

1 ***A Draft Social Message on Government and Civic Engagement:***
2 ***Discipleship in a Democracy***

3 *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for*
4 *in its welfare you will find your welfare* (Jeremiah 29:7).

5 *"It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned*
6 *with a loaf of bread instead of a lion."*¹ (Martin Luther in the Large Catechism, Book of Concord)

7
8 **Introduction**

9 Lutherans care about government because it is a gift from God intended for the safety and
10 flourishing of human life.² Yet too often and in too many ways, this gift has been abused.

11 There is a spirit of broad dissatisfaction, mistrust,
12 and even hatred of government in the United States
13 at the time of this writing. According to a Pew
14 survey, the percentage of U.S. citizens who trust
15 the federal government to do what is right all or
16 most of the time fell from 77% in 1964 to 17% in
17 2019.³

Lutherans need to affirm government in a way that realistically acknowledges its limitations and failures while holding fast to the belief that it is fundamentally necessary.

Government at all levels in the United States merits both the active support and critical engagement of Lutherans.

- 18 • Government OF the people has come to be
19 seen as distant and oppressive.
- 20 • Government BY the people has come to be
21 seen as increasingly controlled by a small
22 minority of elites.
- 23 • Government FOR the people has come to be seen as unjust in who benefits and who
24 pays.

25 Such mistrust is understandable, for concern about dysfunctional government is
26 widespread. Many have experienced government as a threat to personal freedoms when
27 laws are enforced selectively or not at all. Many have experienced government as a danger
28 to the safety and well-being of communities, particularly when law enforcement and the
29 court system distribute justice unequally. Many see government violating moral norms by
30 insufficiently protecting human life, or by giving some people unfair advantage over others.

31 Many have experienced government as a threat to financial well-being, as when taxes rise
32 or overly burdensome regulations are imposed. Anger and mistrust may follow when
33 governmental structures are used to enrich the few at the expense of everyone else. Many
34 see government as incompetent, as when it lets infrastructure decay or fails to respond
35 adequately to natural disasters or other emergencies.

36 Yet government is needed because it does what churches, families, individuals, and
37 businesses cannot do on their own. To understand how important government is, imagine
38 life without the safety and services that a just and well-functioning government typically
39 provides:

- 40 • At the local level, consider drinking water without purification, human sewage
41 without treatment, resources and packaging for consumption without garbage
42 removal, childhood without schools.
- 43 • At the state level, consider travel without highways or trains. Consider health care
44 without regulation. Consider wildfires without firefighters. Consider dangerous
45 neighbors without recourse to law enforcement, courts, and prisons. Consider
46 natural spaces without protection. Consider education without state universities.
- 47 • At the federal level, consider old age without some form of social support such as
48 Social Security and Medicare. Consider food without inspection and drugs without
49 certification of their safety and effectiveness. Consider being poor without income-
50 support programs. Consider immigration without any controls or lawful process
51 and protections for those who seek entry. Consider agriculture without price
52 supports. Consider flying without air traffic control. Consider banking without
53 deposit insurance or any regulations. Consider national security without armed
54 forces or homeland security programs. Consider natural disasters without aid for
55 rescue and reconstruction. Consider technological and medical innovation without
56 federal research support. Consider civil liberties without judicial protection.

57 Many have experienced these benefits to the point where they are taken for granted. And
58 many have experienced the harm that results when government fails—as when the
59 residents of Flint, Michigan, lose their pure drinking water or the residents of New Orleans,
60 coastal New Jersey and Puerto Rico receive insufficient government help after major
61 hurricanes, or when government inflicts suffering on asylum-seekers and other immigrants
62 at our southern border, or when government violates civil liberties.

63 Government at all levels is a force for good or evil—or more exactly, *both* in some
64 combination. For 500 years, Lutherans have been grateful when government functions as
65 God’s gift and critical when it fails. A realistic view of government
66 involves holding in tension the failures of government with the
67 recognition that God intends for government to protect society and to
68 enable it to flourish. It involves walking the line between the extremes
69 of idolatrous endorsement of the nation and cynical rejection of what it
70 does.

71 Living in this tension, the ELCA holds that all residents of the United
72 States have a responsibility to make government function well—not to
73 abandon our democracy but to engage it in a spirit of robust
74 citizenship. The citizens and other residents of the United States can and should affirm

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75 government in a way that realistically acknowledges its limitations and failures while
76 holding fast to the belief that government is fundamentally necessary.

77 This claim expresses the existing teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as
78 elaborated in light of classic Lutheran thought. A realistic view of government begins by
79 acknowledging the power of sin and failure in our lives and human society generally and
80 understanding how God uses government to protect society and enable it to flourish.

81 All residents of the United States have a responsibility to make government function well;
82 Lutherans see their responsibility in terms of a calling from God. We are called not to
83 abandon our democracy but to engage it in a spirit of robust citizenship, as faithful
84 stewards of our own self-governance.

85 This commitment to civic engagement is based on our understanding of how God governs
86 human society through two strategies.

87 ***I. God's Two Governing Strategies***⁴

88 Martin Luther and Lutherans after him believe that God rules all of creation. Lutherans
89 historically have recognized God's governance in two distinct but connected ways,
90 traditionally called the "right" and the "left" hands of God.⁵ Through the right hand, God
91 instills faith in Jesus Christ to actively redeem those who recognize their sin and trust God's
92 promise. Here God acts upon the "inner," personal, and churchly dimensions of our lives by
93 using the Bible, prayer, sermons, worship, and human conscience to transform the way
94 Christians see and engage the world.⁶

95 Christians experience God's right hand in the power of God's love and forgiveness,
96 particularly when they gather together around God's table and are stirred to express
97 mutual love and care. Worldly government has no role in the work of saving us from sin;
98 only God can bring about the fundamental change of heart that is true faith.

99 At the same time, God's left hand of governance operates in the
100 "outer" social, political, and economic world, in support of
101 order and justice. Here earthly government is indispensable,
102 standing alongside church, family, and the economy as basic
103 institutions.⁷ God rules through governmental roles and
104 functions to preserve the safety and enhance the flourishing of
105 earthly life.⁸ In sovereign freedom, God chooses to use earthly
106 government but is not contained within it.⁹ Our church teaches
107 that the two governing strategies (traditionally known as "Two
108 Kingdoms") exist as distinct if interrelated domains of human experience. Both are
109 needed—and indispensable. If God governed only with the right hand, law-abiding but
110 vulnerable people would be unprotected by structures of law and governmental force and
111 would be preyed upon like sheep attacked by wolves, in Martin Luther's memorable
112 image.¹⁰

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| God rules through governmental roles and functions to preserve the safety and enhance the flourishing of earthly life. |
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113 If God governed only through the left hand, Christians would feel condemned without the
114 possibility of forgiveness, and so experience a constant, miserable, and losing struggle
115 against human moral failure. Cynics then might be justified in seeing no role for
116 government beyond despotic control. But God’s right-hand rule encourages us to see
117 government in a positive light. “God’s reign intersects earthly life, transforming us and how
118 we view the systems of this world.”¹¹

119 These two governing strategies are connected in at least four vital ways, and these
120 connections explain how earthly government can be a force for improving as well as
121 safeguarding the lives of its residents and citizens.

122 *First*, God’s law is God’s will for human life, used in two ways. From God’s left hand,
123 enshrined in the Bible, the law tells us to love God and our neighbors. At the same time, the
124 law drives Christians to recognize that we are estranged from God and our neighbors, and
125 impels us to seek forgiveness and reconciliation from God’s right hand, through Christ.¹²
126 Strengthened by such assurance, Christians see that the same law that invalidates every
127 effort by humans to save themselves is intended by God to support human community. It
128 finds expression, however imperfect, in the “civil” law from God’s left hand.

129 Civil law includes both coercive laws to deter and protect against criminality and
130 coordinating law to structure the social, economic, and political dimensions of our lives.
131 Civil law gives concrete shape to justice and equity, which aims at the well-being of the
132 neighbor. Given the human bent to self-interest, civil law must be founded on the rule of
133 law, an impartial judiciary, and equality of all before law.¹³

134 *Second*, God’s right-hand governance is marked by radical equality, which sets a moral
135 standard for worldly government. Standing before God and made in God’s image, all
136 individuals are in equal need of redemption in Christ, and none can claim privilege or
137 status over another.¹⁴ Martin Luther asserted that all humans are equally empowered to
138 pray for and teach each other—what he termed the “priesthood of all believers.”

139 This equality is expressed in God’s left-hand governance. The world
140 is fractured along economic, political, social, cultural, ethnic, racial,
141 and gender lines. But in it all individuals are called to meaningful
142 work that, from God’s perspective, cannot be ranked in value,
143 because it has no bearing upon salvation. There is no essential
144 difference between a president and a payroll clerk. All residents
145 and citizens deserve the protection and care that government
146 provides.¹⁵

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147 *Third*, God’s right-hand governance liberates a powerful impulse of “empathy,” a term used
148 in political discourse to suggest the sympathetic capacity to feel for and with others, to
149 recognize and honor the stranger as a person with dignity and rights.¹⁶ It is the political
150 form that Christian love takes in the world of civil governance.¹⁷ It diminishes the power of
151 self-interest and selfishness in human motivation.

152 As the gospel message of forgiveness releases individuals from incapacitating anxiety about
153 their own salvation, it opens up space in their worldly lives for a sense of vocation of
154 service to their neighbors. Empathy cannot negate the pervasive and insidious power of
155 self-centeredness, which includes a demand for homogeneity or rejection of diversity in
156 human society.¹⁸ Nevertheless, empathy helps us see strangers as neighbors—to see our
157 blind spots and critique our biases—as we try to imagine the world from perspectives
158 other than our own.¹⁹

159 *Fourth*, God’s right hand imparts a blessing to the institutions and roles of worldly
160 governance. Government, citizenship, earthly callings to public service—all are
161 experienced as gifts to be received rather than entitlements to be clawed after or obstacles
162 to be avoided or destroyed.

163 Still, serious tensions mark the relationship of the two kinds of governance, thanks to the
164 enduring power of sin. At least three temptations are to be avoided: (a) judging both types
165 of governance to be entirely separate, as happens when faith is privatized and seen as
166 irrelevant to the work of government; (b) dismissing God’s left hand as the domain of the
167 devil, in contrast to the community of the faithful; and finally (c) the opposite temptation,
168 seeing any nation as the pure expression of God’s will on earth, which is idolatrous.
169 Lutherans pursue a middle way, confessing that government is *of* a fallen people, *by* a
170 fallible people, but nonetheless used by God *for* blessing a redeemable people.

171 ***II. Governmental Roles and Functions—Is the Neighbor Being Served?***

172 These strong connections between God’s right and left
173 hands bear directly on the performance of governmental
174 functions in the United States. To evaluate how well
175 agencies of government are doing their proper work of
176 providing for the safety and well-being of those within
177 the country’s borders, Lutherans ask one simple but all-
178 encompassing question: Is the neighbor being served?²⁰

To evaluate how well agencies of government are doing their proper work of providing for the safety and well-being of those within their borders, Lutherans ask one simple but all-encompassing question: is the neighbor being served?

179 The question has no single or simple answer, given that
180 government in the United States consists of thousands of
181 agencies and millions of employees carrying out
182 particular functions at the federal, tribal, state, and local levels. Nevertheless, Lutheran
183 teaching points to the following guidelines:

184 *First*, consent of the governed. U.S. Lutherans have learned that their domestic neighbors
185 are best served by a government in which supreme power is held publicly by the people (a
186 democracy) and they are governed by representatives chosen in fair elections in which
187 each person has one vote (a republic).²¹ Such consent requires government to allow the
188 neighbors it serves to pursue their lives in a spirit of freedom.

189 *Second*, unrestricted participation. Efforts to restrict access to voting or governmental
190 services are to be condemned and resisted. The political health of our nation still suffers

191 from the stain of anti-democratic exclusion. Certain territories such as American Indian
192 reservations, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the District of Columbia still aspire
193 to full representation in matters affecting their well-being. For centuries, laws and
194 practices restricting voter rights excluded women and people of color from full
195 participation in democratic self-rule. Poor enforcement or active suppression of voter
196 rights still serves to disenfranchise voters.

197 *Third*, public service as vocation. Since the time of Martin Luther, Lutherans have
198 recognized public service as a worthy calling—a means by which public individuals may
199 live out their vocation to serve God.²² Public service is not limited to the paid employees
200 but includes those who run for political office, who volunteer in political campaigns and
201 emergency situations, and who serve on advisory boards and in national parks and other
202 opportunities for citizen involvement.

203 *Fourth*, functions and roles for public benefit. The work of government is carried out
204 through roles designed to serve particular functions. A given
205 role is occupied by a person who has the expectation—and
206 responsibility—to serve the public rather than personal
207 ambition or gain.²³ Government is to “serve the good of
208 society.”²⁴ For Lutherans, one way Christian vocation finds
209 expression is through dedicated, competent service by public
210 servants.²⁵ There is a sharp distinction between public service
211 and private gain, a distinction measured by the
212 straightforward question “Whose good is being served?” Laws
213 and enforcement are needed to separate officeholders from their personal interest, so that
214 the neighbor is served.

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215 *Fifth*, public gratitude. Public servants need to be paid fairly for their work and to enjoy the
216 benefits they seek to obtain and protect for the neighbors they serve. Differences in
217 function and role are to be recognized and rewarded. Sacrifice for public service must not
218 be forced upon government employees; it can be taken on only voluntarily.

219 *Sixth*, neighborly service to strangers, without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual
220 orientation, or other individual characteristics.²⁶ Governmental agencies and employees
221 encounter the public as strangers to whom law-defined, obligatory performances are due,
222 and from whom law-defined, obligatory performances are expected.

223 Except at the local level, these strangers likely will remain strangers. Strangers are
224 encountered in shared public spaces, in contrast to the enclaves of our private lives.²⁷ Such
225 social distance helps ensure fairness and impartiality. But strangers encountered via
226 governmental action are rendered neighbors by Christian love through competent,
227 dedicated, and compassionate service.

228 *Seventh*, civility. The way in which our government officials treat each other and the
229 strangers they serve should be governed by a spirit of respect for the human dignity of each
230 person as a child of God created in God’s image.

231 *Eighth*, adequate regulation. The proper concern of government is with the safety and well-
232 being of the people within its boundaries, so it must serve as a referee in our economic life.
233 The market economy creates abundant goods and services, but when left unchecked, it
234 generates inequalities of wealth and power. When the market economy fails to incorporate
235 all social costs (pollution, exploitation, etc.) into the prices of goods and services,
236 governmental action is needed to contain the harm done to the health and well-being of
237 residents and creation.²⁸

238 *Ninth*, reform of government. Not only might public officials be corrupt, but the functions
239 they carry out, as outlined in policies, statutes, regulations, and laws, may be corrupt by
240 design or corrupted in practice. A government function quickly loses credibility if carried
241 out unfairly or arbitrarily, in a way that discriminates against some in favor of others.²⁹

242 Here a distinction must be drawn between structured evil
243 and fallible structure. Government becomes evil when its
244 goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed
245 into vehicles for benefiting one group or harming the
246 neighbor—such as voter suppression laws. In contrast,
247 government is fallible when its goals, policies, and programs
248 are poorly designed or implemented, and cause waste or
249 hardship. “Red tape” is a genuine concern, as is bureaucratic
250 stagnation. Sometimes, governmental failure involves both
251 evil and fallibility. Public servants have the obligation to seek
252 improvements in the design and function of the roles they take on.

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253 *Tenth*, calling attention to abuses of power. Government must always be held accountable.
254 Public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of
255 protecting and fostering the common good, but that duty involves citizens as well.
256 Lutherans share a “prophethood of all believers”—the duty of calling for justice in response
257 to both fallible structures and structured evil. No function is beyond reasoned, evidence-
258 based criticism. Where reform through normal channels does not work, the function of
259 whistleblower is necessary, and whistleblowers should be protected against retaliation.

260 *Eleventh*, maintaining the distinction between the role and the person filling it. Good public
261 servants can be caught in poorly designed, destructive, or corrupt roles; well-designed and
262 constructive roles can be occupied by inexperienced, incompetent or corrupt individuals.
263 Public servants are fallible but not immoral or evil unless they use their positions and
264 functions to serve themselves or interests other than the neighbor’s. If the role is designed
265 or used to harm rather than help the neighbor, it should be resisted and changed.

266 *Twelfth*, neighbors and citizens. “Citizenship” is a status established and recognized by
267 government; “neighbor” is a status God bestows on all people as a gift, regardless of their
268 legal status, racial or ethnic background, gender identity or sexual orientation, mental
269 and/or physical ability or disability, religious conviction, or political ideology.³⁰

270 Just as Christians enjoy the “priesthood of all believers” from
271 God’s right hand, all people enjoy a “neighborhood of all
272 residents.” Official citizenship is to be honored and regulated by
273 law—but not used to justify stripping any individual or group of
274 their dignity or human rights as neighbor. For this reason, the
275 ELCA has declared that all residents, asylum-seekers, and
276 refugees in the United States are to be protected as neighbors as
277 they await determination of their immigration status.³¹

Official citizenship is to be honored and regulated by law—but not used to justify stripping any individual or group of their dignity or human rights as neighbor.

278 *Thirteenth*, accepting limitations on freedom. Living within a
279 network of governmental structures protects and privileges but
280 does not absolutize individual freedoms. Living under
281 government involves limiting freedom from interference in
282 order to gain other freedoms to act.

283 To use a mundane example: stoplights, traffic lane striping, highway taxes, licensing
284 requirements, vehicle inspections, and insurance requirements all hedge our individual
285 liberty but enable us to drive at high speeds for hours on end, with reduced risk of accident
286 or death.

287 These 13 proposed guidelines may not seem persuasive to those who have suffered
288 neglectful, abusive treatment by government agencies or officials. The problem runs deep
289 and many Lutherans are among those Americans who distrust government.

290 Many of European descent think that political control has passed to distant elites
291 contemptuous of their well-being. Many of African descent continue to experience the evil
292 legacies, perpetuated by law and government, of slavery, legal discrimination, and mass
293 incarceration. Many of American Indian descent still suffer from the loss of their
294 sovereignty in the complex tangle of federal, state, and tribal government. Many of Hispanic
295 descent feel marginalized by the neglectful federal response to the destruction of Puerto
296 Rico by a hurricane and the suffering of asylum-seekers and refugees at the southern
297 border.

298 In response to these deeply troubling problems, Lutherans confess that a good portion of
299 the blame rests with us as citizens of this self-governing nation. If government has betrayed
300 our trust, that is often because we have failed to raise our voices and votes against misuse
301 of government. Despite a few heroic examples of resistance, historically Lutherans too
302 often have been uncritically obedient and even subservient to their governments, including
303 authoritarian governments.³²

304

305 **III. Called to Civic Engagement**

306 Over time Lutherans have learned that strong civic engagement is part of their baptismal
307 vocation, both as individuals and in the church’s corporate witness. Such civic participation
308 is not simply voluntary, idealistic, or altruistic. The ELCA holds to the biblical idea
309 (Jeremiah 29:7) that God calls people to be active citizens and to ensure that all people
310 benefit from the good of government.

311 Civic engagement takes many forms, from public service as a government employee to
312 involvement with political parties and campaigns, to seeking public office, to advocacy
313 about particular issues, to volunteering for public-service organizations, to serving as a
314 gadfly, and even to civil disobedience when other forms of civic engagement fail.

315 Lutheran civic engagement arises both from a concern about disorder and from hope about
316 what government can accomplish for the neighbor. God’s law in its civic use is intended to
317 contain human sin, and when it fails, chaos results. Corrupt structures and individuals
318 generate destructive consequences, sweeping the guilty and innocent alike into disorder.³³
319 In a democracy, such disorder can serve a constructive purpose. When government acts
320 against the public good or violates fundamental rights, it creates what might be called a
321 “public of strangers.”

322 This public consists of “strangers” who are connected not by family, religious, ethnic,
323 economic, or personal ties but by a shared urge to make government work. They are
324 “neighbors” who band together out of a shared interest in keeping chaos at bay. Democratic
325 engagement with government occurs when citizens and other residents bring issues of
326 justice to the public and render themselves trustworthy witnesses by following the
327 procedures of democratic self-rule. This includes—when there is no lawful recourse—civil
328 disobedience.³⁴

329 This church teaches that Christians have a responsibility not
330 only to fulfill our private roles and functions in society but to
331 join this public of strangers. We do so to act against destructive
332 consequences but also for fair and compassionate governance.
333 For baptized Christians, civic engagement is a vital means of
334 discipleship. We follow the God of the Bible who instructs us to
335 seek justice for the neighbor and expects prayerful discernment and thoughtful action.
336 (Amos 5:24)

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337 The ELCA is called as a church body to discern corporate, nonpartisan means of civic
338 engagement.³⁵ We affirm the importance of government, specifically democratic self-
339 governance. In this affirmative pastoral role, we should support public servants and elected
340 officials in their vocation to wield power for the good of all. This church also should remind
341 citizens and residents of the civic narrative that supports the U.S. experiment in self-
342 governance. This includes affirming the value of civics education, not only in the nation’s
343 schools but as a task for all.

344 God's church also is called to a critical, even prophetic role. It should oppose governmental
345 policies and programs that undercut public health, impose economic harm, destroy the
346 environment, or deny neighbors their dignity. Whenever there is division and inequality,
347 this church should advocate for a more equitable distribution of both the benefits and the
348 burdens of participating in democracy.

349 **Conclusion**

350 When confronted with the stark choice of serving God or Caesar, Jesus declared, "Give to
351 the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark
352 12:17). Lutherans conclude that earthly vocation involves honoring God's governing
353 strategy in both dimensions: the right hand, which receives God's forgiveness and love, and
354 the left hand, which channels that love into just governance on earth.

355 While many have felt their trust betrayed by government, Lutherans affirm that
356 government is a gift indispensable for safeguarding and improving human life. At the same
357 time, Lutherans affirm that its failures and injustices need to be remedied through robust
358 citizen engagement. As citizens we may have serious disagreements about specific policy
359 and choices regarding what government should do or not do. And our participation will
360 always be marked by sin. Still, we rise again each day, forgiven and nurtured through our
361 baptism to appreciate—and do—the work of self-government.

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Endnotes

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 450 (Large Catechism: 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

² The Lutheran view of government as "ordained by God for the sake of good order" was formalized in the Augsburg Confession, article XVI. Language of government as "gift" has appeared as recently as 2013, in the ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice*, section II.

³ <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>.

⁴ Traditionally known as the "Two Kingdoms" in Lutheran teaching. See Martin Luther's classic description in his 1523 treatise "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," particularly section 1, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986; all subsequent references are to this series), pp. 81-104. The term "governing strategies" indicates a contemporary rethinking to overcome many of the problems associated with the traditional concept while expressing better the intent. For one example in this critical retrieval, see Craig L. Nesson, "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms" in *Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. XIX (2005): 302-311.

⁵ In classic Lutheran teaching, "right" and "left" refer strictly to handedness, not political orientations. God's right hand governs with the "Word," and God's left hand rules with the "sword."

⁶ Luther's comment on Matthew 5:7 illustrates what a "pure heart" means for how one sees the world. See *Luther's Works*, vol. 21, pp. 29-39.

⁷ For Luther, the world was organized by God in three “estates”: church, government, and family/economy. See *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, p. 95, and vol. 37, pp. 364-365, for compact discussions of the three estates. In Luther’s exposition of Genesis, the family was created by God’s command to the first people to be fruitful and multiply (*Luther’s Works*, 1:82); the church was created when they initiated worship (1:106) and the government much later, after the Flood (2:139-141). Biblical heroes such as Jacob and King David demonstrated leadership in all three (5:268-269).

⁸ For Luther, God acts through the “masks” of human functions and roles to exercise the “left hand” of governance. For a compact summary of God’s two strategies, see *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, p. 197.

⁹ For Luther, God’s sovereignty over earthly government is underlined by Luther’s recurring and heated criticisms of rulers for arrogance, stupidity, and prideful abuse of their powers; wise rulers are rare. See, for example, his commentaries on the Magnificat and Psalms 82 and 101 (*Luther’s Works*, 21:337, 340-345, 356-358, and 13:47-51, 147-166).

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, pp. 91-92.

¹¹ From the ELCA’s 1999 social statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*.

¹² Known as the “theological” use of the law in Lutheran theology.

¹³ The marks of a fair judicial system are laid out in the ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice*, section II:C.

¹⁴ See Luther’s powerful discussion of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7-8) in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 23, pp. 312-319 (especially 313) and vol. 24, pp. 155-157.

¹⁵ ELCA teaching has emphasized care and justice for all categories of particularly vulnerable people. See the ELCA social statement on race, ethnicity, and culture (1993) and ELCA social messages on homelessness (1990), community violence (1994), immigration (1998), mental illness (2012), gender-based violence (2015), and human rights (2017). All are available for download at ELCA.org/Resources/Faith-And-Society.

¹⁶ Empathy has a dark side, in that the ability to experience the feelings of others can be used to manipulate or even inflict pain upon them. In the political sense used here, the term assumes a standpoint of sympathy or compassion. While “empathy” in this sense does not seem to have been in Luther’s vocabulary, he commends a spirit of forbearing kindness. See, for example, his “Sermon on the Mount” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, pp. 29-32.

¹⁷ One must concede that Luther himself was hardly a consistent champion of democratic empathy. After initially voicing some sympathy with rebelling peasants, he advised their rulers to slay them (“A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 51-74, followed by “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,” vol. 46, 49-55). He also denounced Roman church elites and Jews in the harshest terms. But he understood the latent power of a community to govern itself. He empathically helped shape the experiment in self-governance undertaken by the residents of Leisnig and other jurisdictions forced to cope with the economic consequences of the Reformation (“Ordinance of a Common Chest,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 169-176).

¹⁸ “Self-centeredness” here includes the dimensions of sin identified in the ELCA’s 2019 social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*: “[Sin] may take the form of pride (being centered on ourselves), idolatry (placing someone or something else other than God at the center of our lives), or self-abasement (not recognizing our value and dignity as a person created by God).”

¹⁹ Adam Smith, David Hume, and other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment probed the possibilities and limits of empathy.

²⁰ Luther’s main treatise on government (“Temporal Authority”) emphasizes that the purpose of government is to serve the neighbor, not the self. Christians redeemed for life in the kingdom of God have no need of government (“Temporal Authority,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 93-100, especially 100).

²¹ Technically, the United States has a republican form of government—where supreme authority and power are lodged in the people, who consent to be ruled by representatives.

²² See, for example, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, pp. 4-5.

²³ Luther asserts that the power of a governmental role must not be used to satisfy personal vengeance by the officeholder ("Sermon on the Mount," *Luther's Works*, 21:23-24). See his discussion of the moral duties of private persons versus public roles in his commentary on Matthew 5:38-42 (105-115). For Luther, the three "virtues" of a prince are to secure justice for the faithful, support the vulnerable, and make peace by guarding against violence (13:52-55).

²⁴ See the ELCA's 1991 social statement *The Church in Society*, p. 3.

²⁵ In contrast to cynical accounts of government that reduce governmental decision-making and actions to individual self-seeking economic behavior (see James M. Buchanan, "Public Choice: Politics Without Romance," *Policy*, vol. 19:3 [spring 2003]: 13-18), Lutherans assert that public servants have not only the obligation but the capacity to carry out their functions in a way that serves the neighbor over self, and thus to fulfill the stated design and purposes of government with dedication and competence.

²⁶ The ELCA's 1993 social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* calls for governmental action that provides equal access to education, housing, public transport, employment, entrepreneurship, and other economic functions.

²⁷ Parker J. Palmer's book *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of American Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) presents a strong and nuanced argument for engaging in public life with strangers.

²⁸ In the section titled "Human Dignity," the ELCA's 1999 social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* argues that attaining this lofty goal will involve public policies and regulations to curb the damaging effects of the market and reduce poverty.

²⁹ Romans 13:3-4, perhaps the most influential Biblical text on government, affirms that it is good for citizens to respect figures of temporal authority—in the expectation that governing officials act for the general welfare and not in a despotic manner.

³⁰ ELCA teaching has emphasized care and justice for all categories of particularly vulnerable people. See the ELCA's social statement on race, ethnicity and culture (1993) and social messages on homelessness (1990), community violence (1994), immigration (1998), mental illness (2012), gender-based violence (2015), and human rights (2017). All are available for download at ELCA.org/Resources/Faith-And-Society.

³¹ By action of the 2019 Churchwide Assembly (CA19.03.11).

³² Noteworthy examples of resistance include Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller in Nazi Germany and Bishop Medardo Gómez during the civil war in El Salvador.

³³ Lutherans attribute such disorder to the "wrath" of God against human sin.

³⁴ For example, the ELCA's 1995 social statement *For Peace in God's World* expressed support for those who conscientiously oppose bearing arms in the military. For a strong endorsement of "public witness" through democratic process, see the ELCA's 1993 social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, p. 6: "Through public events such as elections or town meetings, through public bodies such as legislatures or volunteer groups, church members help to forge political will and consensus. Participation in public life is essential to doing justice and undoing injustice."

³⁵ "This church, therefore, will actively promote a public life worthy of the name." See *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, p. 6.