

BEING A CHRISTIAN CITIZEN: A BIBLE STUDY FOR OUR TIME

This Bible Study uses the Moravian Christian Covenant for Christian Living (MCCL) Section 4: *The Witness of a Christian Citizen* as an outline for the 5-week study. Various bible passages and discussion questions are provided. The resource, *Rules for Respectful Conversations*, is suggested for use with this Bible study.

WEEK ONE: HUMILITY AS A CHRISTIAN CITIZEN

MCCL: 5:29 Our Witness in the World: Love Toward All

We will not hate, despise, slander, or otherwise injure anyone. We will ever strive to manifest love towards all people, to treat them in a kind and friendly manner, and in our dealings with them to approve ourselves upright, honest, and conscientious, as becomes children of God. Together with the universal Christian Church, we have a concern for this world, opening our heart and hand to our neighbors with the message of the love of God, and being ever ready to minister of our substance to their necessities (Matthew 25:40)

Bible Passage: Philippians 2:1—11

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Bible Background

According to Christopher M. Bellitto'sⁱ assessment of Aristotle humility, or good pride “sits between” two vices, “arrogance or hubris and “a belittling sense of being unworthy” or low self-esteem. Unlike what some may think, humility is not “degrading yourself and letting others dump on you.” On the other hand, it is being aware of who we are and what we know, and being willing to acknowledge that we can learn from the reservoir of knowledge around us. Unlike humility, hubris is being “unduly proud and puffed up” being willing to “shame others, even cruelly... putting others down in order to raise” oneself up” (pp. 28-29). People with this outlook on life will hear humility as humiliation or losing at every angle. Not so, says Bellitto, humility is

from the Latin root “humus” which means “of the earth” or “grounded.” Humility then is that virtue which gives us a balanced view of ourselves and our place in relation to others in the world.

(Verses 3—4)

For the Christian, humility is that virtue which invites us to act for the good of the whole, rather than only one’s personal interests. So, invariably, there will be times when our best response to a situation will be to yield to the greater good. This pattern of thought and action is often frowned upon in the current individual-focused American society. The person who charts their course and ‘makes it,’ ostensibly on their own steam, is the model for many.

With this worldview, there is little room for considering others, so my “ethnic group, race, nationality, religion, profession, or some other identity marker” takes priority (p. 144, Bellitto). When this develops into “group hubris,” what results is a kind of tribalistic division where various groups think they have all the answers and are more valued than others. This stance goes against Christian principles and so Paul suggests the preferred route of humility.

Verses 5—8

Humility is the virtue that reminds us of who we are in relation to the rest of creation and to our Creator. Paul describes and recommends Jesus as the model (v. 5) and shares three critical points.

1. V. 6. Jesus was “in very nature God” and thus his actions reveal to us the character of God. In this verse and those following we see that humility and refusal to use power and privilege to advance one’s own well-being at the expense of others are essential qualities, not only of Jesus our Redeemer, but also of God as Creator and Sustainer. To assume human nature in Jesus God emptied Godself of power in order to live in solidarity with us. Jesus did not know and was not able to do on earth that which he could do in heaven. So, Jesus often turned to God the Father or his disciples for help.
2. Vv. 7—8 Jesus was willing to become human or to remove all his ‘credentials’ to greatness to accomplish salvation for the world. It was a critical mission and one that needed total obedience.
3. Vv. 9—11 Humility comes at a cost and exercising it can bring great gain. Jesus’ humility led him to pain, great suffering on the cross, for the salvation of the world. The result is substantial gain for humanity because it opened the door to restoring our relationship with God. It is also the unifier of humanity, all those who believe in Jesus Christ, in one family under God.

Dialogue Questions

- a. What are some of the implications of modeling Jesus’ humility in America and/or your context today?
- b. How far are we willing to go, and what are we willing to lose for the sake of obedience to God?
- c. How are love and humility partners in Christian living?
- d. How can you and/or your congregation incorporate this ideal into daily living?

WEEK 2: WE ARE CITIZENS OF A COUNTRY, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

MCCL: 4:25 Recognition of Civil Authority

We will be subject to the civil authorities as the powers ordained of God, in accordance with the admonitions of Scripture (Romans 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14), and will in nowise evade the taxes and other obligations which are lawfully required of us (Romans 13:7).

Bible Passage: 1 Col. 3: 12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[a] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ^[b] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[c] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[d] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Bible Background

This letter is likely not written by Paul, but certainly contains language and understanding from Paul, especially his letter to those at Ephesus. The letter is likely written to a Gentile audience in a church that was not started by Paul. The section above deals with how to live in communal harmony. The virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience are all needed to live together. Forgiveness is foundational and must be practiced over and over. Love for the other is what binds the community together. Gratitude is a disposition that allows us to offer prayer together to God. Worshipping together (singing, sharing the Word, praying together) is a practice that can hold a community together.

Discussion Questions:

How do we stay in relationship and stay true to our Christian principles when they are opposed by those in our community? What is your sense of the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution (separation of church and state):

1st Amendment of the US constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

What does the first amendment mean to you? Is the US a Christian nation? What does that mean?

WEEK THREE: CIVIL AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY: OBLIGATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MCCL: 4:26 Responsibilities

Considering it a special privilege to live in a democratic society, we will faithfully fulfill the responsibilities of our citizenship, among which are intelligent and well-informed voting, a willingness to assume public office, guiding the decisions of government by the expression of our opinions, and supporting good government by our personal efforts.

Bible Passage: Romans 13:1-7

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, **4** for it is God's agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority^[a] does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. **6** For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's agents, busy with this very thing. **7** Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Biblical Background: The book of Romans is attributed to Paul and thought to be his final writing; one in which he tries to sum up all of his thoughts on God, Jesus, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the present Roman culture. In this passage he assumed, like most of his day, that there must be some semblance of civic authority. It is necessary for an ordered world. But we see from Paul's other writings that he knows there is a greater authority, one he has been faithful to and gotten jailed as a result, and that is Jesus Christ. So this passage may act as "in the best circumstance" kind of passage. If all is well, yes, behave and obey communal law. Sometimes civic authority is taking the place of private vengeance (Romans 12:14-21) "do not repay evil with evil" (or "do not take the law into your own hands"). In this way, obeying civic authority can lessen potential harm and violence.

Bible Passage: 1 Peter 2:13-17

13 For the Lord's sake be subject to every human authority,^[a] whether to the emperor as supreme **14** or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. **15** For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. **16** As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. **17** Honor everyone. Love the family of believers.^[b] Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Biblical Background: It is believed that this letter is written as the Christians were starting to endure great persecution, but before that worst time. It is earlier than the book of Revelation. The writer is writing as if they are the apostle Peter and they believe that Peter would share their point of view. We believe the purpose of this book is to encourage Gentiles who have chosen to follow Jesus and who are suffering the rejections of their communities and even their own families. Some Christian values/behavior/beliefs were understood by the general society to be anti-Roman culture and society. One can and should show honor to another and one should do what is right. But as servants to God, the family of believers are given a freedom (from societal law?) to do God's will. It is complicated.

Discussion Questions:

Are our elected leaders instituted by God?

Definition of Christian Nationalism: identifies a human government with God's will and seeks privilege for Christians for that state or "a commitment to combining Christian and American identities tied in with white supremacist ideologies" (from 12th Partial Report Church and Society)
What is the role of the church in national politics? How do we define well-informed voting? Would you run for office? How do you express your political opinions in ways that can be heard?

How does Christian Nationalism and the First Amendment inform each other? At our last Synod (2023 MCNP) we, joining our Episcopal and Lutheran full communion partners rejected Christian Nationalism which supports racism and white supremacy (Resolution #56). How can we live this out?

WEEK FOUR: CHRISTIAN LOYALTY AS A CITIZEN

MCCL: A Higher Loyalty MCCL: 4:27

Though giving our loyalty to the state of which we are citizens, we do recognize a higher loyalty to God and conscience (Acts 5:29).

Bible Passage: Acts 5:29-32

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.^[a] ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Bible Passage: Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come,

you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

Bible Passage: Acts 10:34-35

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness^[a] is acceptable to him.

Biblical Background: The book of Acts speaks of the movement of the Holy Spirit among Jesus’ first followers. This movement invited followers to live more fully in the community of God’s purposes and values. This movement created tension. This tension was between living faithfully as residents in the Roman Empire or faithfully as members of God’s community. The early followers proclaimed a new and different understanding of God’s life in Jesus Christ. This new life in Christ formed communities where social norms were not observed between men and women, rich and impoverished, and across ethnic lines. Into this conflict leaders in the Jesus movement say clearly our ultimate allegiance must remain with God.

In the Gospel text Jesus speaks to what this allegiance to God looks like in daily life. Feeding the hungry, visiting the sick or imprisoned, welcoming the stranger are actions that can violate or run contrary to state allegiances. These practices certainly created trouble for Jesus and his followers and will for us today. These tensions continue and we need to be clear about where our loyalties ultimately land.

Discussion Questions:

How have you remained loyal to your faith in your political choices? How have you seen others do this? Sometimes politicians will run on a “Christian” platform based on one or two stated Christian ideals. What would it look like if Jesus ran for office? What would some of his policies be? What platform would he run on? Would he get elected? Can you think of any politicians (dead or alive) who have gotten close to a Christian platform as you think Christ might define it?

WEEK FIVE: BEING A PEACEMAKER AND A PROPHET:

MCCL 4:28 Peacemakers

For the sake of the peace which we have with God, we earnestly desire to live peaceably with all people and to seek the peace of the places where we dwell.

Bible Passage: Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly;^[a] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God,^[b] for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Biblical Background: Paul offered this letter to the church community in the city of Rome. It is a letter of encouragement to cultivate a community authentic to the teachings of Christ in how they treated each other. This particular text from Romans also lifted up the importance of this early church’s witness. How they treated each other communicated volumes to the larger community around them. How they interacted with others be that enemy, stranger, or friend was to reflect Christ. Their life as a church community was to be an example of peaceable living. In addition, developing a community grounded in peace, forgiveness, and compassion offered a prophetic voice in the city of Rome. Through word and action, the early church community highlighted an alternative way of being community in a world broken by violence, poverty and division.

Discussion Questions:

We earnestly desire to live peaceably with all people. What are ways you can keep the peace and still demand justice? Can the examples of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Dietrich Bonhoeffer give us guidance? Can you name other examples of peacemakers and prophets? What does it mean to live peaceably when you can identify oppression within a system? How do you live peaceable and speak prophetically?

ⁱ Bellitto, Christopher M, *Humility: The Secret History of a Lost Virtue*. Georgetown University Press, 2023.