

The Bible and Christian Citizenship

What does your Christian faith have to do with being a good American citizen?

The following Bible study was adopted by the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations to introduce what the Bible says about Christian citizenship. It also serves as background for the next article, "Practicing What We Preach."—Ed.

What is a good Christian citizen to do, especially in an election year?

Many of the political issues that face our nation today have strong moral overtones. Yet, in America, our treasured constitutional system ensures the separation of church and state.

Should Christians leave their religious convictions out of public debates? Or should they seek, as some Christian activists urge, to make America an explicitly Christian state?

The Example of Jesus

Jesus actually faced similar questions. Read Matt. 22:15–22. Here Jesus is confronted with a "trick question":

Would Jesus side with devout Jews who insisted that the messiah must drive out the Ro-

mans and create a godly government? Or would He acknowledge the legitimacy of the pagan Roman government?

Jewish hopes seem to have focused on a military messiah. How might an Old Testament passage like Ps. 2:8–9 feed such an expectation?

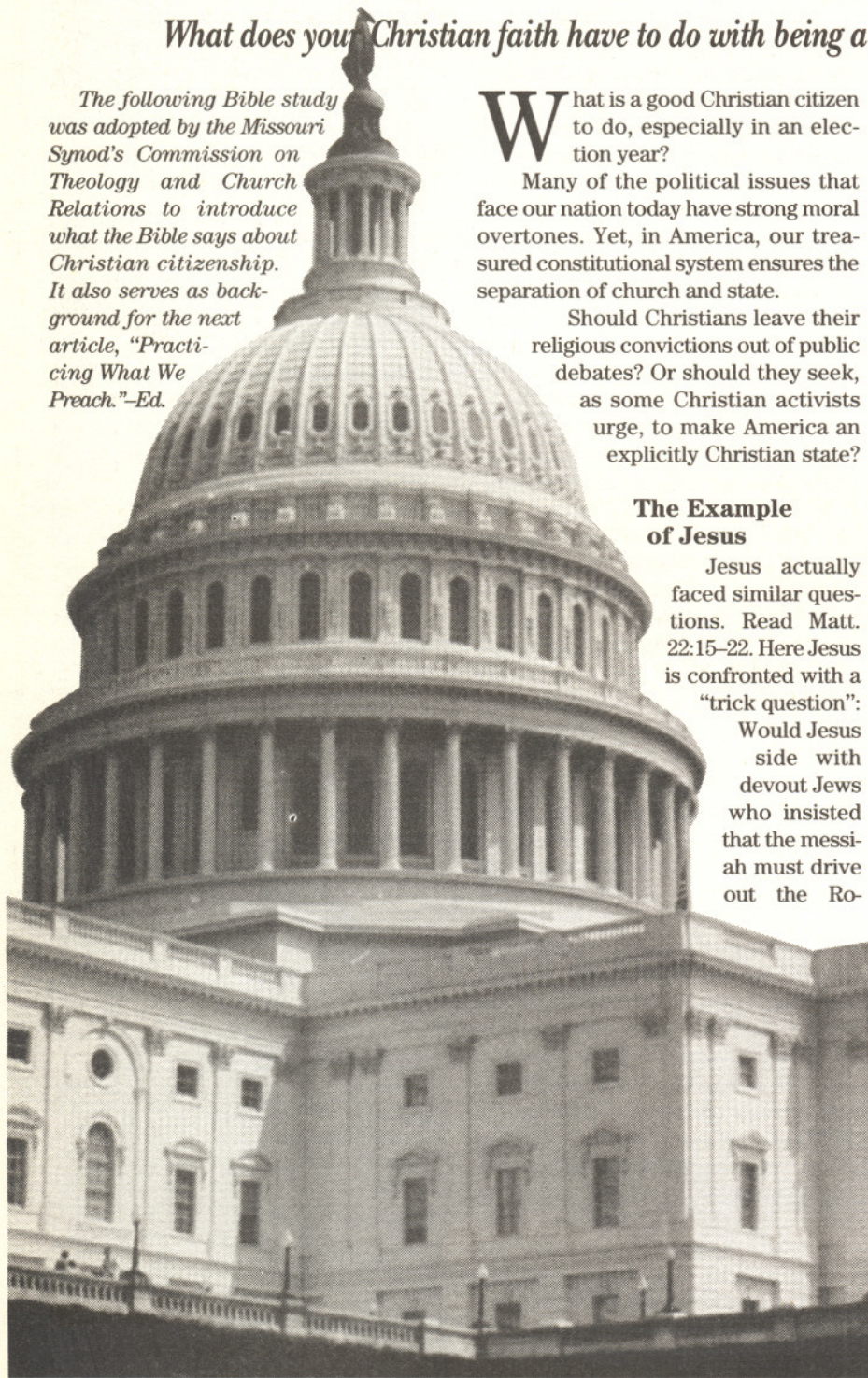
Jesus, of course, *was* the long-promised messiah. Note how He was hailed at His birth in Matt. 2:1–6, Luke 1:30–33, and Luke 2:10–14 and how He was welcomed into Jerusalem in Matt. 21:1–9.

It might have seemed logical to assume that Jesus, as a king in the family of the great King David, would liberate Jerusalem from her foreign enemies. What does John 11:47–48 reveal about the hopes and fears associated with Jesus?

Eventually, Jesus would be executed by the Romans as a political revolutionary (Mark 15:26 records the posted charge: treason), even though Pontius Pilate knew Jesus to be innocent (see Luke 22:13–14). Jesus didn't become the political messiah that many Jews seem to have expected. In fact, what does the teaching of Jesus in Matt. 22:15–22 reveal about His attitude toward the pagan Roman government? (Also read Rom. 13:6–7.)

Jesus had, in effect, refused to "Christianize" Palestine's government—in spite of widespread expectations that this was exactly what the Old Testament said the messiah was to do. As a result, Jesus clearly disappointed many of the religiously faithful who looked for the messiah to establish a godly *earthly* government. How might this help explain why the crowd chose to release Barabbas, a bona fide political revolutionary, instead of Jesus (Mark 15:6–11)?

It's not always easy to say "no" to well-intentioned but confused Christians who insist on trying to create a Christian government in America. Even those who



heard Jesus preach had trouble getting the message (see John 6:15; cf. Mark 8:31–33, Luke 22:49–51).

But Jesus refused to equate His messianic kingdom with the establishment of an earthly government. How does Jesus' reply to Pilate in John 18:36 relate to the great event envisioned in 1 Cor. 15:24–25 and Eph. 1:9–10?

Jesus' Kingdom

In contrast to popular thinking, Jesus restored a proper understanding of the messianic kingdom. Read the following passages from John and identify the true purpose for which God's Chosen One had come: John 1:29, 3:14–17, 13:3–11, and 18:33–37.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus really is a king and that His followers really do belong to a kingdom (see Col. 1:13–14). Yet, according to Matt. 28:18–20, how does Jesus exercise His Lordship today?

This distinction between *spiritual* and *temporal* (or political) authority is known by Lutherans as the doctrine of the two kingdoms. What do these New Testament Scriptures teach us about the important difference between the spiritual kingdom of Christ and earthly governments: 1 Peter 2:9–10; Heb. 11:13–16; Matt. 16:18; Luke 12:14; 2 Cor. 10:4–5; and Rom. 1:16?

The New Testament doesn't permit Christians to hold messianic expectations for the state, as though Christians need to make earthly government serve Christ's kingdom. The church, not the state, is the proper vehicle of God's redeeming and restoring work. The many social problems that perplex Christians today still are best addressed by the spiritual weapons of Word and Sacrament. These "means of grace" zero in on the heart and bear fruit in changed lives.

How do Rom. 8:5–8 and Gal. 5:16–24 speak directly to the core problem of human existence—as well as to its solution?

Government's Good Purposes

Christians should resist the temptation to make earthly government a tool of Christ's spiritual kingdom. They also need to recognize that there will be no perfect earthly government. Government, as part of a fallen creation, is subject to corruption. Expecting government to

solve all human problems overlooks the simple fact that government is itself subject to those same human problems.

How does the warning in 1 Sam. 8:10–18 apply to earthly governments today? Think about this question in connection with Lord Acton's famous words, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The government functions only to restrain evil and to encourage the good—and it does even this only in a limited way. Still, even with all its weaknesses and imperfections, earthly government remains under God's sovereign control. How should the Christian view government, according to Rom. 13:1–2? What helpful functions of government, even when carried out by non-Christians, are described in Rom. 13:3–4 and 1 Peter 2:14? And how does this apply to us, when the government is "of the people" and "by the people"?

The Christian Attitude

The Bible teaches that our basic attitude toward civil government ought to be positive. Inevitably, though, there will be times when Christians must obey God rather than earthly government.

See Acts 4:18–20 and Acts 5:27–29. How should we respond if government tries to force us to disobey God's will?

How do modern democratic political systems like ours offer Christians both the opportunity and responsibility to work for social change? Think of some specific examples.

What powerful spiritual weapon is always available to Christians, even when they deal with a government that persecutes them, according to Ezra 6:10 and 1 Tim. 2:1–3?

"Render unto Caesar," says Jesus in Matt. 22:21. But He also says, "Render unto God." Christians bear witness that there is a Sovereign to whom all are accountable, even presidents and dictators. There is a standard of justice and morality in a seemingly chaotic world, and Christians are not to remain silent about this. Can you think of times when Christians have not spoken up in the face of corruption or injustice?

The challenge is to bear witness to Biblical truths in ways that the state can "hear" and understand in light of its own claim that it is committed to justice for all. There are moral principles that find

general acceptance among all people, Christian and non-Christian (see Rom. 1:19–20). How might Christians promote the life-enhancing goal of civil government (when addressing controversial issues such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, same-sex marriages, etc.) by emphasizing these moral principles, but without implying that the government must become "Christian" in order to enhance human life?

What are some of the practical issues about which Christians today may feel the need to speak to the state? Read the next article in this LUTHERAN WITNESS. What "message," "messenger" and "means" might be the most appropriate for addressing each of these issues?

We Christians are called to make our every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). So, we can't ignore the social and political dimensions of faith that is active in love. Even so, we Lutherans also know that we must never confuse church and state, or spiritual and temporal power.

The kingdom of Jesus is "in" the world, but it is not "of" the world (John 18:36). What practical implications does this truth have as we live out our calling as Christian citizens? ■

