

Seventh-day Adventists and Government Service

May 19, 1960

Last week we examined Christ's categorical command to render "unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's," which recognizes the Christian's dual responsibility to divine and human authority. We noted also Paul's explicit declaration in the thirteenth chapter of Romans that civil government has legitimate authority to make certain demands upon the Christian. "The powers that be are ordained of God," and the Christian is therefore to "be subject" to them, rendering "to all their dues." We observed further that under the Israelite theocracy, and later under authoritarian Rome, one's duty to "Caesar" consisted essentially in simple compliance with the laws of the land. But in a representative democracy such as the United States, where ultimate authority resides with the people themselves, "Caesar" calls upon Christians, as good citizens, to participate in making the laws—through representatives chosen at the ballot box—as well as to observe them.

This fundamental principle and procedure of democratic government gives rise to the question, Is participation in the process of government, at the ballot box, one of the "things" a Christian citizen may lawfully "render unto Caesar"? Now, obviously, the Bible writers knew nothing of the democratic system. But are there principles implicit in Scripture by which the Christian can determine whether, or to what extent, it is proper for him to participate in formulating and administering the laws of a democratic society, through his elected representatives? Last week we noted that the Old Testament mentions a number of shining examples of Hebrew men and women who, with God's blessing, played an active role in the governments of Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. Let us first review very briefly the inspired record of their government service, and then proceed to ascertain what differences exist between their direct participation in government, on the one hand, and indirect participation by Christian citizens in a representative democracy, through the ballot box, on the other.

Joseph is the first of these examples from Bible times. Believing that God had directed his steps to a position second only in authority to Pharaoh, Joseph declared to his brothers, "God hath made me lord of all Egypt." In fact, He sent "me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:9, 5). Daniel and his three friends provide us with another noble illustration of devout men who rendered admirable service to a foreign monarch, obviously with God's blessing throughout. As Joseph directed Pharaoh's attention to the true God, so, providentially, Daniel and his friends became instruments in God's hand to secure Nebuchadnezzar's cooperation with His divine

and later that of Cyrus when the time came for their liberation. Something more than half a century later Esther and Mordecai rose to positions of authority in the realm of Persia, and with the passing of still another generation Ezra and Nehemiah likewise occupied positions of civil responsibility.

In each of these instances God so ordered events as to place men of His own choosing in positions where they could influence national policy in harmony with His purpose for Israel. Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah did not decline to enter the service of these heathen rulers, in fear that by so doing they would displease God or necessarily be guilty of disloyalty to Him. To the contrary, each believed that he was not only honoring God but was himself an instrument in God's hand. Each found a way to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to reserve for God the things that are His. On the basis of these worthy examples we are justified in concluding that it is right and proper for those who worship the true God to take an active part in conducting the affairs of state. In other words, for the Christian there is nothing wrong, per se, in government service or in participation in the administration of government affairs.

But does God approve of similar participation in our time? We have been told that "many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean home, studying God's Word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal courts, as a witness for the King of kings."—*Education*, p. 262. That this witness is not restricted to occasional appearances before such bodies on behalf of specific issues, but includes active participation in legislative deliberations is evident from the further counsel addressed to youth: "Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness; that you may sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations."—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 82.

From these statements it is evident that there is nothing intrinsically wrong about a Christian's taking an active part in democratic legislative processes, at least when he does so in person. Accordingly, in a democracy the "things which are Caesar's" may properly be understood to include active participation in the function of governing, as well as more or less passive compliance with requirements the government makes upon citizens. But how about indirect participation, through elected representatives? This aspect of the problem we shall investigate next week.