

Are You Being Served?

October 9, 2016

The Forth Commandment

My generation once said, “Trust no one over thirty.” Now we boomers take AARP discounts and draw Social Security benefits. When it comes to anti-authoritarian politics, however, we boomers are rank amateurs. Rejection of authority is now the norm, elevated at times to heroic status.

Trust in social institutions is at an all-time low. According to the Gallup organization, organized religion, the banking system, news media, and the United States Congress all have suffered double digit declines in trust since 2006.

These institutions deserve such disrespect. The church is racked by scandals. Criminal behavior continues in the banking industry. Media outlets push partisan perspectives in pursuit of ratings and revenue. Elections are driven by money, self-interest and the lust to be elected.

It is therefore challenging to read the Fourth Commandment. “*Honor your father and your mother.*” So far so good. Luther then asks, “*What is this?*” Luther writes, “*We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents...*” We’re still with you, Dr. Martin...but wait for it—“*so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority...*”

Did I just hear a gasp in the crowd? If not, you probably weren’t listening. How are we to treat “our parents and others in authority”? Martin Luther says we are to “*honor, serve, obey, love and respect them.*” Wow.

Here’s the main thought for today. **God gives authority for serving.** Let me repeat that. **God gives authority for serving.**

Because of the tenor of our times, I will approach this commandment in reverse.

Authorities must serve those they rule. This begins with parents. “*Parents should consider that they owe obedience to God,*” Luther writes in the Large Catechism, “*and that, above all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge the duties of their office, not only to provide for the material support of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but especially to bring them up to the praise and honor of God.*”ⁱ

You may recall that Luther sees every family as a house church. Parents are the primary educators in civility, citizenship and faith. Parents have this calling from God.

Authorities must not treat those they rule as conveniences. God gives authority to benefit all. “*Everybody acts,*” Luther writes in the *Large Catechism*, “*as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement, gave us servants merely to put them to work like cows or asses, and gave us subjects to treat them as we please, as if it were no concern of ours what they learn or how they live*”ⁱⁱ

Children are not trophies for display. Employees are not horses to be worked. Citizens are not crops to be harvested. Parishioners are not sheep to be sheared.

God gives authority for serving.

Of course, Luther is not making this up. In Mark, chapter ten, a pair of disciples asks Jesus for the number two spots in his administration. That may be how the world does it, he tells them, but it shall not be so among you. Instead, Jesus says, “*whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:43-45.)

We begin with the good news of the Gospel. God rescues us from sin, death and evil in the self-giving love of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus takes on the form of a slave, becomes obedient to the point of death and is raised so that you and I can live and love in hope and joy.ⁱⁱⁱ The Holy Spirit equips us to trust that Good News in life and in death.

Jesus is the standard for authority in and through the Church. We are the model for how God wants the world to operate. Leading is not for looting or lying.

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If those who govern abuse their authority, there is then reason for resistance. Luther rejected the authority of the popes of his age. They abused the power and privilege of their position. They made poor Christians pay for their expensive habits. They held the terrified consciences hostage as they sold God’s forgiveness almost by the pound.

In such a case, Luther quoted the Apostle Peter in Acts, chapter five: “*We must obey God rather than any human authority.*” Dr. Martin Lohrmann writes these words: “The first commandment comes first. While Christians can and should live according to the laws of the land for the sake of peace and order, this does not mean thoughtlessly obeying unjust rulers and systems.”^{iv}

God gives authority for serving. I could talk for another hour about this commandment. But let me leave you, in good Lutheran fashion, with several theses for your consideration.

1. God works for good through the human institutions of the family, the economy, the state and the church. These institutions overlap but one should not dominate another.
2. Individual freedom, whether political, economic or spiritual, is a good gift from God, but individuals are still sinners and personal freedom must not become a god.
3. Human institutions are good gifts from God, but institutions exist in a sinful world and must not act like gods.
4. Most important, human institutions are for loving our neighbors. It is the gift of faith alone which makes us right with God through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God gives authority for serving. Let’s pray...

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ⁱ *Large Catechism*, par. 168

ⁱⁱ *Large Catechism*, par. 170.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Philippians 2:1-10

^{iv} Martin Lohrmann, *Book of Harmony*, page 85.