

Christian Ethics and Voting Rights for the People of the District of Columbia

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Abstract: The disenfranchisement of the citizens of the District of Columbia from participation in their national legislature is an issue that has affected Washingtonians for over two centuries. A review of Christian scripture, tradition, reason, and experience reveals that the current situation is not morally tenable and must be opposed by the communities of faith.

Keywords: Christian ethics; democracy; voting rights; District of Columbia; justice

1. Introduction

The people who inhabit the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., are the only American citizens who are subject to the draft, who pay their full measure of federal taxes, and who are subject to federal legislation, who have no voting representation in the Congress of the United States of America. While the city received a home rule government in 1974, the Congress has the ultimate say over D.C. legislation and has in the past legislated specifically for the people of Washington, often on matters contrary to their will. Various movements have attempted to secure voting representation for District residents through various means. In recent years, the intensity and activity of the voting rights movement have reached a level unprecedented in the history of Washington.

This paper addresses Christians who seek to discern what the church's role should be in this cause. It is written for Christians who believe that they should be active in the political order and that the Church does have something to say about the forms of government under which we live [2].¹

2. The Issue: DC Residents Lack Equal Voting Rights

A crucial issue of focus must be addressed here: we must be clear about what we mean when we say "D.C. voting rights." The issue that this paper is addressing, and addressing alone, is the moral necessity of providing representation in the national legislature to each individual citizen of the District of Columbia.²

This paper will not define the issue in terms of any one solution, e.g., statehood, retrocession to Maryland, virtual statehood, or virtual retrocession.³ Rather, this paper will argue that the continuing disenfranchisement of the people of the District of Columbia is an egregious moral wrong that must be addressed by all members of the community of faith. To illuminate this argument, I will examine the four traditional sources of Christian moral inquiry: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. [1]



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¹ That Christians should be active in the political realm is a presumption of this paper. It is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to argue against the positions of Stanley Hauerwas, *inter alia*, that the church "does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social inquiry."

² This distinction is important. It is not the right of the District of Columbia to be represented in Congress that is at issue. Framing the question in terms of the rights of the people as opposed to the rights of the political entity allows for a much wider range of potential solutions.

³ These are usually identified as the four main political alternatives to redress this issue. Statehood: creating a 51st state comprising the city's residential areas, with two senators and a representative for that state. Virtual statehood: treating the District as if it were a state for purposes of voting rights, but not actually granting statehood or releasing DC from federal oversight. Retrocession: ceding the residential portions of DC to Maryland, the citizens of DC sharing in the federal delegation from that state. Virtual retrocession: allowing DC residents to vote through Maryland for federal representatives but not being under the legislative control of the state of Maryland. Each of these has advantages or disadvantages, but arguing whether one solution is more moral than another is well beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Examining the Sources

3.1. Scripture

There is depressingly little scriptural authority for addressing this question. The questions of equal voting representation in a federal republic do not seem to have weighed heavily on the minds of either Israel or the ancient Church. The word “democracy” does not appear at all in Scripture, and the sole mention of republican government is found in the Apocrypha.⁴

Therefore, this is not an issue that can be resolved with proof-texting. The issues are simply not addressed directly. Rather we must look toward the prevailing themes that are found in Scripture and make our determination accordingly. What emerges are the recurrent themes of God’s sovereignty, equality before God of all humanity, an ethic of servant leadership, and the lifting up of the oppressed.

From a cursory reading of the Bible, it might appear that the dominant model for Biblical society is that of a monarchy. Royal theology abounds in the text, informing everything from the understanding of the messiah to the understanding of God’s inbreaking reign as a “kingdom.” But closer inspection reveals a strong undercurrent in the text that challenges this seeming presumption and turns it on its head.

There is a strong critical voice in the Deuteronomistic and prophetic traditions. It is a voice calling on Israel to model an alternative community based not on human power but on God’s sovereignty. [3] Note this excerpt from 1 Samuel:

But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel, so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.” (1 Samuel 8:7-8 NRSV)

The message of this passage is clear: it is God who is Israel’s true sovereign. From its very beginnings, Israel was called to be an alternative community, unlike other communities of the ancient world, with God as its king.

Indeed, God’s sovereignty is proclaimed from the beginning of the Biblical narrative. Genesis begins with a recounting of the Sovereign Creator fashioning humanity in the divine image. Exodus continues with God as divine warrior and sovereign leading the people out of oppression and concludes with a proclamation of divine rule that is repeatedly echoed throughout Hebrew scripture. [3] It is a proclamation that continues throughout Jewish and Christian scripture, all the way to Revelation’s “and he shall reign forever and ever.”

Earthly forms of power are legitimate only insofar as they recognize God’s ultimate sovereignty. This is likely what Paul had in mind when he wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”⁵

This recognition of God’s sovereignty has concrete political consequences. When offered kingship, Gideon declares, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23). Gideon’s recognition of God’s sovereignty brings with it certain conclusions about the human exercise of power over others.⁶ As one

⁴ 1 Maccabees 8:1-16 contains a glowing evaluation of the Romans and betrays the author’s admiration of republican governance. It is one of Scripture’s more unintentionally ironic texts, given later Jewish hostility to Roman power.

⁵ Romans 13:1. It should be noted that for Paul, all forms of government were not long for this world. He was expecting the imminent end of history. His evaluation of the Roman state may have been different had he been contemplating the long haul.

⁶ This idea is reflected in a statement in the Passover liturgy: “We have no king but you.” This fundamental presumption is behind the tragic irony of the proclamation by the chief priest in John 19:15 “We have no king but Caesar.”

Christian ethicist has noted: “There surely is a sense in which the sovereignty of God is the primary theological entry point on political questions.” [2]

From this recognition of God as sovereign comes an ethic of equality before God and of servant leadership toward each other. In the New Testament, this is nowhere seen more clearly than in Mark 10:42-45:

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

In the prophetic corpus, Israel is constantly challenged to remember the poor, the widow, the stranger, and the orphan. In the Gospels, Jesus ministers to the outcast and the marginalized, describing discipleship in terms of service to the “least of these my brothers and sisters.” Clearly, another resultant ethic from recognizing God’s sovereignty is the responsibility for each other, the lifting up of the downtrodden, and giving a voice to the voiceless.

Throughout Scripture, we encounter a recurrent theme: God, and God alone is the true sovereign. The sovereignty and transcendence of God emphasize the relativity—and thus, the equality—of human beings. [2] Earthly forms of government that place the rights of some people below those of others unjustly exalt some at the expense of others and lead away from a recognition of human equality and of the fact that only God is to be exalted.

We might not find in the Scriptural models anything resembling our modern liberal democracies, but we do find underlying principles that illuminate the issue. Where there is democracy and equality, recognizing God’s sovereignty is easiest. Thus, democracy is the clearest acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty and the equality of all before God.

3.2. *Tradition*

One is tempted to look at the traditions of the Church and conclude that they have very little to do with democracy. However, democratic impulses can be identified not only in the early church but in movements throughout Christian history, including the Conciliar movement, congregationalism, and various other liberalizing efforts. [2] Often, the development of church thought on matters of governance parallels that in the civil arena.

The relationship between democracy and Christianity was made explicit by several nineteenth-century American reformers who saw in democracy the “ordered liberty” that best reflected the Christian liberty derived from “the heavenly doctrines of Christian Union and Holiness.” [4] Many saw liberal democracy as the proper balance between individual freedom and necessary social restraint, between the libertarian and communitarian values of Christianity. [5].⁷ This was done out of an understanding that “human governments should be reordered to correspond with God’s democratic moral government.” [4]

At times, the churches have been very specific, making explicit declarations about democratic principles and egalitarian values. For example, as part of the Social Principles in its Book of Discipline, the United Methodist Church has declared: [6]

The form and the leaders of all governments should be determined by exercise of the right to vote guaranteed to all adult citizens. . . . The strength of a political system depends on the full and willing participation of its citizens.

Similarly, the World Council of Churches has made statements supporting democracy, individual rights and liberties, and political accountability. [2] Based on these principles, at

⁷ Indeed, it was not only the Christians who made the connection between democracy and faith. During World War I, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler declared that democracy “found its classical expression in Israel’s holy writings,” where the law was proclaimed as “the eternal source of liberty.” One commentator notes: “In a single sentence, Kohler braided liberty, democracy, and law into a strand that connected the divine revelation at Sinai to the principles of American constitutionalism” [5].

its 2000 General Conference, the United Methodist Church adopted a resolution supporting voting rights for the people of Washington. [7]

Throughout the traditions of the churches, particularly as they have been developed in recent centuries, there has been a focus on human freedom and equality of all before God and each other. When we examine the church's traditions, we find principles that challenge the status quo in the District. If the people cannot vote for the government that has ultimate control over their lives, as Congress has over the District of Columbia, they cannot give their "full and willing participation." Our traditions force us to recognize further that the "form and leaders" of that government are not chosen by the exercise of the right to vote by any Washingtonian. The disenfranchisement of the people of D.C. does not live up to the normative standards of the tradition.

3.3. Reason: Utilitarianism and the Social Contract

The District of Columbia was created as a seat of governance out of a specific fear: were the new national capital to be located within the boundaries of a state, the federal government could be held captive to the interests of that state.⁸ We might all agree that the idea of a national government not beholden to the particular interests of a particular area of the country is a good thing. But several important questions arise: does having a separate federal territory require that the people in that territory not have a say in the federal government?⁹ It does not follow. Australia has a federal government and a separate jurisdiction for its capital city, Canberra—the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The residents of the ACT are represented in the national legislature. One condition does not demand the other.

Additionally, given that creating a separate jurisdiction for the capital is a good, and assuming for the sake of argument that this tends to mean disenfranchisement, does the disenfranchisement create some greater good? That is, are the 286,368,732 American citizens who are enfranchised benefited by the disenfranchisement of the 572,059 who aren't? Assuming that there is a benefit, is the good derived therefrom greater than the good achieved by all 286,940,791 Americans having a voice in Congress? [8]

It is hard to imagine a calculus whereby the lives of so many are enriched by the disenfranchisement of so few: a mere 0.199% percent of the population. The likelihood that the disenfranchisement of the District serves the greatest good for the greatest number is so small that we must conclude that the situation is unjust.

Alternatively, if human society and the political order are viewed as a social contract, we must conclude that the contract is not validly entered into or applied when there is a particular group denied a voice in that society. Under contractarian thinking, there is no proper consent of the governed when some are purposefully and consistently excluded. The concentration of power in the hands of some and the denial of power to others creates a situation of injustice that cannot be defended rationally.¹⁰

3.4. Experience

At the dawn of the modern civil rights era, a landmark sociological study sought to examine the effects of segregation on the Black population. The study concluded that segregation of White and Black children in public schools had a detrimental effect on Black

⁸ This was a lesson the early Congress learned the hard way. After the Revolution, they were surrounded on all sides by angry veterans who wanted to be paid. They sought help from the mayor of Philadelphia and the governor of Pennsylvania. Neither of them wanted to help. Congress determined that they needed a place where they were in charge.

⁹ Some have argued that disenfranchisement was the Founders' plan. However, this is not likely. As early as 1803, a bill to retrocede the territory of the District back to Maryland and Virginia was introduced in Congress as a response to this inequity. Additionally, in the early days of the Republic, it was much more common to think of rights deriving from state citizenship, not national citizenship. Therefore, we are the inheritors of a system of government based on a Union of States, not of individuals or a nation.

¹⁰ Here, I am using the contract thinking of Locke, not Hobbes. Hobbes' pessimism allowed him to defend a powerful monarchy. Even assuming Hobbes' model, the social contract is not upheld when a particular group is excluded from consenting to the contract but must live under it.

children and that this impact was all the greater when given the “sanction of law.” [9] The result was a “sense of inferiority” that detrimentally affected children’s ability to learn. [9]

It has been the experience of disenfranchised communities that the effects of that disenfranchisement go far beyond those outlined in the laws that exclude them. In the District of Columbia, two hundred years of disenfranchisement has profoundly affected the city’s social and political culture. Generations of children have been raised to think that their input into running their own lives is irrelevant. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find a high proportion of non-native Washingtonians in the voting rights movement. Natives of the District of Columbia have become accustomed to a lack of political power as their lot.

The community’s experience makes it clear that disenfranchisement injuries are not simply that citizens are not allowed a voice. They are injured in ways that go far beyond the political sphere but go to their very self-esteem and human dignity. The wrongs of disenfranchisement penetrate all areas of life.

4. Conclusion: Christian Ethics Demand Voting Rights for D.C.

Scripture challenges us to fashion systems of equality for all people where God alone is exalted. The people of the District of Columbia do not make the fundamental decisions governing their political lives. Others determine how much of their income is to be taxed. Others determine when their sons and daughters will fight in foreign wars. Others determine the laws under which, as good citizens, they must live. The people of the District are not being treated as equals; others and their interests have been exalted over them.

Tradition challenges us to fashion systems where people are given a voice in their own governance. The people of the District have been denied a voice in the governance of their nation and, ultimately, their city. Reason challenges us to seek the greatest good. The rights of the people of D.C. have been ignored, and very little good has come of it.

Experience reminds us that denial of a voice impacts lives and communities in comprehensive ways. District residents. have been treated as second-class citizens and suffered the related effects for far too long.

The lack of voting representation for the residents of the District of Columbia is a moral wrong that must be addressed by the community of faith. The particular manner of this redress is a question for debate among all persons of goodwill. But we must conclude in the final analysis that Christians cannot in good conscience ignore the continuing disenfranchisement of more than half a million of their fellow citizens. It is time for the Church to stand on the side of the disenfranchised so that, at last, the citizens of the District of Columbia are provided with the same democratic rights available to all other Americans.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible
DOAJ	Directory of open access journals
TLA	Three letter acronym
LD	Linear dichroism

Appendix A For Further Reading

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