

The Bible Speaks on Christian Citizenship

By the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission

Politics is the business of deciding who gets what, when, and where. Christians dare not leave such vital business to unbelievers. In fact, it may be said in these times that no one can be a good Christian unless he or she is also a good citizen. The Christian faith demands responsible citizenship. Democracy by its nature requires citizen participation in the process of government at every level — local, state, and national. The Bible, moreover, explicitly calls for Christian citizenship.

The Nature of Government

Biblical principles concerning the nature of government are as valid today as when they were first given.

Civil government is of divine appointment

Civil government is a part of God's purpose for this kind of world. God's people have lived under many different forms of government. While no one form of government is divinely chosen, government itself is ordained by God.

"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. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." (Romans 13:1-2)

Government leaders are servants of God

The Old Testament describes the desired character of a civil ruler.

*"Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice. ...
For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight." (Psalm 72:1-2, 12-14)*

The New Testament identifies public officials as representatives of God, worthy of respect and honor.

“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; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.” (Romans 13:3-5)

Civil government is temporal

No human form of government will last through eternity. All will eventually end. Only the Kingdom of God will endure forever.

“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever.” (Daniel 2:44)

“Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.” (1 Corinthians 15:24)

The Call To Citizenship

God’s people are concerned not only about the world to come but also about the world in which we now live.

Christians are citizens of two worlds

Though these two worlds are never to be confused, faithful citizenship in the Kingdom of God makes demands upon the believer’s citizenship in the community, the state, and the nation.

“He [Jesus] said to them, ‘Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ ” (Luke 20:25)

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3:20)

Jesus noted the following in a prayer:

"I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15)

Christians are called to transform this world

Obedience or disobedience to the Roman government were basically the only options available for New Testament Christians and their fellow citizens. We live, however, in an open political system that allows for much more influential participation in the process of government.

"You are the salt of the earth. ..." (Matthew 5:13a)

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14, 16)

Responsibilities of a Christian Citizen

No single passage of Scripture lists all the duties of a Christian citizen. Insights into what is expected of responsible citizens, however, are to be found throughout the Bible.

Give primary obedience to God

God alone deserves to have unquestioning obedience. Christians must exercise moral discernment in their support of government.

" 'You, O king, have made a decree, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, shall fall down and worship the golden statue, and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire.' ... Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.' "
(Daniel 3:10-11, 16-18)

"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'" (Acts 5:29)

Obey the law

Ideally, laws exist to restrain evil, preserve social order, and promote the general welfare. They are to be respected and obeyed in the context of Christian responsibility.

"Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience." (Romans 13:5).

"For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." (1 Peter 2:13-14)

"Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work." (Titus 3:1)

Pray for public officials

Prayer to God on behalf of government leaders properly complements active political involvement. Christians should pray for government leaders without attempting to make prayer a substitute for active political involvement.

"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

Work to establish justice, righteousness, and peace

In a democracy, the moral quality of government is what the citizens make it. The Bible establishes ideals for the Christian citizen's actions.

*"He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)*

*"Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a reproach to any people." (Proverbs 14:34)*

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

Support, preserve, and protect freedom

That form of government is best in which personal and religious freedom are guaranteed. One function of government should be to guarantee personal and religious freedom. Christian citizens should be eternally vigilant in the preservation of liberty.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

“As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.” (1 Peter 2:16)

Conclusion

Christians ought to be good citizens. In Philippians 1:27, Paul says, *“Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”* In other words, Paul is saying, “Let your citizenship be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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