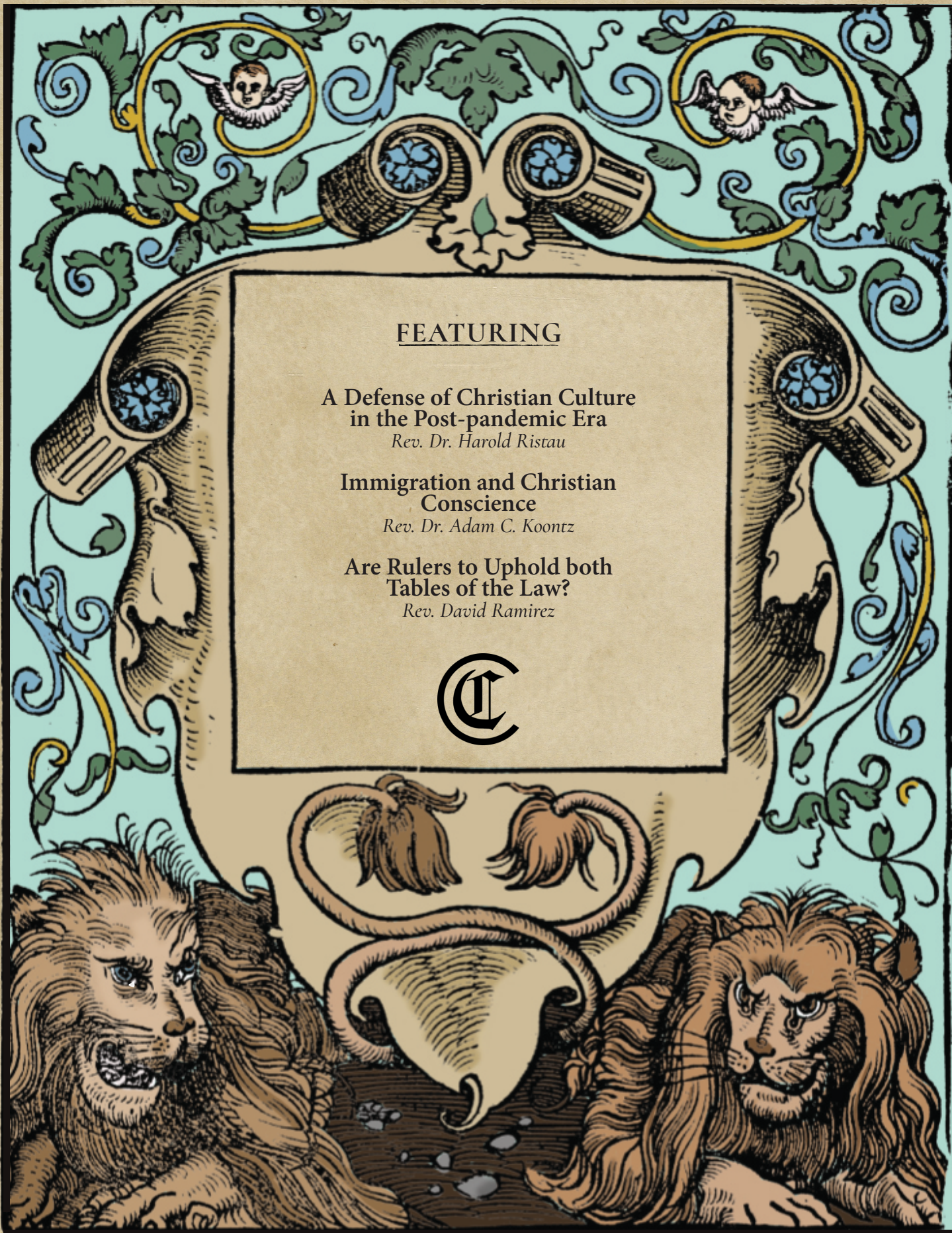


# Christian Culture

A MAGAZINE FOR  
LUTHERANS



## FEATURING

**A Defense of Christian Culture  
in the Post-pandemic Era**

*Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau*

**Immigration and Christian  
Conscience**

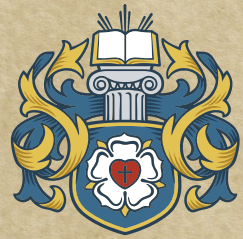
*Rev. Dr. Adam C. Koontz*

**Are Rulers to Uphold both  
Tables of the Law?**

*Rev. David Ramirez*







LUTHER  
CLASSICAL COLLEGE

# CALL FOR RECOMMENDATIONS — PRESIDENT — OF LUTHER CLASSICAL COLLEGE

On June 28 Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau and his family were denied re-entry to the United States after visiting family in Canada. A U.S. border officer determined that Dr. Ristau's previously approved immigration status was invalid due to his administrative role as college president. Following legal counsel and support from Wyoming Senator John Barrasso's office, LCC petitioned for reconsideration, which was ultimately denied. As a result, Dr. Ristau could no longer continue as president.

In response, the LCC Board of Regents has appointed Rev. Joshua Hayes, dean of chapel and a founding board member, as interim president. Meanwhile, the college has secured a new TN immigration status for Dr. Ristau under a faculty-only position. Pending successful re-entry into the U.S., Dr. Ristau will resume his work at LCC as a full-time faculty member, teaching theology and philosophy.

The Board of Regents has formed a presidential search committee and is seeking recommendations for presidential nominees from supporters of the college.

## HOW TO RECOMMEND A PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE

The Luther Classical College Board of Regents invites any

- A. member or pastor of a supporting congregation of the college; or
- B. donor to the college

to recommend qualified candidates by emailing us at [nominations@lutherclassical.org](mailto:nominations@lutherclassical.org). Please include name and contact information for the candidate as well as a description of qualifications for the position.

## DEADLINE

All nominations for president must be emailed to [nominations@lutherclassical.org](mailto:nominations@lutherclassical.org) before October 1, 2025. The Regents then will publish a list of candidates who have been nominated and let their names stand. May the Lord guide our steps!

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# A Defense of Christian Culture in the Post-pandemic Era

By Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau

**T**he public space has never been a theologically or morally neutral one; therefore, the Church has and will continue to heed the divine obligation to speak the holy Word of God into the public space. Only a godless culture would dare to claim that the public sphere is somehow neutral. The New Testament clearly announces the darkness of this present age (Eph 6:12). Yet, those who boldly lift their voices on behalf of the Church and her Lord in the public sphere—which is more important now than ever as we approach the final parousia—are facing intensifying persecution for doing so. Over the last few years, a frenetic buzz around Christian Nationalism has spread throughout our churches. Just as the apostle Paul evangelized more boldly in his most fiery trials, so also must we defend the traditional Christian and Lutheran response to anti-Christian public policy, rhetoric, and other subversive action against Christendom in our Christian vocations within all three estates.

In contrast to active Christian participation, the quietistic response of Christians today places a wedge between Church and state, claiming the role of the Church is limited to prayer, and that the role of a Christian is, at most, voting. This is neither Biblical nor Lutheran. In fact, it appears that those who most strongly advocate against Christian activity in the public sphere are the ones who failed to respond properly to the “pandemia” during the recent pandemic. They appear to hide behind the screed of Christian Nationalism as a reason to avoid participation in the public sphere and to justify what amounts to a soft-antinomian behaviour.

Prior to this pandemic, most of us had never heard of Christian Nationalism. Due to my participation in the peaceful protests of the Freedom Convoy in Canada in 2022, which sought to halt the government overreach of pandemic mandates into Christian lives and churches,<sup>1</sup> I was accused of being a Christian Nationalist by some local clergy who, instead of confessing that Christ is King of all

realms of life, believed in a juxtaposition of “church” and “state.” I found the accusation to be laughable, as I was not aware the term existed, and I was not alone. Enemies of the Lord have made Christian Nationalism into a powerful gaslighting term which dissuades Christians from fulfilling their vocational duties in the civil sphere for fear of becoming persona non grata due to their concerns about immigration, abortion, or the abuse of children through peddlers of gender dysphoria. By distorting the language employed in public discourse, the godless manipulate the parameters of discussion within it. Christians who are unaware of these political tactics cannot effectively contend for the faith.<sup>2</sup> In a society that is ill-equipped to think logically—due to the demise of Christian culture including, “Western reason,”—those who use Christian Nationalism as a slur are simply fear-mongering. Orthodox believers of goodwill must carefully interrogate this label itself, since certain things often dismissed as mere modern, reactionary, and novel “Christian Nationalism” do, in fact, have deep roots in historic Christian doctrine and practice.

For example, Dr. John Stephenson writes:

[F]or Luther in the Large Catechism “holy Christendom” (ein heilige Christenheit) is the ‘best and clearest’ rendering of the credal article of faith in the one holy Church (LC II, 48; BS8 656,26), so that Christendom and Church are synonymous terms. Since Anglo-Saxon times, “Christendom” has also had the wider sense of the geographical area over which Christ holds sway. It denotes not only the Church stricte dicta but also connotes cultures suffused with the Christian ethos. Ostensibly neutral definitions of Christian Nationalism, such as that found in the Encyclopedia Britannica,<sup>3</sup> bristle with sarcasm as an alleged belief system is accorded pariah status as an “ideology.” Moreover, a series of linked developments on five continents over twenty centuries is



*Rev. Dr. Maj. Ristau proclaiming Christ Crucified to a Canadian throng.*

flippantly dismissed. The incontestable influence of Christ and His Church on history and culture, which has undeniably uplifted many nations, is scornfully waved away. It is as though the godless mean to say, “Who could ever think that Christianity might be an ‘integral part of some country’s ‘identity’? What fool examining the historical data would ‘create or maintain a legal fusion’ between certain countries and the religion practiced by a majority of their citizens?”<sup>4</sup>

The fear mongers have even gone so far as to malign Christian culture through its association with Christian Nationalism. Their views are frighteningly aligned with those who advance neo-Marxist ideas that judge Western culture and most of its vicissitudes, like Christian values, as harmful and destructive to society. As every Christian is well aware, the alternatives today have been revealed as anti-Christian, unveiled in the prevalence of “Critical Theory,” which seeks to demonize Western civilization and Christendom, and to replace it with absurd alternatives that destroy the very pillars upon which the West is founded. Why would a Christian dispute the value of Christian culture and its aim to ensure that Christian principles, etiquette, and values—many of which are evident in natural law—underlay any

honourable society? Without these in place, civilization crumbles into barbarism. Even the new atheists appreciate the invaluable benefits of Christian civilization as the best option to all other alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

Clear illustrations of the horrific impact of the deterioration of Christian culture in the Western world, whether it be unsettling trends in public education or public policy, explains the increasing attractiveness of conservatism, traditionalism, common sense values and, in short, Christian culture. The popularity of Donald Trump can be attributed to what he represents: government accountability through an anti-establishment stance, a return to accountable governance, opposition to the secular religion of liberalism, and resistance to the threat of leftism. These political sentiments find counterparts in spiritual values based in the Holy Scriptures. Certainly, this fact should be self-evident among Christians, as any true Christian must, by definition, embrace a “conservative” worldview, which includes a political perspective, when it comes to the timelessness of God’s Law and Word.

Even the founding fathers of America did not boast a rigid separation of Church and state. The iconic language was intended to protect the life of the Church from overreach from the state, and not the



other way around. The outlandish argument that the Two Kingdoms somehow coexist as two self-contained silos was foreign to our fathers. Luther is clear on the Church's mandate to not only pray for, but to rebuke and advise the prince. The prince was required to protect the Church and the freedom to provide her services. It was a symbiotic relationship. Accordingly, faithful Christians are obligated to preserve and even advance Christian culture in the public sphere. Without it the safety and mission of Christ's Church on earth is at risk. The Old and New Testaments are threaded with precedents. Whether Isaiah or Jeremiah, Joseph or David, the prophets warned government officials of the consequences of ungodly rule and kept them accountable. Luther's distinction between two kinds of righteousness includes "civil righteousness," which obviously assumes some level of Christian moral expression in the estate of the civil sphere. It cannot be overstated that up until the age of revolutions in the 18th century, the notion of a radical separation of church and state was absolutely inconceivable. Those Christians today who oppose envisioning our Triune God as Lord over both appear to be the same people that were all too eager, however inadvertently, to hand over on a silver platter that which is God's to Caesar during the irrational panic of the recent pandemic.

Whether or not we acknowledge it, all of us as citizens have religious beliefs that influence public policy and legislation at all levels of government. Those concerned that Lutherans would go too far in proclaiming God's Word in the public sphere should consider how, according to their own descriptions of Christian Nationalism, St. John the Baptizer would come under their scrutiny. He is rightly praised as a martyr. On behalf of the Church, he condemned the immoral behaviour of government officials of the day, and he was executed by the state. Christians should rejoice in the Holy Spirit's call to "fight the good fight of faith" (2 Tim 4:7) even in the public sphere.

The first preacher of the beloved Lutheran Hour, Rev. Dr. Walter A. Maier, addressed these same issues a century ago and arrived at the same conclusion:

Despite everything radicals may try to tell you, keep this basic truth firmly implanted in your mind: Our colonies, later the States, were settled by men and women who were

Christians, who came to our shores, among other reasons, because they could here spread the Gospel, erect Christian churches, and worship the Savior according to His Word! Those early pioneers had their faults, of course, and I am not endeavoring to glorify something so far distant from us that its frailties cannot be seen; but for the most part, the people who built America were outstanding in their devotion to Christ. The Charter of Virginia assures its colonists the right to live together in "Christian peace" and instructs them to help "in propagating . . . the Christian religion to such people as yet live in ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God." The Plymouth Charter specifies that the colony is established "to advance the enlargement of the Christian religion, to the glory of God Almighty." The Delaware Charter defines one purpose of that settlement as "the further propagation of the Holy Gospel." Maryland's Charter explains that its first settlers were moved by a "pious zeal for extending the Christian religion." The Massachusetts Bay Charter emphasizes that Boston was founded by men who wanted to bring the new world "to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and the Savior of mankind." The early settlers of Pennsylvania came to America, according to their own declaration, for the spread of the "Christian religion." The Rhode Island Charter commits its people to the "true Christian faith and worship of God," and in the Rhode Island Compact the signers declare, "We submit our persons, lives, and estates unto our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." The Connecticut Constitution in its preamble pledges the settlers to help "preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ." The first article in the New Hampshire Charter begins: "We . . . in the name of Christ and in the sight of God." The oath that this instrument requires was to be administered in the name of "the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Savior of His people."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, rulers must take care to preserve, sustain, and advance the interests of Christ's Holy Church on earth, as well as ensure government overreach into religion is kept in check.<sup>7</sup> Even if one would

dare to argue that communism and globalism meet the material needs of their constituents, they have consistently proven themselves to stifle and maim God's beloved Creation, the Church, and the Gospel. Klaus Schwab, former leader of the World Economic Forum and considered one of the five most influential people on the globe,<sup>8</sup> had a clear agenda to penetrate world governments with such policies that subverted the interests of Christians.<sup>9</sup> Christians are wise to refrain from understating the influence of such deliberate agendas to silence Christ in the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> The accusatory shrieks of "Christian Nationalism" are often accompanied by squeals of "theocracy," another term used to bludgeon Christ's children when they dare to act politically. While we confess that ecclesiastical authority must not subsume political authority<sup>11</sup>—as it did in the medieval Roman Catholic system, with the Pope acting as head of Church and state—we likewise confess that rulers should uphold the right preaching of the Gospel and defend the Church against the devil's wiles.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we should be wary of the godless theocracy from leftist agendas that we find present in the supposedly neutral public space in America. Religious beliefs underpin all political parties. During the recent US presidential election of 2024, one presidential candidate told hecklers professing the Lordship of Jesus that they were in the wrong rally, while the vice-presidential candidate of the other party instantly responded to the same cries with the confession, "Yes, Jesus is King." During this same period, a portable abortion clinic welcomed attendees of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Only one Democrat congressman dared to vote for the Born-Alive Act passed in January 2025.<sup>13</sup> Lamentably, Harmeet Dhillon's Sikh "prayer" was not the first of its kind at a Republican National Convention.<sup>14</sup> In the recent American election, Christians were free not to vote for Trump, but it was hardly justifiable for any of them to vote for his adversary based on her anti-Christian policy recommendations alone. To suggest that moral, and thus, political positions that are even loosely tied to Christian concerns are a matter of adiaphora is simply another antinomian heresy condemned by our Lord.<sup>15</sup>

The massive number of Christians involved in the peaceful protests during the 2021 Canadian Freedom Convoy in the nation's capital stood against government overreach into Christian churches and families insisting that Caesar's usurpations be returned to God. It was an effort to

maintain clear distinctions between Church and state where they were so obviously confused. The Christian participation in these loving and family-friendly protests—crime in the capital was at an all-time low since the homeless were also being fed by volunteers—was a commendable outcome of Christian faith at work in the public sphere, as is petition-writing and communicating with senators, governors, and elected officials between elections.

Ironically, movements such as the Canadian Freedom Convoy, unrightfully labelled as Christian Nationalism, represented refreshing reactions against leftist and socialist "anti-Christian Nationalism," such as the kind of Neo-Marxist nationalism of Justin Trudeau's abusive regime. And this is precisely the point: there is no such thing as a neutral Left-Hand Kingdom; there is no such thing as neutral public space.


To reject "Christian culture" as a positive contribution to "secular" public space is to welcome any number of other religious cultures to take its place. When the former prime minister of Canada first came into office, he boasted that Canada has no shared values. "Canada is becoming a new kind of country," not defined by our history or European national origins, but by a "pan-cultural heritage." "There is no core identity," as Canada is "the first post-national state."<sup>16</sup> He also said, "There is a level of admiration I actually have for China because of their basic dictatorship."<sup>17</sup>

There is no ideal political system, including democracy, that can perfectly protect the holy ark of the Church as she wrestles with the waves of the world, but some forms are better than others. Christendom and Christian culture are natural consequence of active and lively Christian faith at work through the gathering of sanctified praying Christians. After all, faith produces good works. To deny or discourage the cultivation of the fruits of faith in the public square is to rob the Holy Spirit of opportunities to serve and evangelize through the hands, hearts, and minds of His holy people.

What fills the dark vacuum remaining when Christian culture is chased away? Look around you and see the bombardment of Western civilization once founded upon God's Word and Christ's Church. God is the sovereign Lord of all human institutions and history, and faith in God's providence has never justified a retreat from



vocational obligations in the public sphere, nor from being godly, public stewards of the gifts of God. Furthermore, Christians who criticize and discourage active Christian political participation indirectly embrace a national anti-Christian religion, which unabashedly pursues the demise of the Kingdom of God and the Gospel on earth.

Which is a greater threat to Church and society: the rhetorical phantom of Christian Nationalism or the real phenomenon of Christian apathy? 

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#### Endnotes

1. Quoting from a CTCR document from 1965—which I know is a bit controversial, and a somewhat improved version of it was published in 1974—that sought to ensure that, in good Chalcedonian Christological logic, the relationship between the two kingdoms is expressed in a Biblical and balanced way, without separation and with confusion: “There may conceivably be times when the state goes beyond its God-given authority and requires of its citizens that which is contrary to their consciences and their individual religious convictions. In such cases the church reserves the right to protest. However, since the church always acknowledges the state to be a divine institution, it does not resort to force. From the Biblical point of view violence, force, rebellion, and revolution are rarely justified.” *The Mission of the Christian Church in the World: A Review of the 1965 Mission Affirmations*, (St. Louis, MO: Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 1974), 7.

2. We witnessed this during the abortion debate by allowing the dialogue to be framed by a rights-based versus responsibility-based language. In spite of the existence of any civil or even human rights, mankind has a responsibility to care for the innocent. Further, with homosexuality debate, by adopting the language of LGBTQ+, Christians add legitimacy to the absurdity of the concept of more than two genders, or multiple identities present in one human being.

3. “Christian nationalism, ideology that seeks to create or maintain a legal fusion of Christian religion with a nation’s character. Advocates of Christian nationalism consider their view of Christianity to be an integral part of their country’s identity and want the government to promote—or even enforce—the religion’s position within it.” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-nationalism>)

4. From an early draft of Rev. Dr. John Stephenson’s “Aphorisms on Christendom in the shadow of ‘Christian Nationalism,’” *Ad Crucem News*, 2025, <https://www.adcrucem.news/p/aphorisms-on-christendom-in-the-shadow>.

5. When Constantine “Christianized” Roman society, he improved it, making it a better version of itself by asserting

human dignity, equality between men, banning murderous sports in the colosseum, and offering care to the poor and enslaved, to name just a few. The Church has always aimed at improving the Left-Hand kingdom so that it better aligns with Biblical principles, supported by natural law. Until recently, This was not controversial in the least. Through such acts of love experienced in temporal society, countless sinners have been directed to Christ and come to eternal salvation.

6. *Keep America Christian!* A sermon by Dr. Walter A. Maier. First Aired January 1942. <https://branscome.org/KeepAmer.htm>.

7. America’s founding fathers insisted upon checks and balances in American governance in view of human sinfulness—which, incidentally, is absent or minimized in socialistic forms of government. A healthy suspicion of government is derived from Holy Writ: “all men are liars” (Psalm 116:11) and “Put not your trust in princes” (Psalm 146:3).

8. Seamus Bruner, *Controlgarch: Exposing the Billionaire Class, their Secret Deals, and the Globalist Plot to Dominate Your Life*, (Sentinel, 2023), 88.

9. “In 2017 Klaus Schwab, who heads the World Economic Forum, declared, ‘What we are very proud of, is that we penetrate the global cabinets of countries with our WEF Young Global Leaders ... But what we are very proud of now is the young generation like Prime Minister (Justin) Trudeau ... We penetrate the cabinet. So yesterday I was at a reception for Prime Minister Trudeau, and I know that half of his cabinet, or even more than half of his cabinet, are actually Young Global Leaders.’” Terence Corcoran, “In Canada, Follow the Money & the Ideas,” *Financial Post*, February 18, 2022, <https://financialpost.com/opinion/terence-corcoran-in-canada-follow-the-money-the-ideas>. Accessed January 1, 2025.

10. See Megan Basham, *Shepherds for Sale: How Evangelical Leaders Traded the Truth for a Leftist Agenda* (Broadside Books, 2024).

11. AC XXVIII.

12. *The Magdeburg Confession: With Historical Introduction and Annotations*, trans Christian Preus, (Concordia Publishing House, 2025), 85-108.

13. <https://www.newsweek.com/democrat-henry-cuellar-born-alive-act-2020047>

14. <https://religionnews.com/2024/07/17/conservatives-balked-at-rncs-diverse-religious-voices-but-its-an-old-tradition/>

15. See Luke 11:23; 12:35-48.

16. Candice Malcolm, “Trudeau says Canada has no ‘core identity,’” in *Toronto Sun*, Sept 14, 2016. <https://torontosun.com/2016/09/14/trudeau-says-canada-has-no-core-identity>. Accessed January 1, 2025.

17. Patrick Amborse, “The Legacy of Justin Trudeau,” in *Notes from the North*, June 29, 2023. <https://notesfromthenorth.ca/the-legacy-of-justin-trudeau/>. Accessed April 17, 2025.

# Immigration and Christian Conscience

By Rev. Dr. Adam Koontz



hrist’s Church has a perennial interest in distinguishing divine commandments from merely human precepts (Matthew 15:9). The Christian’s conscience should not be chock full of man’s precepts and empty of God’s mandates. Incessant media consumption since the smartphone’s advent has made the availability of human precepts in op-eds, “think pieces,” and short-form, vertical videos on TikTok, Instagram, and their like all far greater than ever. All that text and all that video tell us how to think and what to feel and how to be, and the Word of God is neglected, especially since it is usually read as a book, a declining medium in the smartphone era.

Nowhere is the confusion of divine commandment for human precept more obvious than in political controversies. The existence of controversy is nothing new, and if we were without controversies in church or state, we would be in the new heavens and the new earth. What’s new is how much information about the controversy a person may have long before or entirely without the counsel of Scripture. We are like kings of Israel with many, many counselors all around us day and night, but without any knowledge of the Word of God. The predictably chaotic and wrathful outcome of this state of affairs was evident during COVID and has reappeared with the upheaval in the American regime that the second Trump administration has created.

Since at least the end of the Second World War, American churches have been formally engaged in the US immigration process. For Lutherans this was first the resettlement of displaced Lutherans from eastern and central Europe in the United States, a care for the brother who would otherwise have lived under Soviet or some other Warsaw Pact communist tyranny. The endurance of those institutions for promoting immigration long after the flush of immigration from postwar Europe led in time to the resettlement of other nations from other places in the world through the Lutheran churches—Southeast Asian allies of the United States during our conflicts

in Indochina in the 1970s and 1980s and the creation of Minnesota’s significant Somali population in the 1990s.

One could have made a case for the resettlement of Lutherans from Europe to the United States. They would be persecuted for their religion if they remained in what became the Soviet Union and its satellites during the Cold War, and their emigration to America made possible their freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their consciences. This is an especially sympathetic portrait to most confessional Lutherans, whose ancestors did not come to the United States all that long ago, seeking the liberty to be confessional Lutherans since their homeland in their minds forbade them that liberty.

Yet even such sympathetic cases of immigration rest upon state policy. If a Lutheran somewhere in the United States finds his coreligionists’ plight sympathetic, is the American government under any obligation to admit those coreligionists into the United States or speed their path to citizenship, much less the enjoyment of the manifold financial and social benefits of being an immigrant in our own time? No, it is not. The Church may have a sense of duty to her own, but the state is not bound to have the same sense of duty. The Church may want to help her own in another country, but the state does not need to make helping those Christians in another country easier for the church by bringing the foreign Christians into their country. If the state should decide to admit Christian refugees, that is its free decision.

As the state does not need to feed my children, but I do need to find food for my own children, the state does not need to admit anyone into that state whom I may find sympathetic, likable, or desirable, whatever my reasons for finding them to be so may be. For example, I believe it was right for the United States to resettle its very loyal Southeast Asian allies such as the anti-communist Vietnamese, the Hmong, and the Montagnards after the end of our war in Southeast Asia because we had become their protectors in war, they had staked their lives on



helping our war effort, and we should not have requited their valor and loyalty with abandonment to the Vietnamese communists. That is my political rationale, but I am not permitted to say of that rationale, “thus saith the LORD.” Any Christian is free to disagree with me and to seek a different policy in the American government toward our allies in Indochina. Your conscience is not bound by my political judgment nor my conscience by your judgments.

How much more is this true when the political questions at hand today concern the immigration of large numbers of non-Christians to a country with plenty of native-born non-Christians already in need of the gospel? How much more is clarity needed, since the amount of money now permanently available to church-adjacent agencies (such as Global Refuge, formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services) is vastly greater than in resettlement efforts of earlier decades?

In the shift from the admission of coreligionists to the admission of Muslims or others, there are primarily two lines of argument that appear again and again to convince Christians that it is their duty to hold to a certain immigration policy, and that this policy is the only truly Christian policy: 1) the immigrant and especially the refugee is a sojourner whose treatment is laid out in Scripture, and 2) to desire a more restrictive immigration policy or to close one's state borders entirely is un-Christian. We will take these lines of argument in their turn to prove that the Christian is not required by God to support any particular immigration policy, and the chief danger of a modern Christian and of the modern church is confusing what their smartphones tell them for what the Word of God says.

Many have argued that the immigrant to a modern nation-state is a sojourner, such as ancient Israel also contained (Exodus 22:21). The largest problem with that assertion is that the duties required of ancient Israel are not the duties required of a modern nation-state, other than what in the law of Moses agrees with natural law. A modern state need not have a class of Levites or specific food laws or a tabernacle, since Christ is the end-point for the law of Moses. A modern state's laws must agree with the law of nature, as Abimelech knew that he should not have Rebekah for his wife once he learned that she was already the wife of another man, Isaac, though Isaac lied about their relationship (Genesis 26:9-10). The nations have God's law written on their hearts

sufficient to practice justice in some measure. A modern nation-state is not necessarily composed of former sojourners as was ancient Israel (Exodus 23:9), and the assertion that the United States is a “nation of immigrants” and should thus have an open immigration policy is a historical assertion with a political thrust, not a scriptural argument. One can debate what a “nation of immigrants” is and whether the United States is one, but one cannot use the law of Moses to make the Christian captive to one's immigration preferences and politics.

Even if one concedes such regulation and allows the law of Moses to determine immigration policy, one notices that the sojourner is not a modern immigrant to a Western nation-state with a high standard of living. The sojourner, a man temporarily in Israel and passing through on some time scale, whether he remains for a time and departs or whether his children return to their father's land of origin, is to be treated fairly and to be allowed to join Israel's worship if he so chooses. He is not permitted to blaspheme Israel's God (Leviticus 24:16). The sojourner should not be taken advantage of since his position in Israel is necessarily precarious; in Leviticus 19:10 he is left the same gleanings as the poor man because he presumably has very little. The Israelite should be considerate, as he must also be to a poor man or an indebted man. He is not voting in any Israelite elections or enjoying Israelite state benefits or sending large remittances to his country of origin through Israelite financial payment systems on the strength of the Israelite shekel. The requirement concerning the sojourner is a requirement of fairness, not of preference for the sojourner or to bring the sojourner's entire extended family into Israel.

The analogy between the sojourner and the immigrant breaks down because it is neither scripturally nor logically sound. Fairness to the sojourner is not a certain required immigration policy in the state or support for that policy by the Church. Fairness to the sojourner is not all that a modern immigrant seeks. He seeks by and large greater wealth in the United States and comes here because however difficult life in modern California or Florida may be for him, it is better for his pocketbook than life in Somalia or Ecuador. No one can blame him for wanting to improve his lot in life, but no one can require the Americans to make sure that his lot in life is improved through immigration to America. Americans are free to bring him over to improve his lot, and Americans are free to tell him,

“No, thanks.” Christians are not free to require Americans to fund agencies whose purpose is to bring in as many immigrants and refugees as possible.

In the service of an open legal immigration policy or a disregard for governmental regulation of immigration at all, including the acceptance or at least winking at illegal immigration, the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) is most frequently used across many agencies' websites, denominational overtures, and other paraphernalia of this debate. If the nations are coming to the United States and desire admission, we stand in the way of the gospel if we deny them admission. They

will now be our neighbors and can be evangelized here much more readily than if we had to go to Somalia or Ecuador or wherever their homes may be. This confuses the direction of the Great Commission. Jesus did not command the apostles to bring many people into Galilee or to change the makeup of the predominantly Jewish lower Galilee or the predominantly Gentile upper Galilee regions. Instead, He commanded the disciples to go out to the nations and share their lives there with them in their homes, eating what they ate and speaking and living as they spoke and lived, exactly the thing Paul is so eager to do in Christ's mission (1 Corinthians 9:20).



*Jesus Predicts His Death Woodcut*



The mandate of Jesus to preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) is not a political mandate rearranging the world's borders or nations or languages. It is a mandate for the Church to translate that gospel, as at Pentecost, into the world's languages so that all the nations may hear. The nations need not come to a central place, whether Jerusalem or some American suburb with a higher standard of living than where they were born. The Church needs to go out to the nations and preach the gospel to them wherever they live. It has no requirement to bring as many people into an ostensibly wealthy place. The Church's ministers travel with the gospel. Paul desired to go to Spain as quickly as possible. The Church does not require the nations' migration into or out of anywhere. Since the gospel is portable, the nations do not need to move. The need to move nations is a political prerogative of government.

The American government may find it expedient to resettle no refugees for the next decade, or in the American system of government, the voters and other decision-makers may resolve that mass immigration was a benefit they're tired of going without. Whatever the case and whatever the wisdom of those decisions, the Christian does not need to confuse God's commandment to preach the gospel to the nations with the political prospect of a certain level of immigration to the United States. This is a subtle version of the mistake of seeing the modern United States, modern state of Israel, or other modern states somewhere in Daniel or Revelation, as dispensationalists do. The Church is God's Israel (Galatians 6:16), not the United States of America, so there are no specific promises or commandments about the nations incumbent upon the American government. It is free to accept vastly more immigrants than it does—preferring none and allowing all, it is free to accept no immigrants, or it is free to prefer certain nations, income levels, or professions in its immigration policy. The debate about whether and how to regulate immigration is a matter of human judgment and prudence. Is mass immigration beneficial to the native population of a country? What about a points-based system of immigration? All of these are political questions to be resolved through a country's political processes. The ministers need not pronounce everyone's duty from the pulpit on such matters.

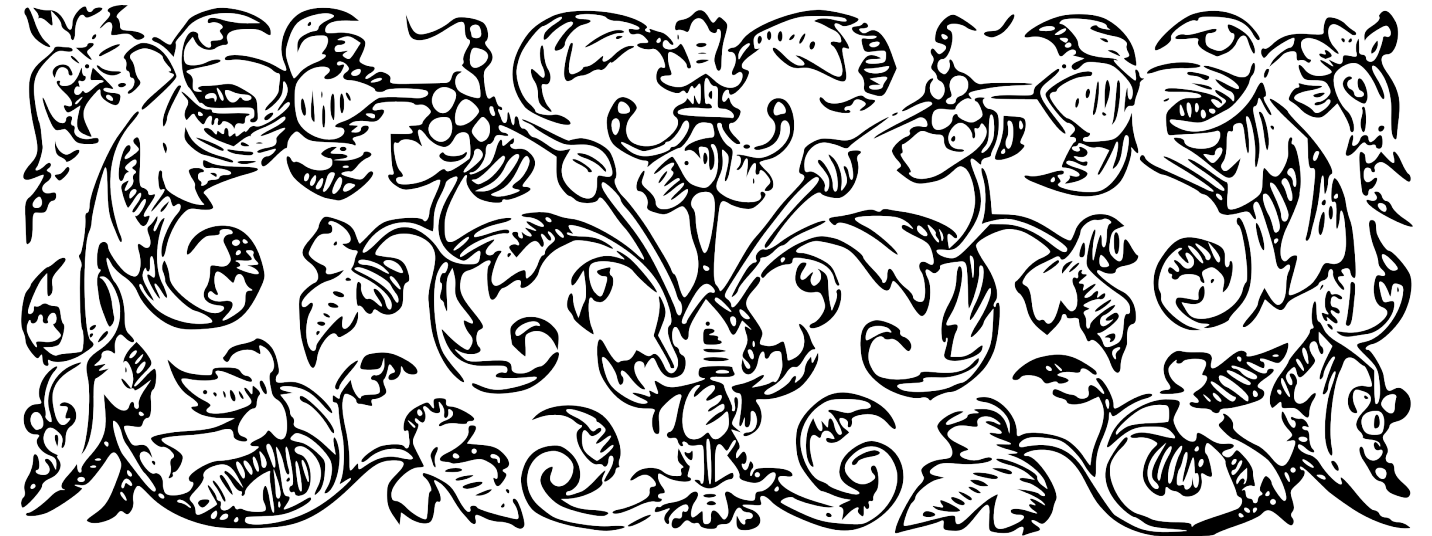
During COVID there was often great sternness about one's duty to obey the government when it set

regulations about divine worship. Romans 13 was invoked, quoted, and stretched to cover any regulations in any city, county, state, or country, and dissension from the ideas and dictates available on everyone's smartphone was swiftly cried down. However, Romans 13 actually teaches that it is the government's duty to punish wickedness and reward goodness (13:3-4), not to regulate divine worship, which Jesus Christ Himself regulates in His holy Word. His regulations always avail and suffice for His Church. He is King, and we must bow—even governors and county executives and presidents—to His prerogatives.

During the second Trump administration there is no such great sternness in the Church about obeying the government's dictates concerning immigration, although in this case its prerogatives are much clearer. The government cannot decide when to administer the Lord's Supper and how it should be administered. The government must decide what its laws are and who is breaking them and how to punish lawbreakers. I don't note the lack of sternness in the Church to decry it. The Church is not a public-relations agency and need not agree with or disagree with everything occurring in the state and covered in the media, but the difference in tone is notable because the Church has been taught for years through what it funds and how evangelism is discussed that mass immigration is more moral, in fact, more Christian than no immigration. This was never true and has not become true through propagandistic repetition, emotional exhortation, or any other means.


Should America's immigration policy change radically, perhaps even back to the mostly absent regulation of the Biden administration, the Church would need to evangelize the nations wherever they are. Even without such a change, even if all immigration to the developed world ceases, the Church in the United States, Canada or any other Western nation already has plenty of native-born pagans to evangelize from now on. It does not require the importation of unbelievers to have work to do in its own country, not to speak of sending as great a percentage of missionaries to other nations—as the South Koreans do, who send an enormous percentage of missionaries abroad while having a very restrictive immigration policy at home.

If a Christian disagreed with the immigration policy of the Biden administration, let him fight that out through America's political processes to have it



changed. He would not need to preach from the pulpit or require in a synodical convention that everyone agree with him on the ills of mass immigration. If a Christian disagrees with the immigration policies of the Trump administration now, let him fight that out through local, state, and federal government. He need not require his synod or his congregation or his minister to condemn what the Word of God does not condemn.

The stakes of silence in the Church when Scripture is silent are much higher than the resolution of current political controversies because the effect of requiring what God does not require is much greater than the temporary strife of today's problems. The angst and stress of current controversy comes and goes, painful at the time but mostly forgotten later. However, the precedent for a church or a synod or an

individual Christian of teaching the conscience from some other source than Scripture is set and quickly engulfs God's commandments. Once we allow the teachings of men to subsume and replace God's commandments, we may allow anything. Once our smartphones teach us more than the Bible, we may be taught to obey or to think or to feel or to denounce anything. If we are the world's mouthpieces, we will not speak for God. 

*Rev. Dr. Adam Koontz is pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Oakmont, PA, and is co-host of the podcast A Brief History of Power.*

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# Are Rulers to Uphold Both Tables of the Law?

By Rev. David Ramirez



Every week, in the Prayers of the Church, millions of Lutherans around the world pray for their civil rulers. Undoubtedly, many pray not only for these men to govern effectively and fairly, but also for their souls—that they would be Christians. But should we also pray that these men would rule as Christians? And, if so, to what extent?

Reading the Scriptures, it seems straightforward enough. Rulers who feared the Lord, turned away from idolatry, and led the people in following God's Word were blessed and commended by God. The Scriptures hold up men like Joshua, David, Hezekiah, and Josiah as faithful examples of pious rulers. On the other hand, those who turned away from the Lord and His Word were cursed. When the prophets condemned Gentile nations and their rulers, God's wrath was similarly connected to their rejection of the Lord and His Word. When reading church history, it is natural to "root for" rulers such as Constantine, Theodosius, Clovis, Charlemagne, and the Lutheran Electors of Saxony. These men actively, and in their official capacity as rulers, promoted the Church and defended lands that were part of what once was called Christendom. Should we not still pray for such rulers? It is rather dissatisfying, yet common, to claim that these scriptural and historical examples are inappropriate or inapplicable to life in America and the modern West.

Ever since Constantine became the champion of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire, there have been vastly disparate reactions to cooperation or alliance between throne and altar. Undeniably, this momentous event presented new challenges and different dangers. But did it signal the beginning of a fundamental corruption of the Church or relief and victory from God? Were well-intentioned Christians sinfully mixing together the Church and the state? Or, should Christians strive for their civil communities, as they certainly do for their families, to be Christian? Should they pray that their nation be a part of Christendom?

As Christians in the West are increasingly marginalized and driven from the public square, questions concerning the proper relationship between Church and state are in the forefront of the minds of the faithful. In such times, it is wise to listen to our forefathers and their testimony concerning the proper relationship between civil government and the Church.<sup>1</sup>

But to zero in on a critical aspect of this debate, I would narrow the focus to the question: What are the duties of the civil government in regards to the Ten Commandments? To guide us in our thinking, let us look at how our forefathers answered this question.

## The Two Tables of the Law

Some would assert that civil rulers are to govern on the basis of natural law and reason and thus are to be concerned only with the second table of the law (commandments 4-10) and not the first table of the law (commandments 1-3). There are at least three serious problems with this viewpoint.

First, both tables of the commandments are part of the natural law, not just the second table. The first two chapters of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans make this very clear. Second, attempting to divide the tables of the commandments according to matters of faith and matters of common morality quickly falls apart (as if the first table has to do with inward matters and the second table has to do with outward matters). While the first table certainly focuses on our relationship with God and the second table with our neighbor, outward and inward aspects of the law run through the commandments. The two tables are not to be sundered by such a distinction. Both the Small and Large Catechisms make this plain. We are not to despise the Word of God by outwardly absenting ourselves from worship nor by inwardly spurning His Word in our heart. We are not only to refrain from outwardly harming our neighbor, but also from inwardly hating him in our heart. Third, if we were to claim that civil rulers are only to concern themselves with the second table of the law, we will have cut ourselves off from our forefathers and

*Are Rulers to Uphold Both Tables of the Law?*

joined the ranks of the Anabaptists.

At the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists believed that the fall of the Church coincided with the reign of Constantine and the melding of Church and empire. Luther and the other reformers did not believe this to be the case nor evaluate church history in this fashion.<sup>2</sup> It was the rise of the papacy, in conjunction with the teaching of salvation by works and elevation of monasticism, that led to spiritual tyranny over the Church, home and civil government. Though they insisted on maintaining the proper distinction between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the reformers praised Constantine, Theodosius and other Christian rulers who aided the Church by convening councils, promoting unity, and combating heresy. The reformers believed that civil rulers were custodians of both tables of the law concerning outward matters. To this day, many American Christians follow in the Anabaptists' footsteps, denying that any type of supportive or cooperative relationship can exist between the Church and civil government. This is especially strange because this view is out of step with our nation's history during the colonial period, the vast majority of the founding fathers, and our history from the early republic until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

## Luther on Civil Government and the Church

Martin Luther recognized that God's Word establishes distinct institutions that have different purposes, goals, and methods.<sup>4</sup> The distinction between civil government and the Church was an important distinction that he maintained throughout his life.<sup>5</sup> A related distinction, the distinction between inward, spiritual, matters and outward, earthly, matters was fundamental for Luther when approaching the roles and responsibilities of civil government and the Church and their respective duties to the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> However, there was also a fundamental unity underlying the institutions of civil government and the Church. Luther recognized their common origin in creation and that both were ruled by Christ.<sup>7</sup> Another important point of commonality is that both civil and ecclesiastical authority flow from the family and that rulers and pastors are a type of father under the fourth commandment. Luther's teaching of the three estates undergirded and enriched his understanding of the two kingdoms.<sup>8</sup> He recognized the universal responsibility to acknowledge and serve God in accordance with one's particular station.

Luther understood that the heart of the Church's mission was to bring men to saving faith by the forgiveness of sins—the eternal peace of God. The heart of the government's mission is to maintain as much earthly peace as possible in a fallen world for the sake of order and the glory of God. Peace is the goal of both the civil government and the Church.<sup>9</sup> Both institutions reflect God's love for and bestow His blessings upon mankind. Each of them teaches and directs men towards God's will and the appropriate good works within each person's vocation.<sup>10</sup> While each has its distinct purpose and focus, each institution is to aid and serve the other one.<sup>11</sup> Civil government aids the Church's mission by maintaining earthly peace so that the Gospel may be preached and men may be given the peace of God by the forgiveness of sins. The Church assists in the civil government's furtherance of earthly peace by teaching how people are to lead godly lives and to honor the civil authorities.

Luther recognized the duty of the Church to preach on what God's Word taught concerning our relationship with both God (first table) and our neighbors (second table), connecting the spiritual, inward meaning of the commandments to faith and trust in Christ. However, the Church was not to execute temporal punishment against those who did not follow the Ten Commandments. Similarly, while civil rulers were not to rule over their subjects through preaching or directly attempting to heal men's souls, they too had a responsibility to acknowledge and honor the Lord. They were to uphold the outward keeping of both the first and second table and punish outward violations of the commandments.<sup>12</sup>

Luther believed that there ought to be a supportive and cooperative relationship between the Church and civil authorities. He was careful to maintain the distinction between the kingdoms, but the distinction of duties did not ultimately lie between the two tables of the Ten Commandments, but the distinction between inward and outward matters.

## Blasphemy

Luther never questioned the magistrate's duty to suppress blasphemy.<sup>13</sup> Throughout his lifetime, he lobbied the magistrates to support Lutheranism in their lands and suppress heretical practices and preaching. To note two specific examples, he was insistent in his desire for Lutheran princes to repress Roman abuses concerning the mass,<sup>14</sup> and wrote that it was the princes' duty to suppress false



preaching<sup>15</sup>—particularly of the Anabaptists and other sectarians.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, he not only justified punishment of heresy on the grounds of the threat to public peace, but also on the grounds of blasphemy. Luther believed in social responsibility for publicly committed sins. As is vividly clear in the Scriptures, Luther believed that public blasphemy calls down God's punishment on the community that tolerates it. In *The Abomination of the Secret Mass* of 1525, Luther noted the civil government's duty to punish blasphemy and warned of consequences if it does not, "For the authorities [secular rulers] are responsible for the prevention and punishment of such public blasphemy of God, but if they tolerate it and simply look on where they could be preventing it, God will not wink at such conduct but will terribly punish both the blasphemers and those who approve them."<sup>17</sup>

In his *Commentary on Psalm 82*, Luther also demonstrated his understanding of the duty both Israelite and Gentile rulers had towards both tables of the commandments—especially regarding questions of blasphemy and the suppression of heresy. He wrote:

"If some were to teach doctrines contradicting an article of faith clearly grounded in Scripture and believed throughout the world by all Christendom, such as the articles we teach children in the Creed . . . such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers. For they are not mere heretics but open blasphemers; and rulers are in duty bound to punish blasphemers as they punish those who curse, swear, revile, abuse, defame, and

slander. With their blasphemy such teachers defame the name of God and rob their neighbor of his honor in the eyes of the world."<sup>18</sup>

Luther consistently maintained that no one could force faith; however, outward suppression of blasphemy and the preaching of false doctrine were distinct from compelling faith.<sup>19</sup> Luther believed that only the Word of God could cure heresy, and that private false belief was an inward matter not to be dealt with by the magistrate. However, Luther considered false teaching an outward matter since it both disturbed the public peace and openly blasphemed the name of God. Thus, he held that false teaching was to be suppressed by civil rulers in accordance with their duty to further God's Word.

Luther saw Psalm 82 teaching not just Israelite kings, but every king, how he ought to conduct himself in his office. In his commentary, Luther pointed to both Israelite and Gentile rulers who were overthrown for their rejection of God and His Word as examples of those who refused to rule according to the virtues taught in Psalm 82. He wrote, "Read the books of Kings and see how He wipes out the kings Jeroboam, Ahab, Jehoram, Ahaziah; and among the heathen, the emperors, Julius, Nero, Domitian. Our own times, too, give us illustrations in plenty, if we consider or regard them . . . They deserve this overthrow, it [verse 5] says, because . . . they do not accept the duty of advancing the Word of God."<sup>20</sup>

Luther understood that Gentile nations were not bound to the particulars of the civil and ceremonial code given to Israel since it was for a specific time

and people. However, he also understood that the moral, or natural, law included both tables of the commandments, which the Lord expected all nations and peoples to follow. Thus, he viewed David and the godly kings of Judah as a positive example for Christian nations to follow, especially in matters pertaining to the first table of the law, such as idolatry and blasphemy.

#### Rulers as Fathers

Luther, and the Lutheran orthodox fathers, emphasized the paternal role rulers had towards their subjects. They rooted this understanding in the fourth commandment, and, thus, in creation itself. This can especially be seen in Luther's catechetical writings. In his *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528), Luther taught that the civil rulers were responsible for instructing their subjects to "fear God" according to their "paternal office."<sup>21</sup> Luther stated in the preface to the *Small Catechism* that parents and employers should not feed those who refused to learn the Catechism, and should "notify them that the prince will drive such rude people from the country."<sup>22</sup> He also emphasized the distinction between inward faith and the outward maintenance of religion: For although we cannot and should not force anyone to believe, yet we should insist and urge the people that they know what is right and wrong with those among whom they dwell and wish to make their living. For whoever desires to reside in a town must know and observe the town laws, the protection of which he wishes to enjoy, no matter whether he is a believer or at heart and in private a rogue or knave . . . . As the context makes clear, the knowledge of "what is right and wrong" included religious instruction in the Catechism.

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther more fully expounded his understanding of the relationship of civil rulers to fatherhood and the fourth commandment. Luther identified the civil rulers as fathers of the nation who occupied an office that flowed from the fourth commandment.<sup>23</sup> And, when describing the duty of all fathers, including civil rulers, he said that they are to train those under their care in the fear of God, "[T]hey should earnestly and faithfully discharge their office, not only to support and provide for the bodily necessities of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but, most of all, to train them to the honor and praise of God. Therefore do not think that this is left to your pleasure and arbitrary will, but that it is a strict command and injunction of God, to whom also you must give

account for it."<sup>24</sup>

#### Phillip Melanchthon

Melanchthon also held the long-standing conviction that the civil government was to support the true religion and suppress heresy.<sup>25</sup> In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Melanchthon, appealing to Charles V, wrote: Therefore, most excellent Emperor Charles . . .

"To God most of all you owe the duty [as far as this is possible to man] to maintain sound doctrine and hand it down to posterity, and to defend those who teach what is right. For God demands this when He honors kings with His own name and calls them gods, saying, Ps. 82:6: I have said, Ye are gods, namely, that they should attend to the preservation and propagation of divine things, i.e., the Gospel of Christ, on the earth, and, as the vicars of God, should defend the life and safety of the innocent [true Christian teachers and preachers]."<sup>26</sup>

Seven years later, in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, Melanchthon again asserted that civil rulers were to support the Church and suppress error. He wrote: "But especially the chief members of the Church, kings and princes, ought to guard the interests of the Church, and to see to it that errors be removed and consciences be healed [rightly instructed], as God expressly exhorts kings, Ps. 2:10: Be wise, now, therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth. For it should be the first care of kings [and great lords] to advance the glory of God. Therefore it would be very shameful for them to lend their influence and power to confirm idolatry and infinite other crimes, and to slaughter saints."<sup>27</sup>

It is also important to note that the students and followers of the reformers did not dissent from Luther and Melanchthon on this matter. As Dr. Cameron MacKenzie writes, ". . . throughout the Reformation period, no one understood the two kingdoms theology as requiring a Christian ruler to refrain from establishing authentic Christianity in his state. Indeed, quite the opposite, temporal rulers were supposed to support and maintain the Church."<sup>28</sup> For all the other disagreements between the Gnesio-Lutherans, Crypto-Calvinists, Osiandrians, etc. after Luther's death, the belief that the civil government was to serve the Church by promoting the true faith and suppressing error was

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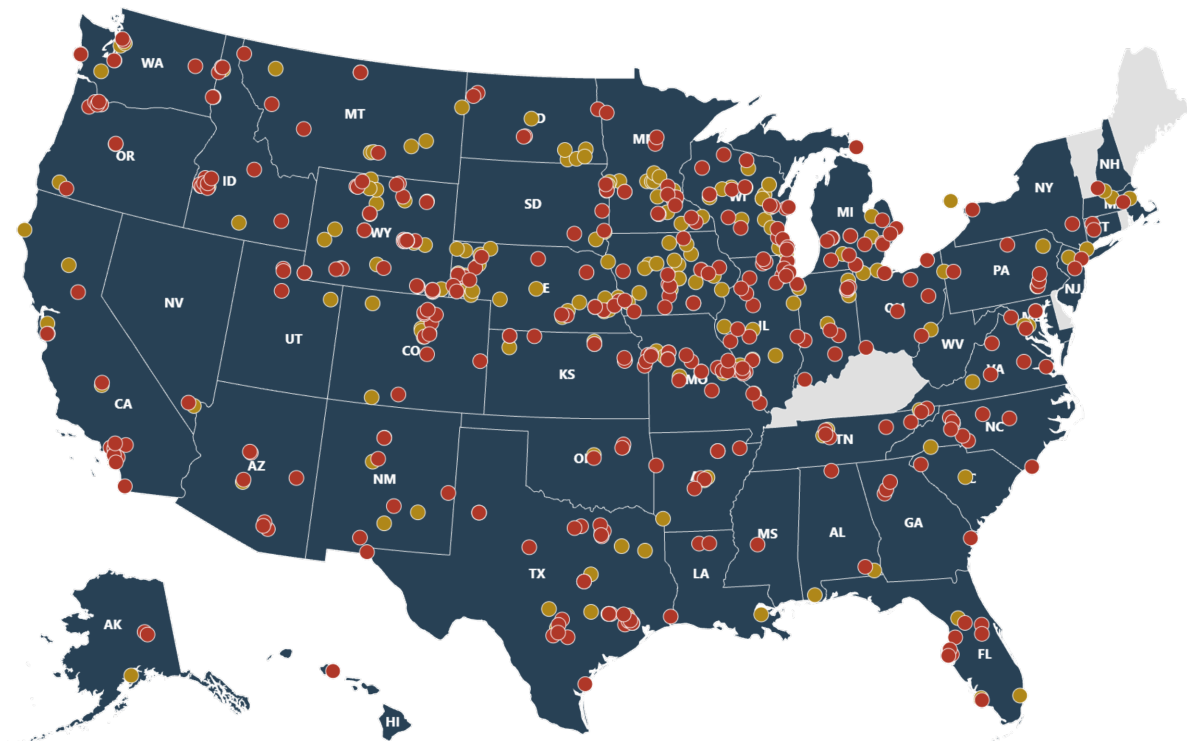
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not a point of contention.<sup>29</sup> We see this conviction reflected in the Preface to the Christian Book of Concord, which was written and compiled by Chemnitz, Andreae, and other faithful Lutherans, and presented and signed by the Lutheran princes and other rulers subscribing to the Book of Concord. It states:

“Wherefore, mindful of our duty, which, we know, has been divinely enjoined upon us, we think that we ought diligently to apply ourselves to the labor of attacking in our provinces and realms the false teachings which have been disseminated there, and are gradually insinuating themselves, as it were, into the intimate acquaintance and familiarity of men, and that we should see to it that the subjects in our government may persevere in the straight way of godliness and in the truth of the heavenly doctrine. . . it has always been our purpose that in our lands, dominions, schools, and churches no other doctrine be proclaimed and accurately set forth than that which is founded upon the Word of God, and contained in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, (and that, too, when understood properly in its genuine sense,) and that opinions conflicting with these be not admitted. . . we understand that we owe our subjects this, viz., that we should diligently care for the things which pertain to this life and the life to come, and that we should take pains, with the greatest earnestness and to our utmost ability, to attend to those matters which promote the extension of God’s name and glory, the propagation of His Word, (from which alone we hope for salvation,) the peace and tranquility of churches and schools, and the instruction and consolation of disturbed consciences. . . whereby the glory of God and the common welfare in both temporal and eternal things may be promoted.”<sup>30</sup>

Would that we were blessed with such rulers today! Let us pray that it may be so.

**Confessional Lutherans in America**  
We ought to keep in mind that, as orthodox believers, we have a “right” to practice our religion, not because of some inalienable “right” of every man to blaspheme as he sees fit, but because the King of all creation commands all men to acknowledge and worship Him. Luther and the other reformers

recognized that there was no neutral ground when it came to acknowledging God and His Word (Mt. 12:30). A fundamental belief of our forefathers was that a government would always support religion—the only question was, “Which one?” Practically speaking, we ought not consider it our duty to defend the supposed right of others to blaspheme. Nor should we consider the acknowledgement of the Triune God, the furtherance of His Word, and the suppression of blasphemy by the government inappropriate or transgressive. We should calm the earthly fear that, by teaching this, tyrants might be strengthened. Luther, in his typically blunt way, responded to such fears of his time with full confidence in God’s Word, saying, “What do I care? If we were to hold back necessary instruction because of the tyrants, we would long since have had to give up the Gospel altogether. . . Nevertheless we must not abolish or hide the commandment to stone false prophets.”<sup>31</sup> Tyrants, by definition, will abuse their power whether the laws give them such authority or not. Governments will protect that which is held sacred with blasphemy laws, whether they be referred to as such or not—for example, hate-speech laws. If confessional Lutherans can again recognize the duty of all rulers and nations to acknowledge God and further His Word, we will have made great strides in walking in the footsteps of our fathers. And, we will be far more ready to face the challenges of today and our swiftly changing world as a Church and citizens of our nation. 🌿

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**Endnotes**

1. Some good starting places would be: Cameron A. MacKenzie, “The Challenge of History: Luther’s Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (January 2007). <https://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/mackenziechallengeofhistory.pdf>; David P. Ramirez, “Martin Luther and Religious Liberty” (S.T.M. Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 2020). [https://www.academia.edu/89633865/Martin\\_Luther\\_and\\_Religious\\_Liberty](https://www.academia.edu/89633865/Martin_Luther_and_Religious_Liberty); and James M. Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melanchthon* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

2. Luther’s view of this aspect of Church history is well summarized in John M. Headley, *Luther’s View of Church History* (London: Yale University Press, 1963), 156–157, 169.

3. It is often forgotten that multiple states had established churches after the Constitution was ratified. Numerous religious tests for public office remained in state law long after “disestablishment,” but were held unconstitutional in the 1961

case *Torcaso v. Watkins*. In New Hampshire, members of the State legislature had to be Protestant until 1877. In North Carolina, public officials had to be Protestant until 1835, Christian until 1876, and atheists are still prohibited (though it is now unenforceable) to this day. A wide variety of laws concerning school prayer, Bible reading, outlawing the teaching of evolution, joint state and religious undertakings, etc. continued to be enforced until the 1947 *Everson* decision. *Everson v. Board of Education*, together with *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940), completed the incorporation of the First Amendment clauses concerning religion into the Fourteenth Amendment and created a national law of “religious liberty” applied to all levels of governments. However, Sunday laws (blue laws) and other vestiges of religious “establishment” continue in some ways in local laws to this day. Six states (Massachusetts, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Wyoming) still have laws (also unenforceable) that reference blasphemy.

4. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 45–48.

5. William J. Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 15.

6. Althaus, *Ethics of Martin Luther*, 45. See also “On Secular Authority” (1523) in *AE* 45: 96.

7. Ibid., 54–56. See also “Commentary on Psalm 101” (1534) in *AE* 13: 196.

8. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 322–324.

9. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, 59–60. See also Michael Parsons, *Martin Luther’s Interpretation of the Royal Psalms: The Spiritual Kingdom in a Pastoral Context* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 25–32.

10. Althaus, *The Ethics*, 60, 70–71. See also Parsons, *Royal Psalms*, 33–35.

11. Ibid., 60. See also “On Secular Authority” (1523) in *AE* 45: 92.

12. Regarding the relationship between the civil government and the Church and examples of improper mixing and proper service towards each other, see: “Commentary on Psalm 101” in *AE* 13.

13. Jarrett A. Carty, *God And Government: Martin Luther’s Political Thought* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2017), 119.

14. Estes, *Peace, Order*, 42–45.

15. “Commentary on Psalm 82” (1530) in *AE* 13:61–67.

16. John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists: Luther, Melanchthon and Menius and the Anabaptists of Central Germany*, vol. 13, The Dissent and Nonconformity Series (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2000), 126–139.

17. *AE* 36:328

18. Ibid. 13:61.

19. Ibid. 13:62.

20. Ibid. 13:68.

21. Ibid. 51:151.

22. *Small Catechism*, Preface.

23. *Large Catechism*, Part I.103–158. “. . . so that all whom we call masters are in the place of parents and must derive their power and authority to govern from them. Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scriptures, as those who in their government perform the functions of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. . . Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the country. Besides these there are yet spiritual fathers. . . .”

24. *Large Catechism*, Part I.168–169. (emphasis mine)

25. Estes, *Peace, Order*, 91–92. Estes traces Melanchthon’s development and the formulation of his teaching on civil government in chapters 2–4 of this work. It was Melanchthon who was to be the formulator of what would become the standard Lutheran teaching on civil rulers and the duties before God. See especially Philipp Melanchthon, *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci praecipui theologici* (1559), trans. Jacob A. O. Preus, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 430–431.

26. *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XXI.44.

27. *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 54.

28. MacKenzie, “The Challenge of History,” 25.

29. For a collection of quotes concerning civil authority from the Lutheran orthodox fathers, see: Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1875), 616-9. Also see: Aegidius Hunnius, *The Christian Table of Duties*, trans. Paul A. Rydecki, (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2013), 40–41.

30. *Preface to the Christian Book of Concord*, 6, 21-22.

31. *AE* 13:67.





# The American Interim

By Rev. Karl Hess



Imagine you lived in a country where being a Christian is illegal. If you were exposed you would be subject to imprisonment, torture, or death. How would you live faithfully?

But what if the persecution of Christians in your land was more subtle? What if you were granted freedom to worship and confess Christ, but only within certain carefully defined limits? And what if these limits were designed to choke off Christ's Church, like a siege chokes off a city?

This second form of persecution is probably more destructive to the Church than the first when Christians submit to it. When Christians maintain their freedom in Christ and continue to confess their Lord, the Church survives, even under persecution. But where Christians believe that they serve Christ by the permission of the powers of this earth, the visible Church grows sick or dies. The authority by which Christians confess Christ, teach all that Christ has commanded us, and make disciples of all nations, does not come from the state or society; it comes from the Son of God, who overcame the world and now reigns at the right hand of God. When Christians do not stand firm in the freedom with which Christ has made us free, we do not stand at all.

You do not actually need to imagine living under the second kind of persecution. You are living under it right now in the United States.

In our country, the Church is pressured to refrain from teaching the whole counsel of God's Word when it contradicts the informal, but still real, American religion. I term this attempt to place the Christian Church on a reservation The American Interim. To get a clearer perspective on this veiled persecution of Christianity in the United States, let us revisit an earlier experience of this type of persecution in the years following the death of Martin Luther.

## The Augsburg Interim

A few months after Luther's death in February 1546, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V entered an agreement with the Pope to prepare for war against

the Lutheran principalities in Germany. On April 24th, 1547, he crushed the armies of the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League and imprisoned the Elector of Saxony John Frederick, replacing him with his cousin Maurice. Shortly thereafter he issued a program known as the Augsburg Interim, which spelled out the terms under which the Lutheran Churches would be compelled to live while the Council of Trent determined the future of the churches under the Pope.

The Augsburg Interim permitted Lutheran pastors to be married and distribute both the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. But nearly every other change made by the Reformation was rolled back. Lutheran pastors were required to teach a version of the doctrine of justification that contradicted the Scriptures and teach that the Mass was a meritorious sacrifice.

In Saxony the new elector, together with Melancthon and the other theologians in Wittenberg, tried to work out a compromise. They crafted a different Interim for Saxony which they claimed would preserve the Lutheran doctrine, while submitting to some of the Emperor's ceremonial demands, viewing these as adiaphora, matters neither commanded and forbidden by God. Both the Augsburg Interim and this compromise Leipzig Interim in Saxony were rejected by faithful Lutherans. Many of these Lutherans, who had been deposed from their pulpits, or fled from lands under the Emperor's control, found a home in the city of Magdeburg, where the city council refused to obey the Emperor. The theologians and pastors of the city published The Magdeburg Confession, in which they confessed the pure doctrine of God's Word, showed that any compromise on adiaphora during a time of persecution was unfaithful, and laid out the duty of lesser magistrate to resist, with force if necessary, government orders that attempted to suppress the Word of God. The Magdeburgers' insistence that during a time of confession Christians must refuse to submit on matters of adiaphora later became a part of the Lutheran Confessions in Article X of the Formula of Concord.

Charles laid siege to Magdeburg, but was repelled. A little while later Elector Maurice turned on his

former benefactor, defeating him in battle, which resulted in the treaties of Passau and Augsburg, in which the Emperor allowed each region of Germany to follow the religion of its ruler, without interference.

## The American Interim

In our day the Christian Church lives under another kind of interim. The pastors in the sixteenth century who refused to submit to the Augsburg Interim faced much more severe penalties than we do—imprisonment, banishment, and death. They also were given an explicit list of doctrines and ceremonies to which they were required to conform. The “interim” in our day is informal and shadowy. The cost of resisting it is far less severe—loss of a good name, perhaps the loss of a job, perhaps even of a spouse and children. But it is real nevertheless, and serves the same purpose as the Augsburg Interim; like it, our interim seeks to subjugate Christ's Church to another authority besides her Lord. I term this informal religious settlement of our time: The American Interim.

The Christian Churches in the United States have accepted the somewhat nebulous terms of this Interim in the same way that the churches in Saxony accepted the Leipzig Interim: they have attempted to preserve themselves from the most egregious errors while giving the impression that there is not a fundamental disagreement between this civic religion and Christianity.

The Formula of Concord (SD X 5) explains very helpfully what was at stake in the Leipzig Interim, and what we are experiencing in our present American Interim.

...such ceremonies should not be reckoned among the genuine free adiaphora, or matters of indifference, as make a show or feign the appearance, as though our religion and that of the Papists were not far apart, thus to avoid persecution, or as though the latter were not at least highly offensive to us; or when such ceremonies are designed for the purpose, and required and received in this sense, as though by and through them both contrary religions were reconciled and became one body; or when a reentering into the Papacy and a departure from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and true religion should occur or gradually follow therefrom [when there is danger lest we seem to have

reentered the Papacy, and to have departed, or to be on the point of departing gradually, from the pure doctrine of the Gospel].

The proscriptions of the Augsburg Interim aimed to neuter the Lutheran Church, cause it to bend the knee before the Pope, and make it appear that Lutherans and Rome were reunited. Little by little, the Lutheran Church would have died and been replaced by the Papacy again.

And this is exactly what our American Interim not only aims at, but has actually accomplished in large part. The difference is that the Augsburg Interim aimed at the absorption of the Lutheran Church into the false church of the Pope, while the American Interim aims to swallow up the Christian Church into the religion of liberal democracy.

## The False Religion of Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy arose out of the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century movement that opposed the hierarchical and Christian Europe that existed before it. Enlightenment philosophers believed that human nature and reason were not corrupted by original sin. As a result, people were able to come to the knowledge of God and His will through the use of reason alone. They rejected essential Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Trinity and the atonement as contrary to reason. And since they believed unaided reason was able to determine who God was and how to please Him, there was no need for rebirth by the Holy Spirit, mediated through the Word and Sacrament, dispensed by the ministers of the Church. Neither was there a need for a hereditary nobility to govern depraved human beings with the sword. Instead, the Enlightenment claimed that since human beings are not corrupt, they are able to govern themselves and know God apart from a ruling class and the ministry of the Church. They are equal, not merely in their shared humanity and redemption by Christ, but equal in an almost absolute sense.

In *An Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants of Swabia*, Luther wrote: “This article [that Christian liberty means that no lord has a right to own his serfs] would make all men equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom; and that is impossible. A worldly kingdom cannot exist without an inequality of persons, some being free, some imprisoned, some lords, some subjects, etc.” (AE 46:39).



If humanity had retained the image and knowledge of God, there would be no need of rulers and subjects and other inequalities. People would naturally give to others the love and honor due them, without compulsion. But since human beings are totally corrupted by sin, God instituted ordered inequalities to preserve life and order in this world. Without these inequalities of property, honor, and authority, there could be no peace among fallen men. But the Enlightenment distorted the proper understanding of human equality into an idol that obliterates the distinctions God has established among men.

The root of the American Interim is the unspoken requirement that the Christian Church, following the principles of the Enlightenment, keep silent about anything in the Scripture that teaches that human beings are fallen and that God has not made them equal. “Conservative” Christian Churches often do this in exactly the way the Leipzig Interim did: they attempt to avoid the most radical results of the American religion’s worship of the false god Equality while signaling that they agree with its fundamental doctrines. Consider how common it is in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to find women reading the Scripture lessons in the Divine Service or distributing the blood of Christ, thereby exercising spiritual authority over the men in the congregation. While we have partly kept the Lord’s order for the ministry in prohibiting women from entering it, our tendency to signal our agreement with the concerns of feminism perfectly illustrates how the American Interim works in practice.

#### The Demands of the American Interim

An obvious example of the way the American Interim has been accepted by the churches is in our unwillingness or inability to distinguish between more grave and less grave sins.



Traditional Lutheran dogmatics recognizes that some sins are more grave than others, as our Lord told Pontius Pilate: “He who delivered me over to you has the greater sin” (John 19:11). In the past, Lutherans would point out the gravity of certain sins, such as sodomy, in order to restrain people from doing them and to drive grave sinners to repentance. Now it is common to hear pastors and laypeople affirm that “all sins are equal before God.” It is true that all sins are damnable if not forgiven. It is also true that true repentance does not weigh out the relative gravity of each sin of which we are aware, but contritely confesses “I know that there is nothing good in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7). But as the Smalcald Articles (SA III.III.43) puts it: Where sin rules a person the Holy Spirit has departed. St. John says, “The one who is born of God does not sin,” not meaning that there is no sin in a Christian, but that a Christian mortifies the sinful desires of his flesh rather than give way to them and live in them (1 John 3:9). Scripture also testifies that some sins are so grave that they cry to heaven for judgment (Gen. 4:10, 18:20–21; Jam. 5:4; Rev. 6:10), and that graver sins are punished more severely in eternity (Luke 12:47).

The tendency to declare all sin absolutely equal has the effect of minimizing all sin. Instead of recognizing our sin as very serious so that we find comfort in Christ alone, which the Small Catechism teaches is a reason a Christian goes to the Holy Supper, when Christians say “Oh well, we’re all sinners” they frequently imply “therefore none of our sins are that serious.” This tendency is an unwitting response to the pressure of the American Interim to affirm the fundamental goodness and equality of men.

Another way the American Interim shows itself in the churches is their response to the rise of feminism in the United States.

Scripture teaches that while men and women are equally human, they have different callings and are not equal in authority or gifts. Wives are called “the weaker vessel” in 1 Peter 3:7 and are prohibited from having authority over men, since the woman was created second and also was deceived by the serpent (1 Tim. 2: 13-14). Moreover the Scriptures teach that the primary calling of a woman is to serve her husband as a helpmeet and bear children (Titus 2:4-5, 1 Tim. 2:15).

Yet the churches said little in response to the feminist push to remove women from their primary calling as mothers and keepers of the home and, beginning with the Episcopal Church in 1930, abandoned nearly two millennia of Christian opposition to contraception. In the sixties and seventies, liberal protestant churches began to ordain women; they no longer knew how to distinguish the worship of Equality from Christianity. More conservative churches continued to prohibit women from holding the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, yet capitulated to feminism’s demand for “equality” in nearly every other respect, in order to make it appear that Christianity is not fundamentally opposed to the worship of Equality. For example, when Congress was debating the question of women assuming combat roles in the military, conservative churches were unable to bring themselves to confess that it is contrary to the order of creation for women to fight battles and die on behalf of men. More importantly, with the rise of legal contraception and the push for the full equality of women in the workplace, conservative churches gradually gave up what had been universal Christian teaching until the twentieth century, that contraception is contrary to God’s blessing and command that human beings “be fruitful and multiply” and that the primary calling of a woman is to be a mother and helpmeet to her husband.

A final example of the churches’ submission to the American Interim regards the inequality of the nations. The American Interim expects us to say that nations are nothing more than political fictions, with no real basis in anything besides custom. If there is any evidence that the nations are unequal—morally, intellectually, culturally—this is said to be the result of oppression or bigotry.

The Scriptures do not speak this way. While they recognize that God created from one man all the nations of the earth, they also teach that the division

of humanity into nations is His work, that the nations were separated in order that each one might find God. “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:26-27).

Meanwhile all the nations have an inheritance given to them by God—spiritual, moral, and material. Egyptians could not become citizens in Israel until the fourth generation, but Moabites and Ammonites were forbidden from ever being admitted to the nation, since their ancestors had hired Balaam to curse Israel (Deut. 23:3-6). Different nations have different inheritances from their fathers because of their sins. They also have different inheritances in terms of territory: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He divided mankind, He fixed the borders of the people according to the sons of God” (Deut. 32:8). This is not to argue that no one can ever leave one nation and join another or that national identities do not shift over the course of history. But if the Church speaks and acts as if nations do not exist, and the people of different nations are interchangeable, it is not speaking according to the Word of God, but in submission to the American Interim.

#### Naming the Interim

Naming the American Interim and recognizing it as a yoke of slavery for the Church is necessary if we are to begin to resist it. If the only resistance to the Augsburg Interim had been the compromise Interim confected by the theologians in Wittenberg, the Lutheran Church would have perished before the sixteenth century was over. Christ’s Church does not survive because earthly power gives it a license to exist. She lives because our Lord has destroyed the one who holds the power of death, the devil, and gives her life from heaven through His Word. When the visible Church accepts a yoke of slavery to gain the right to exist from the world, it ceases to be the Church of Christ.

The visible Church’s present submission to the American Interim is strangling her. Why did we lose so many of those who were baptized in the LCMS during the Baby Boom and Generation X?

Is it possible that it was because we had been emphasizing our essential agreement with the claims of the Enlightenment regarding Equality? Just as the




Formula of Concord predicted would happen under the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, have we not for years been signaling that there was essential agreement between the American religion and Christianity? If as a result our members were more committed to Equality than to the truth of the Scripture, it is small wonder that so many of them left. What need does a person who is basically noble, free, and equal have of a God who died a slave's death for the forgiveness of sins? Is it possible that the Enlightenment's rejection of original sin has found its way into our churches as well? When the government declared church services "non-essential," why did so many of our churches and pastors confess with their actions that they agreed? Whatever our Confessions say, our actions indicated that we agreed with the Enlightenment that men do not need the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacrament to give us new birth and preserve us in the knowledge of God. We behaved as if men were not fallen and could get by without the Divine Service.

If we would see renewal in our churches and the salvation of our neighbors, we must begin with repentance of our sin in believing that the Church's security and growth comes through editing the Word of God, leaving out those portions that most sharply contradict the idolatry of our country and neighbors. The Church's security comes from our Lord, who has overcome the world, and the Church is built solely on His Word in everything that it teaches, as all our hymns remind us.

I know my faith is founded  
On Jesus Christ, my God and Lord;  
And this my faith confessing,  
Unmoved I stand on His sure Word.  
Our reason cannot fathom

The truth of God profound;  
Who trusts in human wisdom  
Relies on shifting ground.  
God's Word is all-sufficient,  
It makes divinely sure;  
And trusting in its wisdom,  
My faith shall rest secure.  
(LSB 587 st. 1)

The Church's freedom does not consist in being inoffensive to the world, so that our government and neighbors see us as no threat. The freedom Christ gives is the freedom of a conscience cleansed from sin by His blood. This leads to the freedom to confess His Word, even if it costs goods, fame, child and wife. This freedom always brings with it the devil's hatred and the holy Cross. Suffering for opposing the world's idols is not a mark of bad character or the foolish desire to be a martyr. It is a sign that we are free in Christ. And when a church willingly bears the cross, the mark of freedom, the result is blessing and salvation for many. That is the way the message of the Gospel advances and bears fruit in the world. Faithful witness to the cross of Jesus is faithful carrying of the cross He gives us.

And for Your Gospel let us dare  
To sacrifice all treasure;  
Teach us to bear Your blessed cross,  
To find in You all pleasure.  
O grant us steadfastness  
In joy and distress,  
Lest we, Lord, You forsake.  
Let us by grace partake  
Of endless joy and gladness.  
(LSB 746 st. 4) 

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# The Law of Love: Priority and Extension

By Matthew Cochran



As we survey America's bleak moral and political landscapes, complaints are the one thing of which we will find no shortage. Such is our discontent that I suspect even most unbelievers would find themselves nodding at Christ's description of love growing cold in these latter days (Matthew 24:12). Whether it's a matter of political or personal morality, we all agree that our neighbors' love leaves something to be desired. And yet, this common ground provides no unity, for far fewer would agree on what it actually means for love to grow cold.

In keeping with the Spirit of the Age, many Americans characterize this chill as a failure of equality among us. If only we made no distinction between family and stranger, between Christian and pagan, or between countryman and foreigner, then there would finally be enough love to go around equitably, and no one would be left behind. So long as we each love the entire world, they think, love could never grow cold. This attitude provokes some rather peculiar moral dilemmas among us. Is it more loving for a young woman to be fruitful and multiply or to adopt barrenness to put less strain on the world's resources? Is it more loving for nations to let good fences make good neighbors or to welcome countless immigrants without a second thought? Is it more loving to honor our fathers and mothers or to disown our ancestors over the offense they gave other tribes? The question of whether we first love those who are close or those who are far off has become one of the most contentious of the modern age.

Christians must be on their guard against worldliness, lest they get caught up in this same attitude. Christ has instructed us to love one another, so we must avoid receiving our view of love from the gaggle of cultural taste-makers surrounding us. The same conflicts over love which afflict our nation threaten our churches as well. If we want to know what love truly entails, we should first look to Holy Scripture.

God's Word is quite clear that truly loving actions are the ones required by God's Law. As Paul explains in Romans 13:9-10, "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." John says the same in his first epistle (1 John 5:2-3): "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."

But then, the Apostles only echo what they heard from our Lord (John 14:15 and Matthew 22:37-40), "If you love me, keep my commandments" and "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." For that matter, Jesus attributes the love of many growing cold to increased "lawlessness" in the first place (Matthew 24:12). The sad state of our love results from neglecting the commands God has given us.

When we study those commands, however, we do not find the modern sense of equality within them. That is to say, God does not command us to love everyone exactly the same way and with the same priority. On the contrary, the duties He gives often depend on the relationships He imposes.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the 6th Commandment. If I am to lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed and honor my wife, I cannot treat her the same as my neighbor's wife. Indeed, I am explicitly forbidden from treating any other woman the same as her. And this does not stop at the mere letter of the Law with adultery. After all, if I even merely did more to care for strange women than for my wife, I would prove a terrible husband indeed.



The 4th Commandment is another obvious example, for it requires me to honor my mother and father. To treat my parents no differently than I would two strangers would be an egregious violation. Likewise, honoring my parents requires me to honor their parents whom they, too, were obligated to honor, carrying that honor back through generations of family. In contrast, when the Pharisees prioritized their donations over support for their parents, Jesus sharply rebuked them for it (Matt. 15:4–9). Paul likewise explained this priority in stark terms: “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). There are many people near and far whose needs we fail to provide, but here Paul only marks neglect of family and household as being incompatible with faith in Christ.

These commands are crystallized in Biblical example as well. For instance, when the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah lost their battle against Chedorlaomer's alliance, Lot was taken captive.<sup>1</sup> After hearing the news, Abraham took it upon himself to raise a small army out of his household to reclaim his family. In doing so, he prioritized his nephew and kin over both Chedorlaomer's people and over his household servants, whom he risked to accomplish the rescue. Rather than being condemned for treating his neighbors unequally, Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.

What's more, these kinds of godly priority wrought through familial connections go further than many modern Americans suspect. Though the 20th Century gave us a fixation on the nuclear family which tempts us to end familial priorities with parents, wife, and children, Scripture has no such restriction. Solomon tells us<sup>2</sup> that a righteous man leaves an inheritance not only to his children, but to his children's children. Clearly, the righteous man must not have assigned the lion's share of his estate to various NGO's, but provided for his own family first.

Furthermore, the Bible does not make inheritance merely a matter of household wealth, for God repeatedly describes the Promised Land as an inheritance given collectively to the Israelites as a nation.<sup>3</sup> This inheritance was also meant to be passed on to their own posterity because God warned them that wickedness would lead to their land being given to foreigners<sup>4</sup> rather than to their children—a true curse indeed.

Jesus likewise affirmed that such priorities extend as far as our nation. When a Canaanite woman appealed to Him as the Son of David (i.e. as King of Israel), He said He must prioritize the children of Israel—going so far as to tell her that “it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”<sup>5</sup> It is only when she demonstrates her faith in Him as something greater than an earthly king—as the One whose mere crumbs are sufficient for miracles—that He grants her what she seeks. Jesus is not being coy or out-of-character here as many modern interpreters suggest. He is simply doing what any good king would do by prioritizing His own people. It is because He is not only King of Israel but also King of Kings that we may all benefit from His grace, just as the Canaanite woman did.

Though Scripture should be sufficient for us, it's worth consulting our ancestors in the faith as well. That loving action is characterized more by priority than by equality has not gone unrecognized throughout Church history. St. Augustine, for example, famously coined the phrase *ordo amoris* or “order of affections” in *The City of God*.<sup>6</sup> Therein he explains the disordered love of the antediluvians as elevating God's lower gifts above higher gifts—and indeed above God Himself. For St. Augustine, love was characterized neither by chaos nor by uniformity, but by an ordered hierarchy in which some objects of love are greater than others—some greater by nature and some by circumstance. This idea was recently brought to the public conversation by Vice President J. D. Vance, but it has been taken up by many others throughout our history, from medieval Christians like St. Thomas Aquinas to modern Christians like C. S. Lewis.

St. Augustine explores the idea further in his *Christian Doctrine* with respect to loving our neighbor.<sup>7</sup> While he does assert that “all men are to be loved equally,” he means this in the abstract sense that all men occupy the same cosmic level in his hierarchy of loves by their shared nature. Nevertheless, he explicitly refrains from extending that equality of nature into the loving actions of individuals. He immediately goes on to write, “But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you.” Among these connections beyond our control, he lists not only matters of need but also matters of relationship, just as we find in Scripture. That St. John Chrysostom recognized the same kind of priority is clear from his homily on 1

Timothy 5:8:<sup>8</sup>

“If any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house,” that is, those who are nearly related to him, he is worse than an infidel. And so says Isaiah, the chief of the Prophets, “You shall not overlook your kinsmen of your own seed.” (Isaiah 58:7, Septuagint) For if a man deserts those who are united by ties of kindred and affinity, how shall he be affectionate towards others? Will it not have the appearance of vainglory, when benefiting others he slights his own relations, and does not provide for them? And what will be said, if instructing others, he neglects his own, though he has greater facilities; and a higher obligation to benefit them? Will it not be said, These Christians are affectionate indeed, who neglect their own relatives? He is worse than an infidel. Wherefore? Because the latter, if he benefits not aliens, does not neglect his near kindred.

It is no novel teaching that we have greater obligation to our kin than to others. On the contrary, our closest relations are where we are first trained to love others. The man who loves all people equally—who treats his family as strangers—can have no understanding of love in the first place.

One could also cite Luther on the matter. When he explains in his *Small Catechism* how we are to examine ourselves for confession, he writes, “Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any person by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected or wasted aught, or done other injury.” We do not analyze our actions as though they were done with respect to anonymous “image-bearers” on the other side of the globe. Considering the relationships God gave us is step one when reflecting on our failure to love our neighbors.

To be sure, the Bible does not restrict love to our families or nations. On the contrary, there are many places in which we are explicitly instructed to extend love beyond our friends and family to strangers and even enemies. As we shall see, however, these instructions do not impose equality the way some modern Christians contend. Some of the passages most often used against prioritizing close relations

actually affirm that these priorities remain part of God's commands and therefore part of proper love towards our neighbors.

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>9</sup> Jesus teaches us:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As Jesus says, Christians ought to love anyone—even our enemies. Let us not forget, however, that love is the fulfilling of the Law. Loving our enemies means we must not murder them, rob them, covet their wives, and so forth. Rather, we ought to help them keep their lives, property, and families intact. That very same Law we extend to our enemies therefore still requires us to maintain all the priorities we have already established. I still must not treat my enemy like my wife or like my parents. I still must prioritize my own household over my enemy's.

Loving our neighbors also requires us to keep the vocations God has given us. A policeman who arrests a murderer still loves his neighbor according to his office by restraining the wicked among them as God commands.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, a father to whom God entrusted a family still loves his neighbor according to his office by shooting a home invader. He may be an enemy, but refusing to provide such protection for his household still constitutes a denial of the faith as Paul wrote. And careful readers will realize that Jesus is saying exactly the same thing as Paul does. “Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” “Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” Jesus doesn't say that loving your enemies is the same priority as loving your family or friends. On the contrary, He establishes loving your own as such a fundamental baseline of human decency that even raw pagans routinely figure it out. Christians must go further than that baseline, but it is only modern devotees of equality who think it is virtuous to love your enemies by sacrificing your friends because you “piously” make no distinctions between the two.



The parable of the Good Samaritan provides a similar lesson.<sup>11</sup> The self-justifying lawyer asked who counts as his neighbor, so Jesus told a story in which a foreigner rescues a man set upon by robbers even as the most pious of his countrymen simply passed by. Readers correctly note that the love Jesus teaches extends beyond nationality. But once again, extension is not the same as priority. Contrary to what many modern commentators tell us, the parable does not tell us to love everyone equally. After all, who, upon finding his daughter beaten half-to-death on the side of the road, would simply drop her off at an inn and continue on his journey? That great love shown by the Samaritan is something to which we should all aspire, but those closer to us than needy strangers require a still greater love.

Others will base their case for equality of love on God's proscriptions against partiality. After all, would not favoring your own over outsiders show partiality towards them? Scripturally, this is clearly not the case. Devotees of equality are fond of quoting Deuteronomy<sup>12</sup> where God says "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." However, they tend to pass over the previous verse where He says "Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." Clearly sinful partiality does not include favoring one tribe or nation over another since God does exactly that.

Like Christians today, the Israelites were to extend their love to sojourners (foreigners who visit and then return home.) In other words, they were to treat them justly according to God's Law. But even the civil laws God lovingly gave to Israel made distinctions between Israelites and foreigners. There were different regulations regarding, for example, usury,<sup>13</sup> slavery,<sup>14</sup> and kingship<sup>15</sup> which favored the Israelites over foreigners within their own land. The modern mistake is confusing partiality for preference. Biblical partiality is specifically a subversion of justice for the sake of personal gain: altering one's good judgment over bribes, threats, and so forth.<sup>16</sup> We should surely reject favoritism of that kind. But where justice requires you to favor the people God has entrusted to you over others whom He did not, there is no partiality in acting

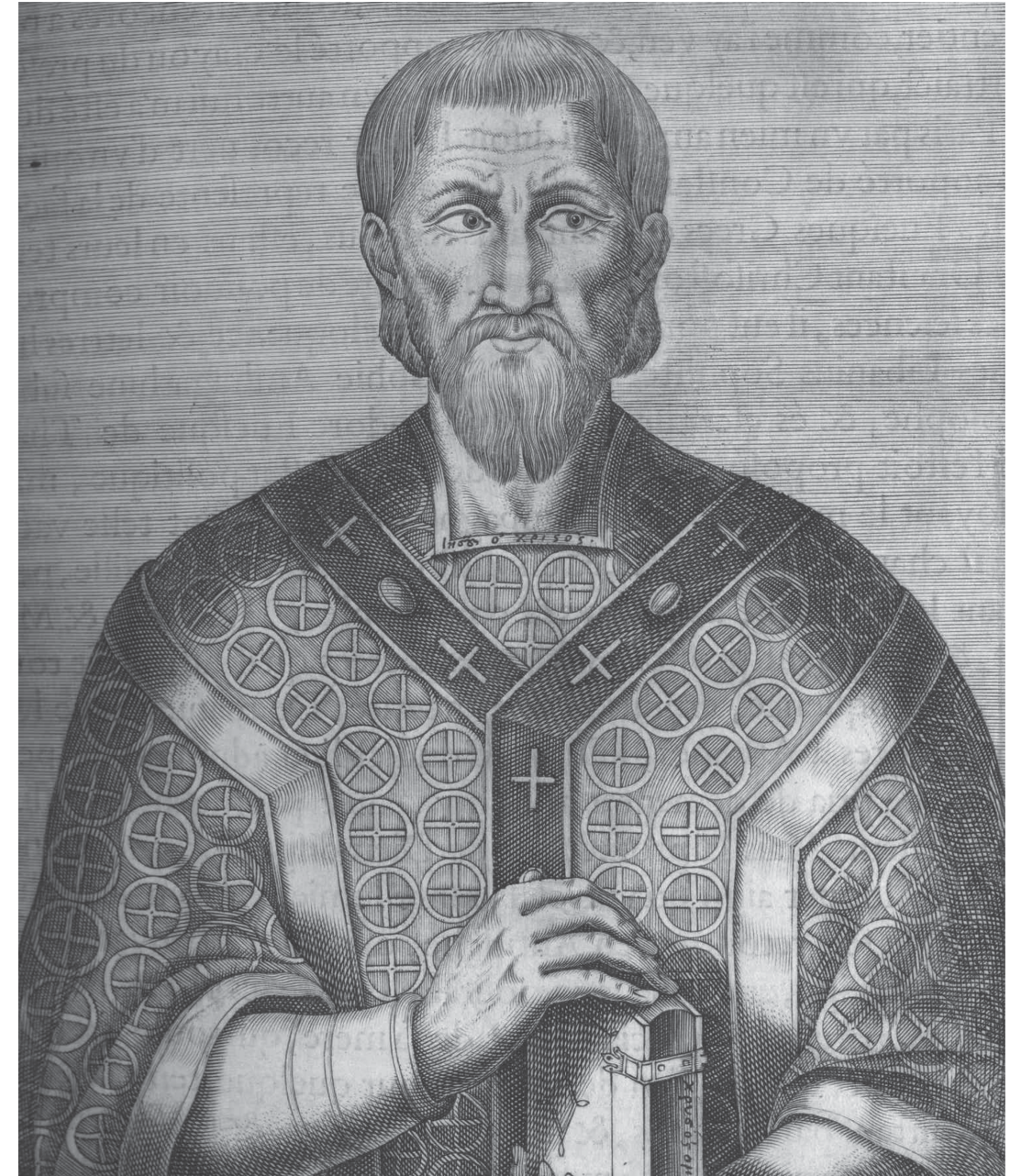
accordingly.

It should be clear that the equal and uniform love demanded by the world is not the same thing as the ordered and hierarchical love our Lord requires of us. When we try to strip away the relationships and priorities which God has given and update His Law for modern audiences, we make His Word void with our traditions, just as the Pharisees did. Fulfilling the law by prioritizing your own is not hating your brother, as many suppose. On the contrary, by adulterating God's Law, it is modern equality which makes the love of many grow cold around us. ☞

*Matthew Cochran is a software engineer by trade and a lay Lutheran philosopher/theologian.*

#### Endnotes

1. Genesis 14
2. Proverbs 13:22
3. e.g. Leviticus 20:24, Deuteronomy 26:1, etc.
4. Deuteronomy 28:32-44
5. Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30
6. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1993), 15, 22.
7. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine in Four Books*, <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDFBooks/Augustinedoctrine.pdf> 1.27-1.28
8. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Timothy*, "Homily 14", <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230614.htm>.
9. Matthew 5:43-48
10. Romans 13:4
11. Luke 10:25-37
12. Deuteronomy 10:15-19
13. Deuteronomy 23:20
14. Exodus 21:2
15. Deuteronomy 17:15
16. Matthew E. Cochran, "The Sin of Partiality Explained," <https://matthewcochran.net/blog/the-sin-of-partiality-explained/>



Woodcut of John Chrysostom

**F**ulfilling the law by prioritizing your own is not hating your brother, as many suppose. On the contrary, by adulterating God's Law, it is modern equality which makes the love of many grow cold around us.



# A Review of the Song of Roland

By Rev. John Henry III



**T**he *Song of Roland* (Chanson de Roland) was reintroduced to the world with the 1835 discovery of a twelfth-century manuscript in Oxford. Scholarship notes the wide-spread popularity of the story at the time the version that comes to us in the manuscript was composed, which is likely AD 1030-1160. The epic poem (chanson de geste), the oldest surviving work of French literature, is some 4,000 lines long, and the last line says, “Here ends the story which Toruldu told.” Who this Toruldu was, and what he means that he “told” the story are matters of no consensus.

Though written in the middle of the High Middle Ages, the story is about an earlier time. If we had to date this time, we’d have to begin at AD 778, the year of the Battle of Rencevaux Pass, and end at AD 814 with the death of Charlemagne. That’s the best we could do, since the story is about this battle during the reign of this king, though, by modern standards, the account of both is highly fictionalized.

In the story and in history, the Pyrenees mountains roughly marked the boundary between Charlemagne’s Frankish and European Christendom and Muslim Spain (Iberia). The Rencevaux Pass in the Pyrenees was the site of an attack on the rear guard of Charlemagne’s army.

In the story, but not in history, Charlemagne is coming to terms of peace with the Muslims in Spain, which are supposed to include the conversion of King Marsile of Saragossa to Christianity. One of Charlemagne’s chief vassal lords, Roland, nominates his own stepfather, Ganelon, as emissary to Marsile’s court. Ganelon believes the Muslims will kill him, believes that Roland knows this, and so interprets Roland’s nomination—which Ganelon must accept—as tantamount to murder. As Charlemagne withdraws his forces from Spain, Roland volunteers for the dangerous mission of commanding the rear guard through the Rencevaux Pass. For revenge and for personal gain, Ganelon convinces Marsile to ambush this vulnerable tail end of the force, as both

Ganelon and Marsile will benefit from Roland’s death. As the rear guard is attacked, Roland, notably accompanied by Oliver and Archbishop Turpin, commands his outnumbered forces to fight. Now comes the first great and moving question of the poem: will Roland blow his ivory horn, his olifant, to call for help from Charlemagne, or must he and his men fight alone? The second great question comes at the final movement of the story, when Ganelon is on trial: just what was the nature of his betrayal—merely personal against Roland, or treason against Charlemagne? At the end, Charlemagne wearily resigns himself to endless holy war for his Christendom.

To whom does such a story and such questions belong? We might say that they belong, first of all, to France and the Frankish heritage. But they might just as well belong to all who have received Charlemagne as the father of Europe and the architect of the culture of western Christendom. Or, thinking of the era out of which the poem emerges, they might belong to the Crusades, to the Reconquista of Spain, or to William’s Norman Conquest of Britain (Roland’s song is known to have been sung at the battle of Hasting in AD 1066). By certain historical extensions, they probably belong to the Reformation, too, since Charles V is heir to the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne, who was crowned Emperor Romanorum (Emperor to the Romans) in Rome on Christmas Day, 800 AD, by the Pope himself. This crowning, the first in the west since the fall of Rome and something of an affront to Byzantine Romans, came in recognition of and admonition toward the Emperor’s perpetual support of the Roman pontiff’s prerogatives through thick and thin—the very issue at question in the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530. On the other hand, like the confessing Saxon Electors at that Diet, Charlemagne was a great patron of Christian and classical learning, of a renaissance of catechesis for laity and clergy. And, I think, the story and its questions are ours to embrace today, since even in the pages of this issue of Christian Culture, some of us seem—what shall we say? Inspired? Haunted?—by the geist of Charlemagne’s Christendom.

For us today, Roland, Charlemagne, their world, their values, and their conflicts will seem both familiar and strange. They will be familiar especially if we know more ancient classics, if we remember Achilles, Hector, Aeneas, and Beowulf. Two of the familiar spirits of the west, undying fame and tragic hubris, are alive and well in the *The Song of Roland*. And in another way, too, it should be familiar; and that is, it is all distinctly Christian.

But, in the same place, it is also strange to us, because the Christianity is that of Christendom, and that, not of an abstraction, an ideology, or an “-ism,” but a unique and irreducible vision of the cosmos from top to bottom. This vision will only suffer under my analysis, so instead I’ll just invite you to open the book and enter in—with the unironic warning for the Christian reader that reading such a thoroughly Christian poem might be something of a shock.

Christendom isn’t a comfortable place, and people here don’t think or act like you might expect them to. There is virtue here to be learned and pursued, to be sure, and the poet is not shy about pointing it out, though it would be good if we paid attention to the way the poet draws this attention, at the very moral center of the story, away from the center of Christendom and out to the rear guard. Here we are not at the heartland, but the borderland. Here we have to do not with throne rooms (and certainly not board rooms) nor with the places where things are being built and into which riches and glory are flowing, but rather with contested territory, declining strength, even retreat.

The main action of the story takes place on a mountain pass on the geographic border of Christendom and that which is not. Notice that the question, “Should Roland blow his horn?” is

precisely a question for people on such a border, in the rear guard, the last line of defense—and not really for people in palaces. Borderlands are, in both myth and real life, strange places. Decisions—to call for Christian help or not—must be made here that those in the comfortable center can avoid, or debate objectively, from a safe distance. And those decisions are not just academic or policy-based; they have to do with...well, why don’t you read the story and keep track of all the items at stake around the issue of whether or not to blow the olifant.



*Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux*

Yet, Roland is no Lone Ranger. He is, rather, self-consciously (and different translations may render this term differently) a vassal, and here is a virtue of ancient Christendom for which one would be hard-pressed to find an analog today. Notice that being a vassal, that is, one who is sworn by oath to a lord, is subordinate to this lord, and who owes him homage and more, is something Roland and others are quite proud of; it is a station from which they derive a great deal of positive purpose, identity, and agency for life’s fray. There is nothing cynical or subversive in Roland’s actions or in Toruldu’s song over-against vassalage; it is all quite earnest. The rear guard, in his borderland decision about the olifant, is not at all torn about whether or not to be a vassal, but only about how to be the best vassal he can. Go figure.

While mentioning things familiar and strange, whether virtues or not, I’d be remiss not to bring up a few things that every modern analysis will point out, for good or ill.

For example, what I’ve been referring to as “Muslims” in the story are actually more of a projection and invention of the poets of the Middle Ages than they are accurately portrayed followers of Islam. In fact, in many ways they are a mirror image



of Christendom, but without the Christianity. Their manners, feudal structure, and even knightly virtues are similar to those of Charlemagne's kingdom—making them worthy adversaries—except that King Marsile “does not love God; he serves Muhammad and calls upon Apollo [sic!]. He cannot prevent disaster.” This polytheistic portrait does not reflect any historical reality, but apparently it was a compelling portrait for medieval Christians of what the enemies outside their borders were like. Something to think about.

Also, where is the border between the family and the civil estate under King Charlemagne? Ganelon has conspired and betrayed, that is clear. But the issue is whether this was vengeance against a family member or high treason against God's king. When does a family feud become an assault on Christendom? Charlemagne would see it one way, but the poet allows those who see it another way to speak—but then are they also traitors?

A final item. Charlemagne's swords and the Spiritus gladius (Sword of the Spirit) are firmly fused together in *The Song of Roland*. The Archbishop is as adept at hacking pagans to death as he is at administering last rites to the dying. We could have some qualms about this, but then also wonder if these qualms are not implicit worship of the fashionable false gods of our own age. Take note, though, that the saintly and learned Alcuin (died AD 804) had occasion to admonish the historical Charlemagne about the measures he used to convert or suppress the Germanic peoples. The borders of Imperial Christendom are violent places, as Saxon pagans experienced at Verden and Saxon Lutherans at Magdeburg.

None of the above is offered to subject an ancient story or the ancient Christian world to the merely critical canons of modernity. Instead, from the foregoing I come to this point, that *The Song of Roland* is precisely that sort of book to remind us why we read any old books in the first place. In that spirit, a concluding word from C.S. Lewis:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at recognizing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means old books. [...] Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.<sup>1</sup>

For readers today, I will not recommend any particular of the several available translations, other than one you can read with ease and pleasure. The beauty of the Old French poetry will likely escape most of us, but the story is deeply moving and instructive even in English. ♡

#### Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, Introduction to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (SVS Press, 1996), 4–5.



*The Tribute Money* by Peter Paul Rubens (1610), based on Matthew 22:15-22



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