

OUR BICENTENNIAL PRAYER AND GOAL: A NATION UNDER GOD

1) All of us are familiar with the words of the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands..." These thoughts were put into their familiar form by one Francis Bellamy in 1892 for a national school program to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, and have since been recited countless times, especially in our schools, and have become familiar to and beloved by all. In July, 1954, Congress voted to make a small but significant change in the wording of this Pledge of Allegiance, so that it now continues: "one nation, UNDER GOD, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

2) "One nation, under God!" These are fine sounding, impressive words, indeed. But exactly what do they mean? We need not concern ourselves here with what these words meant to those who proposed and voted the change in wording. No doubt there were a variety of understandings and interpretations, some good and proper, others misguided or even completely false. Rather let us determine from God's Word what they properly can and should mean for us as Lutheran Christians today.

3) Not only will such a correct understanding be of value in itself for us as American citizens, but it can also help us to celebrate our present national anniversary in a manner that will bring lasting blessings to us and to our beloved nation. We will let these words provide us with our theme for this bicentennial essay:

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Such a nation humbly acknowledges that:

- I God establishes a nation and its rulers.
- II God assigns proper functions to its rulers.
- III God appoints important duties for its citizens

I A NATION UNDER GOD ACKNOWLEDGES THAT GOD ESTABLISHES NATION & RULER

4) In his classic statement on the relations of the Christian to secular government in Romans 13 St. Paul says: "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." (Rom.13:1 - NIV) According to Paul, God is the originator of the governments that rule in this world. Is Paul correct? How is this to be understood? It may be of value for a correct understanding of Paul to look at the Old Testament to determine what it tells us about the origins of government. From the statement that God originated government one might logically conclude that at some point in Old Testament history God decreed: "Now you men are going to get a government; and this is how it is going to be!" Was that the case?

5) As we go through Genesis we find that it gives us no information as to any government that might have been organized before the flood. After the flood in Genesis 10 we find the listings of the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth which were born after the flood. We are told how these people spread out across southern Europe, southwestern Asia, and northeastern Africa establishing cities and nations. We read of the city of Babel and its ambitious but illfated attempt to disregard God's commands by building a tower that is to reach up to heaven, help keep all the people together, and make a name for them.

6) We meet Nimrod, famed as the "mighty hunter before the Lord." He is described as the first "gibbor," a strong man or despot. Beginning with Babel he expands his despotic rule over three other cities in the Plain of Shinar. Then, ambitions still unsatisfied, he moves 200 miles up the Tigris valley to build Nineveh and three additional cities there. Empires and imperialist expansionism may be said to have begun

here. Delitsch comments rather fittingly: "This first chief of state represents rebellion with his name; (the Hebrew root from which "Nimrod" is formed means to rebel) and despotism with his rule." ¹ The next ruler we meet is one of the Egyptian Pharaohs. When Abraham seeks to escape a Palestinian drought in Egypt, Pharaoh's courtiers quickly spot Sarah's rare beauty and try to add her to Pharaoh's harem. Fearing for his life, Abraham had instructed Sarah to say she was Abraham's sister. By a plague God intervenes and tells Pharaoh to keep his hands off Sarah, and Abraham and Sarah are ushered out of the country. Using beautiful women as proofs and badges of high political office and using the power of political office as a means for giving free reign to lust were not invented in Washington.

7) Genesis 14 brings us a whole list of political firsts. We now have kings rather than strong men (no less than nine in one story). There are military alliances, armies, and battles. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, going down to defeat, are forced to pay tribute to King Chedorlaomer and three allied kings from Babylonia. After twelve years of paying tribute Sodom, Gomorrah and three neighboring cities get fed up and refuse any further tribute. This brings another expedition by Chedorlaomer and his allies. In the ensuing battle the armies of Sodom and Gomorrah are put to flight, the cities are captured and thoroughly plundered, and many inhabitants, Lot among them, carried off as hostages or slaves. Here Abraham intervenes. He organized 318 of his servants into a little army, overtakes, surprises, and routs the armies from the east and brings back all the captives and plunder.

8) The first rulers mentioned in the Bible clearly are not an especially godly or noble lot. In fact this picture of early nations and

their rulers in Genesis reminds us of present day conditions. Russians are "just visiting" all across eastern Europe. Cubans and Russians turn up in Angola to help assure victory for the right party in a three way civil war. Coups bring strong men to power in several South American countries. If we can judge by appearances, the aggressors "shall inherit the earth."

9) But what does our brief look at early rulers and governments in the Bible suggest concerning the origin of governments? Well, we see a variety of governments. Abraham with approximately a thousand servants (assuming there were comparable numbers of women and children) might be called a ruler, something like the Arabian desert chiefs still found today. His informal, patriarchal rule surely was kind and good. He organized his 318 man army only in defense of Lot. His refusal to accept any of the plunder from Sodom and the other cities which was offered him proves he was the opposite of rapacious men like Nimrod and Chedorlaomer. And surely the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High God, who blessed Abraham on this occasion, must have been a wise and good ruler. But on the other hand we have energetic, ambitious, power-hungry Nimrod building up an empire at the expense of anyone and everyone in his way. We notice how Chedorlaomer finds a way to help his "neighbors" (they lived almost a 1000 miles away) by relieving them of their excess cash. We notice that kings become all the fashion of the day so that every city, even Zoar, of which Lot a little later told the angel: "Is it not a little one?" boasts a king.

10) But where in all this beside the incident at the tower of Babel do we see the hand of God ordaining and establishing governments? Was

Paul politically naive and totally innocent of the facts of political life from the days of Nimrod to Nero. Paul certainly was fully aware of the governments described in Genesis and aware of the similarities to "heroes" like Herod. Paul then clearly could not have intended in Romans 13 to say that God establishes governments through direct intervention, dictating the form of government to be used and the rulers to be selected. Paul certainly was fully aware of the human element we notice in the establishing and toppling of governments. But he also understood that God had a hand in this in that he created man in such a way that, whenever his numbers grew he felt a need for a form of organization, for leadership and authority to preserve peace and order. God created mankind so that some men have a talent and inclination to step forward and become leaders when the need arises.

11) Luther pointed to the example of Cain as evidence that man was created with a need for government. ²When Cain murdered Abel there was no government. There was no commandment that said, "Thou shalt not kill." No Word of God that said: "Whoso sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," (Gen. 9:6) no police to arrest Cain and punish him. Nevertheless Cain was afraid: "Everyone that finds me will slay me," he complained. God is a God of justice and order. Man, His creation, has a knowledge of God's holy law in his heart, he has a sense of justice, and feels a desire for the order and authority to provide them. And so he establishes authority and government in every type and size of nation.

12) Another factor in the establishing of governments is God's general rule and control of the world which He created, which is referred to as Divine Providence. Paul told the Athenians on Mars' Hill: "From

one man He (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." (Acts 17:26-NIV) Thus while strong men, kings and emperors are convinced that they are in full control of their land, according to Paul, it is God who controls the rise of nations and sets the limits of their growth and expansion. He also determines the times when new empires arise, and when they again will fade from the scene. Moses expressed similar thoughts: "When the most High divided the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the people." (Deut. 32:8)

13) But not only does Scripture teach that God sets the general outlines of history and the basic courses of nations. He also "has a hand" in the rise and fall of individual rulers. In Romans 13 Paul said: "There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." In the course of His trial before Pilate, Christ told that proud Roman: "You would have no authority over me, unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:11-NASB) Hundreds of years earlier Daniel had told Nebuchadnezzar, at the time the greatest ruler on earth, "He (God) changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings." (Dan. 2:21) Even proud and successful Nebuchadnezzar himself, after God had afflicted him for a season with insanity, so that he lived like an animal in the wilderness, when he had been restored to sanity and to his rule, confessed: "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He will." (Dan. 4:32) When the Bible describes Christ as "Lord of Lords and King of kings," (Rev. 19:16) it is ascribing to Him this divine work of controlling all nations and their

rulers.

14) Now our understanding has difficulties harmonizing the Scriptures' teaching that God is in full control of the existence of nations, with what we observe in this world, where it appears that men, especially the mighty and aggressive in high places, run things. But the teaching of God's Word is clear. Let us trust it and find comfort and reassurance in it.

15) But someone may ask: if God is in complete control of all nations and governments, does that mean that the human rulers are mere robots, automatically doing what God has programmed them to do? And if God picks our presidents, is there any use in voting? If the power that rulers have to do either good or evil is given them from above, doesn't that mean that God ultimately is responsible for Herod's slaughter of the Innocents, for the horrors of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau, for the barbarity and injustice of a "Gulag Archipeligo?"

16) God's activity of controlling the affairs of all nations is as has been said, a part of what is termed His Divine Providence. This has been defined as the activity according to which "God actually preserves and governs the whole universe and all individual creatures in it through His omnipresence and His omnipotence," as Pieper puts it.³

17) The fact that God in His omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence rules all things does not exclude the existence or functioning either of the laws of Nature or the human mind and will. Rather God so directs them and uses their effects that His will is done. In spiritual matters we men are by nature slaves of sin. We do not have the ability to choose what is good. All our decisions, all our actions are tainted, corrupted by sin. But in the everyday affairs of this life

we do have a certain freedom of choice. We can choose to get up in the morning, or stay in bed; to wear a blue shirt or a white one; to vote Democratic or Republican. We can decide and we are responsible before God for our decisions. Although He is unalterably opposed to sin, and punishes it, God permits man to sin. Yet He uses also the sinful actions and decisions of men as well as their consequences to His own good purposes. "All things work together for good to them that love God." (Rom. 8:28)

18) Perhaps the best illustration of how the will and working of God and the desires, decisions, and actions of men combine ultimately to accomplish what God wills is the story of how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. The brothers wanted to vent their jealous anger on Joseph and sold him as a slave. Potiphar was looking for a slave and bought Joseph. Pharaoh's butler and baker wanted someone to interpret their dreams. Joseph was there in prison to do it, thanks to Potiphar's wife. Through the Butler Joseph came to interpret Pharaoh's dream and become prime minister of Egypt. God used the evil thoughts and actions of the brothers and Potiphar's wife to place Joseph where he could be instrumental in saving the lives of the members of his own family and countless Egyptians in the great seven year famine. "Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good, to save much people alive," is how Joseph explained it to his brothers later.

19) Thus we must say that when governing authorities do wrong, whether on a small or large scale, they are responsible for and will be judged before God for their actions. If they carry out some evil plan successfully, we must say that God has permitted that evil, but we may also be sure that He will turn it to ends that are just and ultimately

good. God is in control. He IS the King of all kings, the Lord and Master of all emperors, dictators, and presidents.

20) A nation under God? Yes, indeed! In a sense the congressmen who voted the change in wording of the Pledge of Allegiance were wasting their time. ALL nations are inescapably under God. He controls the history of all. The important question is whether the rulers and citizens of our country remember and acknowledge that fact.

21) "One nation, under God." May those words, as often as we recite them, remind us that all we are and have as a nation has been entrusted to us by the Almighty. Truly, we should be overwhelmed with a sense of God's great goodness and our own unworthiness of so great blessings. We sing: "This land is my land, this land is your land," let us recall who gave us a land so fertile that, for example, we can export two-thirds of our wheat crop. The over six billion bushels of corn farmers expect to harvest would surely dwarf the stores of grain gathered by Joseph during the seven good years. We enjoy a largely healthful, favorable climate, great mineral resources, and an infinite variety of scenic beauty, that should move us to sing with a grateful heart:

"O Beautiful for spacious skies, *Beyond a sunset*
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain
America, America!
GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON THEE!"

22) Nor is that all by far. The Lord of all nations has blessed our citizens with health, energy, discipline, and a great abundance and variety of talents. We regularly take these for granted. But our returning foreign missionaries often comment about them. Only rarely in its two hundred years has any portion of our land been touched by the

searing hand of war. Tranquility and prosperity have been the rule, especially during the last one hundred years.

23) In addition - and this is one of God's greatest blessings - we have a government not of strong men, despots and tyrants, but government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Since 1789 the highest authority in our land has been a constitution which guarantees to us such precious freedoms as: freedom of religion, worship, and conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of the Church from the control and interference of the State, so that we can meet to worship where and when we please, according to God's Word and our consciences, so that we can confess Christ and testify to our faith without hindrance or fear. We can voice our opinions in all matters without danger of reprisal. Surely in this Bicentennial we should thank God for giving us founding fathers with the political wisdom and vision to form an instrument of government that is strong and yet flexible.

24) We have been blessed too with talented, faithful, and upright government officials. We should be grateful that by and large our officials have not exploited or abused their power and privilege while in office. In public and in private, as individuals and as a nation we have the greatest cause to acknowledge with heartfelt praise the good that is ours as a nation - under God. We have reason to raise anew the old patriotic song:

"Our fathers' God, to Thee,
Author of liberty, to Thee we sing:
Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King.

II A NATION UNDER GOD HUMBLY ACKNOWLEDGES THAT
GOD ASSIGNS PROPER FUNCTIONS TO ITS RULERS

25) What is the basic function of government? Ask a number of people that question and one most likely would receive a wide variety of answers. About April 15th many would be tempted to complain that the basic function of government seems to be to separate citizens from their money. Someone who has had an unhappy experience with government regulations might have the impression that it is a function of government to tie everyone and everything up in ^{red} tape. Absolute monarchs of former centuries looked upon government as an institution to satisfy their whims, fulfill their desires, and to jump and run at their every beck and call.

26) In Romans 13:4 Paul says of the governing official: "He is a minister of God to you for good." (NASB) God established government in this world for a purpose, His purpose. And so Paul can correctly call government a servant of God, a minister or servant intended for our welfare. It is not government's basic function to annoy, frustrate, or impoverish people, but to be helpful and beneficial in their lives and affairs. Government is to be involved in questions of good and evil, good and evil in as far as men's relations with each other are concerned. Luther said, "Government exists to keep people from doing harm to each other."⁴ Government is to protect its citizens from the attacks and violence of criminals.

27) We are told specifically how government is to do this. "Rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. (Rom. 13:3 - NASB).

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Government is to act as a deterrent to evil, using fear as motivation. We all have seen that being done. Several cars may be speeding recklessly along a freeway, but let a squad car appear and suddenly the drivers decide that 54 mph is the most desirable speed to maintain. That is deterrent in action. So is the policeman walking his beat, the squad car cruising along dark back streets. The officer positioned where everyone can see him at a large assembly serves that same function. So do signs that forbid trespassing or other transgression and then spell out the penalty for infraction of the law.

28) Paul points to another role of government in protecting citizens from crime when he says: "But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing." (v.4 - NIV) Today we might think of a sword as a decorative addition to a uniform, or as a weapon that was used to fight with long ago. For the Romans a sword was perhaps the most important weapon in war. One used ~~For the Romans a sword was perhaps the most important weapon in war. One used~~ it to attack one's enemy and defend oneself. But the sword had an additional meaning for the ancient Romans. It was the means used to execute a Roman citizen who was sentenced to death. ^{Condemned} Roman citizens ^{were} decapitated with a sword. Paul says government officials don't carry a sword for nothing. They can and may use it on evil-doers. We agree that Paul used the term "sword" as a symbol for all forms of punishment administered by governments in enforcing law, but surely that original Roman meaning is not excluded.

29) For quite some years there has been a movement to abolish capital punishment. Among the reasons given are the arguments that the Bible says, "Thou shalt not kill," and that the Old Testament decree: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," (Gen. 9:6) is not in keeping with the New Testament spirit and its emphasis on mercy and forgiveness. ^{However} There is nothing in Paul's words to support such arguments. Rather government is authorized to use punishment, the ultimate punishment if need be, in combating crime and criminals and

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protecting law-abiding citizens. Paul certainly would not have agreed that to carry out the death sentence is murder, as some today insist.

30) There seems to be growing confusion in our day over the function of police, courts, and penal institutions. People debate whether reform or retribution should be their main goal. All would agree that it is most desirable that criminals be convinced to change their attitudes and ways. However, the evidence that our justice departments have effective means to do so is less than convincing. Meanwhile many are forgetting or rejecting the idea that a primary duty of the law and justice departments is: Justice. Surely all citizens would or should favor that the constitutional rights of persons arrested and convicted of crime be fully safeguarded, even if they cannot afford an attorney, but to let concern for these result in ignoring the plight of the victims of crime and the safety of the rest of society is to lose sight of the basic function of government. For example, to parole criminals because the prison is crowded would appear to be valuing the health and comfort of the criminal more highly than the safety of those citizens who have not broken the law.

31) Paul's next phrase is worth noting in this connection: "He is God's servant, an avenger who brings wrath on those who do evil." (Rom 13:4). The opponents of capital punishment repeatedly point to the fifth commandment and argue that government should not transgress such a simple clear command. In Romans 12:19 God says: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." But in chapter 13 Paul expressly states that the right of carrying out vengeance, of meeting out retribution to the wrongdoer is bestowed by God on the secular government. When government punishes a guilty criminal it is acting as God's servant, Paul says, and is giving concrete expression to the wrath of God over against sin.

32) It is appropriate that we remind ourselves of what a blessing it is that we have governments and government officials who are responsible for apprehending and punishing criminals. If every individual took it upon himself to avenge himself and his family, the long, bloody feud between the Hatfields and the McCoy's would very likely have had too many counterparts to be famous. Dodge City, Deadwood, and Tombstone wouldn't have been unusual enough to attract tourists. There are numerous reports of fatal fights, stabbings, and shootings in the paper day after day as it is. What would they be if there were no police, if it were up to the victims and their relative and friends to catch and punish the wrongdoer? Vigilante actions, mob justice, and lynchings and shootings may make exciting television fare, but none of us would care to live where they prevailed.

33) Yes, to protect its citizens from violence and harm is a basic, God-given function of government. But violence and harm may also come from another source beside the local criminal; namely, in the form of an enemy attacking and invading the country. Although, Paul does not explicitly say so, the government, it is generally agreed, is obligated to take the necessary steps to defend itself militarily against any neighboring countries that threaten it. It has the right to raise and maintain the armed forces necessary to do so, and to equip them with effective weapons. It is justified in maintaining a defensive force adequate to be an effective deterrent to a belligerent neighbor.

34) While we are speaking of protection from ^{violence} ~~violence~~ we might call attention to a service which our constitution provides, not ^{so} provided in many a government, that is the provision for regular, orderly succession. We do not very often think of ^{it} ~~them~~ in that light, but our system of fixed terms of office and elections to select successors not only gives us a voice in deciding who will

govern us next, but also has effectively spared us the coups and bloody power struggles, that accompany changes of government where there is no such order.

35) Now let's go on to other functions of government. In his major work on the Christian's relation to government, "On Secular Government," Luther makes the point that Christians really do not need a government. If only true Christians are living together, they, out of faith and love for God and each other, will voluntarily do all that any law demands regarding their neighbors, and therefore, no police, no government would be needed. While we all understand and basically agree with Luther's point, it is also true that, from a practical point of view, all Christians, even the most sanctified, find various forms of government useful and necessary. Christians regularly organize a form of government, a constitution, rules of order, and officers, in conducting the affairs of their congregations and its organizations. They do so not because they fear some members will be disorderly and lawless, but because a certain organization and order lends itself to more effective and efficient working together. Similarly secular governments offer a number of services or functions that we might lump under the heading: "Order."

36) Jesus was once asked if it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. This was a very touchy question at the time, hotly debated by most Jews. Many insisted that it was contrary to God's Word and will as expressed in Deut. 17:15 where the Jews are commanded not to choose a foreigner as king. To settle the question Jesus asked for a coin of the type used to pay taxes. When it had been brought Jesus asked whose image was stamped on it. They replied: "Caesar's." Jesus responded with the familiar words: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." By calling attention to

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the image ^{which} the Roman government had stamped on this coin, Jesus was pointing out that all the Jews, even those who objected most heatedly to paying Roman taxes, regularly used Roman coins, and so were making use of a very convenient service provided by the Roman government. In return for the convenience of using Roman coins they were under obligation to pay taxes to the Roman government. Coinage is only one of a considerable number of such services which are regularly provided for citizens, services which help citizens carry on the affairs of daily life more smoothly and efficiently. What would happen to our economy if we tried to go back to a system of barter, or if individuals had to make their own medium of exchange. What confusion, what haggling! Coins and bills of fixed, uniform value certainly make our shopping trips shorter and less complicated.

37) Similarly our governments set uniform units of weight and measure and check to assure that merchants' scales are accurate. When was the last time you checked to see whether you got full weight? ^(Pound) We all were reasonably prompt in arriving ^{the morning} and our convention could begin on time at 10:00 a.m. as announced, courtesy of the government, which long ago, in cooperation with other governments around the world, established international time zones and one uniform time, regulated according to the sun with great precision. Via radio, television, and telephone the correct time is accessible to us all at a moment's notice. If you resent, rather than appreciate, the clock's pervasive power over your life, talk to one of our missionaries who work in a culture where people don't live by the clock. Sunday School may be announced for 10:30, but children arrive anytime between 10:00 and 1:00. When do you actually start? A very frustrating and time consuming little problem. Another service we rarely give a thought to is the surveying and mapping of land and recording of ownership. What difficulties there would be in establishing ownership of a property without

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these services. Government regulates traffic and all transportation. Can you imagine the mayhem that would result if every driver made up his own rules? Many more instances of such useful government regulation could be cited. They serve to prevent friction, smooth the processes of living and working together and seek to assure that we don't harm each other unintentionally.

38) Another wide area in which governments have since ancient days been involved might be described as "promoting the general welfare." At the suggestion of Joseph and under his supervision the Egyptian government gathered and stored grain during the seven good years and sold it during the seven years of drought. Irrigation projects of rather extensive scope were carried out in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates long before Christ. The Romans built long aqueducts to bring water to Rome and other large cities of their empire. The present finds governments involved in a great number of such projects. Cities lay water mains and sewers. Dams are built for flood control, irrigation; hydro-electric power, and to facilitate navigation. Highways, ^{Bridges} airports, canals, harbors and other large projects are built in all parts of the land. Scientific research is carried on, on a vast scale. And, of course there are the schools, high schools and colleges providing educational opportunity at all levels for all who want it, and services to the sick, the poor, and the aged are offered on an ever larger scale, all for "the general welfare."

39) At various times, I imagine, all of us grumble about and question the wisdom, necessity, or feasibility of one or the other such projects. God's Word offers no real guide^{lines}. ^{Here} Reason and Common sense must be our guides. The benefits must be weighted against the cost in rising taxes, increasing regulations, and loss of choice and self-determination. The majority, if not all, of us would, I should think, ~~agree~~ agree that we all benefit in many ways from a large

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variety of government services, so that we must agree here too, "He is a minister of God to thee for good." A nation under God will recognize gratefully how much God blesses us through the wide variety of services government performs for the general welfare.

40) Governments do provide good services in an impressive number of areas in our life today. In fact, some people are so impressed with the accomplishments of governments that they seem convinced that all of man's problems can eventually be solved by passing laws, voting money, and creating more government bureaus. And men begin to entertain visions of a "Schlaraffenland," a Utopia, where illness, poverty, and all ills of society are successfully overcome. Such hopes and visions are surely appealing. But there are some hard sayings in the Bible that should help us to maintain a sober realism: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake." (Gen 3:17) "The creature was made subject to vanity." ^{Christian}

(Rom. 8:20) No government is going to get us around them. No welfare state is going to undo the effects of the Fall more than superficially. Mankind is not destined to lift himself into heaven by means of Government Issue bootstraps. ^(on a heaven or earth)

41) Clearly there are limits to the functions of government, and to the services that government can effectively provide. It would be well for our nation if our governing officials remembered at all times that their plans and programs also are under the control of the Almighty, that if they are to succeed, He must grant it. The besetting sin of rulers throughout the ages has been that they come to think of themselves as gods with unlimited authority, unlimited power. Pride and vaulting ambition have beclouded the perception and judgment of many a king and president, and their nations have suffered for their folly. But we must go on to speak of some specific limits to government set by God.

42) In Romans 13 Paul teaches that God established governments as His servants to and among men. Governments, therefore, clearly do not have, and are not to seek to exercise an authority higher than God's by issuing laws or ordinances which call on citizens to disobey or ignore God's moral law. Luther put it like this: "The temporal government has laws which extend no further than life, property, and external affairs on earth. God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, where the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads and destroys them"⁵

43) In the first part of this study we pointed out that God does not intervene directly and visibly to establish governments and rulers; but rather works through human and earthly means and causes. There was one very notable exception to that rule, God's people Israel in the Old Testament. God Himself brought the nation of Israel into existence through a series of miracles beginning with the birth of Isaac. He Himself set the framework of its government and its social and religious life by giving them a complete code of laws - the Law of Moses. He led Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua. He Himself chose each of Israel's rulers from Moses to David, directly. This was a theocracy, rule by God Himself.

43) Israel's theocracy came to an end after it had fulfilled its purpose and the Messiah had arisen from its midst. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple clearly signaled its demise. Although, many of the Jews were expecting the Messiah to renew and restore the theocracy, Christ did not do so. He called for no rebellion against Rome. He did not make an appeal for loyalty and patriotism to a renewed Jewish nation. Rather he said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." There he pointed to the dual responsibility of the New Testament believer to an

earthly kingdom or government and to the Kingdom of God. Christ told Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world." Rather, he explained, his was a kingdom ruled and controlled by the Truth, the Truth of the Gospel. Neither Christ nor any of His Apostles made it their business to tell the Emperor, or Pilate, or Herod how to run the Empire. Although, they did not use the terms, they recognized and practiced the separation of church and state.

44) Unfortunately, the wisdom of their word and example was disregarded by both church and state in the Middle Ages. Proud princes claimed the right to hand-pick bishops. Popes and bishops claimed and tried to exercise ultimate authority over emperors and kings. Western Europe was looked on as a "Christian realm" with a dual leadership: the Pope, in charge of spiritual matters; the Emperor in charge of the secular. Meanwhile, throughout the Middle Ages, there was an intense power struggle between the princes of the Church and the princes of the secular state, both seeking power and supremacy over the other.

45) When the Reformation came, the secular princes as well as bishops and popes became involved in its essentially theological struggle. Duke George of ducal Saxony, for example, ordered all his subjects to turn in their copies of Luther's new Bible translation. Any student who attended Wittenberg University was to be executed. George was very determined to keep the Reformation out of his land.

46) Luther and the Lutheran Confessions pointed to and sought to restore the New Testament concept of church and state as separate and different types of kingdoms, each with its own God-given functions. Luther said, "Temporal authority and government extend no further than to matters which are external and corporeal."⁶

On the negative side, concerning the attempts of secular governments to control the spread of heresy, the Reformer remarked: "Heresy can never be restrained by force. Here God's Word must do the fighting. If it does not succeed, certainly the temporal power will not succeed either, even if it were to drench the world in blood."⁷ Thus, Luther clearly taught that the use of the Means of Grace, the preaching and teaching of the Gospel and the use of the Sacraments belong to and are the work and concern of the Church alone. On the other hand, Luther and the Confessions insisted just as strongly that the Church should keep its hands off the functions and means of the state: "There belongs to the bishops no jurisdiction except to forgive sins, judge doctrine, reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from communion of the Church wicked men, whose wickedness is known, and this without human force," simply by the Word."⁸

47) Unfortunately, these truths and principles were not fully realized in ~~the~~ practice in Lutheran lands. After ^{the} break with Rome, new administrators and leaders had to be found for the new Lutheran Church. Luther called on the princes of the land to serve as "Nothelfer," as emergency administrators. They readily agreed to do so. As often happens, an emergency, stop-gap solution was never replaced, but hardened into the permanent arrangement, becoming the state church still in existence in European countries today, in which the administration of church affairs is to a considerable extent in the hands of a bureau of the national or territorial government, with the secular government thus having a large say in the work of the church.

48) In the Reformed Church under the leadership of Calvin developments were different, but surely not better. The historian G. P. Fisher says this of the Reformation as it was structured in Geneva: "Under Calvin's influence new

ecclesiastical and civil order was created. It was the duty of the state to foster the interests of the church, to carry out its requirements, and to inflict temporal penalties on those who disobeyed its rules. The Old Testament theocratic view was held to be still applicable. In the constitution which he created at Geneva the jurisdiction of the church was extended over the details of conduct to such a degree as to abridge unduly the liberty of the individual."⁹

49) But God moved "in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." What Luther called for but never saw fully realized, what Geneva - and Rome too - opposed, was realized here in a predominantly Reformed America, to a considerable extent through the influence of Deists. Although a number of the colonies were founded by single religious groups and originally had established churches, the Constitution established separation of church and state, safeguarding it by the Bill of Rights. We surely have much reason to thank God for this development.

50) But attempts to "have the state foster the interests of the church" continued to be made. Attempts have been made, and very likely will continue to be made to gain funds from secular governments to support the educational institutions of the Catholic Church. Some from the Reformed tradition have sought to use state and federal legislatures to bring about a state of sanctification fitting for a "Christian Nation." "Blue Laws" and Prohibition were two successes that crowned their efforts. Evident still in the words and actions of various individuals and groups, most often of Reformed background, is the old theocratic idea that identifies a secular nation with the Church, the People of God, and equates national developments with the growth and progress of the Kingdom of God. This was most explicit perhaps in the Abolition Movement up to the Civil War. For an Abolitionist the Civil War was a holy war to advance

the cause of Christianity. Julia Ward Howe expressed that idea plainly in the familiar "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword.
His Truth is marching on!"

To a lesser extent similar sentiments were expressed concerning the "War to make the World Safe for Democracy" and the War for the Four Freedoms." A certain fanatic "crusader zeal" evidenced itself, confusing the political sphere with the spiritual with unhappy results. While we dearly love our country and highly treasure and prize our democratic system of government, we are mistaken and deceiving ourselves if we Americans think that we are a new "Chosen People" living in a sort of new "Promised Land," if we identify the Kingdom of God with the USA and its form of government and think, to paraphrase Mr. Knutsen of G. M.: "What's good for America is good for the Kingdom of God and vice versa."

51) "A Nation under God!" If by that phrase we mean to boast that we are a people and a government obedient to God, more obedient to God and more zealous in His service than others, then let us never use it again. Then we are making ourselves hypocrites. Has our government carried out its functions uprightly, justly? How does God judge our treatment of the American Indian? How much were some of our wars "defensive?" Have our officials always devoted themselves whole-heartedly to their duties, resisting the temptations to use their office to gain power, fame, wealth, and personal pleasure? If we are going to be honest in using the phrase "a nation under God" and refer it to our government and citizens we dare only use it as prayer and a goal not fully realized, a prayer for humility, wisdom and dedication to their God-given functions for our rulers.

III A NATION UNDER GOD ACKNOWLEDGES THAT GOD
APPOINTS IMPORTANT DUTIES FOR ITS CITIZENS

52) In going on to our third and final thought we return to Romans 13 where Paul also speaks most fully about the duties that God expects citizens to carry out. "Everyone must submit himself to Government authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Rom. 13:1 - NIV) The most important question in the relationship of citizen to his government is one of attitude. What is the proper attitude for a citizen toward his government? The reflexive verb Paul uses might be translated very literally: "To arrange, position, or place oneself under, hence, to submit, to obey.

Voluntary submission or obedience is the proper attitude toward governing authorities and their requirements. Most people do obey their government regularly, but out of fear, simply because they don't want to be punished. Christians, too, recognize and

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respect government's power to punish. "But if you do wrong, be afraid, Paul says in verse 4. But we have a stronger, a positive motive. We recognize that God has established government. He has placed our officials over us. They are God's servants, God's representatives and so we willingly accept their rule over us.

53) Paul's principle is all-inclusive: "all," literally, "every soul" is to obey. Thomas Muenzer, the radical reformer taught that the Gospel frees Christians from the normal stations and institutions of life. Christians, he said, must rebel and set up the kingdom of God. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, maintained that priests, monks, and nuns are under the government of the Pope and therefore, even if they should commit a crime against civil law, are not subject to arrest and punishment by secular governments.

Luther and the Lutheran confessions said: "Let it (the Church) not break into the office of another...let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience." ¹⁰⁾ Paul

told Titus: "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good."

(Tit. 3:1 - NIV) Likewise Peter, writing in the face of the first great persecution under Nero wrote: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority, ^{instituted among men / whether to the Lord or to the emperor,} or to the governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

(I Pet. 2:13 NIV) We might also point out that Christ, the Son of God, acknowledges that Pilate did have power over him. Paul and the other Apostles acknowledged and submitted to the authority and rule of Jewish and Roman officials over them. We, too, will willingly place ourselves under the direction of all government

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officials over us, and under the commands of the laws and constitution of our nation and state. 54) Are there any limits or exceptions to the obedience we owe government? There are, indeed. But, most likely, not of the sort we are looking for. We would be inclined to say: OK, I'll obey the government - unless I don't like the official, or the law, or the party, or the present form of government, or the way the present government came to power. None of these are valid reasons for disobeying government. "The authorities that exist have been established by God." Paul said. That means the government that is actually running things now. Americans might protest the idea of a man appointed by Nixon being president. But there is no question as to who is in the White House. We have no permission to oppose or tear down a government, either our own or others, because we don't like its form or philosophy. We have no permission to be selective in our obedience and obey a law only if we feel it is fair, but disobey those we find unfair.

55) The only situation in which Scripture gives us reason to refuse to obey a ruler or law is when we are ordered to do what God forbids, or forbidden to do what God commands. When the people of Babylonia were ordered to worship a golden image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego told Nebuchadnezzar, "We will not serve thy God, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

(Dan. 3:18) When the Apostles were commanded to speak no more about Jesus, they refused to obey, saying: "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) Early Christians went to a frightful martyr's death rather than obey the Roman demand that they

repudiate Christ and say: "Caesar is Lord ." When Duke George commanded his citizens to turn in their German Bibles, Luther advised them to refuse and say: "Gracious sir, command me within the limits of your authority on earth and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey, for then you overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority."¹¹⁾ If today a government would tell a Christian surgeon or nurse that they must perform an abortion, they should follow their conscience and refuse. We should however add that the fact that a government orders us to carry out a command contrary to God's Word does not give us permission then to rebel against that government entirely. We ought only to disobey the specific command that is not in agreement with God's Word. In other matters we still owe obedience and allegiance. And if we must disobey a command or law, then like the three men in the fiery furnace and like the Apostles, we should be ready to suffer the consequences.

56) It might be in place to add that Romans 13 and the other passages on obedience to government do not demand a slavish, frightened obedience to government or a fawning, boot-licking type of servility to any ruler. Examine the conduct of Christ or the Apostles before government officials. They did not cringe and grovel. Nor does God's command to obey government prevent us from making the fullest use of the rights guaranteed by law. Nor under our constitution and government does it prevent us from working for the repeal of a law we find unwise or objectionable (on non-religious grounds), or from working for the passage of a law that is

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more to our way of thinking.

57) But let's return briefly to the question of the Christians attitude toward his government. We might say that our attitude is, or ought to be, the exact opposite of the Marxist revolutionary. He believes that any non-Marxist government is corrupt and evil, and he seeks by any and all means to bring down that government, or, failing that, at least to weaken it wherever possible. He foments revolution; and where people are not interested in revolution he tries to discredit the government in the eyes of its citizens by terrorism and guerrilla action, trying to prove that the government cannot protect its citizens, that it is incompetent, and has many enemies.

58) The Christian, on the other hand, will seek to defend, support, and strengthen his government, even though it has weaknesses and failings. The Jews who were carried off as captives to Babylonia had reason to resent and feel rebellious toward the Babylonian government. But through the prophet Jeremiah God directed them to: "Seek the peace of the city...and pray unto the Lord for it." "In the peace thereof," God explained, "shall ye have peace." (Jer. 29:7) As Christians we are citizens of a far off kingdom. There only will we be truly and lastingly at home. Yet for now the land where we live is our land, too. Its government is our government ~~for the present time~~, its welfare, our welfare.

59) As Christians it is our duty to support and strengthen our government. How can we do that? There are several things we

can do. One is very practical and concrete. In verse 7 of Romans 13 Paul instructs us: "Give everyone what you owe him; if you owe taxes, pay taxes, if revenue, pay revenue." If we recall what Paul told us about the divine ordering of government and recall the services we all do enjoy through it, we should be motivated to fill out our 1040 forms as fairly as we can with a minimum of grumbling, realizing that this is God's will and an opportunity to support our government in return for its many necessary services.

60) Paul goes on in that same seventh verse to mention another means we have of supporting our God-given government: "Give everyone what you owe him...respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Similarly Peter said: "Honor all men...honor the king" (I Pet. 2:17- NIV) Especially at state occasions kings and presidents are showered with respect, with ceremonious bowing and scraping. In the golden days of monarchy the heaping up of honorific adjectives extolling the virtues of the nobility was carried to absurd lengths. Even today in our democratic society people usually show due deference and respect to officials when dealing with them face to face. But what they do behind their back is another matter entirely. It is then that their real attitudes come out.

61) We Americans seem to have a special urge to scorn, ridicule and belittle with our sharpest satirical barbs those whom WE have elected to our highest offices. There certainly is a place in politics for humor, and it is only natural that incumbants of high

office should also be the butt of jokes. But to consistently picture a president as an imbecile and block head is demeaning not only to the man and the office, but also to our country. And this kind of vicious caricaturing can lessen a man's ability to function effectively as leader. God calls on us to hold our leaders in respect in spite of their human failings.

62) This would seem to be a proper place to bring up a question related to honoring governing officials, namely, the question: What does God expect of us when an official betrays the public's trust and is guilty of malfeasance in office? First of all, we Americans should thank God that the Founding Fathers provided for an orderly procedure to examine such a case fairly, arrive at a decision, and if the man is found guilty, to remove him from office. As long as such an official continues in office, he should be obeyed as otherwise for the sake of good order. If a man is removed from office for malfeasance, or resigns, that cannot help but lessen our respect for, our opinion of, the man. This should not, however, lead to making the man the object of special scorn and hatred.

63) But we must return to the subject of the duties of citizens. In addition to supporting our government by a generally positive attitude, the showing of proper respect, and the paying of taxes, there is another broad opportunity open to us. That is to enter government service. The radical reformers of Luther's day insisted ^{that} it was wrong for a Christian to become involved in the sinful world, that Christians should not participate in any way in secular government. Luther and his co-workers strongly

rejected this view. They pointed to the examples in the New Testament. The Roman soldiers and officials who came into contact with John the Baptist, Christ and the Apostles were not told to leave their positions, but rather to avoid abusing or exploiting people, to deal honestly and fairly according to their duties.

Luther strongly encouraged young men to enter government service:

"After the office of the Ministry, the secular government is the highest form of service."¹²⁾ Again, "It is necessary to keep

the best boys for this work, for in the ministry Christ does everything through His Spirit. But in the kingdom of the world one must use reason...for God has subjected temporal rule and the things of the body to reason, and has not sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to do this work. Governing is therefore the more difficult task."¹³⁾ If Christians have the necessary talents

they should be encouraged to seek elected office, or professional government service. Christians who have positions in other callings should be willing to serve on juries, boards, and committees. Luther emphasized that in such positions one would be serving the Lord and the needs of one's fellow citizens. In an age of deteriorating moral standards, of corruption and scandal in government there is a crying need for men and women who can be the "salt of the earth," who are not conformed to the immoral ways of so many in the world. We need people who fearlessly follow conscience and God's Word and offer their government and their fellow citizens honest, upright, and dedicated service.

64) God has placed us under the blessing of a democratic government. With that privilege there also goes the responsibility

of being an informed citizen, of regularly studying the issues of the days and the record or qualifications of the candidates for political office before each election. Each of us has a voice, a small share in the governing of our country. We Christians ought to consider the exercising of our right to vote as a most important matter. And we ought to vote not just for our own narrow self-interest, but earnestly take into consideration the welfare of our city, state, and nation. If politicians are guilty of making bigger and bigger promises, with less and less real possibility of delivery, it is at least in part because we voters have indicated by our ballots that that is what we wanted.

65) There is another related service and duty that is ours as Christian citizens seeking the best interests of their country and government. We might call it "speaking up." Luther has been blamed at times for the alleged docility, the lack of outcry and protest on the part of the Germans in the face of the excesses of the Nazi regime. Luther has not deserved this charge. "Christ has shown us and has given us a precept, that we should not muzzle the truth before the "grosse Hansen," i.e. the "big shots," and nobility, but rather admonish and rebuke them on account of their injustice. For there is a great difference between these two things: suffering injustice and violence patiently on the one hand, and chastizing them on account of their injustice on the other. We should suffer injustice and violence, yet we should not keep silent. For a Christian should bear witness to the truth, and should be willing to give up his life for it." (A comment on Christ's words to Pilate.

If we are concerned about some matter, if we feel strongly, or are sure that something is wrong, or a particular cause is just and right, we should speak up. Various channels are open to us, discussions with friends or fellow workers, a letter to our newspaper, to our congressman, or even to the President is not out of place. We have the right of free speech. Our love and concern for our country could lead us to make fuller use of it. We will, of course, take care not to destroy the effect of our words by being disrespectful, or by becoming annoyingly repetitious.

66) We can speak up on behalf of our country and its government in another way. That is speaking to God in prayer. Paul instructed Timothy: "I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." (I Tim. 2:I-2) Of all the duties and services we can perform for our nation, surely this ought to be of highest importance. Some only criticize and condemn even the best efforts of our ruling officials. Those officials are weak, fallible humans just as we are. In our complex age the burdens of rulers are great; human knowledge, insight and foresight are all too limited. What finer service can we render our rulers and our country than to go frequently on their behalf to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to ask Him to enlighten, guide and bless our officials daily, as Luther urged in his explanation of the Fourth Petition in the Large Catechism: "We (should) pray that He give to emperors and kings, and all estates, and especially to the rulers of our land and to

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all magistrates, counsellors, and officers wisdom, strength and success, that they may govern well." In an election year such as this we have reason to pray the more frequently and earnestly that God may give us a wise and good president for the next four years, that He keep from us war, famine, pestilence, and other disasters. It is to be regretted that few congregations ^{regularly} include in their Sunday prayers a petition for the government such as we have in the General Prayer. If nothing else, let us make up for this lack with increased private prayers for these important concerns.

Finally, there is one more very important service or duty that we can render to our nation and government. That is to bring up our children to be God-fearing, law-abiding, patriotic Christian citizens. One of the darkest clouds on our national horizon recently has been the rapid growth in crime and lawlessness and destructiveness, especially among young people. If this should continue, it ^{certainly} bodes ill for our country. It is still true that "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." (Prov. 14:34) Only the Gospel of Christ can transform hearts and lives. ^{Then} Let's devote our very best efforts to preaching and teaching God's saving truth to our children and all who will listen. What better thing can we do for our land? As our Prof. Fredrich put it: "Christians ^{citizens} are still the best resource of our ^{country}." If our Lord gives us growing numbers of them then we will in the best and truest sense of the words ^{be} become: A Nation under God.

FOOTNOTES

1. Franz Delitsch, Commentar ueber die Genesis, p. 306.
2. Martin Luther, Luther's Works, v 45, P. 86.
(Hereafter: L.W.)
3. Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, v 1, p. 483.
4. Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke, (Weimarer Ausgabe) V 45,
(Hereafter: W.A.) p. 114.
5. L.W. v 45, p. 105.
6. Martin Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, (St. Louis Ed.) v 9, p. 1042.
(Hereafter: St. L.)
7. L.W. v 45, p. 114.
8. Augsburg Confession, Art. 28 in Concordia Triglotta p. 81.
9. George P. Fisher, History of the Christian Church, p. 329.
10. Triglotta, p. 85.
11. L.W. v 45, p. 111.
12. St. L. v 5, p. 707.
13. ibid. v 10, p. 443.
14. W.A. v 28, p. 361.
- L%. Triglotta, p. 721.

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