

CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

By

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I

I feel I should begin my presentation with an apology – an apology in both senses of that word. First, I regret that I was unable to participate in all of the events of this symposium. I certainly am disadvantaged by not having heard the preceding presentations. Because I am disadvantaged, my audience is certainly similarly disadvantaged. I regret this. A death in the family changed all of our plans.

I also want to give a second apology: an apology in the way Cardinal Newman used the term in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*; that is as an apology as an explanation of myself. The topic of this symposium is at the heart of my scholarly interests. The title of my doctoral dissertation was “The Sword of the Spirit: An Examination of the Intellectual Premises of the Political Thought of John Milton.” My thesis was that Milton’s philosophy – political and otherwise – could only be understood if you understand as well his high view of the authority of Holy Scripture.

However, my approach to my assigned topic has been practical, not scholarly. I have been a “practitioner” in the world of government and politics for virtually all of my working life. I worked for five Wisconsin Governors (both Democrats and Republicans). I have had the surreal

experience of attending “cabinet” meetings where the old regime was attacked, all the while discomfited by the fact that I was part of that old regime. Given the current political climate, I undoubtedly should disclose all of the peccadillos from out of my past. Yes, I have been naked with the Governor of Wisconsin! As noted in my biography, I was responsible for international trade for the State of Wisconsin. In carrying out those responsibilities, the Governor and I journeyed to Finland to attend the meeting of a corporate board, a meeting which, as a matter of course, was held in the sauna.

The questions of the civic responsibilities of a Christian are very real to me. They are questions I had to address not just on Election Day and on the 4th of July, but daily. However, I will argue that the questions of civic responsibility are constant ones for all Christians and not just for those who count themselves as practitioners.

II

My own education on the civic responsibilities of a Christian began – as it did for many in this room – with confirmation instruction. There I memorized Matthew 22:21, “. . . Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” On the basis of this passage I was taught the importance of the principle of the separation of church and state. There was no explanation of how this principle fit with Dr. Luther’s free-wheeling advice to the princes of his day.

Regardless of what lesson was supposed to be taught, I learned that I was supposed to stay as far away from government and politics as possible and *sotto voce* that government and politics are evil, not just tainted by sin as are all worldly institutions, but a special kind of evil on a par with drunkenness and dancing.

We may well laugh at this “kids-say-the-darndest-things” version of a scriptural principle. However, studies of Lutheran attitudes and career choices in the United States suggest that what

I learned was not so terribly distinct from what other Lutherans have internalized. There has never been a Lutheran president of the United States. The number of Lutherans holding either elective or appointed office is significantly below what the proportion of Lutherans in the population would suggest it ought to be. Sociological profiles of the attitudes of American voters have for decades counted Lutherans among the most negative about government and politics. And, as Walter Cronkite used to say, "That's the way it is."

Of course, as our President would say, "It depends on what is is." IS is not necessarily the equivalent of OUGHT in the Christian world view. As Christian educators, we must keep this distinction clear in what we teach.

III

Jesus said, ". . . Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Rightly understood, this scripture should motivate Christians to be responsible in both the Church and in government and politics. Jesus' command – and we are talking about law, not Gospel here – is to *give* to Caesar as well as to God. Our first duty is, of course, to God, but we owe a duty to government as well. We as Christians have *responsibilities* vis-à-vis government. Indeed, I would argue that the Christian is under greater compulsion to exercise his or her responsibility toward government than those who recognize a different Lord, or no Lord at all.

St. Augustine, in the *City of God*, spoke of the two cities. Martin Luther referred to the two kingdoms. Both emphasized that Christians have responsibilities in BOTH.

IV

This, then, brings us to the heart of my presentation and to the heart of my scholarly and practical question: What are the responsibilities of a Christian vis-à-vis politics and government?

Christianity is not just a matter of externals. The Bible enjoins us not just to avoid adultery and murder, but also lust and hatred. Our responsibilities in the kingdom of this world, this political world, involve attitude. That is, it is a matter of the heart.

St. Paul writes,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (Romans 13:1-7).

St. Paul is saying no more and no less than Jesus said. It is God who instituted government every bit as much as He instituted the Church. And, just as Jesus commanded us to GIVE to God and Caesar, St. Paul tells us we have a responsibility to GIVE. And what are we to give? Taxes – but most relevant on the topic of attitudes – he tells us to submit, to respect, and to honor.

Submission is never, in Biblical terms, just a matter of external observances; it involves the whole person, mind and body. Even so, submission to government is our responsibility and is supposed to be from the heart.

The same must be said for respect and for honor. It has been said that once you laugh at someone (as opposed to laughing with them), it is impossible to respect them. Be that as it may,

if in our hearts we hold government in contempt, it is impossible to say we are carrying out our God-given responsibility to respect and to honor.

Lest we think that God has given us a mere suggestion, a kind of “conditional commandment” – i.e., that we respect and honor government only as long as it is honorable and respectable – I refer you to the Apostle Peter who wrote, “Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.” (I Peter 2:17). Now the word “king” clearly refers to the emperor, and the emperor at the time St. Peter writes was most likely Nero – a ruler who was neither respectable nor honorable. Yet, we are told: “Honor the king.”

I leave as a topic for another day what our attitude as Christians should have been toward George III in 1776. Again, I am unclear in my own mind whether anyone taught me this, but I distinctly recall learning in Lutheran elementary school that God was on the side of the American Revolution. He may have been, but we need to think clearly on the basis of Scripture why we might take and teach such a position.

V

Moving, then, from the subject of responsible attitudes to the subject of responsible actions. We must ask the same question as a title of V. I. Lenin’s – if I can use that name in this place – *What is to be Done?*

It is important to remember that we are talking about our RESPONSIBILITIES as Christians. Lutherans have long been accused of putting so much emphasis on faith that we neglect sanctification; that our religion is a matter of the heart and mind, but has no perceptible effect on our lives. Like all generalizations, there is probably much that is false and some that is true in this statement. I say there is something of the truth in the statement, for God surely had His reasons for giving us this warning in Holy Scripture:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17).

Our civic responsibilities, then, are commanded to include both attitude and action.

What actions should we take? Well, in this country, we can vote. Does this mean that we should always vote for the "Christian candidate"? In recent years, two members of the clergy – Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Pat Robertson – have run for the presidency of the United States. To answer this question, "Should we always vote for the Christian candidate?" I believe we must look to Scripture. Government was ordained by God. But God is a purposeful God; He does things for a reason and at times He shares some of these reasons with us.

In the passage from Romans I cited a few moments ago, St. Paul says that God instituted government to "bear the sword" – i.e., government's principal purpose is justice. The principal blessing of a just society is also described by St. Paul when he urges us to pray "... for kings and all those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all Godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (I Timothy 2:2-4).

On the basis of this and other Scriptures I would argue that we do not necessarily vote for the "Christian candidate"; rather we are to vote for that candidate who has the greatest potential for advancing the purpose of government as defined by God Himself: namely, that we might lead quiet and peaceful lives.

Taking responsible action in voting is not easy. It may require us to vote against a brother or sister in Christ who is simply incompetent or less competent than the opposing candidate. I should be clear that, as I am using the term, competence does not just mean administrative

efficiency. After all, Mussolini did make the trains run on time; competence includes a sound ideology. Competence includes philosophy, policy, and practice. It also requires us to give some thought to our voting. Dr. Luther is alleged to have said it is better to be governed by a wise Turk than a dumb Christian. Tossing a coin is not acceptable; nor, in most cases, is voting a straight party ticket. When I have made this point in other settings, the rebuttal returned is, "Because I don't know much about the candidate or government, I am better off not voting." Political scientists have made similar arguments in the past, asserting that it is destabilizing to the regime to have the uninformed voting. The question I would ask is: Why are you uninformed? Or better: How dare you be uninformed? God has commanded responsible attitudes and actions by Christians in the political realm. The excuse "I am uninformed" is similar to the excuse of those who excuse their sexual sins by asserting they are only human. Or, to give a Biblical example, it is an excuse similar to those who neglect their parents because they have given a "gift to God."

Before moving on to other Christian actions, I want to return briefly to the passage from I Timothy which describes a purpose of government as enabling us to lead "quiet and peaceful lives." Quiet and peaceful lives are not ends in themselves. Such lives are "pleasing" to God who wants all to be saved. Ultimately, it is God who breaks down the barrier between church and state. He ordained both; He decrees the purpose of the state to be justice, which leads to peace, which helps the preaching of the saving Gospel to advance. Surely, advancement of the Gospel is another reason – if any were needed beyond God's commands – for Christians to carry out their Christian responsibilities in attitude and in action.

Another way to take action in expressing our Christian responsibility is to hold office in government – either elected or appointed office.

Again, in this country, Lutherans have been underrepresented in public service and this underrepresentation is the result of self-selection, not *de facto* or *de jure* exclusionary policies. I can talk in the roundtable section, if anyone is interested, of my own experience in governmental service – an experience unfettered by any *de facto* or *de jure* impediments. For the purposes of this presentation, the real question is: What are God’s purposes for letting a Christian pursue a calling in government? Mordecai’s words to Queen Esther are certainly appropriate here: “. . . And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). Few in government – whether Christian or not – have a chance to prevent a holocaust, but, as with all of our lives, whether we know it or not, God does have a purpose.

Given that God’s purposes may not be clear to us, how should officeholders conduct themselves in office? Follow again the guidance of Scripture: We are to be a “salt” (Matthew 5:13) and, as in all we do, “act to the glory of God.” (I Corinthians 3:17-21).

VI

A final type of action for which the Christian is responsible is speech. We are commanded to speak up for God’s truth and, in this governmental system, speech is a fundamental right and responsibility. Indeed, if you take seriously what God says about speaking up, you will, as the old spiritual says, tremble. We read:

When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. (Ezekiel 3:18-19.cf.20-21).

It is notable that the object here is quite similar to St. Paul's warning about government acting as an avenger, wielding the sword. The purpose of this injunction to speak up is to bring quiet and peace to our earthly lives.

It also is notable that this injunction with its strong thrust is addressed to the prophet Ezekiel – i.e., it is addressed to a believer. We cannot let the proverbial “George” do it. All of us have a civic responsibility to speak up.

What, then, is to be said? This question has been answered in many ways. In the name of Christ, positions have been taken on acid rain, the anti-ballistic missile system, property taxes (including exemptions for churches), Viet Nam and Kosovo, to name just a few.

What, then, is to be said? I will not attempt to answer, but I will give some guidance from Scripture as you think about the policy positions you take as a Christian citizen.

First, be careful. Let us turn again to Ezekiel:

. . . prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: Hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! . . . Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, ‘The Lord declares,’ when the Lord has not sent them; . . . Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord. (Ezekiel 13:2-8).

Although Christians clearly have a responsibility to speak up, we risk the Lord's wrath when we speak in the Lord's name when He has not spoken.

Let me give you an example involving this Synod. Many in our circles have opposed choice on the grounds that government money, even if it is passed through the parents, will inevitably result in governmental entanglements with curriculum. This is a defensible argument, but also a debatable one (and I do not propose to debate it here). What would be indefensible, in my view, is a statement that God's Word is in opposition to school choice.

Clearly, there are issues on which God's Word is clear: murder, for example, is a violation of God's law. Again, the difficulty in ascertaining the Christian position on a public policy issue should not deter us from making the attempt. The situation is exactly parallel to the difficulty of becoming an informed voter; the difficulty of the task does not obviate our responsibility for attempting it.

I have always found it useful to remember Joshua on the issue of speaking up in the name of God.

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' 'Neither,' he replied, 'but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come . . . Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.' (Joshua 5:13-15).

That one word "Neither" is important. It does not mean that God was neutral on Israel's military campaign. It does mean that He chose not to reveal his position and that, in this instance, Joshua dared not to say "thus saith the Lord."

VII

In sum, Christians have responsibilities, in both the church and the civic realm. In the civic realm, it is an issue of attitude and action.

Before I conclude, I want to make mention of some things we should not attempt to do as Christian citizens.

First, we dare not seek to use the power of government to coerce conversions. Jesus makes it clear that His kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36). The passage with which I began enjoins us to GIVE to God and to Caesar. It is the work of the church, not the state, to preach the Gospel. Those who want to use the state to establish a "Christian Nation" have a fundamental

misunderstanding of the nature of saving faith. “. . . [N]o one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (I Corinthians 12:3). Not only is a coerced conversion an oxymoron, even attempts to use the propaganda power of the state to build the kingdom of God cannot be condoned and, indeed cannot succeed. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (I Corinthians 1:18).

VIII

On the basis of God’s holy Word, Christians have responsibilities in both the church and the civic realm. God’s Word provides a sufficient basis for us to understand our responsibilities.

We are responsible for maintaining an attitude of respect and honor toward government. We also are responsible for action. Responsible Christian action may include voting, holding office, and, above all, speaking up – speaking up for God and His Word.

Our Christian witness is not confined to the church or even to churchly things. In all that we do and all that we say, we must tell the ancient and ever new story.

I began with a personal apology telling of my scholarly and professional involvement as a Christian in politics. You might legitimately ask how I have done. I leave this to God to judge as He will judge all of us.

I want to leave you with a last word. Our civic responsibilities as Christians are a matter of the law. The law is binding on each of us, but, thanks be to God, there is also the Gospel. There is forgiveness too for what I today will call our political sins.

