

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

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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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