

CHRISTIANS AND TEMPORAL AUTHORITIES

Virgil Warren, PhD

In non-Christian societies, people wonder whether they can continue in their jobs if they become Christians. The minister of a new congregation in Moscow asked about that issue. A policeman had asked whether he would have to quit his job if he accepted Christ.

A policeman would not have to give up his source of income in accepting Christ. Paul states the principle in 1 Corinthians 7:20: *“Let people stay in the calling where they were when they were called.”* Paul is addressing marriage issues, but he is drawing on a broader principle because he also connects it with slavery (7:21-24) and circumcision (7:18-19). Christianity is transcultural and trans-vocational; it has no racial, social, marital, economic, societal, or vocational association.

But, some practices in many jobs and statuses do not fit with what Christ is concerned about. An example in scripture is the response John the Baptist makes to tax collectors and soldiers in Luke 3:12-14. Being a tax collector or a soldier might involve expectations that God’s servant could not include in his tax collecting or soldiering. A “publican” could not indulge in collecting more taxes than required so he could make extra profit. Soldiers could not be John’s followers and misuse their position to extort money, to falsely accuse them for some personal advantage, or to do anything for selfish gain.

As to being a policeman, taking bribes would not be something Christian policemen could do. They could not stop motorists on the pretense of checking their papers and then imply that they were going to charge drivers with speeding unless some “satisfaction” was given in the form of money or a “gift” of some kind. Such things involve lying and abuse of authority. Since that possibility would not have to be part of their work, policemen could continue their work without yielding to that temptation no matter how customary it was.

Some vocations do require people to engage in what their Christian commitment disallows. In conflicts of authority, Christians must choose which authority to follow. The ethical principle is to put Christ’s authority in highest position and arrange other authorities under it. Under that hierarchical arrangement, we can fulfill everyone’s requirements as long as those requirements do not conflict with Christ’s authority. No one can have two masters (Matthew 6:24), so to speak. Each of us must put one authority in first position and make others secondary. For us, God and Christ have ultimate position.

When two authorities place conflicting demands, we obey the higher authority rather than the immediate one. Peter and John invoked that principle when the authorities arrested them for healing the lame man at Gate Beautiful: *“We cannot say other than what we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4:20). They prioritized Christ over the Jewish state even though doing so could have had serious consequences. In a conflict of authorities, obeying the highest one contrasts with obeying the immediately superior authority, who takes the penalty if it is wrong.

In Christ, the one who does the wrong is guilty of the wrong and bears the penalty for it. If we prioritize Christ’s authority in moral matters, we can remain in whatever calling we had before we accepted him.