



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

# Minnesota South District

*...joyfully serving together in making disciples of Jesus Christ*

January 30, 2023

Brothers,

Epiphany greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the light made manifest to the nations!

While presenting at a recent MN Lutherans for Life conference, I was asked point blank why our pastors do not specifically call out the Democratic Party by name as evil and take a more forceful public stand against them. The individual asserted we need more pastors to be like Dietrich Bonhoeffer lest we soon end up like Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup> The concern was we are about to encounter a complete takeover of the country by immoral oppressive leaders who will not only advocate for the loss of religious liberty but destroy the virtuous common good this country has upheld for generations.

It was a pointed question. One that had a great amount of exasperation about the perceived complacency of our pastors. But one that also expected an answer affirming the virtue of the Republican Party as the answer to the cultural ailment. It revealed an expectation about the role of pastors when it comes to things political.

## **The Role of Pastors in a Political World**

That's what I want to talk to you about at some length in this letter. In a society that continues to propose and pass laws meant to implement immoral and unbiblical public policy, what is our role as pastors? With an abortion bill that affords no protection to the unborn under any circumstances passed by both houses of our state legislature and soon to be signed by the governor, a transgender rights bill that proposes to strip parental rights also in our state legislature, our governor enacting education standards forcing an unbiblical view of humanity, and a misleadingly titled Respect for Marriage Act now enacted by federal law, how do we find the proper balance of shepherding the flock and leading our people in exercising their civic duty? Likewise, how do we go about conducting pastoral acts (like weddings) in a culture that continues to redefine marriage and the human body? Our political and legal system are part of the cultural backdrop of the people we shepherd. It intertwines with our lives as Christian citizens.

As it stands, the American political system is built on a two-party system. Presently both parties have become so ideologically and diametrically opposed to each other they no longer see one another as colleagues who work for the common good, but as enemies that must be defeated, lest the Republic fall. To the devil's delight, the people and pastors of our congregations are often pulled into this kind of thinking.

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<sup>1</sup>This is the same point being made popular by Eric Metaxes in his recent book, *Letter to the American Church* (Salem Books, 2022).

Sadly, there is little remaining common ground to be found between the parties. Simplifying to the extreme, Democrats wish to be progressive—to progress past and beyond the virtues and constitutional structures that first established our republic. Republicans wish to be conservative—to conserve the virtues and constitutional structures that first established our republic. There are variations and shades of each, of course, but this is where the lines seem to be drawn.

Exactly how, then, is a pastor to guide his flock? To start, it's not advisable for a pastor to become a spokesman for a political party. Though the platform of the Republican Party may have substantially more areas of overlap with the Christian view of morality, we dare not make the church or her pastors into mere cogs of a political party. Forming coalitions with like-minded people and focusing on specific moral issues is different than embracing a political identity and making it synonymous with the Christian faith.

### **Public Policy that Contradicts Biblical Morality**

At the same time, if you've been watching the debates on the abortion bill in both chambers of the MN state legislature you saw the malicious disregard for human life that Democrat Party members expressed. There was not even a willingness to consider an amendment on banning the dismemberment of full-term babies. Such cruelty toward the most vulnerable and defenseless of our society in the so-called name of woman's reproductive health care is a vile offense that must be called out for the evil that it is.

Sadly, this kind of human depravity is nothing new. In our country, this depravity has long been manifesting itself in a concerted attack on the created order of family and human identity.<sup>2</sup> It's rooted in the expressive individualism that deems personal sexual fulfillment the highest good for human flourishing. In other words, anything that interferes with the personal fulfillment sought by one's preferred sexual means or one's perceived identity must be eliminated.

The current attacks on family and sexual virtue are only possible because of the successful attacks of previous generations. The church bears some responsibility in this regard. Long before today's iterations of public policy proposals, the church was making exceptions for, then normalizing, and then embracing previously taboo subjects like contraceptives and divorce.

Trying to fight against the latest versions of the progressive agenda can, therefore, seem like a bleak endeavor, where the temptation is to turn to a political party and tie the church to it as the only means of defense. But Christ Jesus did not found his church to be a branch of a political party (Mark 12:17; John 18:36). Nor did he use those means to accomplish his will in the hearts and minds of people.

### **The History of the Holy Christian Church**

So how are we pastors to shepherd our people in the face of this adversity? The history of the Holy Christian Church is helpful in this regard.

Since the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Christian Church has existed across countries and political systems of all kinds, and certainly not just amid a two-party system. The New Testament church began amid the oppressive Roman government. It not only existed in that context, but it thrived and flourished for the first three hundred years after Jesus' ascension, although at times it was at great personal cost to

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed analysis and encouragement on how to address this as the church, see Lucas Woodford, "Reclaiming Family and Sexual Virtue" *Seelsorger: A Journal for the Contemporary Care of Souls*. (Vol. 5), August, 2019, p.83-110.

<https://www.doxology.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Reclaiming-Family-and-Sexual-Virtue-Seelsorger-Vol-5.pdf>

many. Christianity then became an accepted religion of the Roman empire and eventually became the official religion of the land. Through them all, pastors had the same charge to direct and care for souls with the word and sacraments and not at the dictates of political forces.

As things stand now, Christianity has lost its privileged position in culture and we are seeing a return to the paganism similar to the context in which Christianity first began. That loss of privilege is difficult to endure. Yet, that does not mean we sit in silence. We speak the truth of Christ in love, and we shine His light on the dark deeds of those who oppose him. As I wrote to you last fall, we have a robust Two Kingdom Theology to help guide us.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Lutheran theology has a rich understanding of vocation.

Therefore, the vocation of a Christian citizen who carries out their civic duty and use of the legal system and its rights of redress can and should be engaged with all vigor and might, and our congregation members should be encouraged to do so as well. As you catechize and teach members about biblical morality, you can also encourage and teach about the U.S. constitutional legal system and their rights as a citizen. You can encourage engagement in things like voting, expressing concerns to elected representatives, engaging in peaceful demonstrations, volunteering to serve the community, giving input in community forums, offering expertise to shape public policy, or even running for elected office.

With that said, we are not alone in what we are experiencing. Around the globe there are countless countries where Christians live and have never had a privileged position in culture. The church has always had to navigate within the confines of its legal and political surroundings.

#### **Ambassadors of Christ (not a political party)**

You are called to be a pastor who is an emissary and ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. That means you have a particular view of human identity, personhood, and morality. But it also includes an ethic of love and compassion amid your voices that speak against the evils and sins of proposed secular laws and public policies. In other words, we advocate for and model reasonable and kind interactions. We see the humanity in all people and treat them with dignity and respect even if we completely disagree with them.

Brothers, we are the Lord's men, not a political party's man. We are sent to do what he has given us to do. That includes things like performing the weddings we choose to perform while retaining the right not to perform others. The Respect for Marriage Act has made many of you ask if we should continue as we have always done.

We perform weddings not because we are an agent of the State and therefore obligated to solemnize all unions for which the State has issued a license, but rather because we believe that marriage is a holy estate instituted by God for the benefit of society. As such, we bless the unions of one man and one woman in his name. As long as we retain the discretionary right to officiate at those weddings at which we choose, we can in good conscience sign a legal certificate, stating we have conducted such a ceremony, without becoming complicit in the redefinition of marriage. In other words, we are in no way acting as an agent of the state. Indeed, to give away our role in performing marriages is to give the progressive state exactly what it desires, the power to redefine reality.

J.R.R. Tolkien once pushed back against his good friend C.S. Lewis on something very similar. At the time, Lewis was arguing for the creation of two separate marriage institutions within the United Kingdom in order to address the reality of divorce. Tolkien objected strongly saying, "No item of

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<sup>3</sup> Fall 2022 Pastoral Letter: Civic Duty in a Secular Age <https://www.mnsdistrict.org/presidents-office#pastoral-letters>

Christian morality is valid only for Christians.” In other words, it is dangerous to create “bifurcations between a kind of privatized religious morality and the real public morality that governs our common life together.”<sup>4</sup> We dare not let a secular state tell us what reality is.

To be sure, the Holy Christian Church is the one institution that through time and history has been strong enough to push back against oppressive governments while simultaneously caring for the souls being repressed. But the Holy Christian Church was not formed to be a political party. The intentional move of the Republican Party to tap into the so-called “moral majority” of the Christian electorate some decades ago to bolster party loyalty and stability was a shrewd political move. But as pastors we must be careful we do not adopt political platforms as our guide in shepherding our people. The care of souls through the word of God must always serve as our one and only guiding principle.

### **The Promises of Christ**

I have gone on at length, but many of you have been asking how we should navigate it all. What I have offered is a basic framework to navigate our politicized and vitriolic times along with some encouragement to take heart in the confidence of Christ. Our allegiance is to him first and foremost—and to his beloved church—to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

You, too, are loved by the Good Shepherd; you have been washed in the saving bath of his baptism and nurtured by his life-giving word and sacrament. What’s more, you have been called and ordained into the office by which he lovingly tends his sheep and lambs. Keep your eye fixed on him and your ears tuned to his word amid the political and social tumult of our day.

Yes, the times seem challenging, but the Lord is faithful to his promises. He is the Lord who came into the flesh to suffer on the cross for our sins and, in so doing, also taught us how to suffer and bear up under injustice. Yet, he is also the Lord who walked out of the tomb alive as the Resurrection and the Life, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the Lord of all Lords and the King of Kings. He will lead us forward.

Your Brother in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford  
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*<sup>1</sup>I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup>preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup>For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup>and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. <sup>5</sup>As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Tim 4:1-5)*

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<sup>4</sup>Jake Meador, “Tolkien Was Right: Notes on the Respect for Marriage Act and the Post-Boomer Church” Mere Orthodoxy, November 30, 2022. <https://mereorthodoxy.com/tolkien-was-right-notes-on-the-respect-for-marriage-act-and-the-post-boomer-church/>