for all of us. And it's also good for the other kingdom of which we are citizens because it allows God's Word to continue to go forth unhindered bringing sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus by which they are saved in time and eternity. Therefore may our gracious God and Father bless both kingdoms of which we are part and make us good and faithful citizens of each. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!