

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview:
Circuit Rider Court (15–20 minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goal

Students practice applying common law principles, weighing fairness in decisions, looking for potential restitution, following precedent, and seeking justice instead of simply following rules mechanically.

Instructions

1. Divide students into groups of 3–5. Each group becomes a traveling “circuit court.”
2. One student is the judge, one the accused, one the victim, and the others are advisors/witnesses. (Students take turns playing the different roles.)
3. Read each case aloud. Groups must decide:
 - What is the fairest outcome?
 - Should restitution be required?
 - Does an older precedent help—or should it be ignored?
4. After each case, groups briefly defend their rulings.
5. Give students 12–15 minutes to finish all the cases, and then have volunteers offer their decisions and reasons why as a class.

Scenarios

Note: Answers will vary, but students should generally recognize that (a) justice should consider real harm done; (b) restitution focuses on restoring victims; precedents can help consistency, but should not override fairness; and (d) blindly following bad precedents can continue injustice.

1. **Case 1: The Broken Cart** – A farmer’s wagon wheel breaks after a blacksmith repairs it poorly. The farmer loses two days of work and several chickens escape during the accident. *Old precedent:* “Blacksmiths only repay the direct repair cost, not other losses.”
2. **Case 2: The Flooded Field** – A landowner digs a trench that accidentally floods a neighbor’s crops after heavy rain. *Old precedent:* “Accidents caused by nature are not punishable.”
3. **Case 3: The False Accusation** – A merchant falsely accuses another merchant of theft in front of customers. The accused loses business for weeks before being proven innocent. *Old precedent:* “Only physical property losses deserve repayment.”
4. **Case 4: The Refused Payment** – A man damages another person’s horse and refuses to pay the ordered restitution.

Wrap-Up/Final Direction

After finishing and discussing as a class, ask students these questions:

- Why might common law sometimes lead to fairer outcomes than strict statutory laws?
- When can precedents become dangerous?
- Why is justice more complicated than simply “following the rules”?

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In your group, have one person be the judge, one the accused, one the victim, and the others are advisors/witnesses. (Take turns playing the different roles for the cases below.)

Read each case aloud. Groups must decide:

- What is the fairest outcome?
- Should restitution be required?
- Does an older precedent help—or should it be ignored?

1. **Case 1: The Broken Cart** – A farmer's wagon wheel breaks after a blacksmith repairs it poorly. The farmer loses two days of work and several chickens escape during the accident. *Old precedent: "Blacksmiths only repay the direct repair cost, not other losses."* Keep these questions in mind:

- Is the precedent fair?
- Should the blacksmith pay only for the wheel?
- Should lost income or chickens matter?

2. **Case 2: The Flooded Field** – A landowner digs a trench that accidentally floods a neighbor's crops after heavy rain. *Old precedent: "Accidents caused by nature are not punishable."* Think about these questions:

- Was the damage still someone's responsibility?
- Should restitution be paid?
- How much responsibility belongs to the landowner?



3. **Case 3: The False Accusation** – A merchant falsely accuses another merchant of theft in front of customers. The accused loses business for weeks before being proven innocent. *Old precedent: "Only physical property losses deserve repayment."* Questions to consider:

- Is reputation damage real harm?
- Should restitution include lost business?
- Was the precedent unjust?

4. **Case 4: The Refused Payment** – A man damages another person's horse and refuses to pay the ordered restitution. Questions:

- What should happen now?
- Why did common law use outlawry?
- Would outlawry create order or chaos?