

Paul's *Politeuma*: He Lives His Life before God, Acts 23:1; the *Politeuma* Metaphor in Phil 1: Roman Citizenship Illustrates Heavenly Citizenship, Phil 1:27

17. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, before charges could be sent to Rome, the commander had to know the nature of the charges against him.

Acts 22:30 - On the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he [**Lysias**] released Paul and ordered the chief priests and all the Council [**συνέδριον, sunedrion: Sanhedrin**] to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

Acts 23:1 - Paul, looking intently at the Sanhedrin, said, "Fellow Jews, I have lived [**πολιτεύω, politeuō**] my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."

18. The English translations miss the thrust of what Paul is saying here: (1) KJV, "I have lived," (2) NIV, "I have fulfilled my duty," and (3) NASB and NET, "I have lived my life."
19. In each case we have the translation of one Greek word: **πολιτεύω, politeuō**, which is the word for citizenship but which we will learn means a whole lot more in this context. The NIV comes closest with "I have fulfilled my duty."
20. Paul is telling the Sanhedrin that he has lived his life as a citizen in accordance with the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of the heavenly community.
21. Paul's use of the word to his Jewish brethren is a proclamation that he is a member of God's kingdom and he has conscientiously performed the duties of a citizen of the heavenly commonwealth.
22. The previous day before Chiliarchos Lysias, Paul had claimed his *Roman* citizenship. Here before the Sanhedrin he claims his *heavenly* citizenship.
23. This began a very involved and extended legal process which lasted several years and eventuated in bringing Paul to Rome.
24. In fact, before it was over, Paul would endure seven trials, all initiated by religious opponents and ending with his decapitation at Rome in the summer of A.D. 68 during the reign of Nero.
25. Paul faced trials before:
- 1) The city officials in Philippi in Acts 16 where Paul used his *politeuma* privileges to gain release from the local "chief magistrates" who had imprisoned him and Silas.
 - 2) The Proconsul Gallio \gal'-i-ō\ of Achaia \a-kā'-ya\ while in Corinth.
 - 3) The high priest Ananias and the Sanhedrin in Acts 23.
 - 4) Governor Felix of Caesarea in Acts 24.

- 5) Governor Festus of Caesarea in Acts 25.
 - 6) King Herod Agrippa II in Acts 26.
 - 7) Emperor Nero in Rome in Acts 28.
26. It was in prison at Rome that Paul wrote the Epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. It is in the Book of Philippians that we find Paul driving home the point of the heavenly citizenship of the Church Age believer.
27. In a Roman colony where *politeuma* is completely understood, Paul uses the word in a metaphor to describe the unique aristocracy of the believer.

9. The *Politeuma* Metaphor in Philippians 1:

1. In chapter one, Paul speculates as to whether he will be executed by the Roman government or be set free. He points out that his *modus vivendi* on earth is Christ while his physical death would be a profit for him personally: Philippians 1:21.
2. Paul continues by comparing two options associated with his future fate: if he goes on living, it would be a benefit for the churches, however, if he dies, it would be a benefit for him: Philippians 1:23-26.
3. In verse 27, Paul says that no matter what happens, the Philippian church is to continue to stand fast in the face of opposition.
4. The way these believers are to make this stand is through oneness of mind: *esprit de corps* through the filling of the Holy Spirit and utilization of the divine operating assets.
5. The members of the Philippian church lived in a Roman colony. Its citizens were to demonstrate the superiority of the Roman lifestyle and supremacy of their *politeuma*.
6. The church was made up of those who both possessed Roman citizenship and those who were simply citizens of District 1 of the Province of Macedonia.
7. Having been identified as followers of the new religion called Christianity, all were under pressure and most were persecuted.
8. Whether they possessed Roman citizenship and its *politeuma* or not, they were keenly aware of its advantages under this cosmic intimidation.
9. Among those bringing pressure on these believers were the Judaizers, Christians in the early church who thought it was necessary that Gentile converts to Christianity be circumcised and observe the Jewish law.¹

¹ J. D. Douglas (general editor), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 554.

10. In Philippians 1:27, Paul challenges them to continue to stand fast in doctrine as they stand fast as Roman citizens who utilize their *politeuma*:

Philippians 1:27 - Conduct yourselves [πολιτεύω, *politeuō*] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

1. The opening phrase “conduct yourselves” misses the force of the statement. The clause is really just one word, the present middle imperative of the verb **πολιτεύω, *politeuō***.
2. An analysis of this word and its cognates is important to the understanding of our study:

Heaven is like a city (*polis*); Christ is its sovereign (*Kurios*), and it has its own laws and constitution (*politeia*). Christians are its citizens (*politai*); they have the rights of citizenship (*politeuma*). Such a citizenship carries with it rights and privileges but also obligations and responsibilities. Each one is then required to “live as a citizen” (*politeuomai* [*politeuō*]), i.e., according to the laws and the spirit of this city, conformably to its statutes. (p. 124)

The citizen (*politēs*) is one who—living in community with his compatriots—is a legal subject and participates in the political life of the city. (p. 125)

The defining characteristic of a *politēs* (citizen) is possessing *politeia*, the right of citizenship. Rome and the Greek cities used to grant this honor to their benefactors, to particularly deserving persons, veterans and military leaders, politicians, men of letters, officials, physicians whose merits they wished to honor or reward or whose services they wanted to gain. Thus citizenship was a title of nobility that placed its beneficiary in the ranks of aristocracy. (pp. 125-26)

This information greatly enhances our understanding of the clash between the chiliarch Claudius Lysias, who boasted that he had purchased citizenship at a high cost and Paul, who answered “But it was mine at birth” (Acts 22:28-29). Inheriting the title greatly increased its value. Apart from the honor involved, citizenship conferred many practical advantages: Equality before the law, immunity, exemption from customs taxes and tribute, from public levies and burdensome duties. Inheritance rights and property rights were greatly enhanced. Hence the praise of Aelius Aristides \ar-a-stīd'-ēz\: “Of all the things that can be said in praise of the Romans, one thing is by far most worthy of attention: the magnanimity they have demonstrated in the matter of citizenship and even their very way of thinking of this right. Indeed, the world has never seen the like.” Especially with respect to legal proceedings, the *civīs* (L: citizen) was free to choose his court in his own country and to be judged according to its laws or to appear before Roman magistrates. Paul used this right to appeal to the supreme jurisdiction of the emperor (Acts 25:11-12, [Καίσαρα ἐπικαλοῦμαι, *Kaisara epikaloumai*: “I appeal to Caesar.”]). (pp. 127-128)

Politeia also refers to the organization or system of government of the state, its constitution, its ancestral institutions, and finally “the commonwealth of free men,” the life of the citizen within his city, his political activity, all the forms of interaction with the life of the state. Hence pagans ... were not only incapable of being incorporated in the Israelite theocracy, but they were as alien as they could be to the covenants, “without Christ,” having no hope of salvation (Acts 26:6-7), without God’s providence and help. Only citizens benefited from the protection of the *polis* (government). But through baptism, the Gentiles became “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the family of God” (Ephesians 2:19); their names are written in the rolls of the heavenly Jerusalem (Luke 10:20), and they possess full rights of citizenship and the attendant privileges, in particular quality with the “natives,” i.e., the Jews (Ephesians 2:14-16) or the angels, those great elder denizens of the celestial city (Hebrews 12:22-23), and even brotherhood with them, since they are henceforth members of the same family (Galatians 6:10). (pp. 128-29)

In the strict sense of the word, a *politeuma* is an organization of citizens from the same place, with the same rights in the midst of a foreign state. (p. 130)

So we see how Paul could write “For our part, we are citizens of heaven” [Philippians 3:20, Ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει, *Humōn gar to politeuma en ouranois huparchei*], especially since the “community” at Philippi, largely made up of Antony’s veterans, and then Augustus’s, enjoyed the municipal rights of the *ius italicum*. The Pauline *politeuma* of Philippians is not so much a reference to their citizenship, nor even their status as a “colony.” It is a community of foreign nationals with a threefold meaning: (a) local—our *politeuma* is in heaven; (b) political, conferring liberty and equality on all its members, full rights; (c) constitutional and legal—exclusive dependency on the supreme authority of the *Kurios*, Jesus. (p. 131)

The Israelites had a particularly vivid awareness of their place in their people’s tradition and law, of what they called *politeuesthai*, “living as a citizen”; which leads to personal behavior that is conformed to the common law, a nuance of public life. In this sense, Paul proclaims before the Sanhedrin: “I have lived before God with a clear conscience” (Acts 23:1), observing the laws of the divine *politeia*. According to Xenophon, this verb means “subscribe to a rule, submit to a discipline.” It is with civic connotation that the apostle instructs Christians, “Live as a citizen worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). To live out one’s citizenship is to conduct oneself according to the demands of the *politeia*, which means first of all being willing to take on a public function, to consider oneself in all of one’s actions as a member of a social body, and accordingly to say nothing and do nothing that is not appropriate for a citizen of heaven. But it is also a call to honor, to preserve one’s country’s spirit or mindset—*noblesse oblige*.² (pp. 131-33)

3. This analysis of the *politeuō* word group informs us of the nuances that each possesses. In Philippians 1:27, Paul uses *politeuō* to solicit the Philippians to develop behavior patterns that comply with what is expected of a citizen of heaven, “Conduct yourselves as citizens who behave worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

² Spicq, Ceslas. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3:124-133.

4. Each member of the Philippian church was aware of the importance of Roman citizenship, the responsibilities it required and the privileges it provided.
5. Paul takes up this idea and commands them to look on their spiritual citizenship as superior to that of every earthly *polis* – city, or state, or empire – just as from the establishment perspective Roman citizenship was superior to all others.
6. In other words, Paul is commanding the believers in Philippi to think as aristocrats who are citizens of a heavenly community.
7. Why does he command this? The verse continues with the introduction of a purpose clause by the conjunction **ἵνα, hina**:

Philippians 1:27 - Conduct yourselves as citizens who behave [πολιτεύω, *politeuō*] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ [ἵνα, *hina*], in order that whether I come to Philippi or remain absent, I will hear that you are standing fast [στήκω, *stēkō*] in one Spirit [πνεῦμα, *pneuma*] and one soul [ψυχῆ, *psuchē*] cooperating in the conflict [συναθλέω, *sunathleō*] for the faith of the gospel.