



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 1

Faithful Citizenship: An Adult Lenten Study

From Individualist to Faithful Citizen

Introduction to the Study

Lent is the church season between Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. It is a time in the church year of repentance, recommitment, and introspection as we reflect on our walk of discipleship and seek to be more faithful.

Lenten devotion often focuses on the personal: *I* need to grow in this and that. *I* need to make amends and try again. *I* need to give up this certain food, or this habit, to focus more faithfully on God.

This individual focus is very appropriate! But this study is a different kind of Lenten devotion. We will focus on our citizenship responsibilities as disciples, on pressing social issues disciples should care about. We will consider Lent as a time of growth in community outreach and in our social vision. We will look at ways to grow in a very socially minded kind of faith as “faithful citizens.” What a sorely needed topic in today’s chaotic world!

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity,

to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4:11–16)

This familiar biblical passage helps us reflect on the relationship between our spiritual life and our sense of service. Paul speaks here of equipping “the saints for the work of ministry,” and by “saints” he means people who are saved by Christ and called to show Christ’s love through service in the world: in other words, you and me, and many others like us! One of the main purposes of the church, then, is to help people discern their call to service and to understand more deeply their gifts within the body of Christ (Rom. 12:6–8, 1 Cor. 12:4–20). Accordingly, many churches offer programs to help people identify their spiritual gifts, channel their volunteer time in parish and community service, and hopefully gain a sense of purpose as they serve God.

Serving within the church is important, necessary, and rewarding. Sometimes, however, adult faith development gives short shift to what we could call a “public component.” The Ephesians passage refers to growing up into Christ, and we know that Christ himself had an active public ministry, teaching and serving people, and crossing literal and figurative boundaries in order to serve. How does our faith help us serve? How does our faith form our judgments about society? Do we feel any sense of responsibility for or solidarity with persons of a lower income level, with persons who are sick, or with persons in other countries? How do we perceive God’s guidance and calling in things like civic and social responsibilities?

Overwhelming Problems

Unfortunately, the world is filled with needs that no single one of us could ever begin to address. For instance, the National Council of Churches has published “A 21st Century Social Creed,” calling attention to the earlier Social Creed a century ago, in 1908. The twenty-first century creed affirms “a vision of a society that shares more and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms.” In offering a vision of a just world, the creed cites world problems such as forced labor, inadequate wages, disparities between the rich and the poor, the unsustainable overuse of the earth’s resources, unclean air and water, and the need for more multilateral diplomacy to deal with international problems.¹

Similarly, the bishops of The United Methodist Church noted in a recent statement that our contemporary world faces a “storm” of interrelated forces. Among issues of poverty, for instance, we find economic “systems built upon self-interest and fraud”; a “resource crisis” wherein energy, water, and food are scarce; a “justice/poverty crisis” where the gap widens between rich and poor; a “global health crisis” where preventable diseases such as malaria, TB, and HIV/AIDS are related to poverty; and also a “refugee crisis” wherein millions of people become displaced. Among pressing environmental issues, we recognize “the energy crisis” of heavily tapped oil reserves, the “climate crisis” of greenhouse gases, and the “biodiversity crisis” of plant and animal extinction. Among other social issues we

discover the “weapons crisis” of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; the “small arms crisis” of 639 million light weapons and small arms circulating in the world, as well as the illegal small arms trade; and also the “security’ crisis” of increasing global military spending, half of which is spent by the United States.² The bishops note that these threats are so interrelated that making progress on any single issue is difficult: “We find ourselves overwhelmed by complex webs of brokenness: injustice against migrants, resource scarcity elevated to warfare, energy crises, environmental racism, economic globalization, and violence against the most vulnerable, especially women and girls.”³

And yet problems such as these need not discourage us but instead can and should awaken us to public, caring aspects of Christian faith. As we learn about global challenges, we should also learn theological truths from Scripture and tradition. Those truths, in turn, provide us insight about God and God’s world, as well as sustenance for our ongoing Christian growth and ministries. The resource you are now reading aims to help us grow in socially conscious kinds of faithfulness. A generation ago, one large empirical study, to be quoted in our final session, concluded that church members who become active in public life most often share three characteristics: a strong hope for social justice, support by a cluster of a few friends who sustain them against public disappointments, and a willingness to stay in public life long enough to learn the skills and the ups and downs of citizen effort. All three characteristics can be decisively cultivated in the community of a local congregation of Christians.⁴

Audacious Openness

Christian ethicist Eric Mount is author of *Covenant, Community and the Common Good: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Mount speaks of faith as “audacious openness,” a phrase that describes Abraham’s faith. Openness need not be a passive activity in which we ignore risks. Mount reminds us that we need openness whenever we take a risk: for instance, getting an education is taking the risk that learning new things and being influenced by other people are good things. “So too openness to the transforming power of God’s Spirit and to the transforming possibilities of genuine dialogue and interaction with people different from us (in

race, ethnicity, class, religion, political ideology, nationality or sexual orientation) is an act of faith.”⁵

This openness is entirely biblical. Abraham is a notable example. He is audacious in pleading with God to spare Sodom. Jacob is audacious in demanding a blessing from the strange visitor who wrestles him, as is Moses in convincing God to change his mind and not destroy the Israelites. The biblical people who make a big impact are the ones who do not have a submissive, obsequious relationship with God; they have *chutzpah* with God! For Mount, an audacious faith in God implies an audacious openness to other people, because God’s Spirit, in transforming us as Christians, also opens us to new kinds of interactions with people. “This openness is not simply tolerant of the other [person], or receptive to encounter by difference; it is audacious. Its hospitality is daring. It is not docile obedience; it is courageous engagement.”⁶

In Genesis 18, we find the story of a divine appearance to Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham was approached by three strange men whom he welcomed. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant” (Gen. 18:3–5). He ordered Sarah to make a fine meal for them and offered them further assistance.

This is a wonderful story to illustrate and encourage an audacious attitude toward others. What if Abraham had seen the three men and said to himself, “I don’t care. I’m taking care of my own business.” Instead, he was hospitable to the travelers—and, indeed, entertained angels (Heb. 13:2). Soon they announced that he and Sarah were in God’s own presence and that Sarah, despite her age, would give birth to a son, ensuring the promise of a new nation and people.

Openness to other people is a civic virtue because we live in communities and societies, and, in turn, we have certain responsibilities toward the common well-being. Several years ago, William J. Bennett popularized the importance of character education with his anthology *The Book of Virtues*. The notion that virtues—habits or

dispositions that we learn from one another—can transform society has gained credence. We often learn and cultivate these virtues within our individual lives, our family life, and our own church life. But these virtues, in turn, lead us beyond our individual, family, and even church life to include our responsibilities to the wider public world. So for Mount, religious communities are essential nurseries for civic virtue, as are our families, schools, neighborhoods, and the natural environment.

The notion of civic virtue is “filled out,” as it were, with Mount’s three interrelated concepts: covenant, community, and the common good. These are by no means new ideas but are foundational for ethics and society back to the Israelite’s theology of covenant and to ancient Greek conceptions of citizenship. Let’s look at those three concepts.

Covenant, Community, and Common Good

This six-session study will discuss the challenges of civic virtue using three concepts from the Christian tradition—covenant, community, and the common good. One of the greatest strengths of American culture is also a potential weakness—our tradition of individualism. We Americans cherish our individual freedoms and become upset when, for instance, we perceive that government is interfering in our lives or threatening our personal values.

On the other hand, the preamble to our Constitution affirms the need for justice in society, domestic peace, security (“common defense”), and the promotion of “the general welfare.” Although the blessings of liberty are individual, they are secured through a concern for the common good. Faithful citizens must balance excessive individualism with ideas about how to think and act responsibly in our national society and also in our global society!

Covenant. The Latin word for covenant is *testamentum*. Think of Christians calling the Hebrew Scriptures the Old Testament (covenant) and the New Testament

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(the new covenant in Jesus Christ). In turn, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. The Bible is a long book about covenants.

Covenant versus Contract

Eric Mount draws a helpful distinction between a covenant and a contract: A contract constitutes an alliance of individuals for the satisfaction or guarantee of mutual interests; a covenant unites people with common allegiance to shared values or norms in a commitment to the long-term well-being of the community members. Contracts tend to be minimal, short term, and presumptive of little or no community bonding. Covenants presuppose community, lasting commitment to the other's total well-being, and the assumption of obligations to each other and to shared values that change one's life.*

*Eric Mount, "Covenant, Community, and the Common Good: A Tale of Two Americas," *Church & Society*, May/June 2005, 21.

In the Bible, God is quintessentially a covenant-making God, establishing agreements with people through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. God's covenants involve an expectation for the people, but also the people can expect care and blessing from God. At different times over the centuries, the divine-human relationship was strained, but people like the prophets spoke for God and called the people back into covenant relationship.

Christians later interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus using the frame of covenant. Weekly worship, which stands at the heart of Christian faith, ritually reenacts our covenant in Jesus Christ, with the Eucharist (Lord's Supper or Holy Communion) serving as the celebration of Christ's covenant with the faithful. "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant" (Luke 22:20). Covenant lies at the heart of our faith, and it is a gift.

Community. Community is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing many sizes of groups and transcending face-to-face encounters. The Greek word *koinonia* is a transliterated word meaning **community**, "fellowship," "communion," or "participation." It is used several times in the New Testament. With the

growth of the internet and social networking sites, we are more connected in community with one another than ever before. But it's important that we think about community in comparison to the "individual."

Our individual rights are set in the context of community needs. I can't shoot a person at will, but can't I protect my home against an intruder? Car insurance is required by law, but should I be required to have health insurance? Such questions arise when we try to balance individual freedoms with the well-being of others. The balance can be tricky!

Being aware of community is also being sensitive to the many ways we're dependent on other people. Think about it: from the moment we are born, we are surrounded by people who care for us and are concerned about our well-being. We eat food that has been butchered or harvested by others. We do not make our own clothing but purchase clothes made by other people in our own country or overseas. We depend on the skill of medical people when we're sick or when we're maintaining our health. We receive education from many people. We are dependent on and a part of a global community, whether we recognize it or not.

Common Good. The rights of the individual are affirmed in the Declaration of Independence, but **the common good** and "the general welfare" are affirmed in the preamble of the Constitution. They are two sides of the same coin.

John Locke gave us one important tradition, the God-given rights of the individual. But the Puritans give us another tradition that helps us think about the common good. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr points out that the idea of covenant and social contract, based on common interest, was the dominant idea in the minds of Americans from the colonial days until the early 1800s. What Lincoln expressed as government of, for, and by the people under God is a dual sense of responsibility to God and to one another.⁷

The Roman Catholic tradition, too, has placed the common good at the center of its ethics, as illustrated in the U.S. Catholic bishops' recent pastoral letter on the economy, *Economic Justice for All*. The letter defends social policies that increase employment opportunities for everyone, reduce poverty, and render the food and agricultural sectors more fair to

small farmers. Underlying their call to action is the idea of basic human rights. Full employment should be guaranteed because our work builds up the common good.

Our Churches Open to Others

Concepts like covenant and common good can be acted out in our congregations, which are communities that live and behave based on shared understandings and core values.

Churches of any size can become wonderful examples of openness to different kinds of people. A United Methodist Church in Gravois Mills, Missouri, is small in membership yet twice helped with hurricane relief efforts. The church also serves Wednesday community dinners that provide an extra meal for students who get free breakfasts and lunches at their schools. Another small congregation, Oakhurst Presbyterian in Decatur, Georgia, works intentionally to have congregational membership reflective of the racial diversity of the area. They have also developed a ministry that addresses the problem of predatory lending in their community.

Think about your own church or churches in your community. How is faithful citizenship practiced that reflects covenant and community and that promotes the common good?

Looking Ahead

This first session has introduced several concepts: individualism, covenant, and common good. The common thread is this: Christians should think deeply about their role as citizens in American life. We can question whether the notion that individualism—the lone individual seeking self-fulfillment and personal well-being—should stand at the center of our ethics and our faith.

In the following sessions, we will look at several social issues, including the economy, the environment, security, and health. We will think about how our faith informs our sense of citizenship in our communities, nation, and world.

Hopefully these lessons will encourage conversations and therefore growth in hope, faith, and trust. Wendell Berry writes that if you honor the other person in conversation, you may not receive an expected answer or an answer you like. “A conversation is immitigably two-sided and always to some degree mysterious; it requires faith.”⁸ Having a conversation puts us in a (hopefully) respectful relationship with another person: in other words, it creates a little community. May Christ be present as we gather in his name (Matt. 18:20)!

Notes

1. National Council of Churches, “A 21st Century Social Creed,” <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/christian-unity/a-21st-century-social-creed>.
2. The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, *God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 2009, 2010), 19.
3. Council of Bishops, 19–20.
4. Donald W. Shriver Jr. and Karl A. Ostrom, *Is There Hope for the City?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).
5. Eric Mount, Jr., *Covenant, Community, and the Common Good: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 136.
6. Mount, 136.
7. Mount, 9–11.
8. Wendell Berry, “Nature as Measure,” *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 209.

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