Asserting citizenship rights and responsibilities

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The Australian Coat of Arms

Thy blessing has rested upon us ... and we pray that it may be the means of creating and fostering throughout all Australia a Christlike citizenship. - Alfred Deakin

Loss of respect for civic citizenship

Many citizens take for granted the freedom and peace that characterise Western society, without realising that the privileges we enjoy must be safeguarded and preserved for the future. Children especially are at risk of thinking that it is normal for the world's nations to have peace, prosperity and freedom, though these are absent in many nations. Wrong thinking has produced a failure to comprehend the value of citizenship. So angry people sometimes burn their national flag in reaction to governmental policy.

Such expressions may be motivated by deeply held views, but they exhibit a total lack of respect for the values that guarantee free expression. While the law may require improvement, the concept of legislating and the rule of law should not be despised. So the challenge is for good people to exercise the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship wherever possible, to protect our civic foundations from erosion, and to build upon them for the future.

Christians have a key role as good citizens as we are the *salt of the earth* and the *light of the world* (Matthew 5:13-14). Our challenge is to recognise biblical teaching on civic citizenship, including how we can use our rights to further the work of God and the good of the community, though ultimately *our citizenship is in heaven* (Philippians 3:20). While there is a place for us to *"turn the other cheek"* (Matthew 5:39) - to shame our enemies and help win them over - there is also a place for asserting our citizenship rights.

Christian respect for citizenship and the authorities

Government and civic participation are God's gift according to Romans 13. In that letter, Paul stated: *The authorities that exist have been established by God* (verse 1), and he called each authority *God's servant* (verse 4) who must *commend* and *punish* (verses 3 and 4). Civic citizenship is affirmed as Christians must pay the authorities *taxes... revenue...* and *respect* (verse 7).

Using our rights to advance the gospel and gain protection

God's people in many lands have no civic rights, but Christians who have such rights should use them in God's service - like the Apostle Paul. Born in Tarsus, Paul proudly stated he was *a citizen of no ordinary city* (Acts 21:39) and more valuably he held the rare privilege of Roman citizenship. This enabled him to be brought safely to trial and to testify to Christ - in fulfilment of the Lord's commission: *"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings"* (9:15). So Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen on four occasions that are recorded in the Book of Acts:

Firstly, Paul demanded an escort from prison by Roman magistrates after he and Silas had been falsely jailed and badly beaten in Philippi (16:22-39).

Secondly, he questioned the legality of proceedings, and he was therefore spared from a brutal scourging by Roman soldiers in Jerusalem (22:23-29).

Thirdly, he gained help from a vast military escort that protected him from a murderous plot (23:12-23). This enabled Paul to address key civic leaders:

- **Felix** (Governor of Judea) and his royal wife **Drusilla** (24:24);
- **Festus** (Governor of Judea) who replaced Felix (25:1-8);
- **Herod Agrippa II** (King of Chalcis) and his sister **Bernice** (25:23).

Fourthly, when Paul's life was again in danger (on trial before Festus), he exercised his citizenship rights by saying: *"I appeal to Caesar!"* (25:10-11). So Paul effectively asserted no confidence in those unjust proceedings by transferring his case to the court of the world's highest authority: the Roman Emperor. While the Book of Acts concludes with no detail of such a hearing, it gives the angel's assurance: *"You must stand trial before Caesar"* (27:23). It then records a centurion intervening to save Paul from death (27:42-43). So Christians may benefit from asserting citizenship rights and privileges - to achieve testimony and protection.

The contemporary challenge

Christians today can use citizenship rights to glorify God. Like Erastus, the Director of Public Works (Romans 16:24) God's people can serve in civic leadership to promote good laws along with infrastructure - such as Rome's roads and peaceful rule (the *Pax Romana*) that helped the spreading gospel.

Moreover, freedom itself now requires our protection. Every freedom we enjoy could be lost suddenly, if upright people do not defend our heritage. Already many Christians suffer in various countries, simply for speaking the truth or training children in a Godly way. We are rapidly losing the rights and privileges historically valued in Western society, such as freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of contract. So now is the time for Christians to influence society as salt and light, using our citizenship rights to promote the gospel, along with good social order, freedom, and our personal safety.

Australian Christians who are not citizens of the nation are to be encouraged to gain citizenship, so they can serve fully in civic life by enrolling and voting within national and State (or Territory) elections and referendums. Further, they can join with other Christians who aspire to positions of civic leadership that are open only to citizens. They might run as candidates for Parliament, or become members of Parliament, justices of the peace, police, magistrates, judges, public servants, members of the defence forces, etc.

Enhancing the qualification for citizenship

Citizens can call for improved citizenship qualifications and civic awareness as in other nations: In Canada, citizenship is restricted to those who understand Canada's history, geography, civic system, and the rights and obligations of its citizenry. In the USA, most people who apply for citizenship must demonstrate a knowledge of US government and history. People seeking Australian citizenship must have a basic knowledge of the English language along with "adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship" (*Australian Citizenship Act* 1948 s13.1), but are not required to thoroughly understand Australia's history, civic system, or its Constitution - though all citizens must vote within federal elections and constitutional referendums. Sadly, many Australian-born citizens are also highly ignorant of our civic system. Much work remains to be done in order to promote awareness of the responsibilities and privileges of citizens.

The Australian Citizenship Pledge

Australian citizenship was established on Australia Day 1949, when the *Australian Citizenship Act* came into operation. Under this law since 1994, new citizens make the following pledge (the words *under God* are optional):

> *From this time forward, under God, I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.*

The privileges of Australian citizenship

- to vote in national and State (or Territory) elections and referendums;
- to stand in national elections (subject to s44 of the Constitution);
- to apply to join the Australian Defence Force (including the reserves);
- to register children (under 25, born overseas) as citizens by descent;
- to apply for jobs, scholarships, and grants that require citizenship;
- to seek overseas assistance from Australian diplomatic representatives;
- to apply for an Australian passport and to leave and re-enter Australia without the requirement of a resident return visa.

The responsibilities of Australian citizenship

- to enrol on the Electoral Register and vote in elections and referenda;
- to serve on a jury, if required;
- to help defend Australia, if required.

Testifying to Jesus Christ as Lord over the civic system

Jesus is to be uppermost as we pray, petition, proclaim and participate as salt and light. Christians can especially testify to him while upholding citizenship, civic knowledge and values at community events that churches may hold on Citizenship Day (17 September), and Australia Day (26 January). At those events we can testify to Jesus Christ as the saviour and lord of all - to whom *all authority in heaven and on earth has been given ....* (Matthew 28:18). Addressing the civic authorities and the ordinary citizens, we can issue God's challenge, like Paul who asked: *"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?"* (Acts 26:27) and who continued, *"I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am ..."* (25:29).

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