

THE PUBLIC LIFE OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD
DICK ROBINSON / JULY 1, 2021

I write first as a believer, a follower of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The apostle Peter wrote to fellow-believers in Christ who were scattered strangers (or *exiles* – drawing on the collective Jewish memories of being exiles first in Babylon, then continuing in the 1st Century under the thumb of the pagan Roman Empire) across the Roman Empire. He called these exiles “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9). Before all other allegiances, our citizenship is in the Kingdom of God.

I write second as a citizen of the United States of America. I was not born in the U.S. My parents were missionaries in a remote location in central Africa; my birth certificate reads: “*Report of Birth | Child Born Abroad of American Parent or Parents*”. My father’s heritage descends from the Pilgrims, English citizens who relocated to Amsterdam seeking religious freedom, then – after ten years – setting sail for England to join other “pilgrims” to Plymouth in the (then called) New World.¹ We come from a long line of immigrants. My mother’s heritage is Swedish. Her father – last name Lindblad – immigrated to the United States through Ellis Island, early in the 20th Century.

Celebrating the Fourth of July, Courtney Beesch notes that “The tradition of celebrating Independence Day in America holds roots in the days following the Continental Congress formally adopting the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. A few days later, bands played and bells rang as public readings took place in Philadelphia’s Independence Square”.²

Fourth of July celebration! It’s in my biological blood! Not only am I an American citizen, I am a veteran of the Marine Corps and a Vietnam War vet. I rode my Harley Davidson Ultra Classic Electra Glide in the classic American company’s 100th Anniversary ride in Milwaukee, WI. I may be an “immigrant” by heritage as well as personal history, but my citizenship credentials speak for themselves.

All that said, my primary allegiance is to Christ. Our word *christ* is a transliteration of the Greek *Christos* (Χριστός), meaning “anointed”, which the early Christians used to speak of Jesus as the Messiah, the long-expected Jewish king who would throw off the yoke of foreign oppressors, emperors and their local minions. What does it mean to live a public life as a member of the people of God, a citizen of the Kingdom of God?³

We need to remember that – for all of their faults and failures (and who among us does not have major private as well as public moral issues to confess – we are all personally compromised) – those who colonized this continent included Christians seeking

freedom to worship God apart from the institutions of established national churches. Many who followed them in subsequent decades and centuries doubtless included freedom of religion as well as economic motives or political oppression.

We must remember the stories of God with his people. He established covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a divine testament to form them as a nation that would be a blessing and a light to all nations. As you read their stories in Genesis we see again and again how despite their failures God remained faithful. In Exodus we read again the stories of calling and covenant, of faithfulness – *on God's part* – and failures – *of his people*. Rather than a light to the nations, they demanded to be like the nations, with a king to rule over them; failures in multiples. Yet God's promises prevailed, *the King was born in humility and died the death of a slave on an oppressor's cross.*

Matthew's gospel tells the story of the inauguration of Jesus' public life in four vivid stories: (1) John the Baptist's preaching of the nearness of God's *kingdom*; (2) John



baptizing Jesus in the waters of Jordan – remember Israel's crossing the Jordan into the land of Promise? (3) the Spirit leading Jesus into the desert to be tempted by – among other enticements – being given rule over all the *kingdoms* of the world; and finally (4) Jesus announcing the good news of the *kingdom*: “healing every disease and sickness...news about him spread and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and

the paralyzed, and he healed them.⁴ Large crowds...followed him.” Could it be that we, citizens of the kingdom of God, should take this as a signpost for our public life? Notice that Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, James and John – ordinary fishermen operating the family business (Matthew 3:18-22).

Again Matthew tells us that when Jesus asked his disciples what the people thought about him, who he was, the disciples gave a checklist of answers (Matthew 16:13-20). Jesus then turned the tables: “But what about you...who do you say I am?” Simon responded immediately: “You are the Christ [remember? – “the anointed”], the Son of the living God.” With this insight, Jesus changed his name to Peter, or Cephas – a word which translates as “rock”; the foundation stone on which the church would be built⁵, the church which holds the keys to the kingdom.⁶

How then, ought we to live? We live in expectation and anticipation of the coming “day of the Lord”.⁷ The apostle Peter is thought to have been martyred by crucifixion under the Roman Emperor Nero after the great fire in Rome, about 64 AD, blamed on the Christians.⁸ A strong tradition from early Christian writings suggests that he was crucified – in part based on Jesus words to Peter after his restoration to ministry: “when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone will lead you to where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” During the night of July 19, 64 AD, a fire broke out in the city of

some 2 million. It lasted for six days, was briefly controlled, then burned for three more, destroying ten of Rome's 14 districts. Some of the city's upper class opposing Nero's grandiose ambitions suggested that he had started the fires among the shops around the chariot stadium in order to build a number of palaces in his name. Nero, however, is said to have blamed the supposed Jewish growing religious sect called Christians.

The Roman historian Tacitus, a young teenager at the time of the fire, when writing his *Annals* describing the events of Nero's reign, blamed Nero for the fire. "In their very deaths [Christians] were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights."

For his part, the apostle Paul was arrested in 57 AD by the Roman commander in Jerusalem as a result of a mob riot at the temple, and held by the authorities for the next approximately five years, in one city or another, by one authority or another. Paul was not only Jewish by birth, he was Roman by citizenship, and he appealed to Caesar. The physician Luke, in his account of early Christian mission, concludes his history with Paul under house arrest in Rome. Luke writes: "Boldly and without hindrance [Paul] preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ".⁹

What came next for Paul? Luke does not tell us. His purpose was to see the gospel preached, beginning in Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth. Paul is in Rome, preaching the gospel unhindered to all who came to visit. N. T. Wright suggests the probability that Paul was released in AD 62, traveled to Spain – the end of the Western world as then thought – as he had expressed when writing to the church in Rome, then returned to Rome sometime during 64 AD, only to be re-arrested and beheaded.¹⁰

Clement, bishop of the church in Rome in the first century, wrote that Paul, "after he had been seven times in chains, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, and had preached in the east and in the west...won the genuine glory for his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world and having reached the farthest limits of the west."¹¹

Both Peter and Paul wrote that we are to submit to governing authorities because they are established and accountable to God; they are servants of God to care – economically, socially and personally – for those under their divinely mandated authority.¹² They do not exercise absolute sovereignty, that belongs alone to God; the civil authorities are themselves accountable to God. Both apostles wrote this at a time and in circumstances where they themselves were members of subservient communities. We live in a much different political world, we have the rights and responsibilities to use the freedoms given by a democratic political order to call governing authorities to account in a moral world. Moral order does not arise *ex nihilo*, it is dependent upon divine sovereignty. As Christians we are ultimately citizens of the Kingdom of God. Living Kingdom lives is the subject of another paper.

END NOTES

¹ Three of our ancestors, all named Robinson, sailed on the Mayflower. Our family's heritage has been thoroughly researched and documented by one of my brothers.

² Courtney Beesch (a social media editor on the Washington Post's Instagram team), "How we celebrate the Fourth of July", *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2021.

³ The title of this essay is taken in part from an excellent online class taught by N. T. Wright, et al. on Udemy. [You can find more information and registration here.](#)

⁴ Matthew 3:1-12; 3:13-17; 4:1-11; 4:23-25. NIV.

⁵ The idea of building on a foundation stone speaks to the replacement of Herod's temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, a recapitulation of the destruction of Solomon's temple by Babylon in 587/86 BC. As noted by , "The Greek term *ekklesiā*, or "church", never denotes a physical structure in the NT, but always a community of people. The new temple is not a building of literal stones, but consists of 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5)." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2007.

⁶ The idea here is that of a set of keys given to the steward, or administrative officer of the house, to open the doors to the storerooms. Ibid. "Stone" in verse 18, and "keys" in verse 19, are metaphors. Both of these are extended to the disciples as a leadership group in Matthew 18:18-19. Jeannine K. Brown. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI. 2015. Note that Matthew speaks of the "kingdom of *heaven*" rather than the kingdom of God. Matthew is understood as the most Jewish of the gospels, written for Jewish hearers. For them, "heaven" – the dwelling place of God – was a circumlocution for God's name as YHWH (pronounced as Yahweh) and translated in our O.T. English Bibles as LORD.

⁷ 2 Peter 3:10-13.

⁸ John 21:18-19. See also N. T. Wright & Michael F. Bird. *The New Testament in Its World*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI. 2019. p. 660. John's gospel seems to allude to this, at least the manner of his death "...you will stretch out your hands". [See also this internet link.](#)

⁹ Acts 28:31. The very last word of Acts is "unhindered".

¹⁰ Romans 15:23-24. He would use Rome as a base for his mission to Spain, as he with Barnabas had begun their mission to the Eastern Empire. See also N. T. Wright. *Paul: A Biography*. San Francisco: Harper One, 2018. pp. 392-397.

¹¹ Quoted in Wright, *Paul: A Biography*. p. 393. Clement wrote in the first century; it is *possible* that he is named in Philippians 4:3. [Church tradition suggests](#) that Clement was martyred by being chained to an anchor and thrown into the sea.

¹² Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17.