

Christians and Courts: A Five-Part Bible Study

Part One :: Setting the Stage

Introduction

Christians are “in the world but not of it” (John 17:14-19). We live in this tension throughout our entire Christian life here on earth. There are many different situations where we see this tension lived in. This study gives attention to but one: how are Christians to view and use our country's legal system? And especially in times of conflict between Christians, what role(s) should the legal system play?

This study has been developed in the midst of the current situation in the ABC District of LCC, where its CEF is insolvent and a process in the Canadian courts has been invoked according to a law called the CCAA. This places the District leadership along with En Charis (aka, the “District Group”), under the authority of Canadian courts as the CEF dispute goes on. This study is not an apologetic for or against the actions of District leadership; neither is it for or against those who might wish to respond through the court system. It examines the Scriptures and gives some suggestions for examining one's own views and actions—questions and issues to consider in light of the current situation, and to consider in a more general way.

Dual Citizenship

Christians, as humans, are citizens of at least one geopolitical nation here on earth. But we are also citizens of heaven, called through the Gospel into a kingdom ruled by God alone (2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Ephesians 1:3-20, Philippians 3:20-21). This dual citizenship often leads to tension for Christians as we try to discern how best to live life as dual citizens.

Two Governments

As Lutherans, we understand that there are different ways God exercises His authority over all creation. As dual citizens, we deal with two kingdoms or governments. We often speak of “the kingdom of the right hand” or “spiritual government”¹, that is, the church. It's the place where God works through the means of grace to create and sustain faith. It's in this place where the Gospel prevails above all, where confession of sin is made and forgiveness is given freely.

¹ Some Lutheran theologians prefer to use a more precise language of “two governments”, preferring to use “two kingdoms” to refer to “the kingdom of light and life and grace, governed by God through the Gospel” and “the kingdom of darkness and sin, governed by Satan”. It might be helpful in this study to use that same language, since we are dealing specifically with civil government rather than the kingdom of sin.

We also speak of a “kingdom of the left hand”, or “civil government”. This is the place where God rules through duly-constituted earthly authority to reward good and punish evil through earthly laws.

Once again, we find ourselves in tension. What relation does the spiritual government have with the civil government? Are they mutually exclusive or do they interact somehow?

Throughout history, God’s people have experienced different situations in regard to this. In the Old Testament, Israel was a theocracy.² It was a geopolitical nation with God Himself as their King. Israel’s earthly citizenship and their spiritual one were intertwined much more closely than ours is today. At the time of the Reformation, the two governments were also bound up together.³ In our own 21st-century North American context, the most popular view is that of the so-called separation of church and state.

So what happens in our own culture today when issues of civil and spiritual government interact? This is a primary question in our current ABC District/CEF situation. Our church—that is, people and pastors together as congregations, walking together in fellowship—organizes itself as a legal entity: Lutheran Church—Canada, which is then represented geographically in Districts, which are themselves legal entities. One of the departments of our District, CEF, engages in transactions largely governed by civil government (or “left-hand”) principles for the sake of increasing the reach of the spiritual government (more commonly described as “for the sake of the Gospel”). When those worlds collide, how do we make sense of it according to the Scriptures?

A comprehensive look at the interaction of “right-hand” and “left-hand” issues in a more systematic way is beyond the scope of this study, as is a more thorough treatment of the intersection of “left-hand” and “right-hand” issues in the theocracy of the Old Testament and Reformation issues. Here we will examine the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, in seeking God’s wisdom in applying them to living under these two governments here and now, in 21st-century Canada.

² At least, until Israel rejected God as their King and wished to have their own earthly king (1 Samuel 8:1-22).

³ In fact, the context of the Reformation cannot really be understood solely with 21st-century North American “eyes”; we need to try to get into that culture to properly understand all that was going on there.

Part Two :: The Two Governments in Scripture

Scripture and Civil Government

Scripture is clear that Christians owe due honour and respect to civil government in that sphere. At the same time, there are limits to the authority of civil government.

Read Luke 20:19-26. Here Jesus acknowledges the difference between “what is Caesar’s” and “what is God’s”. Yet there is no specific direction about what to do when they are in conflict. How can Christians properly give to “Caesar” what is owed while at the same time giving properly to God? How can Christians discern what is God-pleasing in any given situation when Scripture is silent about that specific situation?

Read Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. What are the purposes of civil government? Can Christians rightly say civil government is good? Why or why not?

We can see in those passages that there are limits to civil authority when compared with God’s own authority. How can we determine what the limits of civil government are?

Scripture and Spiritual Government

Scripture is also clear that for Christians, an altogether different kind of government exists. We are members of the church, where the “law of the land” doesn’t rule; it is the Gospel that is primary, and leads us to an altogether different way of thinking and acting in the church than in the world.

We know that spiritual government involves the proclamation of the Gospel through Word and Sacrament. We know that authority is carried out through the office of the keys. For our purposes in this part of the study, we will focus more on the *results* of the means of grace as Christians live in fellowship with one another than on the source and enacting of spiritual authority. It is sufficient for our study that we know this takes place as the means of grace are administered rightly.

Read Romans 13:8-12. In contrast to the verses immediately before these, which we read earlier, what is the primary thing that guides life within the community of the church?

Read Ephesians 2:8-22, 4:1-7 and 4:11-16, Galatians 5:13-15, and 1 John 4:7-22. What are the defining characteristics of Christians’ life together?

Read Philippians 2:1-11. How does the person and work of Jesus Himself impact the life of the Christian community?

Read Galatians 5:22-24. What are the general characteristics of a Christian's demeanor as a result of being a new creation in Christ? How does this manifest itself within communal life?

This passage is also an instance where grammar is especially helpful and can lead to new insights. In English, the word "fruit" is used to refer to both singular and plural, which can make it difficult to tell at a glance which it is in any given instance. It's clear in Greek that "fruit" here in Gal. 5:22 is singular. (And to be sure, we do get a hint of that in English with the singular verb "is", not the plural "are", in listing the fruit.) What effect does it have on our reading of this passage to consider this list a so-called "collective singular" description of the fruit of the Spirit rather than a list of individual attributes?

Part Three :: Rights, Ownership, and Stewardship

Two of the fundamental purposes of civil government are to protect people's rights and to provide a means of redress when a person's or group's rights have been infringed. Are those purposes compatible with our understanding of spiritual government and the Christian life?

What is the Christian view of protecting one's rights?

Read Exodus 20:12-17. These are what we know as the "second table" of the commandments, dealing with our relationships with one another. Luther's explanations to the commandments are instructive for us in this issue. Luther focuses not only on the prohibition of (or commandment *to*, in the case of the fourth commandment) certain actions, but on the positive nature of them; we are commanded not simply to avoid harm, but to actively protect others' interests: property, reputations, etc.

God's command, then, is to actively help protect others' interests. What happens when it seems that protecting others' interests would conflict with protecting one's own interests?

So far we've spoken about "interests". What does protecting "interests" (whether one's own or another's) have to do with "rights"? From a civil government perspective, it's clear that everyone has certain rights. And it's the duty of civil law to protect those rights. Do the Scriptures, including the commandments, make "rights" a matter of spiritual government as well? In other words, are the rights we have as earthly citizens the same rights we should uphold as Christians? Why or why not?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:3-12. How does Paul deal with his rights as an apostle? What is his motivation for dealing with them like he does? Should someone who acts differently than Paul in view of his own rights be commended or be corrected?

What is the Christian view of ownership and stewardship?

Presupposing the issue of "rights" is the issue of ownership. If the courts exist to protect one's rights, there must be a sense that a person in fact possesses a right that can be infringed. In most cases this deals with the concept of *ownership*. So, the thinking goes, if I own something (and it might not be a physical thing; it could also be a more abstract concept like a good reputation), I have a right to possess and use that thing. If you deprive me of that thing, my right has been infringed and I am entitled to seek justice in court.⁴

⁴ One example of how complicated this issue can be in our society is that of *copyright*. Just think of the countless amount of time, energy, and money being devoted to trying to sort out and/or protect who owns what kinds of art, for how long, and who gets to do what with that. To be blunt, it's a complete mess.

Read Psalm 24:1-2 and Matthew 25:14-30. Do Christians own anything? Why or why not? If so, how do we deal with this issue of my rights to ownership? If not, what are some implications of that?

What does it mean to be a steward? What are the expectations of stewards? Are there different expectations for Christian stewardship than in the world in general?⁵

Read Luke 6:27-36. How do Jesus' words apply to the concept of ownership?

Read Acts 4:32-37 (also reference Acts 2:44-45). What was the attitude of Christians towards material goods? How does this compare and contrast with our culture today?

Read Acts 5:1-5. This tragic event happens in light of the previous passage. What was Ananias' and Sapphira's fundamental sin in this account?

These issues of rights, ownership and stewardship find significant intersection of the two governments, and require much wisdom in dealing with them as Christians. As you've now read some Scriptures, take some time to apply those to every-day situations. How do the Scriptures inform them? A couple examples to get you started in thinking: to what lengths should we go to protect and safeguard material items? Does the answer to that depend on the monetary and/or sentimental value of a given item?

The ways in which we answer the questions from this section will inform how we then deal with conflict, especially when it comes to the infringement of rights and issues of ownership and stewardship.

⁵ An example from popular culture might provide an illustration of the tensions of stewardship. In J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings", the character of Denethor is called the *Steward* of the land called Gondor. His own view of his role is more than that of a steward, and leads to conflict. If you're familiar with the story, you could discuss Denethor as a character and the challenges of being a steward.

Part Four :: Christians in Conflict

Though Christians are new creations in Christ, our sinful nature still clings to us. Because of that, it's inevitable that we will find ourselves in conflict. Depending on the nature of that conflict, there may be civil government issues as well as spiritual ones. It can be very difficult to deal with conflict as Christians precisely because we live in tension while we live under these two governments.

Many of the Scriptures we've already read can rightly be applied in conflict situations, though this study doesn't seek to find guidelines or prescriptions for every kind of conflict. We will consider some further Scriptures that speak to conflict between Christians, and most specifically, ones that deal with the intersection of civil and spiritual government.

Two primary texts for this specific issue are Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 6.

Read Matthew 18:15-20. Here Jesus lays out a clear process for conflict resolution within the church, but they also are used more generally in society (at least, the first two steps). What are the steps of that process?

This passage is generally used in private, personal conflict situations, and more specifically than that, in situations of sin. Can it also be applied to conflicts that are more broad (i.e., not just sin, but disagreement in general) and more public? Why or why not?

Then also, 1 Corinthians 6. We'll spend a bit of time with this one since it deals more specifically with the issue of the intersection of civil and spiritual government. First, though, a bit of context: throughout this letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul is addressing themes of Christian unity as it expresses itself in many different ways, or, in the case of the Corinthian church, in how they're missing the mark in many different ways.

We won't take time to study all of these, but we can note a few examples of their failures to live as one body, one family, under Christ: divisions in following various leaders (1:10-17, 3:1-9, 3:18-22); making unwarranted judgments on one another (4:5-8); arrogance (4:14-21); sexual immorality and the refusal to call that to repentance (5:1-8); judging non-Christians (5:9-13), lawsuits (6:1-8); more sexual immorality (6:12-20); idolatry (10:11-15), perhaps most importantly, misusing the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); and wrong ideas about spiritual gifts (12:1-31).

Paul sums up the correction of all of these by showing the Corinthians "a still more excellent way" (12:31): the way of love.

Given our focus in this study, let's consider 1 Corinthians 6:1-18 more specifically. We're not told what are the specific issues, but it's clear that Paul is writing about this issue (and quite forcefully at that) in a way that's consistent with how he

addresses the other issues of disunity we listed above. The Corinthian Christians are conducting themselves here in a manner contrary to the true fruit of the Spirit, not exhibiting the characteristics that we studied in parts two and three of our study.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1. How does Paul react to the news of how the Corinthian Christians are handling their disputes?

Read verses 2-3. Paul reminds them of their great positions within the church and world, that the saints will judge the world and angels. How does he use this knowledge to address their conflicts?

Is there any significance to the fact that Paul is addressing “trivial” cases (v. 2b)? What about cases of greater significance? Should those be covered here too?

With that in mind, note this: Paul first says the saints will judge the world (v. 2a). Then he asks about trivial cases. Then he goes back to a bigger perspective: judging angels (v. 3a). Then he compares that to “matters of this life”. Could Paul be saying that *all* earthly matters are “trivial” compared with the weighty task given to the saints in the spiritual realm at the end times? If so, how does that impact how we apply these verses?

Read verses 4-8. What is Paul’s direction for cases where a Christian has a grievance with another Christian? Does he allow for the use of the courts at all?

Compare this direction with Paul’s actions in **Acts 16:16-40, Acts 22:22-29, and Acts 25:6-12.** (If you have time, it would be good to read all of Acts 16-28 to get the bigger picture.) Here in Acts, Paul appeals to his Roman citizenship and makes use of the civil courts. What are some possibilities for why Paul could write what he does in 1 Cor. 6 and act like he does in Acts 16-28?

Concern for Public Witness

When Christians are in conflict with one another, there is another dimension to consider: the effect of that conflict on the world around us. Some non-Christians might have a misguided notion that Christians should always be nice and get along. Most, though, are probably aware enough to know that even Christians will experience conflict. And there are two issues to consider: what the conflict is about, and how Christians conduct themselves in the midst of conflict.

Issues of Conflict

It’s a legitimate question to ask not just what kinds of things *do* create conflict among Christians, but what kinds of things *should* create it. Not all conflict is inherently sinful. There are examples of conflict between God’s people all throughout Scripture. Some are a direct result of sin and some aren’t. Below is a short list of passages that describe a conflict between God’s people. Read them and discuss the following questions:

1. Was this conflict as a result of sin? If not, what was the cause?
2. Is this an example of a conflict in which a Christian *should* be angry?⁶ In other words, if non-Christians witnessed Christians in conflict over this issue, how would it likely be perceived: honorable, necessary, petty, etc.?

A few passages to consider:

- **Matthew 10:34-39**
- **Luke 12:13-21**
- **John 2:13-17**
- **Acts 15:1-35**
- **Acts 15:36-41**
- **Galatians 2:11-14**

Conduct as Public Witness

Distinct from the issue of *what* leads Christians into conflict, is *how* Christians conduct themselves while in the midst of it, and the public witness that entails (for good or ill). In Part Two of this study, we considered a few general characteristics of Christians according to the new creation they are in Christ. Earlier in Part Four we mentioned 1 Corinthians 5-7 in connection with this. Let's consider a couple other passages in light of this specific topic.

Read John 13:34-35. How does Jesus say all people will know we are disciples? What kinds of specific words and/or actions would lead to this kind of result?

Read Luke 6:39-42. In any conflict situation, we know that no one is completely blameless. We are all sinners. So how should we conduct ourselves in light of Jesus' instructions here?

Read Romans 12:9-21. What specific instructions does Paul give that would especially apply in the midst of conflict?

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12. What is the desired result of honourable conduct in the midst of conflict? (Matthew 5:16 speaks to this same end, in a more general way.) This also speaks to the power of the Gospel; what a public witness there can be when Christians go through conflict, but are able to end it with confession and absolution!

It might be appropriate at this point to step out of "study mode" and pause for prayerful reflection. Of course, that's invited all the way through, but particularly here. It might be appropriate to take some time to do what we have just studied—since it's likely that some personal conflict has been brought to mind, or a reminder of your own actions in the midst of this ABC District CEF crisis—to make confession of sin, to

⁶ A fuller discussion of "righteous anger" is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that there are things that should make a Christian angry. God's call to us in this midst of this is still, "in your anger, do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26).

acknowledge the plank in your own eye, and to hear and/or share a word of forgiveness. One of the beautiful things about studying Scripture is that we're not just acquiring information, but that God Himself is speaking to us. His Spirit is working in us as we dig into His Word, and He's working through us as we confess and forgive sin.

At the same time that confession leads to complete absolution for sin, a wonderful gift from God, there might be earthly consequences for sin. Even when confession and absolution happen, and are perfectly valid, there may be lasting earthly consequences. What are some ways that Christians could give a good public witness in these types of cases?

Though not a Scriptural example, the early church leader Tertullian wrote that he imagined pagans looking at Christians and saying, "see how they love one another" in contrast to how they treated one another (that is, not with love at all). Can you imagine non-Christians today saying that? What are some concrete ways Christians can love one another, even within conflict that might have lasting earthly consequences?

Part Five :: A Specific Situation: ABC District, CEF, and CCAA

Having considered all of the issues above, we need to focus for a moment on one of the specific issues at hand: that the CEF/DIL situation is now before the Canadian courts through the District Group's application on January 23, 2015 for the CCAA process to be enacted.⁷

There have clearly been wide-ranging reactions to the placing of this issue before the courts, and even prior to the Jan. 23 application, there had been discussion about whether this matter should ever come before the courts, and if so, how.

Our task in this study is not to give a defense for any particular person's or group's actions, but to allow Scripture to speak into the process. Below are some questions for all parties to consider in light of all we've studied so far.

- If love is the defining characteristic of Christian community, what does love look like in this situation?
- The Biblical ideal is to not insist on one's own rights but to show self-sacrificial love and pursue the interests of others. In seeking protection under the CCAA, is the District Group seeking a solution under civil government to protect the rights of others or their own rights, or both? In responding to the District Group's actions, is it appropriate to pursue further legal action to protect one's own rights and/or the rights of others?
- To those who find fault with the application of the District Group to the court, how does Romans 13:3-4 apply? Now that the District Group is under the authority of the court, is that a legitimate means to ensure any further bad conduct is prevented?
- There seems to be a general consensus in those who've written about 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 that *motive* is a prime issue in bringing lawsuit. If one's motive is greed, then going to court can be sinful even if legal. If one's motive is honourable, then legal action may be employed in good conscience. How do we determine whether *our own* motives are honourable or not? How do we determine whether *others'* motives are honourable or not?
- In light of 1 Corinthians 6:3-4 and the comparison of heavenly to earthly matters, should Paul's admonishment that Christians should in essence "sort it out themselves" apply in this instance, either to the District Group's application in court or to those who might be considering responding in kind?
- Did the District Group bring lawsuit against the depositors? In other words, does 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 apply in a narrow sense, in a broad one, or not at all? Why or why not?

⁷ The particulars of this process are online, and we will be bold to presume that study participants will have some familiarity both with the conflict and the CCAA process, so no background info is given here.

- Does 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, especially verse 7, apply to those who might be considering taking court action to get their money returned to them? Why or why not?
- Given that the matter is now before the courts, is the only option to respond before the courts? Why or why not? If not, what are the alternatives?
- Given our exploration of the marks of Christian community (and most specifically, the call to love one another), how would sacrificial love now best be expressed, for all of the parties involved?

This is certainly not a comprehensive list of questions. There may be many more, and you're encouraged to add to it. But our task is to apply Godly wisdom from the Scriptures to this difficult situation and to all situations of conflict between Christians. It's my prayer that this study has been helpful to you as you prayerfully consider the complex issues facing our church, and helps to enable us to take steps forward under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Christians will find themselves in conflict in life; it's inevitable. There's also a good possibility of needing to deal with the court system at some point in life, whether it's something that we'd consider relatively minor (like a speeding ticket) or something as huge as the CEF crisis in our ABC District. While Scripture has much to say about conflict, there are not step-by-step instructions for every situation. God has graciously given His Spirit, who calls to mind the word of Jesus as He teaches us, and even more importantly, the actions of Jesus as He accomplished our salvation for us.

As you study these complex issues, may God grant you much grace, much wisdom, and may He lead you to much peace—not just the absence of conflict, but an abiding wholeness, the *shalom* of God here on earth between His people, just as you already have it with God because of His love for you in Jesus.

May God grant this to us all for the sake of Jesus.

This study was developed by Pastor Michael Schutz in February 2015 upon request as an attempt to help all of us who are affected by the recent CEF crisis to seek God's guidance and wisdom as He speaks to us through His own Word. If you'd like to connect with Pastor Michael about anything in this study, please contact him at michaelschutz@gmail.com.