

# CITIZEN

*Faithful Discipleship  
in a Partisan World*

**C. ANDREW DOYLE**

Foreword by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge



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## Introduction: Engaging an Apathetic Christian Citizen

*Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.*

Thurgood Marshall, U.S. Supreme Court justice<sup>1</sup>

The 2016 U.S. election revealed that Christians are divided about what it means to be a citizen<sup>2</sup> in God's kingdom and a citizen of the empire. We have not been forming the baptized for the task of navigating the complex waters of a dual citizenship. This book is about Christian citizenship. What is its framework? What are its originating principles? How does it engage the princes of this world? What is its message? How does it make its way in community? These are just some of the questions I attempt to shed light upon.

Similar to Christian formation, civic formation in America has eroded. Voting percentages are down, there is a malaise among citizens towards their government, and hopelessness pervades political conversation. This malaise is a symptom of the overall crisis of citizenship formation that has taken root in most nations around the world.<sup>3</sup> The church has all but abandoned the conversation about Christian citizenship altogether. When apathy becomes the *modus operandi* of citizenship, and especially Christian citizenship, then we are in trouble. In the vacuum left by a

retreating church, the nature of citizenship is being defined by other, less charitable voices.

Very few of the congregations in my diocese speak about voting or the duty of citizenship. Few speak about the importance of being a Christian citizen. Citizenship formation in my tradition is silent at worst, or merely preached from the pulpit, which is not helpful. The church has offered little teaching on the topic of Christian citizenship, so that her people bring their secular politics into their congregations totally unexamined.

I found clergy and lay leadership underprepared for the difficult conversations that emerged in the 2016 political environment. For example, there was widespread confusion about the separation of church and state. Somehow, we started to believe that separation of church and state meant we should not talk politics or religion with friends and family or at church. This is poor advice. Just because we don't do these conversations very well doesn't mean we shouldn't have them. We should be able to speak with skill and nuance about politics and religion. And, if we can't, in the immortal words of Napoleon Dynamite, "We need to get some skillz."

I would argue that schools, political parties, and the corporations that control the media have largely defined what is meant by citizenship. In this way, unchurched people have defined the terms of Christian citizenship for those inside our faith communities. The notion of Christian citizenship fell prey to the wider forces of principalities. The end result was that some Christians found themselves parroting their political party's agenda as Christianity. Others left the church from an inability to speak honestly about their opinions within a Christian framework or to have their opinions heard.

One of my priests related a story about a man who burst into his office barking and cursing, and alleged that the priest was a puppet of the Democratic party. After some conversation, the shocked priest who had done nothing more than invite his church to pray for the children separated from their parents at the U.S. border, responded, "Maybe you are a puppet for the Republican party." In the end the two remained colleagues and recognized that each has an important role to play in the discussion. Other conversations around my diocese were less civil.

Some parishioners came up for air following the election and were confused about the inner congregational conflict. I heard from many that their priest or their church friends weren't who they thought they were. Members' families were divided. One group in a Spanish-speaking congregation explained that as a family they talk about everything, but they were struggling because they could not talk about the election. Elsewhere, many parishioners thought that it was the work of Christians to be good Americans and support the nation-state without question. It wasn't that people didn't want to talk, they didn't want the church to ask critical questions about their government. This sentiment is commonly expressed when a president from your preferred party is in office. It is the rare Christian citizen indeed who manifests the same critical eye towards the government regardless of presidents and parties holding office. It is a rare Christian citizen who sees the issues defined first from the Christian perspective and then as a citizen of the nation.

Our post-9/11 politics have shaped many Christians into an unquestioning group within the wider voting population. Prayers for our soldiers and first responders during the prayers for the people abound, with no prayers for other civil servants. There is no critical conversation about the way the United States participates in armed engagements and occupations around the world. There is no safe space for opposing views. This is true even in our schools where critical space for political discourse is hard to come by. Teachers are struggling to form healthy citizens with critical political skills. Anxious parents, jittery school boards, and a never-ending politically charged news cycle makes this nearly impossible.<sup>4</sup> Churches share all of those same variables, but the way that our life in church intersects with deeply held personal and spiritual values and emotions make the conversation even more charged. My wife even asked, "Are you going to get in trouble for writing this book?"

Our discussions in public, private, and at church are charged with emotion and tribal loyalty to our political party. People feel threatened, anxious, and powerless. And, why not? The massive number of baby boomer retirements is putting pressure on our social services. The economy is good, but healthcare is gradually becoming something only the wealthy can afford.

Demand for skilled and unskilled labor is becoming unbalanced. The state of Texas itself is losing about 1 to 4 percent of its white population a year due to death. It will be a majority Hispanic state by 2020. American cities are quickly becoming majority minority communities. And, there is what some are calling a “death tsunami” coming, because as Deacon Bob Horner likes to say, “People have had too many birthdays.” This will speed up the transformation of the country in the next twenty years. All of this threatens an old lifestyle and exacerbates power shifts.<sup>5</sup> There is a lot at stake for people and more than enough anxiety in the nation.

All of this reveals that what must be plumbed is not only what it means to be a Christian citizen, but what does that citizenship look like within the wider geography of local and global relationships *and* what does it look like as a theological concept over and against the powers of this world?

There are biases I need to name here. My first bias is that Christians must be Christians first, and citizens of their country second. This book is not about being an American who happens to be a Christian. This book is very much about what it means to be a Christian citizen in the reign of God who happens to be an American, or a citizen of any other nation-state. I firmly believe that a good citizen in the reign of God is a good citizen in whatever nation one may find oneself. Being a good citizen in the reign of God also requires that we subject the powers and principalities that make up our nation and permeate our government to a healthy degree of critical scrutiny. I understand that we need to have laws, have safe borders, and protect ourselves from threats. But I am not interested in bending the Christian story to justify unchristian means of achieving those things. When we do that we undermine our citizenship in the reign of God and make Jesus into a puppet of the empire. It also makes us poor citizens, because it erodes the critical eye that maintains the health of American democracy.

My second bias is my conviction that Christian citizens in the reign of God must have a global eye. God, the creator and redeemer of all things, is not interested in Americans only. God created all people. God came into the world to save all sinners. God has a global vision of the kingdom and therefore so must Christian citizens. This means that it matters how we

treat people who are not Americans. Christian citizens are obligated to care about how our government treats foreigners, our neighbors, and those who are citizens of every other nation. Honoring our global calling will require a much bigger conscientious horizon.<sup>6</sup>

We are entering the conversation about Christian citizenship at a moment of seismic shifts. We can see these shifts clearly by analyzing our relationships and the nature of conversation within our congregations. Presently, the very idea of democracy is being reconsidered and many are questioning the assumed foundations upon which it operates. Anglican scholars John Milbank and Adrian Pabst write in *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future*:

The sway of both social and economic liberalism is today being qualified by the intrusion of political polarities that do not readily fit into a left-right spectrum. These new polarities concern variously the populist *versus* the technocratic, the bio-conservationist *versus* the trans-human, rootedness *versus* mobility, the interpersonal *versus* the anonymous, the virtuous *versus* the amoral, the local *versus* the uniformly global and, above all, the primacy of society *versus* the primacy of the economy and the polity.<sup>7</sup>

In the Letter to the Ephesians (whose authorship is unknown but traditionally attributed to Paul the apostle) we are reminded that we cannot be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14). Instead we are to put on the person of the Christ. We are put together a community made up of citizens of the reign of God, unified by the work of Jesus upon the cross and by virtue of our baptism. The preface for baptism found in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer reads, “. . . because in Jesus Christ our Lord you have received us as your sons and daughters, made us citizens of your kingdom, and given us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth.”<sup>8</sup>

We are at once defined by the one God in Christ Jesus, and at the same time we are the many knit together by his work. The Letter to the Ephesians continues, “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every

ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph. 4:14–16).

The body of Christ cannot leave its understanding of the polis, the city, the nation, the state, and our place in it as dual citizens, to secular philosophers, politicians, political partisans, or the media. Presently, Christian citizens are being blown this way and that. As we survey the landscape of our churches, our worship looks more like a reaffirmation of our political partisanships than the renewal of our Lord and Savior's body in the world. We are the most politically, racially, and ethnically divided on Sunday morning.<sup>9</sup>

A vacated Christian citizenship means the loss of a critical voice within the wider political discourse. In the U.S. there is more at work here than simply a disagreement between red and blue states. There is a deep work of manipulation underway by the powers that be to manipulate local and global forces towards greater inequality, and income disparity, through wage theft, lack of access to health care, and the reining in of freedoms.<sup>10</sup> Assumptions that Christian citizenship is equal to an American civil religion are over. The church no longer has the luxury of believing that Christian citizenship is synonymous with American citizenship—as if it ever were. The same is true for Christians in every nation.

Outsiders cannot define the work of virtuous citizenship for the Christian. The outsiders who promote a false understanding of the division between church and state in order to manipulate Christians into supporting their unchristian agenda includes but is not limited to politicians, campaign managers, political commentators, and the media. Christianity is not practiced alone. Christianity is not an individual sport. It must be practiced among people in relationship. A practiced Christian citizenship affects various levels of community, in relationship to goods and services, and as part of the wider economy. It cannot be practiced in the church only. Christian citizenship must be lived out in the world, supported by the church.

Christianity is not a spiritual exercise for the individual but a communal expression that, if lived as imagined by God, cannot help but be political. Christianity is about politics. What is interesting here, and of no little importance, is the fact that Americans define politics as oriented around the

nation. Politics for most Americans is defined as the work of government, the art of influencing policy, the science of holding control of government. It is political actions, practices, and the political affairs or business of parties. It is professional in nature.<sup>11</sup> Christians define politics as the primary relationship between citizens and systems that govern their community. This book is not interested in a secular American understanding of a political ideology that serves the government and those who work in it. It is concerned with the role and work of Christian citizens in shaping the systems of authority that impact our community, nation, and the world.

As Christian citizens we have a particular way in which we do this. We approach it with a posture of conviviality. When we use the term convivial, we understand that there is a personal interdependence within the broader whole that captures both individual freedom and relationship to God and others.<sup>12</sup> Christian theologian and cultural critic Ivan Illich suggests that conviviality is Christian citizenship lived out in action. For instance, convivial citizens resist only speaking and answering the question in their minds while the other is talking. They practice the art of listening first before speaking. Convivial citizenship requires an active curiosity, a constant looking and watching in order to gain understanding of our context. Convivial citizens practice their virtuosity in relationship with a diverse group of other people. This conviviality generates its own path and is always opposed to oppression because it is so reliant on relationship between citizens who are different. This book will imagine a Christian citizenship that takes a convivial approach to all people, thereby destroying the invasive political notion that *if you are not for us then you are against us*.

I say all of this by way of introduction because this book is not simply offered as another book on citizenship to be read by the like-minded. Instead, I aim for this book to be a guide for conversation and for listening, for thoughtful action, reflection, and prayer; brought forth from God's imagination and generative within the community, polis/city, nation-state and global contexts in which Christians make their home. I hope that this book will offer an engaged, virtuous, habit-forming Christian citizenship that is convivial in manner and works towards a common good.