

This article was written in response to the booklet, “Christ-Centered Voting: A Practical Guide for Bible-Believing Christians” (Crown and Covenant, 2020).

The “Christ-Centered Voting” booklet is an effort to explain the guidance of the *Reformed Presbyterian Testimony* on the topic of voting. It was presented to the Synod of the RPCNA at its June 2019 meeting. At that meeting, the RP Synod “received” the booklet as a resource, but Synod declined to “adopt” or “approve” it.

Those latter designations (“adopt” or “approve”) are given to documents that represent the denomination’s official position on a matter. Since the “Christ-Centered Voting” booklet represents only one application, and does not represent the full range of applications allowed by the *Testimony*’s voting guidance, Synod refrained from “approving” or “adopting” it. However, Synod did “receive” the booklet and directed that it be published as one possible position, in hopes that its publication would foster further discussion of other views as well.

It is in that spirit of discussion encouraged by Synod that we now offer this article. The following was written as an alternative position to that outlined in the “Christ-Centered Voting” booklet. This article is our effort to provide a more full interpretation of the RPCNA’s *Testimony* on voting and to fill some of the gaps left by the narrower application of the “Christ-Centered Voting” guide.

We hope that, together, the “Christ-Centered Voting” booklet and this article will assist Reformed Presbyterians and other Christians as they prayerfully consider how to participate in political elections as faithful servants of King Jesus.

how shall we then vote?

*an exposition of the reformed
presbyterian testimony on voting*

Another American election is upon us, and on November third, millions of Americans will go to the polls to vote. There is a lot at stake in this year’s election. For Reformed Presbyterians in America, this is an opportune moment to revisit the guidance on voting provided in our denominational *Testimony*.

Ever since the first Blue Banner was sewn together on the moors of Scotland, Covenanters have borne witness “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant”—including our commitment to his crown rights over the state. These convictions have been compiled into our written *Testimony*, first developed in 17th century Scotland and revised through the centuries since. As some Reformed Presbyterians left Britain for the New World, they refined the *Testimony* to better apply its doctrines in a North American context.

The most recent clarifications on the doctrine of civil government added to the *Testimony* were adopted as recently as 1963. These revisions include several paragraphs on voting. This article will focus on those passages that address voting, after first attending to the church’s foundational convictions

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on civil government captured in the second paragraph of the *Testimony's* chapter on that topic (chap. 23).

Already King of America

"God has given the exercise of all authority to the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the Divine Law-giver, Governor and Judge. His will concerning the purpose of civil government and the principles regarding its functions and operation are revealed in the written Word of God. The Holy Spirit enables even unregenerate rulers to fulfill their proper functions. A true recognition of the authority and law of Christ in national life can only be the fruit of the Spirit's regenerating power in the lives of individuals" (*RPT* 23.2).

Perhaps the most compelling feature of the RP doctrine on civil government, is our joyful declaration that Jesus is already king over all things, including the state. It is not our place to "make" Jesus king. Someone with absolute authority has already elected him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. "God has highly exalted him..., so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow..." (Php. 2:7-11). We yearn for revival, such that both individuals and governments would come to honor Christ's crown. But Jesus is already king, regardless.

Because Jesus already rules over every nation, our *Testimony* asserts, "The Holy Spirit enables even unregenerate rulers to fulfill their proper functions." We pray for God to raise up Christian rulers who will conscientiously serve Christ. But King Jesus knows how to advance his purposes even through unconverted rulers. This means that we should expect all rulers—believing and unbelieving alike—to uphold Jesus' principles of justice and righteousness.

Paul explains, "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God... He is God's servant for your good" (Rom. 13:1–5). Those words are not a blanket endorsement of all that rulers do. Rather, the apostle urges us in that passage, to expect Christ's justice even at the hands of unregenerate governors and, as far as it is in our power to do so, to hold them accountable to heaven's righteousness.

This doctrine lays the groundwork for the

Testimony's guidance on voting. We will not always have a candidate on the ticket with a clear witness of love for Christ, but we do have a duty to expect even unregenerate candidates to be measured against Jesus' principles of righteousness.

Whether to Vote, At All

Sometimes, we may find that no candidate warrants our vote. In past generations, the RPCNA resisted participation in the political process altogether. Because the U. S. Constitution does not acknowledge King Jesus, a previous version of our *Testimony* instructed church members to abstain from voting.

An older version of our *Testimony* exhorted, "The only position consistent for the Christian is the position of dissent from any constitution or form of civil government which refuses or neglects to own allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Prince of the kings of the earth... [They] are also under moral obligation to relinquish all such privileges of citizenship [e.g., voting] as may tend to neutralize their testimony to the regal rights and claims of Christ." (*RPT* 1950, 30.1, 3)

That former stance of wholesale dissent had been shaped by the church's experiences under the British monarchy. It took several generations in the New World to reflect on the application of RP convictions in the American political context, and to refine our *Testimony* accordingly. Synod began its review of the former position in the early 1960s. The deliberations in synod were then opened up to the wider church through a series of articles in the denominational magazine (then called, *Covenanter Witness*). Those deliberations in the church

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courts and among the membership accommodated a wide range of opinions, ranging from

those who retained a conviction of wholesale dissent to those who believed political participation could be a means to promote Christ's rule in American politics.

The result of those deliberations are the changes reflected in chapter 23 of the current *RP Testimony*. And given the range of views in the church, the new language of the *Testimony* was necessarily the language of consensus. It was designed to allow room for a variety of applications—including views still inclined toward

dissent as well as views accommodating greater participation—all to be guided by commitment to Jesus' crown rights.

Guidance for Voting

For those Reformed Presbyterians who would participate in political elections, the *Testimony* provides guidance for doing so in light of Christ's kingship. In chapter 23, paragraph 15 (cf., para. 19), this guidance is given:

"The Christian, when such action involves no disloyalty to Christ, ought to be involved in the selection of and to vote for civil rulers who fear God, love truth and justice, hate evil, and are publicly committed to scriptural principles of civil government."

This paragraph urges us to cast our vote for candidates marked by three motivations: fear of God, love for truth and justice, and hatred of evil; and whose public positions reflect "scriptural principles of civil government." Let's first examine the threefold set of motivations we are urged to consider. Then, we will reflect on the standard for assessing a candidate's positions.

The Three-fold Motivation Assessment

The *Testimony* urges us to discern, as best we can, three motivations in a candidate before we vote for him or her. Does the candidate demonstrate the fear of God, a love for truth and justice, and a hatred of evil? Many candidates are motivated by pride, by "hot button" issues, by money, or other interests. The *Testimony* urges us to watch for three good motivations, being motivations consistent with Jesus' purposes for civil government.

Today, as in the 1960s, there are varying opinions in the church regarding how narrowly or broadly to apply those qualifications. For instance, are we to vote only for candidates who demonstrate a "fear of God" through a strong, evangelical faith? Or is it appropriate to vote for a candidate who demonstrates a genuine sense of accountability to God without (yet) professing faith in Jesus? Consensus language—like the term "fear God" rather than the more explicit, "profess Jesus"—is designed to allow room for such differing opinions within the church regarding the application of our *Testimony* while nonetheless keeping our varied forms of political engagement united around the same convictions.

Some in the church interpret that sequence of qual-

ifications more narrowly. They interpret "fear God ... love truth ... and hate evil" to mean that a candidate must have a credible profession of evangelical—even Reformed Presbyterian—faith in order to receive their vote. This is a legitimate application of the *Testimony's* guidance, but it is not the only application permitted by these terms. This list of motivations guides Reformed Presbyterians who would consider voting for less-ideal candidates as well.

To "fear God" does not necessarily mean a candidate is regenerate. The term "fear of God" is frequently used to capture a broader scope of reverence beyond explicit Christian faith. For instance, in Acts 13:16, 26, the term is used for those who attended the Jewish synagogue out of genuine reverence, but who were

neither proselytes to the synagogue nor yet believers in Jesus. The *Testimony* could use a more precise phrase, like "love Christ" rather than "fear God," if the church held that one should vote only for regenerate candidates.

The term "fear God" can encompass all those who believe God exists and who believe that he judges human affairs. Understood in this manner, the *Testimony* urges us to abstain, at a minimum, from voting for atheists and deists. Those who believe morality is subjective, and that it is changeable by social whim, and who lack reverence for transcendent, objective truth rooted in our Creator, cannot be supported by those with a view to Jesus' rule over the state. Rather, we should vote for those who demonstrate a genuine sense of reverence for God's justice—whether or not they have a personal relationship with Jesus (yet). Likewise, the terms "love for truth and justice" and "hatred of evil" instruct us to look for candidates with a demonstrated commitment to the principles of Jesus' law, whether or not they know Jesus personally.

Whether a voter selects candidates based on a more narrow application (e.g., professing Christian candidates only) or a less narrow application (e.g., unregenerate but God-fearing candidates, also) of these qualifications, all Reformed Presbyterians are urged by these quali-

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fications to labor and pray for candidates who demonstrate motivations consistent with Jesus' purposes for civil government. All Reformed Presbyterians are urged to examine the motivations of candidates with a view toward their duty, in Paul's words, to serve as "God's servant[s] for your good" (Rom. 13:4).

Reviewing the debates leading up to the 1963 revision demonstrates the presence of this wide range of perspectives at the time this guidance was drafted. In fact, the debates that produced the *Testimony's* changes took place in the wake of the 1960 presidential election. The angst of that contest between John F. Kennedy (a Roman Catholic) and Richard Nixon (a Quaker) is evident at various points in those *Covenanter Witness* articles. One minister even voiced his understanding that the proposed change would allow him to vote for the Quaker candidate in that contest: "In the last election, it seemed to me most important that Christians should make their influence felt [by voting] as we faced the prospects of Roman Catholicism strengthening its hold upon our land" (*Covenanter Witness* 48.10, Mar. 7, 1962, p152).

Neither a Roman Catholic nor a Quaker measures up to the ideal anticipated by the *Testimony*. Some Reformed Presbyterians will conclude that faithfulness to Christ's crown requires abstention from voting altogether in the face of such options. But some Reformed Presbyterians will conclude that faithfulness to King Jesus allows (even encourages) them to vote for a candidate who at least embodies motivations consistent with Jesus' purposes for civil government, even if neither candidate is ideal. Both applications are to be respected, so long as all are seeking to promote civil government that fears God, loves truth and justice, and hates evil.

It is impossible to know a candidate's heart. But by listing this threefold series of motivations, the *Testimony* urges Christians to exercise their best discernment and to vote with King Jesus' reign in view: looking for candidates whose sense of conscience before God and passion for objective justice make them useful as "God's servant[s] for your good."

Scriptural Principles of Government

In addition to specific motivations to watch for, the *Testimony* also identifies the standard for measuring a candidate's positions. "The Christian... [ought] to vote for civil rulers who ... are publicly committed to scriptural principles of civil government." (*RPT* 23.15; cf., 23.19) The phrase "scriptural principles of civil government" captures all that King Jesus assigns to states as their duty before him. Paul writes, "Rulers are ... God's servant[s] for your good... [and] avenger[s] who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:3–4). It is God's definition of what is good and just which ought to be the

here is a particular form of wording used in confessional documents like the *RP Testimony* when qualifications are listed as an ideal rather than as a restriction. The presence of such terminology in the *Testimony's* guidance on voting supports the interpretation described in this article.

Confessional documents like the *RP Testimony* employ nuanced helping verbs—like "may," "ought," "must," and "shall"—to indicate the nature of its instructions. Helping verbs like "must" and "shall" are typically used to indicate an absolute requirement. These are restrictive verbs. Instructions given with restrictive verbs must be applied strictly. On the other extreme, helping verbs like "may" or "might" are permissive verbs. Instructions given with permissive verbs are regarded as prudent advice, but not nearly so forceful as those with restrictive verbs.

In between these two extremes is a category of urgent verbs, meaning, verbs that "urge" or "push" in a particular direction. Helping verbs like "should" and "ought" convey such urging, and they press us toward an ideal without restricting action to the stated condition.

The *Testimony's* instructions on voting employ such urgent verbs. For instance, *RPT* 23.15 states, "The Christian ... ought to be involved in the selection of and to vote for civil rulers who fear God [and so forth]." This wording presses us to employ our votes in a manner that moves toward the ideal stated, but it does not restrict us to voting only when the stated conditions fully exist.

A restrictive form of verbs would make it clear if members were to abstain from voting until the ideal is present. For instance, that same paragraph in the *Testimony* might have been written: "The Christian ... must only be involved in the selection of and must only vote for civil rulers who fear God [and so forth]." This wording would indicate that dissent from voting is expected until the ideal standard for a candidate was met.

The *Testimony* employs urgent rather than restrictive verbs in its guidance on voting. This indicates that the *Testimony* is not requiring dissent from voting until the ideal described is satisfied, but that each voter is urged to determine how to exercise his or her vote to advance Christ's reign in light of the qualifications stipulated.

standard by which Christians evaluate a candidate's platform.

The Scriptures teach to love our neighbor, to care for the weak, to provide for the poor, to preserve a neighbor's property, to promote the integrity of the family and the honesty of business dealings, to pursue only justice in war, and so forth. These are all matters of concern to King Jesus as governor of the nations. The *Testimony* calls us to assess the policies of candidates in relation to Jesus' priorities for human society.

Modern campaign rhetoric tends to focus on the benefit a candidate's victory would bring to the voter's own station in life, to one's job prospects, to a certain business market, or to other civic causes that will resonate with the voter's own concerns. But the Christian should resist those temptations and vote to advance "scriptural principles of civil government."

Again, there are some who interpret this line of the *Testimony* more restrictively. Some Reformed Presbyterians withhold their vote from any candidate who does not acknowledge that most fundamental principle of scriptural civil government:

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namely, that Jesus is the King and the source of all true justice. That conviction is, indeed, the ideal toward which all Reformed Presbyterians are urged to labor and to pray. Whether one exercises his or her vote in a spirit of graduated progress toward that ideal, or withholds one's vote in persevering witness while waiting for that ideal, the language of the *Testimony* unifies our faith in that ultimate expectation.

Civil government, as an institution under Jesus' crown, is accountable to operate according to scriptural principles. Therefore we who acknowledge Jesus as already king over the state will vote for candidates whose positions serve "scriptural principles of civil government."

Promoting Christ's Crown

Political passions are running high in American society. And we are not immune to those passions as Reformed Presbyterians. But we have a guiding conviction for our political engagement that transcends political party affiliation. Our commitment must be to honor King Jesus in our engagement with this year's election. This is not a cause for angst, since it is not our vote that "makes" Jesus king. Indeed, our doctrinal convictions should grant us greater peace as those who know Jesus is already the king over our nation, regardless of how any particular election turns out.

In that confidence, the *Testimony* offers us simple but important guidance for evaluating our votes

this year in light of Jesus' priorities for civil government. Some will draw more restrictive applications from the *Testimony* regarding those for whom they feel conscientiously free to support with their ballot. Others will apply the *Testimony's* guidance for evaluating less-than-ideal candidates. The *Testimony* gives room for these differences on how we exercise our votes, but it also unites us in a com-

mon conviction for Christ's rule.

"It is the duty of every Christian citizen to labor and pray for his nation's official and explicit recognition of the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Preserver and Ruler of nations, and for the conduct of all governmental affairs in harmony with the written Word of God" (*RPT* 23.6).