

Citizenship: A Christian Duty
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Scripture: Matt. 22:15-22

INTRODUCTION: Just in case any of you have forgotten or have been out of the country or have just returned from another planet, Tuesday is Election Day! How many of you have already voted? How many of you plan to vote early either through mail or by early voting at a designated site? How many of you will wait until the very day of the election and perhaps the last minute? How many of you plan to be un-American and don't plan to vote so that you can blame your friends and neighbors for all of the problems that will arise during the next few years?

As we approach Election Day, there are a few things that I would like to say. First, I will not tell you which way to vote. As a good Baptist, I thoroughly believe that the pulpit is not the place for a preacher to share with you "God's candidates." I may at times address political, social and ethical issues, but I respect your right to choose, even if you disagree with me. Furthermore, if I did use the pulpit to endorse candidates this church should lose its non-profit tax-exempt status. That's called being Baptist. I am sure that my political opinions sometimes slip into my sermons but I hope that you understand and forgive when that happens.

Second, I reserve the right to be critical of all parties and candidates. I am reminded of that well-known Oklahoma humorist Will Rogers. When asked if he had ever been a member of any organization that tried to overthrow the United States government, he replied "I voted Republican once!" On another occasion he was asked if he was member of any organized political party. He responded, "No, I am a Democrat!" My kind of guy.

So, what do I have to say to you this morning on the Sunday before our national election? What pearls of wisdom can I pass your way that you have not already discovered? Probably not too many, but it is a good opportunity to be reminded of some important biblical teachings on Christian citizenship, especially those of Jesus

I. Jesus left us with one very important teaching concerning our relationship to the state. He recognized the authority of the state. [Tell the story of "Render to Caesar."] In Matthew 22 there is a story about an effort to entrap Jesus on the issue of the state. The story also is told with a few variations in Luke's Gospel.

Two old enemies joined together in this attempt. The Pharisees and the Herodians tried to entrap Jesus with a loaded political question for Jews in Palestine in the first century. They asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The question really was in a general sense "can a good, dedicated Jew pay taxes to support a pagan government?" In a more specific sense, "could a good Jew pay the poll tax that was used to support the government of a descendent of Herod the Great?" This was an extremely volatile issue.

And if Jesus answered "yes" or "no," he would get into trouble with someone. If he answered "yes" the Pharisees would accuse him of being disloyal to the Jewish faith. The Pharisees despised this tax. Jesus would be saying that it is OK to pay allegiance to the pagan Roman officials.

If Jesus answered "no," the Herodians would accuse him of sedition or treason against Rome. The Herodians supported the rule of a descendent of Herod the Great, whose government in Palestine would be financed by this tax upon the Jews. The Herodians benefited from having a descendent ruling over them. To oppose this tax would be for undermining the legitimate government established by Rome and could not be tolerated.

I can't help but think that this tactic of entrapment continues to be used by politicians against each other, by members of the press and the media in interviews, and even in the debates, which are supposed to be neutral. We as individuals even use such an approach when we have meaningful dialogue with each other over candidates and issues. Get someone to say something that can be used against him.

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Jesus, however, saw the pitfalls put before him. He responded not with an evasive answer, nor with a flippant remark. Rather, he took the question very seriously and gave an answer that took the debate to a higher level. He asked for a coin, presumably one used to pay this special tax. Someone in the crowd provided him with the coin, which should have been an embarrassment to the Jew for being in possession of such a coin.

He then responded to the question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" as he often did, with his own question "Whose image is on the coin?" The clear-cut, simple and obvious answer was "Caesar's". Jesus then responded with great wisdom "Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's."

Jesus recognized that government had a legitimate function in society. Government was responsible for maintaining the peace, for protecting its citizens. Government had a responsibility to promote commerce by building good roads and establishing safe sea routes for shipping. In our day we would emphasize the importance of education,

Jesus was calling upon his followers to be good citizens. All were citizens of earthly kingdoms. Such kingdoms provided services, benefits, and protection. Believers could be and should be good citizens, regardless of the kind of government under which they found themselves.

II. But Jesus also said that there was another kingdom. Jesus taught that his kingdom was spiritual. In his appearance before Pontius Pilate he responded in John 18:36, that "My kingdom is not of this world." Jesus was teaching us that his kingdom was spiritual. It was to be found not in the halls of government but in the hearts of men and women.

And he called upon his followers to be good citizens in his kingdom. If one looks carefully at the teachings of Jesus on this matter, he was saying that when the earthly kingdom performs its duties as expected, one can and should be a good citizen of both that kingdom and God's kingdom. They should be complementary rather than contradictory. There is something to be learned from this teaching about these dual kingdoms in the 21st century.

So many in our society would like to have a theocratic form of government. During the time of the judges, Gideon was offered the kingship over his tribe. He responded, "I will not rule over you, my sons will not rule over you, God will rule over you." He was calling for a theocracy, the rule of God. This is a wonderful ideal - but it has never worked!

Israel established its monarchy based upon the theocratic ideal. But what happened was that the priesthood and the politicians compromised the faith. Only the prophets were able to speak out against abuses in which appeal to God was often used to justify corrupt activities and practices. In the end the prophets condemned such as system.

Throughout the history of Christianity time and time again theocratic systems failed. John Calvin established a theocracy in Geneva. Not all the citizens were pleased. Some even named their dogs after him! In the end the theocracy of Geneva failed.

Puritan New England in the American colonies favored the rule of the elect. Laws were passed which established the Congregational Church, when required observance of the Sabbath, and which discriminated against dissenters. The laws of the church were enforced by the state. Roger Williams, who established the first Baptist church in the American colonies and who established Rhode Island Colony on the foundation of religious liberty and separation of church and state, was among those driven into exile in the theocratic system of New England. In the end, once again theocracy failed under this oligarchical system, under the rule of the elite.

Many in the 21st century would like to make the United States and theocracy (like you have in Muslim countries in places like Iran and Iraq). A movement called Restorationism would like to replace the Constitution with the Bible and enforce it in a very literal sense. As James Dunn, former head of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, often said, "There are those who call for a theocracy, and they want to be "theo."

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History has long taught us that you can't establish religion. A coerced faith is a shallow faith. Our Baptist ancestors knew this and called for both religious liberty and separation of church and state.

So the question is "Should we be citizens of the state or citizens of God's Kingdom?" Jesus said that we can and should be both.

III. What does all of this mean in the 21st century?

A. We are citizens of two kingdoms - civil and spiritual. Jesus teaches us that we are to be good citizens in both kingdoms. We have responsibilities in the civil kingdom - to vote, to pay taxes, to obey the laws of the land, to participate when the opportunity presents itself.

And we have responsibilities in the spiritual kingdom, as well. Our duties take us beyond those of the civil kingdom. Our allegiance is to God.

Only when the temporal earthly kingdom makes claims of absolute authority that intrudes upon that of God do we face the issue of resistance - and it seems to me that if we read Paul and Revelation seriously our resistance should be passive.

B. By avoiding a union of church and state, and establishment of religion in the political system, we then have the freedom and the responsibility to call people to a higher level of citizenship. If we are to have a prophetic voice, we cannot simply identify our religious views with any one particular party or person. Our faith should demand that we call for justice, respect, lawfulness for all, and recognition of a higher authority in our lives.

In the magazine "ABC People" there arrived this week a special edition called "Election Year Issue." Tony Compolo, one of the most highly respected ministers of our time wrote an article entitled "A biblical approach to politics." He called upon /Christians to be good citizens and he recommended three choices that we must make to have a political approach to political involvement.

He calls us "Red Letter Christians," which points to those Biblical translations which have the words of Jesus in red. He said first that we must stress issues over parties. He encouraged all of us to take an active role in political parties, but never to identify any party with "God's party."

Second, he emphasized authority over power. He pointed out that Jesus claimed authority to speak to those in power. His claim was based upon his sacrifice to meet the needs of others. He made a legitimate claim upon us. In the Sermon on the Mount he claimed authority even over the Jewish law, when he said "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you."

Compolo says that if we are to speak with authority we must have a track record of service and sacrifice.

Third, he emphasizes knowledge over ignorance. Christians must be an informed people. We must work out our own salvation and apply it to the hot issues of the day. He points out that he has been wrong and that through study and dialogue we can change our minds. I also like what he said about his own journey, that he studies Scripture with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He encourages us to share our convictions and to receive critiques from our fellow believers.

CONCLUSION: So come Tuesday, as your pastor I will tell you how to vote. Go into the voting booth, follow the instructions, and vote on the issues and the candidates with authority based upon service and knowledge.

*Tony Compolo is professor emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in St. David's, Pennsylvania, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education (EAPE), and associate pastor of the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia.