



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

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### **Christian, Citizen 1 Peter 2:13-17**

Are you ready to celebrate? This Wednesday will be the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Independence Day, when we celebrate our country's birthday! It will mark 242 years that we've been a nation—242 years since those brave patriots spent a sweltering summer in Philadelphia hammering out our *Declaration of Independence* from Great Britain.

Around Independence Day, we do well to turn our thoughts toward our responsibilities as citizens. Whatever you thought of him as a person or as president, John F. Kennedy's words from his inaugural address still challenge us, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."<sup>1</sup>

As Christians, we have particular responsibilities to the country we're citizens of, whatever country that may be. And there are a number of New Testament passages that help us understand those responsibilities, including the one we just read. So what do these passages teach us about our responsibilities as Christians who are citizens?

#### ***Honor and Respect***

First, as Christians, *we must honor, respect, and submit to legitimate governmental authority*. In our text, Peter told his readers that Christians should voluntarily submit **to every human institution** of government. Why? **For the Lord's sake** (2:13-14)!<sup>2</sup> God's will is that by doing so, they would silence the ignorant accusations that foolish people were spreading about them (2:15).

This was ultimately a matter of bearing a good witness by their way of life. In doing so, they'd really be living as free people, not using their freedom **as a covering for evil**, but rather using it **as bondslaves of God**. What a paradox—living free by being God's slave! Peter even told his readers what that would look like. They would **honor all people, love the brotherhood** (the family of believers in Christ), **fear God**, and **honor the king** (2:17).

So Peter has given us the blueprint—honor and respect for *legitimate* governmental authority.

Paul talked about the same thing in Romans 13:1-7. He urged submission to government, arguing that it was instituted by God to maintain order in society. He went so far as to say that Christians should submit to that order, looking to the government for the administration of justice against criminals. He also said that Christians should even support the government's functions through paying taxes and tribute! Christians had a responsibility to relate properly to the government, which in Paul's day took the form of the Roman Empire.

On the other hand, though, by the time John wrote the book of Revelation in the mid-90s of the first century AD, the government of the Roman Empire had become *hostile* toward Christianity, and was on a course to become even more so. The renewal of emperor-worship was directly contradictory to the Christian commitment to the one and only God revealed in Jesus Christ. For Christians, to confess that “Caesar is Lord,” as some emperors demanded, was to *deny* that “Jesus is Lord”! So Revelation took a much more negative view of the government of Rome, because John saw the government as having gone beyond its rightful God-given function and authority, *usurping divine authority*, setting itself squarely against God and His purposes. In doing so, it was no longer *legitimate* governmental authority, and Christians were called to be faithful to Christ above all else, even if the government threatened their lives.

As Christians, we owe allegiance to our country *so long as* our government does not move beyond its rightful God-given function and authority. But the moment *any* government steps beyond those boundaries and usurps divine authority, it tries to become God. Its authority is no longer legitimate. When that happens, our highest allegiance as *Christians* takes its stand.

### ***Positive Influence***

Now honor and respect are important, but our responsibility as Christians who are also citizens doesn't stop there. *We should also seek to influence governmental authority in positive ways.*

We look at the state of every level of our government —city, county, state, and federal—and wonder how in the world we can have any influence! It seems that lobbyists and special interests have the ear of the politicians while Christians who call for justice for all people are ignored. So how can we have a positive influence? Several ways!

First, we can *pray*.

We can pray that God would revive His church and send a spiritual awakening to our nation. He does that kind of thing in the darkest hours of history. When the church is weak, when society is degenerating badly, God lays it on the hearts of some of His people to start praying for revival. When evil is so rampant around us, we're reminded that only God can do what must be done to redeem the situation. So His people begin to pray, and He moves. He stirs the hearts of His people, convicting them of sin. They turn to Him in repentance and seek His help. They make themselves available as His instruments, and He empowers them and works through their witness to turn hearts to Himself so that people are saved. He works through His people's efforts at justice to work His purpose, and society is changed—not by legislation, but by the work of God's Spirit in the lives of people!

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul very specifically told Timothy that an important part of Christian worship is *praying for governmental leaders*. When was the last time you prayed for the president or the governor or a senator or representative or a state legislator or the mayor or a county commissioner or city council member? It's an important responsibility God has given us as Christians.

We can also influence our government positively through *our genuine, consistent practice of the Christian faith*. Jesus calls us to be salt and light in a dark and corrupt world. Light dispels darkness. Salt adds flavor and inhibits decay and spoilage. When we really practice the teachings of Jesus, it has an effect on the world around us. Some will reject us, maybe even persecute us, but we will impact society when we take our commitment to be disciples of Jesus seriously. Someone has very rightly said that the most powerful thing the church can do to impact our society is to *be the church!*

Praying and practicing our faith are foremost and vital. But we must also *participate* as citizens if we're to influence our government in a positive way. And we can do that in a number of ways.

For instance, it's important that we *exercise our rights legitimately*. Paul was a Roman citizen, and when the officials of Philippi violated his rights, he held them accountable (Acts 16:35-40). He used his citizenship to avoid an undeserved flogging (Acts 22:22-29), and to appeal his case to Caesar (Acts 25:1-12).

There are times when *we* have to appeal to our rights as citizens and point out when they've been violated. As citizens we have the same constitutional rights as any other citizen, and we should use them—or sometimes forego them—in a way that honors and glorifies God and bears a winsome witness.

Here in the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution has guaranteed religious liberty and the separation of church and state. We must insist that *both* the establishment clause *and* the free exercise clause are implemented, so that the government neither favors one religion above another nor in any way hinders the free exercise of religion. And that means *any* religion or *no* religion, because faith can be neither forced nor enforced! Religion definitely has a place in the public square; but it's the responsibility of each religion's adherents, not the government, to give voice and support to it!

Exercising our rights legitimately, particularly in the area of separation of church and state, enables us to *speak to our society and our government on issues of morality and justice in a winsome way*. God desires justice not only in individual hearts but also in society's structures and systems. Most of the great social reform movements in the West have resulted from times of spiritual revival moving Christians and churches to work for social change and justice—the movements to abolish slavery, child labor, and a number of other ills had their roots in the application of Christian ethics.

But it's important to say this—these reforms, while they may result in legislation insuring them, can't be forced through the political process. Individual hearts have to be influenced and changed through our being salt and light. When individuals are changed by God's grace and incorporated into His church, then the influence of God's people begins to change society.

One of the most important ways that Christians who are citizens can participate in and influence government is through *voting*. Voting can be a powerful tool for influence. Sometimes we might feel that our vote doesn't really make any difference, but I beg to differ. Elections have sometimes been determined by a handful of votes.

In this election year, I can't stress enough to you that as Christians who are also citizens, it's vital that we vote our conscience in an informed way as we choose our leaders—even if that means writing in a name if there's not a candidate we can vote for in good conscience!

### ***Ultimate Loyalty***

There's one other thing that's important for us to remember as Christians who are also citizens. You may have picked up that I've been phrasing that very carefully in this sermon—not “Christian citizens,” where *Christian* is the adjective, the modifier, so that we are citizens of the United States or any other nation first, then Christian second. Rather, we are “Christian, citizen”—where *Christian* is the noun, the reality of who we are first and foremost, while we are also citizens of our nation.

As Christians who are also citizens, *we must always remember that our first and ultimate loyalty is to God and His kingdom*. We are citizens of the kingdom of God *first*, then citizens of

our country.

That doesn't mean we don't love our country. It means that we love it, but we love God more. It doesn't mean we're not loyal to our nation. It means that we're loyal, but our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ.

During the last week of Jesus' earthly life, some Pharisees came to Him along with some Herodians to try to **trap Him in what He said**. Knowing what a bitter pill Roman rule was to the Jews, they asked Him, **"Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?"** Jesus asked for a coin like they used to pay the tax and asked them, **"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"** They of course replied, **"Caesar's."** So Jesus said, **"Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"** (Matthew 22:15-22).

In other words, we owe to our nation and government submission to legitimate rule, support, service, and even taxes to be used for the common good in the affairs of this world. But we who bear the image and inscription of God owe to Him our greatest loyalty—*our very selves!*

That's why for me as a pastor, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I carefully guard against equating patriotism with faith and I make a careful distinction between the United States of America and the kingdom of God. Our nation has been blessed by God beyond measure, but God's rule is over *all nations*, not just ours! The truth is that we'll love our country and be loyal to it best when our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus as Lord!

So looking at what Peter and Paul and John and Jesus said and did, it all comes down to this: *as Christians who are citizens, we love and are loyal to our country, but our ultimate love and allegiance belong to God.*

We must *never* make the mistake that so many of the churches in Nazi Germany did in the 1930s and 40s, giving their ultimate allegiance to their Fatherland—in essence making their country their God while giving lip service to Jesus Christ as Lord.

We can and should be faithful Christians *and* faithful citizens. But if we are ever forced to choose between the two, as many Christians in other lands are, may God give us the grace to be ultimately and absolutely loyal *to Him!*

Not "Christian citizen," but "Christian, citizen"!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/ask-not.htm> (accessed 06/27/2016).

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®.