

## SESSION 1: STUDENT

# DISTINGUISH “THUS SAYS THE Lord” FROM HUMAN JUDGMENTS

### OPENING

God bless our native land;  
Firm may she ever stand  
Through storm and night.  
When the wild tempests rave,  
Ruler of wind and wave,  
Do Thou our country save  
By Thy great might.

—“God Bless Our Native Land” (*LSB* 965:1)

### SERIES INTRODUCTION

Someone once said, tongue in cheek, that you never know just how much America is the land of *promise* until you’ve heard a bunch of political speeches during an election year!

It’s not a bad saying. For one thing, it encourages a sense of humor about a walk of life in which individuals can take themselves too seriously. Then, too, it suggests a certain healthy skepticism about political promises.

Christians who are citizens of the United States can give thanks to God for our country, for the precious freedoms we enjoy, and for a system of government that involves us. Although we rest assured in God’s promise that is greater than any political one—that bought with the blood of the crucified and risen Christ, we are baptized into His name; He is our Lord—we do have the responsibility to participate in the political process and hold our government up to scrutiny. And we do so through supporting various candidates and causes, and voting in elections, among other ways.

What you have before you does not constitute a voting guide—this study is not intended to lead you to a particular candidate or the sweep of any party platform. The subject at hand is far from that simple. Rather, this study provides congregations and pastors with a tool that is designed to spark a thoughtful biblical conversation about voting in a democracy. Specifically, it addresses ways in which the Lutheran confession of faith may be applied to political situations in which choices must be made. For example, when approaching a complex subject, we can start by taking a cue from the Lutheran Confessions, which urge us to make appropriate distinctions in the proper places (see Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV 16).

This study consists of four sessions. The first three present key distinctions relevant to our topic—the distinction of “thus says the LORD” from human judgments, of God’s two modes of ruling, and of yourself as *ruled* versus “*ruler*.” The fourth Bible study session will, in effect, end the study with prayer by suggesting areas in which we should repent.

## SESSION INTRODUCTION

During the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that while many in Europe thought *the king cannot fail*, the feeling in democratic America tended to be that *the people cannot fail*. Since the inception of our country, Americans have placed extraordinary confidence in the collective wisdom of the people.

Christians know, however, that people are sinners. As with any subject, including public policy, the people can be wrong, even a majority of them. You too!

Therefore, the first distinction to observe as you seek to exercise responsible Christian citizenship has to do with your basis for knowing what is right and what is wrong. As a Christian, you unabashedly listen to God’s Word. “Whoever is of God hears the words of God,” says our Lord (John 8:47). And while Scripture is given chiefly to “make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” still, “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:15–16). As the psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Yet Scripture does not address every political question, and certainly not in detail. For example: no matter how much you search the Bible, you will not find a list of names of people who are standing for election. Here your human reason has to enter into your considerations—always subject to God’s Word, though, never above it.

Christian citizens should carefully distinguish what God tells us in Scripture from the judgments that we make, even those at which we have arrived within a general biblical framework. It is important to know the difference between “Thus says the LORD!” and human opinion.

## QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Does the Lord know what He is talking about only when He says things that might be considered “religious”? Why or why not? How does Luke 5:3–6 help you to understand this matter? Why is this point important to observe?

**Q2.** What does the Lord say when people try to pass off their own thinking as His Word? What results when people do this? See Jeremiah 23:31–32 and Matthew 15:8–9; compare Revelation 22:18–19. Why should Christians bear this in mind with respect to political matters?

**Q3.** We know we must differentiate carefully between what God says in His Word and what human reason has come up with. Now let's apply this truth to a political issue: abortion. Read the Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Proverbs 6:16–17; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:41–44; and then compare these to Proverbs 31:8. What should be said about abortion based on God's Word? Is there anything more to say, based strictly on human judgment? If so, what?

**Q4.** Here's another political issue: poverty and what should be done for the poor. Rather than debate the issue now, focus on what God's Word says. See the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:15) and Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:17–18; Luke 10:27–37; Proverbs 14:31; James 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:10. What does God's Word say about what we should do for the poor? What else can be said based on human judgment?

**Q5.** Think broadly about your own participation in past elections. For whom did you vote? This is not to ask, *For which candidate did you cast your ballot?* but rather *On behalf of whom did you vote?* See Matthew 22:35–40; Philippians 2:3–5; and Romans 12:9–10. What does God's Word say on this matter?

## CONCLUSION

American Christians who participate in the political process do so as a result of being moved by the love of Christ, who first loved us. Christians go to the polls informed by God's Word and our own best thinking. But we should never forget to distinguish between the two.

What is the role of the church? There's another distinction, for next time.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty and ever-living God, You make us both to will and to do those things that are good and acceptable in Your sight. Let Your fatherly hand ever guide us and Your Holy Spirit ever be with us to direct us in the knowledge and obedience of Your Word that we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.