

What is the Function of the Church in Promoting Civic Righteousness?

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When your Executive District Committee proposed this question as the title for an essay at this convention, it extended the privilege of changing the wording somewhat, if this should be desirable. The one thing that seemed to speak for a change in wording is the fact that the question as it stands might seem to imply that it is indeed the function of the church to promote civic righteousness, and thus it would lead one to expect an essay which would carefully define this function and outline its proper execution. Your essayist is, however, of the conviction that though the church in its God-entrusted activity does promote civic righteousness, the promotion of civic righteousness is not assigned to it as its function, its specific duty, office, calling. This may seem to be a fine distinction, but it is a vital and important one that needs to be made lest the testimony of the church to sin and grace be vitiated.

Even so, there is good reason to let the question stand as it reads and to unfold the answer just given, though it is a negative one. For the question, *WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH IN PROMOTING CIVIC RIGHTEOUSNESS?* is one with which we are often faced, particularly in our day. In the interest of fully understanding the answer which Scripture gives to it, let us dwell first on civic righteousness, its nature and purpose, and how it is maintained; then on the spiritual nature and function of the Church; and finally on the manner in which the Church in its God-entrusted activity at the same time promotes civic righteousness.

I. Civic Righteousness, Its Nature and Purpose, and How It is Maintained

Civic righteousness is a term that has been coined by the Church. We find it repeatedly in our Lutheran Confessions. It occurs, for example, in the Latin text of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession as *iustitia civilis*, and this is translated in the English text of the *Concordia Triglotta* as “civil righteousness.” Though Scripture does not use the term civic or civil righteousness, it does touch upon the substance that is meant to be covered by it.

Ever since man fell into sin and brought God’s temporal and eternal wrath upon himself life here on earth, the life of the individual and mankind in general, is meant to serve as a time of grace. Upon the entrance of sin God did not immediately destroy this world and bring man’s earthly life to an end; but He has permitted fallen mankind to sojourn here on earth that He might carry His purpose of redeeming all sinners through His incarnate Son and of proclaiming the Gospel of this saving grace in their midst to make them partakers of this salvation from sin and death. Not until He has called, enlightened, and gathered the entire number of His elect through the Gospel and thus perfected His Church of believers unto eternal life will He destroy this world and bring mankind’s earthly life to an end. In the meantime men are to live and dwell together here on earth, each for his appointed time.

To make this possible for God’s gracious purposes at least a measure of outward decency, peace, and order needs to be maintained. Let us bear in mind what has become of man through sin. Scripture tells us that man is by nature totally corrupt, dead in trespasses and sins, under the power of Satan, and without ability to do anything that is spiritually good. “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.” In Romans 3 St. Paul gives even a longer description of the spiritual condition of natural man: “There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable: there is none that doeth

good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher, with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes.” We also find much evidence of this as we carefully analyze human nature and human relations, as we study human history.

Still, when we observe human relations about us and note only what comes to our outward attention, the impression that we get is in general a favorable one. We see people working with one another and for one another, the farmers, the merchants, the businessmen, the miners, the manufacturers, the laborers, the craftsmen, the doctors, the lawyers, the educators—all of them in their vast numbers ordinarily perform their various tasks and functions in such a harmonious manner that each supplies the other with that which is needed for their common earthly well-being. On a busy street of any of our larger cities we may in a short time pass hundreds of people who are perfect strangers to us and yet harbor little fear of suffering harm in body or limb. Though we know that we must reckon with drunken and irresponsible drivers, we ordinarily set out upon any of our highly congested highways in the confident hope that we will not meet with such. On our travels we are ready to stop at any town and enter a restaurant to satisfy our appetite without doubting that the food set before us will be safe and wholesome. We are ready to accost almost any stranger for information, which we feel he is able to give and assume that he will oblige in a courteous manner. There are exceptions, of course, in all these things. Yet the number of those who openly disturb order and peace, who are manifestly dishonest and untrustworthy and need to be feared, is proportionately small.

What accounts for this? We know that it is not due to the fact that all these people or even most of them are true Christians motivated by faith-born love. Under ordinary conditions we might meet with much the same thing in a purely heathen country. Scripture tells us that this, too, comes from God. This is civic righteousness, mere outward decency, uprightness, and order. If we could probe behind these acts we would find the basic selfishness of the human heart untouched where unbelievers are involved and also find this selfishness still staining the deeds of the believers. Under abnormal circumstances, during war, revolution, social and economic upheavals, we also find this outward decency and order, this civic righteousness, breaking down. As soon as wartime rationing set in, we immediately had to deal with hoarders. As soon as potatoes became scarce, it was at once every man for himself; government code prices were largely disregarded, and black market trade began. How, then, does God bring about a measure of civic righteousness among sinful men that He may carry out His plan of salvation? Scripture tells us that God has established certain ordinances for mankind. The institution of marriage and the home, established in paradise, remained in effect also after the fall. Though affected by sin and perverted in many respects this institution nevertheless serves to curb in a measure the wickedness of the human heart. Russia experienced the evil effect of trying to set this institution aside and saw the need of returning to it. God also ordained and established human authority beyond the home in the form of government and civic authority. Paul, admonishing the Christians at Rome to be subject to the higher powers, instructs them that God is the source of all authority and power among men. There is no power in any shape, form, or manner, but of God. God has prescribed no specific kind of government, or any specific manner of establishing it. The point to be considered is the actual existence of such power: “The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God” (Romans 13:1,2). St. Paul then sets forth God’s purpose in establishing civil authority among men. With threats of punishment government acts and is to act as a deterrent, checking and restraining the evil designs of the wicked, preventing crime and violence. After a criminal deed has, however, been committed, government is to be an avenger, is to inflict speedy and adequate punishment on the guilty one. If a government fails in this, the country, which it represents, would be held accountable for it before God. On the other hand, government is to protect the law-abiding citizen that he may be benefited. Many other statements of Holy Writ corroborate this divine origin and purpose of government. When Pilate boasted of his judicial and executive power, of his power to crucify or to release Jesus, the Savior reminded him: “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.” The apostle Peter, speaking of arrangements for the regulation of human affairs, says: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them

that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well.” Then he continues to designate such submission to civil authority as “well doing” which is in accordance with “the will of God.”

It is this righteousness among men, which God maintains through civil authority, through human government, that we mean when we speak of civic or civil righteousness. It has to do with outward deeds and acts insofar as they make for a measure of peace and order quite apart from the motivation out of which they are performed. In its God-assigned function of maintaining and promoting such civic righteousness human government is to acknowledge and accept those deeds which contribute to peace and order and on the other hand to restrain the deeds by which outward decency would be endangered and undermined. In maintaining civic righteousness the government is not interested in motives as such, in their spiritual value, but merely insofar as motives promote certain outward deeds and restrain others. Thus also the Augsburg Confession states that civil authority does not defend the soul but bodies and bodily possessions with the Sword and bodily punishment in order to preserve civil justice and peace (Triglotta 84,11). Civil authority is for example to keep people from stealing the possessions of others. He, who desists from stealing, be it from the motive of fear, of pride, of reward, or out of true fear and love of God, meets the demand of civic authority and thus the demand of civic righteousness. He who does steal falls short of these demands. The government may consider extenuating circumstances and exercise leniency when dishonest deeds are perpetrated in extreme need, in ignorance, or under duress, but it does so only because deeds of dishonesty committed under such circumstances are not as great a threat to peace and order. On the other hand, government may also punish clear and manifest intent to defraud even though the intended deed was frustrated before completion. It does so because the condoning of intent to defraud when it manifests itself in carefully made plans would endanger the safety of human property, while punishing such intent discourages acts of fraud. The state may also enlist motives to encourage and stimulate honesty and integrity: the motive of reward by extending positions of trust, power, influence, and rich financial remuneration; the motive of fear, that crime does not pay; of benefit, that honesty is the best policy; of pride and of patriotism.

God has, however, not merely ordained civil authority to maintain civic righteousness; He has at the same time left natural man, though corrupt in sin, the ability to show an understanding for such authority, the ability to see its necessity and usefulness, the ability to establish it and to make necessary and appropriate laws and ordinances, and finally the ability to render in a measure the civic righteousness which it demands. Our Lutheran Confessions sum up this ability of man as “human reason,” meaning the full scope of the abilities that Scripture ascribes to natural man and which are sufficient unto these ends.

This is, first of all, a measure of ability to distinguish in purely earthly and secular affairs between that which is beneficial and that which is detrimental. Out of this ability the smaller and larger human communities set up adequate police regulations: health rules, sanitation ordinances, traffic laws, building codes, banking rules, trade statutes, zoning regulations, tax measures. That human reason is sufficient for this is evident from the fact that Scripture bids the Christian to submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake without prescribing what these ordinances should be (1 Peter 2:13).

Included in the natural endowment of man which we sum up under human reason and which promotes civic righteousness are also certain natural impulses and emotions. There is the impulse of self-preservation. Man realizes that in satisfying it he is largely dependent upon others and must cooperate with others, that in many ways he best serves himself by serving others. Then there is the natural love between parents and children, between husband and wife; there is the affection of human friendship, the patriotic love of country; there are the sympathetic feelings towards fellowmen in misery and need. These emotions and impulses as they manifest themselves in the unregenerate and lead them to action are something different from love as a fruit of the Spirit, from love toward our fellowmen, which flows out of faith-born fear and love of God. Hence they also have no spiritual value in God’s sight. Yet Scripture recognizes them as real, often incidentally, in drawing comparisons with spiritual realities. We shall mention only a few instances. “If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? ... If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” (Luke 11:11,13) “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she shall not have compassion on the son of her womb?

Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee”(Isaiah 49:15). “Greater love hath no man, than that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). In extolling Christ’s supreme love that He died for us while we were yet sinners Paul states by way of comparison that peradventure for a good cause some would even dare to die. Jesus in pointing out that a believer is moved to love even his enemies says: “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?” Also when Jesus earnestly rebuked the weeping daughters of Jerusalem for the tears of impenitent worldly sorrow, He did not deny that they were really stirred to human sympathy in seeing His innocent suffering and shame. These tears were an expression of natural human aversion for everything painful and disagreeable. God uses these natural impulses and emotions in maintaining a measure of civic righteousness.

When we speak of human reason, we furthermore include the ability to discern in a measure, as far as outward deeds are concerned, what is morally good and evil. This ability comes from the inscribed law. Included also is a realization of the divine authority of this inscribed law, a realization of man’s accountability before God to act according to this inscribed law.

St. Paul testifies, Romans 2:14,15: “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.” The Apostle distinguishes between three things: the inscribed law, conscience, and a flood of judging thoughts. The Apostle asserts that also the Gentiles, which do not have the revealed Law of God, do the things contained in the Law. He does not say that they always do them, not even that they regularly do them; even much less does he say that they do them properly, so that God’s Law must be satisfied with their obedience. He is not demonstrating that the Gentiles are capable of performing truly good works. In the whole context he asserts the very opposite. He is speaking of outward acts, which men can see and evaluate. He points out that with their occasional efforts, whenever they do the things contained in the Law, these unregenerate Gentiles give unmistakable evidence that the work of the Law is written within their hearts. This inscribed law of which they are conscious is not the result of their speculation, something that they reached after a slow and laborious process of reasoning by the trial and error method. Neither is this inscribed law the result of their experience and observation, a summary of what proved most expedient in regulating human conduct. It does not consist of conventions, which through usage and training have become a custom and gradually acquired the force of law. No, this inscribed law forms the starting point of all ethical thinking and judging. Man did not write it into his heart; he finds it there written by another hand. Paul speaks of the Gentiles doing by nature the things contained in the Law. The same God who created their nature is also the author of the inscribed law; it is God who wrote it into the hearts of men. By their conduct the Gentiles show that they did not make this Law themselves but that it exists independently of their wishes. They may not like it, they may hate its provisions, but it doesn’t yield to their wishes. It is unrelenting in its demands. The Gentile realizes that the Law has authority over him, which he must regard.

St. Paul adds, “their conscience also bearing witness.” Conscience joins hands with the inscribed law in bearing witness; it corroborates fully the testimony of the inscribed law. Conscience is more than an activity of the intellect discerning what is morally good and evil; it is more than a moral function, judging the ethical merits or demerits of specific human conduct; conscience is a religious function. It is a consciousness of God, which confirms the inscribed law as the Law of God and declares the demands of this Law as divinely binding. In performing this function conscience then calls forth the flood of accusing and excusing thoughts Paul mentions. He intimates that these thoughts will be largely accusing thoughts, granting, however, that they may occasionally arise in the defense of a person concerning certain conduct. Every time a person has violated the inscribed law conscience will trouble him and arouse thoughts marked with fear, with the realization that he is at odds with God. The apostle does not say that the conscience of natural man is always correct, just as little as he says that the inscribed law is always correctly understood. When God at creation inscribed the Law, it was a perfectly reliable expression of His Holy will. When God at creation gave man his conscience it was likewise an infallible witness. As man’s entire nature became corrupt through the fall, so did also his conscience and the inscribed law. The inscribed law is blurred and conscience is subject to error. Yet for the purpose of bringing

forth civic righteousness both still function sufficiently, inducing man to accept God's judgment, based on the inscribed law and the testimony of conscience, as just and inescapable.*

Conscience, which bears witness of man's accountability to God for his conduct over against the inscribed law, shows that man has an inborn knowledge of God. This inborn knowledge of God can be deepened and developed by a study of nature (Romans 1:20) and of history (Acts 14:15–17, 24–27). This natural knowledge of God in man goes beyond the bare realization that there is a God; it embraces a consciousness of His eternal power, glory, wisdom, goodness, and righteousness. It is not a saving knowledge of God. In the opening chapters of Romans St. Paul clearly shows that it serves no positive spiritual function but only the negative one of depriving man of any pretext for his failings so that he may realize to his consternation that he is without excuse. Yet this natural knowledge of God together with the inscribed law and the testimony of conscience perform a function in promoting civic righteousness. This endowment enables man to establish civic authority to exercise the function which God would have it perform of punishing the evildoers and of protecting the law-abiding. It enables human government to enact suitable laws and statutes and to acknowledge the criteria of common law and equity as a basis for judging ethical acts. At the same time it leads men to show a measure of respect for such laws and to guide their conduct according to them. In other words, these endowments of human reason do to a certain degree serve to hold most people back from gross crime and vice and to incite them to outward decent living. We need to note the limiting expressions: "most people" and "to a certain degree." Hence our Lutheran Confessions say of civic righteousness that it is rare, that it is never perfect (Triglotta 334,71). These outward deeds when effected in the unbeliever, of course, have no spiritual value before God inasmuch as they are born out of slavish fear, out of the vain attempt of self-justification, out of selfish motivations of pride, honor, and reward. They do, however, make for decency, peace, and good order in human relations. They make for civic righteousness. God is not interested in civic righteousness as such; as far as justification before God and salvation are concerned the outwardly upright and law-abiding have no advantage over the addicts of vice and crime. The maintenance and safeguarding of civic righteousness which God effects through civil authority on the basis of all that belongs to human reason is thus not God's ultimate aim. It is merely a means to an end. God's ultimate aim is the peaceful development, internal growth, and external spread of the church, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty (1 Timothy 2:2); that the churches may have rest to be edified and built up (Acts 9:31).

This is also what our Lutheran Confessions have to say about civic righteousness, its nature and purpose, and how it is maintained. Let us quote from the Apology: "Human reason naturally understands, in some way, the Law, for it has the same judgment divinely written in the mind" (Apology, Triglotta, page 121, 7). "Although, therefore, civil works, i.e. the outward works of the Law, can be done, in a measure, without Christ and without the Holy Ghost from our inward light" (Triglotta 157, 9). "Nor, indeed, do we deny liberty to the human will. The human will has liberty in the choice of works and the things which reason comprehends. It can to a certain extent render civil righteousness or the righteousness of works; it can speak of God, offer to God a certain service by an outward work, obey magistrates, parents; in the choice of an outward work it can restrain the hands from murder, from adultery, from theft. Since there is left in human nature reason and judgment concerning objects subjected to the senses, choice between these things, and the liberty and power to render civil righteousness, are also left" (Triglotta 335, 70). The most striking passage is probably the following: "Now, we think concerning the righteousness of reason thus, namely, that God requires it, and that, because of God's commandment, the honorable works which the Decalog commands must necessarily be performed ... For God wishes those who are carnal gross sinners to be restrained by civil discipline, and to maintain this, He has given laws, letters, doctrine, magistrates, penalties. And this righteousness reason, by its own strength, can, to a certain extent, work, although it is often overcome by natural weakness, and by the devil impelling it to manifest crimes. Now, although we cheerfully assign this righteousness of reason the praises that are due it (for this corrupt nature has no greater good [in this life and in a worldly nature nothing is ever better than

* Both as to substance and language the preceding comments on Rom. 2:14, 15 are largely a summary of the exposition of Prof. John Meyer in "The Natural Knowledge of God and Civic Righteousness," *Quartalschrift*, Vol. 44, No. 4, October, 1947.

uprightness and virtue] and Aristotle says aright: *Neither the evening star nor the morning star is more beautiful than righteousness*, and God also honors it with bodily rewards) yet it ought not to be praised with reproach to Christ.” (Triglotta 127, 22–24).

II. The Spiritual Nature and Function of the Church

Having considered the nature and purpose of civic righteousness and how it is maintained, we now want to dwell on the spiritual nature and function of the Church that we may realize that it is not the function, the direct calling, of the Church to promote civic righteousness.

The Church is the communion of saints, the spiritual body of those who have been brought to faith in Christ as their Savior, whom the Holy Spirit has called by the Gospel, enlightened with His gifts, sanctified and kept in the true faith. When Scripture speaks of the Church, it means either the entire number of such true believers or a smaller or larger group of such believers more or less locally circumscribed. The outward mark by which the presence of the Church is recognized is the use of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Thus the term Church is also applied to those who profess Christian faith in gathering about the Gospel Word and the Holy Sacraments. But they are called the Church only because of the true believers in their midst. Externally receiving or even administering these means of grace does not constitute membership in the Church. What essentially constitutes the Church is the fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in the hearts.

Now the Church as the Communion of Saints, as the spiritual body of believers in Christ, has only one entrusted task and function: it is to preach the Gospel, it is to proclaim the whole counsel of God in Christ to men. The risen Savior told His disciples: “Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47–48). According to Mark 16:15 the Savior before His ascension told His disciples: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.” We have the same commission in Matthew 28:19, 20: “Go ye therefore and teach all nations (more exactly: go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” This is the whole duty of the Church unto the end of time toward all men. The Church and every individual believer, in particular also those whom the Church calls to teach and preach publicly, are by these words which Christ spoke to His believer’s before His ascension made the stewards of the saving mysteries of God. Christ’s Church of believers is to preach His Gospel, the message of remission of sins in His name; all things whatsoever He has commanded us we are to teach to all the world, neither departing from His Word nor withholding any part of it. The entire Word of God, which the Church is to proclaim to men, however, stands in close relation to the central message of pardon and salvation in Christ. In proclaiming any part of God’s Word to men the Church is ever to keep it in close relation to this message and to divorce no part from this message. Only thus will all of its testimony remain a part of the proclamation of the Gospel, the one function assigned to the Church. It is a most sacred trust that Christ has committed to His Church, His believers, putting into our hands the Gospel of grace and forgiveness which He has established with His own vicarious life and death, which He offers to all as a ready gift, and which is the sole light, life, and hope of sinful men. The privilege of this testimony has been granted to His Church exclusively. If the Church does not carry out this assignment and function, no one will.

In the discharge of this function the Lord seeks faithfulness. Faithfulness will move us, Christ’s Church of believers, to proclaim His Gospel in all purity, without any human additions or alterations. But faithfulness also means ever keeping the purpose in mind for which Christ asks us to proclaim the Gospel and not supplanting it in any way with a purpose of our own conceiving. What is the purpose for which the Church is to preach the Gospel? When Jesus first told His disciples to go out into the entire world and preach the Gospel, the number of believers in Christ was still exceedingly small. It was almost exclusively an unregenerate, unbelieving world to which they were to preach the Gospel. The purpose for which Jesus bids them to do so is that of making disciples of all nations. They were to preach the Gospel that through their testimony the Holy

Spirit might bring ever more sinners to saving faith in Christ. Thus the body of Christ, His Church of believers, would be built up from without, in that ever more souls would be added to it. For this purpose, we too, as believers, are still to preach the Gospel to the unregenerate world. With its testimony the Church is not bidden to reform sinners, to induce them merely to lead outwardly decent and orderly lives, but to convert them so that the number of Christ's believers might be increased. With its testimony the Church is not bidden to instruct human government how to maintain a measure of outward peace and order in this world, for which human reason suffices, but it is to make disciples of men in all nations.

Let us remember that the Church is also to bear witness before the unbelieving world through the lives of its members. By leading sanctified lives in the sight of men Christians are to commend the message, which they proclaim individually and publicly; they are to demonstrate and manifest the power and blessedness of the Gospel. Jesus says: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Note the purpose for which men are to see our good works, not that they might be induced to observe outward decency and order, but that they, too, may be led to glorify our Father, and that they can only do after having been brought to faith themselves. Our lives are led in the presence of endless numbers who know not Christ and His grace. If people notice that we can still trust in God even when we are down and out, see that we really gather strength and peace upon prayer, see that we can actually be content with mere food and raiment, some may come to yearn for the God of grace whom we Christians know and on whom we build our trust. If people see us go to church Sunday after Sunday, not in a self-righteous attitude of doing a meritorious deed, but out of sheer longing to hear the Savior's Word—just as if it meant a personal sacrifice to forego this privilege—some may wish to share our experience and likewise seek out our house of worship. If people see that we Christians are less selfish, more considerate, kind, helpful than others, if they notice that the bond between us is very intimate and cordial, some may be led to look for the motivation to such conduct and long for a part in our fellowship. Gentiles once marveled at the unselfish love that reigned in the Apostolic Church, marveled at the courage with which the early Christians bore mockery, persecution, even death rather than to deny their faith, marveled at the grateful contentment with which their life was permeated even in the midst of poverty. Because they marveled many were induced to listen to the Gospel message, which had caused such a unique life and were then brought to faith and to a new life through the divine power of this Gospel.

But the Savior's commission to His Church to preach the Gospel to all creatures, which stands until the end of time, also includes preaching this Gospel to those who have already come to faith. St. Paul speaks of it at length in the fourth chapter of Ephesians and sets forth the purpose for which it is to be done. He does so as he calls attention to the manifold gifts, which the exalted Lord has bestowed upon His Church for the public proclamation of His Gospel. The apostle writes, Ephesians 4:11–16: "... and he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers: for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." We see that it is the spiritual purpose of perfecting the saints, of edifying the body of Christ, His believers. To edify means to build up. The Church is edified, is built up, from within when those who already belong to it are through the Gospel strengthened and furthered in their Christian faith, joy, comfort, understanding, love, and hope. The Christian is built up when through the Gospel he is strengthened in the blessed assurance of faith that for Christ's sake all his sins are blotted out, that he is a dear child of God and rests securely in His fatherly love, that his prayers are acceptable to God and heard, that all things must work together for his good, that a blessed inheritance in heaven, a glorious resurrection unto eternal joy is awaiting him. The Christian is edified when he grows in Christian knowledge and understanding "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, but speaking the truth in love, may grow into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." The Christian is edified when through the Gospel his thankful love toward his Lord and Savior becomes ever more ardent and his child-like awe and reverence before Him ever deeper, so that he is constrained to glorify God ever more fully in all that he thinks, says, and does, so that his words and deeds are motivated and permeated by a faith-born fear and love of God.

Whatever does not redound to the edification of Christ's Church of believers either by adding to their number or by furthering those who already belong to it in faith and life, cannot rightfully be called the function and work of the Church. The Church has no call to seek and to wield temporal power, to take an active part in politics; it is not bidden to be the guardian of public morals, to function as the instructor of civil authority, to initiate and to foster social reform, to promote culture and diversion for leisure time. Neither is the Church to pursue the purpose of fostering pride in its outward achievements, in the force of its numbers, in its position of importance in the sight of men, in the prominence of its members in the affairs of this world. All these things lie outside the scope of the one task of the Church and the purpose for which it is to perform it.

May God lead us to appreciate the grandeur of the function He has assigned to His Church and the blessed purpose it is to serve. We have again celebrated Ascension Day and been reminded that our Savior "was received up into heaven, and sat down on the right hand of God." We know from God's Word what this means: ever since the memorable moment when our Savior parted from His disciples, with hands outstretched in blessing, and a cloud removed Him from their sight, He is sitting at the right hand of God, He is ruling over all things with divine omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and glory. We also know the plan and purpose of our exalted Savior according to which He is guiding and directing all things with divine power and wisdom. When Joseph exercised sovereignty in Egypt, he used his royal power and position in the interest and for the benefit of his brethren. Thus Christ our Savior governs and directs all things for the particular interest and well being of His brethren, His believers. Through the Gospel that He has commissioned His Church to proclaim He is gathering, extending, strengthening, and perfecting this Church unto eternal life.

When a large and costly building is being erected the scaffolding that is put up during the construction is often very elaborate. Judging from the material used, judging from the labor and care that is devoted to putting it up one might easily come to think that it was meant to be permanent. Especially one who did not know what was being built, one who did not understand the plans, might easily be led to consider as of primary importance something that is only a part of the scaffolding, and at the same time be led to regard as insignificant some smaller item which is to be put into the building itself. The heavy timbers or the steel frames which serve the workmen in putting an item of adornment into its proper place might easily appear more significant to him than the smaller piece of permanent decoration itself. When the building is finished, however, everything that was a mere help and tool, regardless of size and value, is then thrown away: but everything that went into the beautiful building itself remains.

Thus Christ is now building the holy temple of His Church, building it for all eternity. Everyone, be he humble or renowned, who through the Gospel is brought to saving faith becomes a part of this building, and all that the believer does out of faith through the Gospel's power becomes a part with Him in this temple. Under Christ's wise and almighty guidance all things must in some way serve this plan and purpose, all civic righteousness maintained by civil authority through the light of human reason, all wars and disasters, all political and social upheavals, even the wicked activities of the ungodly as a needed chastisement for the Church. Yet those who remain without faith are, with all that they do, but apart of the scaffolding which the Lord employs. When Judgment Day breaks, Christ's holy temple will be complete. Then all that was mere scaffolding will be taken away and thrown into the fire of eternal judgment. Only those who through faith were built as living stones into the Lord's temple will remain to glorify Him eternally. Seeing things from this viewpoint we shall be ready to have the Lord use even the heavy hammer of adversity and the sharp chisel of sorrow whenever He finds them necessary for putting us with His Gospel in a true and abiding faith into His eternal structure. It will encourage us as believers to use our gifts, our time, our strength, and our means to help build up that which alone shall remain for eternity. It will move us to keep the true function of the Church single-mindedly before our souls.

There is one more thing we want to unfold before we close our consideration of the spiritual function of the Church. In the interest of winning sinners to faith and of perfecting them in faith the Church is also to preach the Law, God's holy will, to all men. Our Lutheran Confessions, therefore, have much to say about the Law. The Formula of Concord in its Thorough Declaration, Article 6, of the third use of God's Law states that the Law is useful in three ways: (1) "that external discipline and decency are maintained by it against wild,

disobedient men; (2) that through it men are brought to a knowledge of their sins; (3) that, when they have been born anew by the Spirit of God, converted to the Lord, and thus the veil of Moses has been lifted from them, they live and walk in the Law.”

Let us consider first the usefulness of the Law for the Churches testimony to the unregenerate, those who have not yet come to faith. The use, and the only use, that can come into consideration is the second one, that through it men are brought to knowledge of their sins. The Gospel the Church is to preach to lost sinners, so that they may be brought to faith, is the message of gracious pardon and salvation through Christ Jesus. Yet this message is meaningless and without appeal unless the sinner fully realizes that he is utterly lost and condemned in his sin and guilt. As we study the earthly ministry of our Lord and consider the various instances in which He dealt with people who did not as yet believe in Him, we find that He ever used the Law to awaken knowledge of sin and condemnation. To the lawyer who asked what he should do to inherit eternal life Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan portraying true love toward the neighbor. Why? That it might serve him as a guide and a rule? No, Jesus did so because this man gave a fine enough summary of the Law and yet hoped to justify himself. The Savior’s parable was to show him that he had not really loved his neighbor as himself. Only to His disciples did Jesus unfold the Law as a guide. Or take the rich young ruler who had used the Law as a curb and led an outwardly decent and upright life. Did Jesus finally tell him to distribute his goods unto the poor that he might raise to even greater heights of civic righteousness? No, Jesus sought to show him that he really loved his possessions above all things and could not inherit eternal life by his works. We will look in vain for instances where Jesus used the Law to promote mere outward decency and order. St. Luke tells us that when “one of the company said unto Him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me” Jesus “said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?” This did not belong to the Savior’s work. Also the Church, through whom the Savior now continues His prophetic office, can use the Law for only one purpose in its testimony to those who have not yet been won for Christ, and as long as they have not been won. It is to use the Law to bring them to the realization that of themselves they are lost and helpless sinners. Only thus is the real message of the Church, its message of gracious salvation and pardon in Christ, served. For the sinner must be humbled and crushed before the Gospel can awaken blessed faith in his heart. By preaching the Law to unbelievers for the express purpose of leading them to outward decency and uprightness, the Church would hinder its real work and fall into the role of the reformer. It would contribute towards hardening men in their self-righteousness.

To those, however, who have already come to faith, to its members, the Church is to preach the Law in all of its uses. Because of his flesh, still clinging to him, because of the bitter battle which the Christian must wage with his Old Adam in his daily life of sanctification he must hear the Law as a curb, as a mirror, and as a guide. That our flesh may be terrified and restrained in its evil lusts, we need to hear what God says of the works of the flesh, how He hates sin and punishes sin; we need the warning: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.” Lest our flesh deceive us and lead us to think lightly of sin and thus lightly of the Savior who delivered us from sin and its curses we need to hear the holy will of God that we may ever realize our own sin and helplessness and cling all the more firmly to our Savior and His Gospel.

Finally the Christian needs to hear the Law as a guide for a God-pleasing life. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit has brought him to faith and dwells in his heart; through the Gospel the Holy Spirit continually glorifies the Savior and His precious gifts before the Christian’s soul. Thereby the Holy Spirit fills his heart with thankful love and reverent awe towards his God and Savior and incites him to an ardent desire and willingness to do God’s will in all of his thoughts, words, and deeds. But because the Christian here on earth still has his sinful flesh clinging to him, darkening his understanding and confusing his judgment, he needs to have God’s Word unfold the holy and immutable will of his God so that in every station and relation of life he may express his faith-born fear and love of God in a manner pleasing to the Lord. Thus the Church is to show its members from God’s Word what it really means to fear, love, and trust God above all things, how His Name and His Word are to be hallowed. Through God’s Word the Church is to instruct Christians concerning the God-pleasing relation between parents and children, teacher and pupil, pastor and congregation, master and

servant, employer and employee. Through God's Word the Church is to lead its members to a true understanding of civil authority, which God has ordained, and to a true understanding of its function and of the obligation that rests upon those in authority and upon those under authority. The Church is to show Christians from God's Word how He would have husband and wife live in the holy wedlock He has instituted, what constitutes a chaste and decent life in word and deed, what true love toward the neighbor will do and not do in respect to his life and health, his possessions, his good name and reputation.

To this end the Church is to cast the illuminating light of God's Word upon all the patterns of human conduct and behavior surrounding and confronting Christians at their particular time and in their particular environment. Yet how far is the Church to do this? It can only pass judgment on those things to which it can apply a clear Word of God. It has no message beyond the Word of God. It will not presume to give instruction concerning matters on which God's Word has not spoken, on matters that lie in the realm of human reason and judgment.

In his epistles we see how the Apostle Paul gave guidance for a God-pleasing life. He did so with constant reference to pagan conduct and behavior as it confronted those to whom he was writing. He also took full note of the social order in which they were living. Let us mark that he speaks to the members of Christ's flock and only to them. He told the Corinthians: "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? ... them that are without God judges" (1 Corinthians 5:12). He, however, corrected the wrong impression which some seem to have gotten that as Christians they were now to separate themselves outwardly from all the unbelievers and not to have any contact with them even in the external affairs of life. Not outwardly but spiritually they were to be separated from the unbelievers, have no part in their pagan idols, ideals, and lusts, no fellowship with their unfruitful works of darkness. He exhorted the believers to be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation and shine as lights in the world. As a Gospel messenger of the Lord the Apostle Paul did not consider it his function to advocate or initiate social changes, to abolish the institution of slavery, to change the outward pattern of family life, to bring about a more democratic form of government. Within the existing social order he directed Christians to lead their lives as joyful, thankful children of God and to shun the abuses and vices that commonly prevailed in this social order. He exhorted Christians to love their wives, even as Christ loved the Church; Christian wives to submit themselves to their husbands as unto the Lord; masters to be merciful and to forbear threatening, knowing that they also have a master in heaven; slaves to be dutiful, not with eye service as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; fathers not to provoke their children to wrath, but to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This, however, leads us into the final part of our essay. Let us therefore consider:

III. How the Church in Its God-entrusted Activity at the Same Time Promotes Civic Righteousness

We may first of all mention this: the Church through the Gospel gives its members a motive, the motive of faith-born fear and love of God, which will constrain them to render all that civic authority looks for and has a right to demand in the way of civic righteousness, in the way of those deeds and actions which make for decency, peace, and order in human relations. The more sinners that the Church through its testimony leads to bow before the condemning verdict of God's Law and to accept salvation and a new life in Christ, the more people will there be who for the Lord's sake are constrained to meet all the demands of civic righteousness. In his weakness the Christian, or course, still performs many deeds out of the motives of his flesh, such as fear, pride, and gain; but it is the very function of the Church through the Gospel to help the Christian to mortify and restrain his flesh and to strengthen the new man in him. Now when the Christian according to the new man shuns the gross works of the flesh and shows himself honest, trustworthy, temperate, and chaste in his human relations, works faithfully for his living, provides for his dependents, respects the rights of others, pays his taxes, conscientiously obeys civic laws and ordinances, he does all these things out of faith-born fear and love of God. They are then fruits of the Spirit pleasing in God's sight. They are a part of the Christian's life of sanctification. Spiritually these works of the Christian are therefore something quite different from similar

deeds rendered by unbelievers out of slavish fear, pride, natural self-respect, or for the sake of gain and reward. But this is an evaluation that lies beyond the function and judgment of civil authority. In the earthly sphere of human government the deeds which the Christian renders as fruits of the Spirit and similar deeds which the unregenerate perform as outward works of the Law both alike count as civic righteousness.

Furthermore, we may say that the Church promotes civic righteousness in instructing its members concerning the divine origin and the true purpose and function of human government. Thus the Christian will realize that while in the spiritual sphere he is a member of Christ's Church he is at the same time a citizen in the secular sphere. The faith-born fear and love of God with which the Gospel has filled his heart will constrain him to be faithful and conscientious in all the obligations that rest upon him as a citizen. God's Word, therefore also the Church, does not tell him what these obligations and responsibilities are beyond the general obligation of obedience. The particular government under which he is living prescribes the specific obligations for him. In our own country the Lord has been pleased to have us live under a democratic form of government. The Christian will therefore not only thank God for the earthly rights and privileges which this gives to him as a citizen, but he will also faithfully carry out the obligations which go with it. In a democracy every citizen has a part in the government through his right to vote in electing men to legislative, executive, and judicial offices, and through his eligibility to hold office himself. God's Word does not tell the Christian how to vote and therefore also the Church cannot tell him. Here he, too, must fall back upon his human reason and judgment. He must endeavor to pass judgment on the ability and integrity of the men who seek office and try to evaluate the civic measures which they advocate and endorse and then vote for the men who hold out the best hope of serving the true function and purpose of civil authority under the circumstances. The fear and love of God, which dwells in his heart, will move the Christian citizen to do this faithfully and conscientiously according to the best of his ability and opportunity. He will want the government to carry out the functions for which God has ordained it and carry out his responsibility as a citizen in effecting this.

In this interest the Christian citizen may be moved to encourage certain men to seek public office. With his vote and testimony he will help to put officials out of office who lack integrity and ability. Yes, he will be ready to hold office himself in keeping with his ability, education, and training. Holding any office the Christian citizen will discharge the duties of his public trust so that thereby the general welfare is promoted. He will be guided in his official acts not by Christian principles, not by the revealed Word of God, but by the laws of the land passed and enforced for the purpose of managing the affairs of the country for the best interest of all concerned. As an official of the government he may propose, enact, and execute regulations for the sake of external order and tranquility in the land which as a Christian he could not use to guide his own conduct. As a legislator, for example, he may advocate laws that permit divorce on grounds he could not consider valid as a Christian, laws of which he could never make use himself. For in his capacity as a legislator he is to reach his decisions on the basis of what his reason and judgment tell him will redound to the greatest measure of outward decency and order in a sin-infested world. Thus he may realize that laws granting divorce only on Scriptural grounds would lead to scandalous disorder on the part of many whose hearts are simply not bound in fear and love of God to His Word. Even in Israel, as a nation, Moses was bidden to provide for a bill of divorcement because of the hardness of heart of those who were not true spiritual Israelites. In his capacity as a civil judge a Christian may therefore find it necessary to grant divorces, which in his Christian testimony he would have to condemn. To cite another example, the Christian as a legislator might see fit to advocate bankruptcy laws and statutes of limitation to terminate certain obligations, which as a Christian he would himself have to continue to recognize. This, of course, does not mean that the Christian forgets that he is a Christian or ceases to be one when he is in public office. It rather means that he is exercising civil authority according to the function, purpose, and means, which God has assigned to it. His Christian fear and love of God will incite him to discharge the duties of his office with honesty, integrity, and faithfulness.

All other things being equal we have reason to say that the Christian citizen should be the best kind of office holder. Still, we cannot say that the Christian is necessarily the best public official, because other things are not always equal. To discharge certain public offices for the outward peace, order, and common welfare of men often requires special or even outstanding natural gifts, gifts of leadership, of insight, and judgment in

earthly affairs; it often requires a wealth of experience and a certain type of training and education. All these things may be found in citizens who are not Christians while some of them may be lacking in Christians who are seeking public office. And we saw in the first part of our essay that the outward honesty, integrity, and faithfulness, which suffice for the exercise of civic authority, can be supplied by human reason, even though the motives on which they are based are spiritually reprehensible. Thus civic righteousness is not necessarily promoted by a general appeal urging Christians to seek public office, or by voting certain candidates into office just because they are confessing Christians. The Christian citizen may therefore find reason to pass up such candidates and to cast his vote for one who does not profess to be a Christian. For in exercising his vote as a citizen, the Christian, too, is to use his human judgment to discern who would seem to serve best for the promotion of civic righteousness.

Let us, however, proceed to consider another manner in which the Church in its God-bidden activity promotes civic righteousness. Inasmuch as the church commits all of its own needs and the needs of all men to the Lord in confident prayer, it prays also for the establishment and maintenance of civic righteousness. In this it heeds the admonition of St. Paul, I Timothy 2:1–2: “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior: who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” In keeping with this admonition the Church in its prayer for civic righteousness is mindful of the purpose which such outward peace and order are to serve under God’s provident guidance, namely the purpose of providing a time of grace for men that His ultimate purpose of the salvation of men, of the growth and completion of His Church be furthered. As in all prayers for earthly gifts so also in this one the believers confidently leave it to the Lord to answer it in His own way and at His own time according to His wisdom, power, and grace. Thus the Church continues to voice this prayer even in the midst of war, disasters, and social upheavals, knowing that such judgments also have a wholesome purpose under God.

Finally, we want to mention how the Church in an indirect way promotes civic righteousness even in those who have not come to faith in Christ. This is a by-product of the Church’s God-given activity. It is simply this that the Church through its testimony to sin and grace in the midst of a human community, particularly also through the sanctified life of its members, exerts a marked influence even upon the conduct and behavior, the thoughts and the judgments of those who are not believers or have not yet come to faith. Their conscience is sharpened, and the inscribed law and their natural knowledge of God are confirmed. The faithful testimony of the Apostolic church in word and deed and its growth through such faithful testimony had a remarkable influence upon the social order of its day, eradicating many of its abuses. Not merely the cruelties of slavery but the very institution of slavery gradually died out. For without its abuses it lost its charm. The woman’s position in the home was raised. Infanticide diminished and eventually became a crime before the law. A great deal might be said on this point. This is not necessary, however, inasmuch as it is a by-product of the Church’s activity. Over-stressing it always brings with it the temptation of making it an end in itself for the Church. Let the Church be true to its God-given function, and God will also bring forth this by-product according to His purposes.