

# CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

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## VOTING, POLITICS AND THE CHRISTIAN

### *Study Paper*

*Approved by the Ministerial Board of Directors  
July 2015*

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**T**he issue of politics and voting for government leaders is one the Church has dealt with over the past 60 years and always with a consistent voice. The Church's position and teaching have been that involvement in the political processes of this world, including voting, is not appropriate for a Christian. It has been understood for many years that involvement by members in the political process is contrary to the biblical admonition that, as Christians, we are to live in this world but not be part of this world.

When defining Church beliefs, we seek direction and instruction from the Word of God. With such doctrines as Sabbath-keeping and observance of the holy days, we find explicit instructions in the Scripture that guide our fundamental statements of belief and Church practice. When the Bible does not speak as directly on a given subject, we use biblical examples and principles that allow us to establish judgments and teachings in a manner pleasing to God.

In this, we follow the principle of 2 Corinthians 5:9-10: "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." While the Church does not teach that the act of voting is sinful of and by itself, because of God's instruction on how Christians are to live their lives while still in this world, we believe it is not appropriate for a Christian to be involved in the political process as it exists in society today.

What does the Bible tell us about our spiritual walk, and how would being involved in politics impact a Christian's effort to live by the Word of God?

We'll begin by considering the Church's historical understanding of what the Bible says regarding this topic.

### **History of the Church of God's teaching on involvement in politics**

In the 1984 October/November issue of *The Good News* magazine, Herbert W. Armstrong wrote an article titled "How Would Jesus Vote for President?" The understanding expressed in this article about politics and voting constitutes the Church's approach over many decades, a teaching that has stood the test of time. Mr. Armstrong wrote:

In ancient Rome the politicians ruled over the church, business and society. Then after A.D. 554, *the church ruled over* the state, business and society. In America, where we are supposed to rule ourselves, it has been a constant struggle for dominance between big business and the politicians. ...

The Bible teaching for the Christian is to be SUBJECT to the powers that be in this world, but, on the other hand, Christians shall *obey* God rather than man.

The true Christian will so conduct himself as to be highly regarded by the powers of government where he lives. He will be regarded by them as a good citizen.

He will appreciate the privileges, advantages and opportunities extended. He will regard himself as the *paying guest* of the country where he resides, and he will act with due courtesy, submission to its rules and regulations, insofar as they do not conflict with the commandments of God, and submission to their *penalty* where they do.

But the true Christian is one who *follows* Christ, and Christ did not vote!

Jesus did not try to reform Caesar. He did not try to make this a better world. Rather, He preached the doctrine of a radically different world to come—and he called His followers out of all participation in this present evil world, and to allegiance to His KINGDOM that is to come.

In the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, we continue with these same beliefs, finding them sound teaching in the light of God's Word. We believe that campaigning and voting for leaders in government is not consistent with Scripture and not a part of the Christian calling.

### **Our citizenship**

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21).

*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* refers to *citizenship* as “commonwealth” (the Greek word is *politeuma*) and states that the Philippians would have understood this concept well since they were considered physical citizens of a distant city, Rome, even though most of them had never been there.

The apostle Paul also wrote in Ephesians 2:19: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” The Greek word *sympolites*, translated “fellow citizens,” denotes “possessing the same citizenship with others, a fellow-citizen” (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). Upon conversion, Christians are brought into a spiritual union of the saints and join those who are the consecrated of God.

The apostle John later wrote, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1). This reminds us that this world, apart from God, does not understand the intentions and desires of God. Therefore it should be no surprise to learn that the political underpinnings of society do not reflect God's values, and often are in direct conflict with God's Word.

One of the clear principles in the Bible is that Christians are representatives of the government of God. “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 5:20). As *Adam Clarke's Commentary* notes, “We execute the function of ambassadors in Christ's stead. He came from the Father to mankind on this important embassy. He has left the world, and appointed us in his place. Ambassador is a person sent from one sovereign power to another; and is supposed to represent the person of the sovereign by whom he is deputed. Christ while on earth represented the person of the Sovereign of the world; his apostles and their successors represent the person of Christ. Christ declared the will of the Father to mankind; apostles, etc., declare the will of Christ to the world.”

As members of the Church, we should function as ambassadors. An ambassador is one who lives in a foreign land as the official representative of their home government. As Christians, we live in one country, but represent another—the Kingdom of God. An ambassador for one nation, who lives in a foreign land, is not involved with the local political process of that foreign land. The ambassador should obey the laws of the land in which he or she is living unless those laws violate the laws of their home country. As Christians, we should see ourselves in that role. We obey the laws of the country in which we are living, as long as they do not conflict with God’s laws. When they do, we must obey God first (Acts 5:29; Romans 13:2-7; 1 Peter 2:17). Therefore, as ambassadors for the Kingdom of God, we should not involve ourselves in this world’s political process.

Based on the principle found in 2 Corinthians 5:20, for well over half a century the Church has taught, “Since we are NOW ambassadors for the Kingdom of God, we relinquish the right to vote or take part in the politics or the government of this world” (*The Good News*, October 1960, “Should a Christian Fight?”). This is not to say that a Christian should be uninterested in the subject of government. We are deeply involved in God’s system of government that is coming. In fact, the preaching of the gospel is all about describing to this world the government and Kingdom that will replace the governments and kingdoms of this world! As ambassadors, we should be living examples of that future government today.

Scripture confirms this role by reminding us that we are here temporarily, like an ambassador in a foreign nation. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:11-12). We represent God’s government through our examples while we sojourn in this life. Therefore, being actively engaged in the political processes of the governments of this world would be wrong for the Christian.

### **The family of God**

“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:16-17, King James Version).

“Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:5-6).

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

How does this fundamental concept—that Christians scattered among all nations are all children of God—affect the issue of our involvement in politics?

As members of the same spiritual family, we must always remember that while we each live in a particular country, first and foremost we represent all of God’s family members wherever they

live in all nations of the world. We base our lives not on the principles of our localized constitution, kingdom or dictatorship, but on our common foundation—the Word of God.

We also understand that Satan the devil currently has sway over the affairs of this world, including its governments (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). If we choose to play a part in the multitude of political processes of various nations, we are participating in systems that are not centered on the truths of God. Some may reason that they should vote for candidates who most closely align with our beliefs. We cannot avoid the fact, however, that by attempting to put a person into office by voting for him or her, we are inadvertently supporting *all* of his or her policies. No one who knows the truth of God could possibly agree with every aspect in a candidate's platform.

In fact, as we learn to view the world's problems from a biblical perspective, we realize that problems that may appear simple on the surface may be far more complex than we originally realized. A solution that may appear correct at one point may appear quite different when viewed from God's perspective.

Neither can one know for sure whether, once elected, a candidate will continue to support the platforms on which he or she campaigned. The nature of politics is that of compromise and self-seeking, and history is replete with examples of politicians reneging on promises.

While there are always candidates whose decisions or public views we may respect more than others, all of these individuals are nevertheless subject to the sway and influence that Satan has over this world. People can and do change! What starts out as good intentions often ends in envy and self-interest (James 3:16).

In most cases, in this world's political systems, a vote is for a particular candidate, not for a position or decision. Our votes do not support just our selective objectives or issues; they support those of the person being elected. All political parties and groups have policies and beliefs to which a Christian cannot be aligned. For example, many politicians and their parties, adapting to social pressures, have recently changed their stance on issues of immorality, abortion and gay rights.

Furthermore, when one country enacts policies that affect other nations, those policies might have adverse effects on Church members elsewhere. Embargos, trade restrictions and cultural interchanges can potentially serve the needs of one country and the people of God in that country, but those same policies might hurt members of our global family in other regions of the world.

Members' involvement in the voting process can also adversely affect the Church in general. The Church believes that the separation of the Church from state-sponsored activities of a political nature is in the best interest of its members. Active involvement in politics and government can put at risk a member's exemption from other government-related activities, such as military service.

### **God chooses whom He wants in power**

“The Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses” (Daniel 5:21).

In ancient Israel, leaders were appointed directly by God. When Israel followed that example and when the leaders followed God, the people and the nation prospered. When they strayed from God, He sent judges and rulers to bring the people back. Eventually, however, the Israelites coveted a governmental system like the nations around them and asked for a king of their choosing.

“Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, ‘Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations’” (1 Samuel 8:4-5). While God complied with this request, He did so with a warning: “And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them’” (verse 7). He then added, “And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day” (verse 18).

This principle is still true today for the Church. God is our ruler, and we should not be actively engaged in the political process of selecting our own kings, presidents, prime ministers or other secular rulers. God has allowed this world’s governments for now, because of the sins of the nations in which we live. While we have to live under those governments, we still must represent God according to His will and intent.

For instance, even though the Roman members lived under a governmental system that was not of God, Paul was inspired to exhort them to be good citizens by being subject to its authority, paying taxes and obeying the laws of the land. Paul explained to them this principle: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ... Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:1, 7).

God long ago decided to allow Satan to have sway over humans and their governments at this time. We do not have to assume that function ourselves by engaging in the political process in an attempt to elect certain candidates. In fact, there may be times when the political leader we feel would be best may not be the person God wants or allows to be in office.

Daniel explained this to Nebuchadnezzar when he said, “This decision is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men” (Daniel 4:17). In the bigger picture, it may serve God’s overall purpose and plan to have a person in power who is not the best choice from our perspective. Only God knows how His plan should unfold, and we leave that in His capable hands to manage (see also Daniel 2:21; Psalm 75:6-7).

### **The problem of division**

Theoretically, if most people in the Church voted, it would probably be for more conservative representatives. However, it is important to note that other members of the Church might vote for a different candidate for different reasons. The needs, desires, priorities and political perspectives of one member will undoubtedly differ from those of others within the same country—to say nothing of members in other countries. Bringing these differing views into the Church would inevitably pit one member against another and create division. It has, in fact, done so in the past.

“No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier” (2 Timothy 2:4). Paul told Timothy that he was not to get engaged in the affairs of this age, but rather to see himself as an enlisted soldier for God.

Other verses tell us that we should avoid involvement in circumstances that can produce confusion and division within the family of God. “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

We also know that politics is often more about promotion of the candidate than the policies. “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (James 3:16). In the same way that the spirit of politics creates conflict and division in the world, it would eventually do so in the Church as well.

While there may be times when local initiatives, bond issues, etc. arise at the community- or city-level and a Christian chooses to vote, such a vote should have little to do with politics and be more simply about financial or policy issues that directly affect you or your property. To offer your opinion about a bond issue is not the same as involvement in the political process to elect government leaders.

**Christ is not coming to *fix* this world’s system—He’s coming to *replace* it!**

“And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (John 8:23).

Today’s governments represent both good and evil and, therefore, are a part of the system that sprang out of Adam and Eve’s partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. We know that a Christian’s standards must come from God Himself, and not from this world or its systems (Deuteronomy 4:8). When Jesus Christ was on trial for His life, He told Pilate that He could have fought, and won, against the powers of that time, but His time was yet for the future. “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here’” (John 18:36; 17:16).

When Jesus Christ returns, He will not be coming to modify the human governments that are in place, but rather to destroy and replace them. It is those governments, in fact, that will eventually threaten to bring total destruction to this world.

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21-22).

“And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and *consume all these kingdoms*, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold—the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure” (Daniel 2:44-45). God’s coming Kingdom will break in pieces and consume all others—nothing of them will remain.

Psalm 50 details the returning Christ as a righteous judge, showing that God will not be content with reforming the governments of mankind. “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him. He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that He may judge His people” (Psalm 50:3-4). When Christ returns, He will take charge. Speaking to the leaders of this earth about how they mismanaged the affairs of this world, God says, “These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes” (Psalm 50:21).

People often seem to have good intentions, and many even claim they are striving to follow God, but God tells us that mankind simply does not think as He does. Paul understood this, telling the Corinthians, “However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing” (1 Corinthians 2:6). The human rulers and systems that are in charge of this world at Christ’s return will not continue into the Millennium.

Peter also explained this when he broadly applied the term “Day of the Lord” to not only the year that culminates in His return but to His rule on through the Millennium and going beyond the second resurrection to the lake of fire. God will completely and forever replace the rule of Satan and man!

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth *and the works* that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:10-13).

### **The government to come—our time to become involved!**

“And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands, and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).

The time is coming in the near future when the people of God will be ruling in the Kingdom of God, teaching God’s way of life and establishing His governmental policies. We are told that after Satan is displaced, and this world’s systems are destroyed, the people of God will reign with Christ for a thousand years. There will be no voting and political campaigns to select rulers. Jesus Christ Himself will appoint the saints to positions of rulership under the authority of His perfect world government.

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be 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. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).



Mercifully, the governments of this world will end; and the perfected children of God will then have their opportunity to rule, not by engaging in the systems or political processes of this world, but in God's true form of government. It will be a time when we can "[give] thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:12-14).

Once Christ has returned, He will share the administration of His government with those with whom He has worked and chosen—those "ambassadors" who represented Him in this life. "The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever" (Daniel 7:18; see also verses 21-22, 27).

Until then, the people of God eagerly look forward to the future—to the time when God will place us in our true spiritual homeland and we will no longer be, as it were, living abroad. Waiting for that time to come requires patience and faith that God will watch over and protect His people. But we must not get ahead of God and His plan by engaging in political processes in order to change the world today. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Later in Hebrews 11, we read, "By faith [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (verses 9-10). We look forward to that time, waiting for God's time to step in and bring the government of God to this world.

Until then, Christians should remain as pilgrims and sojourners, acting as God's ambassadors for the Kingdom of God.

### **Summary statement**

While the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, does not teach that the act of voting is sinful, the Church does remain convicted that involvement in politics (and the campaigning and voting for individuals associated with it) does not represent the Kingdom of God and is not, therefore, something that we, as Christians, should be engaged in.

We believe in the future restoration of God's government to this world. As such, we represent that government now while we sojourn as pilgrims and strangers. As His ambassadors, our examples in this life should point people to that future government rather than this world's system, which we do not represent.