



CITIZENSHIP
WITHOUT
ILLUSIONS

A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

BELONGING: BENEFITS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the 1980s an advertisement for a major credit card company aired on North American television screens ending with these words: “Membership has its privileges.”¹ To be a member of a community entails belonging to a particular group of people. The group may be an amorphous one forming spontaneously out of a shared interest or pastime. It may be an ethnic group with a language, religion, and traditions in common. The group may or may not be organized for a specific purpose. Like all such groups, it has outer boundaries that could be flexible or rigid. In either case, only a select number of people can belong to a given community; otherwise, it ceases to be a community in any meaningful sense. The numbers can vary widely, from fewer than ten on the board of a local chamber of commerce to several scores of millions in a political community or an institutional church communion. To belong to such a community means that it has a certain claim on one’s loyalty. In turn, the member makes reciprocal claims on the community.

Membership has a significant affective side. The *feeling* of belonging is important to virtually everyone. To belong gives us a place to feel that we are at home. We need to sense that we are part of something larger than ourselves. Membership in the more proximate communities tends to bring them closer to the members’ hearts. The intensity of our feelings of belonging increases as the group to which we belong decreases in size. We are likely to experience a greater sense of camaraderie with family, coworkers,

¹This was used by the American Express Company (Amex).

and church community than with a nationwide professional association or a large impersonal corporate entity. Our feeling of belonging to the human race is probably weakest of all since a “community” so large and nebulous is generally incapable of commanding more than a minimal sense of obligation. In fact, those claiming the human race as their highest loyalty, when pushed, would probably have to admit that in reality they are loyal to a fairly small group of like-minded people who profess humanity as their highest loyalty. They constitute, as it were, a parochial community of professed cosmopolitans.

Citizenship is one form of membership. Historically as well as etymologically, it was attached to a particular city. In our English translations of Acts 22 and 23 we read that the apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, the Greek indicating simply that he was a Roman, although he was born in Tarsus in southeast Asia Minor. To be a citizen meant to have a privileged relationship with the city of Rome, something that not all residents of its empire possessed. We still speak of the citizens of, say, London or New York, although those cities do not, of course, issue formal certificates of citizenship. In a political system characterized by a federal division of powers, in which different levels of government share power, we can speak as well of multiple levels of citizenship. When I was growing up, I was a citizen of Wheaton, Illinois, one of the many western suburbs of Chicago. I was not born there, as there was no hospital within the city limits, but the mere fact of our family living there made us citizens. We were simultaneously citizens of the state of Illinois, but of course neither do individual states or provinces issue citizenship certificates. The United States of America does issue such documents. The birth certificate functions thus for the majority of Americans, as does the passport, while a substantial minority, including my late father, became naturalized citizens in adulthood.

Today we expect that anyone born within the borders of a particular country is a citizen by birth, although not all countries necessarily recognize this. There have always been groups of human beings who lack citizenship for one reason or another, perhaps due to war, revolution, undetermined borders between states, or a clash between different legal definitions of citizenship. A stateless person is in a precarious condition indeed, deprived of the protections of a particular government and unable

to claim to belong to the community defined by a particular homeland. The number of stateless people in the world today is unknown, but they are variously estimated to be between four and twelve million, depending on the source. Although the United Nations adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, in practice the enjoyment of rights is dependent on being under the jurisdiction of a government willing to protect them. One might still argue that stateless persons have rights in principle that governments ought to acknowledge. These might be termed natural rights. But the United Nations is scarcely in a position to compel governments to protect these rights, which might then be said to exist merely as abstract principles or, worse, mere ideals.

To what extent do we identify with the country of which we are citizens? This will vary from one person and from one community to the next. Many French-speaking citizens of Québec identify first with the province of their birth, with loyalty to Canada coming in second place. For citizens of Ontario, however, Canada probably comes first in their loyalties, although other Canadians accuse Ontarians of too closely identifying their own provincial interests with those of the country as a whole. If the feeling of loyalty to one's country varies too greatly across its territory, and if the people in one region sense that they are constantly neglected or oppressed by the central government as it sets policies for the whole, this could fuel a movement to separate that region from the remainder of the country. A succession of Irish rebellions against British rule and Polish rebellions against Russian rule were rooted in grievances that could be resolved only by the creation of separate states and citizenships out of the larger territory.

A strong sense of loyalty to a political community is needed if citizens are to fulfill willingly the responsibilities that accompany citizenship. Citizenship is not only about rights and the protection of those rights. Any membership comes with a set of responsibilities for the community of which you are part. Fulfilling these responsibilities may present a burden of greater or lesser degrees on the member. If you have a strong sense of belonging to a group, you are more likely to bear these burdens willingly and happily because you care for the other members and for the community as a whole. In a small community, you can witness first hand the

positive results of discharging your responsibilities and are likely to experience the gratitude that its other members express to you. These are among the rewards of membership in such a community.

If, however, the community seems remote to you, like membership in, say, the American Automobile Association or the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, your stake in that community will be diminished accordingly. Created in God's image and invested with authority over his creation, we are embedded in a variety of communities, to each of which we owe a measure of loyalty. However, they are not all equal in our eyes, given the natural limitations to our affections. We inevitably give priority to some communities over others. Parents naturally favor their own children over other neighborhood children, and it could scarcely be otherwise. We may value our church membership over our citizenship in a political community. Or we may value our national identity over a narrower ethnic identity. It varies with each person.

As many have observed, our sense of nationhood does not come to us automatically. A nation is a slippery entity, even an "imagined community," as Benedict Anderson famously described it.² But its members may not be the ones doing the imagining, at least not initially. A sense of nationhood has often been forged deliberately by a government presiding over a territory of disparate peoples. The ancient kingdom of France comprised speakers of the *langue d'oïl* and the *langue d'oc* (also known as Occitan), Breton, Alsatian German, Basque, and the Corsican dialect of Italian. But centuries of concerted efforts by the Bourbon kings and a succession of revolutionary and postrevolutionary regimes created a French people bound together by a unified language, education, culture, and political institutions centered in Paris. Loyalty to *la France* did not spring up spontaneously from below; it had to be instilled intentionally from above. A common enemy may also knit disparate peoples together into a single nation quite apart from a policy imposed from the top, yet the catalyst for this too originates outside the people's hearts.

During my childhood near Chicago, a sense of loyalty to country was nurtured in my peers and me by daily rituals practiced in the public

²Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2016).

schools: pledging allegiance to the flag, singing “My Country ’Tis of Thee” (rather than “The Star-Spangled Banner,” whose vocal range is too wide for the average seven-year-old), and observing such special days as Lincoln’s and Washington’s birthdays, Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving. We learned American history and were taught to take pride in our country’s accomplishments. The Cold War imbued this process with a certain nervous urgency as we all were aware of the Soviet Union’s belligerency under the irascible Nikita Khrushchev, who had dared to station nuclear weapons just offshore in the newly communist island nation of Cuba. A few years later, when I was in grade eight, we were part of a model congress, playing the parts of legislators responsible for introducing bills into whichever chamber we were part of. Then in high school I took a civics course. Although I remember little about the class half a century later, it apparently taught us about the structure of the US Constitution and, as one of my classmates recently reminded me, about Illinois politics as well. All of these were part of an effort not so much to create an American nation as to maintain it against the centrifugal forces that might weaken it over time. Given the predominance of Lockean individualism in the founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence, our educational policymakers undoubtedly sought to dilute its unintended effects in a population of some 200 million.

However, the years of my schooling also coincided with an era of unprecedented political turmoil occasioned by the confluence of several factors, including political assassinations, the civil rights struggle, racial unrest in the inner cities, a protracted war in southeast Asia, student protests against the war, and a dramatic shift in social mores toward what some observers have called expressive individualism. A climate of cynicism about the civic liturgies of my childhood spread throughout the country, seemingly discrediting our teachers’ efforts to imbue in us a sense of belonging to America and respecting its traditions. What if these were designed to keep us quiet and prevent us rocking the proverbial boat? What if they were intended by our “betters” to stop us asking too many uncomfortable questions that they might be unable to answer? Because I came of age during the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, I easily fell prey to this cynicism—at least for a time.

Indeed, questions must be posed! Our societies require whistle blowers who will stand up to the abuses of power that so often deform our political landscape. However, the disillusionments of the 1960s and 1970s did not lead to an uptick in public spirit or to citizens' increased willingness to take up their political responsibilities and hold their elected officeholders accountable for their actions. Instead, they led many Americans to turn inward, thereby exacerbating the centrifugal tendencies of an individualist liberalism. Increasingly, people were mocking respect for the flag and the national anthem, not out of loyalty to something higher and more principled but out of a sense that what such symbols represent impinged on their own personal desires and aspirations. Randy Bachman's samba-esque song, "Lookin' Out for Number 1," released in 1975, seemed to sum up the spirit of the notorious "Me Decade," a descriptor coined by American journalist and novelist Tom Wolfe.³ The rebels of the era had demolished what seemed to them a corrupt edifice without replacing it with something obviously better.

Furthermore, maintaining political community clashed inevitably with an increasing focus on aggrieved individuals and groups within it. Where a legitimate patriotism had not been wholly supplanted by a focus on the liberated self, it was eroded by the demands of identity groups claiming victim status. To be sure, there were victimized groups, most notably African and indigenous Americans. Their place within the American polity had to be secured, and their struggle for inclusion was necessary if the country was to live up to its highest ideals. In Canada, French-speaking Québec's minority status within the country compelled the province's political leaders to seek a special place within the constitution, a decades-old effort meeting with uneven success.

Similarly, Canada's First Nations have had to recover from more than a century and a half of abusive treatment, especially in the church-operated residential schools where the federal government placed many of their children. But in the absence of a generally recognized way of distinguishing genuine oppression from the sorts of inequalities characterizing every society, it was inevitable that others who saw themselves similarly aggrieved

³Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York*, August 23, 1976, 26-40.

would queue up behind these groups for their own share of the political pie. However justified such efforts, taken individually, may have been, the cumulative effect was to channel civic action into somewhat narrow grooves that fragmented loyalty to the larger political community.⁴

For Christians, the issue of citizenship and political loyalty is significant because, as followers of Jesus Christ, we claim that our ultimate loyalty is to the kingdom of God and never to a mere earthly community. Yet, we recognize that we have responsibilities to the communities of which we are part. It is a truism that the Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms: the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. Some would express this in more obviously dualistic terms: our spiritual lives are under God's domain, and our earthly lives under a temporal ruler. This is how some readers have interpreted Jesus' words in Matthew 22:21: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Of course, even Caesar is subject to God's sovereignty, as is the whole of creation. So how do we live as citizens of his kingdom while discharging our responsibilities as citizens of our respective political communities? That's what this book is about.

A CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES

Near the beginning of the millennium, I wrote a book titled *Political Visions and Illusions*, which appeared in a second revised edition in 2019.⁵ It is a book about political ideologies, specifically about liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democratism (a neologism, admittedly), and socialism, along with an attempt to point beyond them to something better. My thesis in that book is that the ideologies are contemporary manifestations of a very ancient phenomenon, namely, idolatry, and that each tells a story of salvation imitating the biblical redemptive narrative. An idol can be made of natural materials such as stone, wood, and metal, as we see recounted in the Old Testament. Or it can be a more subtle god, like wealth, career success, sexual fulfillment, prestige, or fame. Of course, the things

⁴See Sheldon S. Wolin's argument in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

⁵David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).

we idolize are in themselves good because they are created such by a good God. But, as John Calvin memorably put it, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.”⁶ We find it difficult to keep the things that God has created and given us in their proper place, namely, subordinate to their creator. We tend to love inordinately—to focus our ultimate loyalties on things that do not deserve such treatment. This affects the ways we live our lives at a basic level, including our political lives.

The followers of the political ideologies do not simply clash on concrete policy programs. If they did, they might more easily come to agreement on at least the broad contours, if not the specifics, of public policy. But ideologies are rooted in clashing worldviews of a more basic religious character. Liberalism in its many forms is right to esteem individual liberty, but it is wrong to raise this liberty to the position of supreme political principle capable of trumping other legitimate considerations. Conservatives properly esteem tradition, but once again they esteem it too highly, rendering themselves largely incapable of judging among a multiplicity of conflicting traditions received from our forebears. Socialists properly value economic solidarity and communal ownership of property, yet they attempt to subsume the pluriform manifestations of ownership under a single type, more often than not led by the coercive arm of government. I suggested in that earlier book that the alternative must in some fashion affirm societal *pluriformity*, a term the standard software dictionaries do not recognize but one that well accounts for our experience of genuine flesh-and-blood societies, characterized as they are by a multiplicity of social formations, each of which has its proper place and normative task in God’s world.

I then surveyed two historic Christian efforts to account for this pluriformity, namely, the body of Roman Catholic social teachings, with its focus on subsidiarity, and Abraham Kuyper’s neo-Calvinist approach, with its principle of sovereignty in its own sphere, or sphere sovereignty.⁷ I suggested that for the serious Christian, accepting one of the ideological

⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.xi.8.

⁷Why focus on Catholic and Reformed approaches rather than those rooted in other Christian traditions? For an answer, see David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 219-20.

formulations is out of order due to its distorted understanding of this pluriformity and its effort to suppress it in favor of an artificial uniformity, usually imposed by the state. But this, of course, raises a problem difficult to resolve given the paucity of available alternatives in our political communities. Christians who have read my first book have asked, given my argument that the ideologies are fundamentally idolatrous, for whom they should cast their votes. Is not every party or candidate tainted by one or more of the ideologies? And if so, might it not be better to direct our attention elsewhere than to political life? If the Christian community is increasingly divided along ideological lines, which is true of the United States, Brazil, and elsewhere, should we not perhaps focus on healing the local body of Christ and refrain from making political judgments at all? After all, every time we express a political viewpoint, we risk alienating a brother or sister in Christ. Some may be tempted to take this apparently safe route, and many undoubtedly have done so.

However, I would suggest that this is not a viable option for the Christian. We can no more withdraw from political life than we can from the other areas of our existence. If we think we can give up on politics, we delude ourselves. If we claim to have no interest in politics, it will not take long, if we remain alert, to recognize that politics definitely has an interest in us. That is, the issues decided in the chambers and corridors of our legislatures, executive offices, bureaucratic departments, and courts inevitably have an impact on our own lives and on those of our neighbors, both at home and abroad. Given that the two great commandments would have us love God and our neighbors as ourselves, we cannot abandon the world where God has placed us and withdraw into our own isolated houses of worship, which of course can never really be isolated at all.

How then do we discharge our responsibilities as citizens of our political communities while remaining faithful to our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord? This is what I hope to address in the present volume. At the outset it should be noted that this question is not fundamentally different from a series of related questions: How do we remain faithful to the gospel in the worlds of business, academia, the arts, the sciences, technology, and so forth? Each of these spheres of life has its own unique challenges and pitfalls for those striving to live the redeemed life *coram Deo*—before the

face of God. Yet, there are broad continuities among all of these, and addressing the temptations that arise in one area may by analogy be applied, with appropriate adaptations, in others as well.

For three decades I taught political science at a Christian university in Ontario, Canada, about an hour or so from Toronto. During this time, I discovered something of the magic of the classroom—seeing youthful eyes light up at learning something new and contributing to the growth of my students, not only intellectually but spiritually as well. There was something exhilarating about the discussions that took place, especially in the upper-level courses styled more as seminars than as lectures. After my retirement, and especially after the Covid-19 pandemic led to a dramatic expansion of online conversation formats, I found myself in a new academic ministry, reaching out to people around the world, but especially Brazil and the Spanish-speaking Americas. After the publication of the second edition of *Political Visions and Illusions* in 2019, I began receiving invitations to speak and interview on topics related to both of my books, the second of which, *We Answer to Another*, was published in 2014.⁸ The organization with which I currently serve is Global Scholars Canada, a Christian organization begun in 1995 that originally placed Canadian scholars in overseas secular universities for limited terms.⁹ While I am no longer in the classroom, I continue my role as an educator and even mentor a limited number of young people informally.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book grew out of the conversations I have had both with my past undergraduate students and with readers of my books in Canada, the United States, Brazil, Chile, and the United Kingdom, among other places. While it is, of course, impossible to replicate the magic of the classroom in written format, I hope to communicate something of this in the current book. Although my base of operations is North America, I have sought

⁸David T. Koyzis, *We Answer to Another: Authority, Office, and the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

⁹See home page, Global Scholars Canada, www.globalscholarscanada.ca/. See also Peter Schuurman and Anna Sklar, eds., *Christian Academics Crossing Borders: A History of Global Scholars Canada Since 1995* (Toronto: Global Scholars Canada, 2021), www.globalscholarscanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/25th-Ann-Booklet-Final-Kindle-Paperback.pdf.

to incorporate material relevant to those living outside this continent and under a variety of political systems, not all of which are necessarily constitutional democracies in the Western sense. In so doing, I hope this book will have relevance for the larger body of Christ as we struggle as a global faith community to fulfill our callings as citizens of our respective political communities.

In chapter two we will discuss the nature of citizenship, its meaning, and its history. I will suggest that, although political rule has existed from time immemorial wherever human beings have lived, citizenship has not. Citizenship is entailed in the notion of the state as a public legal community of people led by government.

In chapter three we will discuss how to be a good citizen. This will cover the responsibilities of citizenship, including obedience to the law, keeping informed on the events of the day, starting our efforts at the local level, and participating in public affairs when called on to do so. Recognizing that many, if not most, Christians today live in countries governed by non-democratic constitutions, we will discuss how people in such circumstances might go about living out their calling as citizens when the possibilities of participation are severely limited.

In chapter four we will explore the relationship between citizenship in our political communities and our ultimate loyalty to God's kingdom. What are the implications of the kingdom of God for political life in a religiously diverse state? What do we do, furthermore, if these two kingdoms collide in some fashion? What if we have to make a choice between these two loyalties? This is where we will cover civil disobedience and other possible responses to such conflict.

In chapter five we will discuss the practical issue of how to vote and otherwise participate when the political alternatives are less than optimal. We will touch on the impact of electoral systems in limiting options even in an otherwise democratic constitution.

Chapter six will cover the ways that we might mobilize for political action. In any polity it is likely that few will take an active interest in political life. If we admit that politics is not everything and that our diverse callings are dispersed throughout the larger array of life spheres, we will then recognize that people will naturally gravitate toward different

occupations and avocations. However, some of us will want to move beyond the basic responsibilities of citizenship and take a more active role in the public square. This requires further education in the field, both formal and informal.

Chapter seven will cover the historic cleavage between professed progressives and conservatives. Since the turn of the millennium, Americans in particular seem increasingly to have polarized between progressives and conservatives. We will analyze what I believe is fueling this tension and how a biblical worldview offers an alternative to both. This alternative need not be limited to those overtly confessing the faith. Accordingly, I believe it can appeal in principle to our unbelieving neighbors, who nevertheless see the flaws in the current bipolar options.

In chapter eight we will examine the notion of citizenship in a global community. Recognizing that such a community will seem remote to most people, for whom their more proximate loyalties have greater significance, we must admit that we do bear some responsibility for the welfare of the larger human race. Our concern for the physical environment, for bi- and multilateral relationships among states, and for international cooperation flows out of a biblical concern for loving our neighbor as ourselves, even when those neighbors inhabit another continent on the other side of the globe.

In chapter nine we will address the place of prayer in political life. Here we will look at the contexts that motivated especially Peter and Paul to instruct the ancient believers to pray for their rulers. We will also survey some of the confessional and liturgical documents that address the important role of political leaders and our duty to pray for them. These include the writings of Luther and Calvin, the Reformation confessions, the Book of Common Prayer, and similar liturgical documents. We will explore the role of the institutional church as well in shaping Christians for the responsibilities of citizenship.

I hope this book will persuade you, the reader, that your faith has implications for how you discharge your responsibilities as a citizen of your political communities, recognizing that the claims of Jesus Christ extend to the whole of our lives in God's world.

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