

17 Lutheran Theses on Government

By Martin Lohrmann

Introduction

In this diverse world of the early 21st century, we live with a challenging balancing act: how do we claim personal values while also recognizing that other people see the world differently? Is this even possible? In light of such questions, returning to core spiritual and social commitments reveals that we already have strong resources about how to live and work together respectfully.

The following 17 Theses are points for discussion about faith and government. They come from the Lutheran tradition, with the awareness that other traditions also bring insights to this topic that could be great to share together. The title “17 Theses” is a nod to Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, a set of statements about indulgences and repentance that launched the Reformation era in Europe in 1517. While times have changed a great deal in the past 500 years, the need for understanding and dialogue remains just as critical.

Conversations that come from these 17 points might address two themes: first, that we name the values we bring to issues of personal faith and respect for others; second, that we talk about how to live together in a complex time, especially when it comes to our political institutions. We might hit some bumps along the way, but our communities are worth the effort!

The 17 short theses are followed by slightly longer versions below. Peace.

17 Lutheran Theses on Government

1. God created all people to live together in harmony and mutual care. As Jesus said, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”
2. God’s good creation includes the creation of civil government.
3. God-pleasing service happens in all areas of life, not just in spiritual things or church work. For this reason, people in government and public service are doing holy work.
4. Religion and government can be separate but mutually beneficial partners: people live out their faith by serving their communities in their daily lives, while service is a way to share and deepen faith.
5. In a diverse world, faith gives the freedom to serve our neighbors and work for the common good with no strings attached. This is a way of sharing God’s grace, which came to us as an entirely free gift, too.
6. God works through imperfect institutions and broken people, including political ones.
7. There is no single “biblical” form of government.
8. How do we know what good government looks like? The Bible evaluates good government in terms of the health of the entire community, especially the well-being of its poorest and most vulnerable members, often described as aliens, orphans, and widows.
9. Paying taxes is a biblical way to care for our neighbors.

10. Communities can rightfully expect that their taxes, labor, and shared resources are used responsibly. Mutual accountability is part of “do to others as you would have them do to you.”
11. Unjust governments come and go, but not before they cause great—and avoidable—harm to lives and lands. Good government really is a gift and something worth working for.
12. New Testament verses about obeying authority emphasize peace, public order, and protecting the weak from injustice. These verses do not justify or excuse bad leadership.
13. Care for the environment, fair economic systems, public education, just law enforcement, military service, and support for people’s basic needs belong to the proper work of government.
14. Christian freedom does not depend on political circumstances: no government can give or take away a person’s relationship with God.
15. If they discern a serious reason for practicing civil disobedience, Christians can resist civil authorities by being willing to suffer for the truth, not to make others suffer.
16. Rather than imposing our beliefs on others, Christians follow the way of the cross and live out their faith by trusting God, bearing with the weak, practicing endurance, working for what is right one day at a time, and giving mutual strength and encouragement to each other.
17. A loaf of bread is a fitting symbol of government’s blessed reason for being.

Explanations

1. God created people to live together in harmony and mutual care. Jesus affirmed this in the Sermon on the Mount, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12).
2. As soon as people live in groups, some form of governance necessarily arises. In this way, the Lutheran reformers believed that political life is an intentional—not accidental or optional—part of how God created us. As Martin Luther put it: “the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government” (LW 37:364). For Luther, marriage meant not just families but also household-based economic systems like farming, family businesses, and working a trade; similarly, “civil government” for Luther included all who worked in judicial and legal systems, law enforcement, local governments, and other positions of public leadership. Seen in this light, God created government to be a good part of human life.
3. While spiritual work is one of those three “holy orders,” our lives as citizens, families, friends, employees, employers, and neighbors are also filled with holiness and godliness. This is part of what Luther called the “priesthood of all the baptized,” in which all Christians serve God equally no matter what jobs and roles they may have in life. Godly service can happen in so many ways, including citizenship, political involvement, law enforcement, and public service.
4. Instead of faith and politics either having to be the same thing or be totally separate, Lutherans envision an independent but mutually beneficial relationship between spiritual and secular life: people of faith serve their communities in their daily work, while service is a way to share and deepen faith. This happens one day at a time, including those days when it feels like faith and love are decreasing rather than increasing. We can trust that the Holy Spirit makes

good works happen through us just like trees produce good fruit in due season (Augsburg Confession, articles 6 and 20).

5. Jesus' words about treating others the way we want to be treated allows us to extend the self-giving love and grace of God to all people, no matter what their religious or political views may be. We are free to serve others with no strings attached, including our own subtle needs to feel like good, righteous, and holy people.

6. We know and trust that God works through imperfect institutions and broken people. Government doesn't have to be perfect before we get involved; instead, we can get involved in the hard work of shaping good government at any time, especially when things seem most dysfunctional. This is just like how it's always the right time to work for healthy families, friendships, neighborhoods, and so on. Imperfection is not a Christian excuse to disengage: if it were, we would still be waiting for a redeemer.

7. There is no single "biblical" form of government. God's people are never more or less God's people because of the political situation they are in. For instance, the ancient Israelites lived as aliens under foreign kings (sometimes as slaves, sometimes not), as free people ruled by judges, as members of a divinely-sanctioned monarchy, and as exiles in diaspora. Christians have similarly lived in a diverse set of political systems. The form of government is less important than the government simply doing what it exists to do: namely, care for its people.

8. How do we know what good government looks like? The Bible evaluates responsible leadership in terms of the health of the entire community, especially care for its poorest and most vulnerable members, who are often described as "the aliens, the orphans, and the widows." These are outsiders, vulnerable young people, and vulnerable senior citizens. We see this biblical concern in Moses' words in Deuteronomy 15, Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the deacons' care for women and the fair distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6), Paul's words about sharing the Lord's Supper equally among rich and poor (1 Corinthians 11:17-22), and basically the words of every prophet ever.

9. Some form of taxation, tithe or community sharing is part of life together. Each of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—insists that its people pay taxes to governing authorities, as in Genesis 14:20b, Deuteronomy 17:22-29, Matthew 22:15-22, and Romans 13:7. In this way, paying taxes is a biblical form of caring for neighbors.

10. Just as we can have honest expectations for good government, communities can rightfully expect that their taxes, labor, and shared resources are being used responsibly, as when Moses appealed to Pharaoh (Exodus 5), when Jeroboam complained to King Solomon and King Rehoboam (1 Kings 11 and 12), and when Jesus denounced those who "devour widow's houses" (Luke 19:47). Mutual accountability is a key part of life together.

11. Unjust, tyrannical, and abusive regimes always fall and are always wrong, even if they may seem politically, militarily, and ideologically invincible for a time. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia,

and Rome are examples of powerful empires mentioned in the Bible. They come and they go. However, they do a lot of damage to lives and lands along the way, which is why working for good government and confronting injustice is so essential in every generation. At the same time, the Bible praises foreign leaders and people who do what is right, for instance, King Cyrus of Persia (Isaiah 45:1) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Such passages show that good government and neighborliness can take place among people of different religious faiths.

12. The New Testament contains passages about obeying authority like Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. These verses emphasize that peace, public order, and protecting the weak are gifts of God. These verses do not excuse unjust governance or political oppression. Moses, Nathan, Elijah, Jeremiah, Esther, Peter, and Paul give good examples of faithful people who confronted unjust rulers and mob mentalities.

13. The work of punishing wrong and protecting the innocent gives government important constructive work to do. Overseeing fair economic systems, protecting the environment, stewarding natural resources, serving in the military and law enforcement, working for peace, and shaping social systems that provide for people's daily needs and basic safety are proper tasks for government. For Martin Luther, all these things belong to the part of the Lord's Prayer in which we pray for daily bread, since "daily bread" encompasses everything we need to live one day at a time, including food and shelter, clean air and water, fair laws and good leaders (*Large and Small Catechism*, Lord's Prayer).

14. These verses about obeying authority also indicate that the political situation one lives under is not a condition for receiving the freedom, love, and goodness that comes from God: no government or political system can give a saving relationship with God, and no political establishment can take it away. In Reformation terms, this is the Christian freedom that comes from the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is entirely independent from civil government, even though it gets practiced and lived out in local communities. We can trust that God knows the difference between the faith of our hearts and the secular laws that exist to serve public peace and the common good. In the same way, Christian freedom includes the assurance that salvation is not at stake when we live under individual laws or legal systems that we find offensive.

15. There may, however, come times when our consciences insist that something around us is wrong and needs to be confronted. In such cases, the Lutheran reformers used Acts 5:29 as a guide: "we must obey God rather than human authority." These words indicate a willingness to stand up, speak out, and suffer for our beliefs. However, Acts 5 does not give us the right to make others suffer for our beliefs.

16. Rather than imposing our beliefs on others, Christians follow the way of the cross by trusting God, bearing with the weak, practicing endurance, working for what is right one day at a time, and giving mutual strength and encouragement to each other. We follow the one who came not to be served but to serve. While this may not look impressive when it comes to human systems, this persistent care for truth and service reflects the love of God powerfully and effectively. This endurance of the saints is worth praying for and living into every day.

17. As baptized children of God, we are free to work in government—as citizens and public servants—for the good of our neighbors. What else would we do? What else can we do? Affirming both the goodness of government and challenging political structures to do what they were created to do, Martin Luther suggested that the symbol of every government and the sign printed on all money should be a loaf of bread, because government exists to make sure that citizens have what they need for daily life (Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, paragraph 75).

For Further Reading

Martin Luther’s *Large Catechism*, especially Luther’s explanations to the fourth through seventh commandments and his explanation of the petition in the Lord’s Prayer on “daily bread.”

Philip Melancthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, article 16 on political order.

Questions for Discussion

+ What views of government did you learn when you were growing up? What have you learned as you have gotten older?

+ Have you ever thought about government as a part of God’s creation before? Have you thought of good government as a gift of God before? Did Luther’s views surprise you?

+ How might the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) apply to democratic principles and practices in our diverse world?

+ What does Christian freedom mean to you? What does religious freedom mean to you? How might these be related or different?

+ What does Luther’s view of “daily bread” mean to you?

+ Lutherans have a strong view of original sin, which says that people and human institutions are never totally free of sin in this life. How might that impact a Lutheran view of government? What potential strengths or weaknesses come from this view?

+ What kind of political situation would you like to leave to future generations?

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