

Citizenship

LAWRENCE C. WALTERS

We live in exciting times. Over 180 years ago the Lord said, “I will hasten my work in its time.”¹ On every hand we hear from Church leaders and see evidence that *now* is that time. From temple construction to family history to conversion to reactivation, the pace is quickening. And the young adults of the Church are central to virtually every aspect of this hastening of the work.

However, this stone is not rolling forth without resistance.² These are exciting times, but they are also described as “perilous times.”³ Just as the hastening is taking place on multiple fronts, so the perils we face come from multiple directions. I would like to focus on what we can do in response to one trend that is making building the kingdom more difficult.

In 1996 Professor Jean Elshtain from the University of Chicago spoke from this stand about the state of democracy in America. She argued that we now live in a political age of resentment of and withdrawal from civic life. She described at some length the weakening of democratic civil society.⁴ As a student of public decision processes, I can tell you that conditions have not improved in the years since Professor Elshtain spoke here. The ability of democratic societies to bring together diverse

views, critically examine arguments, and take action continues to erode.

This is a problem for us because we need governments and civil society to work reasonably well if we are to effectively build the kingdom and spread the gospel. My purpose is to explore what we can do to hasten the building of the kingdom by improving the quality of governance in our society. In particular I want to consider more fully a theme that Professor Elshtain referred to briefly in her talk. She noted that the great democratic theorists argue that “democracy relies on the formation of civically engaged citizens.”⁵

Oscar Arias, former president of Costa Rica and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, once observed:

*Democracy cannot survive as a matter of institutions alone. It relies ultimately on the conscience and care of each citizen. . . . So individuals and individual choices **do** matter: the effect of one upright individual is incalculable. World leaders may see their effect in headlines, but the ultimate course of*

Lawrence C. Walters was a professor in the BYU Romney Institute of Public Management when this devotional address was given on 1 April 2014.

*the globe will be determined by the efforts of innumerable individuals acting on their consciences.*⁶

So the question I ask you to consider is, What must I do to be an engaged, conscientious, and caring citizen in a democracy? Some of you are now saying to yourself, “Oh, great, now I have to add saving democracy to the list of things I am supposed to do.” My objective, however, is not to give you one more thing to do but to give you a citizen’s approach to everything you do. In answering this question for yourself, my hope is that you will reflect more deeply on your role in our society.

To stimulate your thinking, I would like to share the personal vision that gets me out of bed every morning. In doing so I will compare being a citizen in our society to being a citizen in the kingdom of God.

Two Views of Citizenship

There are at least two ways to think about citizenship. The first sees citizens as having certain rights that should be protected by law. Those who hold this view see “citizenship as [a] legal status”⁷ and are concerned mostly with defending individual freedoms from interference by others. There is no question that rights are an important aspect of citizenship. All too often, however, in today’s world this approach to citizenship descends into a type of consumerism: citizens see themselves as no more than customers of government.

A government’s efforts to improve their operations by focusing on citizens as customers are certainly valuable. My concern is with the way we *act* when we think of ourselves as customers of government. Consumer citizenship is something we assert only occasionally. We exercise our right to vote every year or two, maybe—when we go to the polls or “the store” to choose what we want from a list. If we don’t like what is on the list, we may not even go to the store. If there is a problem in the community, we expect the government to deal with it.

Most of the time, though, we just want to be left alone. We either actively avoid or at least ignore what is going on with governments. “After all,” we say, “there is not much we can do about it anyway.” We would certainly never think about what we do at work or at school or in the neighborhood in terms of citizenship.

Some view their citizenship in the Church in this way as well. They may attend their meetings, but if they miss occasionally, no big deal. They may have a calling, but if it doesn’t get done very consistently, it is because other things came up. It may even be that they ward hop precisely because they want to limit other people’s expectations of them. They may say to themselves, “I’ll show up just often enough to keep the bishop off my back and to stay off the rescue list. I’ll think about church part of the day on Sunday, but the rest of the week is mine.”

The second vision of citizenship is more demanding and is captured well in a definition offered by Peter Block:

A citizen is one who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole. That whole can be a city block, a community, a nation, the earth. A citizen is one who produces the future, someone who does not wait, beg, or dream for the future.

*The antithesis of being a citizen is the choice to be a consumer or a client.*⁸

We often see references to a quote from Theodore Roosevelt about “the man who is actually in the arena . . . ; who does actually strive to do the deeds; . . . who spends himself in a worthy cause; . . . who . . . , if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.”⁹ What is less often remembered is that Roosevelt was describing what it means to be a citizen.

This view of citizens as doers of deeds and as active builders seems more consistent with what our Heavenly Father expects of us as fellow citizens in His kingdom. He blessed us

with agency—the ability and responsibility to act in ways that make a difference in what happens. He expects us to use our agency to be anxiously engaged in building His kingdom.

There are lessons to be learned about active citizenship in the training we have been receiving about hastening the work through ward councils. If I understand the message correctly, each member of the ward council is to prayerfully consider the needs of the members of their organization. Then, as the council meets, these needs are expressed and discussed by all members of the council. As a body the council prayerfully deliberates on the needs of ward members, investigators, and their families. All members of the council take an active role in these deliberations. They bring their own perspectives, insights, and concerns to the discussion. All are equally and fully committed to the success of their joint efforts. A course of action is decided upon and assignments are made. In the weeks that follow, those receiving assignments are asked to report on their efforts. The council can then evaluate the actions taken and follow up as needed.

I believe we can see in this example five essential attributes of active citizens in the Church and in society more broadly. Active citizens accept responsibility, do their homework, engage with others, take action, and, finally, learn from their experiences. Let me say a bit more about each of these attributes.

Active Citizens Accept Responsibility

First, active citizens accept responsibility. In the Church these citizens take seriously the covenants they have made to bless the lives of God's children and to build the kingdom of God. They are "willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole."¹⁰

Elder Alexander B. Morrison made this observation about our stewardship as citizens in the kingdom of God:

*In addition to all else for which they are responsible, faithful stewards also have a deep sense of personal commitment to the mission of the Church. They see that mission in personal terms, as one that applies directly to them and for which they bear a **personal** responsibility. They know that someday the Master will demand of them an accounting of what they did in helping to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.¹¹*

Section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants connects this view of citizenship to our role in society. This declaration of the Church's belief regarding governments states:

Governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and . . . he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society.¹²

We believe that not only are we accountable for our individual actions but that we are also individually accountable for the actions taken by our governments. This accountability extends both to "making laws and administering them." Active engagement in the functioning of government and in addressing community concerns is an inherent responsibility of our citizenship and demands our best efforts.

Active Citizens Do Their Homework

Second, active citizens do their homework. Just a few verses after the Lord says He will hasten His work in its time,¹³ He proceeds to outline what *we* need to do to prepare for that hastening. It is a challenging list: we are to "continue in prayer and fasting from" then on and

teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom [and] all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God . . . ;

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, [and] things which must shortly come

*to pass; things which are at home [and] abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms.*¹⁴

And then we are given the reason for pursuing such a broad education: “That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you.”¹⁵

So if we are to fill our role in hastening the Lord’s work, we need to devote ourselves to the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom in pretty much all fields. “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy,”¹⁶ we aren’t just interested in it—we seek *earnestly* after it.

Being an active citizen in our society requires the same kind of commitment to learning that is expected of active citizens in the kingdom of God. Eleanor Roosevelt once observed that “learning to be a good citizen is learning to live to the maximum of one’s abilities and opportunities, and every subject should be taught every child with this in view.”¹⁷ Just as we see education as central to our preparation for citizenship in the kingdom, she saw producing citizens as the true purpose of education, and I agree.

This emphasis on preparation and education reminds me of an article I read as a young graduate student. I was enthusiastic about becoming a public policy analyst and anxious to understand what would be expected of me. I read an article by a well-known professor in the field that outlined what he thought should be included in the curricula of public policy programs. It was the most discouraging article I had ever read. He said that to be a competent policy analyst I needed to master not only economics and political science but all types of history, science, technology, philosophy, psychology, and institutional design and change and then be prepared to analyze any given

public problem using methods from several of these fields simultaneously and at different scales.¹⁸ For someone just starting out in the field, it was overwhelming.

I have now been doing policy analysis for over thirty years, and I have found that this professor was right. I have needed to understand these and other fields in order to address the different problems I have worked on. But I didn’t have to master everything all at once; I did always have to be ready to learn new things. The nature of the problem I was working on determined the skills required in that situation.

The lesson I learned about preparation is that active citizens, both in the kingdom and in society, must prioritize and focus their attention on the most significant issues. They then do their research, critically evaluate information, and analyze carefully. They cultivate the ability to examine problems from the multiple perspectives that may be relevant. They seek to learn and understand all they can on any given issue.

Active Citizens Engage with Others

Third, active citizens engage with others. Paul wrote to the Ephesian converts:

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;

*In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.*¹⁹

We are linked together through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the covenants we have made to produce the finished temple. The councils of the Church are more effective when all members of a council have embraced their responsibility, done their homework, and are fully involved in council deliberations. It

is when we are all “fitly framed together”—united in our pursuit of the same eternal objectives and each contributing our utmost—that we make the most progress as a church and as a people.

It is the same in the broader society. Paul’s statement is strikingly similar to a line that Thomas Jefferson penned: “A nation, as a society, forms a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society.”²⁰

This is a weighty thought—that we are each personally responsible for our society—but that is also the declaration of Doctrine and Covenants 134. We are each accountable for the quality of governance in our communities and nations. But we are not asked to bear this responsibility alone. Our lives are interconnected with others’. Our capacities are enhanced and our possibilities expanded through cooperation and collaboration. Because of our shared responsibility and because we are so much more effective together than we are individually, as active citizens we must actively engage with others.

We must cultivate the ability to participate in collective reasoning, just as we do in Church councils. Such reasoning involves joining with others to identify issues and concerns, giving and receiving information, and taking counsel together. In this process citizens actually listen to others with a desire to understand their views. They ask questions they don’t know the answers to. They respect others, and they respect the decision process.

Inevitably, deliberative processes such as the one I have described identify conflicting points of view. When that happens, active citizens don’t give up but look for common ground and seek to build on a foundation of common understanding. We build relationships, coalitions, and networks as we patiently strive to reach joint decisions.

There is no question that serious deliberation with people we don’t agree with can be slow and frustrating—especially if we want

the Lord’s help, because then we have to get rid of all those unkind thoughts so that the Spirit can be unrestrained. My experience suggests that we make much more progress when we put aside the idea that people who don’t agree with us are ignorant of the facts, stupid, or evil and focus instead on what we have in common. Whether in the kingdom or in our society, active citizens must strive to synthesize and reconcile conflicting views, values, and priorities. This is not easy to do, even in the Church. It requires that we place the well-being of all on an equal footing and that we always balance the common good against individual claims.

One of the best examples of this type of deliberative process outside of the Church is the convention that produced the U.S. Constitution. The delegates came from different regions of the country, with strong and conflicting personal and regional interests. In creating a written constitution for a new form of government, they were attempting something that had never been done before. What they shared in common was a commitment to some very basic principles of freedom and governance. It took months of collaboration and, at times, contentious discussion, but the result has blessed the lives of millions.

Active Citizens Make Decisions and Take Action

Fourth, active citizens make decisions and take action. Active citizens realize that obtaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom is not enough and that discussion is essential but insufficient. Deliberation must result in action. Agency implies both the ability and the responsibility to act for the accomplishment of our purposes. Active citizens produce the future; they do not simply wait for it or dream about it.

One of the best examples of this active citizenship attribute I have ever encountered is my wife, Carol. At one point in our early

married life we moved to a very small town in Utah. We were concerned about the limited range of cultural opportunities in the community. Carol's response was to organize and direct a community theater. She also led an effort to relocate and expand the library. Shortly after we moved to Philadelphia so that I could attend graduate school, the teachers went on strike for several months. We had five children at the time. Carol's response was to organize the parents, find a venue, and hold classes for all the kids in our neighborhood.

When we moved to Provo, Carol continued to be involved in public education and was instrumental in developing a character education program that was implemented across the city. She is currently engaged in efforts to protect and improve environmental conditions in Utah. She is the mother of seven children, and each is a remarkable individual. Carol understands at a very fundamental level the need to take action if the future is to be better for our community than the present.

Active Citizens Learn from Experience

Fifth, active citizens learn from experience. The central purpose of life is to enable all of God's children to learn and develop through the exercise of their agency. As active citizens we should reflect on our own experiences and that of others as we continue to accept responsibility, do our homework, actively engage with others, make decisions, and take action. In the kingdom we learn through this process to become more Christlike. In society we learn from our experience to exemplify Christlike attitudes that will strengthen our communities. These attitudes include the humility to recognize that we might not be right, the empathy to strive to understand the minds of other men and women, the charity to value their interests alongside our own without bias, and the strength to aspire to a world in which the least are heard and considered side by side with the greatest.²¹

Conclusion

I have briefly described five attributes of active citizens. I am convinced that developing these attributes will make each of us more effective in our citizenship roles. When Abraham Lincoln dedicated the cemetery at Gettysburg, he spoke of "the great task remaining before us"—the task of preserving a free and democratic government. The work of carrying out that task is not finished, and it never will be. It will always require active citizens to maintain a "government of the people, by the people, for the people."²²

For me and, I hope, for you, active citizenship in the kingdom of God and active citizenship in society are not separate. When I am in the service of humanity, I am in the service of my God, whether that is in my Church calling or in advising a developing country on how to raise the tax money needed to improve public services. I hope to go wherever opportunity presents itself to try to improve the functioning of governments, because governments have such a huge impact on the freedom, security, and happiness of all people. That connection between government and the well-being of God's children is why the Lord needs active citizens and why preparing students for careers in professional public service is essential to the mission of BYU.

What I have shared represents my vision and my testimony of what we need to become—what I strive to become. I am not suggesting that you must single-handedly save the world or even just democracy, but your path through your life is not intended to be a "leave-no-trace" hiking experience!

If you will live your life as an active citizen, you *will* have an impact on "the ultimate course of the globe."²³ The Lord will use you to hasten His work in ways unimaginable to you today. These are exciting times. The Lord has such confidence in us. May we as active citizens be willing to accept responsibility, do our homework, actively engage with

others, take action, and always learn from our experiences.

I will close with words penned by the Prophet Joseph Smith from Liberty Jail, with a slight addition:

*Therefore, dearly beloved brethren [and sisters, my fellow citizens], let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed.*²⁴

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. D&C 88:73.
2. See D&C 65:2.
3. 2 Timothy 3:1; see Cecil O. Samuelson, "Perilous Times," *Ensign*, November 2004, 49–51.
4. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Democracy at Century's End," BYU forum address, 29 October 1996.
5. Elshtain, "Democracy."
6. Oscar Arias, quoted in Rushworth M. Kidder, *Shared Values for a Troubled World: Conversations with Men and Women of Conscience* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), 269; emphasis in original.
7. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "citizenship," section 1.1, plato.stanford.edu/entries/citizenship/#1.1.
8. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 63.
9. Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic," speech delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910.
10. Block, *Community*, 63.
11. Alexander B. Morrison, *Feed My Sheep: Leadership Ideas for Latter-day Shepherds* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 24–25; emphasis in original.
12. D&C 134:1.
13. See D&C 88:73.
14. D&C 88:76–79.
15. D&C 88:80.
16. Article of Faith 1:13.
17. Eleanor Roosevelt, "Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education," *Pictorial Review* 31, no. 4 (April 1930): 316.
18. See Yehezkel Dror, "New Advances in Public Policy Teaching," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 2, no. 3 (spring 1983): 449–54.
19. Ephesians 2:19–21.
20. Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to George Hammond, 29 May 1792.
21. See Learned Hand, speech given on "I Am an American Day" (commonly known as "The Spirit of Liberty" speech), 21 May 1944, New York City; see Hand, "The Faith We Fight For," *New York Times Magazine*, 2 July 1944, 26.
22. Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 19 November 1863.
23. Oscar Arias, quoted in Kidder, *Shared Values*, 269.
24. D&C 123:17.