

## The Christian and Nationalism

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**Thesis:** Anabaptists historically have held a position that is neither politically left nor right. Jesus taught instead a third way that promotes the kingdom of God and does not mix faith in Him with nationalism.

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## Part I: The Challenge for Believers

### Living in an Immoral Society

We are inescapably impacted by the things that are happening in the society around us. As Christians living in America or Canada, we do well to be concerned about the direction of the societies in which we live. Our governments have passed legislation that does not reflect our views and is contrary to biblical principles. Abortion, same-sex marriage, gender identity, challenges to religious liberty, and assisted dying are issues that can potentially make it challenging for our churches and families, even affecting our businesses and livelihoods. The moral degeneration of society has potentially costly consequences for followers of Christ who hold biblical perspectives on a variety of issues.

While history tells us that this is not new, it is right to be distressed when we see evil accepted or even lauded in society. In some ways, we may feel like Lot felt when he was living in Sodom: “For that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds” ( 2Peter 2:8). It is also proper to be concerned about the welfare of the society in which we live. When the children of Israel were in captivity in Babylon, God told them through the prophet Jeremiah, “seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace” (Jeremiah 29:7).

We have much at stake in caring about the direction of society around us—especially since North America has become a very comfortable home for us as a people. For the first time in our Anabaptist history, we have lived in one place for several hundred years with little persecution. In this generation, we have lost our memory of living outside the approval of the larger society. We have become accustomed to, and perhaps even reliant on, being accepted by the society around us, even while maintaining specific differences. Those differences, far from bringing persecution, have brought mainly respect and goodwill from a society that sees us as good, hardworking people.

In addition, we have become economically successful with generationally accumulated wealth and property. We are interested in preserving our way of life and prosperity, which can develop a sense of entitlement in feeling that we deserve to have our way of life preserved. The underlying issue can be our desire to control our own lives

and the world around us. The desire to control is contrary to trust in God and His sovereignty. Our human efforts to be in control are the antithesis of the Gospel.

When a political party promises economic advantage and some protection for our beliefs and values, we can be drawn into getting involved in the political interests of an earthly kingdom. We may even develop the perception that God is working out His will through the party or a person in charge.

If we become alarmed or even outraged with the direction of society, political solutions can provide an immediate and satisfying sense of response or action. We can embrace the emotion of that outrage leaving us convinced that political involvement is the way to bring moral change to our increasingly immoral society effectively. Some things should cause us to feel righteous anger. However, that anger should lead us to godly action rather than antagonism toward groups, parties, or individuals.

## The Allure of Nationalism

One answer to the challenges of our day that has captured the imagination of many Christians is nationalism. Nationalism is an approach to politics that prioritizes the sovereignty and interests of one particular nation above all others. It tends to appeal to some of the fleshly instincts the Gospel transforms: “we first,” war on those who threaten our security, and ethnic superiority. This is expressed by all political parties. In the United States, it can be expressed by the “America First” approach of former President Trump, or in the statement by President Biden: “When the Lord asks, ‘Whom shall I send?’ the American military has been answering that call for a long time, ‘Here I am, Lord, send me.’” If we view America as a “Christian nation,” and the American military as

answering God’s call, we can then feel that God blesses America above others and scriptural promises to Israel as God’s chosen nation may be seen as promises to the United States.

We can be drawn toward nationalism due to our desire to belong to a group with a shared vision and goal, especially related to preserving our livelihood and Christian values. Furthermore, when there are tensions and relationship breakdowns in the local church, we can find acceptance in an alternate group identity found in nationalism. Interactions with others on social media or with people from churches that promote nationalism can lead to us develop a stronger sense of identity with our friends and associates there than we have with people in our local church fellowship.

We can begin to think of the United States or Canada as “my” country. We can start to talk about the actions of the government as what “we” have done. After the Iraq war, some Anabaptists commented, “We really beat them,” and, “They didn’t stand a chance against us.” When we begin to use personal pronouns to talk about the government’s military actions, what is this saying about our sense of identity?

It is instructive to read Romans 13:1–7 and observe the use of pronouns in this passage. The Apostle Paul refers to his recipient readers who are believers in Christ as “you” and to the government as “they.” This gives a good sense of our identity as part of a group of Christians but not part of the government.

We can forget that our primary identity is not as Americans or Canadians but as children of God and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our allegiance is to the King of kings and Lord of lords, and our identity is wrapped up in the kingdom of God. This sets us apart from a nationalistic society. We are indeed strangers and pilgrims here, ambassadors for Christ and His kingdom.

But what does it mean to be strangers and pilgrims living in an earthly kingdom? Scripture tells us that faithful men and women of old saw themselves as foreigners within the worldly society around them: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland” (Hebrews 11:13–14). The

distinguishing characteristic of strangers and pilgrims is that they are seeking a homeland. We cannot see the United States or Canada as our homeland and still be seeking a homeland. We are living here but still seeking a true homeland.

Another biblical passage identifies believers as ambassadors for Christ: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19–20). Ambassadors work outside of the politics of the nation to which they have been posted. They represent the interests and perspectives of their homeland.

So, what is the true homeland of the follower of Christ? It is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God calls for our first loyalty as we serve as ambassadors here on earth. We have a primary allegiance to the kingdom of God and only a secondary responsibility to serve the interests and to meet obligations as residents of an earthly nation. We live with the reality of being physically present in a country that is not our homeland.

When we are drawn away from our primary allegiance to the kingdom of God and into nationalism, we set ourselves up to support things that are contrary to Scripture. As citizens of the kingdom of God, we Anabaptists do not make good nationalists in any nation on earth. Historically, we have not fared well when we have become drawn into nationalistic thought and actions.

## Lessons from History

When the Anabaptists moved into Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796), they were given grants of free land, tax exemptions for the first few years, and exemptions from military and civil service. In 1787, Jakob Hoepfner and Johann Bartsch negotiated the first Mennonite Charter of Settlement (known as a Privilegium) with Empress Catherine and the Vice Regent of New Russia, Potemkin, obtaining their exemption from service in the military “for all time.” The Mennonites assumed that all her royal successors would uphold that policy without significant revisions.<sup>1</sup>

The Mennonites prospered in Ukraine, which was part of Russia, and grew in their support of the Russian Empire that provided them peace and prosperity. They became wealthy landowners and tended to see landless Russian peasants and Jews as inferior people. Sometimes their contempt also spread to those Mennonites who were landless.

When Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in February 1917, many Mennonites, especially younger people, were relieved. They recognized the legitimacy of calls for fundamental changes in Russian society. Yet, they were concerned about talk of a Russian revolution, seeing it as a threat to their well-being and privileged position within society. The violent Bolshevik revolution came to some Mennonite colonies in October 1917. However, shortly thereafter, the German army invaded, and the Mennonites welcomed relief from the violence. The stability the Germans brought was short-lived, and when the Germans were defeated in WWI, they withdrew from Ukraine. However, when they retreated, they

left weapons in the hands of the Mennonites in the colonies. The Mennonite colonies used these weapons to form self-defense units (Selbstschutz) and attempted to protect their way of life and their wives and children.

Later, when the White Army formed to fight against the socialist Red Army, many Mennonites joined the forces of the White Army and fought in battle. The eventual defeat of the White Army had a devastating effect on the Mennonite colonies, due in part to their joining to fight with the White Army. In desperation, many Mennonites fled Russia and moved to the United States and Canada.<sup>2</sup>

The initial desire to protect their property and families led Russian Mennonites to see national government with its use of force as the best way to maintain their way of life and protect their families from the brutal violence of the revolutionary raiders. In the end, they lost it all.

Having never been tested as terribly as they were, we should be slow to criticize too harshly the Russian Mennonite's desperate defense of their homes and families. Yet we must recognize that even their seemingly understandable actions failed to bring meaningful moral improvement to society, escalated the cycle of violence, and destroyed the church's witness in the process.

The Russian Mennonites were not the only Anabaptists to get caught up in the nationalism of their day. Just a few decades later, German Mennonites also picked up a nationalistic mindset. They came to see the prosperity and welfare of the German state as crucial to their welfare and identity. This led to the German

- 1 Klippenstein, Lawrence, and James Urry. “Mennonites and the Crimean War, 1854-1856.” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989): 9-32.
- 2 Klippenstein, Lawrence. “Russian Revolution and Civil War.” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. 1989. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Russian\\_Revolution\\_and\\_Civil\\_War&oldid=131810](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Russian_Revolution_and_Civil_War&oldid=131810).

Mennonites initially affirming Hitler and lending their support to his political cause.

Dean Taylor documents the support of German Mennonites for Hitler as follows:

Sadly, the Mennonites of Germany joined in with the jubilant nationalistic feelings that were spreading. As a matter of record, the German Mennonites were so happy with their new Führer that they wanted to express their official gratitude to him. In a telegram written September 10, 1933, the sentiments of a church council that had just taken place were expressed:

*To Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Berlin:  
The Conference of East and West Prussian  
Mennonites, assembled today in Tiegenhagen,  
Free State of Danzig, feels deep gratitude **for  
the powerful revival that God has given our  
nation** through your energy, and promises  
joyful cooperation in the upbuilding of our  
Fatherland through the power of the Gospel,  
faithful to the motto of our forefathers:  
No other foundation can anyone lay than  
that which is laid which is Jesus Christ.”*

I'm sure Hitler didn't take time to answer every telegram that he received, but this one he replied to personally:

*For your loyalty and your readiness to cooperate in the upbuilding of the German nation, expressed in your letter to me, I express my sincere thanks. —Adolf Hitler*<sup>3</sup>

Historically Anabaptist Christians have followed the teachings of Jesus that call His

followers to allegiance to the kingdom of God and not to mix nationalism with faith in Him. The early Anabaptists expressed this commitment in the Schleithem Confession of Faith with the following statements:

The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same (sword) is (now) ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates.

In the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without putting the flesh to death—simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

3 Taylor, Dean. “Mennonite Nazis: A Lesson from History.” *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* Nov/Dec 2012. <http://www.ephrataministries.org/pdf/2012-11-Rem-Mennonite-Nazis.pdf>. Emphasis added by Taylor.

4 Schleithem Confession. Rod and Staff. 1985. <https://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleithem-confession.html>.

## Part II: The Perspective of the Believer

### Bringing True Change to the World

If nationalism, political involvement, and military force are not the way to bring peace and security to the world, what is the best way to see the world change for good?

The answer is in the opening phrases of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mat. 6:9, 10 KJV). The kingdom of God is the reality, and the church is the organization through which God intends to change the world.

The best way to see the world change for good is to experience the work of Christ in our hearts and become new creatures in Christ. Our allegiance then changes from worldly kingdoms to the kingdom of God. We begin to change the world by first being changed ourselves.

Consider the example of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus chose twelve men to entrust the

message of the kingdom of God and to establish the church. They were ordinary men who accomplished extraordinary things for God. They experienced a profound change in their own lives as they spent time with Jesus. Peter went from denying that he knew Jesus to boldly proclaiming Him as the promised Messiah. These men went from men who fled at the first sign of danger to men who boldly proclaimed the Gospel and gave their lives as martyrs.

As the gospel spread, the early church defied the boundaries established by the world and religious systems. The inclusiveness of the church erased the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. It welcomed both rich and poor. Ethnicity, economic status, gender, and social position no longer gave anyone special access to God or made anyone spiritually a second-class citizen.

### The Power of Suffering Love

This Gospel also radically changed how we view and relate to enemies. The revolutionary concept of loving one's enemies instead of killing them or coercing them, which gathers all men in brotherhood, is the "mystery" of the gospel which God planned before He created the world; suffering love was His secret weapon which would finally destroy the powers of darkness (Ephesians 3:5-11).

As demonstrated on the cross, the nonresistant love of one's enemies is how the Gospel breaks the cycle of violence and hatred. It is not passivity or a squeamish reluctance to resist evil; instead, it is the only way evil is meaningfully resisted. Whether conducted with bullets or with votes, war is fighting fire

with fire. Loving our enemies is fighting fire with water. It means rejecting the tit-for-tat escalation of gaining power over others in favor of the shattering force of gaining "power under" others through suffering love.

In the book *The Christ of the Mount*, E. Stanley Jones refers to what he calls "the terrible meek:"

"They are terrible in that they want nothing, and hence cannot be tempted or bought, and in that they are willing to go to any lengths for others because they feel so deeply. Christ standing before Pilate is a picture of the terrible meek. He could not be bought or bullied, for He wanted nothing—nothing except to give His life for the very men who were crucifying him. Here is the supreme

strength—it possesses itself, hence possesses the earth. It is so strong, so patient, so fit to survive that it inherits the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

The meek can change the world through suffering love. The church stands in stark contrast to the rage, coercion, and division of nationalism. God invented the brotherhood of believers to bridge the divides of ethnicity, economic status, and social position. The message of the Gospel is a message that their creator loves all, all are valued as being created in the image of God, and all are invited to kingdom citizenship. As the Gospel's message is understood, accepted, and lived out, it transforms individuals and the world.

Conversely, whenever the church has embraced political or military power, it has rarely improved society and almost always destroyed its credibility. Tony Campolo has said, “Mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure. It doesn't do much to the manure, but it sure does ruin the ice cream.”

In the 1920s, the American church rallied behind the cause of Prohibition, citing the devastation that alcoholism had wreaked on society. Eventually, this effort succeeded in criminalizing the production, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages, with a few exceptions. Well-meaning Christians rejoiced in this moral victory. Billy Sunday was among them:

The reign of tears is over. The slums will soon be a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and corncribs. Men will walk upright now, women will smile, and children will laugh. Hell will be forever for rent.<sup>6</sup>

But the victory turned out to be temporary and shallow. Michael Craven observes these sobering effects of the Prohibition Act:

Unfortunately for Prohibition, the public did not recognize “the evil of the thing prohibited.” This is the problem with trying to moralize society through political coercion: good law follows the cultural and moral consensus; it cannot create it. In other words, the law cannot change the culture as it relates to the actual beliefs and values of society.

Finally, the church's aggressive actions in the Prohibition of alcohol helped to alter the public perception of the church from a valued social institution to an overbearing political interest group determined to impose its will on an unwilling public. The church's characteristic love of neighbor was diminished by a perceived desire to control thy neighbor. This perception would only embolden resistance to the church's role in the public square and its kingdom mission.<sup>7</sup>

Political action and nationalism are extremely limited in the lasting change they can bring to any society of unredeemed people. As followers of Christ and citizens of the kingdom of God, we are not passive and isolated from society, but we become part of the ideal resistance to evil in a fallen world. We are active in bringing real and lasting change to the world. We engage with people in society, not to coerce them into better behavior, but to invite them to experience the lasting transformation that an encounter with Christ can have. We summon them to leave the small ideas of political parties and nationalism behind and walk into the grandeur and power of the kingdom of God.

5 Jones, E. S. *The Christ of the Mount*. New York, Cincinnati: The Abingdon Press, 1931. P. 68.

6 Sunday, Billy. Qtd. in Reese, Charley. “Prohibition, Drug War Legacy: Bureaucracy, Corruption, Violence.” *Orlando Sentinel*, Jan 03, 1993, pp. G2. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/prohibition-drug-war-legacy-bureaucracy/docview/278156146/se-2>.

7 Craven, Michael. “Changing Culture: A Study in Cultural Engagement—Part 2.” *crosswalk.com*. October 2010. <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/michael-craven/changing-culture-a-study-in-cultural-engagement-part-2-11640010.html>.

## The Kingdom of God

When Jesus began His ministry, He began with the message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). He was calling people to leave behind the pettiness of their former way of thinking and living because something much more significant and more wonderful was here, the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of God is transcendent in its very nature. Every kingdom has a king, and Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). His power and sovereignty exceed that of any other king, president, prime minister, or earthly ruler. There is none to compare with him.

Every kingdom has a territory, and the territory of the kingdom of God is in the hearts of men and women who have chosen to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God knows no national or earthly borders. Citizenship is open to all who wish to be citizens of the kingdom of God. Nationality, ethnicity, social position, or economic status have no significance in the kingdom of God. “And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3:10–11). When the Apostle John saw the great multitude before the throne of God there were people there from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Revelation 7:9).

Every kingdom has citizens, and the citizens of the kingdom of God are the persons who become children of God and have declared their faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). This citizenship supersedes any earthly citizenships we may hold.

Earthly kingdoms may enforce laws and suppress violence with violence. The threat of force or violence does not impose true peace. The kingdom of God functions in a totally different way. The kingdom of God brings real and lasting change from the grassroots up. This is true peace that comes from heart change.

The kingdom of God is like yeast in a bowl of flour (Matthew 13:33). As followers of Christ our presence in the world is both a conviction of sin in our society and an influence for what is true, good, and right. It is like the mustard seed that initially seems so small but grows in size, significance, and utility (Matthew 13:31–32).

As citizens of the kingdom of God, we do not withdraw and enclose ourselves inside walls or boundaries. Instead, we become ambassadors or advocates for kingdom citizenship. We actively invite others to join us in the kingdom of God. We become a bridge to bring others in rather than a wall to keep others out. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17–19).

We become excited to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). The power of God does for humanity what no earthly kingdom can do. It is so much greater in bringing real change to the world.

When Jesus Christ was on earth, the Jewish people wanted Him to overthrow the Roman occupation of the nation of Israel and establish an earthly nation of Israel. Jesus rejected the call to nationalism and invited them to participate in a kingdom that far exceeded even the Roman Empire in scope and power. Today we live in the age of the American empire, but we are part of something much larger and much more powerful, the kingdom of God.



## Conclusion

While aligning with the world's political power structures may seem like an appealing choice, especially in times that feel threatening, the only way we can bring effective, lasting change to the world is through the kingdom of God. Today we live in a time when nationalism is on the upsurge. It is popular to be passionately for or against legislation, policies, politicians, or parties according to how they align with perceived national interests. Many are drawn to causes such as nationalism; however, we invite you to step away from the allure of these causes and into the grand vision of the power and glory of the kingdom of God!

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*This paper was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues.*

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## The Christian and Nationalism

### Part III: Frequently Asked Questions

These short essays continue the discussion begun in the main paper “The Christian and Nationalism.” For the original article, visit [anabaptistviewpoint.org](http://anabaptistviewpoint.org).

#### Primary writers of the responses to the Frequently Asked Questions are as follows:

What about all it takes for evil to conquer is for good men to do nothing? (p. 11) - *Mahlon Zehr*

Does silence by political non-participation equal consent? (p. 13) - *Nathan Zook*

Shouldn't I vote when I live in a country that gives me the opportunity to do so? (p. 14) - *Tim Stoltzfus*

What if we lose our freedom of religion? (p. 15) - *Arlyn Nisly*

Isn't political involvement a good way to defend the vulnerable and to act for justice? (p. 17) - *Stephen Russell*

Shouldn't we support politicians who hold views that we agree with on

abortion, and other key issues, and who promise to protect our religious freedom? (p. 19) - *Mahlon Zehr*

Can a nation be a “Christian Nation”? (p. 21) - *Dan Ziegler*

Why is an international perspective on the kingdom of God important for us and how can it be fostered? (p. 23) - *Tim Stoltzfus*

What does it mean to be an ambassador for the kingdom of God? (p. 25) - *Dan Ziegler*

How do our heavenly and earthly citizenships relate to each other? (p. 27) - *Stephen Russell*

#### What about “All it takes for evil to conquer is for good men to do nothing”?

The charge of “doing nothing” in the face of a rising tide of evil is one that no one who cares about the world, their neighbors, their families, or the kingdom of God can just shrug off. Is this, then, all that a rejection of politics, militarism, and nationalism amounts to? The truth is that “doing nothing” is far from what we are called to in the kingdom of God. We are not to stand idly by while the darkness deepens and the demons shriek. In fact, Romans 12:21 warns us not to be overcome with evil, but to overcome evil with good. We are to be on the

offense, not defense, attacking the gates of hell, not hiding in the hills (Matthew 16:18b).

As Christians who embrace Christ's example of rejecting nationalism and loving our enemies, we are not shying away from confronting and pushing back against darkness wherever we find it. The way of Christ, which is the way of suffering love modeled for us on the cross, is far from passivity. It is in fact, a shatteringly effective weapon against evil, far more effective than armed force, or legal coercion, or the kind of grandstanding activism for activism's sake which

swaps sacrifice and discomfort for selfie sticks and hashtags. Suffering love is powerful and effective because it targets the hearts of men, the engine that drives their behavior, rather than simply trying to rebuke their behavior. It is not fighting fire with fire; it is fighting fire with water.

Christ's model of suffering love is often difficult, lonely, and unrecognized; in other words, the complete reverse of what most people today pursue when they set out to “do something” about the broken world we live in. There is perhaps an even greater boon to the kingdom of darkness than that of good men doing nothing—and that is the spectacle of men seeming to do something but not.

In the spirit of honesty and transparency, perhaps this charge of “doing nothing” does not completely miss the mark for North American conservative Anabaptists. It is easy to become absorbed in our picturesque farms, safe communities, and prosperous businesses, or perhaps we become distracted by personal difficulties, conflicts, or health crises. Whatever the case, if this charge of doing nothing is not completely without merit, it isn't due to a failure of suffering love; it is a failure of men to faithfully practice it. Let's commit ourselves to love and care of friends and enemies alike. Then no one can ever say with justification that evil has conquered because we have failed to love as Christ loved.

## Does silence by political non-participation equal consent?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., declared, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, signs carried the shorter warning “Silence Equals Consent.” This phrase conveys the underlying message that those who do not participate in the political process to oppose social inequities are complicit with the system that perpetuates the injustice. The assumption is made that those who do not publicly articulate opposition or actively engage against a perceived wrong-doing are by default guilty or at least sympathetic to an opposing position. This leaves no room for being an innocent bystander. It also leaves no room for those who are engaged in the much more difficult and potentially courageous task of reaching lost souls.

Jesus and John the Baptist did not specifically condemn the institutions and structures of society that could be seen as perpetuating violence in the first century AD. Does the fact that Jesus did not speak against taxation mean that He actively endorsed the injustices of the Roman Empire against the Jewish people? When John the Baptist told soldiers to “Do violence to no man” but was silent on the expansionist wars of the Roman Empire, was he an imperialist sympathizer? Both Jesus and John the Baptist called individuals to repentance. Both left no doubt that violence is to be avoided by believers.

Speaking out against institutions and societal structures can make individuals feel absolved of guilt. Holding signs or posting blogs against societal ills is easier than meeting people face to face and calling them to repentance. It is one thing to protest against racism, war,

corporations, or governments, but it is another thing to tell someone sitting next to you that they need to be born again. It is one thing to hold a sign outside the Canadian Parliament, the US Congress, or the Roman Senate demanding change; it is another thing to boldly proclaim the Gospel. Jesus and John the Baptist courageously did what many protestors have trouble doing: they approached individuals face to face and called on them to “sin no more.”

As believers who serve a separate kingdom, our stance on issues will not align with the partisan divides of earthly politics. Rather than being distracted with trying to discern which side is the lesser of two evils, the believing church member can actively work to create a refuge inside the church. Yes, we recognize there are discriminatory practices in the wider society. Yes, we recognize that many government officials may abuse their power and attempt to profile people according to racial characteristics. However our churches ought to be places “where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3:11). We are working for a kingdom that breaks the mold of all earthly structures and institutions.

Do not worry if someone thinks your mouth is too silent against the world's structures; we are involved in modeling a new one. Far from complying with or condoning the world's practices, we are working for a very public kingdom. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

## Shouldn't I vote when I live in a country that gives me the opportunity to do so?

At first glance, simply casting a vote of preference for a political candidate in an election may seem like the best of both worlds. However, it is important to realize that voting is not a neutral, nonpolitical action. If it were, why bother to vote? The purpose of voting is to influence government by electing a supported candidate, and thus, to cast a ballot is to enter a political system.

Years ago, the question of whether I (Tim) should vote became more settled in my own mind in an unusual way. I passed a Mennonite place of business and noticed a “Vote for Bush” campaign placard conspicuously placed on the property. I was taken back a bit, but the sign triggered a series of successive questions in my mind. If I believe that voting in an election is a duty or right which I should exercise, then why should I not also encourage others to vote by campaigning for my candidate? (At least the Mennonite brother was being consistent on this point.)

Furthermore, if in the process of campaigning, someone were to tell me, “Well, why don't *you* run for office since your position on the issues is more biblical than his?” what would restrain me from doing so? If I defended political noninvolvement on the basis of Scripture, my questioner could rightly ask, “Then why are you voting and campaigning for a candidate?” Several miles down the road, I realized with increased clarity that voting is simply the starting point in a continuum of political involvement.

Issue voting is one of the baits offered to Christians to lure them into the fray of politics. For example, a person may decide to always vote for the candidate who most strongly opposes

abortion. However, no candidate supports everything that a conservative Anabaptist Christian believes. It is inconsistent to support a candidate because of his position on one issue but disregard his unbiblical position on another issue. At its heart, issue voting is an attempt to use political means—voting, legislation, and the coercive power of government—to accomplish spiritual or societal reform. However, the core problem is the sinful heart, which no government mandate can change or remedy.

Jesus has established a kingdom that is not of this world, and the nation-states of the earth will never be able ministers of the Gospel of Christ. An Afghani pastor put this issue in stark perspective for us—amid the recent unrest and turmoil engulfing the nation of Afghanistan and in the face of imminent, horrific persecution at the hands of the Taliban, he wrote:

We can trust that our Lord is mighty and will care for His children. Our hope is not in politics but in Jesus who is the King.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult or perhaps impossible to cast a vote without conceding allegiance to a sovereign state. This reality should create an insurmountable conundrum for Anabaptists who maintain a two-kingdom theology since it is not possible to grant allegiance to both the kingdom of Christ and one of this earth.

Citizenship in an earthly kingdom includes political privileges with accompanying responsibilities. Governments offer voting as a full political right of citizenship, alongside the right to hold political office. To be consistent, those who exercise the political right to vote should also be willing to embrace corresponding duties obligatory to citizenship, such as military duty.

8 Manley, Josh. “Afghan Pastors Ask for Prayer.” 9Marks. August, 2021. <https://www.9marks.org/article/afghan-pastors-ask-for-prayer/>

## What if we lose our religious freedom?

While we can profitably wrestle with this question by itself, the answer to this question may well answer questions about the loss of other freedoms: What if we lose our freedom of speech, or free enterprise, or freedom of travel? Scripture clearly tells us that God's design for civil government is to provide for the well-being of its citizens, so we appropriately accept and appreciate these freedoms when we have them. Since all earthly kingdoms exist outside the perfection of Christ,<sup>9</sup> their rulers use force (the God-ordained "sword") to provide for this well-being. What happens, then, when rulers wrongly direct this force?

We submit that the underlying issue can be stated thus:

*Should Christians care how much control their country, region, or city's government exerts over them?*

Suppose the answer to this question is "yes." Let's assume for the moment that we could all agree on how much control the government should exercise. If Christians should care about this, then we need to discern what we do if our government is exerting too much control. Is the answer revolution? Violent resistance? Passive resistance? Emigration/escape? Appeal? Through the ages, each of these answers has been embraced by people who call themselves Christians, with a wide variation in outcomes. As members of Christ's peaceful kingdom, Anabaptists have historically rejected violent responses to excessive control.

Can we still support that stance? Regarding the non-violent responses, we have examples in the apostolic church of only the last one.<sup>10</sup>

Suppose, however, that the answer to this question is "no"? Do these freedoms really enhance the spread of the Gospel, and does their absence really hinder its spread? The church has a rich history of flourishing under the most oppressive conditions; sadly, it has often atrophied when it enjoyed the luxury of these freedoms. Perhaps in this case, what we gravitate toward is not what is best for our spiritual health.

In *The Insanity of God*, Nik Ripkin reflected on a counter-intuitive conversation with believers in China. They had explained to him that the Communist government wasn't opposed to Christianity per se; rather, it was fixated on complete control, and Christianity threatened that control. Puzzled, Nik asked them "how the oppressed could truly threaten a totalitarian oppressor." They gave this typical scenario to demonstrate:

The security police regularly harass a believer who owns the property where a house-church meets. The police say, "You have got to stop these meetings! If you do not stop these meetings, we will confiscate your house, and we will throw you out into the street."

Then the property owner will probably respond, "Do you want my house? Do you want my farm? Well, if you do,

9 Schleithem Confession. Rod and Staff. 1985. <https://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleithem-confession.html>. Art. VI.

10 See Acts 22, 23, and 25. Paul also leveraged his citizenship in Philippi (Acts 16). Note, however, that in none of these cases is Paul challenging civil laws that are contrary to Christian faith and practice. He is appealing to civil rulers and to the established law for protection against unlawful treatment. Further, the cases where he fled were also not from civil authority, but from unlawful attack by mobs. Acts 4 is frequently cited as an example of resistance to civil law, but we should note that this resistance is to the Sanhedrin, a religious ruling body that explicitly acknowledged it did not have civil authority (John 18:28ff). We certainly do need to obey God rather than man, and we have the examples of civil disobedience from Daniel 3 and 6, but we need to go outside the biblical record for such examples in the New Testament era. This doesn't diminish the value of those examples, but we need to recognize the limitation of extra-biblical examples in establishing doctrine or setting precedent.

then you need to talk to Jesus because I gave this property to Him.”

The security police will not know what to make of that answer. So they will say, “we don't have any way to get to Jesus, but we can certainly get to you! When we take your property, you and your family will have nowhere to live!”

And the house-church believers will declare, “Then we will be free to trust God for shelter as well as for our daily bread.”

“If you keep this up, we will beat you!” the persecutors will tell them.

“Then we will be free to trust Jesus for healing,” the believers will respond.

“And then we will put you in prison!” the police will threaten.

By now, the believers' response is almost predictable: “Then we will be free to preach the good news of Jesus to the captives, to set them free. We will be free to plant churches in prison.”

“If you try to do that, we will kill you!” the frustrated authorities will vow.

And, with utter consistency, the house-church believers will reply, “Then we will be free to go to heaven and be with Jesus forever.”<sup>11</sup>

These believers are following the example of a great cloud of witnesses, not the least of which is the apostle Paul. He regularly suffered extreme hardship for his efforts in living out his faith (2 Cor. 11:24ff). In none of the references to his suffering in his letters (at least ten times) did he ask the readers to pray for his deliverance. In a number of them (e.g., Col. 4:3-4), he asked them to pray for boldness

and clarity in proclaiming the gospel. In 2 Timothy 1:8, he directly entreated Timothy to join him in his suffering for the gospel.

We, believers, share with all humanity the natural and justifiable desire to lead stable, peaceful lives. Indeed, in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Paul instructs us to pray for our governing authorities “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” But note that the reason for pursuing this kind of a life is because it pleases God, “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Therefore, if the salvation of all people is our top priority, then our religious freedom becomes a lesser concern. Paul's testimony to the Philippians stands as a challenge to us all:

I want you to know, brothers, that [my imprisonment] to me has really served to advance the gospel... And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:12-26 ESV).

11 Ripken, Nik, and Gregg Lewis. *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*. Nashville, B&H Books, 2013. P. 263. Note that even the Chinese authorities recognized the inefficacy of prison for stopping the church. “At a certain point, when there were too many pastors to imprison, the Communist Party changed its strategy and created the... 'Three-Self Church' as a means of regulating and limiting the spread of [Christianity]. The strategy proved to be too little and too late...” The church movement continued to explode, and even in prisons, many were coming to faith (p 220).



## Isn't political involvement a good way to defend the vulnerable and act for justice?

How one frames a question shapes the discussion. A very logical answer to the question above may well be “yes.” Political action obviously can shape the law of the land and is at least part of what gives a society its distinctive flavor. Peaceful political action is obviously better than violently disruptive action. But for the Christian, a better framing of the question would be, “How has God called us Christians to impact the world around us?” This formulation points us in the direction of seeking to understand better society's needs and our calling by God in relation to those needs.

Essentially, we are asking ourselves, “What is the condition of our society?” Although no western society has ever been truly Christian, in the past Christian ethics have exerted a stronger effect on our society. What was good and what was wrong would have been broadly accepted by almost all. While this general agreement on right and wrong doesn't mean that people were truly Christian, it did mean that a broad consensus existed to encourage certain actions while restraining others. As originally framed, the question does not take into consideration the root cause of societal abuse of the vulnerable; it only deals with the expression of the root cause. Indeed, this is really all that politics can do.

To deal with the root cause, the internal motivation of society's members needs to change. All people are motivated by something, and that something is their love. For Christians, our motivation is our love of God which stands above all other loves. The non-Christian's motivation is the love of self. Nothing that our secular society has or knows can shift the inner motivation from self-love to the love of God. This is where the Christian has what is needed to bring real change. The Christian's call to action

is a call to witness. Seeing this is essential to understanding what God is calling from us.

Each person needs a model for change in his life, not a law, and certainly not coercion. The early church understood this. The patient expression of a new life by the early Christians, lived in a society that in every way rejected this strange lifestyle, caused their pagan neighbors to question their own ways and, in some cases, eventually to desire the inner motivation that they saw in Christians. This approach was not efficient, successful, or always “positive” in the experience of the believers. Very often, believers witnessed not only by modeling a better way of life but often by giving their lifeblood, by what we call martyrdom.<sup>12</sup> It was this patient modeling that shook the Roman Empire and today shakes any human institution that opposes God's work.

The Christian's witnessing or modeling his new love and life drew people to what God wanted most for unbelievers—that they would repent and then convert in their inner motivation. This is the task God has given to believers, and it stands in stark contrast to the task given to the government. If the government fulfills its task, it provides an environment in which the church can spread the good news. If the church draws people to God through Jesus, she begins real change in them, improving the flavor of the society. However, when either the church or the state leaves its assigned task and interferes with the task of the other minister of God, this interference corrupts both actors.

Read Romans 12 and 13 carefully to see the stark contrast between these two realms of action. All of chapter 12 and chapter 13 from verse 8 on exhort the believer to live the life of witnessing, of modeling, of *martyria*. The

12 Martyrdom, from the Greek *marturia*, which means to bear any kind of witness or to witness by giving our lives.

unbeliever is incapable of doing this with the correct motivation—love. Chapter 13:1–7, on the other hand, calls the government to its appointed task and the Christian to his proper relationship to the government, which is obedience, giving honor, and paying taxes. The Christian is never called on to do the things proper to a ruler. Here as in Colossians 1:10–14, God has instituted two realms, two kingdoms, each with its own commission and each capable only of its own commission.

Finally, I (Stephen) would like to look at the experience of the church as well as my own experience. The church has already tried the route of political involvement. That started with Emperor Constantine and has continued in varying degrees right up to the present. Few of us would consider the experience a success. Even if we could point to some positive outcomes from this merging of the two kingdoms, the overall effect has weakened the church's witness and drawn the state into areas in which it is not competent.

For about 1,100 years after Constantine, the marriage of church and state seemed necessary, despite the deformations it caused in both the church and the state. Then, in the Reformation, as people began to reevaluate the message of the Scriptures, an awareness developed of how far off true the relationship between church and state had grown. The Anabaptists, like the early church, focused on forming a church of true believers, not a mixed congregation that had evolved out of the marriage of church and state. This led the Anabaptists to recognize the importance of separation and a life of holiness by its members for the health of the church. This rediscovered approach to church life was so threatening that the state churches violently persecuted the Anabaptists and nearly wiped them out.

My experience bears out some of the dangers of political involvement for the church and for the proclamation of the good news. As a young Catholic believer, I voted and marched in opposition to the movement for abortion rights. Even after I became a Beachy church member, I continued political involvement for a short time. Two things changed this. First, I saw that those things, such as the abortion issue that moved me, did not really move most politicians. Their priorities were quite different. I had voted for President Reagan because he claimed to be against abortion. He also wanted a tax decrease and went on television to ask people to contact their congressmen to vote for the decrease, or it would not happen. The President expended political capital to get what he wanted. He did not expend political capital to have abortions outlawed. His priorities were different than mine. But even more important than that was seeing the effect of my political action on those I disagreed with. I saw that unbelievers deeply resented the attempt by Christians to impose Christian morality on them. I was raising a wall, not just between unbelievers and me, but also between them and Jesus. By trying to force my will on others, I was perceived as ruthless, and that perception also affected how such people saw Jesus Himself. I was making it almost impossible for such people to hear the good news of Jesus!

Now, this doesn't mean that the laws we have don't matter. But how we try to influence the laws and society is very important. We are called to be models of real-life, and we are to woo unbelievers to Jesus one by one and with great patience. A real conversion has a lasting effect. We are called to show people reality and to call them to it.

## Shouldn't we support politicians who hold views that we agree with on abortion, and other key issues, and who promise to protect our religious freedom?

This is an interesting—and legitimate—challenge to non-participation in politics. Abortion is a heinous atrocity against a population that cannot speak for itself, let alone defend itself. And it seems reasonable to align ourselves with candidates who promise to insulate our homes, businesses, and organizations from, for example, LGBTQ+ activism, which many of us feel is an ideology that will destroy the family unit. There are other highly charged social issues near and dear to the hearts of conservative North Americans. While many conservative Anabaptists would hesitate to say it very loudly, it can seem as though one political party is on God's side, and the other is not.

But we would do well to recognize that this is mostly a shrewd smoke-and-mirrors hustle. It is an old political strategy to find the raw nerves in a particular voting bloc and then direct a carefully crafted message to play on those sensitivities. Once the voting bloc is baited and hooked, it is difficult to notice the many differences and conflicts they may have with the candidate or the areas of common ground they may have with a different candidate. To put it bluntly, such catchphrases as “family values,” “religious freedom,” “pro-life,” or “rule of law” are, to many Christians, like waving bacon at George, my (Mahlon's) overgrown yellow lab mix. For George, and many of us, all nuance, critical thinking, and curiosity about context vanish in a hyper-emotional focus on what is under our nose. This is by design. It is what is happening when certain politicians stage photo ops with Bibles and others swear their oaths on a Koran instead of a Bible. They are playing to the sensitivities of a given voting bloc.

While there are doubtless various candidates with some degree of sincerity in their professions of faith and values, the truth is

that almost all politicians, left and right, are a mixed bag when it comes to overlapping values with the kingdom of God, and many of the areas of apparent overlap with Christ's kingdom are illusions created by skilled political strategists and speechwriters.

Should I vote for and support the candidate who opposes killing babies in America but favors bombing them in Iraq, or the candidate who defends abortion but opposes war? Should I support the candidate who opposes gay marriage but has had multiple marriages and/or affairs, or the candidate who supports gay marriage but has been faithful to his wife and children? Should I support the candidate who defends the rule of law but turns away desperate refugees, or the candidate who creates programs to help the poor but also defends rioters and looters? What kind of economic policy did Jesus really teach, hardworking get-what-you-can capitalism or idealistic share-what-you-have socialism? And just how is it that strong promoters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, which specifically preserves the right for citizens to arm themselves and create “well-regulated militias” for self-defense, are generally well-regarded in a nonresistant church?

There are many more such moral quagmires in which we will quickly become lost if we try to blend Christ's kingdom with the kingdoms of the world.

The truth is that politicians' priorities on both ends of the spectrum have at least some overlap with the priorities of the kingdom of God. It is easy to listen to the siren song of certain political parties and candidates who bill themselves as God's party or God's candidate. However, a quick peek behind the talking points, and rhetoric almost always

reveals a very mixed bag at best, and at worst, something antithetical to Christ's kingdom.

As people who claim to represent a different kingdom, and serve a different King, it makes no more sense for us to get involved in supporting American politicians than it would make sense for an American ambassador to Russia to

become loyal to a particular Russian politician because he has an exciting plan to establish Russian dominance. The relevant question is not whether a candidate holds some views that I sympathize with but which kingdom I am serving. I cannot serve them both.

## Can a nation be a “Christian Nation”?

On the eve of the Iraq invasion, in March of 2003, the drums of war were beating loudly. Just 17 months earlier, the US found itself reeling from a terrorist attack that left nearly 3,000 people dead and the great symbols of American financial and military might smoldering. For a brief time, the United States was a relatively unified country, as it grieved and hungered for retribution.

We (the Zieglers) were living in Pennsylvania at the time, having returned a few years earlier from a period of missionary service in Haiti. I remember being alarmed at how religious-sounding the rhetoric around the looming war had become and at how many yard signs with “God Bless America” and “Pray for Our Troops” had suddenly popped up—the words often framed by a mixture of flags and crosses. Perhaps most distressing to us, however, was that some of this nationalistic faith had entered into casual conversation within our small Mennonite congregation. For my wife and me, the idea of exclusively invoking God's blessing on “our” country and “our” military didn't harmonize with our understanding of the boundary-less nature of the kingdom of God and our personal experience with God's dearly loved children abroad. While I struggled for days to formulate a fitting response, my dear wife, who is gifted in all things arts and crafts, quietly painted a banner with a beautiful globe and the words surrounding it: “God bless the whole world!” It hung in the church house until the Iraq war was nearly over.

Historically, those charged with wielding political and military might have known that religion is a powerful motivator. If people can be convinced that a king, country, or party has God (or Allah or whatever deity) on their side, people will be much more likely to sacrifice, conquer, kill, and die for a given cause. We see this repeatedly throughout history. It is evident

in the warrior gods of the ancient world, in the tribal-religious warfare endemic throughout primitive societies, in the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire, in the crusades of the Middle Ages, in the rise of Islamic caliphates and emirates, in the persecutions and inquisitions of the Reformation era, and in the church-blessed conquest of “savages” by European colonialists. Here in the New World, God's cause has been claimed in Puritan theocracy, in the “manifest destiny” of the conquering of native lands and peoples, and in the hymns and prayers of both North and South during the Civil War. In more recent times, God's blessing has been invoked in the nationalistic declaration that the United States is “exceptional” because of its founding as a “Christian Nation,” begun by Godly men and grounded solidly on Judeo-Christian principles—a “Godly heritage” to be celebrated by Christian patriots.

Now, we do not dispute that Christian principles have been incorporated into some of the founding laws and ideals of the United States. But, as David Bercot points out in his book *In God We Don't Trust*, many of the founding fathers were not Christian in the way we embrace the term, but instead were “Deists” and “rebels” with a very loose relationship to the teachings of Christ and to Scripture. Furthermore, Bercot observes that America was birthed and had grown in some very un-Christlike ways, including tax rebellion, taking up of arms, the stealing of native's land and property, and the kidnapping and abusing of people for slave labor<sup>13</sup>—far from being a shining beacon of Christian “exceptionalism.” Greg Boyd, in his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, points out that when something is called “Christian” it should be, by definition, “Christlike.” Boyd observes:

When the kingdom of God is manifested, it's obvious. It looks like Jesus. But America as

13 Bercot, David. *In God We Don't Trust*. Amberson, PA, Scroll, 2011.

a nation has clearly never looked remotely like Jesus. There was nothing distinctively Christlike about the way America was “discovered,” conquered, or governed in the early years. On the contrary, the way this nation was “discovered,” conquered, and governed was a rather typical, barbaric, violent, kingdom-of-the-world affair. The immoral barbarism displayed in the early (and subsequent) years of this country was, sadly, pretty typical by kingdom-of-the-world standards. The fact that it was largely done under the banner of Christ doesn't make it more Christian, any more than any other bloody conquest done in Jesus' name throughout history (such as the Crusades and the Inquisition) qualifies them as Christlike.<sup>14</sup>

As Anabaptist Christians, we understand that there is but one true “Christian Nation.” It is a nation that transcends physical and temporal boundaries. A nation grounded upon the law of love for God and for neighbor. A nation whose King is called “Wonderful, Counselor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever.” (Isaiah 9:6–7).

We who are citizens of Christ's kingdom, his “Christian Nation,” can accept no counterfeit claims to the title or even calls for split loyalty. We belong to Christ and His kingdom alone. According to Greg Boyd,

The reason God now calls kingdom people to remain separate from the ways of the kingdom-of-the-world is not to isolate them from their culture but to empower them to authentically serve their culture and ultimately win it over to allegiance to Jesus Christ. The reason we are not to be of the world is so we may be for the world.<sup>15</sup>

May God grant us discernment  
and strength for the task!

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14 Boyd, Greg. *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2007.

15 Ibid.

## Why is an international perspective on the kingdom of God important for us and how can it be fostered?

Learning about the global church gives us a glimpse into the scope and nature of Christ's kingdom and provides a perspective about how to relate to the kingdoms of this earth. Jesus' kingdom spans all countries, people groups, and cultures. God is redeeming people from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9 ESV). These Christians from all around the world have their citizenship in heaven and make ideal residents in whatever country they inhabit. However, when Christians become involved in the politics of earthly kingdoms, they erode brotherhood with fellow believers from other countries, undermine global mission efforts, and create confusion about the truths of Christianity.

When those who claim Christ's name become active in affairs of the state, they forfeit political neutrality, and the teachings of Jesus become associated with their home country. Recently, I was talking with a refugee from Myanmar who is considering the claims of Christianity. He is enrolled at a university in Southeast Asia, and he told me that his professors portray Christianity as a religion of western powers that subjugate other cultures. In their minds, Christianity is equated with western imperialism and hegemony because it was introduced in tandem with abuses of colonialism. I communicated to him that the faith tradition I belong to does not stake a claim in national politics, but I could tell that the boundary between nationalism and the teachings of Jesus remained blurred in his mind.

The kingdom of Christ supersedes all national and ethnic barriers and makes one family of all who believe in Christ. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him" (Romans 10:12). Caiaphas unknowingly

prophesied that Jesus would die, not only for the nation of Israel, but "also to gather together in one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52). Believers have been transplanted into a spiritual kingdom of light that transcends all earthly kingdoms. When we support a politician or align ourselves with a political state, we are invariably forced to choose between its vested interests and the cause of Christ and His expanding, global kingdom.

An Iraqi woman visited the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center in Holmes County, Ohio, and participated in a tour of the Behalt Cyclorama—a 265-foot long, oil-on-canvas mural detailing the story of Christianity with special emphasis on our Anabaptist heritage and history. After the official tour ended, she stood fixated by the scene of Dirk Willems, who is depicted returning to rescue his pursuer, who had fallen through the thin ice. Incredulous of the story she just heard, she asked the curator who had walked to her side, "Does anyone still live this way?" She went on to relate how her extended family was killed in the Persian Gulf War, led by the United States. Confusedly, she detailed that some of the missiles that had rained down on Iraq had been painted with the Christian cross and inscriptions such as, "God bless America." She also indicated that the crusades are still a strong part of how their culture views Christianity even after eight hundred years. In her mind, these actions represented Christianity—not the selfless, suffering love of Willems in the painting before her.<sup>16</sup> Tragically, these expressions of Christian nationalism are the only introduction to Jesus that millions of people around the world will ever encounter.

One of the best ways to gain an international perspective on the global church is by visiting

16 As told by Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center Executive Director Marcus Yoder, January 30, 2021.

believers in another country. Seeing followers of Jesus expressing their faith outside the context of our own North American culture will enlarge our understanding of how God is building the church in other countries. Since not everyone has the privilege or ability to travel internationally, another excellent way to broaden our perspective is to visit or host international Christians living in our own country, often residing in clustered ethnic communities within large American cities. Other ways to expand our perspective include reading books,<sup>17</sup> subscribing to mission newsletters and periodicals, sponsoring native missionaries in restricted access countries, and staying in touch with Christian workers on the foreign field.

When we catch a glimpse of the international community of believers, we are drawn into God's work of redeeming a remnant church among all nations of the earth. Seeing believers from other countries reminds us that God's kingdom is spiritual and that becoming involved in the politics of an earthly kingdom (our home country) is antithetical to the Kingship of Christ. Indeed, we ought to identify more clearly with believers across the ages and from many nations and acknowledge that we are mere strangers and pilgrims on earth who seek a true homeland—a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16 ESV).

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17 For example, Nik Ripken's excellent book *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* (Nashville, B&H Books, 2013), in which he tells the story of international believers, particularly those who are suffering and persecuted.



## What does it mean to be an ambassador for the kingdom of God?

When it comes to earthly loyalties, Christ and His Apostles speak with one voice—we who have given our lives to Jesus belong solely to His kingdom. In terms of allegiance, dual citizenship is not a biblical idea. Jesus tells us we are “not of the world” (John 15:19), Peter calls us “aliens and temporary residents” (1 Peter 2:11), Paul reminds us that we should not be “conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2) and that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), James encourages us to keep ourselves “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27), and John implores us to “love not the world” (1 John 2:15). With such an unambiguous call to ground our identity apart from the world, how then should Christians relate to society around us?

Should we withdraw and remain aloof from the world and its social orders, or instead should we participate in worldly authority structures with the goal of changing the system as insurgents or reformers? As Anabaptists, we understand the answer is neither. On the one hand, Jesus calls us to a disciple-making faith and to lives lived as salt and light in the world—we can't do that from a cloister. Yet, on the other hand, nowhere does Christ indicate that we are called to co-opt the world's authority for the sake of the Gospel. In fact, Scripture tells us that the powers and principalities of this world are ultimately in competition with Christ's authority (1 Cor. 15:24–28). The kingdom of heaven is not an improved version of earthly government but an entirely new endeavor (2 Cor. 5:17, 2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21:1) sourced in the power and person of King Jesus.

So, if we are not called to be either separatists or activists, how should we understand our relationship to the world's power structures? The apostle Paul offers us an extremely

helpful answer—we are commissioned to be “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20). Ambassadorship captures well the Christian experience of being in the world but not of the world, because it recognizes that we live spiritually in a foreign land as non-citizen representatives of our King and His kingdom. Thus, as we think about how best to live out a faithful and effective witness for Jesus, we would do well to remember the duties of an ambassador:

1. Represent the perspective of King and country. According to the US Department of state, “an ambassador is the President's representative to a specific nation, whose chief role is to represent the interests and policies of the United States.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, we who serve the King of kings serve as His emissaries; Christ is “entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19 ESV). As ambassadors, we must always be mindful that we do not just advocate for our own interests, but we speak and act as Christ's representatives on earth. Since “God is making His appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20 ESV), we have a solemn responsibility to express words and deeds that are in harmony with the teachings and example of Christ, so that God's message to the world is clear and undefiled, and so people may see our good deeds and praise our father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).
2. Be willing to communicate truth—even unpopular truth. In many ways, the prophets of old were God's first human ambassadors, bringing messages of both hope and judgment on His behalf. The role of ambassador for Christ can often be a prophetic one, in which we decry that

18 US Department of State. “What Are the Roles of a Diplomat?” National Museum of American Diplomacy, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/diplomacy/what-are-the-roles-of-a-diplomat/>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

which grieves our Lord and praise that which echoes His mercy and justice. By doing so, we who have learned the way of Jesus not only encourage righteousness when we see it, but we also bear witness to the love-grounded ethics of the kingdom.

3. Be diplomatic. According to Ambassador Benjamin Franklin, the qualities of a diplomat are “sleepless tact, unmovable calmness, and a patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunders may shake.”<sup>19</sup> Ambassadors always remember that their words and emotions can have a significant impact on how the agenda of their homeland is received. While harshness and disrespect seem to be increasingly common in public discourse these days, Scripture encourages us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). It tells us that God favors the humble (James 4:6) and that “a gentle answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1 NASB). When we speak for God, may we do so in a way that befits His dignity and assures that His message will be heard as widely as possible.

4. Rise above the fray. For an ambassador, speaking prophetically is different from taking sides (although it may not always be perceived that way). An ambassador who becomes co-opted into political power struggles will quickly find their credibility compromised and their voice muted. As ambassadors for Christ, we must take pains to guard our loyalties so that our moral voice can ring true above the political rancor. When we, as Christ's representatives, choose to enter into the petty tribalism of partisan politics (which political scientist Lillianna Mason calls “formalized intergroup conflict”<sup>20</sup>) we not only lose credibility; we risk casting the Lord of all Creation into the role of tribal deity—a grievous demotion! Our ambassadorial voice is clearest when our fealty is to Christ alone.

Throughout the world, it is understood as a great honor to be chosen as an ambassador for any country. How much greater an honor it is for lowly followers of the Lord of Lords to be charged with serving as His representatives on earth? May God give us the grace and wisdom we need to rise to the task for the glory of His kingdom!

19 US Department of State. “What Are the Roles of a Diplomat?” National Museum of American Diplomacy, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/diplomacy/what-are-the-roles-of-a-diplomat/>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

20 Mason, Lillianna. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

## How do our heavenly and earthly citizenships relate to each other?

Citizenship, which in Paul's day was the precious privilege of the few, is today nearly universal. Almost everyone is a citizen of the nation in which he resides or in which he was born. We Christians use this national membership in various facets of life, such as when we travel to a foreign country. Of far greater significance, though, is that heavenly citizenship that Paul references in Philippians 3:20. While this citizenship is open to any and all who turn to Jesus, it is far more precious than the exclusivist Roman or any modern, inclusive earthly citizenship.

Jesus is referring to this heavenly citizenship when He tells Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:33-39). Since it is not of this world, its citizens do not conduct themselves like citizens of earthly kingdoms. They are not supposed to pick up the sword to defend their king as others would. In the garden, when Peter struck the high priest's servant, Jesus told him to desist and then healed the severed ear. The citizens of Jesus' kingdom are those who have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and its behaviors and brought into the kingdom of light with its transformed behaviors (Colossians 1:12-14).

Numerous times Jesus told His disciples to follow him. Our goal as citizens of heaven is to become conformed to the likeness of Christ by following Him (1 John 3:1-3). This citizenship means suffering and internal change, often unexpected change, change where we thought we were alright! "If any man desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Paul elaborates on this in Philippians 3. When we take our heavenly citizenship seriously, we want to know Christ "and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible

[we] may attain the resurrection from the dead" (vv.10, 11 ESV). Jesus has the power to change us and our lowly bodies if we "stand firm thus in the Lord" (vv. 3:20-4:1 ESV). As we follow Jesus and let Him transform us, as we are "that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation," we will "shine as lights in the universe as [we hold] fast the word of life" (Philippians 2:15, 16 ESV), thus drawing others to the reality of Christ's kingdom and away from the false allure of passing kingdoms of this world. The kingdoms of this world are based on coercive violence while Christ's kingdom is the peaceable kingdom.

These earthly kingdoms have a place in God's present economy. They are to punish wrongdoing and to commend the good (Romans 13:3-5 and 1 Peter 2:14). We Christians, Peter says, have a responsibility to do good by submitting to "every human authority" and to "show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:13, 17 NIV). We Christians need to support the earthly kingdoms as we can in doing good. Naturally, we should obey any laws which do not contradict God's law (Acts 4:19 and 5:29). Where we can, we ought to do good since we live in these kingdoms. Helping and serving are inherent to the Christian life (Matthew 20:24-28). Like the Good Samaritan, we should aid those in need. There are many ways in which we can accomplish this. A few would include disaster relief, helping with Habitat for Humanity, blood drives, and the many possibilities that show themselves in all of our communities. We should never forget that we are in the world, but not of it.

Sometimes we will suffer for obeying God and doing the good. We are called to bear this for God. "To this, you were called, because Christ

suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps” (1 Pet. 2:2–21 NIV). When we suffer for Christ by obeying Him rather than man, we should “not be ashamed, but praise God that [we] bear that name” (1 Pet. 4:16 NIV). This treatment may come from individuals or from the government when they despise some aspect of Christian living.

This is part of being salt and light. Living in a way that honors God without striking back when we are jeered or persecuted plants a seed in the heart of an unbeliever that the Spirit can use to draw him to God. But, even if the unbelievers do not respond in this way, we are still called to faithfulness to God.

*This paper was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues.*

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