

National Citizenship and Heavenly Citizenship

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The topic chosen for this year, “Dispensationalism, Politics, and Culture,” sets an appropriate context for a biblical discussion of voting in this election. Is there direction for voting consistent with what God is doing at this time in history? Is there any revelation consistent with a dispensational point of view about voting? In this paper, I’d like to address the issue as a biblicist, rather than as a systematic theologian or as a historian of the church.

What initially intrigued me was the dispensational emphasis on citizenship in heaven and citizenship on earth. Charles Ryrie quoted L. S. Chafer, who accentuated the distinction between the church as a heavenly people and Israel as an earthly people. He wrote, “God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with an earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism, while the other is related to heaven with a heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved which is Christianity.”¹ However, by the time I entered seminary as a student, this distinction was no longer an emphasis, or even included in the discussion.

In a recent study of *Ephesians*, I have come to see that the epistle speaks of the church as “blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Further, the theme is developed following the resurrection and ascension of the Lord and speaks of his body, the church “not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:21). In addition, *Philippians* speaks of a Christian on earth with a heavenly citizenship (Phil. 1:27 and 3:20). This recognition of a distinction between this age and the age to come is dispensational. In the remainder of the Pauline corpus, *Romans* also speaks of Christians as they are responsible under Gentile governments.

Thus, the subject of this essay will be the civic responsibility to vote. What is the national responsibility? Does the Christian receive any unique direction from Scripture? Is there influence due to their citizenship in heaven?

Earthly Citizenship

Human government is an aspect of God’s governance first introduced in Genesis 9:1-7; to be incorporated in man’s responsibility since “the LORD saw that human wickedness was widespread on the earth.” So, “the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth and was deeply grieved. Then the LORD said, ‘I will wipe mankind whom I created off the face of the earth, together with the

¹ Louis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 107; qtd. by Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 39.

animals ... for I regret that I made them.' Noah, however, found favor with the LORD" (Gen. 6:5-8).

So, following the worldwide flood, in which Noah, his sons, and their families were saved, the LORD ordained a human governing authority to protect from the shedding of human blood by either animals or fellow humans (Gen. 9:1-5). The LORD decreed that a governing authority would protect from the widespread wickedness on earth:

“Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans his blood will be shed,
for God made humans **in his image**” (9:6).

Then Paul, generations later, pronounced the believer's responsibility to human government (Rom. 13:1-7). Even though human government may not be a distinctively dispensational feature, it remains a believer's responsibility. In Paul's day, he lived under the Roman governmental authority and pronounced the basic injunction: **submit to Government authority** (13:1). While Paul speaks about the whole governing authority, my limited focus concerns the **voting** privilege specified in a democratic government. While nothing is said directly about how that privilege ought to be exercised, **submission** does include voting which ought to be exercised as the Governing authority prescribes.

However, submission is in recognition of a more basic fact, that “there is no authority if it is not bestowed by God”. Then it follows that “God is the actual **Agent** in establishing the governing authorities. God does not merely **allow** certain men to rule. He **arranges** it.”² And that arrangement necessarily includes humans who are evil, without God being responsible for the evil. So, in a democratic government, God establishes the authorities through the voting electorate.

How does this fact of evil in the authorities governing influence a believer's vote? First, since God ultimately arranges the world order allowing evil, a voter cannot avoid evil in the candidates. Second, since voters do not have access to God's particular purposes at a given time in history, the believer's vote is to be based on a general knowledge of God's will. As a dispensationalist, that involves God's purposes in the church age. “So pray for the authorities so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God ... who wants everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:2-4). Further, Paul **used his citizenship** to be delivered from the hatred of the Jewish people in the Temple (Acts 21:15-24:21). In addition, his citizenship provided for travel to Rome (Acts 25:10-28:16). So, voting ought to be consistent with what “we perceive is the

² Zane C Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Soc., 2013), 383.

Lord's will in the church" (Acts 19:21). So as believers, we ought to remain **subject** to the authorities, "since God rules in the kingdom of mankind and gives it to whomever he chooses" (Dan. 4:25, cf. 4:17, 32).

The second injunction is that **resistance to earthly authority is resistance to God himself** (13:2). This raises a question for people living in modern democracies. "There is a temptation to categorize laws as good or bad, where the bad category furnishes justification for disobedience."³ But even resisting bad laws resists God.

But there is a further clarification that is helpful. "Unless the law runs counter to a **direct divine command**, there is no biblical authorization to disobey it."⁴ So a law, like the law permitting abortion, is an evil law. But the law doesn't directly command a citizen to abort an unborn child. Nor does the law command one to participate as an aid in another's choice to abort. There have been nations, like China, that used abortion to manage population growth.

Does the presence of such evil laws warrant social activism? Activism seems to be a personal choice rather than a Christian responsibility. Since the law permits abortion, but doesn't compel it, further accents the fact that the choice is personal. Such activism can take various actions; from attempts to prevent abortions from being provided, to the provision of adoption as a replacement for abortion. What does submission to government authorities entail? In making the decision to be an activist the Christian responsibility on communicating the Gospel ought to strongly influence our decision. Of course, the opening of an opportunity to participate in government ought to be considered, as William Wilberforce did in changing the law of slavery.

How should Christians vote for candidates in their position on abortion? Do they have an **option** or a **duty** to vote on the basis of this one issue? Since the issue involves "the shedding of human blood," it would be a **duty** to vote against a candidate who would support abortion. Of course, as already recognized, in our fallen world, any vote would include some degree of compromise. Yet it is difficult to see a more necessary issue than the preservation of human life as the one issue.

Paul's warning against resistance of God's ordinances is very forceful: "His words are a salutary warning that resistance to governing authorities would ... (subject) ... the believer within the range of God's wrath."⁵

Heavenly Citizenship

The term **heaven/s** is used in at least two distinct senses in Scripture. One sense is **heavens** as used in the creation account (Gen. 1:1-2:3). It is a physical

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 367.

realm beyond the earth which was created by God. Like the earth, it has three dimensions, which frame the directions in space. The three dimensions provide the possibility of identification of a location in space in the heavenlies. The same dimensions serve to locate places on earth.

There is another sense in which **heaven** is used to refer to a spiritual realm where God has His principle dwelling (John 14:1-3). Even though God is omnipresent in the physical heavens of creation, yet His presence remains unknown by natural means in the physical heavens. Jesus said, “not that anyone has seen the Father except the One who is from God. He has seen the Father” (John 6:46). The One who is from God was born of a natural mother, Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, he said, “unless one is born from above (or again), he cannot see the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Nicodemus failed to make a distinction between a natural and a spiritual realm. He thought Jesus spoke of a second birth in the physical realm; “can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?” (3:4). Then Jesus distinguishes between the two realms; “whatever is born of the flesh is flesh and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit” (3:6). So, one who is born from above has a physical life and a spiritual eternal life, which lives co-exist.

When **heaven** refers to the spiritual realm, one speaks of it as ‘up’. It is separate from the earth, but not located in the physical heavens. Jesus said He would “ascend to the Father” (John 6:61, 62). He ascended to leave the earth and be associated with the presence of God. The reality of this spiritual realm is known not by natural means (sight, feel, or taste) but by the words of the Lord who speaks of that realm of existence (John 6:63-65).

In Philippians, Paul speaks of a believer’s **heavenly citizenship** (1:27 and 3:20). It is related to Paul’s revelation of a believer’s being blessed “with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Believers are blessed in the heavens in Christ, since God has seated Christ at his right hand in the heavens (Eph. 1:20). Then God “appointed Christ as **head** over everything for the **church**, which is his **body**, the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way” (1:22; 23). This appointment is to “one body,” the universal church (4:4 and 3:2-12).

Citizenship is translated from the Greek word *politeuō*, which is based on the noun meaning *city; polis*. “The noun actually refers to **citizenship**, and the verb means ‘to conduct oneself worthily as a citizen of the city-state.’”⁶ The interpretation rests on Paul’s use of **citizenship in the heavens**, as a metaphor of what realm? Boice concluded: “Christians at Philippi are to conduct themselves worthily as citizens, he is not thinking of a literal city to which his readers belong.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 101.

He is thinking of the **Church**.”⁷ Lightfoot, on the other hand, understands Paul; “do your duty as good citizens of the heavenly **kingdom**”⁸

Lightfoot’s conclusion that the realm is the kingdom of heaven finds support in **Matthew**. Jesus came preaching, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17). **Heaven** refers to the realm of the kingdom as his prayer later indicated: “Our Father in heaven ... your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in **heaven**” (Mt. 6:9-11). So, there are two realms, **heaven**, where the kingdom reigns, and **earth**, where one prays that the kingdom would reign. Earlier in the sermon on the mount, Jesus had promised that those blessed would possess (theirs is the kingdom) the kingdom (5:3 and 5:10). Such **possession may** refer to **citizenship**, even though they had not yet entered the kingdom.

However, a question arises about the relationship between the universal church in heaven and the kingdom of heaven. If Christ is the **head** of the body, united with the universal church in the heavens, and He is the **king** seated on the Father’s throne in heaven, then Christ reveals the relationship. In the present age, Christ is enthroned in heaven and believers are citizens of the kingdom in heaven, yet to come. In the age to come, Christ will descend to earth to establish his reign on earth (Matt. 24:15-31). The body of Christ will rule with Him and the elect of Israel will be the realm who are ruled on earth (Dan. 7:25-27).

In the present age, how does the believer’s heavenly citizenship affect the believer’s responsibility on earth? In the present age, believers are members of local churches on earth. The church at Philippi, to whom Paul wrote, believers shared the responsibility. As “**citizens of heaven**,” they were to live worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27). Paul had described himself as an “**ambassador in chains**,” so “that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:20, 19). Being an ambassador is certainly included in living worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then Paul added to the Philippians “For it has been granted to you on Christ’s behalf not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since they are encouraged in the same struggle...” (1:29-30a).

In addition, Paul spoke of his **goal** in life: “to know **Christ** and the power of the resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, assuming that he will somehow reach the resurrection from the dead” (3:10, 11). Then, in view of his own **goal**, he speaks to the church. “Our **citizenship is in heaven** and we eagerly wait for the Savior from there” (3:20). This focus of living on earth with a hope of an imminent return of the Savior—this is a dispensational emphasis.

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 105.

In view of Paul's goal to know Christ (3:10), this hope of the return of Christ anticipates the completion of his goal: "He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body..." (3:21). Thus, our life in this age is to be one of **pursuit** to know Christ and is to be one of **expectation** that Christ will complete what he called us to accomplish.

Christian Citizenship and Voting

National Citizenship

Voting is a privilege for the citizen which Paul didn't have under Roman governance, when writing Romans 13. So, nothing is said directly about voting. Does this mean that Paul has nothing to say about voting? Or, are there implications based on what Paul says about governance? I would propose that there are three implications:

1. Vote for both the philosophy and policies of governance that are favorable to a believer's **submission to that government**.
2. Don't vote for individual candidates based solely on the question of character, unless the flaw of character disqualifies the candidate
3. Vote for the candidate that opposes evil practices in the country. Since no set of policies are perfect, priority ought to be given to a preferable set of policies.

Spiritual Citizenship

A heavenly citizenship says nothing about a political solution to governance in this age. Rather these issues await to be addressed when the kingdom of heaven is established on earth. Yet there are two principles, that may influence governance in this age.

1. The Gospel, for which believers in the church are to live worthily, can bring God's power of change to citizens lives in a nation. Yet the Gospel is not a political tool. Rather the Gospel is a word from God to bring salvation to sinners. Such salvation is primarily for reconciliation to God and only secondarily about changing the character of a nation
2. Hope for world-wide change awaits the second advent of Christ. This implies that every historical governance will be limited as we pursue a more perfect union. This also means that the replacement movement is flawed with a fatal flaw. Further, the post-millennial hope of some believers is destined to failure.