

CITIZENSHIP

Contents:

- The History of Citizenship
- The Secularization of Citizenship
- Recovering Christian Citizenship
- Citizens of Two Realms
- References and Resources

To be a citizen is to hold a political office: not an elected office, to be sure, but an important office of public responsibility nonetheless. But what is citizenship? Where does it come from? And what, if anything, does it have to do with Christian faith? What is the connection between one's earthly citizenship and citizenship in God's kingdom? Or is there none?

The History of Citizenship

The idea and practice of citizenship originated in ancient Greece, not in Israel. But biblical religion had a big influence on the development of the meaning of citizenship in the West. The citizen in certain Greek city-states was someone who had a voice in shaping the common life of the community, especially in making its laws through a deliberative process. Most people in those city-states were not citizens. Citizens gained their status by virtue of their education, wealth or leadership prowess. The role of the citizen came to be distinguished from other affiliations and classes of people, such as cultic officials, tradespeople, warriors, farmers and slaves. Citizenship meant having the responsibility and privileges of membership in what was thought to be the highest form of human community, namely, the political community.

The children of Israel exercised many responsibilities similar to those exercised by citizens of Greek city-states and in early republican Rome. However, Israel was structured not as a city-state but as the covenanted people of God, living under a legal order handed down by God to a nation made up of many family clans. Human responsibility for the common laws that governed Israel as a whole belonged to judges, arbiters, conciliators, courts and eventually kings. But everyone of the children of Israel was a member of God's covenanted people through whom God was revealing his will for all nations. The community of which they were a part was more profound and historically far-reaching than a Greek city-state.

Israel, as we know from the Bible, was conquered by Assyria and Babylon more than five hundred years before Christ. Between about 400 B.C. and A.D. 300 the independent Greek city-states and republican Rome also came to an end. Massive empires took their place and essentially smothered the earlier meaning of citizenship and Israelite clan membership. Most people became mere subjects, which is to say, they became subject to an imperial authority and were required simply to obey.

Several important developments between about A.D. 300 and the Protestant Reformation (which began in the 1500s) led to new understandings of citizenship. First, the early church, which

had no political authority in the first centuries after Christ, gradually grew to become the most influential institution in the collapsing Roman Empire and in the feudal period that followed. The Roman Catholic Church gained so much moral and legal authority that it succeeded in subordinating political authority to the church and to the church's canon law—a law that functioned not merely as internal church law but in many respects as public international law for all the lands where the church's authority extended. Consequently, an important distinction was drawn between higher ecclesiastical authority and lower political authorities.

For the most part, until the time of the Reformation, a top-down conception of political authority dominated in this church-led culture, which reached its height in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, called the High Middle Ages. The Roman Catholic Church absorbed the hierarchical pattern from imperial Rome. The idea was that God granted authority to the church (eventually to the leading church official—the bishop of Rome), and the church then delegated political authority to lower, nonecclesiastical officials. However, beginning late in the Middle Ages, a rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman documents led to a renewed interest in the work of Aristotle, the Stoics and other ancient philosophers. One consequence was a revival of the idea of citizenship.

Both inside the church and in wider political circles a number of people began to argue for a bottom-up origin of authority. In one way or another, officials—whether in the church or the empire—ought to be accountable to the people. From this point of view, God delegated authority to the whole church, not just to priests, and to the body politic, not merely to the rulers. Great battles ensued, both intellectual and military, between those claiming the divine right of kings and those arguing for some kind of popular or national sovereignty. These battles contributed to the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire and to the splintering of the church, neither of which could withstand the impact of Reformation theology and the increasingly volatile campaigns for national independence. By the 1700s new political entities had come into existence—the first versions of modern states. In some cases these states refused to subordinate themselves to the Catholic Church. And inside many of them, various efforts were made to redefine the state as a limited, law-bound trust in which the rulers would have to be accountable to the people.

One line of argument for citizenship in the new states was deeply rooted in Christian faith. Its advocates continued to believe that God is the source of all authority on earth, but they also believed that God's grant of authority to governments, for example, should be recognized as having the purpose of establishing justice rather than perpetuating autocracies or monarchies. People should not merely be subject to authority but should be free to participate in holding governments accountable to God. Furthermore, there is nothing sacred about a monarchy, and there is no reason why political authorities should be subordinate to church authorities. Different officeholders have different kinds of authority from God, and each one should exercise that authority in a way that is accountable to the people—whether those people are members of the church or citizens in the state.

The Secularization of Citizenship

At the same time that many Christians were trying to rethink (and reform) politics away from the hierarchical patterns that had dominated the church and most lower governments, another stream of thought was also emerging. Many thinkers during the Renaissance and on through the

eighteenth-century Enlightenment wanted to recover political authority entirely for “the people.” From this point of view, God and the church were part of the problem, not part of the solution. Political freedom and responsibility of citizens would be impossible to achieve as long as people appealed to God or the church for help. Citizenship would have to arise from the people themselves. Sovereignty would have to be grounded originally in the people and then delegated in limited amounts to the rulers chosen by citizens. Rulers—governments—would have to be subject to citizens, not the other way around.

It should be clear to anyone in our day that this line of argument for citizenship won out over the milder form of argument proposed by many Christian reformers. Today, in most democracies and modern states, the belief is that political sovereignty originates with the people, that rulers are subject to the people and that citizenship is an entirely secular affair, unrelated to God. Even in the United States, which was greatly influenced by Puritan and other Christian immigrants, the Constitution grounded political authority in the people. The Declaration of Independence may trace our inalienable rights and freedoms back to the Creator, but the American system makes government entirely accountable to the people, not to God.

Recovering Christian Citizenship

What then shall we say, from a Christian point of view, about the meaning of citizenship today? First, I would urge Christians to try to understand all of life as directly accountable to God. Perhaps most of our employers, government officials and leaders in science, art and the media will not agree with this judgment, but there is no alternative from a Christian point of view. Not only does the apostle Paul say that governments are ordained by God (Romans 13), but the whole of biblical teaching makes this clear. It is not just the church, the people of God, who are dependent on God; the entire creation depends on the Creator, and all human authority comes from God.

Some Christians interpret the passage about Caesar in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 12:13–17) to suggest that Jesus was separating human civic obligations from the obligations owed to God. But when Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17), he does not say that what belongs to Caesar does not belong to God. Instead, we should interpret this passage as we would the passage in Ephesians where Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephes. 6:1). Children should obey their parents, but obedience to parents is part of what children owe to God. So also in political life: citizens owe honor and taxes to government (Caesar), but they do so as part of their total obligation to God. Or, to put it another way, Caesar deserves taxes from citizens, but both Caesar and the citizens together owe all of their political/governmental responsibilities to God. Caesar deserves taxes, but God deserves everything, including the dutiful service we render to Caesar when we pay Caesar our taxes. This is why the apostles were bold, when push came to shove, to say, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29), even when some of those men happened to be government officials.

The error of modern secularism, therefore, is not in affirming the distinction between church and state, but rather in trying to disconnect ordinary life from God. The error is not in the revival of citizenship and the demise of top-down hierarchicalism. Rather, the mistake is in believing that

government's accountability to citizens can be sustained only if both government and citizens disconnect themselves from God.

Staying in tune with biblical revelation about God's diversified creation (including diverse kinds of human responsibility in marriage, family, agriculture, government, industry, commerce, the arts and more), Christians have every reason to accept the differentiation of modern society. Family life may legitimately be distinguished from various professions, as may science from art, politics from church life and so forth. This great diversity of social life holds together under God as a single creation from God; it need not be organized hierarchically under an all-powerful emperor or church. Citizenship is different from parenting or engineering or pastoral ministry. Christians may accept the distinct, distinguishable responsibility of citizenship without imagining that it must be disconnected from the all-embracing allegiance owed to God.

Citizens of Two Realms

Citizenship in two realms is where the important connection between earthly citizenship and citizenship in God's kingdom comes in. Another analogy might be helpful. Christians should have no difficulty recognizing that a family member—a child in the Smith family, for example—can at the same time be a child in God's family. The two are not incompatible. In fact, biblically speaking, the earthly family is supposed to be an image of the family of God. The same can be said about citizenship in the United States of America or in any other country. Fulfilling one's earthly civic responsibilities is a duty owed to God as well as to fellow citizens. Believers who recognize God's supreme rule in Jesus Christ and, by faith, thereby accept citizenship in God's kingdom are people who must learn to perform their civic duties as unto the Lord.

There are correct ways and wrong ways to act as a citizen, just as there are good and bad ways to act as a child in one's home. Christians must be willing to obey God rather than earthly rulers if the rulers seek to compel an obedience that radically conflicts with obedience to God. But very often the challenge to believers is to perform their civic responsibilities constructively in ways that demonstrate their obedience as citizens in God's kingdom. God has called us in Christ to pursue justice, to seek to live at peace with all people and to love our neighbors. In a complex society such as ours, one of the most important ways to live by this faith as a citizen in God's kingdom is to pursue justice for all neighbors in the political community in which we hold citizenship.

If we now turn to examine the nature of citizenship in the country in which we live, we will discover all kinds of important resources in the biblical tradition to help us. Part of what is good about most constitutional governments today is that they were created over centuries by citizens who were trying to define them as limited authorities. Thankfully, Christians do not stand alone in rejecting totalitarian government, but Christians should recognize that every form of earthly totalitarianism is a mistake because God alone holds total authority over the earth.

As soon as citizens seek to define government's limits, they ought to confront the question about the nature of other types of human authority, outside government. This is often a difficult task for those who reject biblical revelation. Most often they recognize only the authority of individuals and the state. Christians can hold a high view of citizenship in the state while also recognizing that family life, business, church life and other arenas of human responsibility are not reducible to either individual autonomy or a department of state.

When it comes to trying to hold government accountable to its own calling before God, citizenship in a modern state becomes an extremely important calling for the average Christian citizen. Certainly one important way to hold government accountable is through voting in regular elections. Another is to make sure that governments are held accountable to a basic law, a constitution, which government may not abrogate autocratically. The fact that these means of accountability have been built into most democratic states should be accepted with thankfulness, and we should recognize that Christian influences had something to do with their implementation.

Christians should be at the forefront of citizen actions that seek to secure accountable governments through constitutional limits and protections and through regular elections and court reviews. They should also take their civic responsibilities much further than this. Not every Christian is called to be a full-time political activist or government official. But the office of citizen gives one important responsibility nonetheless. Part of that responsibility is somewhat passive: stopping at stoplights, paying taxes and essentially heeding the laws that exist. But good citizenship, from a Christian point of view, must go beyond mere obedience to the law. Laws are not always just; times change, and reforms are required even of good laws. To serve God with heart, soul, strength and mind means to offer up all of life, including one's civic responsibility, to God in service. To do that, Christians must do more than merely go along with the expectations and demands of fellow citizens (even the majority of fellow citizens). Instead, Christians should pursue justice by seeking to influence government through elections and other means, by seeking to revise unjust laws and by helping governments make the proper distinctions among state, church, family, school, business enterprises and other institutions responsible to God. Citizenship is one of the important callings Christians have in a highly differentiated social order, which in its entirety is called to accountability before God.

- » **See also:** LAW
- » **See also:** LOBBYING
- » **See also:** POLITICS
- » **See also:** PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS
- » **See also:** STATES/PROVINCES
- » **See also:** TAXES
- » **See also:** VOTING

References and Resources

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¹ James W. Skillen, "[Citizenship](#)," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A to Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), 144–149.