

CITIZENS OF TWO KINGDOMS

NATIONS AND CITIZENSHIP

There are many kingdoms in the world. Their people are citizens of those homelands. They have rights and obligations. If someone moves permanently to live in another land, he can apply for its citizenship. If he receives it, he usually forfeits the citizenship of his former homeland. Some countries', for example the USA's, citizenship is especially sought after. Also the citizenship of ancient Rome was sought after: all did not have it. Paul had it, and he referred to it in a situation where he especially needed the legal security it provided, "civis romanus sum," or "I am a citizen of Rome."

Usually a person can only be a citizen of one kingdom, enjoy its rights, and be bound by its obligations. There are few exceptions to this rule. One of these is that in addition to our homeland, we can be citizens of God's kingdom. Pilate once asked Jesus, "Art thou King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world." The boundaries of God's kingdom have not been drawn on any map, nor can its boundaries be found on the land. However, boundaries do exist. They run through hearts. For that reason, one can be a citizen of two nations: his homeland and God's kingdom. God's kingdom is hidden, it is seen only through eyes of faith. Even Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

God's kingdom is as real as the world's kingdoms. It shall last eternally. The nations of the world on the other hand, rise and fall. Their power or size do not guarantee their permanence. The state of Rome, whose citizenship many sought, was a powerful ruler of the world, but it has been vanquished. During our time, the same has even happened to superpowers. Only the hidden, eternal kingdom of Christ remains.

THE RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP

At the change of the millennium, we received a new constitution in Finland. It was distributed to every home. Citizens' rights and responsibilities are defined in the law. We have freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. We have the right to freely choose where to live. This seems self-evident to us, but history tells us that citizens of many nations have lacked this right and many still do. We have the right to participate in political life, by voting, for example. We have compulsory education and military service. We pay taxes so that organized society can act to our benefit. The rights come with obligations, and the obligations with rights. The right to vote is also an obligation; compulsory education is more of a right.

The constitution also defines the structure of Finnish society and the hierarchy of the officers of societal duties. First is the President, then the Chairman of the Legislature, the Prime Minister, and so on. However, all citizens are equal before the law.

As Christians, we participate in civic affairs. We hold positions of responsibility in the nation and community when they are entrusted to us. We vote in elections and perform duties and functions necessary for society. Scripture teaches us to care for all of the duties given to us as a Christian. "Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men" (Col. 3:23).

God's kingdom has its own order. A person receives the rights of its citizenship already at birth. It differs from a temporal state in that its citizenship cannot be acquired by application or by joining, but the question is always of birth. A person, who has lost childhood faith and citizenship of heaven receives it through new birth. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Rank in God's kingdom differs from that of a temporal state. In chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, which we can also call the constitution of God's kingdom, it is related that the disciples were troubled by the question of rank. For that reason, they asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" Then Jesus took a child, set him in the midst of the disciples, and said, "Verily I say

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unto you, Except ye be converted, and be as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:2–4).

God’s kingdom is a kingdom of children and the childlike. The greatest is the least and the least is the greatest, “Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matt. 20:27). That is something for us to strive toward, when we also would want to be great and in charge.

God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace and forgiveness. People live there only by grace and forgiveness. If our forgiving attitude ceases, we drift outside the kingdom. Our greatest right as a citizen is forgiveness of sins.

Citizens of God’s kingdom also have obligations. The most important, perhaps the only one, is love, because we have become partakers of God’s great love. “For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11). “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love. In this is manifested God’s love toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (1 John 4:7–11).

Love is a caring love. The children of God care for each other, so that no one would drift out of the grace kingdom. In chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives us instruction in this care. They are instructions on caring love, not on ruling or a means for authority. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us, to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

HOW WE DWELL IN TWO KINGDOMS AT THE SAME TIME

Citizenship in two nations creates problems that we cannot resolve by isolating ourselves from the world. It is not God’s will, for He has intended that we be connected with other people. Our temporal life is a God-given gift. Our temporal homeland is dear to us. God wishes that we would serve our neighbors as citizens of this land.

Although we dwell in two kingdoms, we must keep them separate. Our [Finnish] national church is not God’s kingdom, even if we would have the majority in the Church Council, nor can we care for matters there with majority rule, as they may be cared for in the home Zion. And even if we had the majority on a town council, we would be unable to care for matters according to our wishes, but we would have to take into consideration what the other residents think. If we acted otherwise, the boundary between the two kingdoms, which were intended to be separate, would disappear. Luther warns about this, “For that reason, these two kingdoms must be kept strictly separate from each other and both must be kept in power, one to make people righteous, the other to create outward peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in this world without the other” (On Earthly Government).

On the other hand, we cannot conduct ourselves in such a way as to behave in our temporal activities as if we were not believing and then, among believers, in their manner. Paul counseled the Corinthians, “Wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him” (2 Cor. 5:9). In all of our duties, we want to act as God’s children. God sends us into the midst of other people to serve them. He wants us to be a light and salt. This does not mean that we should always preach. God’s intention is that we would take with us some of that love with which He has loved us, when He has forgiven us all of our sins.