

CHRISTIANS AND CITIZENSHIP

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Summary

Christians are called to be “in the world” and “not of the world” (John 17:11–16).¹ We must embrace our identity as Christian citizens, as public witnesses, and as salt and light. Believers must also maintain their Christian character while engaging in politics. We prioritize our calling in Christ and do not condone the demonization of fellow citizens with whom we disagree. Such negative conduct can detract from the mission of Christ and the aligned Assemblies of God (AG) mission to evangelize, worship God, build disciples, and show compassion.²

Introduction

In the high priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus acknowledged that He and His followers are not of this world. Yet, He prayed that the Father would not take His followers from this world (vv. 14–16). This prayer offers a point of departure for discussing the relationship between Christians and civic or political systems. The term *world* in the New Testament encompasses more than government or political systems. Yet, it includes them and is epitomized by them.³

This paper aims to offer principles that help believers learn to live

1. “in the world,” as Christians bear the responsibility to represent Christ in their civic lives; and
2. “not of this world,” as Christians avoid being co-opted by worldly ends or seduced into carrying out their missional influence by worldly means.

Biblical Principles

The Bible offers clear principles to help Christians navigate citizenship. The apostle Paul told the Philippians that their “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). He shared a similar thought in Ephesians 2:19. However, other citizenships mattered, too. Being a Roman citizen made a key difference for people in the ancient world. Paul valued being born a Roman citizen. He used his rights as a citizen to avoid unjust treatment (Acts 22:22–29). Paul even appealed a sentence to Caesar, as was his right (Acts 25:11).

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² Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, “1. The Scriptures Inspired.”

³ See William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Explanatory Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. “world.”

Identity

Citizenship was a matter of primary identity for Paul. The Philippians to whom Paul wrote understood the idea of dual citizenship. They held citizenship in Philippi and Rome, over eight hundred miles apart. Their claim to status and protection came from Rome, not Philippi. The distant citizenship held a primacy in their lives in terms of both benefits and obligations. Similarly, Christians are citizens of earth but also of a distant land—heaven. Like the Philippians, Christians' citizenships vary in quality and their claims upon citizens.

Paul did not call the Philippians to disavow their earthly citizenship. He contrasted himself (and the Christians in Philippi) with those who live as “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18). Enemies of Christ “have their minds set on earthly things” (3:19; compare Romans 8:5–6 and Colossians 3:2). They are in the world and of the world, thus, entirely invested in worldly concerns. Followers of Paul and Christ, though they live in the world, are not controlled by it. Their citizenship is a heavenly one.

First Peter 2:9–12 and Hebrews 11:13 also deal with Christian identity. These passages describe believers as foreigners and exiles on this earth. Peter's letter also refers to Christians as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” and “God's special possession” who live as holy examples (1 Peter 2:9, 11–12). The next passage presents another major theme in the relationship between Christians and the state: submission and obedience to authority (1 Peter 2:13–14).

Submission

After addressing Christian identity, Peter urged his audience to submit to every human authority (1 Peter 2:13–17). Though not as strongly as Paul in Romans 13, Peter asserted the government's role in affirming order and discouraging evil. Governments are essential, and believers are expected to follow the law.

However, the submission is “for the Lord's sake” (1 Peter 2:13). Much stronger language describes believers' duty to God than to human authorities. Believers must “live as God's slaves” and “fear God” (1 Peter 2:16–17). On the other hand, though not equally, they are to “submit . . . to every human authority” and “honor the emperor” (2:13, 17). Living as God's slaves and fearing God are much stronger terms than submission (deference) and honor. Obedience to human authority is important, but such obedience is in the broader context of obedience to God. When obedience to earthly authorities contradicts Christian commitments, obedience to God is the priority. As Peter said in Acts 5:29 to the authorities in Jerusalem when ordered to no longer teach in the name of Jesus, “We must obey God rather than human beings!”

Witness

Peter and Paul depicted the Christian's role in society with a common goal. Both voiced concern with Christian witness among unbelievers. This concept of witness provides another guiding theme for Christians and their relationship to civic life. Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8 clarify the role of Christians in the world. These passages teach that

believers are Christ's representatives on earth. They testify of salvation and lead unbelievers into disciplined obedience to the lordship of Christ. As Paul explained, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). This text teaches the main role Christians play in society.

Historical Examples

For nearly two millennia, the Church has grown in diverse cultural and political contexts. Each context offered a variety of forms of government and expectations for its citizens. Likewise, other branches of the Church developed a variety of models of relationships with the state. These models shaped a range of expectations of Christian responsibility to the state.

The models presented here are illustrative but not exhaustive. They provide a framework for understanding the various ways parts of the Church related to the state and where all those ways could go poorly.⁴

1. In ancient times, the head of state often led the state religion. This is called "caesaropapism" or the Constantinian model. This model can blur the line between Christian faith and citizenship.
2. Lutheranism's "Two Kingdoms" proposed that God works through the Church and secular government, each with distinct roles. In this model, the Church could lose its voice critiquing the government as a separate sphere of authority.
3. Reformed churches viewed political systems as part of God's creation, but emphasized their human and corruptible nature. They advocated for the Church's reforming role. This model threatened to treat the Church's authority as political.
4. The Anabaptists, also a part of the Reformation movement, opposed the influence of political systems. They sought to create separate, apolitical Christian communities. In this model, Christians could potentially lose their witness without political involvement.
5. The Liberation model took a prophetic stance, challenging injustice and appealing to a higher moral authority. This model risks reducing a relationship with the government to one issue or cause.

These models offer ideals with advantages and disadvantages. Pentecostals embraced one model over the others at various times. Depending on their experience of political oppression or support, they found particular models more useful than others.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Assemblies of God in the United States stayed apolitical while keeping a prophetic voice. By the end of the century, the AG favored the

⁴ See *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology, ed. Amy E. Black (Zondervan, 2015).

“Two Kingdoms” and Reformed approaches. In twenty-first-century America, some in the AG stressed political power as a way to promote biblical values.

Articles 10 and 11 of the “Statement of Fundamental Truths” describe the mission of the Church as evangelizing, worshipping God, building up believers, and showing compassion. This mission intersects with the political and social world. Yet, believers who aim to glorify God and rightly reflect His kingdom must govern such activities by mission principles.

Principles of Christian Engagement in Citizenship

The previous models provide a framework for how Christians engaged the politics of society. They aimed to live out their faith within an in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world paradigm. No doubt, Christians live in the world. We work, play, and worship within societies that do not always reflect our beliefs or values. Yet Christians are not of this world. The Bible calls believers to reject the world’s systems and to be transformed (Romans 12:1–2). Christian faith transforms the issues we engage in and *how* we engage them.

Christian Identity as Primary

Like the Philippians, we have dual citizenship. Though we are earthly citizens, we are first citizens of Christ’s superior kingdom. Our primary identity does not derive from a particular earthly state. Instead, it comes from being “in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The primary commitment, in terms of identification, conduct, and orientation to the world must be an allegiance to Christ. In the context of the United States, this means that one is a Christian before he or she is a U.S. citizen. These two identities, though not necessarily in conflict, must never be confused.

Appropriate Submission as Necessary

Citizens of heaven bear responsibility during their time as citizens of this world. God called believers to submit to earthly powers. Responsible citizenship includes respect for governing authorities, even when disagreeing with decisions. Citizens with a vote must stay well-informed. Being aware and evaluating what is happening in one’s community is vital. Believers must contribute to maintaining the peace in society, whether through action or example, in person or online. Embrace the opportunities citizenship offers—voting, running for political office, showing up for jury duty, and the like.

Christians should support the protection of religious freedom. No political figure, party, or system has the power to stop the spread of God’s kingdom. Moreover, no political figure, party, or system has the authority to represent God’s kingdom fully. Religious freedom means both the freedom to worship God fully and the freedom to reject God. No one can truly say yes to God if they cannot also say no. We must protect the freedom to say either.

Christian identity takes priority over national identity. Similarly, Christian obedience to Christ takes precedence over any earthly allegiance. Submission and obedience to God and the state are not identical and must never be confused. Neither 1 Peter 2:13–17 nor

Romans 13:7 argues to offer the state worship. While Christians generally obey and submit to earthly authorities, earthly authorities are not absolutes. All submission occurs under the umbrella of Christian allegiance to God. His Person and kingdom cannot be compared with or subjected to any earthly power.

Witness as Our Core Mission

For the New Testament writers, being witnesses of God's reconciling work in Christ is a core responsibility of believers. Anything that interferes with this work opposes the Christian faith, no matter the motivation. Acting in the name of Christ while undermining the gospel's presentation and the Church's mission risks disobedience to Christ (Matthew 28:19–20). Let it not be said of us that people blaspheme the name of God because of us (Romans 2:24).

Areas for such confusion are politics and civic engagement. Societal issues are complex and multifaceted. Some political and social entities demand allegiance and present simplistic answers that create us-vs-them scenarios. Desiring to make a positive difference in the world, well-meaning Christians often choose a side and universally adopt its stance on all the issues. In so doing, they can alienate others and damage their ability to witness to them. In a worst-case scenario, a chosen side might reveal itself as opposing Christian faith and virtue. Christians must be careful in participating in any potentially harmful system that does not accurately represent Christ or His kingdom.

Christians should ensure that their civic engagements are in harmony with their core task—representing Christ to the world. Losing the ability to witness is never worth the cost. This does not mean that Christians should avoid politics or the public sphere. Believers should take moral stands on issues that matter to God. However, they should exercise caution and discernment in how they do so, living as wise agents of Christ's kingdom.

Salt and Light

One of Jesus' best-known teachings contains dual metaphors for Christian engagement with the world. "You are the salt of the earth," He said, and "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–14). In the right measure, salt improves what it touches. Similarly, Christians improve their environment. Consider this test for valid Christian engagement: *Does our influence make our environment better or worse?*

Modern readers may more easily understand Jesus' light metaphor. He said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Jesus expects His followers to radiate goodness that dispels the darkness of evil. The light of their good works points to the Father—the Source of goodness. It elicits genuine praise for God from those who observe these acts of light. Consider another key test for Christian engagement: *Are people drawn to God by our public actions and disposition, or are they turned off?*

Love of God and Others

Jesus was asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28). He offered a simple and comprehensive answer: Love God with all your being and love others as if they were you. Love is not an add-on; the characteristic of love defines those living an authentically Christian faith (John 13:35).

First Corinthians 13 provides the best description of love in the Christian community. This list of love’s characteristics mirrors actions in every sphere of life, including public life. Biblical love raises another question: *How does our participation in politics and other civic duties reflect the criteria of love, regardless of our intentions?*

The Role of the Holy Spirit

All Christians should seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance when engaging in civic and political matters. Every aspect of Christian life depends on the Holy Spirit. As in the life of Jesus, the Holy Spirit must play a central role in guiding, facilitating, and empowering believers’ private and public lives. Christians engaged in the work of citizenship on their own risk the peril faced by the Galatians. They attempted to complete God’s work in the energy of the flesh (Galatians 3:3). We must also resist the urge to misuse a spiritual gift to earn political approval. To do so would make one no better than the court prophets of Jeremiah’s day, who only prophesied in favor of the king. *Are we living as citizens according to the Spirit’s fruit and gifts (Galatians 5:22–23; 1 Corinthians 12, etc.)?*

Conclusion

Scripture does not single out one detailed model for Christian participation in civic and political spheres. As “the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct,”⁵ the Bible does offer powerful truths that should guide Christians’ civic and political lives. Throughout history, Christians have responded as best they could, in different political circumstances, as they sought to be faithful to the Bible in their unique contexts. From this important discussion comes the following summation for careful consideration.

Believers must be mindful of their core identity as people of another kingdom. Allegiance to Christ as the only Lord and the defining role as His witnesses is crucial. As Christians act in love and as salt and light, under the guiding power of the Holy Spirit, they lead others to God, proclaim the gospel, and improve the world around them.

Modern political movements are not centered around God’s destiny for humanity but rather focus on their ends. Further, they achieve those ends through power plays that rely on the successful domination of others rather than cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

In practical terms, as followers of Christ and ministers of the gospel, we should:

1. prioritize the gospel and its propagation far above personal and political allegiances;

⁵ Assemblies of God *Statement of Fundamental Truths*, “1. The Scriptures Inspired.”

2. become involved in one's community as a mandated participant as God's agent of reconciliation;
3. be cautious of what one attaches to the Church, ministries, and, most importantly, the name of Christ through preaching and teaching;
4. be clear about allegiance, identity, and witness by distinguishing the teaching of Scripture from personal opinions;
5. exercise discernment with political alliances, knowing that no party or political system fully aligns with Scripture and is therefore unworthy of unquestioned allegiance;
6. exert caution in how one advocates for things held to be true, knowing there is accountability for motives, outcomes, and conduct in the process;
7. engage others in a winsome and polite manner so that even those who disagree will be open to hearing the gospel (Titus 2:8);
8. continually evaluate political and social engagement based on the Holy Spirit's leading and the attributes of biblical love. As advised by the *Pentecostal Evangel* in the late twentieth century, Assemblies of God members should "not confuse secular political activity with the purpose of the Church, nor campaigning with witnessing and preaching. Do not make slanderous or false accusations against your opponents; maintain your integrity. Do not consider a brother or sister who is of like precious faith an adversary if he or she holds a different political view."⁶ When a political view demands a denial of our faith, however, we must stand for the faith against such a view.
9. unequivocally affirm the dignity of all, knowing that the heart of God longs for the salvation of all people; and
10. avoid any nationalism or identity politics that elevates political identities and obscures a primary allegiance to Christ. Such conduct is divisive, potentially idolatrous, and leads away from the Assemblies of God's mission to evangelize the lost, worship God, disciple believers, and show compassion, as expressed in Articles 10 and 11 of the Statement of Fundamental Truths.

⁶ "10 Guidelines for Christian Voters," *Pentecostal Evangel*, October 14, 1984, 13. Full text: "1. Do not confuse patriotism, national pride, and Western culture with Christian faith and practice. 2. Do not confuse secular political activity with the purpose of the church nor campaigning with witnessing and preaching. 3. Do not make slanderous or false accusations against your opponents but maintain your integrity. Do not consider a brother or sister who is of like precious faith an adversary if he or she holds a different political view. 4. At all times endeavor to verify information before accepting it as true or before repeating it to others. 5. At all times endeavor to know and understand the candidate's positions and evaluate him or her on the basis of his or her ability to perform the duties and function of the office and his or her integrity. 6. At all times endeavor to know and understand the issues; do not excuse yourself from this duty by saying, "God will show me whom to vote for." 7. At all times compare a candidate's position with Scripture but only where the Scripture addresses the issue; do not force Scripture to address issues that the Author did not intend it to address. 8. Neither vote nor work for a candidate merely because he or she professes to be of the Christian faith. 9. Do not neglect your family, worship, prayer, or Bible study. 10. At all times uphold your leaders in prayer."