

Can a Christian Use Her Citizen Rights?

PRAY.

As a child, my world was limited. All our friends were Christians from our particular denomination. Same with many of the people my parents did business with. Especially young, I never knew if my parents voted, rarely heard discussions of world affairs or things of a civic nature. We didn't go to war—and early on I assumed that also meant we didn't go to the voting booth or otherwise participate civically.

Both the EFCA and my native Anabaptism were born in the rich roots of 17th-18th century Pietism which cried out against the dead formalism that had come to many Protestant churches a century or so after the Reformation began. Many Protestants we like dusty libraries: housing good information, but there was no life.

Pietistic leaders like Phillip Spener and Moravian Count von Zinzendorf urged Christians to cultivate the inner life, but somewhat at the cost of severing ties with the outer life. Pray for the surrounding world, evangelize it, but keep out of its affairs. Pietism's influence remains today, but its traces can be found far beyond the Amish that you might automatically think of.

Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer said true Christianity could not so easily distinguish the secular from the sacred as Pietism implied. For example, was it wrong of Terry Schaivo's parents to use the courts, legislatures, even the white house and governor's mansion, to try and save their daughter? Is it wrong to write an email to your congressman. Maybe even, wrong to ask for an attorney?

Likely most of you have an opinion on Christians using their rights, but for those who don't, here's a small, biblical starting place for you. READ Acts 22:22-29.

Story

Paul had just finished explaining to a hostile crowd of Jews that he too was a Jew. His audience had just tried to kill him. They accused him of illegally bringing a Gentile into the temple (a capital offense). He hadn't, but these people were ready to grasp at *any* charge—whether legitimate or trumped up—to rid themselves of the man who was single-handedly destroying their religion, their way of life.

Yet they listened quietly as he switched from Greek to Aramaic, to speak in their heart language. "I'm a Jew. I'm an educated Jew. I was a zealous Jew; so much so I arrested followers of the Way. I even went to other cities to carry out arrests. On one persecution trip, I was blinded by a light from heaven and a voice asked me why I was persecuting him. He said He was Jesus and sent me—still blind—to Damascus to await orders. A highly respected Jew visited me. Through him I was healed, called on Jesus' name and was baptized.

"But upon returning to Jerusalem, I was in danger and so God told me He was going to send me far away to the Gentiles."

And with that, the crowd went mad. People shouted with fury, threw dust in the air—perhaps *at* Paul, and they shed their robes like they were going to stone him.

The commander was at a loss to know what was going on. He didn't know the language Paul'd used to speak to the crowd so he didn't know what the trouble was. But he figured, "Torture will uncover the truth." He had his men take Paul taken back to the barracks for flogging.

Paul was no stranger to torture: 5 times he'd been under the Jewish whip—each time given 39 lashes. He was familiar with Gentile rods, perhaps $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick sticks: 3

times he was worked over with these. But he'd never felt the Roman flagellum like Jesus had. This was a leather whip mounted on a sturdy wooden handle, with bits of bone and steel braided into the leather strands. Though many objected to the horrific amount of blood in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*," it was a fair representation of the real thing. A flogging with this killed many a man. Others, it crippled for life.

They hung Paul by his hands with his feet just off the ground. The soldiers cleared out and the torturer coiled his whip. And then Paul quietly asked.

"Can you do this to a citizen?"

"A what?"

"Citizen. Can you flog a Roman citizen who has not had due process? Especially one who has not been found guilty?"

Quickly getting his superior the centurion exclaimed, "This guy says he's a citizen!" Which if true, was a big deal. The law gave citizens significant rights not granted to others. Unlike our country, Rome did not grant everyone born in the empire, citizenship. Only those with high social or governmental standing; or those who had offered some great service to Rome. Or, those who bribed someone for their papers. Like the commander had. He came quickly.

"Are you a Roman citizen?" He was skeptical, likely because Paul hardly looked the part after being roughed up by the mob.

"Yes, I am"

"I paid a lot of money for my citizenship."

"But I was born a citizen." And the commander's heart sank. He had the flagellum quickly put away, and he began to worry about his career.

This isn't much of a story, not much action, and so, doesn't get a lot of air time. But in it, one missionary *didn't* get whipped to a pulp. Not because he prayed which no doubt he did, but because he reached for his rights as a citizen. A citizen of a totalitarian society with few rights enjoyed by modern westerners. Paul will do this again in Acts 25:10-11. READ.

At the very least, I think this is NT precedent for a Christian to use her citizen rights. As Americans, we've been given many. We can help choose our own leaders at all levels of government. We can all get 12 years of free education and beyond that whatever we can afford. We can travel back and forth across state lines without documentation. With conditions, we can get a bullhorn and publicly share our opinion on anything—even criticism of the government. If I get enough citizen signatures, I can decide to run for office even *without* the backing of one of the two major parties. I can decide to change careers at any time and move anywhere to work. I can report abuse and dishonesty in government without ending up in jail or dead in a ditch somewhere.

We live in an amazing land, a representative democracy that literally invites its citizens to participate in shaping its present and its future. The Declaration of Independences says...

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, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

Deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. In other words, those who govern, say, "Citizens, we invite you to influence us." I think Paul's example means we can use these rights as we have opportunity. It might be for ourselves as it was for Paul. But use your rights for *Him*, and for *them*. Not just so America is more comfy for me or my children, but so America becomes more God-glorifying, and brings more joy to more people. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom.13:9).

Some of our neighbors are poor. Christians should care about the poor more than anyone else because their *God* cares about the poor. Prov. 19:17 says *He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, And he will repay him for his good deed.*

No unbelieving citizen has such motivation. *And* then again, the Christian citizen understands that the worst thing for the person who *chooses* poverty, is a handout. 2 Thess. 3:10: *If a man will not work, he shall not eat.* Often non-Christian citizens prefer the anonymous handout to that poor man than the bother of the genuine concern behind tough love.

Prov. 29:7 says *The righteous care about justice for the poor; but the wicked have no such concern.*" Many of us complain about politicians who only seek to line their pockets. So let's have more Christian politicians for they have their eyes on more than money. 2 Cor.5:10 says *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

To try to improve society is not worldliness but love. To wash your hands of society is not love but worldliness. (European economist and Christian, Sir Frederick Catherwood)

Concl:

Can a Christian citizen use her rights? Yes. However, a few cautions:

1. Use only rights God approves of. (1 Cor.6:1-8)
2. Be gracious to those who disagree with you how much to use their rights. Attempts to persuade someone to do what you do are fine but don't make your convictions God's law. For example, I dearly wish every brother and sister over 18 would vote, but those who insist it's sin if you don't, are simply twisting Scripture. Be gracious with saints who disagree.
3. *Kindly* exercise your rights. Let's discard anger as a weapon when disagreeing with unbelievers. As Paul said in 2 Cor.10:3-4, our weapons are not like this world's. Protest signs that say "God hates fags," or shrill comebacks on Hannity and Colms send the wrong message to lost people. Be impassionate, but be kind, be self-disciplined; be loving.

Pilate asked Him if He was a king, Jesus answered, "Yes, but my kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my followers would fight to prevent my arrest..." (Jn.18:36)

A one time director for Bread for the world observed that when Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world, he was not saying, this world is of no concern to my kingdom.