

# Christians, Voting, and Politics

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We recently had an election here in the United States. I didn't vote. Why? Besides the fact, as I have stated before, that even the best choice is still merely the lesser or two or three evils—and the lesser among evils is still evil (see "Voting for the Lesser of Two Evils Is Evil" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/evilisevil.htm>)—another reason I didn't vote is that my real citizenship is not in the United States of America.

## **For Our Citizenship is in Heaven**

Oh yes, I was born in the United States, and for that reason the United States claims me as a citizen. For that reason, I pay the taxes it demands rather than be assumed to be a lawbreaker. But many years ago, I died, and my citizenship in the United States died with me. When I arose to a new life, I became a citizen of another country. "For our conversation [Greek *politeuma*, a word from which we get our word "politics" and best translated here as "citizenship"] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). Paul said something similar in Philippians 1:27: "Only let your conversation [*politeuomai*, referring to their behavior as citizens of the kingdom of God] be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

These references to citizenship had special meaning to the people of Philippi. Rome had granted their city a special status. Everyone born there was automatically a Roman citizen. All Roman citizens were supposed to have one savior, the emperor. This is why Paul, in Philippians 3:20, specifically connected the Philippians' true citizenship with their true Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. In effect, Paul, who was also a Roman citizen, was saying that what really matters is our true citizenship in heaven and our true Savior, Jesus Christ, and these are what must dictate our behavior.

## **Paul, Cornelius, and Erastus**

I know that many people won't agree with the position I am taking. They will point out that Paul used his Roman citizenship when he appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11). They will point out that Cornelius and Erastus held government positions. They will point to Old

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Testament people such as Joseph, Daniel, Daniel's friends, and Esther. They will say that if Christians were to agree with my stand they would lose the "culture wars." I would like to address these concerns.

It is true that Paul used the Roman citizenship of his birth when doing so led to the furtherance of the Gospel, but there is no indication that he ever used it to influence changes in the Roman government. Was Paul's use of his rights as a Roman citizen similar to a Christian exercising his earthly right to vote? I don't believe so. Here's why. Even an ambassador has certain rights and privileges in the country to which he is sent. He can't be subjected to false arrest. Paul appears to have been using his Roman citizenship in the same way that an ambassador would exercise his rights. He used the accident of his earthly citizenship to appeal to Caesar to avoid an unjust flogging (Acts 22:24-29) and to appeal to Caesar's court of judgment (Acts 25:10-11) so that he could go to Rome (which is where he desired to go to preach the Gospel anyway). He never forgot the goals of his true citizenship, and while a prisoner in Rome, he referred to himself as "an ambassador in bonds" (Ephesians 6:20).

As citizens of a heavenly city, neither Paul nor Jesus nor any of the apostles ever tried to change the laws of Rome, lobby against same-sex marriage, or petition the government to outlaw infanticide (which was quite common). In fact, Paul said, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). In other words, while Paul was very concerned with the sins in the church, he did not concern himself with the sins of the world. Why? It was not his world.

Cornelius was a centurion (a military captain over 100 men). We do not know exactly what he did or whether he stayed in the military after becoming a Christian. Certainly, he might have faced some tough questions: would he have followed orders to arrest Christians? Would he have participated in the sacking of Jerusalem? One church tradition says that Cornelius became a bishop in Cæsarea. Another tradition places him as a bishop in Scepsis in Mysia. So, perhaps he did not stay

in the military, but we do not know for sure. Therefore, we cannot cite Cornelius as support for Christians serving in the government or military. He was converted to Christianity while serving in the military, but it is unknown whether he stayed in it afterwards. In Rome, it was likely difficult or even nearly impossible to be discharged from the military for religious reasons. Cornelius' example gives no support for a Christian joining the military after his conversion.

Romans 16:23 mentions Erastus the chamberlain [*oikonomos*—literally someone who parcels out the goods of the house; it is the word from which we get "economist"] of the city. Erastus was a city manager or treasurer (it is not clear exactly what his job entailed) before he became a Christian, and he stayed in that job for some time afterward. First Corinthians 7:20-21 indicates a person should remain in the calling wherein he was called, whether free or slave or whatever. The principle can apply to occupations. God called Erastus while he was the city manager/treasurer. The principle is that he should have stayed in that occupation unless there arose a conflict of interest. Apparently, no conflict had arisen in Erastus's case, at least up until the time Paul wrote (see the next paragraph). This does not mean that someone who is already a Christian should seek such a position, however. Also, some occupations would be obviously incompatible with being a Christian, and would have to be given up at conversion, such as illegal occupations, idolatrous occupations, immoral occupations, or any occupation in conflict with the person's belief, convictions, and conscience. And some government related jobs—such as being a magistrate who meted out punishment—might more obviously be in conflict. In summary, don't seek to change your occupation because you have become a Christian unless a conflict actually arises, but don't seek questionable occupations—including working for the government—after conversion.

History indicates that Erastus did eventually face a conflict that ended in his execution. Ada R. Habershon in *The Bible and the British Museum* says that Erastus the chamberlain of Corinth at Philippi was put to death by Nero about the same time that Paul was executed (p. 4).

### **Joseph, Daniel, Daniel's friends, and Esther**

When discussing the Old Testament, we must remember that Israel was something unique—a theocracy ruled by God. No nation today, including the United States, is a theocracy ruled by God. Also, we are to see Israel as a type and shadow of the church. Therefore, God's

blessing of Israel when godly rulers rose to power is a type of God's blessing the church under the rule of Christ. Therefore, because Israel was a unique theocracy, and because Israel was a type of the church, it is not legitimate to say that because Israelites served in their government, Christians can serve in their national governments. The real analogy would be that because Israelites served in their government, Christians can serve in their church.

But what about Joseph, Daniel, Daniel's friends, and Esther who did not serve in the government of Israel, but in foreign governments? First, we should notice that none of these people were seeking office. All of them simply responded to circumstances that were obviously being controlled by God to place them where they would serve a special purpose in times of unusual circumstances. Two were specifically used to save God's people (Joseph and Esther). The others were used to witness to Gentile rulers (of course, Joseph and Esther also did this). This also would seem to be typical of what today is done by the church, not the state. God calls people who are not seeking Him to witness to the Gentiles and spread a message of salvation to His people. I must also point out that all of these people served other governments at a time when the government of Israel did not exist. Joseph predated it, and Daniel, Daniel's friends, and Esther lived during a time when Israel had been captured by a foreign power. So, there was no conflict of interest.

### **You Can't Vote in the Elections of Another Nation**

I have no more a right to vote in the United States than the U.S. ambassador to France has a right to vote in France. Yes, the United States would allow me to vote because it doesn't recognize my true citizenship. But I know it, and God knows it, and that's enough. Just as the U.S. ambassador to France, while on duty in France, represents a foreign power, so do I, while living in the United States, represent a foreign power. The ambassador to France cannot get involved in local politics. If he tried, he would be faithless to his calling to the United States. Like Paul, I can say, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ..." (2 Corinthians 5:20).

### **Culture Wars**

This does not mean that I have not wished that I could vote on certain issues. I have. But, like all carnal desires, these wishes crop up in weaker moments when I lose sight of the glory of the kingdom I represent and the King I serve. But to vote would not only be a

violation of my commission, it would be misdirecting my efforts. Voting, while not violent, is a form of carnal warfare. As Christians who advocate political activism rightly point out, it is a weapon in the "culture wars." But my warfare as a Christian is supposed to be spiritual: "(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5), and, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12).

An ambassador to a foreign nation must always put his government first (Matthew 6:33), putting aside his own desires (Romans 12:1); he must be a good representative of his nation (Matthew 5:16), and not conform to the world around him (Romans 12:2); he must fulfill the commission from his government (Matthew 28:19); he must make sure he understands his orders (2 Timothy 2:15), and communicate regularly with his king (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Good citizens are active in their government. We just need to remember what government we are to be active in. In the case of a Christian, the government we are to be active in is the government of God.

In taking this stand, I have received criticism. I remember one person writing to me saying that by not voting and becoming involved in politics, I have done nothing, stood for nothing, sacrificed nothing, and have told people to stand in a corner and do nothing against this evil world. This is totally without substance. I have publicly stood for biblical truth for nearly twenty years at great personal and financial sacrifice. What sacrifice does one make by going to a polling place and filling out a secret ballot?

Are Christians who vote being a light to the world, or are they merely legitimizing a corrupt and worldly system? Christians are to be lights set on a hill and on a candlestick. We are not to blend in. I think that Christians who believe they must be active in the politics of this world are confusing being in the world and being of the world. Jesus said, "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as

I am not of the world" (John 17:14-16). We are in this world because we are on this planet and interact with its citizens. But we are clearly not supposed to be of the world. Notice Jesus' words again in John 15:19: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." The political systems of this world will love you if you vote.

I sometimes wonder what politically active Christians are trying to accomplish. Some seem to be trying to establish the kingdom of God in whatever nation they live in. If so, this is the same type of plan that Jesus' disciples mistakenly hoped for before they understood the truth. It is also what Judas betrayed Jesus over when he found out Jesus did not have it on His agenda. It is called kingdom now, reconstructionism, or dominion theology. It is the attempt to try to establish God's kingdom as a kingdom of this world through political action. It isn't going to happen, and it is a heresy because it is not taught in the Bible. In fact, Jesus specifically rejected it: "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone" (John 6:15). It was the carnally minded people who looked for Jesus to establish a physical kingdom. It was only after Pentecost that the disciples realized that Jesus had already established His kingdom in the hearts of every believer. Jesus did not commission us to improve this world. He commissioned us to announce the Good News. He did not tell us to vote for laws to try to legislate evil out of existence. He told us to tell people how to obtain freedom from sin through Him.

I caution all who are caught up in seeing politics as an answer to this world's troubles to take heed that the cares of this world do not choke the word and make you unfruitful (Matthew 13:22). Paul warned, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

At election time, we are told that there are important issues we must take a stand on, and certain people we should vote for. But the Gospel is a "vote" for Christ and it is the only message that will really free people from the issues of this world that enslave them.