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SHOULD CHRISTIANS VOTE?

I started reading THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine over 40 years ago, and 38 years ago I started my studies at Ambassador College. Throughout that whole time the Church has always taught that "Christians don't vote", but mostly without going into specific details. Since I have lived all of the past 38 years in countries of which I am not a citizen, voting or not voting has never been an issue to me one way or the other; I have never been entitled to vote in the countries where I happened to be living anyway.

But the question of whether or not Christians should vote in political elections does require an answer. It is appropriate to examine the reasons WHY the Church reached the decision that it did reach on this question. If those reasons were sound and valid in the past, they should still be sound and valid today.

So let's look at how this teaching of not voting was established in the Church.

THE 1960 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

In 1960 Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were contesting the US presidential elections, which are always held in November. And so Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong wrote an article for the November 1960 edition of THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine (which would have been mailed out just before the elections) entitled "How Would Jesus Vote for President?". In this article Mr. Armstrong stated that Jesus Christ would not have voted, and that Christians likewise should NOT vote. This article became the Church's official stand on the question of voting from that time forward.

Apart from this one article on the subject of voting, the Church has never spelled out its reasons for its stand on this subject. So an examination of the reasons presented in this article will give us the foundation on which this decision was made.

The article was published shortly before I started to receive the Church's literature, and I had never read it until deciding to do so recently, though I was familiar with the title. I have now carefully read the article a couple of times, and I now understand the reasoning Mr. Armstrong used in reaching his decision on this subject.

I might mention one point regarding why I had never studied into this question before, because this point may likewise apply to some of you. My own personal private disposition towards politics has always been that I don't really want to get involved. So if you would have presented any arguments to me that told me I shouldn't vote, then you would have had a ready audience, because you would have told me exactly what I myself had felt all along, without in any way considering biblical principles involved one way or the other. What you would have told me would have agreed with my own personal preferences. I would not have needed any persuading. And because I knew the answer to the question Mr. Armstrong addressed in his article, therefore I had no incentive to even read the article. After all, what's the point if I already know and agree with the answer?

However, with the passage of time this perspective has been modified slightly. And NOW I find that I really want to know WHY we should not vote. I now really want to know WHY God would want us to abstain from any involvement in the affairs of our communities and our nations.

As I examine this question, I don't really have a strong preference as to the outcome, though I do want to know God's views on this question. Since I still don't reside in the land of my birth, I don't see myself personally voting in any elections in the foreseeable future, because I am not eligible to vote where I live. Thus the answer to this question doesn't affect me personally one way or the other. But I do know that there are people in God's Church who really would like to cast their votes in national elections, but who for conscience's sake have been reluctant to do so. They deserve a clear answer to this question.

So let's now examine the reasons that Mr. Armstrong presented for the Church's stand on the question of voting.

AN OVERVIEW OF MR. ARMSTRONG'S TEACHING

Mr. Armstrong in November 1960 opened his article with appeals to world war and atomic war and the annihilation of civilization being imminent. Mr. Armstrong felt that the second coming of Jesus Christ was also imminent, following on the heels of the world war he anticipated. While those things are still a distinct possibility for a time yet future, Mr. Armstrong was clearly wrong as far as the timing of those things is concerned. The urgency that his introductory comments placed on the subject of voting was not really warranted, though that urgency very likely influenced Mr. Armstrong's own assessment of this question.

Mr. Armstrong then explained that the gospel Jesus Christ brought was in fact a message about government, the government of God being established over all the earth.

Then Mr. Armstrong presented a historical overview of the subject, starting with Satan's rebellion against God, followed by Adam's rejection of God's way, followed by Nimrod establishing a Babylonian society, etc., right down to the times of the Roman Empire and the influence of the Catholic Church within that empire. The common thread throughout this sequence Mr. Armstrong presented is rebellion against God.

Mr. Armstrong then asked the question: should we strive to make this a better world? He stated that the answer is "NO" because the Bible speaks about "this present evil world" (Galatians 1:4).

Next Mr. Armstrong discussed the purpose of Christ's first coming, which was to qualify to replace Satan as ruler over this world. But Christ did not enter politics, with the inference that neither should Christians do so. And since Christ didn't vote, neither should Christians vote. Christians have their citizenship with God in heaven, and therefore we should view ourselves like ambassadors from another country, irrespective of what our actual national citizenship might be. Our time to become involved with government is yet in the future, when Jesus Christ returns to set up the kingdom of God. But now is not the time for Christians to be involved in governments.

Mr. Armstrong then concluded his article with an emphatic statement that Jesus Christ certainly would not take part in politics, and therefore neither should Christians.

AND BASED ON THAT ARTICLE IT HAS BEEN THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH OF GOD THAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT VOTE!

So now let's examine some of these points regarding this decision that Christians should not vote in political elections.

ARE WE REALLY JUST "AMBASSADORS OF ANOTHER KINGDOM"?

Let's notice how Paul presented himself in different situations. Notice Philippians 3:5.

Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, OF THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN, AN HEBREW OF THE HEBREWS; as touching the law, a Pharisee; (Philippians 3:5 AV)

So when it was appropriate, Paul referred to himself as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin. But at other times he appealed to his Roman citizenship. Notice:

But Paul said unto them, They have beaten us openly uncondemned, BEING ROMANS, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out. (Acts 16:37 AV)

So the Apostle Paul was very much aware of his dual citizenship, being both, of the tribe of Benjamin and also a Roman citizen. And at different times he appealed to both. And that is in addition to his "citizenship reserved in heaven".

Now let's notice the two Scriptures that Mr. Armstrong used in his article in this regard:

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but FELLOWCITIZENS with the saints, and OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD; (Ephesians 2:19 AV)

To AN INHERITANCE incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, RESERVED IN HEAVEN for you, (1 Peter 1:4 AV)

The "inheritance" we are to receive is still future, and we have not yet received it. Upon repentance and baptism we received the Holy Spirit and we became begotten sons of God, and in that way we became a part of "the household of God". But that is on the spiritual level. We OBVIOUSLY are still citizens of whatever nation we happen to be a part of. In no way does our part in "the household of God" somehow negate our citizenship on the physical human level! Even as some people sometimes hold dual citizenship (e.g. Paul was both a Hebrew and a Roman at the same time, etc.), so all true Christians simply hold DUAL CITIZENSHIPS, with duties in BOTH REALMS! A principle which should apply here is found in Matthew 23:23, where Jesus Christ said: "... these ought you to have done, AND NOT to leave the other undone"; in other words, fulfill both sets of duties.

Yes, we do have specific duties and responsibilities before God once we become spirit-begotten members of God's Church. BUT we also continue to have certain duties and responsibilities towards the physical nation of which we are citizens. That's what Jesus Christ explained quite clearly. Notice the following context:

Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, RENDER THEREFORE UNTO CAESAR THE THINGS WHICH ARE CAESAR'S; AND UNTO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S. (Matthew 22:17-21 AV)

Mr. Armstrong also appealed to these same verses in his article, but he interpreted them incorrectly. Here are the two relevant paragraphs from Mr. Armstrong's article which illustrate this incorrect

application:

"Jesus taught His disciples to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Specifically he was referring to payment of taxes. If the government levies taxes, pay them. The Bible teaching for the Christian is to be subject to the powers that be in this world, but, on the other hand, Christians shall obey God rather than man.

The true Christian will so conduct himself as to be highly regarded by the powers of government where he lives. He will be regarded by them as a good citizen. He will appreciate the privileges, advantages, and opportunities extended. He will regard himself as the paying guest of the country where he resides, and he will act with due courtesy, submission to its rules and regulations insofar as they do not conflict with the commands of God, and submission to their penalty where they do." (Mr. Armstrong's article, his own emphasis)

Now everything Mr. Armstrong has said here about our conduct is correct, except that THE PERSPECTIVE Mr. Armstrong ascribed to a true Christian is wrong. The correct perspective for a true Christian is not at all one of "a paying guest"! Paul didn't view himself as "a paying guest" of the Roman Empire; Paul very emphatically appealed to his FULL ROMAN CITIZENSHIP!

Yes, Jesus Christ was here specifically referring to the payment of taxes. But that was only because THE QUESTION had been about paying taxes. However, in response Jesus Christ did NOT give an answer that was limited to taxes. Not at all! No, in response Jesus Christ stated A PRINCIPLE that has a far wider application than merely the matter of paying taxes.

THE PRINCIPLE of "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" really means FULFILL YOUR DUTIES AS A GOOD CITIZEN OF THE COUNTRY! It is a totally wrong perspective to interpret Christ's instructions here as applying to "a paying guest". The very fact that Jesus Christ continued with: "... AND UNTO GOD the things that are God's" makes clear that Jesus Christ was JOINING these two sets of duties. In other words, He was speaking about a DUAL citizenship, rather than "one citizenship in heaven plus one paying guest relationship on earth".

The conjunction "and" typically joins two or more things within the same class or type. So when Jesus Christ joined the two parts of His answer here with the conjunction "and", He was placing both of them into the same category. To create the contrast that Mr. Armstrong inferred (i.e. one relationship as a paying guest, but the other relationship as a citizen) Jesus Christ should really have used the equivalent of the conjunction "BUT" in this sentence, as for example in Matthew 10:34 ("... I came not to send peace BUT a sword"). The fact that Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:21 linked the two statements with the word "and" indicates that they are in the same category, though one is certainly on a higher level. So in this verse Jesus Christ takes for granted that we are citizens in our respective countries. The "paying guest" perspective is not supported by the Scriptures.

Furthermore, it is abundantly obvious that when we travel we always appeal to our full citizenship as we cross national borders. Mr. Armstrong travelled very extensively, and at every international airport he always appealed to his full American citizenship as he handed the respective customs or immigration authorities his passport. Throughout his travels Mr. Armstrong always made use of his full citizenship of the USA. The "paying guest" analogy sounds interesting, but in practical terms IT WAS ALWAYS FLAWED.

We are in actual fact not just "citizens of the kingdom of God" and "ambassadors" to the nations of our physical citizenship. In actual fact we are FULL citizens of our respective countries, and there are many, many situations in which we would emphatically appeal to the rights and privileges accorded to full

citizenship. This means that Mr. Armstrong's conclusion was not correct.

Basically Mr. Armstrong's reasoning was that BECAUSE we are citizens of another kingdom, THEREFORE it is incumbent upon us to adopt a "hands off" policy towards the political activities in our own countries. But THAT line of reasoning reveals nothing more than "a flip-flop" attitude! It says: "as a citizen of this nation I will insist on all the rights and privileges that our constitution guarantees to citizens (flip); BUT when it comes to voicing my opinion as to who should be filling certain key offices within this nation, then I consider myself the citizen of another nation and will therefore not get involved (flop)".

So while a comparison to "ambassadors" is in some ways a helpful analogy in viewing a Christian's relationship to the physical nations of this world, it in no way removes our literal citizenship of whatever nation we happen to be a part of. And viewing the relationship as a "dual citizenship" situation, with duties in both spheres, is probably closer to the truth than viewing the relationship as one citizenship in heaven and an additional paying guest relationship here on earth.

Let's now look at another question that was raised by Mr. Armstrong in his article.

SHOULD WE WORK TOWARDS MAKING THIS A BETTER WORLD?

In his article Mr. Armstrong stated very emphatically that it is "a wrong viewpoint altogether" to see a Christian's duty to be that of working to make this a better world.

While back in the 60's I myself had the same perspective here as Mr. Armstrong, I now believe that this was a highly inappropriate stance for the Church to take. I can understand where Mr. Armstrong was coming from with this statement ... back in 1960 the then Radio Church of God was still very small and Mr. Armstrong was concerned about priorities for a Christian.

However, this position was unnecessarily negative and confrontational. There was no need to take such a hard line in viewing a Christian's relationship to the world. What was the alternative to working towards making this a better world ... making it a worse world, or being completely disinterested in any progress being made in the world towards solving some of the many problems we human beings face? Was it perhaps even a perspective of looking for and hoping to find BAD news? After all, good news does not hasten the arrival of end-time prophetic events. No, it is BAD NEWS that is needed in order to know that prophesied end-time events are indeed approaching. And as a result many of us in the Church have for many years nurtured very negative and pessimistic attitudes towards anything and everything that is a part of "the world", always interpreting things that take place in the most negative way possible. That isn't really the way God would want us to view life.

All of us know Jesus Christ's instruction to us in Matthew 5:16.

LET YOUR LIGHT SO SHINE BEFORE MEN, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 AV)

Now exactly what are we doing if we really "let our light shine" by setting positive examples and by doing something or other that some people will appreciate?

Why, we are in some small measure contributing towards making this a better world!

If we really think this through carefully, I believe there is a major conflict between the instruction to let our lights shine "BEFORE MEN" and the attitude that the Christian should not be concerned at all with making this a better world. THAT latter attitude makes it highly unlikely that we will ever let any light

shine before men.

It is this "hands off" attitude towards the world that forms a major part of the premise that true Christians should not get involved in the process of selecting leaders.

Now let's be clear about this:

While there are certainly exceptions to this, IN MOST CASES today our observance of the weekly Sabbaths and of the annual Feasts and Holy Days does not really constitute any "light" to the people around us! A very large number of people have jobs where they don't work on Saturdays, and our going to church services on the Sabbath will go mostly unnoticed by the majority of people in our environment. Yes, there are always exceptions, where Sabbath observance becomes known to everyone around us. But that is not the case for most people living in large cities in the western world.

If we are to be the light of the world, like the visibility of a city on a high hill (Matthew 5:14), then this is not a reference to setting a good example to just two or three other people, though that is certainly also of great value. But Jesus Christ's focus in Matthew 5:14-16 was on our good examples having a far larger exposure, to larger groups of people. And surely such exposure of right ways of living and right conduct would contribute towards making this a better world, if for nobody else, then at least for those people who come into contact with us?

So I believe that a negative approach towards everything in this world is not how God expects us to view life. And that negative view should NOT be a deciding factor as to whether or not we get involved in voting for leaders.

Let's look at another aspect.

HOW LEADERS COME INTO THEIR POSITIONS OF LEADERSHIP

There are a number of different ways in which people in the world come to be in leadership positions. Some of these are:

- 1) They become leaders by fighting wars and then assuming leadership positions.
- 2) They become leaders by inheritance, like kings.
- 3) They are nominated by other people to positions of leadership.
- 4) They are voted into positions of leadership by the population as a whole.
- 5) They are appointed to positions of leadership, like a king appointing leaders.
- 6) They are voted into a leadership position by a small select group of people.
- 7) They become leaders by violently oppressing everyone else in the nation.

Now true Christians might be living in countries or areas where any of the above forms might be the leadership-style being practised. How do Christians respond to such situations? Are we to just have a totally "hands off" approach to all of these forms of government we might encounter, as if they don't really concern us?

If we would have rulers who are dictators (e.g. Hitler, Stalin, etc.) and who would rule with violence and

oppression, we would surely suffer and groan under such leadership, even as the Israelites in Egypt before the Exodus groaned in their conditions of slavery.

If we had rulers who are there because of inheritance or by appointment from someone else (e.g. kings, emperors, leaders appointed by kings, etc.), they might have our interests at heart in the way they rule, or they might not. So sometimes we might be reasonably well off, and sometimes we might also be groaning?

In a democracy, where the leaders are voted into their offices by the electorate, we can likewise have good leaders and bad leaders. And, like every other system, it can also be exploited by people for their selfish ends. Unfortunately EVERY system of human government can be manipulated by people who are willing to use deception, bribery or brutal force to gain their ends, and democracy is no exception to this.

In all systems of government SOMEBODY has to rule; in matters of national concern somebody has to make the final decisions on behalf of the whole nation. And many of those decisions will affect everyone in that nation. Where democracies differ from the other systems of government is that a democracy gives THE GENERAL POPULATION a choice as to who they will delegate that responsibility to. And because in a democracy such delegation of responsibility is always only for a limited period of time (i.e. until the next elections), therefore a democracy also gives the general population the opportunity to again take such responsibilities away from people they had previously chosen, and then give those responsibilities to other people. Other forms of government don't generally afford the ordinary citizens this type of influence.

There is no form of government on earth where the common ordinary citizen actually has the power to rule. The ruling is always done by the leaders and never by the ordinary citizens (except when some of those ordinary citizens come into positions of leadership). That is true in a dictatorship, it is true in a monarchy, and it is also true in a democracy. Democracy is NOT "rule by the people", and it never has been "rule by the people". Democracy only gives ordinary citizens the right TO SELECT THE PEOPLE WHO WILL RULE!

I believe it is a mistake to think of a democracy as "government BY the people". The ONLY power the people have in a democracy is to express their opinions, and then to enforce the majority opinion, as to WHO THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE AS THEIR LEADERS. But once that process of selecting their leaders has been completed, THEN it is the leaders who do the governing, and not the people. But, because those leaders would like to be elected again in future elections, therefore there is at least a certain pressure on them to comply with the wishes of the majority of the electorate. And certainly, in some democracies there are more checks and balances for preventing and dealing with the misuse of power than in other democracies.

I agree with how Sir Winston Churchill once expressed this. He was asked the question: do you think that democracy is the best form of government? His reply was: "No, it is THE WORST form of government ... EXCEPT FOR ALL THE OTHER FORMS". I believe that, until Jesus Christ sets up the government of God over this earth, a democratic country with established checks and balances to prevent, or at least to minimize, the misuse of power is the most desirable form of government for Christians to live under. This type of government affords us freedoms and rights and privileges that the citizens of countries run by despots, autocrats and dictators (and in some cases even monarchs) simply don't have.

So IF a democracy is likely to be the type of government that will afford a Christian the most freedoms to follow his religious commitments and obligations without interference, then the question is: does God allow us to be involved in the process of actually electing such democratic leaders, or does God want us to be totally detached from and uninvolved with the process of selecting such leaders?

Let's take this one step further.

IF God does NOT want Christians to be involved in the process of selecting leaders to fulfill the leadership roles in a community, THEN that would have to mean that involvement in the selection process for leaders would in some way constitute doing something wrong! I mean, the only things that God does not want us to be involved in are the things that are WRONG in some way. So we then have the question: what could the people who participate in the voting process of electing democratic leaders possibly be doing that God would view as wrong-going?

Let's also ask a very basic question: EXACTLY WHAT IS "VOTING"?

WHAT IS VOTING?

The English verb "to vote" comes to us via the Latin language. It is derived from the Latin noun "votum" which means: a vow, pledge, religious undertaking, promise, prayer, wish. Now while that is the root word from which our English verb "to vote" is derived, the act of voting does in actual fact have nothing at all to do with the primary meaning of its Latin word of origin. THE MAIN MEANINGS of the Latin word "votum" are basically retained in the English word "vow". But "voting" has nothing at all to do with "vowing" or "pledging" or "making religious undertakings".

No, the only rather loose connection the English verb "to vote" has with the meaning of its Latin word of origin is the meaning "to wish". In plain terms: VOTING EXPRESSES OUR WISHES!

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY includes the following definitions for "vote":

- a usually formal expression of opinion or will in response to a proposed decision, especially one given as an indication of approval or disapproval of a proposal, motion, or candidate for office;
- the total number of such expressions of opinion made known at a single time (as at an election);
- an expression of opinion or preference held to resemble a vote;
- the collective opinion or verdict of a body of persons expressed by voting;
- to express one's views in response to a poll; etc.

So what is voting? It is nothing more and nothing less than expressing one's views, wishes or opinions! That's all it is! And an election is basically an opinion poll in which the majority view will then be adopted.

So the question for us then is: When the system of government under which we find ourselves not only given us the right to express our views and opinions, but actively ENCOURAGES us to do so, does GOD allow us to express our opinions, OR does God under such circumstances want us to refrain from expressing our opinions and be totally uninvolved with this process of making the opinions of the general population known in a formal and public way?

Does God allow us to have opinions?

Does God allow us to openly express such opinions?

Probably all of us have at one time or another criticized various politicians. We have verbally expressed disapproval of their actions or their decisions. We have very likely expressed our personal opinions about various people in leadership positions VERBALLY on many occasions, be it approval or be it

disapproval. We have opinions about whether they are doing a good job or whether they are doing a bad job, and we have expressed these opinions to our friends and acquaintances at various times.

So it is not a question of whether or not we have opinions and whether or not we express those opinions. We DO have opinions, and we DO express those opinions in some way or other to those people we interact with in our daily lives. We surely don't believe that it is wrong before God for us to have opinions about: how our countries should be run, whether or not the people currently in leadership positions are doing a good job, whether or not other people who want those same leadership positions might do a better job, etc.? Surely God allows us the latitude to conclude that some leaders are doing a better job than other leaders, and to openly express our views in this regard to our friends and acquaintances?

So we can further refine our question:

Since there is nothing wrong before God in us having opinions about how various people in leadership positions are doing their jobs in ruling over us, does God APPROVE of us readily expressing such opinions in our conversations with our friends, but at the same time DISAPPROVE of us expressing those same opinions in a formal way (i.e. by casting a vote in an election)?

IF it is alright to TALK approvingly or disapprovingly about a politician's job performance, is it then wrong to formally express that same approval or disapproval by means of a tick on a piece of paper (a voting ballot)? If the one action is acceptable before God, WHY should the other action not be equally acceptable before God?

Forget about the "ambassador" and the "paying guest" analogies, because they are not really valid when we examine the question of whether or not God would want us to vote.

Let's now look at some biblical examples.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

1) All of us are familiar with Joseph being appointed to the position of Chief Executive over the whole land of Egypt, with enormous powers (Genesis 41:39-44). Joseph held the top political office in Egypt, with the Pharaoh being the figurehead.

2) All of us are also familiar with Daniel being repeatedly appointed to the top political job in the empires of the Babylonians (Daniel 2:48-49) and of the Medes and the Persians (Daniel 6:1-3). Daniel's three friends were also given top political offices (Daniel 3:30). At a later time Nehemiah was also given a high political office by the Medo-Persian leaders.

3) We also know that God repeatedly appointed people to positions of power and authority within the nation of Israel, leaders like Moses and Joshua and Samuel, and various judges, and King David, etc.

4) In New Testament times Philip baptizes a man who was the equivalent of "the Secretary of the Treasury", or "the Minister of Finance", for Queen Candace of the Ethiopians (see Acts 8:27-39), and after being baptized the man promptly went back to his job with the government of his own nation.

So I believe that IN PRINCIPLE there is no problem in a true Christian today fulfilling a leading role within the government structure of his own nation, PROVIDED that he does not have to compromise any of God's laws. IF someone can continue to observe God's Sabbaths and annual Feasts and Holy Days without compromise, and IF he can fulfill his job without resorting to dishonesty and lying and deception and bribery and corruption (very hard to do in many political positions), THEN holding some political office or other isn't really any more of a problem than Joseph or Daniel or the Ethiopian "Eunuch" (i.e.

Official) holding some political office.

However, IN ACTUAL PRACTICE many politicians DO repeatedly make misleading statements, they DON'T always tell the truth, they DO cover up problems and mistakes, they DO make decisions which violate some of God's laws, etc. and therefore in our circumstances today usually it is not wise for true Christians to seek political offices with a high public profile. But THE REASON for a Christian not seeking high political offices is not because there is some inherent problem in those political offices; the reason is that the execution of the duties attached to those offices today places ENORMOUS PRESSURES TO COMPROMISE SOME OF GOD'S LAWS on the holders of those offices, and in some cases a refusal to compromise some of God's laws would make a person totally unsuitable for that office.

So there is a difference between the theory and the practice, as far as Christians holding high political offices is concerned. While theoretically it may be fine for a Christian to seek some high profile political office, the practical circumstances of fulfilling the duties and responsibilities attached to that office might make it impossible for a Christian to avoid compromising some of God's laws. A simple example would be: would the Christian be able to ALWAYS AND WITHOUT FAIL observe God's weekly Sabbath and God's annual Feasts and Holy Days ... OR would the political requirements of the office demand a compromising attitude in this regard? In some positions a person might get away without having to make any compromises, while in other positions the "no compromise" approach would never be acceptable. The higher the office, the less likely it is that an uncompromising stand will be acceptable.

So much for Christians seeking high political offices. But what about voting for other people who want those high political offices? What about expressing our views and opinions on such issues?

Let's look at some other biblical examples.

ACTS CHAPTER 6

The Church of God congregation in Jerusalem had grown to about 5000 men (Acts 4:4) and the widows of Greek-speaking Jews in the Church were being neglected to some degree. So some feelings of resentment started to surface (Acts 6:1). The twelve apostles then told the whole congregation, in modern terms: "right, you select seven men of high character whom we will appoint to take care of this matter" (Acts 6:2-4). What was needed was Greek-speaking Jews who would take care of the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the Church, and so we see that all seven of the men chosen had Greek names and were Greek-speaking, so they could fulfill this specific need that had arisen.

Notice verses 3 and 5:

Wherefore, brethren, LOOK YE OUT AMONG YOU SEVEN MEN of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, WHOM WE MAY APPOINT over this business. (Acts 6:3 AV)

And the saying pleased THE WHOLE MULTITUDE: and THEY CHOSE Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: (Acts 6:5 AV)

Now HOW did they choose these seven men from amongst a congregation of more than 5000 people? Did those 5000 members of God's Church in any way "voice their opinions" (i.e. express their "vote") as to who they felt should fulfill these seven positions within the Church at that time? Exactly HOW were these seven men chosen?

The overall procedure is fairly clear. The apostles told the whole congregation: YOU select the seven

men and then WE will appoint them to these positions.

Now there had already been some "murmuring" among the two factions within the Church (Acts 6:1), and I would expect that different names were put forward by different people. I think it is unlikely that in a group of over 5000 people no more than seven names were initially put forward for these positions. There may have been any number of candidates proposed for these seven positions. All we are told is that, when everything was said and done, they reached full consensus on who those seven should be.

But the "selection process" for these seven men from amongst the 5000 church members must surely have involved large numbers of members "expressing their opinions" as to who should be included in those seven? And that is precisely what "voting" is ... selecting out specific people for specific positions from amongst a large number of potential candidates.

The wording of Acts 6:3 makes quite clear that the apostles themselves did not control the "selection process"; in this particular instance they gave that responsibility to the whole congregation. Where the apostles retained control over the whole process is that they did the actual appointing to these positions, implying to me that they COULD have rejected any of the candidates put forward by the congregation, had they for any reason wished to do so. Thus the apostles initiated the process (by giving the instruction for this to be done) and they concluded the process (by prayer and the laying on of hands), but they left the selection process up to the congregation.

However we might want to view the selection process of the seven men in Acts chapter 6, in some way it must have involved the members of the Church "giving their views and opinions" on this selection, which is another way of saying that they "gave their votes" on the selection of these men.

Now does this mean that all the decisions within the Church should therefore always be made by voting? I don't think so.

Consider the circumstances:

Within ONE DAY the Church had grown from 120 members to about 3000 members (Acts 2:41), and then within a matter of weeks it had grown to over 5000 members. Obviously the twelve apostles did not have any personal knowledge of the character, personal skills and abilities of the majority of the people who had come into the Church in that short time. In modern terms we might say that the apostles didn't really know the majority of the members very well on a personal level.

Then a problem of neglect arose amongst a new segment of the Church (i.e. Greek-speaking Jews rather than Aramaic-speaking Jews) that the apostles very likely had even less personal familiarity with. The need was to select Greek-speaking Jews who would be capable of effectively helping the Greek-speaking Jewish widows within the Church. The apostles themselves would at that point in time hardly have known the right people for this specific duty. Therefore it was only logical that they would ask the people concerned, i.e. the congregation, to propose people for this specific responsibility.

But such a large congregation would easily have proposed many more than seven for this job. So some kind of voting would have been needed to get to some kind of consensus. But note: the voting the congregation may have done in selecting the seven men did NOT put those seven men into their positions of responsibility. No, it was the apostles who put those seven men into this position within the Church (Acts 6:6).

In this case, because of a lack of personal knowledge about most new church members in general, the apostles readily accepted the majority opinion of the congregation that was brought to them for approval. I expect that in all matters where the apostles themselves were knowledgeable of all the relevant

information pertaining to a specific matter they made the decisions themselves, without necessarily looking for consensus from the congregation. It was the specific circumstances of this situation that made an appeal to the congregation the most suitable way to deal with this matter.

Today, where most congregations are far, far smaller than 5000 members, the ministers themselves will, after many years of personal contacts, often be very familiar with the personalities and the characters of most people in the congregation. This is a totally different circumstance from Acts chapter 6, and therefore there is usually no need to appeal to the congregation for help in selecting specific church members for specific responsibilities within the congregation. Acts chapter 6 presents us with "unusual circumstances" (a huge congregation in which most members were not personally known to the ministry) and an emergency situation that needed to be addressed very quickly. Therefore the apostles opted for a procedure that they might not have followed under different circumstances.

Anyway, we do have an example here in Acts chapter 6 where the members of the Church were asked in some way or other to express their views (i.e. their "vote") on who should fill seven specific positions within the Church.

Now let's look at something the Apostle Paul mentioned about himself.

PAUL BEFORE KING AGRIPPA

In presenting his case before King Agrippa, the Apostle Paul made the following statement:

I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I GAVE MY VOICE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:9-10)

The expression translated as "I gave my voice against them" is a translation of the two Greek words "katenegka psephon". The noun "psephos" refers to "a small pebble" that was anciently used "to cast a vote". Black pebbles expressed a vote of condemnation and white pebbles expressed a vote of acquittal. "Katenegka" is the aorist active indicative of the verb "kataphero", which refers to "casting a pebble into an urn". The combination of these two Greek words referred to "casting a vote".

This is well understood by most translators of the New Testament, and so we have a number of translations which readily acknowledge this. For example:

And this I also did in Jerusalem: and I both shut up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, and when they were put to death I GAVE MY VOTE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:10 1901 ASV)

Which also I did in Jerusalem, and myself shut up in prisons many of the saints, having received the authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death I GAVE MY VOTE. (Acts 26:10 1884 DBY)

And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I CAST MY VOTE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:10 1977 NAS)

And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the

saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I CAST MY VOTE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:10 1984 NIV)

which also I did in Jerusalem, yea and, many of the saints, I myself, in prisons, shut up, —the authority, from the High-priests, having received: and, when they were to be put to death, I BROUGHT AGAINST THEM MY VOTE; (Acts 26:10 1902 Rotherham)

And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I CAST MY VOTE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:10 1947 RSV)

And that was how I acted in Jerusalem. Armed with authority received from the High Priests I shut up many of God's people in various prisons, and when they were about to be put to death I GAVE MY VOTE AGAINST THEM. (Acts 26:10 1912 WEY)

which also I did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I in prison did shut up, from the chief priests having received the authority; they also being put to death, I GAVE MY VOTE AGAINST THEM, (Acts 26:10 1998 YLT)

I have here presented eight different translations, which all make quite clear that Paul was referring to "having cast a vote". In other words, Paul had made known his opinion in the cases where members of God's Church had been put to death by giving his vote; he had agreed with finding the Christians guilty. Now while Paul is presenting this to King Agrippa as evidence against his own past conduct, Paul in no way implies that the process of voting itself, in which he had been involved, was in any way wrong. What was "wrong" in Paul's past conduct was that he had cast a vote to condemn people who were innocent, but the process of voting itself is here not in any way incriminated.

In Acts 26:10 Paul freely admitted that he had "voted". There is no hint that Paul thought that God might have disapproved of the process of voting.

VOTING IN THE CHURCH OF GOD

For several decades the Church used to sponsor speech clubs at Ambassador College and also for the local congregations. At every "Spokesmen's Club" meeting all the members were always asked to cast three VOTES ... for the "Most Effective Speaker", for the "Most Improved Speaker" and for the "Most Helpful Evaluator". In addition to these three votes every member was also asked to express his opinion on the job performance of the "Toastmaster" and of the "Topicsmaster", in effect casting a vote on their performance.

Such voting was always encouraged and considered acceptable because it wasn't really the same as "political voting". And voting at the Church's speech clubs is in fact the only voting I have thus far ever done in my whole life (in addition to on a few occasions also voting for the trustees in our apartment complex).

But the facts are these: voting is voting is voting!

IF it is acceptable to vote for who we personally may think was the best performer in one category or another at a speech club (and our vote here may not even be correct, our opinion may in fact be biased in some way, we may lack discernment, etc.), then WHY is it not also acceptable to express our opinions in the identical way about who we think will do the best job in certain political positions? After all, it is the identical activity in both cases ... expressing our personal opinion about job performances. Will God approve of the one activity but disapprove of the other? We are NOT merely "paying guests" in the

countries of our citizenships; so THAT line of reasoning should not influence the answer to this question.

I believe that it is something of a double standard to accept voting for our own purposes, but to reject voting in other circumstances. IF the activity of voting in itself is wrong before God, THEN it must surely be wrong under all circumstances? And IF the activity of voting is NOT WRONG before God in SOME circumstances, THEN it must surely also not be wrong in other circumstances? How can "expressing our opinions" in some circumstances be wrong, when "expressing our opinions" in other circumstances is not wrong at all?

If people feel that the activity of voting in itself is wrong, then the onus is on them to show WHY it is supposedly wrong before God! Specifically, what is it about the activity of voting that supposedly makes it wrong before God? What is wrong about "expressing our opinion" about who should fill certain positions in an organization or in a city or in a nation?

Consider the following hypothetical situation:

When the Church of God maintained a college campus in East Texas in the 1960's and thereafter, a number of the small communities in the area had a large number of church members living in those communities. In some cases the number of church members who moved into the area more than doubled the population of some small towns. So let's take the following situation:

You have a small town of perhaps 2000 people, more than 1100 of whom are members of the Church of God. From amongst the 900 people who are not members of the Church a number of men and women are running for public offices in the town administration (mayor, councillors, etc.), and all of these people running for those offices are known for holding either negative or even openly hostile views towards the Church. If they were to be elected to those offices it would be bad news for the members of God's Church in that local community. What should the church member citizens of that town do?

Should they just sit back and say: "If the wrong people are elected to run this town, then that must be God's will, and we will just have to accept that"? Or should they not rather say: "Look, there are 1100 of us in this town and only 900 who are not a part of us. If we put up some of our own candidates and ALL OF US vote for our own candidates, THEN we will easily win this election and we won't have to worry about some elected official passing decisions that will adversely affect, or in some way disadvantage, the people in God's Church."?

I am convinced that in such circumstances the people in God's Church should CERTAINLY participate in the election process and very clearly and unambiguously "express their opinion" that certain church member candidates should fill those positions. To not vote in such circumstances would in effect be an open invitation to non-members to make whatever decisions they like for that community, with a total disregard for the wishes and the interests of the church members.

I can think of other situations where it would also be very desirable for members of the Church to make their opinions known openly by means of voting for the issues or the candidates they believe most closely reflect their own views. For example, IF there was ever a national referendum on the question of whether or not abortion should be permitted, THEN I believe every Christian should make his or her views known very clearly by voting against abortion. To not vote on such an issue, when the state actually encourages citizens to voice their views by means of voting, could have devastating results.

But let's consider a more basic issue that affects this question of voting.

ARE GOD'S LAWS INTENDED TO RESTRICT US?

We in the Church of God are not the only ones who have taken the approach that "we don't vote in national elections". There are a number of other churches which teach their members the same approach in this regard, and who in actual fact held this teaching even before it was accepted and expounded by Mr. Armstrong. WHY do we and they have this teaching?

I believe there is a very basic point here which we need to examine. And that basic point is: our perception of God! How do we perceive God, as far as how God interacts with us human beings is concerned? Do we in effect see God as wanting to run our lives for us? Does God intend for us to live and function within very narrowly defined parameters? Did God intend for His laws to restrict our lives, our activities and our ability to express ourselves? Or did God intend to give us a vast scope of opportunities and activities and ways of interacting? And what are the reasons why God has taken the approach He has taken?

Let's look at how things started out, to get an idea of how God was going to deal with human beings. Let's go back to Adam's creation.

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:8 AV)

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, OF EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN THOU MAYEST FREELY EAT: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:15-17 AV)

Here God had planted a huge garden with many thousands of trees in it, as well as all the animals which God had created. Was God's focus on restrictions or was God's focus on opportunities and on giving man many options?

You know the answer. God gave man a vast scope, basically saying: "Adam, all you can see is there for you to use and to enjoy; there is JUST ONE TREE that is totally off-limits for you. But everything else you can see is there for you." That "one restriction", if adhered to by Adam and Eve, would have been a very minor restriction indeed for the range of foods and of activities that God had opened up to them. God was not restricting man, but giving him vast scope.

Later, when God gave Israel His commandments and His laws in a codified way, those laws were not detailed and specific restrictions. Rather, God's commandments and His laws are mostly STATEMENTS OF PRINCIPLES, and not just specific do's and don't's. And all of God's laws to us can be summarized in the two great principles Jesus Christ stated in Matthew 22:36-40.

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS HANG ALL THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS. (Matthew 22:36-40 AV)

We are all familiar with the understanding that the first four of the ten commandments are in principle covered by the instruction to "love God with all our heart", and that the last six commandments are in principle covered by the instruction to "love our neighbour as ourselves". And God expects us to apply these principles ourselves to all of our conduct. That we have always understood. But sometimes we haven't continued with that understanding and then drawn the obviously intended conclusion from this

fact.

God deliberately gave us human beings instructions in the form of statements of principles BECAUSE God wants us to learn to consistently make right decisions! God gives us the principles, and then God watches to see if we are able to apply them correctly in the whole range of our daily experiences and circumstances. It is the fact that God has given us enormous scope in the way we choose to live our lives that exposes our real character to God. In uncertain situations do we apply the principles in OUR OWN favour, or do we in such circumstances in all fairness "love our neighbours as ourselves", and avoid reaching conclusions that give us what we really want to have at someone else's expense?

To get back to our subject: God wants us to learn to make decisions based on the principles He has given us. Now people who cannot deal with applying principles correctly themselves always tend to try to narrow the principles down to SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS in the form of do's and don't's. They want to see the principles applied to, and also limited to, specific situations as either approval or else as prohibitions.

And so it is a fact that MANY CHURCHES have tried to run the lives of their members by making decisions FOR them! THE CHURCHES, rather than the Bible, have introduced many "you shall not ..." teachings for their members; in effect applying (or trying to apply) the biblical principles for the people. Now as the centuries and the millennia have passed, so we human beings have been faced with different circumstances and with different choices for our daily lives. And in many of those situations it is certainly very helpful for the membership if the Church can clearly, soundly, logically apply biblical principles to our present conditions, and then make sound judgments, especially regarding modern forms of conduct and behaviour that are clearly contrary to the principles God has given us in the Bible.

But at the same time there will also ALWAYS be the tendency for the Church to legislate for its membership conduct IN FAR TOO MANY SPECIFIC AREAS OF LIFE! This is based on the assumption that the more specific areas are covered by the decisions the leadership of the Church has legislated on, the less gray areas there will be where church members might make bad decisions and then "sin through ignorance".

And we forget that before God it is far more important that every person learns to make right decisions based on applying in the integrity of their hearts everything they understand. So people make mistakes in this process ... I make mistakes, and I assume that you too make mistakes. But if we make those mistakes in the integrity of our hearts, because of a lack of understanding, then God is also prepared to "wink at the times of our ignorance" (the principle of Acts 17:30) once we come to a better and more correct understanding.

We need to understand:

It is NOT primarily the right conduct itself (i.e. obedience to His laws) that God is looking for in us. What God is PRIMARILY looking for in us is right conduct which is A CONSEQUENCE of correctly applying the principles He has given us in the Bible. God is looking for right conduct that is the consequence of deliberately choosing the right way, based on a correct understanding of God's instructions and God's intentions. In other words, obedience without understanding is not particularly valuable before God, because such obedience has no effect on our character. Rather, it is obedience that is motivated by a correct understanding of God's ways which will develop godly character in the person practising such obedience towards God. God's laws are intended to be tools for bringing our attitudes towards God Himself out into the open. The Apostle John explained this principle as follows:

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother

whom he hath seen, HOW CAN HE LOVE GOD WHOM HE HATH NOT SEEN? (1 John 4:20 AV)

If we say and believe that we "love God" while at the same time having totally ungodly attitudes towards some of our fellow human beings, it becomes glaringly obvious that WE DON'T UNDERSTAND what it is that God REALLY wants from us. It means we don't really get the picture and we don't really grasp how God wants us to APPLY the principles of all of His laws to our daily lives and circumstances. We ONLY learn to really "love God" by coming to understand, and by then correctly applying, the principles God has established regarding how we should treat all people. This requires discernment on our part, rather than a mere willingness "to do whatever God tells us to do". God is looking for THINKING obedience.

So a very basic point in establishing a right relationship with God is to understand that God requires us to use our minds in order to establish HOW we should best submit ourselves to His wishes and desires for us.

This also affects the question of voting or not voting in political elections.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR MAKING BINDING JUDGMENTS

So the next question is: do we have any guidelines regarding when the Church should legislate what conduct is right or wrong for its members and when the Church should refrain from making any such judgments pertaining to specific actions or conduct?

Yes, there are guidelines we can apply to these questions. Here they are:

1) WHEN IT IS UNAMBIGUOUSLY CLEAR that some form of conduct or behaviour is wrong or that it has ONLY negative or bad consequences, that there are no positive consequences at all from this activity or conduct, THEN it is usually extremely helpful for the members of the Church if the leadership of the Church makes a clear judgment on this matter, and in the process presents to the membership the facts and the reasons for the judgment.

This is a matter of applying the principle of Matthew 7:16, 20, that we can KNOW "by the fruits that are produced" whether something is good or bad, whether it is right or wrong before God.

2) IN ALL OTHER CASES, where it is NOT unambiguously clear that some behaviour, conduct or activity is clearly wrong or that it has nothing but bad consequences, the Church should be very careful to NOT MAKE ANY JUDGMENTS THAT WILL BE BINDING ON THE MEMBERS!

3) Specifically, the Church should be EXTREMELY CAREFUL in establishing that binding judgments under #1 above are not made based on assumed premises or on biased personal interpretations which reflect not the principles of the Scriptures but only the biased personal views of those responsible for making such decisions. Such binding judgments must only be made based on the clear and sound and logical and correct application of the principles revealed in the Bible.

As an example, it was certainly correct for the Church to make a binding judgment that smoking is NOT ACCEPTABLE for any member of the Church. The fruits of smoking (or chewing) tobacco are ONLY BAD! Smoking is a totally selfish habit that blatantly disregards the well-being of other people, and which clearly damages the health of both, the smoker and the people in his immediate environment. There is nothing good about smoking, and the Church's judgment that it is not right for Christians to smoke is certainly correct.

By contrast, it was equally correct for the Church to refrain from making any judgment about the

moderate consumption of alcoholic drinks by members of the Church. The only judgment the Church has made (correctly so) regarding the consumption of alcohol is that it is a sin, and therefore totally unacceptable, for members of God's Church to get drunk. But the Church has never attempted to define the border between moderate consumption and getting drunk. THAT decision always rests with the individual.

There is no question that the consumption of alcohol can and does cause very many problems in our modern societies. However, in these cases the problem is not the consumption of alcohol per se, but THE MISUSE of alcohol. When used in moderation, the consumption of alcohol can have both, medicinal and emotional benefits.

The Bible is ABUNDANTLY clear that the moderate use of alcohol is beneficial and intended by God for our enjoyment. The very fact that some of the offerings God commanded Israel to bring included WINE, makes clear that Israel OBVIOUSLY was expected by God to produce wine ... otherwise such "wine offerings" could not have been brought before God (see Numbers 18:12; Numbers 28:7; Numbers 28:14, etc.). God also commanded Israel to take "the tithe of their WINE to the annual Feasts for enjoyment (Deuteronomy 14:23, 26, etc.). We are told that wine makes glad the heart of a man (Psalm 104:15), and Jesus Christ spoke about wine in a positive way on several occasions (e.g. John 2:3-10, etc.).

So it is clear from the Bible that it is not the moderate use of alcohol that is wrong before God; what is wrong before God is THE MISUSE of alcohol, using alcohol to excess.

The same applies to the sexual relationship. It is NOT that a sexual relationship between a man and a woman in itself is wrong; it is THE MISUSE of sex that is wrong. God intended for a sexual relationship to be reserved totally and exclusively for within a marriage between a man and a woman. Any sexual relationship outside of marriage (i.e. adultery, fornication, homosexuality, etc.) represents a misuse of the God-ordained purposes for sex.

So here we have examples where some churches (not God's Church) have inappropriately made binding judgments for their members on these matters.

1) Regarding the consumption of alcohol: because the misuse of alcohol is clearly a sin before God, therefore some churches have legislated that their members are not to drink any alcohol at all, not even in moderation. This is an attempt to control the lives of their members, on the false assumption that never drinking any alcohol somehow makes a person more righteous before God than someone else who occasionally drinks alcohol in moderation.

2) Regarding the sexual relationship: because of its teaching that a sexual relationship is intrinsically evil (even between a husband and wife within marriage), therefore the Catholic Church has legislated that a man and his wife may only engage in sex if they do not prevent a potential pregnancy (i.e. no contraception is allowed). This is also a very powerful attempt to control the lives of the members of the Catholic Church. It is also built on the wrong premise that a person who voluntarily abstains from ever having sex is more righteous before God than someone who has a healthy and enjoyable sexual relationship within a happy marriage.

THE TRUTH is that every human being is expected to make right decisions before God in these matters. People themselves, NOT their churches, need to decide whether or not they themselves should ever drink any alcohol; and IF they decide to sometimes drink moderate amounts of alcohol, to then also decide for themselves what "moderate" means in their specific circumstances. What may be moderate for a 200-pound man may not be moderate at all for a 110-pound elderly lady. And as long as a person's consumption of alcohol is still very obviously within the bounds of moderation, then that is certainly acceptable before God.

Likewise, when a man and a woman get married then they themselves, and not their church, need to mutually decide when they would like to engage in marital sex, and they themselves need to decide whether they would like to allow for the possibility of a pregnancy or whether they would prefer to practice contraception to avoid the possibility of any pregnancy. They themselves, and not their church, need to make these decisions.

And that brings us back to the matter of voting.

THE MATTER OF VOTING

In biblical times voting for leaders was never an issue for the people of Israel. So any reasoning that appeals to the fact that "Jesus Christ never voted and therefore neither should we" is totally without any merit. OF COURSE Jesus Christ never voted, because the system under which He lived never made any provision for the Jews to "vote for their leaders". And even if the system had made provisions for voting, Jesus Christ's UNIQUE circumstances would have made it highly undesirable for Him personally to have cast any votes. OF COURSE, God Himself NEVER votes because God ALWAYS makes perfectly correct decisions without any need of any input from anyone! But THAT FACT is simply not true for us human beings.

Consider the principle that "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14; Proverbs 15:22; etc.). In an election surely the greatest possible multitude is being asked for input? Why should that be wrong before God?

Furthermore, while the analogy to being "ambassadors" does not really describe our position within the nation of our physical citizenship, that analogy DOES describe Jesus Christ's position very accurately! Jesus Christ was indeed "an ambassador" from God! He made clear that He only spoke the words God the Father wanted Him to speak ... the sign of a true ambassador (see John 14:10). This is not true for us ... we speak many, many words that God would rather not have us speak. Thus the ambassadorial status that applied to Jesus Christ does not apply to us; as stated earlier, we really have a dual citizenship with responsibilities in both areas.

Now as far as voting is concerned, IT WAS A MISTAKE for the Church of God (and likewise also for any other church that has the same teaching about voting) to ever try to legislate what members of the Church ought to do when it comes to voting. Voting is not really anything that affects a person's relationship with God! Voting is not immoral (like sex outside of marriage), it doesn't ruin the voter's health (like smoking does) and it doesn't cause the voter to slur his speech and to become intoxicated (like misusing alcohol). Casting a vote in an election has no effect whatsoever on the character of the voter; it makes the voter neither better nor worse, as far as God is concerned.

Voting is nothing more than expressing an opinion in a public way, so that it can receive equal recognition and consideration amongst all the other opinions that are expressed at the same time.

As far as our character is concerned: the chances are that most of us ALREADY have an opinion about which candidate we would prefer to see in the office being voted for (congressman, senator, president, etc.), even before the eligible voters have cast their votes! We all engage in "I sure hope he wins or doesn't win" mental games. And when the results of an election are announced, we are indeed interested in finding out who was elected and who was not elected. Very few of us pay no attention at all to the results that are announced. How many of us are surprised when we hear about a president being inaugurated into office and we say: "Oh, I thought the other candidate had won the election"? That doesn't happen to us very often when the results of the election were publicly known for several weeks before the date of inauguration, does it? No, we KNOW who will be inaugurated on that date. And in most cases we will also have feelings about whether we are pleased or whether we are displeased by

the election results.

Do you know what this means?

It means that WITH OUR MINDS we were all along actively involved in voting! In our minds we had (in very many cases) preferences as to who we would like to see win the election. IF we at any stage ever had the thought: "I sure hope he wins (or loses)" THEN WE WERE VOTING IN OUR MINDS, even if we did not actually fill in any election ballot papers.

Let's recall another principle.

In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus Christ explained that THE THOUGHTS of anger were no different from actually killing someone. In Matthew 5:27-28 Jesus Christ explained that THE THOUGHTS of lusting after someone were no different from actually committing adultery.

The principle should be clear, but let me spell it out anyway:

THE THOUGHTS of who we would like to see win or lose in an election are no different from ACTUALLY VOTING IN THAT ELECTION!

So IF you are going to have the thought: "Boy, I sure hope he wins (or loses)", then you might as well physically cast your vote in the election, BECAUSE you have already voted in your heart! The thought precedes the little "tick" on the ballot paper, and even if that little "tick" is never made, if we have THE THOUGHT, then it is just as if we had also made that little "tick". And since there is nothing whatsoever wrong before God with voting in an election, then you might as well go ahead and complete the process that started with the thought your mind entertained ... fill in your ballot sheet.

Now don't misunderstand. I am NOT saying that you MUST vote. Not at all! Thus far I have only addressed the matter of those of us who "vote in our minds" but then feel compelled to not vote with our ballot paper. Anyone in THAT particular category should certainly go ahead and also vote physically.

There are large numbers of people who don't vote, and for most of them that is not due to any religious constraints. They just couldn't be bothered to get involved for any number of personal reasons. That is also true for some people in the Church of God. And if that is true for you, then it is certainly your right to continue with that frame of mind. In most democracies you also have the right to not vote, if you so choose. So don't by any means feel that you now HAVE TO vote. Not at all.

When a government gives you the right to participate in the process of electing certain people to specific public offices, then GOD GIVES YOU THE FREEDOM TO MAKE UP YOUR OWN MIND! Nowhere does God hint that it would be wrong for you to participate in this process. If your country gives you the right to participate in that process, then God also gives you the freedom to decide for yourself what you should do ... whether or not to vote at all, and if you decide to vote, then which candidate you would like to support. The Bible places no more restraints on you regarding whether or not you should vote, than the Bible tells you whether or not you should eat cabbage and broccoli: you yourself decide whether to eat these vegetables or whether not to eat them. These things are personal decisions which have no effect on our character before God, and voting or not voting is in the same category.

We need to very clearly recognize that the Church's stand on voting was based on a misguided desire to make the right decision FOR the membership of the Church. But before God there is no right or wrong stance when it comes to "expressing our opinions" by means of voting in some election or other. To vote in an election requires us to use our minds, and thus the way we vote is one more avenue that brings into the open the thoughts of our hearts. Who we support in an election says something about us.

But the matter of voting is NOT an area of life in which the Church should ever have legislated conduct for the membership, no more than the Church should legislate against a married couple using contraception, or legislate against any and all uses of alcoholic beverages, or legislate against things like dancing and playing cards. It was never God's intention that the Church would control the lives of its members to such a degree that the members never have to use their own minds to make decisions about what to do or not do.

It is only in those things that are clearly and unambiguously wrong, and where the fruits are "only bad" that the Church should consider making binding judgments for the membership. These are very narrow parameters, and very many issues in our daily lives will fall outside of those parameters, and will therefore not be appropriate for the Church to legislate on.

So ...

SHOULD you vote? I don't know, because that is up to you.

DOES GOD ALLOW you to vote, if you want to do so? YES, God certainly gives you the freedom to participate in any voting process if you desire to participate.

The exact same principle that the Apostle Paul applied to eating or not eating certain foods on specific days applies equally well to this question of voting. Notice what Paul said:

Let not him that EATETH despise him that EATETH NOT; and let not him which EATETH NOT judge him that EATETH: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. LET EVERY MAN BE FULLY PERSUADED IN HIS OWN MIND. (Romans 14:3-5 AV)

Below I have exchanged the word "eat" for the word "vote". THE PRINCIPLE that Paul uses is the same. So notice:

Let not him that VOTES despise him that VOTES NOT; and let not him which VOTES NOT judge him that VOTES: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. YEA, HE SHALL BE HOLDEN UP: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. LET EVERY MAN BE FULLY PERSUADED IN HIS OWN MIND. (Romans 14:3-5, but adapted to the issue of voting)

Notice one other point from the correct text of Romans chapter 14. Can we see that the Apostle Paul was very careful to NOT legislate a specific course of action for the members of the Church? That is unlike many churches today, which would without hesitation have legislated for their members either that "eating is wrong" or that "eating is not wrong" (in the specific context to which Paul was referring). But Paul left the decision on this question up to the members themselves, without implying that one answer was clearly correct, and that the other answer was clearly wrong. Paul's approach here becomes very apparent if we read the whole chapter.

So it is alright if you choose not to vote. And it is equally alright if you do choose to vote. God has given you that freedom of choice.

Frank W. Nelte