

Citizenship: Dealing With Secular Authorities

CITIZENSHIP

By

Dr. Gordon Arthur

SERMON FOR SUNDAY MAY 20TH, 2007

Place Written: Canada

Theory: We are called and expected to fulfil our civic duties as fully as is possible without abandoning our allegiance to God: to obey the authorities provided they do not command things contrary to our faith, whether this takes the form of requiring blatant idolatry, as in the Roman Empire, or attempting to prevent preaching and evangelism, as in the case of certain modern governments.

Purpose: Our primary calling is to be faithful to God. This includes such duties and joys as prayer, worship and fellowship and we also have duties to the state, which include obeying the law, paying taxes, living peaceably with others, and participating in the political process where possible by voting, and expressing our views and concerns to our representatives. The purpose is to explore how this works out in practice. Since different faiths express the duties of citizenship differently, I shall restrict myself on this occasion to the religion I know best, Christianity, and concentrate on how a particular Church, in this case the United Methodist Church expresses the facets of good citizenship.

Dear Colleagues,

As people of faith, our primary calling is to be faithful to God. This includes such duties and joys as prayer, worship and fellowship. As citizens, we also have duties to the state, which include obeying the law, paying taxes, living peaceably with others, and participating in the political process where possible by voting, and expressing our views and concerns to our representatives. My aim is to explore how this works out in practice. Since different faiths express the duties of citizenship differently, I shall restrict myself on this occasion to the religion I know best, Christianity, and concentrate on how a particular Church, in this case the United Methodist

Church expresses the facets of good citizenship. As we shall see shortly, this Church is fairly typical in its views. I shall then attempt to place these views in a wider, more global and ecumenical context, and then to offer a few comments. We begin by exploring what the Bible has to say on the subject.

In Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:21-26, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking Him whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, hoping to force him either into fomenting rebellion by saying no, or losing the sympathy of the people by saying yes. His reply, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's", neatly avoids the trap, and establishes the principle that we should be good citizens, but does not spell out in detail what this means. There is, however, more detail on this in the Epistles. In Romans 13:1, Paul states: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." He goes on: "Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due" (Romans 13:7). In Titus 3:1, Titus is charged to "remind [his congregation] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone". Finally, 1 Peter 2:13-14 tells us "for the Lord's sake [to] accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right".

It is therefore clear that we are called and expected to fulfil our civic duties as fully as is possible without abandoning our allegiance to God: to obey the authorities provided they do not command things contrary to our faith, whether this takes the form of requiring blatant idolatry, as in the Roman Empire, or attempting to prevent preaching and evangelism, as in the case of certain modern governments. So how is this calling expressed in the official documents of the United Methodist Church?

United Methodists acknowledge the vital function of government as a principal means for the ordering of society, while at the same time asserting that allegiance to God takes precedence over allegiance to any state. However, they believe a strong political system depends upon the full and willing participation of all its citizens. They support the separation of Church

and state, but maintain that people of faith are as entitled to try to influence the civil authorities as anyone else. Religion and politics cannot be separated entirely. Those who belong to religious groups are also members of secular society. Religious beliefs have moral and social implications, and those who hold them naturally find ways to express this in the political arena. The fact that these convictions are rooted in religious faith neither disqualifies them from the political realm nor gives them any extra weight. United Methodists expect people of faith continually to exert a strong ethical influence upon the state, supporting policies and programmes deemed to be just and opposing policies and programmes that are seen to be unjust. They believe that people of faith have the right and duty to speak and act when public policy enters areas in which basic moral or ethical issues and questions are raised:

The attempt to influence the formation and execution of public policy at all levels of government is often the most effective means available to [religious organisations] to keep before humanity the ideal of a society in which power and order are made to serve the ends of justice and freedom for all people. Through such social action [they] generate new ideas, challenge certain goals and methods, and help rearrange the emphasis on particular values in ways that facilitate the adoption and implementation of specific policies and programs that promote the goals of a responsible society.

They believe that governments and laws should serve God and humanity, and that governments are as subject to God's judgements as individuals are. Citizens must abide by just laws adopted after due process, but, after exhausting all legal recourse, they are entitled to resist laws they deem unjust or those that are used to promote discrimination, provided they do so peacefully, and accept the consequences of their actions.

However, United Methodists acknowledge that governments, like individuals, can and do act in ways that conflict with God's will, thereby perverting their authority. In such situations, people of faith have a responsibility to exercise their prophetic ministries in the service of God by calling the state to account. People of faith must become the conscience of government, in the best sense of the prophetic tradition.

United Methodists assert the duty of religious organisations to support those who suffer because they have taken a stand based on their consciences, and done so without violence. They urge governments to

ensure the civil rights, as defined by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of those facing legal proceedings because they have taken such a stand.

Looking at this from a wider perspective, there is little here that would not be accepted elsewhere, certainly in most Western countries and probably in many other parts of the world. This is perhaps not surprising, since Methodists have traditionally defined themselves by what they do – spreading Scriptural holiness – rather than what they believe.

Other religious groups around the world believe that religious organisations and state have distinct but parallel organisations, and that in spiritual matters religious organisations are not subordinate to the state. Instead, the state has a duty to respect the rights of conscience and religious belief, and to serve God's will of justice and peace for all.

It is similarly widely accepted that people of faith are entitled to campaign against the passing of unjust laws before they are enacted, to resist unjust laws peacefully even if they are passed, and to praise governments when they do the right things and criticise them when they do the wrong things. At least in countries where it is safe to do so, many religious organisations also encourage their members to play a full part in the political process. Again, many such organisations would accept that they have a duty to support those who suffer for acting according to their consciences, and would consider this as part of their mission towards the poor, downtrodden, marginalised and persecuted people in society. In some areas, however, criticising governments may be a very dangerous course of action, but there is a long history of courageous speaking out and action in such areas, even at great personal cost to those involved.

The main point for debate globally would be the separation of religious organisations and state, and this would be questioned principally by Christians in Europe, where established Churches are commonplace, and by many Muslims, who do not always see the state as a distinct secular organisation. The main advantage of establishment is that there is often a ready-made channel for people of faith to offer moral input into the political process. In Britain, the country in Europe about which I know most, for example, senior Church of England bishops have seats in the House of Lords, and therefore have a direct voice and vote in revising legislation

proposed by the British Government in the House of Commons. The main disadvantage is that other groups often feel excluded.

It was just such a situation that prompted the Welsh Anglican dioceses to petition Parliament for disestablishment following a campaign led mainly by other Christians. Their petition was granted and the Church of Wales was set up in 1920. Disestablishment does not seem to have done it any harm. Similarly, no evident harm has come from the Church of England continuing to be established since 1920. In Scotland, however, the established Church is Presbyterian, and has no direct political power, but great moral influence, which perhaps makes it the best example of the benefits of establishment. In any case, most practical discrimination against Roman Catholics, the Free Churches and non-Christians in Britain, which was at times severe and prolonged, ended in the middle of the 19th century. Scandinavia and parts of mainland Europe also offer a number of other versions of establishment.

On one level, this discussion is not about whether religious organisations should influence the state, but how. Where there is no established religion, any religious influence can only be external. An established religion, however, being within the system, has potentially greater influence, but it is also more exposed to the corrosive influence of secular power, and is therefore likely to face more pressure to compromise. At times, established Churches have misused this power; at other times they have been a considerable force for good.

As far as the ordinary Churchgoer is concerned, it makes very little difference in practice whether their Church is established or not: I offer this from the experience of having grown up in a non-established Church in Britain, and then moving to the Church of England. The style of worship was very different, of course, but the main practical difference was that there was more paperwork in the Church of England, and a greater proportion of it was legally required, but most of that burden fell on the clergy, not the parishioners.

It is important, however, that if any faith group is represented in a legislature, all major faith groups must be so represented, and there is growing pressure for this to happen in the House of Lords. However, while this setup works reasonably well in Europe, the situation in North America, with the US first amendment prohibiting establishment and the Canadian

tradition of separation, means it is unlikely to work there, and therefore that separation between religion and state will continue to be maintained, at least in theory.

United Methodists and their predecessors have moved away from having at times to fight for the right to participate at all in the political process, and towards encouraging fuller participation in civic life. What of the future? How can such participation be facilitated and empowered? There are several techniques available to make participation easier, and some of them are being put into place, but there's still the question of motivation. That, it seems to me, is likely to pose a far more difficult challenge, particularly when one gets beyond local matters into the wider arena: no matter how easy it is to participate, people will not do so if they do not think their input will make a difference.

As an example of this, voter turnout for US presidential elections has varied between 50% and 65% since 1948. This is a little on the low side, and suggests a certain lack of interest in some quarters, but it isn't purely an American problem. The turnout in the Canadian federal election of 2004 was the lowest on record, although it recovered somewhat in 2006. Several other countries can produce similar statistics. It happens most often when the result of an election is seen as a foregone conclusion, or people think politicians are not listening to them, and it is therefore not worth taking the trouble to vote. Of course, those who choose not to vote have no cause for complaint if they don't like the candidate who gets elected. Some of this is due to the conduct of politicians, but there is often a reluctance on the part of people of faith to get involved in the messy business of political compromise that so often characterises government, and I would suggest that this is the major obstacle to fuller civic participation.

So, what can be done about it? First of all, we can point out that our calling to be salt and light to creation requires us to engage with the whole of life, including its political side, and to challenge society and its structures where necessary. At times, politics is messy, but then so often, so is life in general. Compromise is necessary to some extent in just about every dealing we have with other people. The question, and probably the issue on which people of faith can offer moral guidance most effectively, is where to set the boundaries.

Secondly, we can remind people of a famous quotation by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “When people say the Bible and politics don’t mix, I don’t know which Bible they are referring to. It’s not the one I’ve been reading.” John the Baptist did not hesitate to challenge Herod Antipas when he married his sister-in-law, even though it eventually cost John his head. Jesus did not hesitate to engage with the politics of first century Galilee and Judaea, arguing with representatives of both the spiritual and the political leaders of His day. After the Ascension, as Christians began to disperse around the Roman Empire, the message of the Gospel was seen as enormously subversive in the political climate of the day. People of faith shouldn’t be afraid to rock the boat when necessary.

Thirdly, we can challenge the lie that one person can’t make a difference, so it’s not worth trying. Look at the difference Mohandas K. Gandhi made in India, Martin Luther King in America, Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and Pope John Paul II in Poland and Eastern Europe. Given determination, persistence and reasonable opportunity, almost anything is possible, and deciding not to make the effort is not a solution.

This programme may not be a particularly easy sell, although some will be more receptive to it than others, but it or something like it is likely to be necessary to motivate those reluctant to get involved in civic life to overcome their hesitation and act. If this can be achieved, with the tools already available and those continuing to be developed, the goal of achieving the full participation of people of faith in civic life may in due course be achieved.

Sermon Word Total: 2480

Meditation Seed Thought: Paul states: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

Feedback/Comments: Please email your comments at:
sermons@newgenius.com

Please also visit www.stuartcdoddinstitute.org & www.wnrf.org