

Protagonist Corner

A Government to Live For

O. Benjamin Sparks III
Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia

I confess that there is something slightly strange about such a title, even in an article which advocates vigorous preaching on Christian citizenship on the Sundays which fall on national holidays: Memorial Day and Labor Day and (when appropriate) the Fourth of July. We are more accustomed to speak from the pulpit about a Christ to live for. Even a Christ to die for. But a government?

But that's the intended irony of such a title if we preach, for instance, on Memorial Day weekend, when our entire nation (Christians, pagans, and everyone else in between) pauses to remember with gratitude those whose living and dying have secured for us a government based upon *law*, and not upon whoever happens to hold power at the moment: king, tyrant, or demagogue. Thus we Americans pride ourselves on orderly transitions every four to eight years; and we have never yet been forced to call in the military to back up the will of the people expressed through the ballot box.

The irony deepens because it appears that when we are not defending ourselves against some external danger, we turn our anger against each other and become a danger to ourselves. The current fashion is to mock government, to attack it with words and weapons, to blame it for all our woes as a people. Yet we need it desperately, whether at war or peace. Perhaps we need it most when we are at peace, to keep the peace internally. Thus the title: *A Government to Live For*.

But another assumption lurks beneath this title: that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which have come in for a lot of bashing recently, are an absolutely basic resource for the understanding and practice of Christian citizenship. How does our faith, nourished by the Word of God, contribute to our understanding of ourselves as citizens of the United States?

This is no idle question. There are many claimants in the newly clothed (no longer naked) public square, bouncing off the Bible, berating the government with the Bible, speaking for God from the Bible, fomenting hatred against government with the Bible in hand. So how have we in our own branch of Christianity understood our responsibilities for citizenship?

We have a Reformed bias. And we have never, in confession of faith or in official teaching thought of government, in itself, as evil. Instead, we have taken very seriously the argument in Romans that rulers are instituted by God to promote justice and secure public safety, a notion dear enough to the founders of this nation to write into the preamble of the Constitution: "to preserve the union, to promote the general welfare, to secure domestic tranquility." Or, in the words of Paul, government is to be a friend of good public behaviour and a terror to those who disturb the peace.

That's why rulers have the sword, and that's why John Calvin insisted that the magistrate (school principal, city manager, mayor, police chief) has a higher calling even than a Minister of the Word, because the magistrate can do good for more people than a minister. Magistrates are our elected officials, our politicians, whom only 12 percent of people in a recent poll believe ever tell the truth! Magistrates. In other

words, government, as government, is instituted by God and is good.

So then, how do we have a government to live for? What do we do when those in power are corrupt, or are bedeviled by a ruthless and arrogant press so as to seem corrupt? How can we limit that which is given by God to us for our own good, and yet not destroy or weaken government so as to render ineffective what we need for domestic tranquility; or by our passivity allow government to become the servant of the loudest voices, or the ignorant majority, or the fattest pocketbook, so that it ceases to serve the good and instead serves evil?

The story from the Old Testament about who will succeed Samuel as judge in Israel demonstrates that such questions are ancient; far, far older than our mere 200-plus years as a republic. How do we order public power and guard public well-being when political leadership itself tends to pervert that public power and public well-being?¹ Samuel's sons were scoundrels; they took bribes and were thoroughly corrupt; they did not have their father's character.

And in this period also, the people had grown weary of judges. For during the time of the judges of Israel, according to another interpretation, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. There was no general welfare, no domestic tranquility; in their places were outbreaks of domestic violence and attacks by enemies that had to be confronted by episodic leaders whom God raised up, for that crisis alone, to restore peace and to secure boundaries: Deborah, Samson, and Gideon. Then the same thing would happen again. The people demanded a king. They craved stability.

And God gave them what they wanted, even as God told Samuel to warn the people that there were consequences they had not counted on. But the Israelites persisted, and chose to centralize power to save themselves from continued chaos. Isn't that a perennial human problem? Aren't we always on a similar quest in our public life, trying to balance order with freedom, trying to clean up corruption without bringing down the house around us?

Please be clear that this is a Christian argument for government, for a strong government, strong enough to preserve domestic tranquility. For the condition we face is more serious than the number of weapons in the hands of state militias. The seriousness of our problem is not about firepower, but about idea power—the idea that government is evil, or that government power should never exceed citizen power,² a foolish and dangerous idea, which will destroy this nation for which so many have died, much more quickly than any external threat.

After all, Thomas Aquinas argued that the difference between civilization and barbarism lay in the ability of civilized peoples to settle differences with conversation, reason, debate, disagreement, and then resolution. Barbarians always resort to violence, the stronger overpowering the weaker and declaring victory.³

President Bush, admirable as his condemnation of the National Rifle Association was, did not go far enough. It is not enough to chastise the NRA for their appalling rhetoric about those who enforce our laws. We need leadership in both parties, people who will step forward and educate a fearful and often ignorant populace about the positive role of government in making our lives secure. For without safety for our lives and property, we can be sure we will never salvage civilization from the chaos and threatened anarchy in which we find ourselves.

What can we say to promote the positive and necessary role of government? First, engender respect for the office, if not for the person who holds that office. I remember

being taught as a child to respect the office of president or governor, even when I could not respect the person holding that office. I overheard scores of political arguments among family members as I was growing up, friendly but passionate. And when I picked up some derogatory epithet toward a public official, and gleefully repeated it, I was warned in the sternest way that we were people who spoke respectfully of those who hold office, so as not to demean the office, even if the man holding it (and they were all men in the South forty-five years ago) was a crook, or worse.

We have grown too far away from such teaching. Even when the persons who hold office do not act honorably, by teaching respect (rather than cynicism and scorn), by granting even unworthy persons courtesy and dignity—we make implicit claims that government itself has a chance, and is not merely captive to the person who holds the office.

And in the church, at least, we need to raise up persons of character. Parents need to take responsibility; church school teachers need to take responsibility. All of us who take vows when children are baptized need to take seriously the importance of children growing up knowing the difference between good and evil, growing up to be people who cannot be bought or intimidated, to be persons committed to honesty and integrity in public life. Children also need to learn to be civilized citizens in their conduct of public business, not to act like barbarians who respect only the strongest and the meanest.

Second, promote a new understanding of the use of power. Of all people, we Christians need to advocate the proper use of force, the careful and accountable use of power to restrain those who are harmful, and to protect the weak and defenseless. It is painful to recall what I write here. Twenty-five years ago in Jacksonville, Florida, I was an associate in a downtown church. There were high-rises for the elderly in that area, quality housing built by the Episcopal Diocese, in walking distance of grocery stores, pharmacies, doctors, and of course, our churches. But these elderly residents were cautioned not to leave their apartments on the days Social Security checks arrived in their post office boxes. They stood the chance of being mugged by marauding toughs from a nearby neighborhood. Twenty-five years ago, and the situation has worsened in all our cities, not improved!

We may live in a secure cluster of homes, with security systems, guards, and fences, while our parents are trapped in a changing neighborhood, in a decaying section of the city riddled with violence, and their only protection is an effective police force. Surely we do not want government policies that require seventy-five and eighty-five year olds to be armed with AK 47's.

Further, we will never challenge bigotry, or keep abusive prejudice in check without power, the power of the principal, of the school board, and of leaders who are willing to stand up and be counted. (That's why President Bush's argument was persuasive.) What keeps our leaders so silent in the face of pervasive violence and the trashing of lawfully constituted government? As Christians we need to be serious about power, and its effective use in the maintenance of order for the safety and protection of all people.

Third, religion may never be used to subvert government, or to destroy it. That does not mean that when government does evil it should not be resisted. Had Hitler been resisted much sooner (both internally and externally), war might have been averted and millions of Jews saved from gas chambers.

Yet religious dissent must always be accountable to the government it opposes, as was Martin Luther King in his civil disobedience. For when religious dissent is thus accountable, not only does the witness point beyond the immediate issue of corruption or tyranny to God, whom we obey rather than corrupt human institutions; dissent, by its willingness to be accountable, even to be incarcerated, testifies to the goodness of government itself, even though for the moment, government is thoroughly corrupt. Which leads us back to the argument for respect, and for honor. "Give honor to whom honor is due, respect to whom respect is due," wrote the apostle Paul. This keeps the church from being up to its steeple in politics, and saves us Christians from accusations that we are merely partisan, devotees of trendy, transient causes going absolutely nowhere.

What our nation needs so desperately now from the church is a clear voice that government itself, representative government, is possible, worth working for and living for, and when attacked by enemies from without and within, even worth dying for. But before any government or nation is worth dying for—especially for Christians—then it must first claim our loyalty, our affection, and our energies as worthy of our best efforts. The question is not, in the end, whether we will have government, but whether government will serve justice and mercy, or merely be the pawn of those who have enough power to do anything they want.

How do we order public power and guard public well-being when leadership tends to pervert that power and well-being? It's an ancient question, and as real as last night's evening news.

For those of us who preach and teach, it is by encouraging our hearers, who have power as citizens, and especially by encouraging those known to us who hold public office or who work in the political arena. We have opportunity to nourish their faith and to exercise our Christian citizenship most appropriately when we make government as good (that is, effective, useful, and oriented to the tasks for which God has ordained it) as possible. Let us be those who promote good government in our preaching; a government just and fair, a guardian of tolerance which promotes respect among all citizens, deterring the need for vengeance, and securing at every moment, domestic tranquility. It is the work of a lifetime, and should be the responsibility of every preacher, for it is the abiding vocation of every follower of Jesus Christ in a free republic.

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press).

² Jonathan Yardley, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 21 May 1995, editorial, Commentary section.

³ Michael Novak, "A New Vision of Man: How Christianity Has Changed Political Economy," *Imprimis*, vol. 24, no. 5 (May 1995).

I am also indebted to Paul Achtemeier's commentary on Romans (Interpretation series) for his exposition of the thirteenth chapter.