Claiming Our Citizenship

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In these days in which so much is being said about the rights of citizenship and about paths to citizenship, it may be well to remember that the Apostle Paul had what was then the most coveted citizenship in the world. While the Roman Empire was enormous, most of those who lived within its boundaries did not hold Roman citizenship. On the contrary, citizenship was a very coveted status limited to a few privileged ones. And Paul was one of them.

The book of Acts shows that on occasion Paul claimed the privileges of citizenship in order to forward his ministry. When he and Silas were beaten in public for performing a good deed, Paul makes the authorities cringe by declaring that both he and Silas are Roman citizens. They had committed a grave error for, as every Roman knew, one of the earliest laws in Roman jurisprudence declared that a Roman citizen could not be flogged. Later, in Jerusalem, he once again appeals to his rights as a Roman citizen. And finally, in his trial before Festus, he makes use of those rights to appeal to the court of Caesar.

And yet, this privileged Roman citizen, writing to the church in Philippi, says: “But our citizenship is in heaven.” He may be a Roman citizen. He may use his privileges as a Roman citizen to further his ministry. But ultimately, his true and final citizenship is elsewhere.

As we look at Paul’s use of citizenship in this manner, we are reminded of the words of a second-century anonymous Christian who is apparently addressing no less than the emperor himself. He says:

> Christians are not different from the rest of men in nationality, speech, or customs; they do not live in states of their own, nor do they use a special language, nor adopt a peculiar way of life. . . . . Whether fortune has given them a home in a Greek or foreign city, they follow local custom in the matter of dress, food, and way of life; yet the character of the culture they reveal is marvelous and, it must be admitted, unusual. They live, each in his native land—but as though they were not really at home there. They share in all duties like citizens and suffer all hardships like strangers. Every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign land.

Paul is a Roman citizen, also a citizen of Tarsus, and a Jew. This is who he is. He does not deny this reality. But he also knows and proclaims that as a Christian his true and final citizenship, the one that really counts, the foundation of his identity, is his citizenship in heaven. He is a citizen of the new city that God has promised. No wonder that the Romans resented such a message.

At this point it may be well to explain that in Paul's time the word "city" had a different meaning than it has today. For us today a "city" is an urban center. For Paul and his contemporaries, a "city" or a *polis* was not only that, but also an entire order of society, more like what we would call a state. Actually, while the Greeks used the same word to refer both to an urban center and to the political order managed by such a center, the Romans had two different words: there was the *urbs romana*, and the *civitas romana.* The first was the city on the Tiber that had become the capital of a vast empire, and the second was the order that ruled that vast empire.

This is why in English and in many other modern languages we have the anomaly that you cannot be a citizen of a city. New York is a city. Grand Rapids is a city. You may be a resident of New York or of Grand Rapids. You may be a model citizen in Grand Rapids. But you cannot be

a citizen of Grand Rapids. Your legal citizenship –wherever it may be—is not in a city, but in a state; not in an urbs, but in a civitas.

This is why, even though the words polis means "city," *poli*tics is not always limited to a city. And the word *poli*cy refers to a general order, as a set of principles, goals, and practices because a polis was not just a city, but an entire system of authority, laws and values by which a society was run.

Early Christians were well aware that the earthly *polis*, what we would call a government, was necessary for human life; that without such an order social life would be impossible. Jesus told his followers to give unto Caesar what was Caesar's. And Paul told Christians in Rome to obey the existing authorities. But Christians were also well aware that there were times and issues on which the two cities, the two *poleis*, would clash. Jesus was killed by order of the existing authorities, and Paul was killed by the Roman Empire whose citizen he was.

By the end of the first century, the clash had become inevitable between a *polis* led by an apparently deranged man named Domitian, who claimed inordinate powers, who could not admit opposition or criticism, who was undermining all the basic moral and civic values of the earlier Roman Republic, and who declared himself lord over all.

This led to a clash that can be seen in the book that we now call Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John. I invite you to read the Book of Revelation again, now keeping in mind what I have just been saying about a *polis*, and you will soon note that Revelation is a tale of two

cities. (Again, not two urban centers, but two orderings of society, or two states). On the one hand, there is the *polis* of Rome, which is the great harlot sitting on seven hills and drunk with the blood of the saints. On the other, there is the polis of God, which descends from heaven as a bride coming to meet her husband. Each of these represents a certain order, a certain system of values, and these have come to such a point of tension and clash that a citizen of the heavenly city cannot buy or sell without bearing the sign of the beast. In a nutshell, from his exile in Patmos John is telling his fellow Christians in Asia Minor that the time has come –or is about to come—when they will have to make a choice between the ruling political power of the land, and their citizenship in heaven.

Paul the Roman citizen had said that his own citizenship, as well as that of other believers, was not in Rome, but in heaven. Now Christians in Asian Minor, Roman citizens and non-citizens alike, have come to a point where they have to affirm in actual practice that ultimate and joyful citizenship that Paul proclaimed when writing to the Philippians.

We must understand, however, that declaring that this is a heavenly citizenship does not mean that it is to be otherworldly. Revelation is certainly a protest against the claims of the emperor to be served as if he were God. But it is also a protest against an economic order that is increasingly enriching the rich and impoverishing the poor. A few decades earlier, Asia Minor had been one of the breadbaskets of the Eastern Mediterranean, producing enough cereals to feed itself as well as other areas of the Empire. But now the rich landowners had discovered that they could make more money by devoting their land to vineyards and olives, in order to produce wine and oil for export to Rome. Since many of these landowners were of the

senatorial class, they were exempt from most taxes. With this and with the profits of their vineyards and olive groves, they acquired more land, and devoted it also to wine and oil. The result was a scarcity of cereals, and an inflation rate in the price of grains of 800% to 1200%. It is within this context that John tells us of a rider who appears wielding a balance, the sign of trade, and of a protesting voice that is heard, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and to not damage the oil and the wine.”

Thus, taken as a whole, the book of Revelation is a call to those who claim that their citizenship is in heaven, reminding them that the heavenly city and its rule must be obeyed above the earthly city and its rule. And this includes what we today would call religious issues, such as idolatry, as well as what we today would call political issues, such as an unfair system of taxation and unfair trade practices.

Back to the Apostle Paul. He had two important reasons to be proud of himself and his inheritance. Not only was he a Roman citizen. He was also a child of Abraham, a descendant of Israel, an heir to the great and wonderful promises of God. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, after whose one king, Saul, he had been named. And yet, just as he proclaimed a new citizenship that was open to slave and free, to male and female, he also proclaimed that, through the work of Christ, the way was now open for gentiles to claim the promises made to Abraham. There was no Jew or Gentile.

No wonder then that he had trouble with many good, profoundly religious Jews. These Jews did not dislike Paul only because he was a Christian, but also because, as a Jew and as a Christian, he was undermining their sense of privilege of the children of Abraham.

Look at what happens in Antioch of Pisidia, in Acts 13. Luke tells us that on the Sabbath Paul and his companions went to the synagogue and were invited to speak. Paul's sermon takes most of the chapter in Acts. Since it is his first such sermon as he begins his missionary travels, it probably reflects what Paul would say in the many other synagogues in various cities that he visited later. In this sermon, in the RSV, he addresses his audience as "Men of Israel, and you that fear God." But the NIV says, "Men of Israel, and you Gentiles who worship God." While the first is very literal, the second is clearer and closer to the actual meaning of Paul's address, for at that time "those who fear God" was a way of referring precisely to Gentiles who worshiped the God of the Jews but did not become Jews.

Paul is addressing a congregation composed of both Jews, people who can claim to be children of Abraham, and Gentiles who, while not becoming Jews, worship the God of Israel and follow the moral laws set by that God. They attend synagogue, as is clear in this case. But they must always remain at the margins, for they are not real Jews. Then Paul tells them that through Jesus "everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified by the law of Moses."

This is generally well received, and Paul is invited to speak at synagogue again on the following Sabbath. But apparently there were in the city many Gentile God-fearers, Gentiles

who worshiped the God of Israel. Having heard that now full citizenship in the people of God was opened to them, on the next Sabbath they flock to the synagogue, where Luke tells us that "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord." But seeing this great crowd, all coming to claim the promises made to Abraham, the more traditional Jews felt that this was too much. What of our privileged position in the eyes of God? The synagogue will no longer be ours! And so, Luke tells us that "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying." The result is that they managed to have both Paul and Barnabas expelled from the area.

Imagine how a good faithful and religious Jew, proud of his heritage and of the long walk of his people with God, would react to these words of Paul, which he wrote to Gentile Christians in Colossae: "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised . . . not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ."

So, Paul, who being a Roman citizen announces that there is a higher citizenship, being a Jew announces that through Jesus all the promises made to the people of Israel now belong to these newcomers. No wonder that the Jews expelled him (should we say, "deported him"?) from Antioch of Pisidia and from many other cities!

What Paul did with his Jewish privilege, opening it to others, he also did when it came to citizenship. If in Philippians we have his assertion of the higher citizenship in heaven, in Ephesians we have words addressed to Gentiles who have now been made part of the people of God. These are words that reflect Paul's attitude toward his own Roman citizenship:

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of the household of God."

There are many ways in which we could deal biblically and theologically with questions of immigration, intercultural encounters, and similar matters. I would suggest that, particularly in view of the way the public discourse is being shaped, one good place to start is the very notion of citizenship. As in the case of Paul, it is not a matter of deciding that our human citizenship is worth nothing. Human societies need order, governments, principles of interaction, laws –in short, all that in the ancient world would constitute a city in the sense of a state, as in the *civitas romana*. As Paul shows in Romans 13, such order is not to be blithely ignored, as of no value. But also, as in the case of Paul, we who believe in Jesus Christ have another citizenship –a citizenship much higher than any much-coveted human citizenship. And, as John of Patmos calls his readers to consider, when obedience to the laws and policies of our earthly citizenship conflict with obedience to the principles of our heavenly citizenship, we have to decide in which of these our true identity lies.

No matter where we were born, or what papers we have, we are all citizens. Some may be citizens of this country, and some of others, but we are all citizens. Such citizenship is to be honored and respected. Its principles must normally be obeyed. But in the case of Christians, when our earthly citizenship—no matter which it may be—clashes with the principles of our heavenly citizenship –with the principles of love, peace, and justice, we have to decide which of these two best defines us. The choice is never easy. But there are times when such choices must be made, for --as Jesus himself warns us-- no one can serve two masters.

And then, those of us who have an earthly citizenship of privilege –as did Paul the Roman citizen—or even a religious tradition we cherish –as Paul cherished his Jewish heritage—must be willing to put that earthly citizenship at the service of the heavenly, and that heritage at the service of what God is doing in our day. In so doing, we are heirs of a long tradition that goes back to Abraham himself, for, as we read in Hebrews:

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . . All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. . . . They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

For them, for us, for citizens of every earthly city, God has provided a heavenly city, and it is in that city that our true citizenship and our final identity lies. And it is to that city, and to that city alone, that we owe our final allegiance.