

## Civil Righteousness versus Civil Religion

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There is a distinction between civil righteousness and civil religion. To endorse the one is not to endorse the other. Civil righteousness is a gift of God to fallen mankind through the Law. Civil religion, on the other hand, is a creation of men and interferes with the Gospel. It can never be in accord with God's will.

Civil righteousness is a gift of God, but it is wrong to equate it with the Kingdom of the Left, the State, government, or the United States. When people equate what the Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions say about civil righteousness with their particular form of government, then it becomes unchristian to criticize that form of government, its rulers, or their decisions. Apology XVI, 56-58<sup>1</sup> uses a variety of terms ("the state," "states," "political association," "public state," "outward governments") to describe civil government. "This variety of terms not merely designates the identical form of government from different points of view but leaves room for the variety of forms of civil power, monarchy, estates, democracy, and others."<sup>1</sup> Luther believed that those in the office of the public ministry, but not the laity, were *required* to rebuke civil rulers openly and publicly.<sup>2</sup> While Luther believed that the particular government at any time in actual existence had divine sanction, even if they opposed the Gospel,<sup>3</sup> he also believed "those who occupy these offices are usually put there by the devil,"<sup>4</sup> and that the "vast majority" in secular government "will always persecute Christ, His Word, and those who are His."<sup>5</sup>

Equating civil religion which men establish with civil righteousness which God works through the Law leads to the same problem that confusing civil righteousness with your particular form of government does. If civil religion is civil righteousness then it becomes a Christian duty to say the Pledge of Allegiance, to have an American flag in the chancel, to participate in civil

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religious services, and to support whatever actions your government takes. If civil religion equates to civil righteousness, one dare not say as C.F.W. Walther did that America “drew up a religionless constitution.”<sup>6</sup> Such a view is tantamount to heresy in the minds of Americans who believe civil religion is God-pleasing civil righteousness. To them, you are denying the true God when you deny the god of American civil religion or say that our founding fathers did not write the Constitution as a religious document.

What then should a 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutheran think of the call to recognize and embrace American civil religion in the name of good citizenship and civil righteousness? While we are called to respect secular government and civil righteousness, we should not tolerate equating them or making either into a religion.

Civil righteousness is what God brings about through the Law that is written in men’s hearts and preached by God’s men. The teachings of the Second Table contain civil righteousness according to The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (IV, 34). It is not the activity of government per se that brings about civil righteousness, but government that acts in accordance with the Second Table of the Law. Left to itself the State will not act this way. Without the preaching of the Second Table and the subsequent heeding of it by men, governments develop that do away with private property in violation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment, sanction human sacrifice contrary to the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, and ignore marriage in violation of the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Likewise, without the spiritual office proclaiming the divine dignity of civil government and its incumbents, no one can know that these are from God.<sup>7</sup>

Yet not every use of civil power, every law enacted by men, every decision by the State “can be equated with the activity of God through his establishment of civil government.”<sup>8</sup> This means that God is not to be considered the avenger through every sentence passed down by a court or

through every war waged by a government. Our Apology XVI, 53 recognizes God at work when “**just** punishments” are set and “**just** wars” are fought.<sup>9</sup> There is a standard by which what a government does is to be judged moral or immoral, just or unjust. That standard is the Second Table of the Law. Apology IV, 7 says that to some extent natural human reason understands the 10 Commandments especially the Second Table. “Thus,” concludes German scholar Edmund Schlunk, “the second table of the law, even in the distortion of the natural knowledge of the law, is the norm in the laws of the lawful pagan government.”<sup>10</sup> A government, says Luther, “should punish all sins forbidden in the Second Table.”<sup>11</sup>

Then should we work toward having a Christian government? While Walther did believe that the Americans who formed the United States “wanted to do it as Christians, for they subscribed ‘In the year of our Lord,’” he also believed they wrote “a religionless constitution.”<sup>12</sup> Luther did not think it was possible to have a Christian government in this fallen world. “It is out of the question that there can be a common Christian government over the entire world or, for that matter, over one country or a great number of people; for the wicked are always more numerous than the pious.”<sup>13</sup> Evidently, though Luther lived in a time when, for the most part, Christian monarchs ruled the world and all of Germany, he did not believe there was a Christian government. This could be the reason why the Confessions do not hold up the German nation as an ideal or template. They refer to the German nation only in the Preface but not in the doctrinal articles.<sup>14</sup> A civil righteousness can be found in many forms of government, but no Christian righteousness can be. The Treatise bristles at the idea that “Christian righteousness was assumed to be the outward government the pope had established” (34).

What then are we to do with Article XXI, 44 of the Apology where a civil ruler is lectured about his ruling? “To God above all you [Emperor Charles] owe the duty to preserve sound

teaching and hand it down to future generations, to defend those who teach what is right. For God demands this when He honors kings with His own name, calling them gods, saying, ‘I said, “You are gods”’ (Psalm 82:6). They should work toward the preservation and growth of divine things, that is, the Gospel of Christ on the earth (Acts 12:24).” This *is* what all rulers owe “to God,” and they will be held accountable by Him, but this is not a call to civil government but to Christians in that government.<sup>15</sup> Joseph, Daniel, and other Christians *in* government have worked for the growth of the Gospel. It is different matter to work to establish a Christian government. This confuses Church and State and civil and Christian righteousness.

Civil righteousness which God brings about in accordance with His Law. We confess in the Apology, “For God wants wild sinners to be restrained by civil discipline. To maintain discipline, He has given laws, letters, doctrine, rulers, and penalties” (IV, 22). Civil righteousness protects authority, lives, marriages, property, and reputations. When civil righteousness breaks down, the devil, the world, and the flesh run wild. However, civil righteousness comes about through the Law not the Gospel. It rules the sinners by bit, bridle, and lash. It does not serve them by forgiving their sins but by punishing them.

While civil righteousness serves men “in spite of sin and under death and the devil,”<sup>16</sup> it does not liberate men from sin, death, or the devil. Indeed, it preserves man in the realm of sin, death, and the devil.<sup>17</sup> Being preserved in a fallen world is a great good, but not the greatest good. The greatest good is being delivered from this vale of tears for Christ’s sake to God in heaven. Civil righteousness preserves sinners alive, so that they can have the Gospel preached to them which does free them sin, death, and the devil, but preaching the Gospel is the office of the Church not the State.

Civil righteousness and all that support it are not ends in themselves. These can only maintain us in this fallen realm, the very realm which the Lord Himself He did not want us to live forever in (Genesis 3:22). When they are viewed as ends, then government, the State, and civil righteousness are regarded as supreme goods, the path toward human freedom and perfectibility. When governments are viewed as ends in themselves, they take on an importance and power which the Lord did not want to give them and the early Christians were careful not to give them. In an essay dating to the mid-1950s, H. Richard Klan, an LCMS professor, observed about the early Christians, “To them the state, so far from being the supreme instrument of human emancipation and perfectibility, was a strait jacket to be justified at best as ‘a remedy for sin.’ To think of it otherwise they considered the grossest of superstitions.”<sup>18</sup>

Civil righteousness maintained by the State not only serves man but the Church. Our families, lives, marriages, property, and reputations are protected and preserved by civil righteousness. The Apology maintains that it is lawful for Christians to use civil ordinances for such things (XVI, 53). In the Large Catechism we confess about civil government “that it is our duty to honor them and to value them greatly as the dearest treasure and the most precious jewel upon earth” (LC, I, 150.) Our Formula of Concord rejects those who think government office is not a godly estate and that a Christian cannot with a clear conscience hold an office in government (SD, XII. 16, 17). Moreover, while Luther believed that those in the ministry are required to rebuke civil rulers, he did not believe lay people should. “But if you are not in office, then leave off all rebuking and criticizing, both public and private.”<sup>19</sup>

In their proper spheres, civil righteousness and the institutions God has set up to further and maintain it are good and godly. The Church furthers and maintains civil righteousness by preaching, teaching, and living according to it. The State furthers and maintains it by

establishing and enforcing laws according to it. The problem comes either when civil righteousness is equated with whatever the State does thus making the State a self-validating entity( that is a god) or when civil righteousness is regarded as God-pleasing apart from Christ thus making civil righteousness equal to Christian righteousness (that is a religion).

There is a paradox here much like the Christian is a servant to none and yet servant of all. Civil righteousness is good and godly, and yet civil righteousness is sin before God. This is a paradox Rome would not confess. In Luther's 1536 work *The Disputation Concerning Justification*, he refutes the reasoning of Rome on civil righteousness. They argued, "A divine ordinance is not impious. Civil righteousness is a divine ordinance. Therefore, it is not impious." Luther replied, "I said before that our righteousness is dung in the sight of God. Now if God chooses to adorn dung, he can do so. It does not hurt the sun because it sends its rays into the sewer."<sup>20</sup> Likewise Rome argued, "A divine ordinance is not godless. Civil righteousness is a divine ordinance. Therefore, it is not godless." Luther replied, "With respect to God. For in us it is defiled, since we are godless and corrupt."<sup>21</sup>

How can what is good before all men be sin before God? How can the Boy Scout doing his daily "good turn," the little boy refusing to tell a lie, the neighbor supporting his family be sin before God? These are in accord with the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are certainly holy but not necessarily the person following them. Civil works done according to the Ten Commandments are sinful if not done by a Christian. This is a repeated theme of our Lutheran Confessions. "The following is also false and dishonoring to Christ: People do not sin who, without grace, do God's Commandments" (AP, IV, 28). "If the carnal mind is hostile against God, the flesh sins, even when we do outward civil works" (AP, IV, 33). "People truly sin, even when – without the Holy Spirit – they do virtuous works" (AP, IV, 35). "But it is false

to say whoever performs the works of the commandments without grace does not sin” (AP, VII, 72).

Civil righteousness can rise no higher than the Fourth Commandment,<sup>22</sup> and that is not high enough. No truly good thing can be done before God apart from Christ. Without Him we cannot do *many* things or even *some* things, but *nothing* (John 15). Article V of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession asserts “that the Law cannot be kept without Christ and that if civil works are done without Christ, they do not please God” (63). Even civil works done by a Christian do not please God in and by themselves. Apology IV says that “when we begin to fulfill the law it is not pleasing before God in and of itself...For we must always believe that we are accepted not on account of the law, but on account of Christ...The virtues of the law, insofar as they are in accordance with the law, are righteous acts, and to that extent this obedience of the law justifies with the righteousness of the law. But this imperfect righteousness of the law is not accepted except on account of faith, nor is it able to bring peace to consciences. Only faith brings that about – faith which is confident that on account of Christ the high priest we have a gracious God” (Kolb-Wengert edition of *The Book of Concord*, page 149).

The true God does not shed His grace on anyone apart from Christ. Every U.S. dollar has the motto *Annuit Coeptis* which is Latin for (literally) [*God*] *has nodded (nods) in approval of our things begun*, but the truth is God smiles on nothing apart from Christ. In fact, while it could be said that the Christian monarchies of the past did indeed kiss the Son as prescribed by Psalm 2, it is manifest that democratic, socialist, and communist regimes do not. Thus, the judgment of Psalm 2 is that the true God’s wrath is kindled against them.<sup>23</sup>

How harsh this sounds to American ears! What about all the fine, good, and noble things done by America and Americans? When a disaster strikes anywhere in the world who is the first to

help? Which country sends her soldiers around the globe in an effort to wipe out oppression? What other country has ever inscribed a statue with the words, “Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shores,/ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”? Yet all such glorious works when not done in Christ are not done to Him, and are, therefore, sin. And when men trumpet them as anything else, the apex of sin has been reached: works-righteousness.<sup>24</sup> Our Lutheran Confessions are careful not to do this. They will not praise civil righteousness at the expense of dishonoring Christ. “We cheerfully credit this righteousness of reason with the praises that are due it. (This corrupt nature has no greater good.)...However, it ought not to be praised by dishonoring Christ” (AP, IV, 24). Christ is dishonored when men believe they can approach or please God apart from Him.

German scholar Edmund Schlink, having witnessed what happens when civil righteousness is regarded as God’s, saw that the civil justice that crucified the innocent Christ was really no different than the civil righteousness that disregards Him. “As once Christ was crucified by an ordered process of civil justice, so now civil righteousness and human piety remain his enemies without and within the church.”<sup>25</sup> Because works of civil righteousness are almost always accompanied by appeals to pray to God and/or that God might bless them and us, Christians mistakenly think the works in and of themselves are God-pleasing. But our Confessions do not think a general belief that God exists and punishes the wicked and rewards the good is sufficient. “In addition to this faith, we require that each one believe that his sins are pardoned” (AP, XII, 60). That is, we require particular faith in Christ and His atonement.

When men make civil righteousness pleasing to God apart from Christ, they establish a religion contrary to Christianity. But this is not obvious to your average Christian in America. This is

due in part to the fact that contrary to the French Revolution which grew out of an attack *on* religion and Christianity in particular, the American Revolution was accompanied by a demand of freedom *for* religion. The predominating religion at the time was Christianity. Therefore, the common misconception is that America was founded as a Christian nation, and supporting her somehow furthers the kingdom of Christ. This is mixing Christ and politics. Luther said this was the work of Satan and that he sought to do it in his time as well. “Satan continues to be Satan. Under the Pope, he mixed up the Church with politics; in our times, he seeks to mix up politics with the Church.”<sup>26</sup>

Even though everyone knows that America believes in the separation of Church and State, there is a mingling in the hearts and minds of men. Schlink states, “According to the Confessions no constitution can permanently safeguard the distinction of the two powers.”<sup>27</sup> He goes on to note that just because people distinguish the two powers “does not necessarily mean also separation of church and state.”<sup>28</sup> Without a real separation between the two in our hearts and minds, particularly in the area of what is righteousness before God, the civil realm cannot be called to account. The famed Soviet dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn lamented concerning the Soviet Union, “We have lost the measure of freedom. We have no means to determine where it begins and where it ends.”<sup>29</sup> This is what happens when men know of no Law above their government, no righteousness above the civil. This is a failing not of the State but of the Church. When the State fails to serve her people, it harms their bodies, but when the church fails she harms their souls. When the church allows civil righteousness to be regarded as the righteousness that avails before God, she is in fact acquiescing to the establishment of a civil religion. Civil religion pleases fallen men and serves their goals, but it does neither in the case of the true God.

Augustine says in *The City of God* that “in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love.”<sup>30</sup> Americans love God and country. While there is command to do the former there is no Biblical command to do the latter, but try suggesting that to most anyone 60 years old or older. They will bristle. Try suggesting that perhaps by loving country they are giving to Caesar what properly belongs to God. They will do more than bristle. These people know of a third commandment in addition to loving God and neighbor. Your country is also to be loved. This is not uniquely American. The problem comes when people don’t see the distinction between God and country. Civil religion always blurs the distinction. Augustine saw that this is what happened in the case of Rome. The unseemly elements of mythology were taken up into Rome’s civil theology.<sup>31</sup> This in turn led “wicked and most impure spirits” taking possession of the hearts of stupid citizens.<sup>32</sup> In order to support their State, the Romans ended up believing they had to accept the gods promoted by their civil religion. American Christians who accept civil religion as their religion do the same.

This is easy to do because the civil religion of America has come to be thought of as Christianity. Benjamin Franklin said, “He who shall introduce into public affairs the principles of primitive Christianity will change the face of the world.”<sup>33</sup> America’s founding fathers did not do this; later Americans did, particularly the Reformed. While a Lutheran sees a benefit, even an obligation, to humanize the State, the Calvinist seeks to Christianize it.<sup>34</sup> Luther believed that it is always “false clerics and schismatic spirits” who want “to teach people how to organize the secular government.”<sup>35</sup> The Reformed think it their duty and for a time they succeeded. In 1892 the Supreme Court in the case of *Holy Trinity Church vs. U.S.* formally declared the United States to be a Christian nation. In 1905 the Court affirmed this judgment.<sup>36</sup>

Being a good American became equated with being a Christian, and being a Christian meant being a good American: waving the flag, saying the pledge, believing that America's causes are always just and her wars God-pleasing. This is how Americans were raised for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But there is serious problem with equating your Church and State. It makes the Church essentially a cheerleader for the State. Karl Barth saw this in Nazi Germany. "To identify herself in the slightest measure with any political cause, such as that of the Allies, would be to misconceive her task as being that of supplying the "accompanying music" to the frightful noises of the world."<sup>37</sup> This is a mingling of the two kingdoms. Schlink, who too experienced Nazi Germany says, "The essence of tyrannical power is the mingling of spiritual and civil authority."<sup>38</sup> This is what establishing a civil religion does. It equates civil righteousness with Christian righteousness, and therefore, the works of man with the glory of Christ.

Fallen man naturally does this because as our Confessions note fallen reason cannot "see righteousness other than the righteousness of the Law, understood in a civil sense" (AP, V, 273). As Luther observed all people will have something they worship. "For no people have ever been so corrupt that they did not begin and continue some divine worship" (LC, I, 17). But as the next sentence of Luther's shows, this is not a good thing. "Everyone has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessing, help, and comfort" (LC, I, 17). When the State becomes what man looks to "for blessing, help, and comfort," this is civil religion, and it serves not the true God, nor even the "parishioners" of civil religion, but the State.

Lutherans are well aware that religion has often been used to hold a nation together and to discourage independence of mind particularly in spiritual matters. In the Reformation era, they saw the religion of the ruler become the religion of the land. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they saw a ruler try to force Lutherans into one religion with the Reformed. In World War I, they saw German

soldiers marching off to war with “God is with us” stamped on their belt buckles. In modern times, they hear people decrying doctrine because it divides countrymen. Through all of this, Lutherans have witnessed the interplay between State and Church, and Lutherans have learned to be on guard when the State wants to enter into the realm of religion. C.F.W. Walther could quote with approval Luther’s dictum that government should not be promoting religious beliefs. “ ‘The government should not hinder what everyone would teach or believe, be it either Gospel or falsehood. It is sufficient that it teaches to guard against rebellion and war.’ ”<sup>39</sup> Lutherans have never wanted the State to promote or even defend what they believed, but governments have wanted to be in the business of believing.

This is true of America. For the seal of the United States Benjamin Franklin suggested a religious slogan, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”<sup>40</sup> John Leland, a prominent Revolutionary-era Baptist pastor, presented President Jefferson at the White House with a 1,235 pound cheese on New Year’s Day, 1802. It was molded in a cider press supposedly from the milk of 900 cows. The cheese was inscribed with this same motto.<sup>41</sup> Governments in general cannot help but enlist religious sentiments in their support. Religious sentiments are powerful, and they give a sanctity and divinity to the plans, purposes, and programs of men.

Furthermore, the governments of men cannot afford to have men judging them by a standard above government. Although America came into existence by appealing to God-given, inalienable rights, although almost two-hundred years later she could alter her Pledge of Allegiance claiming that she wished to be “under God,” this has not been in fact how she developed. God is no longer the source of America’s laws. The Supreme Court has ruled that women have the right to kill their unborn children. States have ruled that homosexuals may marry and that parents have no right to know if their minor children are getting birth control or

abortion. When Americans accept as true such gross outrages against God-given laws, they are saying that their government has authority above God. To whom you look to as the source of authority and law, this is your god. Civil religion wants you to look to the State. Investing the State with religious sacredness makes this easier.

It is true that the office of civil government is God's creature even when the person occupying the office does not honor or even recognize the Creator, but it is false to equate the laws of the State with the divine institution of government.<sup>42</sup> When we do, we are in effect establishing not the kingdom of the Christ but that of the Antichrist. On the Last Day spiritual and civil power will again be united, but it is the Antichrist who seeks to unite the two before that day by demanding the recognition of his laws as God-given. Only Christ is both king and priest. The Antichrist pretends to be.<sup>43</sup>

Civil religion combines what God meant to be separated until the Last Day. This serves the governments of men who recognize no other day other than the one they are currently living in. Note well that when politicians invoke the blessing of God they never have any other day in view other than the present. While the true God is concerned with that eternal day, a reality above and beyond this one, the governments of men never reference that. While the true God works all out in this day in view of the Last, today is an end in itself for fallen men. Therefore, when government invokes the God of eternity, they do not do it for eternal reasons, eternal causes, or eternal blessings, but solely for the here and now. They only have use for His name, His power, and His authority for the here and now and not for the hereafter. Yet, this is above all why fallen men need the true God. Augustine thought this was the reason Christianity troubled Rome. She enlisted people in the service of a “ ‘higher and nobler country’ ”<sup>44</sup> than the one they lived in.

Not only does civil religion serve the State more than the citizens, it gets in the way of true religion and its eternal purposes. The Boy Scouts of America are an example. If ever there was an organization that embodied the civil religion of America, it is the Boy Scouts. Like true religion, the Boy Scouts firmly believe in following the Second Table of the Commandments. But unlike true religion, the Boy Scouts will not confess the Triune God. The First Table of the Commandments is followed in their view by believing in a Supreme Being. However, this is really nothing more than the faith of the devils, a belief that God is. Such faith is contrary to the First Table, and therefore, even if Second Table works follow they are not regarded by God.

There is no doubt that the Boy Scouts of America teach some very important things: respect towards authority, attention to duty, outdoor skills, etc. However, they get in the way of learning the most important thing, i.e. that all people even faithful, sincere Boy Scouts fall short of the glory of God and are lost unless brought to faith in the redemption that is in Christ. It was for this reason that the LCMS at one time said, and the WELS and ELS still say, that membership in the Boy Scouts is not compatible with membership in the Christian Church. The Boy Scouts along with the Lodge were rightly regarded as religious institutions because they did not merely wish to train and rule over men's bodies but over their consciences too.

Civil religion gets in the way of true Christian religion because it seeks to separate what God never intended to be separated: the two Tables of the Commandments. This is a common feature of all religious errors that attempt to establish righteousness before God apart from the holy life and innocent suffering and death of Christ. The Reformers readily recognized this over against Rome saying, "Civil works (i.e., the outward works of the Law) can be done in some measure, without Christ and without the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, from what we have said, it seems that what belongs only to the divine Law (i.e., the heart's affections toward God), which are

commanded in the First Table, cannot be done without the Holy Spirit. But our adversaries are fine theologians. They focus on the Second Table and political works. They don't care about the First Table. They act as though the First Table were of no matter" (AP, V, 9-10).

Most people can readily see that the State cannot have Christian righteousness as its basis. Then the criminal who confessed his sin and clung to Christ in faith would be declared forgiven and righteous. Whom the State addresses as "criminal," the Church addresses as "saint" in Christ, but anarchy would result if the State "spoke" as the Church. Spiritual anarchy results when the Church speaks as the State. The State addresses the man who follows the Second Table to the best of his ability without believing in the God of the First Table as a "righteous man." The Church must address such a one as "sinner," yea, even as "condemned, lost sinner."<sup>45</sup>

Civil religion cannot bear to have her saints called sinners because she knows no redeemer. Look at any modern day civil religious service, you will not hear sins confessed or admitted. Because they only acknowledge the Second Table which can be kept outwardly by man, they have no sins to confess. Not recognizing the First Table where the true God demands He be in the hearts, mouth, and ears of men, they believe their acknowledging of God as the creator and provider is sufficient.

Civil religion proclaims that being a "good American," you have God's grace and blessing. True religion proclaims that apart from Christ the "best American" is damned. When men believe they are sufficient before the true God based on their works, apart from Christ, this is works righteousness, and it interferes with true religion. The Lutheran Confessions oppose such civil works righteousness "more caustically than all open revolt and profligacy."<sup>46</sup> Holy Scripture holds out more hope for prostitutes than it does for those who hold to their own righteousness and disdain that which comes from Christ.

In addition to civil religion leading to works righteousness, civil religion equates the State, government, the kingdom of the left, with the nation. Our Lutheran Confessions deal with government as God's ordained office of civil authority. The modern conception of the State "embraces the entire ordered community of government and subjects." The Confessions do not have the modern idea that the State is the Nation, and, therefore more than the constituted government.<sup>47</sup> In civil religion the people of a particular State are thought of as "one nation under God." This unites all the people living in a land in a common religion beyond their differing confessions of faith. Once more this common religion can at its best never be anything more than a belief in a Supreme Being and a following of the Second Table of the Law as best one can.

A nation can be brought together into one people in this way, but the true people of God, the Church will suffer. The Church does not recognize national borders. The Church is the Body of Christ and exists wherever the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are celebrated according to Christ's intuition. When civil religion brings the people of a nation under one generic god, the true God of all nations is not honored. Civil religion preaches that the enemies of the nation are the enemies of god, when the truth of the matter is that all of the true God's enemies were defeated on the cross. If the Church buys into the notion that the State in which She lives with its particular form of government, with its particular people is the people of God, then Israel of old is reborn where the State is the Church and the Church is the State. Then to criticize the State is to criticize God, to fight in the name of the State is to fight in the name of God. Then there is no one left to call the State or its people in repentance to the true God and His righteousness that is found in Christ.

Civil government, contrary to Abraham Lincoln, is not “of the people” but of God. Civil righteousness too is from God. He brings it about through His Law. Civil religion, however, is not a creation of the true God and is in fact an abomination to Him. This is the position of our Lutheran Confessions.

The Augsburg Confession says that the heathen are without God, so any civil religion formed by them cannot be God-pleasing. “For the devils and the ungodly are not able to believe this article: the forgiveness of sins. Hence, they hate God as an enemy (Romans 8:7) and do not call Him (Romans 3:11-12) and expect no good from Him” (XX, 24-25). Indeed the Apology affirms that those who do not think about God as He has revealed Himself in the Trinity insult God. “We constantly affirm that those thinking otherwise are outside of Christ’s Church, are idolaters, and insult God” (I, 2). Indeed, lacking the Holy Spirit man can only be godless. “For without the Holy Spirit, human hearts lack the fear of God. Without trust toward God, they do not believe they are heard, forgiven, helped, and preserved by God. Therefore, they are godless” (AP, XVIII, 72). The Large Catechism admits that even the heathen know to have a god means to trust and believe. Their error is that their trust is false and wrong. Their trust is not in the only true God (I, 18-19). The Large Catechism goes on to criticize the faith that is found at most civil religious services. “It neither cares for [the true] God, nor looks to Him for anything better than to believe that He is willing to help” (I, 21). The true God remains an enemy of all false worship. “To this day He overthrows all false worship, so that all who remain therein must finally perish ( 2 Chronicles 7: 19,20)” (LC, I, 35). The Formula of Concord does not think it helpful that man persistently tries to approach the true God with reason. “First, mankind’s reason or natural intellect does still have a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God. It also knows about the doctrine of the Law (Romans 1: 19-21, 24, 32). Yet it is so ignorant, blind,

and perverted that even when the most ingenious and learned people on earth read or hear the Gospel of God's Son and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot by their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true. They want to understand these spiritual things with their reason. But the more diligently and seriously they try, the less they understand or believe" (SD, II, 9). While we admit that all men have knowledge of God to a certain extent, even the most pious civil religion neither knows Him nor glorifies Him correctly (SD, V, 22).

Therefore, think of the most pious civil religious service that you will. Think of men singing "God Bless America," or "America the Beautiful" and that God might "shed His grace on thee"; or think of men pledging that we are "one nation under God" and that "in God we trust." If these men know not the incarnate God, their singing and pledging is an offense to Him. Even if individual people do know the incarnate God, if they are gathered together in a civil religious service that must include everyone's god, they dishonor the true God who will not share His glory with anyone.

While we are called to honor our government and even praise civil righteousness as a good thing before men, we are equally called to shun civil religion and denounce it as an abomination before God. A Russian proverb says, "Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye; forget the past and you'll lose both eyes." Nothing good has ever come from the Church participating in civil religion. The civil religion of America at one time had no problem with slavery. The civil religion of Germany at one time had no problem with genocide. Unless the Church stands outside of civil religion, She cannot fulfill Her office of calling the civil realm to repentance.

The rush to participate in civil religion is almost always fueled by a desire to be good citizens in the eyes of others particularly those in government. Perhaps we should not place such a high

value on that. Luther once commented on the Christian king of Denmark, Christian II, saying, ““God takes kings with the same seriousness as children give to card games.””<sup>48</sup> This thought is in accordance with Holy Scripture, but Scripture in fact says that God takes them even less seriously than that. Isaiah 40:17 says, “All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.” Verse 23 goes on to say that the Lord “brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.” St. Augustine had this perspective as well. He said in *The City of God*: “For, as far as this life of mortals is concerned, which is spent and ended in a few days, what does it matter under whose government a dying man lives, if they who govern do not force him to impiety and iniquity?”<sup>49</sup>

Currently our government forces no one to the impiety and iniquity of civil religious services. Therefore we can joyfully live under it fervently praying that “we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1961), 248.

<sup>2</sup> AE 13, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Julius Kostlin, *The Theology of Luther*, vol. 2, trans. Charles Hay, (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 481.

<sup>4</sup> AE 13, 212.

<sup>5</sup> AE 14,277.

<sup>6</sup> *Moving Frontiers*, ed. Carl Meyer, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 353.

<sup>7</sup> Schlink, 275.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, emphasis original.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>11</sup> AE 2, 141.

<sup>12</sup> *Moving Frontiers*, 353.

<sup>13</sup> *What Lutheran Says*, ed. Ewald Plass, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 588.

<sup>14</sup> Schlink, 54, fn. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>16</sup> Schlink, 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Klann, “The Structure and Function of the Church”, *The Abiding Word*, vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 352.

<sup>19</sup> AE 13, 50.

<sup>20</sup> AE 34, 184.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>22</sup> Kostlin, 483-484.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolph E. Kurz, *Feminism & the Church*, (Palmdale: Omni Publications, 1991),163.

<sup>24</sup> Schlink, 228.

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- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 89.
- <sup>26</sup> Kostlin, 571.
- <sup>27</sup> Schlink, 263.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., fn. 28.
- <sup>29</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 143.
- <sup>30</sup> Augustine, "The City of God", *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Philp Schaff, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 19, 24, 418.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6, 7, 115.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7,27,139.
- <sup>33</sup> "Irenaeus Against Heresies", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 552, fn. 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Kurt Marquart, *The Church, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. IX, (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990),182.
- <sup>35</sup> AE 13, 194.
- <sup>36</sup> Ratibor-Ray M. Jurjevich, *The War on Christ in America*, (Denver: Ichthys Books, 1985), 278.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 184.
- <sup>38</sup> Schlink, 268.
- <sup>39</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. J.R. Mueller, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987), 222.
- <sup>40</sup> Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Waco: Word, 1982), 361.
- <sup>41</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 96.
- <sup>42</sup> Schlink, 239.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 281.
- <sup>44</sup> Augustine, *Epistle 91.1*, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 197.
- <sup>45</sup> Schlink, 262.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 75.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 259-260, fn. 27.
- <sup>48</sup> James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 209.
- <sup>49</sup> Augustine, "The City of God", V, 17, 98.
- <sup>50</sup> Collect for Pentecost X, *Lutheran Worship*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 71.

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