

Sound Living

Tale of Two
Citizenships
God & Country

Jerry Nelson

Recently in our culture, Christians have been intimidated into thinking of God and public life as two completely separate categories. There may be a private, internal spiritual world that is irrelevant to everyday life and then there is the rest—the practical world of reality. By getting us to think that religion is not only personal but also private, we also begin to agree that religion has no place in public debate and policy. And so anytime something is labeled “religious” it is automatically ruled “out of order” in the public arena. But the Bible says that God and government are related even if the governors don’t know it. Study how you can become truly citizens of two worlds.

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By Jerry Nelson, www.soundliving.org

A Tale of Two Citizenships

God & Country

She was seven and in the second grade. One late November morning in her Seattle, Washington classroom, her teacher assigned her and her classmates to draw pictures of what they were thankful for. The little girl immediately went to work with full concentration on her drawing. When she finished she proudly took it to her teacher who asked her to explain what she was thankful for. The little girl declared it was a picture of Jesus. The teacher immediately said she couldn't do that in school and told her to draw another picture.

When the parents learned of the incident they went to the principle who agreed with the teacher that the separation of church and state prohibited such a picture in the public classroom. The parents took it to the school board who also concurred with the teacher and principle. In the ensuing debate one of Seattle's largest law firms wrote an opinion that agreed with the school board.¹

That story is similar to my own. When my oldest daughter was in the 1st grade, her teacher invited the students to bring their favorite books from home to be read aloud in the classroom. When Kimberly brought her favorite story from the Bible, she was informed that it could not be read because (and I quote) "we don't talk about God in school."

The tragedy in those two stories is not only that they actually happened, but more importantly that they represent accepted practice not only in our public education

but also in almost every other sphere of everyday life. And most tragic of all is that they are accepted by Christians as legitimate and necessary policies for living in a pluralistic society. The problem is that in our so-called pluralistic American public life of education and government, there is **one worldview that is excluded** and that is the Christian worldview, the one that accepts the existence of a transcendent God.

This sermon is not a brief for school-sponsored prayers or for the establishment of any one denomination as the religion of America. But I would hope by now, forty or more years into the debate, that most of you are quite aware that our country has gone through a radical shift in worldviews. Though their variations are legion, I believe there are only two basic views of reality, two ways of understanding our existence, two ways of viewing the world or as they are commonly called, two "worldviews." One is theism and the other is materialism.

On the theistic side there are countless variations from those who hold to polytheism or to pantheism or to our western heritage of monotheism. I don't think any historian would deny that for the past 1700 years in Europe and subsequently in America, the overwhelmingly dominant worldview of the masses was that there is a God. And that God is not an impersonal force but a personal God who created all else that exists and who has revealed His will for humanity and will hold humanity accountable. That worldview has diminished greatly in Europe in recent years, and has been challenged greatly in our own country over the past 80 years.

But only in the past 40 years have we seen an opposing worldview gain such influence that it has largely taken over education, the media, the arts, government and its

courts. That opposing worldview is materialism. It is a view of reality that says the world and life are the mere products of time and chance. It denies the existence of a transcendent God or at least denies any relevance of such a God, if one exists. Such a worldview is completely incompatible with a Christian worldview. One is “a-theistic” and the other is theistic. One believes there are no absolute values and that humanity is on its own to determine what is temporarily expedient or inexpedient. I do not say “right and wrong” or “good and bad” for such sharp categories can’t exist in a value-less worldview.

But a theistic worldview believes that there are absolute values handed down by God. Or as our Declaration of Independence put it so eloquently, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are **endowed by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights...**” Theists may argue about the nature of God and the specifics of His revelation but they agree He is there and He has spoken. While there is not much else in common, Christians have more in common with Islam than with materialism.

It is logically, philosophically, and practically impossible to live by both of those worldviews at the same time. To the post-modernists who want to enter the debate and argue otherwise, how can you? You don’t even believe your words mean anything. To the rest of us who **do** believe that words can mean something and that discussion is possible, we are left with two choices—materialism or theism.

Why would I even be discussing this today? After all, we all believe in God: we’re theists. My main reason for addressing this subject is because **many of us** who hold a theistic and particularly Christian worldview **are not being true citizens of the two worlds for which we are responsible.**

The Apostle Paul, in Philippians, makes reference to the great truth that we are citizens of heaven: *"For our citizenship is in heaven."* (3:20) Quite evident from New Testament teaching is that by placing faith in Jesus Christ alone, we are born into the family of God and hence are citizens of the Kingdom of God. With that citizenship comes responsibilities, empowered by the Spirit of God within us to be sure, but responsibilities none-the-less. As Paul said it earlier in the same letter, *"Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."* (Philippians 1:27)

But that same apostle declared he was also a citizen of Rome.

The commander went to Paul and asked, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?'

'Yes, I am... I was born a citizen,' Paul replied." (Acts 22:27-29)

We, who are Christ-followers are likewise citizens of two worlds. For most of us those two citizenships are the Kingdom of God and the United States of America. I mentioned earlier that many of us are not being true citizens of the two worlds for which we are responsible. I don't have time to review all the scripture passages but I think that even without it, most of you will agree that God calls on His people to engage the world around us.

- We are called on to pursue righteousness and justice.
- We are called on to live and proclaim the good news of life in Jesus to a world that is following other ideologies that lead to despair and death.
- Our mission is **not** just to get ourselves to heaven after enjoying personal peace and affluence on earth.
- Our mandate is to sacrificially engage the world because *"God so loves the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Now more specifically to the point of our responsibilities as citizens of the United States of America, listen to the Word of God:

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."
(Romans 13:1-7)

It is not my intention to exegete this entire text in all of its detail but instead to point out in broad terms the responsibilities of both the government and the governed.

Recently in our culture, Christians have been intimidated into thinking of God and public life as two completely separate categories. There may be a private, internal spiritual world that is irrelevant to everyday life and then there is the rest—the practical world of reality. By getting us to think that religion is not only personal but also private,

we also begin to agree that religion has no place in public debate and policy. And so anytime something is labeled "religious" it is automatically ruled "out of order" in the public arena. For example pro-life advocates are almost always portrayed as religious in the media thus suggesting their views are irrelevant because they are private, religious ideas.

But one with a theistic worldview says wait a minute. Let's make a necessary distinction between religion as a particular denomination and a religiously based idea. Many Roman Catholics may be pro-life but in their anti-abortion stance they are not forcing people to become Roman Catholics; they are advocating a pro-life value. It would be contrary not only to our constitution but also to Scripture, I think, to try to legislate Roman Catholicism but it is not only fair constitutionally but essential biblically that we advocate a pro-life value to be part of the laws of our land.

But the Bible says that God and government are related even if the governors don't know it.

"There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13:1)

That is consistent with several similar passages in the Old Testament. For example, Daniel 4:17 says, *"The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."*

I know that creates some cognitive dissonance for us when we think of the governments of Joseph Stalin and Saddam Hussein but the Bible declares that God is sovereign over all governments. Not only does government exist under God's sovereign choice but also governments are responsible under God to promote justice and punish evil. Paul says in

Romans 13:4, *"For he is **God's servant to do you good.** But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is **God's servant**, an agent of wrath **to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.**"* (Emphasis Added)

And in a democratic republic, citizen-Christians have the unique opportunity to influence the government "of the people, by the people and for the people" to carry out that charge.

But notice also the text specifically says that the governed are to submit to authority, to pay taxes and to honor the authorities.

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." (Romans 13:1,6-7)

As Christians we must watch our attitudes very carefully as they relate to government.

- Notice the governors are several times called "God's servants" which the same title given to pastors, apostles, and others in the Bible.
- Notice the words "submit," "respect" and "honor" which are words of attitude not just outward appearance.

So how does a Christian live as both a citizen of heaven and citizen of his country? Some have advocated intentional withdrawal. They say don't attempt to get involved in government or politics or policies.

One well-known conservative pastor/author has written: "Personally, I'm not primarily concerned about political, economic, social and civil issues. I do have a reasonable concern about those things, but they don't occupy my

mind... We need to be concerned about the souls of the lost."² The intention seems laudable but the methodology is unbiblical.

Constitutional attorney, Lynn Buzzard wrote that too many treat the relationship of Christianity to the rest of life a bit like this. It's as if early in American history the government came to the church and said, "Church, look. We know you're really important... we want to give you some things for you to do:

- You do church and we'll do government.
- We'll give you gospel songs, we won't write any.
- And you get prayer.
- And you get from 11-noon on Sundays except during football season.
- And finally you get eschatology—you get everything after we die.

Now in exchange for us giving you, the church, all of that, we get education, science, art, philosophy and government. You stay in your place and sing and pray and we'll take care of the rest."³ I'm convinced that such intentional withdrawal from public policy is not biblical. Probably more Christians have withdrawn from politics, public debate and government because of frustration. We become so discouraged with what we see happening around us, and feel so helpless to change it that we give up in frustration. Is it not hopeless?

No, it is not hopeless. God is still the one who sets kings up and takes them down. History testifies to the Bible's claims that God can revolutionize a country.

- Israel was restored from outright idolatry under the leadership of King David.
- Again Israel was recovered from paganism under the leadership of King Josiah.

- Who can deny the transformation of Europe from A.D 313 forward? One pagan nation after another was revolutionized by the Christian worldview.
- It is historically undeniable that our own system of government rests upon a Judeo-Christian worldview. Our entire early legal, educational, and political culture was permeated with Christian speech and values.

It is true that only the ill informed would suggest that all the founding fathers of our nation were Christ-following Christians. But it is equally true that only the ill informed or the intentionally misleading would suggest that our government was not rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview. To be sure, we are fast losing that base but it can be recaptured if God's people act as true citizen-Christians.

What Do We Do?

1. We reenter the public debate.

We show by our lives and words that the Christian worldview is a superior way of life. There are those who say Christians have no right to speak to public policy issues because of the separation of church and state. Their premise is that faith-based ideas, ideas derived from revelation from a supreme being, are illegitimate compared to ideas derived from human reason alone. They can say, "I say" but we cannot say, "God said." Who wrote that rule?

Some would say the framers of our Constitution wrote that rule. Even if that were true we would have to join the Apostles and countless others down through the centuries and obey God rather than man and proclaim the freedom that is in Jesus. But the Constitution does not make such a rule. The first amendment reads in part: "The Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." First of all everyone seems to have conveniently forgotten the second

phrase of that amendment when they try so hard to keep Christian values out of the market place of ideas.

But secondly, the first phrase has much to say about keeping government from establishing a state religion which was common in the 18th century but it says nothing about keeping religious principles, ideals and values out of government. It was only after a materialistic worldview began to exercise influence in this country that reinterpretation of our history and constitution began to take place. And those who keep repeating the mantra of "separation of church and state" don't seem to remember that the phrase does not appear in the constitution and only a deliberate misreading of history has made it mean what some think it means today. Make no mistake, atheistic Materialism, as a philosophy, is hostile to Christianity. Christianity is a threat to its totalitarianism.

I was amazed when I heard a report on the quite liberal National Public Radio about Christianity in China.

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel. And I'm Michele Norris.

"In China for nearly a year, authorities have been holding two Christian activists without trial and without contact with their families...The two men are part of the growing number of Christians in China who are becoming politically active, something that is causing great concern to the Chinese government.

NPR's Rob Gifford reports from Beijing.

Xiu Yonghai and Liu Fenggang were well-known Christian activists in Beijing...Before he was arrested, Xiu Yonghai spoke with NPR at length about his beliefs and his increasing involvement in political issues.

Mr. XIU YONGHAI (Chinese Christian Activist): (Through Translator) A Christian should have a responsibility towards society, especially in a country like China. A country that is a dictatorship cannot give real religious freedom. Religious freedom and political freedom are actually the same thing.

GIFFORD: China's social and economic reforms are, in places, producing more religious freedom. But there's one condition: You stay out of politics...Liu Fenggang and Xiu Yonghai are both part of a growing group of Christian agitators, Chinese intellectuals who've become evangelical Christians and who see in Christianity a salvation both personal and national, a way to revitalize both themselves and the Chinese nation with the values they say are missing in communism. This is a huge concern for the Chinese leaders, says Richard Madsen, an expert on Chinese religion at the University of California in San Diego.

Dr. RICHARD MADSEN: They must have in mind what happened in Eastern Europe, in Poland in the 1980's, and in other parts of Eastern Europe, where the rise of and energizing of a variety of religious groups did, in fact, help to weaken the socialist states and was at least a contributing factor in the demise of Communist regimes there.

GIFFORD: A group of Christians meet to sing at the home of Wong Mei Ru(ph), a 62-year-old house church leader who was also part of Xiu Yonghai's group.

Ms. WONG MEI RU: (Through Translator) If the Communist Party continues to be as corrupt as it is, the Christian Church here will definitely become like the Catholic Church in Poland in the '80s. I think that is the kind of people Christians should be.

GIFFORD: ...Chinese Christians like Wong think very deeply. They think structurally. They think about why certain religions have led to certain systems of government in the world.

Ms. WONG: (Through Translator) In Western countries, the religious revolution led to political reform. Western countries are developed because many people believe in Christianity. The Chinese Communist Party is worried about Christians because it knows the Bible has a revolutionary spirit.

GIFFORD: ...more and more people in China are finding hope in Christianity, and more and more of those Christians, it seems, are finding it hard to separate their personal faith from a fight for social and political justice. *Rob Gifford, NPR News, Beijing.* Copyright ©1990-2004 National Public Radio®.

The Christian worldview aided in the overthrow of the political expression of the philosophical materialism of the Soviet Union. The Christian worldview is an apparent threat to the philosophical materialism of China. And if God's people will continue to speak up and keep advocating a Christian worldview, it can make a difference in our country.

We must win the minds and hearts of the citizens. It is a battle of ideas, of basic worldviews, and truth will eventually win. If Polish Christians weren't discouraged after 70 years and Chinese Christians aren't discouraged after nearly 60 years, then why are we? Christians not only have the right but the responsibility to declare their values, their world-view, in the moral debates of our time. Those who would shut us up by misapplying the constitution of our country must not intimidate us.

In fact what must be demonstrated is that a Christian worldview alone allows for the very pluralism that most people claim they want.

- History confirms that Islam as seen in Iran and many other places does not allow freedom of religion.
- History confirms that atheistic Materialism (as seen in the Soviet Union and in China today) does not allow freedom of religion.
- History confirms that Hinduism does not allow freedom of religion.

Only Christianity, when following the will of our Lord, allows for true religious freedom and even freedom to not have religion—not by forcing compliance with Christian thought but by winning the hearts of people. I will say more of winning the hearts of people later.

2. A second way we act as true citizen-Christians is by protesting, resisting, and even disobeying unjust laws. As we saw earlier from Romans 13, the responsibility of government is to promote justice and punish evil. When a government ceases to do that, citizen-Christians are responsible to react.

The Bible is filled with examples of responsible criticism and even civil disobedience of government that was wrong. And this was done without disobeying the commands of obeying, respecting and honoring God's servants in government. I won't take the time to deal with this subject now but have done so in other sermons from Romans 13.

3. The third way I believe we act as responsible citizen-Christians is by electing and supporting men and women who have a Christian world-view.

I don't mean that they must necessarily be Christians

though that is obviously a great advantage. TIME magazine recently gave its cover story to the role of religion in the lives of President Bush and Senator John Kerry. Implicit was the idea that religious beliefs were somehow sinister and potentially subversive of good government in a pluralistic society. A popular way of saying that is "you can't legislate morality." That is completely false. Every law is an attempt at legislating morality; the only difference is whose "morality" you are legislating.

One man wrote so accurately, "There is no one who comes to political life without some informing philosophy and vision. The question is: What kind of visions and what kind of philosophy will be permitted to compete in the marketplace of ideas? On one of my trips in recent years to the Republic of Georgia (of the former Soviet Union) I met with the Chief Justice of the Georgian Supreme Court. He took me into the lobby of his office building and showed me a vacant display stand. He pointed to it and said, 'until recently, the bust of Lenin stood there. But now we're trying to figure out what to put in its place.' His words were powerful symbolism. You cannot have a society without some philosophy as the baseline. Something is going to be there. There are no empty podiums in terms of values. Some values will exist."⁴ As citizen-Christians, we want men and women who will advocate a Christian worldview. For a Christian not to vote is as irresponsible as failure to pray, read God's Word or worship.

4. Fourthly, for us to act as responsible citizen-Christians, we must recognize we are in a spiritual battle and we must pray.

Israel was commanded to pray for Babylon (the very government that took them captive): *"Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you*

too will prosper.”(Jeremiah 29:7)

The Apostle Paul made it very clear to Christians under Roman domination and to us under whatever form of government we live:

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

(1 Timothy 2:1-4)

God has called us to abandon worldly values and worldly living but not to abandon the world. As I said earlier, our temptation is to assume there is no hope and therefore to withdraw. But God has called us to change the world: To influence its structures and systems; to influence its art, its literature, its media and politics. There is no area of life that is outside the necessary influence of the people of God. Therefore we must pray!

5. And lastly we must live in such a winsome way that people want the life we know.

I close with this quote from evangelical theologian Carl F.H. Henry:

“The way to shape an evangelical counterculture is not simply to march on Washington, to get involved in the political process at the precinct level, to descend en masse on congressional offices, to engage in public confrontation that the media delight to cover, or to launch boycotts. **All such efforts have their indispensable place and time,** but they do not nurture a deeply rooted counterculture. It must rise instead in the churches, in the prayer meetings, in members turning out by the hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands seeking renewal, in so many cars

suddenly parked near a local church that once again the world becomes curious about what is taking place in those forsaken sanctuaries, and gives credence to the rumor that God is alive in the history of our times. It must root in changed lives, in members whose new birth 40 years ago is no longer the only referent wherein God became alive for them, in a neighborly interest in townspeople that makes others think that the crucified risen Jesus may indeed still have hands and feet today."⁵

The following two books are both by evangelical Christians who take quite opposite views on the subject of the Judeo-Christian basis of our nation:

One Nation Under God by Mark Noll

Defending the Declaration by Gary Amos

I also suggest:

A Christian Manifesto by Francis Schaeffer

Citizen Christian an anthology including Carl F.H. Henry, et al.

Kingdoms in Conflict by Charles Colson

The Wall of Separation by William Ramsey

End Notes

¹ Lynn Buzzard, *Citizen Christian*

² John MacArthur, *The Christian and Government*, p. 8

³ Lynn Buzzard, *Citizen Christian*, p. 40

⁴ Ibid, p. 39

⁵ Carl F.H. Henry, quoted in *Citizen Christian*, p. 62

