

CHURCH, STATE, AND THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

A Supplement to

Render unto Caesar . . .
and unto God (1995)

a report of

THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
AND CHURCH RELATIONS

MAY 2026

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The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

May 2026

Abbreviations

AC	Augsburg Confession
AE	Luther's Works
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
FC SD	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
LC	The Large Catechism
SC	The Small Catechism



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INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) published its first extensive report on the relationship between church and state in 1995, titled *Render unto Caesar . . . and unto God*.¹ At the time, there were debates within U.S. Christianity, not to mention within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), over appropriate ways for the church to involve itself in the civil realm, participate in political advocacy and political debates, and prevent secular political concerns from predominating in the life and faith of the church. At the time, the church still had a relatively privileged place in public life. That is no longer the case.

Only three decades later, much has changed that has forced Christians to reevaluate their relationship to the broader secular culture and the impact they might have on political institutions. Such changes include a decline in church membership and the rise of the religious “Nones,” increasing national support for homosexuality and same-sex marriage (enshrined in 2015’s *Obergefell v. Hodges*), the growing gap between liberal and conservative Christians on social issues, and the widespread closure of congregations and religious institutions of higher learning, among other dynamics. The church now must consider how it should speak as a religious and moral minority within society and in a way that addresses grave social and ethical ills.

To that end, the 2023 LCMS convention adopted Resolution 11-05, which charged the CTCR with addressing the relationships between “Church, State, and Christian love of neighbor, especially in light of an increasing

1 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar . . . and unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1995).

hostility toward the Christian faith.”² At the height of tensions over the COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s restrictions on religious gatherings, the fear for Christians was the state intruding into the church’s life. Whether or not those fears persist, the concern is always a present one. In order to fulfill the Synod’s charge, the CTCR has chosen to provide a supplement to its 1995 report. First, it will distill that fairly long and detailed 1995 report into brief theological principles and practical guidelines that remain applicable to the church in our day, while also providing some commentary on how our context has changed in the intervening years and what new considerations have come to light. Second, in the same way that the earlier report commented on the Synod’s approach to practical questions of policy as they relate to the church, this report will offer perspectives on a series of more recent political challenges that the church has faced since 1995 and how those perspectives might inform the way we respond to new issues as they arise.

At the outset, we wish to make clear the orientation and perspective of this report. As the 1995 report maintained, the church must not be reduced to an agency for political change. The Gospel is and must remain the primary and ultimate end and goal of the church. Christ instituted His church to make disciples of all nations, to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, to forgive the sins of the repentant and strengthen their faith unto life everlasting. Politics, however, are penultimate. Political involvement is always secondary. This especially needs to be said in an age of near-constant political vitriol, which Americans consume at a higher rate than ever before via cable news, podcasts, and social media. This inundation with political animus runs the risk of splintering families, congregations, even denominations. Yet as St. Paul urges Timothy: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits” (2 Tim. 2:3–4). Civil government, while a good and profitable institution because God Himself established it,³ was instituted by God after the fall in

2 LCMS, *2023 Convention Proceedings*, 224.

3 See AC XVI.

order to restrain and curb sin and its impact upon His creation.⁴ The New Testament repeatedly says, however, that this world in its present form is passing away (1 John 2:17). When Christ returns, He will bring an end to sin and, with it, the need for civil government. In the meantime, Christians do indeed have an obligation to concern themselves with politics because of its potential for good and ill, not only for the church but also for our neighbors in society. Yet politics must never rival—let alone displace—the Gospel as the central preoccupation of the church in this fallen world.

4 On this latter point, see especially Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*: “There was no government of the state before sin, for there was no need of it. Civil government is a remedy required by our corrupted nature. It is necessary that lust be held in check by the bonds of the laws and by penalties. For this reason you may correctly call civil government the rule of sin” (AE 1:104).

I. REVISITING RENDER UNTO CAESAR (1995)

Before we can address more recent political complexities the church has been forced to navigate, it is imperative to lay again the theological foundations for a Lutheran understanding of church and state. In 1995, *Render unto Caesar* provided an extensive and detailed treatment of that topic. Its chief consideration was avoiding the twin dangers of an unqualified political activism (the preoccupation with political matters in the church) and an unqualified quietism (the avoidance of political matters in the church, a particular temptation of the Lutheran church historically). The report explained the Lutheran view of the two kingdoms as a theologically consistent and contextually appropriate way to avert those twin dangers, then proceeded to provide concrete direction for how the church can practically address and involve itself in political concerns faithfully, responsibly, and in the proper perspective—namely, as a penultimate matter. This section will summarize the basic theological foundations and practical proposals of that report.

It is also worth noting a slight shift in the orientation of this study from *Render unto Caesar*. Whereas that report focused primarily on the church speaking collectively on political issues in the public square, this supplement will attempt to shed more light on the individual Christian and how he or she is called to live in the tension between church and state while also seeking to love one's neighbors through being active politically on their behalf. That is not to say that the collective action or voice of the church is insignificant or irrelevant, let alone that this report does not apply to that sphere either. As the following will make clear, there are times when such public stances should be taken. Nonetheless, the challenge of the present

moment is for the individual attempting to navigate political tensions in a divided country, especially when relating to Christians of good will who happen to disagree with us politically. The Commission believes the theological principles of the two-kingdom framework and the practical guidelines suggested by *Render unto Caesar* can help us respond more faithfully and more charitably, defaulting to neither activism nor quietism—again, keeping politics penultimate, but the Gospel ultimate.

A. Theological Principles: The Lutheran Two-Kingdom Perspective⁵

1. Civil Government as Good Gift and Imperfect Institution

The basic biblical conception of the temporal kingdom underscores how government is a good gift of God yet also an imperfect institution in a fallen world. In the first place, Scripture repeatedly affirms the goodness of civil government as an institution of God. First Peter urges Christians to be subject to every human institution, whether to emperors or governors, who punish evildoers and praise the good (1 Peter 2:13–17). Likewise, Romans 13 describes the governing authorities as God’s servant and institution that bears the sword against the evildoer, and so Christians owe them obedience and respect (Rom. 13:1–17). Paul again reminds Christians in Titus 3 that they are to submit to and obey the governing authorities (Titus 3:1). Repeatedly in the Lutheran Confessions, we read of government as a gift of God. According to Augsburg Confession XVI, “All political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and . . . Christians may without sin exercise political authority.”⁶ Luther’s catechisms describe good government

5 What follows here is a distillation of CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 6–12, 31–41. See more recently the concise explanation of the two kingdoms in reference to the question of the relationship between church and state in educational matters in CTCR, *A Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2025), 16–17 (cf. pp. 17–18 n. 14 below).

6 AC XVI 1–2.

as a gift of God in creation⁷ and apply the Fourth Commandment to civil authorities as well as to parents. They even teach Christians to pray for temporal authority and civil government, since God uses them to provide for our “daily bread and all the comforts of this life.”⁸

On the other hand, government is an imperfect institution. It exists in a fallen world, and its leaders are sinful humans. When Israel demanded a king, God granted their request but showed them that they had rejected Him as king in favor of humans who would rule over them unjustly and selfishly (1 Sam. 8:1–18). The vast majority of the kings of Israel and Judah “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (a repeated refrain in the Old Testament books of 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles). Even the best kings of Israel, such as David and Solomon, were deeply flawed. Throughout the Gospels, we read of civil authorities such as Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, and Pontius Pilate, among others, who slaughtered the holy innocents of Israel, beheaded John the Baptist, and washed their hands clean of Jesus before handing Him over to be crucified. The civil authorities in the book of Acts put Peter in prison (Acts 12:1–5) and routinely persecuted Christians in the early church. To affirm government as a good gift of God does not mean that government or its leaders are always good.

2. Christian Dual Citizenship: Heavenly and Earthly

As Christians, we must learn to view government in a way that recognizes it as a gift of God while also placing it within its proper limitations. Lutherans have often accomplished this by appealing to Martin Luther’s concept of the two kingdoms, which he first articulated in his 1523 treatise *On Temporal Authority*. There, Luther distinguished between the “kingdom of God” (*Reich Gottes*) and the “kingdom of the world” (*Reich der Welt*).⁹ He described these as two different “governments” (*Regiment*). God

7 LC II 15.

8 LC III 74.

9 See AE 45:75–129. Luther will at other times, as in his discussion of the Lord’s Prayer in the Large Catechism, contrast the kingdom of God with the kingdom of the devil (which Luther does not identify with civil government, of course). See LC III 54.

establishes the spiritual government, which rules through the Word of God, not with the sword or other means of force. Conversely, God also establishes a secular, worldly government, which seeks to protect and support life, goods, and honor through the threat of punishment with the sword. Christians should submit to the sword willingly, yet the secular government of this world should not intervene in matters of faith or conscience.

The Christian, then, has dual citizenship in these two kingdoms. We belong primarily and ultimately to the heavenly kingdom and are citizens of that kingdom. The New Testament refers to us as “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11), “strangers and exiles on the earth” who are “seeking a homeland” and who “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13–16). We find that in the heavenly, spiritual kingdom. We have been transferred by God “to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). We have a kingdom, given by Christ, which “is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Yet we also maintain an earthly citizenship in this world, one that we live out in various nation-states, territories, and municipalities. Throughout history, Christians have lived under very different political, legal, electoral, and economic systems. The challenge for us as Christians is to learn to understand and live within them rightly, in a God-pleasing way. That means not entirely *separating* these two kinds of citizenship yet also *distinguishing* between them properly.

It is these two kinds of citizenship that the 1995 report seeks to balance. The report draws insight for finding that balance from Matthew 22:15–21, where Jesus distinguishes between God and Caesar. This distinction represents God’s twofold rule in this world. Caesar represents the civil government, which is ruled by earthly “kings” and governs through man-made laws. Citizens have standing in this earthly kingdom by obedience and receive the appropriate rewards (or civil punishments) for their obedience (or disobedience). The good works that we do in this realm come out of sanctified free will and human reason and are considered civil righteousness.¹⁰

10 Civil righteousness is understood as works done in the sight of fellow man (*coram hominibus*) or the world (*coram mundo*). These works clearly do not justify us before God, nor are they properly speaking “good works,” which are evoked by the Holy Spirit

In this passage, civil government is contrasted with the heavenly kingdom or the invisible church (that is, properly speaking, all believers who have faith created by the Holy Spirit and gather together around the Word and the Sacraments), where Christ Himself is our only king and ruler. He governs us in this church through His Word—both the Law, which reveals His unchanging will and condemns sin, and the Gospel, which offers the forgiveness of sins. We have standing in this heavenly kingdom solely through faith in Christ. This faith is our spiritual righteousness before God. The fruits of that faith take shape in the form of good works in the sight of God.¹¹

Yet in each case God is at work, and He rules through both kingdoms. He protects life and property, restrains evil, and maintains social order through the earthly kingdom. It is in this sense that we can say civil government is a good gift of God, though a day is coming when civil government will no longer be necessary because God will put an end to the evil that government exists to restrain. At the same time, God declares His Gospel, forgives sins, and sanctifies and keeps believers in the heavenly kingdom. He works through both kingdoms, even when we cannot see exactly how He is at work in current events in the life of the church or in the world.

Christians serve God and neighbor not only in this heavenly kingdom but also in the earthly kingdom. That is, we have a responsibility toward government. Serving in civil government is a God-honoring vocation. Scripture also calls us to honor and respect those in authority. We do so for the sake of the God-given office of the emperor, president, governor, or other official (judge, police officer, soldier) but also because God has instituted the authority behind that office (1 Peter 2:13–17; Rom. 13:7). We are to obey those authorities and give them what is due, especially in the case of taxes.

There are, of course, exceptions: When earthly laws or demands directly contradict God's laws and commands, we must obey God rather than men

only in those who have saving faith. They may in fact be “works of the Law,” which proceed from the fear of punishment. Yet they benefit the civil realm through the restraint of evil. On these distinctions, see especially AC XX, Ap XX, and FC SD IV and VI.

11 FC SD IV.

in matters of faith and conscience (Acts 4:18–20; 5:27–29). Nonetheless, we should be prepared to speak and act within civil government, on behalf of others and in defense of our faith. We also should be prepared to suffer the consequences for such speech and action if and when necessary. This type of suffering is to be expected in a fallen world where institutions are governed by sinful human beings, some of whom may even seek to persecute Christians and the church.

3. Lutheran Theological Principles of Church and State

The Lutheran paradigm of the two kingdoms does not prescribe for us exactly how we are to lead our lives practically in the earthly kingdom in each and every situation, let alone when we must oppose that civil realm by way of conscience-bound disobedience. But there are some principles we can draw from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions that may guide us in understanding the relationship between church and state.

Principle 1: Both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions speak in a generally positive way about the role and responsibilities of civil government and about the Christian’s response to government. Earthly authorities are “God’s servants” and should be honored and obeyed as such.

Principle 2: The Bible does not discount or gloss over the consequences of the fall for civil government, nor does it overlook the real and potential dangers of governmental oppression and injustice that work contrary to God’s purpose for government. In this respect, too, the almighty God is able to cause all things—even evil things—to work together for good for His church (Rom. 8:28). This was especially the case for the horribly unjust treatment of Christ Himself, through which our forgiveness was purchased and won.

Principle 3: Christians dare never forget that although Christ’s kingdom exists in this world, it is not of the world and does not function according to the principles of this world.

Christ's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom where grace (rather than human laws or justice) and God's Word (rather than simple human reason or majority vote) rule.

Principle 4: As Christians live in these two kingdoms at the same time, they live by the teaching given them by their Lord to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). The Bible does not, however, provide a how-to manual for applying this teaching to every specific political question or issue. This means that we must expect and allow a considerable degree of freedom among Christians as they seek to apply this same teaching to various (and often very complex) social and political issues and questions. Differing political systems and sociocultural circumstances will inevitably require differing approaches and strategies for Christian interaction with government.

Principle 5: When there is a direct conflict between what Caesar demands and what God requires, Christians must obey God rather than men. Here, too, the principle is much clearer and simpler than its application to specific situations.

Principle 6: Although most of what the Bible says about Christians and government is directed primarily to individual believers living out their faith in their various callings, there are also times when the church as an institution may be called on or required to speak to its members or to the government about pressing or critical civil issues. At the same time, the church must always be aware of the risks involved in such speaking or acting.

Principle 7: Even our good works in the social and political realm—motivated by our love for the neighbor flowing from faith in Christ—are to be done in the light of the church’s unique and ultimate mission to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”

(1 Peter 2:9). Especially in a hostile cultural environment, actions will almost always speak louder than words—and earn the right to speak words.

These principles are not exhaustive, but they represent a distillation of the two-kingdom teaching for application to our present church-state dynamics. They affirm the fundamental goodness of the civil realm as an institution of God Himself and the Christian's citizenship in and responsibility for the civil realm. They also rightly stress the church's commitment to Word and Sacrament ministry and its proclamation of the Gospel to a sinful world in need of salvation. In short, they affirm politics as an important penultimate concern, but the Gospel as the church's ultimate concern. While the relationship between church and state in our context has continued to evolve since 1995, these principles provide biblically sound, confessionally rooted guidance for Lutherans that remains firm and reliable no matter the shifting political dynamics of a particular government or the differing and changing political views held by members of our congregations.

Excursus: Is There Really a Lutheran Perspective?

The 1995 report asked this very question.¹² In fact, there is no single Lutheran position on church and state. There have been many Lutheran views of the relationship between church and state throughout the centuries, including the religious monarchies of the Reformation era and early modern Europe, the state churches of modern Germany, and the free churches of the U.S. republic. The two-kingdom perspective, as it has come to be called since the early twentieth century, is one among numerous types, though it has especially commended itself to the modern context because of the religious toleration and religious freedom that have been embraced by representative democracies such as ours. However, it also comes with its own problems. Theologians such as Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Stanley Hauerwas, not to mention secular

12 CTCL, *Render unto Caesar*, 53–54.

critics such as William Shirer, have in different ways accused Lutherans of using the two-kingdom doctrine to separate their religious views from their political views and of practicing a sort of quietism.¹³

One specific danger worth noting in this connection is confusing the binary of church and state with the binary of the heavenly kingdom and the earthly kingdom.¹⁴ This is a serious category error with very real

13 This latter point has been especially alleged of Lutheran two-kingdom complicity in the Holocaust, but for a refutation of that allegation, see Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 3rd ed. (Concordia Publishing House, 2023).

14 The concept of the two kingdoms has similarities with the modern distinction between church and state, but the two are not the same. The two-kingdom framework helps Christians interpret the church-state distinction (and prevent their unnecessary separation), not vice versa. Note the way the two kingdoms are developed in relation to educational matters in the recent CTCR report *A Theology and Philosophy of Lutheran Education*, 16:

Lutherans typically distinguish between God's two ways of working in the world. This is sometimes described as God's right-hand and left-hand "kingdoms." His right-hand, eternal, spiritual kingdom is where He works through the preaching of His Word, and His left-hand, temporal, earthly kingdom is where He works through the authorities He has instituted in the civil government. In the left-hand kingdom, God has established authorities in the form of governments, politicians, judges, militaries, and law enforcement to protect the lives and property of citizens (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–14). This also includes state regulations concerning education. Our Lutheran schools seek to abide by all civil laws and regulations, including those that govern education. Our Lutheran schools also urge their families to be good citizens, pray for their leaders, and play an active role in our political system. Lutheran institutions serve this left-hand, civil realm by preparing law-abiding citizens to contribute to society in many practical ways, from the politician to the social worker, from the accountant to the elementary school teacher. At the same time, our Lutheran schools are institutions of the church that also ultimately serve the right-hand realm: the ministry of God's Word. These schools have many different missions to serve many different populations. Some seek to educate Lutherans or train them for church service, some seek to aid underserved populations by providing quality education, some see themselves as evangelistic outposts and alternatives to secular schools, and some provide higher education to a broader public. In all cases, however, they are institutions of the church, which is called to the right-hand work of proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the Scriptures in accordance with the Lutheran understanding of the faith. The government must not impede the confession and mission of our schools by overstepping its left-hand authority (e.g., when laws or regulations dictate or limit what our institutions teach about the faith, who may teach in our schools, and what behaviors we

complications. We cannot simply equate the church with the heavenly kingdom or the state with the earthly kingdom. There is much in the institutional church that has to do with the earthly kingdom—things such as tax codes, constitutions and bylaws, building permits, and fire codes—as the 1995 report notes.¹⁵ In the same way, the state is not an exact parallel to the earthly kingdom. The civil realm touches on any number of issues that may be at odds with God’s Word—such as abortion, same-sex unions, sexual orientation and identity, even prohibitions on when and where the church may gather—and so Christians may not ignore these issues as if they were temporal matters that merely belong to the state. While the way in which Christians respond to these matters may involve elements of the earthly kingdom (as we will discuss in the case studies later), it is a mistake to treat them as little more than political issues reserved for the civil government.

Although this report has again chosen to utilize the two-kingdom framework, as the 1995 report did, we must also take note of and commend other theological concepts Lutherans have used to talk about the relationship between church and state. One worth commending is the model of the three estates, which we find articulated by Luther himself and in the Lutheran Confessions: domestic, political, ecclesiastical.¹⁶ The first,

must allow). If civil government trespasses into right-hand matters (faith, morality, and the like), our schools may appeal to their constitutional right to religious freedom in opposing those actions and will obey God, not man (Acts 5:29).

There is clearly overlap between the two kingdoms and church-state when it comes to certain responsibilities—civil educational regulations are temporal responsibilities exercised by the state, and the ministry of the Word is a spiritual responsibility exercised by the church—but that does not make the church the same as the heavenly kingdom nor the state the same as the earthly kingdom.

15 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 66.

16 Various other terms are used throughout Luther’s writings and the Lutheran Confessions: orders (*Orden*), mandates (*Befehl*), governments (*Regiment*), hierarchies (*Hierarchie*), walks of life (*status*). Luther even refers to them in the Large Catechism as various forms of fatherhood. The terms and their referents generally derive from the medieval ways of structuring life according to the threefold “estates” (from the Latin *status*, which simply means “standing”).

and most foundational, is the domestic.¹⁷ It has to do with the daily realities of life, the things Luther itemizes in his explanation of the First Article of the Creed: “clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have . . . all that I need to support this body and life.”¹⁸ God has given us spouses, parents, children, occupations, possessions (Luther will even add teachers or masters and mistresses of the house to the equation) as the most basic sphere of our daily existence and the foundation and source for all human life. Another is the political estate. This estate has to do with the larger political, legal, and economic structures that bind us together socially. Luther and the Lutheran Confessions use many different terms to describe this reality, but in general it refers to structures of civil government (federal, state, and municipal in our context). Finally, God has established the ecclesiastical estate. This includes the church as an institution, its ministry, the local congregation, the fellowship of believers, and other structures through which God brings to us the Word and the Sacraments.

These three estates provided reformers a different way of speaking about a given society that does not simply contrast church and state but sees multiple spheres in which God has organized our lives and established authorities and structures to accomplish the common good. This model offers much food for thought and should receive more attention in the future, though it is not without its own tensions and potential contradictions. It should also be noted that the two kingdoms and the three estates are not necessarily opposed but overlap and complement each other in important ways. Again, the Commission believes there is more salutary research to be done on that relationship, and we commend that work to those in our midst.¹⁹

17 Again, Luther and the Lutheran Confessions refer to this in many different ways: the “housefather” (*Hausvater*), the home, the marital estate, etc.

18 SC II 2.

19 For examples of important work on the two kingdoms and three estates by theologians within our circles, see Cameron A. MacKenzie, “The Challenge of History: Luther’s Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2007): 3–28; Jonathan Mumme, “The Church as Estate: A Reconsideration and Integration

All this is to say that the two-kingdom perspective is not the only way that Lutherans have historically conceived of the relationship between church and state. The two kingdoms paradigm does, however, provide a helpful, biblically faithful way of parsing out the complicated contrast of church and state in the United States. Recognizing and understanding God's twofold rule through the earthly, temporal kingdom and the heavenly, spiritual kingdom enables Christians to rightly distinguish the responsibilities of church and state and to avert the dangers of activism and quietism—either failing to distinguish between church and state or overly separating them. The case studies to come will show how that model has served us well as the Synod and may continue to do so.

B. Practical Guidelines: Moral Authority Without Political Partisanship

While much of *Render unto Caesar* focused on the understandings of church and state in Scripture, Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, and the history of the church, especially in the United States, the report also sought to provide concrete guidelines for how the church can maintain an active presence in the secular realm without abdicating or undermining its primary objective of Word and Sacrament ministry. The most pertinent section in that regard was the chapter titled “Practicing What We Preach,” specifically the section on “Moral Authority without Political Partisanship.” It set forth practical direction not just for how Christians should think about church and state but for how they should live out their witness faithfully and effectively in society. In what follows, we will briefly summarize those points.²⁰

of Martin Luther's Ecclesiology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 33, no. 3 (2024): 185–205; and John R. Stephenson, “The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms in Luther's Thought,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, no. 4 (1981): 321–37. See also Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless, eds., *One Lord, Two Hands? Essays on the Theology of the Two Kingdoms* (Concordia Publishing House, 2021).

20 What follows here summarizes CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 62–70.

First, the report describes the *message*, or what the church has to say to the world concerning politics and how the church should think about what it has to say. It uses four different ways of evaluating the church's message in the public sphere: *principles*, *purpose*, *priority*, and *prudence*. The church's *principles* involve differentiating between Law and Gospel and the two kingdoms to address itself to political matters in ways that are theologically appropriate to the issue at hand. In the case of abortion, that may require calling to repentance a politician who supports abortion (Law) or comforting post-abortive parents who repent of their sin and desire forgiveness (Gospel). The theological principles must guide how the church speaks to the issue. The *purpose* of the church speaking on political matters also shapes how it speaks. This requires determining how and to what end the church is speaking on a given matter. In some cases, that may entail speaking for the purpose of convicting lawmakers or citizens of sin, but, in others, it may have the practical aim of restraining sin through opposing or supporting a legislative or policy stance or initiative.

The *priority* of the church's message involves distinguishing between concerns that have lesser or greater weight. The church need not speak on every political issue—or even on most—but rather on those it deems of greater significance for the spiritual kingdom, the temporal kingdom, or both. Lastly, the *prudence* of the church's message involves caution and reserve in political matters so as not to overtly politicize the church or reduce it to a proxy for a political party. One quote in the original report underscores this point: “When it is not necessary for the church to speak, it is necessary for the church not to speak.”²¹ Where the church uses these four modes to critically evaluate its message in the civil realm, it can resist the temptation of speaking like every other political entity in society or, alternatively, being indifferent to the concerns of its neighbors.

21 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 65. For this comment by Richard John Neuhaus, noted commentator on religion and politics and founding editor of the journal *First Things*, see “The Church as Interest Group, Once More,” *First Things*, April 1, 1992, <https://firstthings.com/the-church-as-interest-group-once-more/>.

Second, the report defines the different dimensions of the church as a *messenger*. One such dimension is the *church as the spiritual Body of Christ*. In this respect, the church is principally focused on its ministry of Word and Sacrament and communicating the Gospel, not advocating for political positions. This is the primary way in which the church lives out its stewardship of the heavenly kingdom in this world, and it must retain its integrity on this score. Another dimension relates to the *church as social institution*, which includes civic functions and responsibilities that require it to address itself to political matters. It cannot avoid doing so in certain situations, nor should it desire to do so. This is an inescapable reality of the church living in the world. Finally, a message is conveyed through the *church as Christians generally*. This means that individual Christians pursuing their vocations in various walks of life are in position to speak to political affairs, whether that is the Christian politician, the Christian lobbyist, the Christian journalist, or simply the Christian citizen at the ballot box (or voting machine). It is in this way that the church most effectively contributes to the common good, especially in a representative democracy such as the United States.

Finally, the report speaks of the *means* through which the church can speak its message in the civil realm. To explain this, the report made special use of Lutheran ethicist Robert Benne's distinction between four modes of Christian influence in political affairs. The first is *indirect and unintentional influence*.²² This is the primary mode of the church's activity, when it allows God's Word to speak for itself in the regular preaching and teaching of the church's ministry, in its worship services, Bible studies, and theological publications. This shapes God's people, who in turn bring those convictions into the world with them. The second is *indirect and intentional influence*, when the church publishes resources that specifically address prominent political matters for the sake of its own members and their education (including resources such as this one). Through these two categories, Christians are instructed and formed in views that will help them

22 These were articulated in Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision* (Fortress Press, 1995). See more recently his updated guidance in Robert Benne, *Good and Bad Ways to Think About Religion and Politics* (Eerdmans, 2010).

speak to and act in relation to political issues addressed by God's Word. The church does not act directly in either of these first two means, but it acts indirectly through the members as they are informed and educated by God's Word.

The other two categories relate more specifically to direct political activity. One is *direct and intentional influence*. This entails the church's clear and public—but necessarily selective and infrequent—commentary on important political issues. Here one may think of church statements on controversial political matters that touch its very life and faith, including policies regarding marriage or sexuality or government restrictions on worship. The other is *direct and intentional action*. This involves the church lobbying for specific governmental policies or legislation, such as filing amicus briefs on religious liberty, participating in congressional testimony, or advocating for ballot initiatives. It is also the most controversial action in the church's life, for it puts the church at risk of being reduced to another political organization and so must be used sparingly.

It was the report's contention—following Benne—that the church should emphasize the first of these modes of influence and use the subsequent three in decreasing measure, preferring to allow its people, formed by the teaching of the Word, to bring that Word to bear upon their life in the public realm. One might summarize the practical guidelines of the 1995 report as follows:

Guideline 1: The most effective and powerful way for the church to influence the state is to “be the church” and to do what only the church can do: live holy lives as Christ's disciples and seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament.

Guideline 2: The church influences the state most effectively and appropriately “from the bottom up,” that is, through the words and deeds of its individual members pursuing their own God-given vocations. There are various ways in which the church can shape what members believe about public

issues without speaking directly to the state on behalf of its members.

Guideline 3: The church is not only a spiritual entity but also an institution in this world and a participant in the temporal kingdom. There are times when, for the sake of its God-given mission and responsibilities, the church itself must speak regarding some particular social or political issue being debated in the civil realm. If its voice is to be heard, such speaking must be done prudently, selectively (only when necessary), respectfully, and persuasively, that is, on the basis of sound reason and arguments that can be accepted and understood by people of good will regardless of their religious beliefs (or lack thereof).

Guideline 4: The church must be aware not only of the risks associated with not speaking but also—and especially—with the risks and dangers of speaking (or acting) on public issues. It must strive to avoid any unnecessary politicization or partisanship that would hinder or undermine its unique and all-important mission of gaining citizens for an eternal kingdom that is “not of this world” (John 18:36).

These guidelines reflect the direction of 1995’s *Render unto Caesar* and the practical guidance that the church (as a corporate body) should consider as it reacts to issues in the civil realm. No set of guidelines, however, can possibly be applied consistently and perfectly in every case. Christians deal with political issues in real time. We respond to them with limited and sometimes inaccurate information. We often fail to understand fully the issues at hand and to respond to them adequately. Together, as a church body, we seek faithfulness to our confession and responsibility for our communities, yet we must acknowledge there will be times when we fall into the trap of either unhelpful or unjustified political activism or political quietism. In those cases, we must do our best to show charity toward our fellow Christians (with whose political views, statements, or actions we may disagree), as we hope they would show the same toward us.

The politicization noted above in Guideline 4 bears reiterating. The simple fact is that we live in a politically divided culture. There is a tendency to read political motivations into words or actions that may not be intended that way at all. Many a pastor can attest that he has preached or prayed about or otherwise commented on a contemporary event, oftentimes a tragedy, and some in the congregation have interpreted that as the pastor being overtly political. While clergy must take great care not to mingle their own political opinions with the Word they are called to preach and teach, it is nonetheless to be expected that their message might sometimes be misconstrued in a culture so heavily politicized. What this document offers in its reiteration of the two-kingdom framework and the related practical direction is a way (hopefully) to avoid that misunderstanding and prevent unnecessary conflict over political disagreement at a time when many are almost constantly inclined to it. It is precisely for this reason that the Commission underscores the need for civility in political discussion, especially among those in the Synod since we are committed to the same Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions and share in the *koinonia* of Word and Sacrament together.

C. From 1995 to the Present: Church and State Today

Of course, in 1995 these theological concepts and practical applications spoke to a considerably different cultural context at a time when Christians made up a larger contingent of the U.S. body politic and had a more prominent voice in the country's political discourse. That does not mean these concepts and applications are irrelevant today. Much can and should be retained. In the first place, the United States is still constitutionally committed to religious disestablishment, which means the church has the freedom to maintain and express its convictions.²³ Second, the Lutheran confession

23 This report will not address the more recent debates over Christian nationalism as there is yet no single definition or school of thought encompassing that topic. On the contrary, many different movements throughout the decades have sought something like a distinctly Christian expression of civil government (and its corresponding suppression of religious freedom for non-Christians or those who do not share a particular

of faith likewise remains the same, and that confession of faith informs not only how we speak in relation to the civil realm but also what it is we say as the church, including the primacy of the Gospel. Third, the Lutheran theological underpinnings of the church's involvement in the civil realm are also unchanged. The restraint urged by the two-kingdom perspective should be heeded, even where the need to speak to civil issues may be on the rise as culture departs from certain biblical and ethical values that we share. Finally, the church's ethical stances on specific moral issues have continued significance for our public testimony. We dare not ignore the responsibility to speak the truth of Scripture on moral or ethical matters.

That said, much has changed in the years since the publication of the 1995 report. The platforms of the respective political parties have changed, and a particular party's current position on things such as abortion, religious freedom, war and peace, poverty, racial discrimination, and support for the ill and infirm may not align exactly with those of 1995. Christians may need to evaluate party affiliation differently in this age. Moreover, Christians themselves have increasingly divergent moral and social views that directly impact their political views, participation, and messaging. Specific policies have also changed in relation to the church, as we saw with governmental restrictions on worship gatherings in many locales during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific legal cases have also reshaped the political discussion in recent decades, ranging from the legalization of homosexual unions as a constitutional right in 2015's *Obergefell v. Hodges* to more recent judicial

interpretation of the Christian faith). Those include the postmillennial reconstructionist theology of Reformed thinkers such as R. J. Rushdoony, the more recent Roman Catholic integralism of Adrian Vermeule or Gladden Pappin, or the many other varieties—some more intentionally Christian than others, some tinged with nationalist, white nationalist, or Neo-Nazi views. If by Christian nationalism one means the imposition of the whole of Mosaic Law on the civil realm, the Commission does not believe this view can reasonably be justified given the scriptural and confessional principles noted above or in *Render unto Caesar*. Confessionally, see especially the statement of Ap XVI 3, which criticizes the former Wittenberg professor Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt for seeking to enforce the Mosaic Law on the civil realm: “Neither does the gospel introduce new laws for the civil realm. . . . Karlstadt was insane when he tried to impose the judicial laws of Moses upon us.” The Commission, however, readily acknowledges the need for more study and discussion of this issue.

decisions concerning the right to religious freedom for individuals or religious charities.

As noted earlier, religious demographics have continued to fluctuate. While the future is uncertain and some of the data on the decline in religious participation has stabilized, there are clearly fewer churches and fewer church-attending Christians in U.S. society than a generation ago (and consequently a smaller percentage of the voting population is Christian). There has also been a notable rise in political and religious violence, ranging from terrorism to assassination attempts to religiously motivated school shootings. This has understandably caused fear and concern on the part of Christians and on the part of the church's institutions. Lastly, and maybe of gravest concern, the rise of new forms of digital media means access to political information is greater than it ever has been, but so is access to potentially false, misleading, or completely unfounded political information. No change has revolutionized society since 1995 quite like the rise of the internet and the vast amount of technological development we have witnessed. That may come with some potential benefit in better understanding certain religious or political issues, but it requires vastly increased discernment in thinking critically about what we hear and how we should respond to it as Christians (not to mention what we say in these digital spaces ourselves).

With these theological principles and practical guidelines in view, the remainder of this document will address a series of political challenges that have emerged (or reemerged in differing forms) since the publication of the CTCR's 1995 report. That report concluded with examples of how the LCMS has spoken to specific political issues according to the fourfold "means" of the church's political activity. In what follows, we will instead focus on several recent political debates to show how the Synod has sought to approach these policies and debates in carefully nuanced, theologically faithful, and pastorally sensitive ways; how it has engaged controversial issues in light of the principles and guidelines noted above; and how it has expressed or updated guidance to its members in response to political changes. These case studies involve abortion, rights for same-sex couples, religious liberty, the conscription and military service of women, and

immigration. Each of these has been addressed by the CTCR and by the Synod in convention resolutions, and the Commission believes the stances taken there reflect a theologically sound Lutheran approach to the church-state relationship and may prove instructive in how we should respond to similar issues in the future. Addressing specific contemporary issues such as these will necessarily limit the usefulness and pertinence of the case studies as ideas and debates in the civil realm continue to evolve. Yet it is *how* the case studies navigate these church-state tensions and exemplify Christian love for the neighbor that may help the church confront new and different issues in the future.

II. CHURCH, STATE, AND THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR TODAY: CASE STUDIES

A. Abortion

The first example of a recently evolving church-state issue is abortion, especially in light of the 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which struck down a constitutional right to abortion and returned the issue to the states. The LCMS has always been steadfastly pro-life. The CTCR published its first report on abortion in 1971, well before the 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade*. That report preceded much of the conservative Christian opposition to abortion that would drive the pro-life movement in subsequent decades. What did change, however, was the Supreme Court decision that made abortion a constitutional right, and that decision led to a corresponding change in how the Synod responded. Our approach moved from a largely theological critique of abortion to a more politically active one. In 1984, the CTCR published a more extensive document on abortion, *Abortion in Perspective*, that expanded considerably on both its medical and its legal considerations. The 1984 report addressed various medical issues, including abortion, amniocentesis, IUD usage, and fetal therapy, as well as medical ethics, to apprise the Synod's membership of potential moral complexities and dangers. Additionally, it treated at length the judicial framework that resulted in the adoption of the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, among other rulings that subsequently affirmed *Roe*.

These perspectives would serve the church well as it participated in the pro-life movement, advocated for an end to abortion, and addressed new bioethical challenges related to the beginning of life. The Synod repeatedly affirmed its position that life begins at conception and that abortion takes the lives of innocent humans created by God. In 1998, Resolution 3-14, “To Affirm Life and Oppose Abortion on Demand,” reaffirmed a 1979 resolution against “willful abortion” but also asked the Synod to marshal “physical and financial support for lawful prolife activities and prolife organizations.”²⁴ In 2010, Resolution 6-02A, “To Be a Light for Life,” denounced “any legislation or action that supports or funds abortions” and urged congregations “to work at the grassroots level with local crisis pregnancy centers.”²⁵ Many other such resolutions could be cited, but all resolutely stated the Synod’s biblical opposition to abortion and sought to mitigate its availability through concerted advocacy.

With the 2022 *Dobbs* decision, the dynamics of opposing abortion changed yet again. The theology the Synod has articulated in defense of life did not change. However, the way the Synod advocates in defense of the unborn must adapt to new political, legal, and medical situations. No longer is it necessary for the Synod to support a particular form of judicial interpretation, as it did in the 1984 document when it defended the originalist model of constitutional interpretation against the judicial activism of *Roe v. Wade* (as Justice Samuel Alito would argue in his 2022 opinion against the 1973 decision). Originalist constitutional interpretation may make good sense intellectually and judicially, but there is nothing biblically or theologically necessary about that position. Reasonable Christians may disagree on matters of judicial theory and interpretation. What matters is the biblically moral end such reasoning is used to achieve—in this case, rescinding the constitutional right to abortion.

Similarly, new medical concerns have emerged that require increased attention. In recent years, medication abortion has become as prominent

24 LCMS, *1998 Convention Proceedings*, 119.

25 LCMS, *2010 Convention Proceedings*, 141.

as traditional abortion procedures.²⁶ Now legal and accessible, medication abortion—which is not to be confused with any form of contraception or with more common abortifacients including the morning-after pill—is simply pharmaceutically induced abortion. While advocacy for life has often focused on care for pregnant mothers who might seek abortion in a Planned Parenthood clinic, for instance, now it must shift to educating the people of the Synod—and others who may be considering pharmaceutical abortion—about how these medications actually kill children *in utero*, no matter how harmless or mundane a pill may seem.

Lastly, the new political situation resulting from *Dobbs* has forced us to reevaluate how we advocate for legislative change. For decades, legislative change (on the federal, state, or municipal levels) took a backseat to the executive branch of the federal government, such as in the electing of presidents who would appoint justices sympathetic to originalist constitutional interpretation or who would issue executive orders eliminating public funding for abortions. In this situation, the consequences were zero-sum: one either advocated against abortion or for it. As the CTCR's recently completed document *Abortion—A Continuing Crisis* has pointed out:

Since *Dobbs* the political landscape has changed. In particular, the focus is now on states rather than the country as a whole. In the present context, advocacy for change at the state level will require more specific attention and more variety synodically. In states with more permissive abortion policies, the goal may be to seek greater protections for the unborn and stricter regulations on abortion. In states with more restrictive policies, where abortion is prohibited entirely or

26 “Among continuously reporting areas that reported by method type and included medication abortion on their reporting form, the percentage of all abortions performed by early medication abortion increased 129% from 2013 to 2022 and increased 4% from 2021 to 2022” (Stephanie Ramer, Antoinette T. Nguyen, Lisa M. Hollier, Jessica Rodenhizer, Lee Warner, and Maura K. Whiteman, “Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2022,” U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Surveillance Summaries [November 28, 2024] 73 [No. SS-7]: 1–28, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/ss/ss7307a1.htm?s_cid=ss7307a1_w).

is significantly curtailed, more attention may need to be paid to greater family services to help mothers or families struggling financially or medically with children whom they did not anticipate having. In politically mixed states, more discretion still is needed in whether to press for constitutional bans or similarly strict measures or to aim for more realistic alternatives in the short term. We will have to show greater charity to one another within the Synod when it comes to understanding that goals in different contexts will vary. There will be no one-size-fits-all approach to defending the unborn.²⁷

In certain respects, abortion is a useful test case for how we as Lutherans must approach changing political issues in a changing society. Our theological position remains firm. Life begins at conception. Every life is created by God. Abortion takes a life that was created by God. Simply because a judicial decision changed federal abortion law does not mean our position should be any less important to us theologically or as a church body. That said, new legal, medical, and political contexts will require us to be nimbler and more diverse in how we defend life and families in the civil sphere. There is no single political approach that can or should be taken at all levels of civil government.²⁸ As Lutherans operating within a two-kingdom framework, we have the freedom to act pragmatically in order to achieve our desired political ends, provided those actions do not contradict what we believe. Yet it is imperative that we do act in defense of the unborn. What remains is a question of *how* we best do so.

27 CTCR, *Abortion—A Continuing Crisis* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2026), 43.

28 The new CTCR document takes account of these changes, provides an even fuller theological defense of life, and gives greater attention to pastoral and congregational care of those affected by abortion.

B. Same-Sex Civil Unions and Marriage

A second church-state concern that has seen much change since the 1995 report is that of the rights of same-sex couples, namely, same-sex unions and their 2015 federal legitimization as marriage in the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The issue of same-sex unions very much parallels abortion. As with abortion, the Synod has been resolutely against homosexual behavior theologically, and that stance has not changed. The Synod has said time and again that, given the scriptural witness regarding marriage and sexuality, homosexual behavior is strictly prohibited as sinful and is contrary to God's created order. The shifting political and legal circumstances, however, have forced Missouri Synod Lutherans to recalibrate how they advocate for biblical marriage in the civil sphere.

In the first place, the prospect of same-sex marriage was not on the table yet when 1995's *Render unto Caesar* was published. There were in fact no synodical resolutions to that point dealing with same-sex unions, marriages, or parental or adoption rights. The CTCR's 1981 report *Human Sexuality* did not address the matter at all. The closest it came to homosexual rights in the civil sphere was in its discussion of legally prohibiting homosexual acts.²⁹ This approach did not question the theological rejection of same-sex behavior, which Scripture expressly prohibits, as the Synod has repeatedly affirmed and continues to affirm. At the same time, this discussion reflected the tensions between the two kingdoms that *Render unto Caesar* articulated and that this report has reiterated.

By 1995, of course, that question was increasingly becoming irrelevant in U.S. politics, despite concerns on the part of the church. *Render unto Caesar* hints at more pressing social concerns that the church would begin to face in the near future.³⁰ Such considerations would come to the fore almost

29 CTCR, *Human Sexuality* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981), 35: "The question whether homosexual acts between consenting adults should be legally prohibited is one about which Christian citizens may disagree. Not all matters of morality are fit subjects for legislation."

30 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 90 n. 167: "To stimulate further discussion, it might be noted that in addition to Scripture's clarity on these issues, both divorce and homosexuality

immediately after its publication as momentum for some form of same-sex civil unions began to emerge, presumably in response to the 1995 adoption of the Defense of Marriage Act, which *Obergefell* would later strike down. In 1998, Resolution 3-21 addressed the issue. First, it contrasted the biblical institution of marriage as a “life-long *union* of one man and one woman” (italics added) with same-sex unions that “come under categorical prohibition in the Old and New Testaments as contrary to the Creator’s design.” It went on to resolve that the Synod declare the latter unions “contrary to the will of the Creator and sin against the commandments of God,” while also urging its members to “give a public witness in word and deed to heterosexual marriage as an estate to be held in honor by all and kept inviolate.”³¹ It would repeat this same basic affirmation in 2004 Resolution 3-05A, only this time urging members “to give a public witness from Scripture against the social acceptance and legal recognition of homosexual ‘marriage.’”³² Note that in both cases it urged members of the Synod to bear witness to the biblical position but not necessarily to act in support of or against specific legislation.

In 2006, the CTCR addressed civil unions in a pair of opinions. In its opinion on *Legislation Regarding Same-Sex Civil Unions*, the CTCR made a distinction between theological questions and political questions. On the theological question, the Synod’s stance is clear: Such unions are “contrary to the will of the Creator” and therefore wrong. On the political question, it asserts that Christians may agree “morally and theologically” in their rejection of same-sex unions, yet at the same time “disagree about the worth, wisdom or necessity of particular legislation in the left-hand kingdom that

have obvious social consequences that need to be considered as the church wrestles with how best to speak to the state on these matters.”

31 LCMS, *1998 Convention Proceedings*, 122.

32 LCMS, *2004 Convention Proceedings*, 130. The resolution noted appeals for the “legal recognition of same-sex unions as ‘marriages’ by appeals to ‘equality under the law’ (e.g., the Supreme Court of the State of Massachusetts, Feb. 4, 2004)” as cause for taking a firmer position against such unions (LCMS, *2004 Convention Proceedings*, 130).

presupposes the existence of these (immoral and unscriptural) unions.”³³ Christians make such decisions not simply on the basis of theology, that is, whether homosexuality is sinful, but rather what they consider the “social consequences” of those policies. Again, Christians may disagree about the nature and extent of those social consequences, but they do so according to the “left-[hand] kingdom realities and complexities” of “legal or political judgments,” *not* as theological judgments, which require Christians to reject same-sex unions categorically.³⁴ The CTCR would draw a more direct line between its theological position and those social consequences in a simultaneous opinion on placing adopted children into homosexual contexts, saying that doing so would contradict the theological position of the Synod.³⁵ What distinguishes this from the opinion on same-sex unions is that this opinion was requested by the Synod’s Board for Human Care and thus was to aid the board itself in establishing policy for entities of the Synod—policies that must accord with the theological positions of the Synod. It did not have in view questions of a political or legal nature, where Christians may and do disagree about broader social consequences in the civil realm and how the church should relate to legislation concerning them.

This issue would become even more complex with the 2015 *Obergefell* decision. Because of fears that same-sex marriages would be forced upon Synod congregations and pastors, multiple conventions responded with appeals to religious liberty (which this report turns to next). Rather than attempting to impact, let alone roll back, legislation, the Synod has focused on protecting the Christian practice of biblical marriage against governmental efforts to undermine it. The 2016 convention, the first following

33 CTCR, *Legislation Regarding Same-Sex Civil Unions* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006), 2.

34 CTCR, *Legislation Regarding Same-Sex Civil Unions*, 2.

35 CTCR, *Placing Adopted Children into Homosexual Contexts* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006), 1: “On the basis of the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexual behavior and about God’s will and design for marriage and the family as foundational units for society as a whole, it is the opinion of the CTCR that a policy of placing adopted or foster children into homosexual contexts would stand in opposition to the official doctrinal position of the LCMS.”

Obergefell, adopted three different resolutions related to biblical marriage. Two of those (Res. 14-02A and Res. 14-03A) reiterated the Synod's theological positions on marriage and sexuality, while a third (Res. 14-04) affirmed the clergy's right to conduct weddings according to the Synod's position. It specifically prohibited same-sex weddings in LCMS congregations or by LCMS clergy, encouraged congregations to develop policies for marriage to preclude those options, and sought to "preserve the right of pastors to decline to officiate weddings that are contrary to their conscience and the teachings of our Synod, as well as protections that preserve the right of congregations to determine on the basis of conscience and the Word of God whom they will allow to use their facilities."³⁶

These different contexts reflect important shifts in how the Synod has dealt with evolving political circumstances. Prior to 1995's *Render unto Caesar*, it could debate the legalization of homosexual acts without a thought to the question of same-sex unions or marriages. Between then and *Obergefell*, as same-sex civil unions were increasingly promoted, the Synod began to argue against those unions due to its theological views yet granted that there would be differences of political opinion that resulted from how one estimates their social consequences. Following the 2015 Supreme Court decision, however, the Synod's emphasis shifted from debating the allowance of civil unions to preventing the state from forcing its congregations and clergy to permit such marriages. In each case, the theology remained unchanged and resolute. Shifts in secular politics and judicial decisions forced the Synod to approach the issue differently in terms of how it responded to specific policies. This is another example of how Lutherans can employ the two-kingdom framework. It must not allow political changes to impact its theology, while at the same time political circumstances may lead Christians of equally firm theological conviction to respond differently to the threat facing them in the civil sphere.

Despite the similarities noted earlier, this case is somewhat more complex than the question of abortion. The Synod's theological stance remains firm on both. The Synod's political perspectives differ in the sense that

36 LCMS, 2016 Convention Proceedings, 243.

advocating against abortion on a legal or political level is a necessity for the church in defense of the unborn. The same is not always the case for advocating legally or politically against same-sex unions, as seen in the CTCR's 2006 opinion on such civil unions (see the summary of this opinion on pages 34–35).³⁷ There may be legitimate differences of opinion among Christians concerning the necessity of the church taking a specific political stand against governmental recognition of same-sex unions. Taking a theological stand, however, is not optional.

C. Conscience and Religious Liberty

A third case study, and one related closely to the Synod's response to same-sex unions, involves appeals to and defense of religious liberty. There may be no greater indication of changes in culture than the concern for religious liberty protecting the rights of the Synod's members and institutions. Early on in the Synod's history, religious liberty was an important issue. For instance, the Synod, on the basis of religious freedom, opposed an attempt by the Wisconsin legislature to ban German-language instruction in the 1880s. Similarly, during World War I, it protested a state law prohibiting German-language instruction that ended up being overturned in its favor by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1919. In the 1960s, the Synod's Board for Parish Education criticized a proposed constitutional amendment regarding compulsory prayer in public schools on the grounds that it would require Lutherans—not to mention those of other religious persuasions—to join in prayers that deny their basic religious tenets.³⁸

In the immediate decades preceding the 1995 report, however, Missouri Synod Lutherans began to perceive themselves less at odds with American religious and political culture. As evidence of this, the Synod in convention and the CTCR published several documents during this period of time essentially supporting positions taken by the federal government.

37 It should be noted that opinions and reports of the CTCR do not, in and of themselves, determine or constitute the official position of the Synod.

38 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 85.

In the context of the Vietnam War and its draft, the CTCR published reports urging respect for governmental authority and careful use of civil disobedience and conscientious objection.³⁹ Likewise, the Synod adopted resolutions and the CTCR issued subsequent guidelines concerning capital punishment (following a 1972 Supreme Court decision) and equal rights for women against sexual discrimination (following congressional passage of the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment, which was never ratified by the states).⁴⁰ None of the above, however, appealed to the First Amendment's guarantee of the free exercise of religion. That would stand to reason in a context where Christians made up a more considerable portion of the population, where Christian voices were heard and respected politically, and where there was an expectation that Christian consciences would be honored (not to mention the provisions of the First Amendment).⁴¹

It is precisely in this context that *Render unto Caesar* issued its guidance on "Moral Authority without Political Partisanship." The goal was to encourage the church to exercise its political involvement cautiously and thereby resist confusing the right-hand heavenly kingdom with the left-hand earthly kingdom, in which Christians participate as citizens and in which the Synod has the right to participate by expressing a common voice on matters of political importance. In short, it urged Christians to advocate for their positions as citizens, not confusing strictly political views with their theological commitments. It is again worth noting that the 1995 report does not appeal to religious liberty in defense of the church's autonomy. The report could encourage political involvement for the sake of the broader culture without having to defend its right to say or practice what it believes, let alone do so against governmental imposition. There was

39 CTCR, *Civil Obedience and Disobedience* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1967), and CTCR, *Guidelines for Crucial Issues in Christian Citizenship* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968).

40 CTCR, *Report on Equal Rights Amendment* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1976), and CTCR, *Report on Capital Punishment* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1976).

41 The sheer number of Lutheran social statements during this period is notable. A collection of such statements from the various Lutheran bodies between 1944 and 1975 includes 282 statements, the vast majority of which come *after* 1960.

no need to defend religious liberty when one could assume that religious liberty would be granted.

With the *Obergefell* case, as noted earlier, that assumption became more tenuous. The Synod needed to advocate for its right to believe and practice according to its confession of the faith. In addition to the 2016 resolutions already discussed, the Synod reestablished its presence in Washington, DC (formerly designated as the Office of Government Information) through the Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty (LCRL). The CTCR was also asked by numerous entities to weigh in on one important debate created by the Supreme Court's decision: clergy serving as "agents of the state" by performing civil marriage ceremonies.

In 2021, the CTCR published *Marriage Between Church and State: A Report on Clergy Serving as Agents of the State*, which directly addressed questions of religious liberty as they relate to same-sex marriage. While the majority of that report deals with the understanding of marriage as an institution of God and the various historical laws and practices governing it over time, it also spoke directly to the question of when the church should appeal to its right to the free exercise of religion. In the first place, it argued clearly that the decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* did not invalidate biblical marriage, impose unbiblical marriages on individual Christians, or require Christian clergy to perform unbiblical marriages. It did concede that the "threat of state sanctions against churches or ministers who refuse to allow same-sex weddings or refuse to perform them is by no means unrealistic in the long term."⁴² Second, it tackled the question of whether individual Christians or ministers should opt out of civil marriages on grounds of conscience. Since it did not believe (in response to the first set of questions) that biblical marriages were proscribed by the *Obergefell* decision, it likewise argued that Christians do not have religious grounds for refusing to have their marriages licensed by the state.

42 CTCR, *Marriage Between Church and State: A Report on Clergy Serving as Agents of the State* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2021), 9.

The case of ministers performing marriages is more complicated. The report cites 2016 Resolution 14-04, which prohibits clergy from officiating or participating in a same-sex ceremony.⁴³ That is clear grounds for objecting to a government-mandated same-sex ceremony and would invoke an appeal to religious liberty. But the simple fact that LCMS clergy sign civil marriage licenses when conducting (biblically appropriate) marriages does not mean they must exempt themselves from that responsibility altogether. Although clergy sign marriage licenses on behalf of the state, this does not necessarily make them “agents of the state” (in the same way government employees are, such as politicians, soldiers, law enforcement officers, or others in civil service). Provided clergy have freedom to perform marriages in accordance with their confession and conscience, doing so is not an endorsement of the government’s otherwise erroneous positions.

Such nuanced discussions are needed. There will be occasions for continued appeals to religious liberty on various matters, such as marriage, or possibly even what clergy are permitted to say from the pulpit theologically about matters such as abortion, homosexuality, and the like. Yet religious liberty is not an end in itself; it simply serves the end of enabling the church to proclaim its theological beliefs in the face of countervailing cultural attitudes. It is also imperative to remember that, even where we agree about these matters theologically, that does not mean we will always agree upon if and how to appeal to the constitutional right to free exercise. Many may be willing to exercise civil disobedience against certain government laws and face the consequences. Others may wish to temporarily tolerate governmental laws rather than exercise civil disobedience, provided the laws do not require them to contradict their own confession and witness. Much depends upon the issue and its relationship to that confession and witness.

The lines between civil law, personal conscience, and the church’s confession of the faith can be blurry, and distinguishing them requires patience with one another and a willingness to engage in conversation without condemning opposing approaches God has not condemned in Scripture. Not everyone will place the same weight or value on the religious importance

43 CTCL, *Marriage Between Church and State*, 12.

of certain objectionable laws. Members of the Synod must stand firm in their shared confession of the faith yet still respect when some find certain laws objectionable on the grounds of conscience and others do not. The remaining case studies will include other examples of laws or policies that may necessitate even greater latitude.

D. Women in the Military

The next case study relates closely to its predecessor: the questions of military conscription and women in combat. The Synod did not have a need to address this matter until 2013 and the years immediately following, as restrictions on women in military combat roles were eliminated and the prospect of conscription through the draft was raised. Dating back to the 1960s and to the debates over the Vietnam War, however, the Synod had spoken numerous times in nuanced ways to the matter of conscientious objection. In 1967, Resolution 2-35 opposed “selective conscientious objection,” that is, objection to specific wars only, yet granted “exceptional cases” in which a “Christian’s conscience might lead him to refuse to bear arms.”⁴⁴ In 1969, Resolution 2-28 effectively rescinded that position, affirming that the Synod’s “historical theological position . . . recognizes that conscientious objection to a war which an individual considers to be unjust is a valid stance.”⁴⁵ It directed the Synod to petition the government to give selective conscientious objectors the same status under the law as general objectors. Yet none of these resolutions dealt with conscientious objection to women serving in military combat roles, neither had any other resolution nor report of the Synod dealt with this issue prior to 2013, including *Render unto Caesar*.

With changes in Department of Defense policy, as well as proposed federal legislation, the Synod addressed this matter in the form of multiple resolutions. In 2013, Resolution 2-12A called the LCMS to “support those who have a religious and moral objection to women serving in ground combat

44 LCMS, 1967 Convention Proceedings, 97.

45 LCMS, 1969 Convention Proceedings, 91.

positions.”⁴⁶ In 2016, Resolution 5-11A treated it far more extensively. It noted that many LCMS Lutherans had specific biblical reasons for opposing the service of women in the military. It also underscored arguments based on human reason and inferences from natural law (rather than express biblical commands) against women serving in combat. It ultimately resolved to support women who file as conscientious objectors to bearing arms in the military (generally or in a combat role) and opposed their conscription into the military, but it did defend the consciences of women who desire to serve in the military voluntarily.⁴⁷

Both of the above resolutions asked the CTCR to complete a study on the topic, which it did in 2017. *Women and Military Service: A Lutheran Perspective* addressed it in light of the faithful service of Christians in governmental vocations, male-female distinctions within the order of creation, and arguments from natural law and human reason concerning the dangers of women serving in military combat roles. It concluded that “the cumulative weight of the Bible passages and principles . . . can legitimately be read by Christians to the effect that it is not in keeping with God’s created design, intention and will for women to be employed in military combat or to be compelled to serve in the military in any capacity.”⁴⁸ It also conceded that, as 2016 Resolution 5-11A had, women may in good conscience serve voluntarily, even in combat roles. In resolving this tension, the report appealed to conscience, where Christians may affirm the biblical teaching of the order of creation yet come to different conclusions about its application to a specific question not directly addressed by Scripture. “It is indeed possible for Christians who are equally committed to the authority of God’s Word and who seek sincerely to be guided by it to come to different conclusions about God’s will for their lives and actions in certain situations where there is no explicit or absolute ‘thus says the Lord.’”⁴⁹

46 LCMS, *2013 Convention Proceedings*, 114.

47 LCMS, *2016 Convention Proceedings*, 159–60.

48 CTCR, *Women and Military Service* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2017), 13.

49 CTCR, *Women and Military Service*, 15.

With respect to the question of women in combat, the report noted that some Christian women may affirm the biblical teaching of the order of creation yet not consider that teaching “decisive on the issue of women in combat” because the order of creation is primarily concerned with women in the church and in the Christian home and is not explicit about the civil realm.⁵⁰ Similarly, a Christian woman may come to the opposite conclusion, for instance, about how the male-female distinctions in the order of creation might preclude service in the military or (in the case of wives and mothers) whether military service might detract from her service in these vocations or potentially imperil the life of an unborn infant growing in her womb. Nonetheless, despite the compelling case of scriptural inferences, natural law, and human reason against women in combat, Scripture does not categorically prohibit women from military service, even in combat roles. The report finally urged that the consciences of both should be respected in this matter, as the 2016 resolution had.

We see here an even more ambiguous case of the intersection of the two kingdoms. While the male-female distinctions are clear in Scripture, and while some Christians may draw implications from them for women serving in the military (to say nothing of combat), Scripture does not directly address it or forbid it. Opinions must be drawn from inference. The Synod has repeatedly and strongly affirmed the order of creation and the distinctiveness of the male and female sexes. It has therefore also pledged to support women who conscientiously object to any compulsory military service, combat or otherwise (more recently still in 2023 Res. 11-06A). Yet there are many LCMS women currently in the military (as well as in law enforcement) who would cite the lack of an express scriptural injunction against their vocation, not to mention the salutary nature of their service

50 CTCR, *Women and Military Service*, 16. It is also worth mentioning that the very definition of combat has changed markedly over the years, creating even more ambiguity in this matter. The 2018 report acknowledges at various places that the changing nature of warfare has made the line between noncombat and combat less distinct. It is conceivable that a woman may engage in active “combat” as a drone operator from a cubicle without ever being in the presence of an enemy combatant. For example, see Dave Philipps, “The Unseen Scars of Those Who Kill via Remote Control,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/us/drones-airstrikes-ptsd.html>.

in the civil realm. From the vantage point of the two kingdoms, we can say that, insofar as it concerns questions of the creation of humanity as male and female, their physical distinctiveness, and divinely mandated roles in the church and in the Christian home, these belong to the right-hand realm and are governed by Holy Scripture. We are conscience-bound to affirm those positions by biblical teachings. On the other hand, insofar as we are dealing with arguments from human reason or nature, debates over specific civil laws or military regulation, or the inherently time-bound reality of waging war, we are dealing with questions of the left-hand realm, where conscience and practical realities are in play. In the Synod, we have no clear position on this left-hand matter, and therefore we dare not bind consciences where Scripture has not. Yet we do have a theology of male and female informed by the biblical teaching on the order of creation, and so we must support members who draw the implication from that teaching that women should not bear the sword, most especially when the government seeks to require it by way of conscription (which the Synod has repeatedly opposed).

How do we reconcile those two perspectives? By exercising prudence in political matters. Our common theological confession is that God created men and women as distinct and that they serve in a harmonious way together in the order of creation, which applies directly to the church and to the Christian home. We may disagree, however, on its application in the civil sphere, to which Scripture does not categorically speak. We need not expect every individual in our congregations to oppose women in combat. Yet, as the 2017 report maintained, there is good reason to oppose conscription of women (into combat or otherwise) in support of a traditional family structure and to protect women from being forced to act against their consciences. That said, there are many vocations in military service absent forced conscription in which women may serve in a way that does not violate their consciences, and those consciences merit respect. There is no single, definitive answer to this question, even though the Synod is completely within its right to take a stand to defend its members against infringement upon their consciences through forced conscription.

E. Immigration

In the case of immigration, we have an example of a civil issue that has not only become contentious within the church and within U.S. culture in recent years but also one that (from an LCMS perspective) lacks a non-prudential theological response (unlike the cases of abortion and homosexuality). The LCMS began as an immigrant church, with the nineteenth-century emigration of Saxon Lutherans. From the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, much of the numerical growth of the Missouri Synod was the result of immigration. As noted above, the LCMS fought legally for its right to teach in its parochial schools using German—the native tongue of the Synod and its recently immigrated constituents for generations—when state legislatures sought to prohibit it. The Missouri Synod is not against immigration, nor does it advocate xenophobia or racism.⁵¹ It boldly confesses the biblical promise that the Gospel is for “every nation and tribe and language and people” (Rev. 14:6). In recent decades, societal debate over immigration has evoked different political reactions from members of our congregations. Those reactions have revolved around the tension between submission to governing authorities and love for one’s neighbor—what one might call a tension between the Fourth and Fifth Commandments.

As early as 1981, for instance, the Synod adopted Resolution 8-10, “To Decline to Support Documentation for Undocumented Aliens.” The resolution held that “to support documentation for undocumented aliens involves political decisions for which the church has neither adequate knowledge nor divine mandate on which to make a judgment.” At the same time, 1981 Resolution 8-10 also states that “the members of the Synod be reminded of their duty to show Christian compassion to undocumented aliens and not to exploit them but to help them seek legal documentation.”⁵² Hence, we see both a firm adherence to biblical teaching coupled with a reluctance to trespass into the government’s responsibilities—also a scriptural teaching.

51 Note especially the many resolutions against racism, including more recently 2023 Res. 11-02A and 2019 Res. 11-04.

52 LCMS, *1981 Convention Proceedings*, 206.

Love for the immigrant is a logical extension of love for the neighbor, but such love must not reject the necessity of laws.⁵³ Moreover, love for immigrant neighbors means attention to their spiritual needs, since God would have all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). Thus, without seeking to usurp the left-hand responsibilities of government, the Synod has urged congregations to evangelize immigrants (1995 Res. 1-04A), to sponsor refugee families (1977 Res. 8-15), and to prioritize care for immigrants and refugees (2004 Res. 6-01).

The 1995 report *Render unto Caesar* did not address immigration at length. However, it did commend the Synod's cooperative work in fostering the "settlement of immigrants and refugees" as an example of attending to matters of human suffering and need. The report adds that the LCMS approach to immigration leaves "necessary room for individual Christians to form their own opinions about the wisdom of specific governmental policies and to make decisions about personal involvement in ecclesial and/or social efforts and activities in these areas."⁵⁴

As greater attention to immigration emerged in recent decades, the president of the Synod asked the CTCR to address the topic more comprehensively. In response, the CTCR published *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues* in 2012. The report affirms support for the rule of law and our historic two-kingdom approach to

53 The Roman Catholic principle of "localism" (or *ordo amoris*) has been cited in recent years as an alternative to "globalization." In Catholic social teaching, this means that the love of neighbor begins with those closest to you—family, church, town, state, nation, etc.—and that would in turn deprioritize immigrants (undocumented or otherwise). On this topic, see Dale Ahlquist and Michael Warren Davis, eds., *Localism: Coming Home to Catholic Social Teaching* (Sophia Institute Press, 2024). There is much in this principle that commends itself, and it is reflected in the Small Catechism's Table of Duties, the doctrine of vocation, and the Lutheran concept of the three estates (as noted in the excursus above). However, it has not been used in Lutheranism—and certainly not within the Table of Duties or the teaching on vocation or the three estates—to disparage concern for immigrants, fellow citizens, or anyone else outside of one's immediate local context (family, church, community, etc.). See the discussion of this in CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2012), especially 11–19, 37–44.

54 CTCR, *Render unto Caesar*, 81.

addressing matters of citizenship as Christians. It acknowledges that there are always social and political questions about which equally faithful Christians will disagree. It offers “biblical and confessional principles and guidelines” to help LCMS citizens and others with respect to their “responsibilities towards their immigrant neighbors.”⁵⁵

The report reminds us that we are “to love the neighbor and obey the civil authorities.”⁵⁶ It then argues that the Christian has a calling (vocation) as both a citizen (left-hand kingdom) who must cast votes and make political judgments about immigrants and as an individual disciple of Christ (right-hand kingdom) who is called to aid immigrant neighbors in their physical and spiritual needs. The report offers no easy answers and instead highlights the complexity Christians face as they seek to obey both the Fourth Commandment’s demand to honor and respect human authorities and the Fifth Commandment’s demand that we do all we can to help and support every neighbor in every bodily need. The callings/vocations of the Christian toward immigrants are not abstract but involve particular people—ones included in the command to “do good to everyone,” especially if they are part of “the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). In the end, the report offers no glib solutions to the immigration conundrum. It upholds the royal law (James 2:8) and also the necessity of human laws, fallible though they may be:

Christians are called to consider not only their particular vocations and specific neighbors, but also God’s clear and timeless will and command in Scripture to remember, care for, and deal fairly with the immigrant neighbors in their midst. Christians will, of course, disagree on *how* to deal with all the aforementioned concerns and demands, but *that* they should do so is not negotiable.⁵⁷

55 CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 8.

56 CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 9.

57 CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 44.

Since the publication of *Immigrants Among Us* in 2012, the issue of immigration has grown more volatile and divisive culturally and politically. It became a central issue in recent presidential election cycles, with most (but not all) attention focused on undocumented or illegal immigration to the United States. After the 2020 election, the number of undocumented immigrants increased to unprecedented levels. Estimates range from 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States (as of January 2020)⁵⁸ to 14 million (2023).⁵⁹ That rise of illegal immigration cannot help but concern Christians committed to obeying civil laws. Conversely, the uptick in mass deportations and the corresponding public debates over the legality and propriety of certain deportation measures have also raised questions for some Christians who are concerned about and committed to keeping immigrant families together or protecting the rights of the more vulnerable or defenseless among us.

How can Lutherans navigate this issue? On the one hand, there is a need for national security and the rule of law. Lutheran theology has always recognized the necessity of government and its responsibility to uphold laws that promote well-being and punish wrongdoing. Thus, there is clear support for the government's work of enforcing existing laws—including laws with regard to immigration. This administration of the law is part of God's left-hand work, which compels us to honor those laws and the authorities who seek to interpret and enforce them. On the other hand, there is the love for neighbor, including immigrants who are in need of our physical and spiritual support. Many faithful Lutherans find themselves caught in the tension between these two responsibilities.

The case of immigration is far less clear than some of the others already noted. There is no obvious theological correlation here with, for example, abortion or homosexuality, which biblical teaching clearly opposes. Critics

58 Lucy Gilder, "How Many Migrants Have Crossed the US Border Illegally?" BBC, September 29, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0jp4xqx2z3o>.

59 Jeffrey S. Passel and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population Reached a Record 14 Million in 2023," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/08/21/u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-population-reached-a-record-14-million-in-2023/>.

and proponents of immigration policies on various sides can appeal to biblical reasons for their views in the civil realm (namely, obedience to authority or care for neighbor), but neither can appeal to Scripture in direct support of the position they take in the civil realm. It is here that we must exercise greater prudence to make sure we do not identify our individual political positions on the matter with biblical teaching, demanding that the church make a statement on issues that are not clearly rooted in its confession of faith.

On issues such as immigration where there is no express scriptural command or clear theological position, we may well disagree on the appropriate response in the civil realm. A pastor may faithfully exercise his vocation as a minister of Word and Sacrament and so proclaim forgiveness and salvation through faith in Christ Jesus to immigrants, providing hospitality and material support, all without demanding proof of legal status, lest such demands prevent some from hearing and believing (Rom. 10:14–15).⁶⁰ At the same time, a devout church member daily goes to work for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, preventing the illegal entry of people into the country. Both serve the same Christ and seek to obey the Law of God. In the right-hand kingdom, they have complete agreement. Yet in the left-hand realm, they are forced to weigh these two concerns—submission to authorities and love for neighbor—against each other, and they may come to different conclusions as circumstance, vocation, and conscience dictate. We must trust our brothers and sisters in Christ to take both responsibilities seriously, to engage one another in civil conversation about those responsibilities in our current political context, and finally not to allow disagreement in temporal, left-hand matters where God has not spoken diminish agreement in eternal, right-hand matters where God has spoken.

60 See “Some Guidelines for Church Workers” in CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 47–49.

CONCLUSION

This report has not sought to introduce anything substantively new to the Lutheran discussion of church and state. The first part of the document distills the basic theological and practical aspects of 1995's *Render unto Caesar*. The two-kingdom framework commends itself in a political context where the distinction between church and state is constitutionally mandated but where its exact relationship is hotly debated. The principle of “moral authority without political partisanship” offers guidance for how the church—collectively and as individual members—can engage the civil realm while retaining the primacy of the Gospel in our congregations and in our lives. Engaging the civil realm, both collectively as the church and individually as Christians and citizens, is incumbent upon us. We do so not only out of faithfulness to the truth of God's Word but also out of sincere Christian love for our neighbors. An unqualified quietism is the equal and opposite error of an unqualified activism.

The second part of the document uses case studies from the three decades since *Render unto Caesar* to show how the Missouri Synod has navigated sensitive, evolving political issues. There are no categorical, non-prudential responses to these issues. Each one involves Christians making wise decisions in their various and varying contexts to love their neighbors in concrete, practical ways. These case studies should caution us against judging (much less condemning) fellow Christians over differences and disagreements that are primarily political in nature. We must show latitude and charity toward our brothers and sisters in Christ as they seek to live out God's Word faithfully in political contexts that may be very different from our own.

In this respect, the present report is timely. In a digitally driven, social-media-influenced age, Christians are tempted to publicly accuse, condemn, or belittle other Christians for differences of political opinion. While U.S. politics has long been divisive and partisan, as politics is in every age and every culture, the shifts in media (from print journalism to cable news to digital media) have unquestionably raised the temperature and pervasiveness of those conflicts. The presence of heat without light threatens to destabilize our society as well as the church. Luther made the same point about the civil realm in his Large Catechism. In his commentary on the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther warned that the devil would not content himself with disturbing the right-hand kingdom. He would do all within his power to disturb the left-hand kingdom as well:

But especially is this petition directed against our chief enemy, the devil, whose whole purpose and desire it is to take away or interfere with all we have received from God. He is not satisfied to obstruct and overthrow the spiritual order, by deceiving souls with his lies and bringing them under his power, *but he also prevents and impedes the establishment of any kind of government or honorable and peaceful relations on earth. This is why he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war, why he sends storms and hail to destroy crops and cattle, why he poisons the air, etc. In short, it pains him that anyone should receive even a mouthful of bread from God and eat it in peace.* If it were in his power and our prayer to God did not restrain him, surely we would not have a straw in the field, a penny in the house, or even an hour more of life—especially those of us who have the Word of God and would like to be Christians.⁶¹

We must be acutely aware that this instability is the work of the devil, who, as Philip Melanchthon wrote in his hymn “Lord God, to Thee We Give All Praise,” seeks “to undermine both Church and state.”⁶² He disturbs the

61 LC III 80–81 (italics added).

62 *Lutheran Service Book* (Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 522:5.

peace of the church, misleads souls away from the Gospel, sows division among Christians, and also unsettles the civil realm. We see it all around us. Families are torn apart by politics, churches are splintered, jobs and income are lost, reputations are destroyed, even human lives are tragically taken. This is the work of Satan.

As Christ's church, we have a higher and holier calling. Scripture exhorts us not to conform to the ways of the world but to live peaceably with all and to do good to all, especially those of the household of faith (Rom. 12:2, 17-18; Gal. 6:10). In this day and age, it is imperative that the church not indulge in the same intemperate, volatile political rhetoric of the world around us. To do so is to give corner to the devil, whose goal is to disturb "honorable and peaceful relations on earth" and to cause "contention, murder, sedition, and war." This response of the CTCR to 2023 Res. 11-05 for a study of church, state, and Christian *love* of neighbor encourages LCMS members to exemplify that love in their public activity and speech about politics, especially in their relationships with fellow Christians. As this report urged at its beginning, a humble posture will seek to keep the Gospel ultimate in our churches and lives and to keep politics penultimate as we strive to live faithfully under God's twofold rule until Christ returns to claim His own.



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