

Electing Not to Vote

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It Might Be Your Sacred Duty

by Charles Strohmer

With all due respect to Chuck Colson, voting may not be a sacred duty. Yet in an editorial in Christianity Today (Oct 2008), Colson writes that "voting is not an option" it's both our civic and sacred duty.... Voting is required of us as good citizens and God's agents for appointing leaders. Bemused by the number of Christians who don't get this by the many who "have given up on politics this year?" Colson wants to escort them into the voting booth this November alongside his "voting is a sacred duty" argument.

He rests it on the following points. Citing both Old and New Testament passages, he writes that our leaders should have a number of basic characteristics. They should be able men who fear God. They should be trustworthy and hate bribes. They should be competent, virtuous, and persons of integrity. And they should be able to preserve order and restrain evil.

Colson also solicits Deuteronomy 1:12-13 to say that "democratic principles" of "choosing leaders he [God] will anoint" goes back to the Old Testament. In "casting a vote," he writes, "judgment should ultimately be guided by what we perceive to be the common good.... If we look at politics from God's perspective, we see that he has a deep and abiding interest in all people being treated fairly." The real question, Colson notes, is not whether your candidate will cut taxes or vote for your favorite program, but will he or she "serve all the people?"

Although I would question Colson's reliance on the passage in Deuteronomy as illustrating democratic principles (i.e., Moses chose and appointed the leaders; the people did not vote them into office), he nevertheless offers some good advice. But it's just common sense. It's got nothing to do with voting being a sacred duty. Colson leaves no room for the equally sacred duty of electing not to vote

If voting is a sacred duty, Colson leaves no room for the equally sacred duty of electing not to vote. By this, I don't mean opting out the way some people do, who habitually just can't be bothered. I have in mind abstinence by people who will vote but who nevertheless at times cannot in good conscience bring themselves to vote for any candidate. To not vote for conscience sake is quite different than never darkening the door of the voting booth. To not vote for conscience sake is to obey the "principles of conscience" that Paul explains in Romans 14. That is, it would be a "sin" for the person to vote. And Christians who feel free to vote are to allow others a conscience not to vote. I can't see why Colson can't see this, or why he acts surprised that so many Christians this year might not vote.

Even from a mere civic point of view, when Christians have good and sufficient reasons for not voting in a certain election, that choice can be a prophetic statement, saying, in effect: We don't see either party's candidate as being, e.g., trustworthy or competent enough. Note the word "enough." The abstainers are not so silly as to be looking for a perfect candidate, but they are at least looking for "enough" of one. If they don't see one, what is that to you? Unlock your political imagination

The caution I would offer is this. Unlock your political imagination. Here are some ways. If you can't stomach either Barak Obama or John McCain, think about casting a "protest ballot" on election day, voting for a different candidate. True, you'd be voting for a sure loser, but enough protests of that sort would not be lost on Washington. If that doesn't interest you, use your political imagination to think outside the ballot box. Just as we have a obediences to fulfill to God in all other aspects of life, so too in political life.

If it's a sacred duty for you not to vote this year, find a substitute way of engaging in political and social life. Think through your argument for not voting, so you can clearly communicate it to others. Explain your good and sufficient reasons in a "letter to the editor" or to your senator or representative. Start a group to pray for the local, state, and national government. Join with politically frustrated, like-minded others to develop creative forms of witness, or join with those who are not waiting for some political program to come along to serve the poor and the needy but who are doing it themselves.

Colson concludes his editorial with the heavyweight intellectual Augustine, who taught that Christians must ?assume the obligations of citizenship.? Let us remember, however, that there are limits to the claims that the state has on conscience. For some, there may be too much distance at times between the City of God and the City of Man.

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