

by DAN TOMBERLIN

VOTING CHRISTIAN VALUES

AS WE NEAR the upcoming elections, we must give serious thought to what it means to exercise the vote. Many Christians throughout the world live in countries with democratic governments in which citizens are given a voice in national policies by virtue of the vote. In many other countries, this is not the case in all countries, and this has not been the norm throughout history. Voting should not be taken for granted.

The United States Constitution (1789) provided for the voting rights of white men. The voting rights of freedmen (former African-American enslaved men) were guaranteed by the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment (1870). Women (white and black) were enfranchised with the vote by the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (1920). Native Americans were guaranteed the right to vote by the Snyder Act of 1924. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 further strengthened voting rights throughout the United States. In the United States, “liberty and justice for all” has been a long slog.

None of the nations mentioned in the Old Testament were democracies; they were monarchies. The Christian church was established in the Roman Empire, in which none of the early Christians had the right to vote. In fact, the right to vote is not explicit in the Bible. There is no command, “You shall vote.” However, being engaged in the political process is implied.

Humans, male and female, are created in the image of God and charged to “rule over ... every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:27-28).* God has authorized humanity to govern the earth so all life may flourish.



Jesus said Christians are obligated to pay taxes and otherwise support the government (Matthew 22:21). The Apostles taught that human government is ordained of God and God’s people throughout the world are obligated to be good citizens (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

The Christian faith must be practiced in a political reality that includes people of diverse ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs. Furthermore, the rights and flourishing of all humans are to be protected. The ancient Hebrew prophets declared God’s people must “dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion” to neighbor and stranger alike (Zechariah 7:9); we must “maintain kindness and justice” (Hosea 12:6). Strangers in the land (immigrants) are to be treated as guests (Leviticus 19:33-34; Hebrews 13:2). Christians are charged to “pursue peace with all people, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). This suggests a Biblical obligation to *social holiness*.

Human government should reflect the will and holiness of God. The Ten Commandments were given as the religious and legal foundation of a people in covenant with God. Within these foundational commandments we discern the virtues of honoring parents and elders (Exodus 20:12), reverence for human life (v. 13), fidelity to the marriage covenant (v. 14), respect for the property of others (v. 15), and the promotion of justice in the

land (v. 16). Jesus inaugurated His ministry by reading from Book of Isaiah to declare He had come to “bring good news to the poor, ... proclaim release to captives ... to set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18; see Isaiah 61:1-2).

The Church of God has declared we believe “Holiness to be God’s standard of living for His people” (*Declaration of Faith*, Article 7). The commitment to holiness is expressed in our practical commitments. The Church of God has proclaimed all believers have a shared *social obligation* that includes sanctifying marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman, being good citizens, obeying the law as long as it does not conflict with the laws of God, correcting social injustices such as racial and economic discrimination, promoting freedom of religion, promoting the sanctity of human life (standing against abortion and euthanasia), and caring properly for the earth’s environment.

We cannot ignore the political implications of the confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11). We must remember “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). Citizens of God’s kingdom include the redeemed from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). We live in this present age as strangers, sojourners, and exiles scattered throughout the world (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). In this world, we are ambassadors of God’s kingdom, chosen by God the Father, commissioned by Jesus Christ, and authorized by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 1:1; Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). When we declare the lordship of Jesus Christ, we are proclaiming no nation has priority over God’s kingdom, no other ruler can claim our allegiance, and God’s church cannot be co-opted by any political party.

The issues before us are often political and Biblical. Political issues are open to compromise. However, issues of Biblical truth are not. Sometimes, it requires great wisdom to discern the difference. The greatest political issues of the 19th and 20th centuries were slavery (subsequently, the civil rights of freedmen) and women’s right to vote. As the political debates on these issues raged, all sides appealed to Scripture; but not all sides were right. As we engage in the political issues of our day, we must be certain our politics are informed by a reasoned faith, rather than our faith becoming corrupted by our politics. We should also be aware that corrupt politicians have no qualms about manipulating religion for the sake of power.

The goal of Christian political engagement is to seek the prosperity of the nation, and “pray to the Lord on its behalf” (Jeremiah 29:7). This means how we pray is more important than how we vote. As we pray, we petition, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Every election has winners and losers. The lordship of Jesus Christ is neither challenged by nor dependent on the politics of this present age. In Revelation 11:15, the seventh declares in a loud voice, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.”

Some Christians tend to view voting decisions in terms of the right or left, conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat. These are insufficient distinctions. The radicals on the political right and left can impose a tyranny

that compromises the justice of God. Conservatives often seek to preserve traditional values and limit the power of government. Liberals are more willing to challenge traditional values and favor the power of government to transform society. Conservatives tend to favor purity; liberals tend to favor compassion. Neither has a monopoly on truth and justice.

Some conservatives have compromised the justice of God by opposing civil rights laws and the rights of women, and by ignoring environmental concerns. Some liberals have compromised the justice of God by denying the sanctity of marriage and the rights of the unborn, and by redefining human sexuality. To suggest that a nation or political party can embody the kingdom of God is idolatry. It is better to view voting decisions in terms of *faithfulness* to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that means being “conservative”—holding to the righteousness and justice of God. Sometimes that means being “liberal”—being generous to the poor and oppressed.

Perhaps we, as Christians, can negotiate political tensions with a conservative head and a liberal heart. Our political agenda must be informed by Jesus Christ’s character, teaching, and mission. ☩

**All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.*

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