



WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE FAIL TO VOTE

by John Revell

Evangelicals have a pitiful record when it comes to voting. Over the last twenty years, on average only half of eligible evangelicals took the time and made the effort to go to the polls. This in itself is sobering, but White House aide Karl Rove has repeatedly lamented that only 15 million evangelicals bothered to vote in the last general election. That might not sound too bad...until you consider the fact that there

are an estimated 60 million evangelicals in our nation! By some estimates, only 25 percent of all evangelicals went to the polls—and less than half are even registered to vote!

Only one quarter of like-minded brothers and sisters voted in the last election. It's fair to ask, "So what?" Does this really matter to God?

At one time I had concluded that perhaps it didn't. I knew God absolutely was concerned about moral issues in our nation, such as abortion and

homosexuality, and as a pastor I passionately represented those concerns in various ways. But I assumed that He probably wasn't so concerned about such mundane things as elections and voting.

That was until a politically active Christian brother challenged me to study God's Word on the matter. I did a word study on "justice," which took me to the Hebrew word *mishpat*, which took me to the first chapter of Isaiah. What I found there rocked my world. From Isaiah 1:10-31, I

found undeniable and irrefutable principles regarding our role and responsibility in the civil arena—principles that should drive us to our knees, and then to the polls.

If you question the value, validity, or necessity of voting in the next election, please consider the following three principles.

SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

In Isaiah 1:10, the mighty prophet declares: *Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!* (NIV) The Lord, in this scathing rebuke, equated the rulers of Judah with the rulers of Sodom. But what had they done that would justify such a harsh comparison?

Isaiah revealed their wickedness in 1:17, where he declared that the nation had failed to: *Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.* Isaiah continued the indictment in verse 23, where he proclaimed: *Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them* (NIV).

This alarming indictment was because of Judah's *civil sin*. The national leadership had failed miserably in key areas of civil responsibility: justice, deliverance from oppression, and protection for the helpless. They had also allowed their rulings and policies to be influenced by bribes and "gifts." God explicitly identified this failure as "evil" in Isaiah 1:16, and equated these civil sins with the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah in 1:10.

But why would a fair and just God include the general population of Judah in this indictment? These failures came from Judah's national leadership, not the average person on the street. When we look closely at Judah's broader history, we find that God had indeed given the people a key role in deciding their leadership.

In Deuteronomy 16:18-19, Moses commanded the people to: *Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people*

fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe. God assigned the *people* the responsibility of appointing fair and just civil leaders in each local area—leaders who would not be tempted by bribes.

In Isaiah's day, God not only held the leaders accountable for their civil immorality, He held the *people* accountable for their actions as well.

The principle we draw from this passage is this: **When the citizens have a voice in the selection and direction of their civil leaders, God holds both the leaders and the citizens accountable for the civil sins of their government.**

It was true of Judah, but is it fair to suggest that God applies this standard to us today? Consider the following:

The citizens of the United States elect the leaders of our nation—leaders who set civil and social policies for our nation, including policies on moral issues such as abortion, same-sex “marriage,” euthanasia, assisted suicide, and more. The decisions of these leaders directly impact the moral direction of our nation. Therefore, the people's vote (or failure to vote) ultimately determines our nation's civil, social, and moral direction.

Furthermore, the president is responsible for appointing members of the federal judiciary. These judges interpret laws and make legal decisions that affect the entire nation. Therefore, the citizen's role in each election directly impacts every level of government.

Because the American system is a representative form of government, there is an obvious relationship between an elected leader's actions and the citizens who elected the leader—or who allowed his election by not voting.

It logically follows that God holds the citizens accountable for immoral governmental policies.

God has established universal standards of justice that He expects all nations to uphold and enforce—and the United States is not exempt from these standards. If our government refuses to uphold and enforce them, we shouldn't be surprised at the judgment that is certain to follow. But even more sobering is the reality that when

the citizens choose their leaders, He holds the citizens corporately accountable for the actions of their leaders.

Our vote—or failure to vote—has a direct bearing on not only the election, but on how the Lord will deal with our land. If we fail to vote for candidates that most closely reflect God's standards—or if we fail to vote—we should not expect to escape the consequences.

WASTED WORSHIP

Isaiah 1:11-16 reveals a second principle regarding civil immorality: **When God's people neglect their civic duty and abandon His moral priorities in civil government, it is sin and hinders their worship.** In verses 11-15, God declared that He rejected the sacrifices, assemblies, and prayers of His people. He further revealed that His rejection was based on the leaders' and the people's failure to keep His most basic moral standards in civil government (vs. 17, 23). In verse 16 He identified their neglect as “evil” and “wrong.”

Both the leaders and the people knew God's moral standards for governing, yet they failed to maintain them. In this they sinned, and consequently God rejected their worship and refused to hear their prayers. The concept of sin hindering worship is not unique to this passage. In Isaiah 59:1-4, the prophet declared that the people's neglect of justice, specifically in the shedding of innocent blood, rendered their prayers useless. In numerous passages the Scriptures indicate that ongoing, unconfessed sin obstructs worship (Psalm 66:17-18; Zechariah 7:13; Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 John 1:6-9; 3:21-22; Revelation 3:14-22). Such was the case with Judah.

The principle applies today. Because we know God's moral standards for our government, and because we have the ability to elect and influence our elected leaders accordingly, when our elected leaders continually defy God's moral expectations, and when we fail to respond through our vote and contact with our elected leaders, we sin.

The admonition of James 4:17 is instructive here: *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.* So, if we know the Lord's moral expectations of government, and if we allow civil immorality to continue through our silence at the polls, we should not be surprised when our prayers, worship, and assemblies bear little fruit.

There are at least two applications for our nation. The first regards our elected and appointed officials. When a leader claims to be a Christian but consistently defies truth, justice, morality, and the sanctity of human life, his walk with God is marginalized and his prayers are blocked. That leader's prayers for wisdom, direction, and national protection will likely not make it past

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the ceiling. A leader who knowingly and continually abandons God's moral standards in governing is living in sin and worships in vain.

The second concerns our worship in local churches. We can't escape the impact of these truths on corporate prayer, worship, and fellowship with God. If members in a local congregation are knowingly and continually involved in sin, it hinders worship. If failure to vote according to God's moral expectations of government is sin, and if a significant number of members are

guilty, it must impact corporate prayer life and worship. Now, consider the time, energy, focus, and preparation that go into our worship. Consider all of the prayers for national revival that are being raised from our churches. Because failure to maintain God's moral standards for our government through our vote and input is disobedience, when Christian people disobey God through their civil silence, the impact on our churches is monumental and tragic.

We should understand that these consequences are directly connected to our knowledge of God's priorities in governing and our support of leaders who will keep these priorities. If we even attempt to be obedient in these areas, these specific consequences would not apply. However, when we consider our nation's condition it is obvious that many of us, if not most, have not been faithful in voting for leaders who will uphold God's standards. Beyond voting, how many of us actually voice our moral convictions to our elected representatives?

This is not to suggest that failure to vote according to God's standards is the only—or even primary—sin threatening churches today. Judah was plagued by materialism, sensualism, arrogance, and idolatry—and so are we. In fact, apathy in the civil arena may be a symptom of these deeper sins. Regardless, it is a sin that must be recognized and dealt with if we wish God to receive our worship and hear our prayers.

Nor should anyone conclude that the ultimate solution to our nation's ills is political. It is not. Our nation's primary ills are spiritual and can only be healed by salvation through Jesus Christ. Someone has observed, “. . . national revival will not arrive on Air Force One.” Perhaps not. However, revival is not likely if we do not reflect God's concern for the passengers on board.

THE NATURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE

The third principle drawn from this passage is this: **God expects His people to embrace and reflect His passions and priorities in all areas of life, including the civil arena.**

In Isaiah 1:26, the prophet relays God's pledge to the people of Judah to: . . . *restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City* (NIV).

The imagery took the people of Judah back to their very foundations and God's expectations of them. When God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, He established a covenant with them in which He would view the people of Israel as "His people," and they would view Him as "their God" (Exodus 6:2-8; 24:1-9; Deuteronomy 29:9-15). In this relationship, God would treat them as His own "treasured possessions," pouring His abundant affection, blessings, and love upon them (Deuteronomy 7:6-9). They, in turn, were to focus their love and obedient faithfulness upon Him (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). In this tender relationship, God identified them as His special, *chosen* people.

In God's instruction to His people, He also pointed out that because of this special relationship, they were to be *like* Him. God identified Himself as "holy," and so He called His people to be like Him in holiness (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2). The Lord identified several areas that He viewed as "detestable," and He expected His chosen ones to view these same things as detestable (Deuteronomy 7:25,26; 18:9-13). God's deliverance from bondage and the establishment of this special relationship should have moved God's people to embrace His concerns and values.

Finally, God expected His people to *reflect* the nature of God to the neighboring nations. When God instructed His people to obey His commands, He told them that the neighboring nations would see their obedience and realize that they belonged to God (Deuteronomy 28:9,10). He also pointed out that if they obeyed and followed Him, other nations would see and respect their wisdom (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). This pointed directly to God, for it was the Lord who gave them the wise commands to follow. The people's actions were supposed to send a message to the world about God's greatness and love.

Because of God's loving nature and His loving relationship with Judah, His people were supposed to reflect His concern in the areas of justice, relief for the oppressed, and defense for the helpless. When the world looked at their behavior, they should have viewed a living illustration of God's love and compassion in each of these three areas. Instead, neighbors viewed shameless examples of civil scams, legalized oppression, and the state-protected slaughter of innocent children.

When Isaiah proclaimed this message to the people of Judah, they had completely rejected God's special, loving relationship with them. While they still belonged to God, they no longer behaved as His chosen ones. They no longer cherished the things that were important to God—instead, they embraced the detestable practices of the Canaanites, and worse.

When we look to the New Testament, we find the same emphases in the relationship between God and those who have been saved by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The New Testament teaches that through the blood of Christ, God delivered us from cruel bondage to sin and established a "new covenant" with us (Romans 6:15-18; Luke 22:20). Those who have been miraculously delivered from this slavery to sin are also called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9).

Also, in the same way that Judah was to embrace God's priorities, we, too, are to embrace His priorities. He instructed us to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:16), and to love each other because He loved us and because He is love (1 John 4:7,8). God calls His chosen ones to hate what is evil, cling to what is good (Romans 12:9) and to seek first His Kingdom (Matthew. 6:33). God *still* expects His "chosen people" to share His concerns and embrace His priorities.

Finally, we also are to reflect His nature to the world around us. When the lost observe us and our behavior, they should see an accurate picture of God's glorious nature (1 Peter 2:12).

When they watch us relate to each other, they should learn of the Lord's love (John 13:34,35; 17:23). When the world views our marriages, they should see a picture of the relationship that exists between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). As God's people, our priorities, actions, and affections are to project His nature to the world so that the lost can get a small glimpse of what God is like.

God has indeed delivered us from bitter bondage and brought us into a loving relationship with Him. Because of His incomparable love and grace, we should respond by eagerly embracing His concerns and accurately reflecting His nature.

Therefore, if God's heart breaks over our nation's civil immorality, shouldn't tears flow

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from our eyes? If we care about the things that concern God, shouldn't we be concerned about blatant violations of His most basic civil expectations? Because our government is "representative," shouldn't we seek representation of God's concern on moral issues? If we have the legal means and opportunity to reduce—and in some cases eliminate—the most flagrant examples of civil injustice, would God expect us to do any less? And when God's people fail to address these issues, don't we convey a false message to the lost about God and His nature?

Our Father is still passionate about the destruction brought through sexual immorality and perversion. But when we fail to call on our elected officials to stand against legalized and state sanctioned immorality and perversion, can we justify our declarations that we follow the Lord?

God's heart still breaks for the helpless and oppressed. In His love, He still holds human life precious and wants it protected. Yet, when we elect so-called "pro-choice" candidates (or *allow* their election by not voting!) who perpetuate the legalized slaughter of the helpless, how can we honestly claim to love God?

When we remain silent at the polls, or don't call our representatives to action in these areas, the watching world could falsely conclude from our actions that God is not *really* concerned about these issues. They then could logically conclude that the vocal minority of politically active Christians don't truly represent God's heart, but are instead "religious right" fringe fanatics who should be dismissed and ignored as such.

We have a dramatic opportunity to fully represent God and His concerns for our nation by voting and holding our elected officials accountable. If we fail to do so, we fail our nation, and more importantly we fail God—and we should not be surprised by the inevitable consequences that most certainly would follow.

Adapted from *Sinful Silence: When Christians Neglect Their Civic Duty* by Ken Connor and John Revell. John Revell is associate editor of *SBC LIFE*.

The SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission has published a non-partisan, comparative guide on the Democratic and Republican Party platforms suitable for distribution in your church or community group. This eight-page resource features a straight-up, unbiased, side-by-side comparison on a wide range of issues from the two political platforms. For more information visit their e-commerce site, www.familybookstore.net or call (800) 475-9127.