

## Aim of lesson

To give the scriptural basis for the Christian's responsibilities to both the commandments of Jesus and to the demands of the civil authorities in this country, and to suggest the principles by which conflicts between the two can be resolved.

## Bible background

1 Peter 2:9-17; Colossians 1:12-14 - explaining the concept of citizenship of God's kingdom; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Romans 13:1-7 - explaining God's wishes concerning our civil obedience; Colossians 4:2-6 - summarising the standard of behaviour expected of us in everyday life.

## Preparation required

There is little apparent difficulty for most of us in serving God and Jesus Christ in this country at the present time. All our governments are 'good', there is religious tolerance, freedom of thought and speech protected by law, and general indifference to our activities.

However, imagine that you were leading this discussion at a time when this country was on a war footing, when the patriotism and loyalty of Christadelphians and their families would be called into question, or you were in a country where the Government:

- was bad, unjust, and made arbitrary rules about people it didn't like
- did not allow freedom of worship
- where true believers were considered to be spies, and are the subject of malicious gossip
- where open worship would be illegal, and true Christians would lose their friends, their jobs, and would be shunned at school.

This is the situation now for Christadelphians in some other countries, and to them the matter of 'citizenship' is not academic, but real.

## Suggested outline of lesson

This lesson has four parts to it:

- What 'citizenship' means for a true follower of Jesus.
- What God's requirements of us are with respect to the civil authorities.
- What our general standards of behaviour should be in everyday life.
- What we should do when there is a conflict between the demands of the state and the commandments of Jesus.

After you have discussed each aspect get the students to write a brief summary in their books.

## What does citizenship mean for the follower of Jesus?

The meaning of citizenship is at the heart of the Christian's relationship to the country in which he lives. Start the group discussion by asking what they think the duties and responsibilities of a good citizen are. The things they might come up with are:

- loyalty to its leader or king
- obedience to its laws
- payment of taxes
- support for other citizens
- participation in its defence/fighting
- participation in its government/voting
- a role in educating or teaching its citizens' children and young people

The Bible makes clear that all the followers of Jesus are citizens of a special nation belonging to God. 1 Peter 2:9-10.(holy = separate), Colossians 1:13-14. Thus the community of true believers makes up God's nation, or God's citizens, belonging to, and responsible to, him. The king, or leader of this community is the Lord Jesus Christ, and he calls it the 'kingdom of light'. In Philippians 3:20 we are told that "our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ ..." The Christian's king is, for the moment, in heaven, and that is where the record of their citizenship is held. The duties of the good citizen, which the class identified earlier, are owed to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his or her fellow citizens.

In Lesson 9 The kingdom of God and The Old Testament was discussed. Remind the class how things changed with the coming of Jesus. Previously the kingdom of God was contained geographically within the borders of the nation of Israel, but with the coming of Jesus it developed. Now there are people of many races living in many countries who together form a separate nation, which belongs to God, who should be living their lives according to his principles and laws.

When Jesus told Pontius Pilate that his (Jesus') kingdom was "not of this world", he touched on a special problem his followers were then to have. Basically, it was this: how could the civil authorities get along peacefully with these separate people who owed their allegiance elsewhere, and could be regarded as a series of 'states within other states'? It was the same problem that the Jews faced in their Diaspora. The next section considers this problem, and looks at the inspired advice of the Apostles.

### **What does God expect of his citizens in relation to their secular leaders ?**

If followers of Jesus come under a jurisdiction other than that of the country in which they live, does it mean that they can behave as revolutionaries, as fifth columnists, and place themselves above the law? The group may realise that this is what some cults do, such as the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, or maybe a more recent example that the young people will be familiar with. It is also a charge levelled at Christadelphians in authoritarian states. In fact, Jesus and the apostles lived in such a state, and their instructions to the first century believers are very interesting. 1 Peter 2:13-17:

It is therefore God's will that we respect authorities and obey their regulations - we must not take advantage of our freedom in Christ to act above the law. We should be model citizens, and by example persuade others of our convictions. So, our heavenly king's commandment is that we obey our earthly rulers. This is logical if we bear in mind that our earthly rulers only do so with God's permission - see Jeremiah 27:4-7 for example. We are told not only to obey the laws of our country, but to pray for our rulers and governments. Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Such prayers are rarely heard in our community. Ask the group what they think of this suggestion, and what the content of these prayers should be. They might also imagine the situation if we lived in a dictatorship, or under an oppressive government.

### **What should be our overall standards of behaviour?**

The Bible suggests that potential conflicts between believers and non-believers will be reduced if we behave considerately towards our fellow citizens. Take a look at these references:

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; Galatians 6:10; Colossians 3:23-24; Colossians 4:5-6

Ask the group to look at these references and summarise their message. They may come up with the following points:

- we should live and work unobtrusively without stirring things up or drawing attention to ourselves
- we should live in such a way that people respect us
- our acts of goodness should not be restricted to those who share our beliefs
- we should do everything as if we were doing it for Jesus himself - this can be turned round so that we can test our actions to see if we could do them in Jesus' name
- we should act wisely in the presence of non-believers - be particularly careful about how you speak

Use these replies when the group decides which actions are acceptable and which are not.

### **What should we do if conflict arises between the State's requirements and God's?**

Inevitably, circumstances arise when we have to make a choice between what God wants us to do and what the state asks. In principle, our response should be clear. Take a look at these passages: Acts 4:18-20 and 5:28-29; Daniel 3:16-18, Daniel 6:13-14.

In both cases the people involved had a lot to lose by obeying God rather than the authorities and not a great deal to gain, at least in the short term. Peter and John risked being ostracised by their friends and losing any

position they had in their home town, as well as being gaoled - they might have rationalised silence by arguing they could do their religion no good from a prison cell. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were definitely risking their lives; in fact, death was certain if they disobeyed the king. Their reply is interesting: first, they had complete faith that their God was well able to save them if he chose to do so, and secondly, that even if he gave them some indication that he would not, they would still not obey the king and worship him as if he were a god. In the students' notes there are some situations which may present a conflict between God's requirements and those of the state. Discuss these and ask the young people to fill in the grid where they can. Young people can be very black and white in their opinions or they may also be very unsure. Don't be too dogmatic or upset about what they think at the moment because issues like these are often ones that get firmed up in young peoples' minds as they mature. Just be prepared to tell them what you think, what other people think and any relevant facts, points of law or problems which they might not have considered.

## **Relevance to our lives**

The young people should be made aware of how the lives we lead in the community are governed by God's laws and how our behaviour shows our beliefs.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord God, we thank you that we live in a country where we can believe in you freely. We pray that we may not forget how blessed we are and so fail to worship you. We ask that you bless believers in countries where governments make life difficult and confirm us in our beliefs so that if times get hard for us we too may be strong.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

- Imagine that you have to write a brochure to invite people to become citizens of the kingdom of God. You have to cover all sides of the argument. Prepare a rough outline of what it would look like.
- If you have not used the mock tribunal at the end of lesson 6, you may like to do so here.