

**“The Dual Citizenship of a Christian”**  
***Politics, Polarization, and Our Christian Witness***  
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**(Eph. 3:17-4:1)**

**Introduction.**

Have you ever known anyone who had a dual citizenship? They are literally citizens of two different countries at the same time, and they have legal rights and obligations in both countries. They even carry two different passports.

I recently read where Italy is actively promoting the opportunity to have a dual citizenship in their country, and they are recruiting people who have any Italian heritage to pursue this option. One of the publications I saw advertised the advantages. Italian dual citizenship allows you to relocate to Italy or anywhere across the European Union. As an Italian citizen you can study and legally work in Italy and anywhere else for that matter in the entire EU. Purchasing property in Italy is a whole lot easier when you're a citizen, and there is also the benefit of having access to low-cost healthcare and higher education. So, what are you waiting for? If your maternal great-grandfather was raised in Italy or you just happen to love eating pasta, have we got a deal for you!

When it comes to being a follower of Jesus Christ, the Bible says that we, too, have a dual citizenship. Only our citizenship isn't in two different countries; it's in two different kingdoms. One is earthly, and the other is divine. We are citizens of heaven as well as citizens of the country in which we live here on earth. That is a very important theological concept which has huge implications for how you and I should view our lives as Americans, and that's what I want to talk about today.

**I. Our Citizenship in Heaven.**

Here in Philippians 3 the apostle Paul writes about our citizenship in heaven. The word that is translated “citizenship” in this passage is the Greek word *politeuma* from which we get our English word “politics.” The Greek word actually had political implications, and Paul probably chose this word carefully because Philippi at the time when he wrote this letter was a Roman colony. This meant that it was ruled by Roman law rather than by the native custom or the particular laws of the surrounding area and that its citizens were actually citizens of Rome, something of which they were very proud. Paul plays on the civic pride of the Philippian believers to help them think of themselves as members of a commonwealth that is located in heaven regardless of where they happened to live on earth.

In his commentary on the book of Philippians, pastor and author Earl Palmer points out that in chapter 1 of his letter Paul encouraged the believers at Philippi to be real people who lived in the real world, so that their involvement in the community would reflect their love for and commitment to Jesus Christ in concrete ways. Earthly citizenship brings with it both privileges and responsibilities, and in chapter 1 Paul told the Philippians to take their social and political

duties as citizens of an earthly kingdom seriously precisely because they were followers of Jesus Christ.

However, as Paul points out here in chapter 3, Christians have a second set of privileges and additional responsibilities as citizens of heaven. The two citizenships are intertwined. If we are fulfilling our responsibilities as citizens of heaven (whose royal law is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"), then we will also fulfill our responsibilities as citizens of the country in which we live here on earth. We live Christian lives in the real and present world at a particular street address with political and social realities precisely because we belong to a permanent citizenship in heaven which is God's gift to us here and now.<sup>1</sup>

Let me give you an analogy. Some citizens of the United States live and work for a period of time in a foreign country. When they are there, they have to live according to the laws of that foreign country, just like its citizens do. But at the same time, they are subject to the laws of the United States. And no matter how wonderful the foreign country may be, the United States is still their home. It's the place where they ultimately belong, and it's where they will go once their work in the foreign country is done. In the same way, the Christian's ultimate citizenship is in heaven, and that is where we will go one day.

Do you see what Paul is saying in Philippians 3? He is describing the way in which the followers of Jesus Christ are citizens not just of two countries but actually of two worlds. One is divine, and the other is earthly. One is supreme, and the other is secondary. One is permanent, and the other is temporary. And we get ourselves into trouble as followers of Christ whenever we either forget this reality or we fail to keep the priority of our citizenship in heaven first and foremost in our minds and hearts.

I think it's easy to get confused and become muddled in our thinking about our dual citizenship, and the disciples themselves were also confused about it too even after Jesus had spent 40 days with them talking about the Kingdom of God after His resurrection and before He was taken up into heaven. They asked Him, "*Jesus, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" They were still thinking in political terms and about earthly kingdoms, and they wanted to use the power of heaven for their advantage to bring about an earthly kingdom. But Jesus replied, "*It is not for you to know the dates and the times of My return. Instead, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you in order to be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the utter ends of the earth*" (Acts 1).

Earlier during His earthly ministry, Jesus had made it clear, "*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place*" (Jn. 18:36). Jesus pointed to a spiritual reality beyond this earth where He and His Father reigned in sovereign majesty. But the disciples were still looking for political power here on earth in order to overthrow the Roman oppression. They were hoping for a new social order in their country.

However, Jesus had something quite different in mind, and if we ever begin to think that our citizenship in heaven is supposed to give us power here on earth, we will be greatly mistaken and always end up disappointed. I think some Christians in the political arena today have forgotten this biblical truth. Our citizenship in heaven comes first, and it rules and overrules our citizenship on earth.

## **II. Our Citizenship on Earth.**

The Bible clearly teaches that while the followers of Jesus are citizens of heaven, nevertheless we remain citizens of the countries in which we live here on earth. And God want us to live out our calling as citizens of heaven in the context of our citizenship on earth. Toward the end of Jesus' ministry, He said, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"* (Mt. 22:21). When Christ said this, He established a principle that had never been heard before. Jesus taught that we owe loyalty to two different spheres, and we need to keep that clear in our minds. Obviously, our loyalty to God is a higher loyalty, but we still have a subordinate obligation to Caesar.

Christians should be some of the best citizens of a country. The great early American statesman and orator Daniel Webster once observed, "Whatever makes people good Christians also makes them good citizens." America's first President George Washington added, "We are persuaded that good Christians will always make good citizens, and that where righteousness prevails among the people the Nation will be great and happy. Thus, while just government protects their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support."

These two American statesmen were well aware of what Scripture teaches regarding the earthly citizenship of a Christian. For example, in 2 Peter 2 we read, *"Christians, submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, or to governors, who are sent by God...Show proper respect to everyone. Love the community of believers, fear God, and honor the king"* (2 Pt. 2:13,14,17).

Now, as citizens of heaven does that mean we simply offer blind allegiance to the country in which we live? By no means! Because of our citizenship in heaven, we are called to speak out against injustice in our country and work to right the wrongs that exist in our nation. Our citizenship in heaven should inform and help us live out more fully our citizenship on earth, and our dual citizenship allows us to be Christ's representatives, in fact His ambassadors, here and now where we live, work, and play. It affords us the unique opportunity to make a difference for Christ right where we are.

Some Christians say that the followers of Jesus Christ should remain detached from this earth and not get involved in politics and the problems we face in America. They suggest we should focus on our citizenship in heaven and forget about our citizenship on earth. "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through," so I don't need to be concerned about what is happening here around me. My focus is on heaven, and I'm not going to allow myself to get entangled in the thorny mess of this fallen world.

But I would suggest to you that, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, it's possible to be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. And that isn't the way of Jesus. The Bible tells us that Christ left the comforts of heaven and His fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and in the miracle of the Incarnation He entered the mess of the world to redeem it. He didn't abandon us in our brokenness and in the awful mess we had made of things, but instead Jesus invaded the earth to reclaim it and to bring salvation to the whole world. And the followers of Jesus Christ are to roll up their sleeves, too, and get involved in trying to address the problems of this world. Our salvation isn't supposed to simply be fire insurance and give us a ticket to heaven. No, we've been saved to serve, and God invites us to join Christ on His mission of love to a lost and broken world.

Some people say that politics is a dirty word, and Christians shouldn't get involved. I disagree. Politics is simply how groups of people make decisions about their common life

together. How we engage in politics can be a very negative thing, and we see that in spades in Washington these days. But politics in and of itself is actually neutral. It's simply how people do life and make decisions with one another in the course of living in this world.

Think about the last time your family went out for dinner. (Well, I know that may have been a long time ago for some of you with all the isolation we've had to endure during this pandemic! But think about a time perhaps in the distant past when you did this.) When you all got in the car and you said, "Where should we go for dinner tonight?", you entered into a political process and you had to find some common ground to make a decision about where you were going to eat.

Perhaps one family member said, "I want to go Mellow Mushroom Pizza," and another said, "No, we went there last week. I want to try something new. How about we go eat at Olive Garden?" Still another family member says, "Let's go to Chick-Fil-A." (Well, okay. That settles it because everyone knows that Christians like to eat at Chick-Fil-A!)

How you make a decision as a family about where you're going to eat is a political process, and often you have to compromise in order to find a common path forward which keeps everyone together. Maybe you said, "Well, Nathan got to choose where we ate last week. It's Susan's opportunity to make the decision tonight." Or perhaps you said, "Kids, your mother and I have decided that we've been eating too much junk food lately, so we're going to go to a place this evening that has some healthier options. Here are three restaurants you can choose from, and we all get a vote. The majority wins."

In a democracy the name of the game in politics is compromise, but that's how groups of people must come together and form a social contract and work for the betterment of all. In government it's how budgets, appointments, policies, and programs get decided, and in a democracy, you've got to work together to seek a common way forward.

One of the biggest problems in Washington and in Raleigh today is that no one is willing to compromise, and they're all talking past each other. They are locked into their own particular ideology or political party, and they treat people with whom they disagree with contempt. For them it's a zero-sum all-or-nothing game.

We're never going to solve the problems our country faces unless we refuse to respond with contempt to people with whom we disagree. And until we're willing to listen to each other, work together, and give a little ground in order to pursue the common good, we will never make progress and create a better world for everyone. Sure, you might not get the whole loaf of bread you're advocating for when you're involved in the political process, but getting a few slices and making sure everyone has their fair share is much better than everyone losing out and being stuck in an intractable mess.

How is God calling you to engage in the world around you as a citizen in this country? As a Christian and as a citizen of heaven, how are you working to make this world a better place for everyone? You don't have to run for public office, and you don't have to belong to a political party. But each of us can vote, each of us pays taxes, and God wants all of us to be involved as citizens on earth.

## **Conclusion.**

How do we as Christians live out our calling and faithfully live in light of our dual citizenship as citizens of heaven and citizens on earth? And what examples are there of believers who

allowed their citizenship in heaven to hold in check and yet still creatively motivate their citizenship on earth? I believe William Wilberforce offers us a remarkable example, and as we close I want to tell you his story.

Wilberforce was the only son of a wealthy merchant and his wife who lived in England in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although he was an average student at Cambridge University, his quick wit made him a favorite among his fellow students. When he decided to enter politics after graduation in 1780, he soon won a seat in Parliament from his home county of Hull. He was only 21 years old at the time. He, along with his close friend, William Pitt, were two of the bright stars on the political horizon, and when in 1784 Pitt won election as Prime Minister, the future looked bright indeed for Wilberforce. He was destined for power and prominence.

But it was while Wilberforce was taking a vacation in Europe with his family in 1785 that God began to stir in his heart. An old professor from Cambridge named Isaac Milner raised the matter of faith with Wilberforce, and through their conversations on that trip God began to move in the young man's mind and heart, and he gave it life to Christ. When he returned to London, he noticed subtle changes in his outlook on life. The parties he once enjoyed now seemed, as he said, "indecent." He also developed a great dislike for corruption, and he wasn't at ease in his soul. He thought about leaving politics altogether.

He sought out the advice of John Newton, the converted slave trader and author of the hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton counseled him not to abandon public office and said, "the Lord has raised you up to the good of His church and for the good of the nation." Wilberforce heeded the advice, and in 1787, on a foggy Sunday morning, God impressed upon the young man that if Christianity is true and meaningful, it must not only save but also serve. At that moment all he could envision were loaded slave ships leaving the sunbaked coasts of Africa. He wrote in his journal, "Almighty God has set before me two great objectives, the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of morals."

It took 20 long years, and he encountered much opposition and ridicule along the way. But in 1807, Wilberforce was able to assemble a coalition in Parliament so that both the House of Lords and the House of Commons voted to abolish the slave trade in England. As the vote was taken in the House of Commons, Wilberforce sat bent over in his chair, his head in his hands, tears streaming down his face. The motion carried, 283 to 16.

William Wilberforce realized he was a citizen of two kingdoms, and it was his citizenship in heaven that inspired and directed his citizenship in Great Britain. Very few of us will be called into a life of politics, but even so our citizenship in heaven should be the primary thing that directs our lives here on earth – our life as a parent, an employee, a student, a neighbor, and as a citizen who resides in city of Winston-Salem in the great state of North Carolina in the country of the United States. Ask God how He wants you to be a better citizen for Christ here on earth this fall. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Earl Palmer, *Integrity in a World of Pretense* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 146-147.