

CHURCH AND STATE

An LCMS Perspective with Special Reference to Immigration

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It is an honor to be with you all. We are especially grateful that you, as elected members of Congress, are willing to make time to meet with us today. As part of a delegation representing the LCMS, I have been asked to speak to you briefly about our understanding of the relationship between the church and the state. Rev. Day asked me to provide something about our theological perspective on that thorny topic.

I doubt that you are interested in a prolonged lecture on the Lutheran theology of church and state, however, and even if you were, there are many people far more competent than I am to give it. So all I am going to do is give you a thumbnail sketch of our perspective on a very deep topic and then apply that perspective to a single issue — immigration. In other words, I'll try to tell you why we're here — why we have asked for your time today.

As Lutheran Christians, we have to start with Jesus. Our view of church and state is anchored in a single incident in Jesus' ministry, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 22. We read there that a group of religious leaders who didn't like Jesus were looking for a way to trick Him, so He would say something that would get Him in trouble — kind of like a hostile reporter's questions. They asked Him about the perennially hot topic of whether they should pay taxes to Caesar — to the Roman government that was ruling Israel with an oppressive, choking power. Specifically, they hoped He would either repudiate the Roman tax or speak in defense of it. If He rejected the tax, they could accuse Him of being an anti-Roman revolutionary who should be arrested and punished. Or, if He spoke approvingly of the tax, that would make Him sound like He was favorable to the hated Romans, and the crowds that were following Him would turn against him.

Instead, this is what happened:

Matthew 22

¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus' answer disarmed His opponents, and it befuddled them. He simply acknowledged two facts. One is obvious. The other is not so obvious but far more important. The obvious fact is that

there is always government — even when it shuts down, there is government. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." Caesar, or some human governing power and its officials, is ever present. And Jesus says we have to acknowledge that and give such officials their due. So Jesus' followers ever since have tried to do just that — give government its due. Saints Peter and Paul tell Christians to be obedient to government, giving respect and honor, paying taxes and fees as required, and praying for them (1 Peter 2:12-17; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4). In other words — be a good citizen in every way.

The other fact is less obvious. "Give to God what is God's." God won't send us a tax bill. He won't create police or armies or other governing forces to enforce His spiritual demands. But, as Christians, we know what is due to God from us. Everything. He has created us with fatherly love and kindness. He has sent His own Son into our world in order to redeem and restore us despite, and even because of, our sins against Him. He has brought us to believe in Him by His Holy Spirit. He has given us life and forgiveness and peace and hope and joy, and more — He has saved our very lives and promised us an eternal life and future.

We owe God everything. So, as the church — that is, the people who believe in this gracious God, revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit — we accept these two facts of life (among others). There is Caesar (earthly government) and there is God. But they aren't equal facts. Rather, our duty to government is defined by God — and not the other way around. So the Bible tells us that, where there are conflicting demands from God and government, we must obey God not government.

Jesus not only spoke this way, He lived this way — He refused to take on the role of a political Messiah but gladly submitted to the Roman governor, even to the point of death. He affirmed government, but He was never deterred from the call to do the work of the spiritual kingdom which He won for all the world by His saving life, death and resurrection.

So, our most important responsibility as Christians is to share the message of salvation in Christ Jesus with all nations. The most important fact of life is that there is a good and gracious God who has created humanity and wants us to know His love and to partake in His eternal goodness.

No offense, but in comparison with that, earthly government is light stuff.

But it is also necessary stuff, because in the here and now people need protection. This is a chaotic, sin-filled, dangerous world, and God wants government to help to provide the needed protection. That is a matter of justice, and it is what government is to foster. God wants government also to encourage earthly goodness, because there is never enough virtue. Justice and virtue — that is what government is about.

So we are here to encourage you in the twin tasks of justice and virtue. We are not here to tell you how to do that, because we're not skilled in the art of crafting policy, and that is not a responsibility given to the church, as church. But we do know injustice when we see it. Which brings us to the topic of immigration today.

1. We have all served in ministries that involve immigrant populations. As a pastor in New York and New Jersey for almost 30 years, I encountered countless men, women and children who had come to this country seeking its protections and opportunities. They were people from Vietnam, Haiti, Cambodia, Mexico, Cuba, Poland, Jamaica, Russia, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia and ... well, all over. The various other individuals here, representing every region of this country, have multiplied such ministry countless times over in their own work. As pastors and deaconesses, we did not try to be immigration officials. We had another task: immigrants are human beings — people the Bible calls our “neighbors,” so we invited them into our fellowship, helped them educate their children (many in Lutheran schools), helped them learn English, did whatever we could to help those who had no papers to become legal residents, and helped many to become citizens. They came with great eagerness, even though many had been badly harmed in the process of coming here. And they were blessings to our churches and communities.

Please don't make outreach to such people, and the help we give, either illegal or suspect in any way, and don't try to define how a church can minister. Our ministries to immigrants are all part of Christ's ministry. Justice requires it.

2. In a time when, internationally, many Christians are suffering from violence and oppression in countries all over the Middle East and also in much of Africa and Asia, we have come to know refugees and people seeking asylum here for themselves and their families. Our church body has ministries to Ethiopians, Sudanese, south-east Asians, and people from the Middle East — to name a few — who have come, running for their lives from their governments and from anti-Christian movements in their countries. Others have run for their lives from sexual predators, from drug lords and other injustices. These are “the least of these my brothers.” Jesus compels us not to ignore but to help them.

Please do all you can to provide refuge for those who are in danger of such brutalities. Justice requires that, too.

3. We know that law is important and that includes immigration law. We are not lawless and do not want a lawless country. We know you have the weighty responsibility of trying to

keep our country secure. We pray for you in that work and want to encourage it. But we also know that the current system of immigration law is ineffective and unhelpful both for immigrants and for this country's well-being. Perhaps the biggest reason people are breaking the immigration laws is that the laws are themselves “broken.” People living in the shadows want out — they want to be able to live without fear and to be productive and fully honest members of our communities.

Please work to develop wise and humane immigration policies that help them get out of the shadows and establish legal status. Such people will be a blessing to this country even as our own immigrant forefathers and mothers have been blessings to this land. Justice requires this as well.

4. We all treasure our families. Families are the building blocks of society — that is a firm biblical truth and a matter of justice. Families are also the first place where civic virtue is learned if it is to be learned. We have seen the tragedy of families divided because of immigration status. We have seen children put into foster care while parents were deported. We've seen long waits while other families seek to be reunited.

Please keep the importance of family central in your considerations. Justice and virtue both require it.

Our church body — the LCMS — has spoken out frequently and consistently on a number of hot-button social issues. We strongly condemn abortion as an unjust offense against God, the creator. We have steadfastly opposed every attempt to diminish the importance of traditional marriage because the marriage of man and woman maintains the ideal of the basic family unit of father, mother and children and the home as the setting in which children are given their most important nurture. And, we have opposed the HHS mandates because they not only compel people to violate their own consciences in paying for contraceptives and abortion-inducing drugs, but they also claim the authority to define the church's ministry — saying, “It's okay for you to have worship on Sunday, but you can't minister through certain schools and social agencies.” We believe we have a duty to speak about these things because they are all matters that God's Word addresses quite clearly. They are matters defining justice and virtue.

We are addressing immigration for the same reasons — Lutheran Christians have to stand for justice and virtue in this area, too. These are the biblical principles and priorities that we cannot ignore. We cannot craft the legislation or set the policies, although individual Christians in government can seek to do those things. But as the church, politics is not our calling.

Our task is to share the love of God in Christ. We want to do that with immigrants and every other neighbor that God puts into our lives. And, as citizens of this country, we will pray for you as you attempt to address this and many other issues in a way that is truly just and encourages what is good.

Thank you.