

## How Shall We Then Vote?

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Another American election is upon us, and political passions are running high. There is a lot at stake in 2020. How should a Christian view this election? What guidance does Reformed Presbyterian doctrine offer as we consider our vote? Such questions are on the minds of many in our congregations (particularly RP congregations in the United States). These questions also received significant attention—and no small debate—at synod this past summer.

At the June 2019 meeting of synod, a committee of six ministers presented a paper on voting for synod's consideration. Their paper was called, "Christ-Centered Voting: A Practical Guide for Bible-Believing Christians" (2019 *Minutes of Synod*, pp. 111–32). The authors' stated goal was to exposit the *RP Testimony's* guidance on voting, and to offer that guidance to the wider church in anticipation of the 2020 elections.

While synod approved publication of the paper as "one" important perspective on voting (it is forthcoming from Crown and Covenant), synod also made clear that the paper does not represent "the" position of the *RP Testimony* on the topic. The *Testimony* defines the doctrinal boundaries within which various perspectives on voting might be held. The position espoused in the "Christ-Centered Voting" paper is one of those perspectives, but other positions are also permissible.

The authors of this present article are among those who disagreed with the position promoted by that paper at synod. While we affirm that paper's position as "one" perspective that fits within the *Testimony's* framework, and while we are grateful its forthcoming publication will stimulate a timely conversation about voting in the church, we also believe more needs to be said about the scope of the views affirmed within the *RP Testimony* than represented by that paper. We therefore hope that this article will be an edifying corollary to that forthcoming booklet in the service of denomination-wide deliberations about voting in 2020.

### *Our Heritage and 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." To preserve that witness, a written *Testimony* was prepared. The earliest versions of that *Testimony* captured studied conclusions on various doctrines, including civil government.

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 were adopted as recently as 1963, including several paragraphs pertinent to the question of voting. We will consider a few of those passages in this article, beginning with the foundational convictions captured in the chapter's second paragraph.

"God has given the exercise of all authority to the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the Divine Lawgiver, 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).

### *Already King of America*

Perhaps the most compelling feature of the passage just quoted, is our joyful declaration that Jesus is *already* the 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" (Rev. 17:14; 19:16). "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 as the sovereign 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). Paul's words are not a blanket endorsement of all that rulers do. He rather leads us to expect Christ's justice even at the hands of unregenerate governors—and, as far as it is in our power to do so, we should hold them accountable to uphold 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 neglects to acknowledge King Jesus, a previous version of our *Testimony* instructed church members to abstain from voting altogether.

Prior to the revisions made in the early 1960s, the previous 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)

Today, we still decry America’s neglect of King Jesus (Psa. 2:10–12). But we no longer regard it as necessary to dissent from political involvement in the meantime. It was about sixty years ago that the RPCNA undertook these changes. The previous practice of wholesale dissent had been shaped by the church’s experiences under the British monarchy in the Old World. It took several generations in the New World to reflect on the application of denominational convictions in the American political context, and to refine our *Testimony* accordingly.

Synod began its review of the former position in the early 1960s, and that study became a church-wide conversation through a series of articles in the denominational magazine (then called, *Covenanter Witness*). The result of those deliberations are the changes reflected in chapter 23 of the current *RP Testimony*. Given the range of views in the church then (like now), 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 more active electoral participation—all in adherence to the same theological commitments.

### *Guidance for Voting*

The *Testimony* now recognizes that a Christian can serve the reign of Jesus by political involvement, even if a nation has not (yet) acknowledged Christ’s crown. And in chapter 23, paragraph 15 (cf., para. 19), this guidance on voting 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.” Today’s debates about the *Testimony*’s guidance on voting essentially ask how broadly or restrictively those terms are to be applied. Let’s first consider 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 *hatred* of evil? Many candidates are motivated by pride, by “hot button” issues, or by money, or other interests. But we ought to watch for motivations that reflect Jesus’ purposes for civil government.

Some interpret that sequence of qualifications quite 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. For example, the previously mentioned “Christ-Centered Voting” paper argues, “The [vote-worthy] candidate must be a credibly professing Christian ... who openly avows the supreme authority of King Jesus” (2019 *Minutes of Synod*, pp. 113–14).

We, the authors of this article, agree with our brothers that the *Testimony* points us to such a high standard as the ideal for which we watch and pray. However, we also believe that the *Testimony* uses the descriptors “fear of God ... love for justice ... and hatred of evil” as guidance to evaluate less-than-ideal options, as well. The *Testimony* does call us to seek candidates who explicitly promote the crown of Jesus; but it does not require church members to abstain from voting until such candidates appear.

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,” taken in its fullest extent, encompasses 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 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).

Reviewing some of the debates leading up to the 1963 revision supports this understanding. 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 measure up to the ideal anticipated by the *Testimony*. Nevertheless, it is left to the church member to discern whether such candidates might be regarded as "fearing God" and, indeed, "loving truth and justice" and "hating evil" sufficiently to receive a vote. It is impossible to know a candidate's heart for certain, 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 for your good" (Rom. 13:5).

### *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). 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 personal concerns. But the Christian should

resist those temptations and vote, instead, to advance “scriptural principles of civil government.”

Again, there are some who interpret this line of the *Testimony* more narrowly. At synod this past summer, the previously mentioned committee argued, “The [vote-worthy] candidate must publicly state his intention to ‘kiss the Son’... The candidate must appeal openly to the authority of Scripture... [And] the candidate must testify openly against anti-Christian principles” (2019 *Minutes of Synod*, pp. 120, 122).

Such requirements do capture the ideal for which we are to pray and labor. But it strains the *Testimony* to interpret its guidance as requiring dissent from all voting until that ideal emerges. The language of the present *Testimony* was chosen to affirm the viability of serving King Jesus while voting for candidates who may fall short of his ideal, but whose positions demonstrate meaningful coherence with his principles of justice.

### *Promoting Christ’s Crown*

After extensive debate over the “Christ-Centered Voting” paper this past June, synod declined the committee’s request to “adopt” the paper since it does not provide a full statement of the *Testimony*’s teaching on the matter. Synod also declined to “approve” the paper since it does not reflect a consensus of synod’s thinking on the topic. The paper was instead “received,” which is a category synod assigns to documents that offer one allowable perspective, but not the perspective endorsed by synod as a whole.

This present article is offered as an alternate view to that paper, mindful that it is in process for publication. By having both that forthcoming paper and this present article, we hope that church members today—as in a past generation—will be able to participate in this corporate debate over the important question of voting.

The *Testimony* gives room for these differences on how we exercise our political rights, but it also unites us in this common conviction: “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). However we exercise our votes, it is that shared vision that should motivate all Reformed Presbyterians.

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*Content to be used in a sidebar:*

Both we (the authors of this article) and the writers of the “Christ-Centered Voting” guide subscribe to the same doctrinal ideal. We all share the *Testimony*’s conviction that, “Every nation ought to recognize the Divine institution of civil government ... [and] should enter into covenant with Christ and serve to advance His Kingdom on earth” (*RPT* 23.4). But we disagree on how closely a candidate must adhere to that ideal before we are permitted to vote for him or her.

The reading presented in this article is further supported, we believe, by a syntactical nuance of the verbs in the *Testimony*. One of the nuances of confessional documents like the *RP Testimony* is the careful use of helping verbs, like “may,” “ought,” “must,” and “shall.” Helping verbs like “must” and “shall” are used to indicate an absolute requirement. These are *restrictive verbs*. Instructions given with restrictive verbs must be strictly followed.

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 impresses 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. But this is not the verb form used, and the *Testimony* is not requiring dissent from voting for less-than-ideal candidates. It is left to each individual’s own conscience to determine how to exercise his or her vote in service of Christ’s crown and the advance of his justice in the land.