

“The Community of Christians in America” The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
Romans 13:1-9 First Presbyterian Church  
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Last month we took an in-depth look at our Moral Compass – that GPS that helps us navigate our way, especially in unfamiliar territory. Now we’re in our second week exploring our community. Why community? Though we’re born with a moral compass it’s our community that calibrates it and charges it up. Or to use a different analogy: it’s rare that a bad apple gets that way on its own. More often good apples are ruined by bad barrels.

Last week we looked at our Christian community from the past – our communion of saints: how our forebears in faith stir us with their bravery; how their stories remind us what we are made of; how their strong voices still surround us and encourage us on our way. Today we’ll explore our Christian community here and now, and how it guides us in modern American life.

*Romans 13:1-7*

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Is America a Christian country? We’ve always enjoyed the separation of church and state, but for years the operating system we employed was Christian, or more specifically, WASP. Our culture was under-girded by some common values, many of them growing out of Calvinist Puritanism: industry, piety, thrift. But over the centuries, waves of change – the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Gilded Age the Depression, two World Wars, the Social Revolution of the 60s, and most recently, Globalization – these waves of change rewrote our operating system. Instead of industry, piety and thrift, American 2.0 seems to be based on entitlement, indulgence, and excess. This, of course, has proved to be a rather faulty operating system. To find a working alternative, an operating system for our GPS that’s calibrated with different values, may I suggest we look to our Christian community. Let’s see whether Christian values can guide life “on the ground” in two major current events: the election, and the economy.

Let's start with the election, which, if you haven't noticed, is finally over. Now that our government is in place, what should our attitude towards it be? Depending on where you get your news – Fox, ABC or The Daily Show – your attitude may be loathing, fawning, or cynicism. But the apostle Paul says, “None of the above.” He instructs us this way: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

Now, when Paul wrote these words, he wasn't living in a Christian country either. In fact, the governing authority he was living under was the Emperor Nero. Nero, noted for tyranny and extravagance, for myriad executions, including his own mother and brother, for “fiddling while Rome burned,” and for his brutal suppression of the early Christians (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero>). Paul certainly didn't support everything Nero did; in fact Paul went to prison for his beliefs. But he submitted to prison, respecting the authority of the state.

So Paul tells us to “respect the governing authorities.” Why? First, because Paul recognized our need for authority – that God-given moral compass point that resists anarchy and respects order. And second, because Paul differentiated between the ideal of the *ruling office* and the fallible human beings who governed. Thoroughly schooled in the philosophy of Plato, Paul understood the difference between the bright-shining ideal of governance and the dim, shadowed reality on the ground. “The authorities that exist have been instituted by God,” Paul tells us: we are ennobled when we respect and cherish the offices that govern us ... whether or not we respect the people who occupy the offices at any given time.

And every Election Day, I'm reminded how John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> c. father of Presbyterianism, took Paul's teaching one step further. For centuries, medieval Europe had taken St. Paul's words to support the doctrine of the divine right of kings: “that a monarch derives his or her right to rule from the will of God.... Chosen by God, a monarch is accountable only to Him, and

need answer only before God for his actions”  
 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_Right\\_of\\_Kings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_Right_of_Kings)).

John Calvin begged to differ. Though he believed that good government is a gift from God, established for our well-being, his revolutionary ideas included the right of individuals to elect pastors for the church and magistrates for the city, and the doctrine that “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” giving each of us both the right and responsibility of personal liberty (John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1950) 84).

Calvin was a humanist – with a high view of human potential. But he was also a realist – acknowledging that humans inevitably “fall short of the glory of God.” Checks and balances and an educated citizenship were essential for his experiment in democracy to work. Moreover, as McCormick Seminary President Cynthia Campbell reminds us, Calvin saw government as especially entrusted with the care of its most vulnerable citizens: its poor, its children, and its elderly. Care for the neediest is “not simply a matter of personal or [church] philanthropy, although it is certainly that. Our tradition would suggest that care for those in need is something the society as a whole should provide through its civic structures. For us, this is an outgrowth of [Calvin’s view of the public servant] to build up the “commonwealth”—the common good of society” (“A Call to Citizenship, Answering the Challenge of Political Life”; from <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/campbell.htm> accessed 10/24/04).

What does that mean for us? As Christians who vote in America, this means we vote not as people who are in it for ourselves, but first and foremost as Christians who seek the common good. Therefore the question before an election is never “what’s in it for me?” but “under whose leadership will the common good best flourish?” And the question after an election is never “did I get my way?” but, barring tyranny, “how do I respect the governing authorities that the majority has elected into office?” That’s surely one crucial value that our Christian operating system gives us: neither loathing, nor

fawning, nor cynicism, but a healthy reverence for the offices of the land, and esteem for those in government who seek to help those most in need.

The election: that's one test case for Christian values as a guiding system for life in America. Let's look at a second "test case": our economy. Now, everyone, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, everyone is equally hit by this economy, no matter what their religious persuasion. The rain falls on the just and the unjust, the Scriptures tell us, and the market falls for the Christian and the atheist alike. But our Christian community gives us tools to address our financial downturn – tools that are extraordinarily useful in such a time as this.

These last few days, a number of colleagues of mine in churches like ours around the country have been sharing our strategies for church budgets and stewardship in this brutal economy. Senior pastors in large, well-to-do Presbyterian Churches in Falls Church, Virginia, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and more – we've been exchanging stories and strategies like crazy. It's been at times depressing – I'm particularly mindful of my friend in Farmington Hills, Michigan, whose coffers are emptying even as the need for help explodes in Detroit. The ailing auto industry has moved to life support, and even the wealthiest churches are reeling.

But to some extent, all of our churches are in the same boat: deficit budgets, stretched volunteers, worried parishioners, overwhelmed staff. All of us have been sharing the same message: keep spending flat, give minimal raises, don't expect much. All of us, that is, except Louise Westfall, at Fairmount Church in Cleveland, who sent this message late this week:

“Hi friends. We're taking a different approach. Our stewardship theme is 'Sharing Abundance,'” drawing upon ... the idea that we are stewards of the endless abundance God lavishes upon us continually. We're offering ... biblical stewardship as an antidote to the fear of unstable financial markets. Each Sunday in worship a different member is giving a witness about how shared abundance in Fairmount's ministries has made a difference for them, their family, the community. So far we're

running about 9% ahead of last year's campaign, and the official stewardship dedication is still two weeks away. Of course we're concerned – Cleveland has been especially hard-hit .... But I think people understand that these difficult times mean the congregation has even more responsibility to 'step up.'”

All I can say is, “wow.” She's right, of course, and all of us pastors needed her to witness to us about God's abundance. This is a message our Christian community reminds us of, when the culture around us is screaming “scarcity.”

Or take the message our own Bob Crawford (Bob the younger, I call him) shared with us as our Stewardship Committee was, not without cause, wringing its hands. He said,

“Over the last few months, as a committee, we've been challenged in many ways. Not just economic and financial meltdown, but we've wrestled with topics like: what information do we share with the congregation, do we benchmark against other churches, how do we get above 51% participation rate, we're running a deficit, etc. But Stewardship is about doing things differently with your life and with your financial resources. Being a Christian is about giving up things and truly sacrificing for a bigger cause and for other people. It's about softening your heart, sharing your resources, giving cheerfully, and it is also about asking others to share in the responsibility to help those who are truly destitute and in need.”

He ended his note by saying that if I was moved to, maybe I could address something like this in my sermon. I was moved, and he said it better than I ever could.

What does it mean to be a Christian in America today? How do we find our way when the moral compass of the culture seems to be set on self-absorption, and veers between excess and panic? I may be wrong, but I think that our faith has more to say now than perhaps it ever has before. Our Christian faith reminds us to respect the office of our governing authorities no

matter who we voted for, and now that they're voted in, to press our leaders to help the people who are most in need. And our faith encourages us to open our own hearts to the vulnerable in our land, to give as generously as we can, not out of fear, but in the confidence that God's abundance will provide for us, even in times like these.

And if we find ourselves in the company of those in need ... well, there's a message for us too. We are not alone, and we need not be embarrassed by the state we find ourselves in. It is a vulnerable time for all of us here, and we will stay in it together till the end. You can count on it: because we are Christ's community, and that's what Christ's community does. Amen.