

## The Gospel & True Citizenship: Part 1

1 Peter 2:9-25

*“...that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”*

**Introduction:** You may have noticed that we are in the midst of a quad annual ritual in a democratic republic: its *presidential election time*. The role of POTUS in our country is fundamental to the direction of the country, where an elected official has given authority to operate, but within the confines of a three branch government. Every four years in November we recognize the pivotal nature of who the next President is, but this year **seems, or at least feels, more pivotal than ever**. Maybe it's the growing sense of polarization or the lack of decorum and trust among the candidates themselves, but this year feels different. It begs questions:

*Who should we vote for? What's going to happen after all the ballots (whenever that happens) are counted? What will reality be if \_\_\_\_\_ gets elected? What does all this mean for the next 4 years and beyond? What do we do with other believers who vote differently? What are we leaving to our kids? Are we watching the crumbling of capitalism and the way of life America has enjoyed the last centuries? What is our church doing about it? What SHOULD we do about it?*

We are tempted with these questions to pin our hope for the future on a “positive” outcome of an election, or live in fear and negative reaction based on a “negative” one. We can get lulled into thinking that if certain results swing a certain way, then maybe everything will work out just fine. But politics and elections are like the rest of the Christian life: *there is **complexity** when it comes to living in a fallen world as we await something better in the future*. God has not set up a *theocracy* right now, though Christ will reign on the earth one day. We know that **politics or government** is not the answer to the problems in the world, though it is used by God for His purposes. As believers we have responsibility to obey God AND obey government, which often puts us in tension. Involvement in political processes is a blessing to be enjoyed (which has not been historically enjoyed by a majority of the world) but not a God given right. We should be informed voters, both in the issues and the Biblical grid to think through, yet we know that no amount of law or policy can change the human heart.

So the question we want to grapple with today, based on the world we live is this: *how should we then live?*

***Our greatest influence in our culture and political realm is NOT our voting guide but rather our **witness in the world.*****

There are a few **overall Biblical principles** we should remember going into any and every election season, as well as anytime we think about politics:

- **God is sovereign over the nations** – Even a prideful ruler like Nebuchadnezzar had to be humbled by God until he could say, “till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will” (Dan. 4:25), and remembered that “the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will and sets over it the lowliest of men.” (Dan. 4:17). We are reminded that God is sovereign when a prideful king sits on the throne, and that God

dictates what happens with nations. This means that no matter what happens in November, God is the one who was truly ruling.

- **God appoints all rulers** – God is the One who changes times and seasons, He removes kings and sets up kings (Dan. 2:21), which means God is the One who counts all the ballots. “For there is **no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.**” (Rom. 13:1). No matter what happens, we know that God is in control, He is still building His church, and nothing will stand in its way. We can have **confidence** that whoever is leading this country is doing so under God’s divine appointment.
- **Jesus is Lord & King** – Lord is the name that God gave Jesus after He died and rose again (Phil. 2:9), and there is a day coming that every knee will bow and tongue confess that reality (Phil. 2:10). By Him all things were created, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things **were created through Him and FOR HIM** (Col. 1:16). Jesus Christ is preeminent, has put all things under His feet, and will one day rule physically as king.
- **Christians pray for politicians and governmental rulers** – 1 Tim. 2:1-2 minces no words and leaves no doubt as to what is a primary interaction between Christians, the church, and government, and it is **resounding that we pray**. Scriptures silence on other interaction does not mean we should not engage in protests, rallies, debates, voting guides, blogging, posting on social media, or watching the news. But it DOES MEAN it gives us clarity to a **primary participation**. If you have spent more time arguing over politics, stressing over results, or posting on social media then you have in prayer for the candidates themselves, we are doing it wrong.

Heading into this election season, there are 3 things to remember:

**Remember who we are as a church** (1 Pet. 2:9-10):

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into light.** Once you were not a people, but now you are **God's people**; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

**Political situation the church found itself in was NOT PRETTY -**

The Bible was written in a certain time, space, and historical situation, given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to men to write down (2 Pet. 1:21). Because of this, we believe that the truth of God's Word is **authoritative, sufficient, and inerrant**, and thus **relevant and sufficient for all of life and godliness** (2 Pet. 1:3). The first epistle that Peter wrote was given to a scattered, suffering, and confused church who needed encouragement to trust the Lord and cling to HOPE. But it was also written during a time of a **dictatorship**, when Roman rulers had almost absolute power (until someone in their family killed them), and with believers or the church having little to no hope or dream to change the governmental system. *Does this invalidate 1 Peter to a group of believers living in a democratic republic?* By no means. It actually gives great insight into the way the church should act in the world.

Just for a brief bit of context, remember that during the reign of **Nero**, he started (at least he was greatly suspected of starting it) a fire in 64 A.D. that burned a quarter of the city of Rome (probably with a baby gender reveal). He had big plans for the open space. He wanted to build an enormous palace with a 100 foot statue of himself. **Tacitus**, a Roman historian, reported that Nero placed the blame for the

conflagration on Christians, an easy target that gave him the cover of innocence. But he did not stop with the blame game. He rounded up Christians and created exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations. They were convicted, mocked, covered in the skins of beasts, torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination when daylight had expired. (Tacitus, *The Annals*, XV. 44).

In other words, if there was ever a time that the message would have been **fight back, run away, hide, or work to legally proclaim your innocence**, Peter instead gave a message of faith, hope, and love, doggedly determined to follow the example of Jesus who willingly faced death as the ultimate INNOCENT (1 Pet. 2:21-22). As we examine the following Scripture and realize our political situation may be worsening, we also remember that no matter how bad it gets or good it is, these truths are timeless for the Church.

#### **Purpose of the church is to PROCLAIM -**

The church is a group of "called out ones", those called out of the world and into the possession of God Himself. This language of "chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and sovereign possession" is almost identical to that of OT Israel (see Deut. 7:6; Isa. 43:20-21), which makes sense since Peter was writing primarily to a Jewish audience. Some have believed that promises like this in the NT means that the church has replaced Israel in God's program. Yet we know that God still has a plan and purpose for national Israel in the future, and the church has the mysterious yet glorious makeup of Jews and non-Jews who come together in Christ in the beautiful entity called the church.

Notice that the church is **distinct from the world, in its makeup, holiness, and ownership**. This is not a mere social club or paltry gathering of those who give marginal time of gathering, but a people that **God chose, bought, and owns**. But also note that there is a greater purpose of our being called out from the world: **we are to PROCLAIM THE EXCELLENCIES OF CHRIST!** That is our purpose. We do this as **worship, but we also do this as evangelism**. Worship is something we will do into eternity, but evangelism has a shelf life. Our life and purpose is to magnify, make much of, and make known the glories of Jesus Christ!. This means that our life will have much by way of responsibility and activity, and we will all have distinct paths that we walk, but the one thing that cannot be neglected or ignored is making Jesus Christ known.

*What is the motivation for this?* Like Israel in the OT, we were nothing but those who were wondering aimlessly in the darkness and deserving wrath, and God made us His people, shined the light of Jesus in our eyes and heart, and gave us His mercy. We were beggars who at the brink of starvation lifted our heads to see the banquet feast of His Son. We have tasted of the bread, and we just want to point others to it.

**Remember who we are in this world** (1 Pet. 2:11):

*Beloved, I urge you as **sojourners and exiles** to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.*

#### **Primary citizenship is of primary importance -**

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul talked to them about citizenship. We know and understand this concept. Being born in a country gives you automatic citizenship, while some have dual citizenship as they have gone through the process each country sets up. Citizenship carries with it **rights and privileges** that non-citizens do not enjoy. When I travel overseas I not only carry a distinct passport but am cognizant of where the US embassy is in a country.

So Paul described Christians as having a **new citizenship, one that exists in heaven** (Phil. 3:20). This means a couple of things:

1) **We await something better as we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ** - We look forward to a city that is **better**, a heavenly one (Heb. 11:10, 16), knowing that the one we live in now will not last (Heb. 13:14)

2) **We do not have a theocracy now but we will** - There is a day that will come that Christ will bring justice and make all things right (Rev. 21:1-5), but that governmental structure is yet to come. That means that we are NOT trying to set up heaven on earth or Christ's kingdom now, but that will be something that Christ will establish when He returns again.

3) **We live as those with dual citizenship, but one is clearly secondary** - Our primary focus of **transformation is that which takes place in the heart of mankind, not that happens in the world around us**. True change WILL ALWAYS come in culture when there are more and more true Christians there, but when Constantine tried to set up a "Christian kingdom" in 313 A.D in Rome, it did not lead to the thriving but rather the weakening of the church. But this does not mean that Christians should **retreat, surrender, or capitulate** in the culture its planted. Christianity and the church can **thrive in any and all political realms**. Paul was keenly aware of his Roman citizenship, and leveraged it for the safety of the church at Philippi (Acts 16:37-38) and **appealing to Caesar** (Acts 25:11) to get passage to Rome. Perhaps the greatest example of the understanding of proper dual citizenship was the **prophet and statesman Daniel**. At 14-15 years old, he determined not to go against God's Law while captured by a foreign power, which led to God's blessing. He rose the ranks of political power NOT BY PLAYING THE POLITICAL GAME, but by trusting himself to his God, living in integrity, and acting consistently. Even being outflanked by his opponents, Daniel continued to pray openly, **as he had done previously** (Dan. 6:10), making petition and plea before his God.

We must remember that our primary citizenship, along with their rights and privileges, belong in **heaven, not here**. Though we may enjoy certain blessings as a dual citizen, these are all to be geared for the proclamation of the excellencies of Jesus, not to be clutched as divine rights.

**Purity is primary in the proclamation of the gospel** -

The next part is almost more fascinating. In the midst of being downcast, persecuted, and despairing, the **main duty or command was for the church was to be morally excellent, to fight against their sin!** I did not see that one coming! But it makes perfect sense. When we are weary, down, frustrated, angry, scared, or basically all the things that we are feeling right now, we are **more susceptible to sin**. **Do you feel that?** Its easier to complain, to justify "little" sins, to form bad habits or to neglect the best ones. Reports are coming in that drinking is up during quarantine, divorce rates may spike, and depression is about to spark like the wildfires of California.

What does this mean for us? If we truly want to be effective in Southern California, it starts with our own holiness and purity. Before we focus on the evils around us, we must put to death what is earthly in us (Col. 3:5)

**Remember how we live matters** (1 Pet. 2:12):

*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your **good deeds and glorify God** on the day of visitation.*

**Practical ministry differentiated from corporate responsibility** -

Purity produces powerful ministry. Peter comes back to the **way that Christians act in the public sphere is of utmost importance**. This means that how we communicate our differences with those in the world and the church matters. Honorable conduct means that we do well when we **listen more than argue, love the person more than the issue, and see those in opposition NOT as the enemy to be fought but**

**as a potential friend to be made.** Peter says it later on, *"in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense (not be defensive) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect."* (1 Pet. 3:15). Not only should we be so compelled by our hope in Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:19), that people want some of what we have, but when we are disagreed with, even in angry and nasty ways, we treat people **gently, with dignity and respect.** In our present climate of polarization, one of the easiest, clearest, and most distinctive ways to show Christ is HOW WE TREAT PEOPLE IN DISAGREEMENT.

There's one more important thing to keep in mind when we talk about our public engagement. We must understand the difference between the mission of the church and the responsibility and life of the individuals within the church. As a corporate entity, we have a mission that is given Biblically, but that mission is expressed in a million different ways as the church scatters. In other words, the mission of our church is to glorify God, to make disciples, to equip for ministry, and to send for the harvest. And though the mission of the church is not to end heinous things like abortion (we'll talk more about this next week), the church is made up of individuals who have God given talents, abilities, and passions to engage in all kinds of good conduct in culture.

This happens on multiple levels. It happens at the level of **vocation**, where those that engage in the arts in Hollywood, build cars, are public servants, lay flooring, are plumbers, teachers, repertory therapists, or businessmen that sell insurance do it all as an act of worship. They do the best job they can to honor Christ, to make the best products, to treat customers with dignity and respect, and to create beautiful things. In this there is no secular/sacred divide, as everyone of us worships God in our jobs, whether we get to open the Bible or not.

This also happens at the level of **passion and service in the community around.** Some have a passion to teach in women's prison, to help pregnant moms who are considering the termination of a pregnancy, some as coaches, or befriending a neighbor, or foster care, or working to overturn laws. I think about one of our families whose son was born with a rare heart condition that required multiple surgeries and created a whole new life for their family. They are actively involved in this unique community of other "heart families", and have the ability to encourage, bless, and potentially comfort in Christ in a unique way. **Does this mean that the mission of our church is to help this beautiful community? Yes and no.** It is not the mission for everyone, but the opportunity for a family in our church to accomplish our mission in this unique sphere, the same types of spheres we all have, whether formal or informal, through a structured ministry or simply interpersonally with neighbors, friends, and co-workers.

**Personal example extremely effective** - The world is thirsty for people who live out what they believe with conviction and hope. When the former President of Harvard was asked to sum up the students at that institution, his comment was "emptiness". People are not thirsty for political hot-takes, but for genuine believability.

I'll leave us with this story this morning. I was talking to another friends this week (yes, these are real people and REAL friends), and they were telling me a story of the experience they had while camping. They struck up a conversation with another couple, and over time, they were asked about their marriage. My friend said they had been married for over 35 years (I actually can't remember the exact number and don't want to get in trouble for it being too high). The other couple was astonished. They noted that there was genuine love and patience exhibited, characteristics that this other couple had never tasted for a sustained period of time. This lead to more conversation, ongoing correspondence, and the promise of future interaction where the reason for the hope that they have in Jesus Christ can be given.

Our main and essential influence in our culture is not our voting guide, though we will vote and be active to the degree we can, but it is **our witness and proclamation of Jesus Christ**. *Is that what you are compelled to do?*

Next week we will look at 1 Peter 2:13-17 and how this plays out more specifically in our culture.