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The Call to Christian Citizenship

By Tal Davis

This year, 2026, is especially significant in the history of the United States as you should well know. In a few weeks, on July 4th, we will mark the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Perhaps you have visited the National Archives in Washington D.C. where you saw the actual document on display carefully preserved under glass with special lighting to prevent fading

July 4th, 2026 is also the 200th anniversary of the deaths of two of America's most important founding fathers: Thomas Jefferson (primary author of the Declaration of Independence) and John Adams (2nd U.S. President). Those men were fierce political rivals. However, ironically, they died on the very same day, July 4th, 1826, exactly 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was one of history's most amazing coincidences (or was it?).

That bit of history being said, some of you may be old enough to remember July 4th, 1976, when we celebrated the U.S. Bicentennial. It was an exciting event across the country as we remembered those men and women who brought our nation into existence two centuries before. It was a time of great renewal of patriotism, especially coming off the years of division in the Vietnam War. People asked: What is true patriotism and what is the duty of a citizen in a free society? They still ask that today.

This question is especially relevant for Christians. We need to ask: What is a Christian's responsibility and relationship to politics and government – whether in America or any other country? Whether in a free society or not? Throughout history there has been a tension between God's people and earthly powers. All we have to do is look at the Bible. As far back as Moses and Pharaoh God's people have clashed with human authorities when their laws or religious beliefs contradict His will.

Down through the ages, men and women of God struggled with hostile political and religious powers. For instance, Christians faced Roman persecution from Emperors Nero, Domitian, Caligula, and others. All but one of the twelve Apostles were martyred for their faith in Christ. In the 16th Century, Anabaptists were attacked by medieval church powers. In the 20th Century, behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains, communist regimes have murdered millions of believers (more than all other centuries combined). Even now in

this century, in North Korea, India, Sudan, Nigeria, Indonesia and Iran, Christians still suffer harsh oppression from Communist and Islamic regimes.

In the United States, of course, we face a different situation, thank God. While we face no organized opposition, nonetheless, there is a growing tension. We live in an increasingly secular and pagan culture. What was once a society based on biblically based Judeo-Christian morals, ethics, and laws are now centered on evolving relativistic humanist values.

So this is the time we need to think again what it means, and how to be a Christian citizen. First let's establish a clear basic axiom. Christians should be active citizens of their country (whatever country that may be) and maintain good relations with the government as far as it does not directly conflict with God's will for their lives.

A good place to go in Scripture to clarify this principle is in the second chapter of Peter's first epistle. Peter wrote this letter to those who are "chosen" (*eklektois* - "elect" - i.e. Christians) in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). They were facing difficult times from their hostile pagan neighbors and the Roman government. The Emperor Nero was ramping up persecution of Christians about that time, so Peter wanted to prepare his readers for what was likely to come. This letter was directed to them, probably about A.D. 62 or 63, just before Nero set fire to Rome and blamed it on the Christians. In any case, Peter was concerned for the believers' well-being as pressure was mounting from political powers.

For that reason Peter wanted them to stay at peace. So in chapter 2, verses 11-17, he presents several basic principles for Christian citizenship, then and now.

Principle One: Christian Citizenship Begins with Acknowledgment That We Are Actually Strangers in a Strange Land.

11 Beloved, I urge you as foreigners and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. 12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:11-13 NASB

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Years ago, my wife and I lived in Key West, Florida. At that time, a large number of refugees from Cuba had recently arrived in the famous "boat lift" of 1980. I had the opportunity to meet and speak with some of the refugees. Most of them were happy to be in America and free, but were sad to be exiled from their homeland. It was hard to learn a new culture and language.

In verse 11, Peter reminded his readers that they were *foreigners and strangers*. They were part of a hostile pagan culture and a political system that gave them no intrinsic rights. Therefore he advises them, in verse 12, to *Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles*. Why? For two clear reasons. First, *so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, you will prove them wrong*. And second, *they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation*. That last phrase, "day of visitation," may refer to the last judgment, but more likely means a future time in those people's lives when the Holy Spirit might draw them to a decision to repent and receive Christ as their Savior.

We are all like strangers in a strange land. Yes, we are Americans, but we have a dual citizenship. We are first and foremost citizens of Heaven. As Paul says, *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*. (Philippians 3:20 NASB) "Citizenship" is *politeuma* which means being a legitimate part of an earthly commonwealth or nation with all the rights and privileges therewith. Paul himself was a citizen of Rome, which he utilized occasionally to his advantage in legal situations. Nonetheless, Paul makes it clear that as Christians, our real citizenship is ultimately in Heaven. All earthly citizenships are temporal. We are fellow citizens with all our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world and in all time.

Principle Two: Christian Citizenship Means We must Obey and Support Just Human Authorities.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, 14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. 1 Peter 2: 13-14 NASB

In verses 13 and 14, Peter exhorts his readers to *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution*. The word "submit" is "*hypotagete*" and means to "be under obedience to" or "under subjection to." He says plainly this includes *a king as the one in authority, or to governors*. Peter then gives an important theological principle as to why Christians should obey the civil law. It is because the civil authorities

are sent by him (the Lord) for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. Can you imagine a society that had no laws or police to enforce them? It would be total chaos. The civil government is established by God to bring order to humanity. The tragedy is when the government is as evil as the criminals it is supposed to control.

The Apostle Paul also states this concept in Romans 13:1-7 (NASB).

Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a servant of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

Basically what Paul is saying is that one who is "law-abiding" need have no fear of the government or the law. When I was in high school a fellow student, knowing I was a Christian, asked me somewhat sarcastically, "Give me one good reason why I should not drink?" I think he figured I would give him a sermon on the dangers of demon alcohol or something. But I just answered softly, "It's against law."

As Christians we should obey the law – even when it seems trite. Remember those bumper stickers that said, WWJD ("What Would Jesus Do?") Did you ever see one on a car doing 80 miles per hour? Not a good witness for Christ, right? Christian citizens are to obey the civil law. "But," we might ask, "is there ever a time when we should disobey the law?" The answer is "yes." But that is only if the civil law compels us to act in disobedience to God's will or in protest to an explicit moral injustice.

Remember, Peter himself, in Acts 5:29, standing before the Jerusalem Council for having disobeyed their order to remain silent, declared, "*We must obey God rather than men!*" And what about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and Daniel, who challenged the Babylonians and refused to compromise their faith? So,

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yes there may be times when believers must disobey the civil law if it requires disobedience to our biblical conscience. And sometimes we should work to change and publicly protest against laws we believe violate the higher moral law of God. For five decades American Christians struggled to overturn what they considered the immoral 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion in all fifty U.S. states.

Principle Three: Christian Citizenship Is for the Purpose of Glorifying God.

15 For such is the will of God, that by doing right you silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond-servants of God. 17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. 1 Peter 2: 15-17 NASB

Peter sums up his perspective on being subject to the civil authorities by telling his readers that doing the right thing *will silence the ignorance of foolish people*. "Foolish people" is *aphronon anthronon* and refers to mindless or short-sighted people. When God's people do what is good in the eyes of the law and society, then their critics will have nothing to charge them with and they will win praise for the Lord.

Verse 16 presents an important ethical point. He says to *Act as free people*. His point is that as believers in Christ, we are free to do what is right. We are not bound by sin, Satan, or selfish desires, but free to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. He says, *do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond-servants of God*. When we serve God we exercise our freedom in the right way and glorify Christ.

In verse 17, Peter concludes with four important summary points for what it means to be a Christian citizen. First he says, "*Honor all people*." In other words, show proper respect to everyone you encounter. That is to recognize the value of each person as one made in the image of

God. Second, he tells them to *love the brotherhood*. Christians should have a special love for those in the household faith because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Third, he says to *fear God*. Fear of the Lord, we are told, is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Finally he says, "*honor the king*." As the citizen of an earthly realm, we should give honor to those who have authority over us. Normally our duties to God and the government do not conflict and we can obey both without objection. But as we indicated earlier, when there is a clear conflict of loyalty, "*We must obey God rather than men!*"

In conclusion, we are called to be godly citizens who are active in the social and political life of our country. We should, as far as is possible, maintain good relations with the government, as far as it does not directly conflict with God's will for our lives. There are several practical ways we can all see this happen. For one thing, register and vote in elections, both local and national. And support godly and honest candidates. You may want to campaign for them and even donate money. Just be sure they are worthy of your endorsement. Ask questions and look for information into their backgrounds and lifestyles. Also, pray for your government officials. Most will ap-

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preciate knowing someone is lifting them up. And finally, don't be afraid to speak out for Christian principles in government and society. Just make sure your positions are biblical and just.

The United States is 250 years old. It is the oldest continual democratic republic on earth. As Christian citizens, it is our duty and responsibility to work to maintain that record for another 250 years and longer!