

Congregational Feedback & Input

What follows are a number of insightful and important responses from SLC to PB's article "Is Silence Tacit Approval?" and to the class on Church and Society in general.

I understand the idea of the left-hand and right-hand kingdom, but sometimes it takes both hands to accomplish a task. I believe Jesus told us to separate church and state in his comment "render unto Caesar...render unto God...." So I think when a group like White Christian Nationalists promotes melding the two, it is well within the Church's purview to speak against that idea. Furthermore, I believe churches are remiss if they don't speak out against it because it gives a tainted and false view of Jesus's teachings.

When oppression is enacted/perpetrated by an institution or government, are churches to remain idle spectators? Or is it their role to call out the oppression whether it is denial of due process or the desire to relegate women to the kitchen? I am not asking the church to support a candidate or a particular party, but I am hoping the church will give support and aid to the oppressed. And I'm wondering, in America, because of pervasive privilege, if we don't recognize oppression in our own country.

Regarding political activity, you may know that the Lutheran church played a role in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 60's, although the role was not universal across the church. Demonstration was seen by many as an act of resistance to legal authority. In an article Lutherans and the Civil Rights Movement, published in Journal of Lutheran Ethics, Nov. 2006, Vol. 6, Issue 11; the author, Gregory Freeland, quotes Martin Luther's "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It should be Obeyed." Luther's Works, v. 45. Philadelphia. Fortress Press. 1957. pp. 76-130. "Men are to obey the prince, because, as St. Paul stated, the ruler(s) were appointed by God to correct evil and to encourage good." Here is another, lengthy, quotation from that article that gives a good picture of individual vs. institutional involvement.

"Lutherans were prominent in terms of participants and supporters for the 1963 March on Washington, and they increased their activities in the succeeding months and years. Reverend Joseph Ellwanger, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on March 8, 1965, led seventy-two white Alabamans in a 12 block march in Selma,

Alabama, to back the civil rights demonstrations going on there. However, an encounter between two Lutheran pastors illustrates that Lutheran participation in political civil rights action was not universal. Reverend Ellwanger was met at the beginning of the march by Reverend James Rongstad of St. John's Lutheran Church in Selma, who protested his interference in Selma's problems. Reverend Ellwanger was compelled to explain himself. In support of Reverend Rongstad's position Reverend Edgar Homrighausen, President of the Southern District of LCMS, sent a telegram stating that LCMS did not sanction or support Reverend Ellwanger's efforts in support of the march. Reverend Homrighausen's telegram stated that the LCMS supported the goal of freedom under just legislation, but could not support the demonstration, presumably because the demonstration was an act of resistance to legal authority, which should not be challenged. [my emphasis] In this show of differences within the church, Reverend Ellwanger commented that his decision to become involved in the politics of racial segregation in Selma was based on a conviction that this kind of demonstration was a clear witness to his Lord and to his love for all people."

In light of this political involvement 60+ years ago, where do we stand as a church today to support oppressed and disenfranchised individuals? I have to be honest, I do not believe for a minute that our current federal administration (legal authority), in any way, is concerned about correcting evil OR encouraging good in a Christian sense. I believe in "God's work-our hands," and when authority walks the edge of legality and morality, or when their actions fly in the face of legality and morality, I believe it is our responsibility to call out that authority and to work to ensure rights, protections, and opportunities for all. The benediction today included the phrase "...send us forth to be your people in the world...", and I remember the praise song from a previous generation "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love. Being God's people in the world and showing agape love require action, targeted action, including righting wrongs. Mere belief, I think, is insufficient. The church is good at helping people deepen their faith and belief convictions. My hope is that it deepens help and modeling for Christians in how to live out their faith- how to be God's people in the world and how to love others.

Bill, I understand your reluctance to voice from the pulpit disapproval of so many actions taken by our current administration, but I am of the mind that the church needs to overtly disapprove when government agencies and personnel treat people inhumanely: zip-tying children, separating families, arresting citizens using racial profiling,.... I know you are between a rock and a hard place, and leadership is hard. I hope my blurb here can help the discussion move forward.

As a member of the SLC congregation, I expect the pastors that we have called to stay true to their calling. Without actually looking at your letter of call, I know that you are here to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, to teach the biblical word and to minister to those in need (visitations, counseling, etc.). In following your calling, you spend much time and energy applying your gifts to this call.

If you were to use the pulpit to preach about the many political hot-button topics, I would expect you to thoroughly research the topics and speak to the complexities, addressing the various viewpoints to include what is valid and what is not. The time and energy to do this well would certainly take you away from what you have been called to do.

So many people in today's world are over-sensitized to each drama depicted in 30 second news stories. The 'evidence' used to form individual opinions is mostly anecdotal or circumstantial. And most people only listen to views aligning with their opinions that have been informed through their favored 'news' feeds. Most news feeds are designed specifically to increase viewership by creating, or maximizing fear or other negative emotions. Very little actual news is presented that covers the facts in a way that clearly states what is known and what is not known about a specific case. In my view, the jury of mis-informed public opinion is not news but is presented as if it were.

Yes, there are specific topics in current affairs that you could address as clearly wrong. I have no idea how you would choose which topics are most important. I do not believe that any pastor should jump on the latest scandal, or misbehavior or misuse of power just because it is "trending". Again, to speak from the pulpit as a person of authority, you must first do the research in a much more meaningful way than is done for the 6:00 news. As a pastor in a Lutheran church, you have a great amount of theological and biblical training that, merged with your gifts, you have used to successfully meet your calling. I would be disappointed if you set aside any portion of your calling to immerse yourself so deeply into current affairs that you could adequately speak to the issues.

Our pastors at Silverdale Lutheran Church faithfully “hand over the goods” of the Gospel each Sunday. We hear the objective truth that Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification. As Paul writes: “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not a result

of works... For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10, ESV).

The promise of salvation is primary. Yet in times of acute suffering—mass shootings, war, famine—I long to hear how that same Gospel shapes our life together in response. God’s Law disturbs us and drives us to Christ for comfort. But even as we rest in that comfort, human suffering remains. Those created in Christ for good works are called to enter that suffering as Christ entered ours.

Our pastors rightly send us out each week with the Gospel ringing in our ears. Still, after particularly horrific news, I sometimes long for pastoral wisdom that helps us ask: What does faith active in love look like here? How do the Scriptures guide our response?

In my diaconal formation, my vocation is Word and Service—in that order. Service flows from the Word. The Gospel creates the very love it commands.

This becomes difficult in our cultural moment. Care for “the least of these” is often heard as political. The poor, the immigrant, the unborn, the vulnerable—these concerns are quickly sorted into partisan categories. At the same time, overt political instruction from the pulpit distorts the Church’s task. Neither extreme serves the Gospel. Nothing must replace Christ crucified and risen as the heart of every sermon.

Yet the Gospel itself shows Christ’s deep concern for the least of these. In Matthew 25:31–46, we meet Christ in the hungry, the stranger, and the imprisoned. Justification and neighbor-love are not competitors. They belong together in right order.

Luther called the work of Christ crucified the “Happy Exchange”: Christ takes what is ours and gives us what is his. Clothed in Christ, we are also bound to our neighbor in shared flesh. This self-giving love—kenosis—is the shape of God’s action toward the world (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:17–21). Those reconciled to God are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

A political agenda does not belong in the pulpit. But human suffering remains, even when its causes are debated politically. Is it possible to name concrete suffering in light of the lectionary text and call the congregation to faithful vocation? That is not partisanship. It is pastoral application.

Martin Luther’s framework in *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*—often called the “Two Kingdoms” doctrine—distinguishes the Church’s means (Word and Sacrament) from the State’s means (law and coercion). The Church does not legislate. Yet the doctrine does not require silence about suffering. The Gospel frees us not only from sin but for the neighbor.

In *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther writes: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Freedom from justification becomes love in action.

The “Two Kingdoms” reminds us that no civil authority speaks with Gospel authority. When governments claim divine endorsement, Christians grow uneasy. The Church’s task remains the proclamation of Christ. But proclamation includes forming consciences and shaping vocations.

In 1522, during his return from exile at Wartburg, Luther preached the *Invocavit* sermons to calm turmoil in Wittenberg. He did not coerce civil outcomes. He applied the Word to concrete disorder, urging love, restraint, and service. He addressed real suffering without surrendering the Gospel. [luthers-1522-invocavit-sermons](#)

Perhaps the challenge is not whether we hear Christ crucified preached—we must—but whether, in times of acute suffering, we also clearly hear how our crucified and risen Lord sends us into the world in love. I would like to hear more of that connection.