

How to Recognize a Christian Citizen

by J.I. Packer (1985)

It is a paradox of the Christian life that the more profoundly one is concerned about heaven, the more deeply one cares about God's will being done on Earth. The Christians who show most passion to serve others in this world are regularly those with the strongest hold on the other-worldly realities. This has always been true, whether we look at ministers, missionaries, statesmen, reformers, industrialists, physicians, men of wealth and power, or ordinary layfolk. Service to others, as an expression of love to them, is a Christian priority. But citizenship is a form of service, as most Christians have seen from the start. Despite the Marxist claim that religion anesthetizes one to the needs of Earth, we instead find that, other things being equal, those whose citizenship is in heaven (I echo Paul's phrase in Phil. 3:20) make the best citizens of any state, democratic or totalitarian, Christian or pagan, secular or even atheist.

The Biblical Basis for Public Activism

In the New Testament, civic obligation is emphatically commanded alongside—indeed, as part of—the obligation to serve God. When Jesus answered the question about taxpaying with the words, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Mark 12:17), this was not a clever evasion of the issue, but a clear acknowledgement that rendering what is due to the existing political regime is part of the Christian calling. When Peter in one breath says, “Fear God. Honor the Emperor” (1 Peter 2:17), he spotlights the same truth; as does Paul when, in the course of his overview of the life of gratitude for grace that is true Christianity, he teaches the Roman Christians to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1), and tells them that “for the sake of conscience” they should “pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (vv. 6–7).

Paul speaks of each state official as “God's servant for your good” (v. 4). Note that it is pagan Roman officials, from the emperor down, that he has in view! And he further explains that God instituted the state as such to maintain law, order, justice, and “good.” “Good” here evidently embraces protection and well-being, and is thus not far removed from the opportunity to pursue happiness, which the American Constitution enshrines.

Hence, although Christians are not to think of themselves as ever at home in this world but rather as sojourning aliens, travelers passing through a foreign land to the place where their treasures are stored awaiting their arrival (see 1 Peter 2:11; Matt. 6:19–20), Scripture forbids them to be indifferent to the benefits that flow from good government. Nor, therefore, should they hesitate to play their part in maximizing these benefits for others, as well as for themselves. The upholding of stable government by a law-abiding life, and helping it to fulfill its role by personal participation where this is possible, is as fitting for us today as it was for Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Nehemiah, Mordecai, and Daniel (to look no further). We must see it as service of God and neighbor.

As one Christian member of the European Parliament, Sir Frederick Catherwood, trenchantly put it: “To try to improve society is not worldliness but love. To wash your hands of society is not love but worldliness.”

Some Misguided Christian Developments

Here, however, we must note three developments in modern Christendom that have set up perplexing cross currents with regard to political duty. Each requires some discussion before we can go any further.

1. *The politicized intentions of some Christian relativists.* When I speak of Christian “relativists,” I have in mind certain Protestants who treat biblical teaching not as God’s revealed truth, but as man’s patchy pointer to God’s self-disclosure, couched in culturally relative terms that today’s Christians are not bound to use and voicing many sentiments that today’s Christians are not bound to endorse.

When I speak of “politicized intentions,” I mean that their goals reduce the Christian faith from a pilgrim path to heaven into a socio-political scheme for this present world. This scheme is often referred to as establishing God’s kingdom on earth by ending society’s collective sins—racism, economic and cultural exploitation, class division, denial of human rights—and setting *shalom* (the Hebrew word for communal well-being under God) in its place.

What is wrong here? Not praying for *shalom*, nor working for it as one has opportunity.

Neighbor-love in the global village requires every Christian to do this—and to do it on an international as well as a domestic scale. But it is surely disastrous when Christian faith (our grasp of God’s revealed purposes among men) and Christian obedience (our efforts to do God’s revealed will) are reduced to and identified with human attempts at social improvement. The heart is cut out of the gospel when Christ is thought of as Redeemer and Lord, Liberator and Humanizer only in relation to particular deprivations and abuses in this world. This, however, has become the standard view of liberals and radicals among the Protestant leadership. It is expressed and reinforced by the World Council of Churches. (The “liberation theology” of Roman Catholic Latin America also embodies and feeds these tendencies, but I shall not discuss that now; Protestant North America is my present concern.)

What has happened, putting the matter bluntly, is that clergymen and clericalized laymen in the mainline Protestant bodies have allowed themselves to reinterpret and redefine their basic religious values as political values. Thus they have secularized Christianity under the guise of applying it to life. In doing so, they have turned it more or less into a leftist ideology, in which even revolutionary violence and guerrilla warfare against lawful governments get baptized into Christ. A flow of semi-technical books expressing this viewpoint, the entrenching of it in liberal seminaries, and the verbal dignifying of it as the discipline of “political theology” have made it respectable. Steady propaganda in its favor from Protestant denominational headquarters now leads many laity to equate the Christian citizen’s role with pushing this program everywhere.

The basic mistake in all this is that Christianity’s transcendent reference point has been lost sight of. Those who revere Bible teaching as divine truth, who see Jesus in New Testament terms as first and foremost our Savior from sin, delivering us from wrath to come, renewing us in righteousness, and opening heaven to us, and who view evangelism as the basic dimension of neighbor-love, ought to oppose social evils just as vigorously as anybody else. To do that is part

of the practical Samaritanism to which all Christians are called—that is, the relieving of need and misery every way one can. But it is all to be done in the service of a Christ whose kingdom is not of this world, and who requires mankind to understand this life, with its joys and riches on the one hand and its hardships and sorrows on the other, as a moral and spiritual training ground, a preparatory discipline for eternity. Lose that perspective, however, as the relativists of whom I am speaking have lost it, and the entire enterprise of neighbor-love goes astray.

2. *The pietistic inhibitions of some Christian absolutists.* “Absolutists,” as I here use the word, are either those Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox who believe that God’s unchanging truth is given to the church in Scripture, and that only by obeying this truth can one please God. They may be called Christian conservatives, or even conservationists, by reason of their unwillingness to recast or diminish the historic biblical faith. Among Protestant absolutists, many, perhaps most, would prefer to be called evangelicals, since the gospel (the evangel) of Christ is central to their Christianity.

“Pietistic” points to a concern about achieving holiness, avoiding sin, winning souls, practicing fellowship with Christians, and opposing all the forces of anti-Christianity on the personal level.

Pietistic inhibitions take the form of political passivity and unwillingness to be involved in any level of civil government. Some will vote but not run for office, others will not even vote, and all incline to treat political issues as not directly their business. Their stance as Christian citizens is thus one of withdrawal from, rather than involvement in, the political process.

Why is this? Several factors seem to operate. One is a reaction against the “social gospel” of the more liberal Protestantism such as was described above, from which evangelical pietists want to dissociate themselves as fully as possible. A second is a faulty inference from their eschatology (i.e., their view of the future), which sees the world as getting inevitably and inexorably worse as Christ’s coming draws near, and tells us that nothing can be done about it; therefore it does not matter who is in power politically. A third factor, linked with this, is the stress laid on separation from “the world,” with its moral defilements, its compromises of principle, and its earthbound, pleasure-seeking, self-serving way of life. Politics, thought of as a murky milieu where principles are constantly being sacrificed in order to catch votes and keep one’s end up in the power game, is seen as an eminently “worldly” business, and so off limits for Christians. A fourth factor, potent though imponderable, is an individualism that resolves all social problems into personal problems, feels that civil government is unimportant since it cannot save souls, and so is fundamentally not interested in the political process at all.

But none of this will do. Whatever mistakes the “social gospel” may enshrine, and however true it is that ministry in the church and in evangelism should be our first concern, there remains a social and political task for Christians to tackle.

Even if the Second Coming is near, we need not think that we cannot under God make this world temporarily a little better if we try, and in any case the fear of not succeeding cannot excuse us from trying when God in effect tells us to make the attempt.

Politics is certainly a power game, but it has to be played if social structures are to be improved, and though it belongs to this world it is a sphere of service to God and men that is not intrinsically “worldly” in the proscribed sense. Moreover, political compromise, the basic maneuver, is quite a different thing from the sacrificing of principles, as we shall see.

Finally, the individualism that destroys political concern is a kind of myopia blurring awareness of the benefit that good government brings and the damage that bad government does (think of Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin). No. Pietistic passivity cannot be justified, and its present practitioners need to be educated out of it. This is no more valid a stance for the Christian citizen than was the politicized posture that we rejected above.

3. *The political imperialism of some Christian biblicists.* I have in mind the crusading spirit that currently animates certain members of Bible-loving churches and fellowships. They would call themselves “fundamentalist” rather than evangelical, because they feel that the former word implies more of the uncompromising fighting stance.

Here there is no hesitation in announcing objectives and plunging into the hurly-burly of the political world in order to gain them. Problems arise, however, through the temptation to view the democratic power game as the modern equivalent of holy war in the Old Testament, in which God called upon his people to overthrow the heathen and take their kingdom by force. It is because of this temptation that I spoke of “imperialism” in my heading.

In biblical holy war, the heathen had no rights and received no quarter, for God was using his people as his executioners, the human means of inflicting merited judgment. Viewed as a revelation of God’s retributive justice (an aspect of his character that shines throughout the whole Bible), holy war made coherent, if awesome, moral sense. But holy war is no part of God’s program for the Christian church. Leave retribution to God, says Paul in Romans 12:19. And it makes no moral or practical sense at all if taken as a model for Christian action in the political cockpit of a modern pluralistic democracy like the United States, India, or Britain.

In a democracy, you cannot govern except as public opinion backs you and retains you in office. Therefore the quest for consensus, and the practice of persuasion with a view to achieving consensus, is all important. Riding roughshod over others as if they did not count will always have a self-defeating boomerang effect. Pressure groups that seek to grab and use power without winning public support for what they aim at will provoke equally high-handed opposition and will typically be short-lived.

Protestants may well rejoice that Roman Catholicism has now given up its long-standing conviction that error has no rights. Should Protestants themselves now flirt with that discredited principle, however, there will very soon be egg on their own faces. And the danger is constantly present. As Paul Henry has pointed out, “righteous zeal” can be very “detrimental to the practice of politics. For ‘true believers’ of any stripe are always tempted to become hard-core ideologues seeking to impose their truths on society at large.”[+] Christian citizens, who ought to have strong beliefs about communal right and wrong, will always need to be careful here.

Why We Support Democracy

Representative democracy as we know it—in which the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive have separate status, the public information services (media) are not under government control, the elected administration always faces an elected opposition, and popular elections on a one-man, one-vote basis recur at regular intervals—is not the only form of government under which Christian citizens have lived and served God. However, there is no doubt that from a Christian standpoint it is a fitter and wiser form than any other.

The Christian recommendation of democracy rests on two insights.

The first is the awareness that government of the people, by the people, for the people, in an open community system that in principle allows anyone to qualify for any office, best expresses in political terms the God-given dignity and worth of each individual.

The second is the perception that, since in this fallen world, as Lord Acton put it, all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, the separation of powers and the building of checks and balances into executive structures will limit the dangers of corruption, even if such procedures for restraint will never eliminate them entirely.

These Christian insights mesh with the worldly wisdom that sees that the more citizens can feel they have shared in making the decisions that now shape their lives, the more resolutely they will adhere to them. The pattern of government, therefore, that maximizes public consent will ordinarily be more stable than any other system.

Making Democracy Work

Christian citizens, then, may be expected to show a firm commitment to the principles of democracy, and to see themselves as bound to do all they can to make democracy work. But that means conscientious commitment to the democratic process as the best way of decision making within the body politic.

In democracies that are philosophically and religiously pluralist, like those of the West, the democratic process that achieves consent out of conflict is vitally important. In this fallen world, conflict arising from limited vision and competing interests is an unavoidable part of the political scene. The intensity and integrity of the public struggle whereby a balance is struck between the contending parties then becomes an index of community health and morale.

The name given to the resolution of political conflict through debate is *compromise*. Whatever may be true in the field of ethics, compromise in politics means not the abandonment of principle, but realistic readiness to settle for what one thinks to be less than ideal when it is all that one can get at the moment. The principle that compromise expresses is that half a loaf is better than no bread.

Give-and-take is the heart of political compromise, as compromise is the heart of politics in a democracy. To see this is a sign of political maturity. By contrast, a doctrinaire rigidity that takes

up an adversary position towards all who do not wholly endorse one's views and goals implies political immaturity.

Democratic decision making is as public a process as possible, and officials are expected to publish their reasons for action wherever this can be done without jeopardizing the future. But all major political decisions prove to be both complex in themselves and controversial in the community. This is inescapable for at least three reasons.

First, everyone's knowledge of the facts of every case is partial and selective.

Second, values, priorities, and opinions of the relative importance of long- and short-term results will vary. Think, for instance, of the debates that go on about conserving the environment.

Third, calculations of consequences, particularly unintended and undesired consequences, will vary too, and many actions that seem right to some will seem wrong to others because they predict different consequences. Because executive decisions regularly have unwelcome by-products, they become choices between evils—attempts, that is, to choose the least evil and avoid evils that are greater. Think, for example, of the debate about using large-scale nuclear devices in war.

The Christian citizen must accept that in politics no black-and-white answers are available, but God wills simply that all be led by the highest ideals and ripest wisdom that they can discover. The case of Solomon (1 Kings 3) shows that God's gift to rulers takes the form of wisdom to cope creatively with what comes, rather than ready-made solutions to all problems.

What Should the Christian Citizen Do?

The New Testament does not speak about active political participation, for the very good reason that this was not an option for first-century believers. The Roman Empire was not a democracy, and many if not most Christians were not Roman citizens. They were a small minority from the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, and were viewed as eccentric deviants from the older eccentricity of Judaism. They had no political influence, nor any prospect of gaining any. (It took a longer period than the 200 years of American independence before Christians secured even political protection; prior to Constantine, their faith was illegal, and they lived everywhere under spasmodic persecution.)

So the only politically significant things they could do were pay their taxes (Matt. 17:24–27; 22:15–21; Romans 13:6–7), pray for their rulers (1 Tim. 2:1–4), and keep the peace (Rom. 12:18; 1 Thess. 5:13–15).

Present-day representative democracy, however, opens the door to a wider range of political possibilities and thereby requires of us more in the way of responsible commitment than circumstances required in New Testament times.

That commitment may be summarized:

1. All should keep informed; otherwise we cannot judge well about issues, vote well for candidates, or pray well for rulers. Political ignorance is never a Christian virtue.
 2. All should pray for those in power, as 1 Timothy 2:1–4 directs. The secret efficacy of prayer, as Scripture reveals it, is enormous.
 3. All should vote in elections and referendums, whenever expressions of public opinion are called for. We should be led in our voting by issues rather than personalities, and not by single issues viewed in isolation, but by our vision of total community welfare. This is one way, real if small, in which we may exert influence as the world's salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16).
 4. Some should seek political influence, by debating, writing, and working within the political party with which they are in nearest agreement. Clergy should not ordinarily do this, since it will be a barrier to the acceptance of their ministry by people who disagree with their politics. It is, however, very desirable that lay people with political interest should be encouraged to see the gaining and exerting of political influence as a field of Christian service, alongside the fields of church life, worship, and witness, with which they are likely at present to be more familiar.
 5. Some should accept a political vocation. Who should do this? Those in whom interest, ability, and opportunity coincide, and on whom no rival career has a stronger claim; those with a vision for improving man's lot globally, advancing international peace, replacing unprincipled discrimination with justice, and furthering public decency; those, finally, who are prepared to work hard, with patience, humility, tolerance, and integrity, fleeing fanaticism, riding rebuffs, and putting the public interest before their own. The Bible histories mentioned earlier show that God wants some of his servants as professional politicians, leading and shaping society well, and the discovery that one is fitted for the role is a *prima facie* summons from God to go ahead and embrace it.
- Let none, however, be starry-eyed at this point: The choice is costly. The political path is rough traveling. The goldfish bowl of public life exposes one constantly to pitiless criticism, and to live there requires resilience and involves major self-sacrifice. As Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard have written: "The work is often thankless and discouraging, and it sometimes means psychological strain and heartbreak for those involved in it. The problems are difficult, and, no matter what a politician does, invariably someone will be dissatisfied and complain about it. Every person in the community has the right to criticize the acts of any public official, and the critics have the advantage of hindsight, a privilege denied the decision-maker.... From a personal standpoint, political endeavor places heavy demand upon one's time, family and financial resources. Many friends will automatically assume that an individual is in politics for some ulterior motive, and they will reveal this by the knowing look or sly remark ..."[+] Politics is a power game, and the envy, hatred, malice, and self-seeking duplicity, which the power game regularly draws out of the sinful human heart, is too familiar to need comment here. No politician of principle can expect an easy passage, certainly not the Christian.

But who ever thought that the fulfilling of any aspect of Christian vocation would be easy? The words with which Sir Frederick Catherwood ends his book *The Christian Citizen* are worth frequent pondering:

“We must be humble and not opinionated. We must be prepared to find that we are sometimes quite wrong and be able to admit it. We serve our fellow-men because of our love for a Lord who gave his life for us, a debt which, however well we serve, we can never repay. So whatever we do, we do it from a sense of duty and because it is right. We do not, like the cults, claim instant satisfaction. We do not, like the salesmen, guarantee success. The Christian’s time-span is not mortal. One sows and another reaps. One labors and another enters into his labors. One day with God is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. The Christian knows the meaning of patience and endurance. But he also knows the meaning of action.[+] This is the right formula for Christian politics, just because it is the right formula for every single part of the Christian life.

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