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Witness in the Public Square

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Abstract

This article aims to encourage Christians to respond with vigor to Christ's call to follow him in whole-life discipleship. Life in the public square, which includes the responsibilities of citizenship and government, is one of the arenas in which our love of God and love of neighbors must be exhibited. With biblical and historical arguments, the author emphasizes two principles of justice that obligate governments and citizens. The first is "structural pluralism," which requires constitutional recognition and protection of the diversity of God's creatures and the diversity of human responsibilities and organizations. The second is "confessional pluralism," rooted in God's patience and mercy in this age, made manifest in the rain and sunshine that falls on the just and unjust alike. One of the implications for political life is that all citizens should be treated with equal justice without discrimination due to their faith.

Almost everyone in the world today lives in some form of a state that has membership in the United Nations. Some states are so undeveloped or broken that they hardly represent a genuinely governable political community. Others may lack some of the essentials of a dependable, trustworthy government such that many, if not most, of their citizens (or mere subjects) do not trust them or give allegiance to them. Many other states, however, have strong institutions of government, including functioning court systems, regular elections, accountable legislative and executive bodies, and other elements of a rule-of-law system, all of which help them maintain relatively high levels of civic allegiance.

Regardless of the kind of state in which Christians live, they are to bear witness to Christ. Some do so at great cost—even the cost of their lives. Many Christians are being driven from their homes, persecuted, or slaughtered precisely because they are Christians. In some settings they are mistreated or marginalized with disdain. Yet in other cases, there are states in which Christians enjoy the same standing, protection, and participation in their political communities that every other citizen enjoys. Whatever the case Christians must decide how to act in their capacities as citizens or subjects. Should their witness in the public arena be a matter of high or low importance to them? Should they try to keep their distance from politics or, if possible, should they engage with vigor and commitment?

In this essay I want to make the case, on biblical and historical grounds, for the high importance of purposeful Christian engagement in public life, including political and governmental life. Whether that witness can be nothing more than to hold fast to Christ while suffering torture or death (Heb 11:35–37; Acts 7:1–59) or can be much more, even the full participation of free citizens able to work for a more just public order (Job 29:1–24; Jer 22:11–17; Isa 1:13–17), Christian public witness is fundamental to our life in Christ as faithful disciples in all that he calls us to do.

Beyond our citizenship in different states, Christians need to become more fully conscious that we live today in a shrinking world that allows us to be in touch with one another more closely and quickly than ever before. We no longer live in relatively self-contained states with little or no contact with "foreigners" across the globe. The awareness and tangibility of a worldwide Christian community was hard to imagine or understand for many centuries, but it is at hand today if we will only reach out to make it so.[1] Among other things, we need to change our speech and thinking from referring to ourselves as Indonesian Christians or American Christians or Kenyan Christians to speaking of one another as members of the body of Christ—fellow Christians—who may be Indonesian citizens, American citizens, or Kenyan citizens. In the Bible we read that after the resurrection of Jesus he told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," making clear that on that basis they were to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18–19 NIV). And in the same way, just before his ascension, when Jesus was continuing to teach them about the kingdom of God, he told them that after they received power from the Holy Spirit, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the

[1] See Michael W. Goheen and Erin G. Glanville, eds., *The Gospel and Globalization* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2009).

ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV). We are members of a worldwide community of faith whose highest authority is Jesus Christ, the Lord, and within that community we are, subordinately, citizens of different countries, workers in different occupations, and members of different families.

On what basis should we approach the challenge of Christian witness in public life? At the most basic level we have the great commandments—to love God with our whole lives and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:34–40). We also know a great deal from Israel's history: God's covenant law holds Israel's judges, kings, and people accountable to be righteous and to do justice. This is magnified in the words of the prophets delivered against the wickedness of the people and their governing authorities. Justice and righteousness were fundamental norms for Israel's life and governance in a wide variety of social, economic, and ecological ways.

In fact, an examination of justice and righteousness in the Old Testament shows a significant contrast with Greek political thinking from the time of Plato and Aristotle until the end of city-state independence. In Greek thought, contextualized by life in diverse city states, justice was seen to be part of an ideal *form* of political community. It was believed that if reason could grasp that ideal form, then it could shape the ever-changing conditions of actual political life. Even today, people throughout the world who have been influenced by Greek philosophy tend to ask, what is the ideal form of government? The Bible, however, does not speak of an ideal *form* of government or polity but rather presents God's *normative* call to do justice. Justice is a *norm* that calls us to act in accord with it, not a *form* that entices the quest for rational capture of an ideal state. In the development of life through changing circumstances, Israel's responsibility was to do what is just in keeping with God's commandments regardless of whether the people were wandering in the wilderness or living under judges or kings.

Paul's brief account in Romans 13 of God's will for ministers of government is that they are to encourage the good and punish evildoers. Paul does not even hint at an ideal rational form from which we deduce just laws, institutions, and procedures. Nor does he hint at what governments should and should not do to encourage the good or to punish evildoers. It is clear from many parts of the New Testament that God is the merciful judge and that those who govern and those who are governed bear responsibility to do what is right in God's sight in relation to one another and their neighbors. There has, of course, been a long history of Christians acting politically. There have been martyrs who chose to suffer death because of their faith. At the other end of the spectrum there have been Christian advisers to, and officers of, governments. Depending on their circumstances and convictions,

communities of Christians have either shunned or accommodated themselves to different forms of government, including the Roman imperial system adopted by the emperor Constantine, after his conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century. At the time of the Reformation, Anabaptist dissenters chose to stand apart from both government and the churches that continued to accept church-state bonds. This is not the occasion to try to detail any of this history.[2] Yet we know today that Christians throughout the world living in almost every conceivable kind of political system continue to face everything from dictatorial oppression to opportunities of participation in open political systems. Political debates and governing struggles around the world continue over what makes for a just political constitution and over particular laws that deal with taxation, education, health care, religious freedom, immigration, economic development, wealth and poverty, and so much more. Internal to almost every political order (or disorder) in the world are tensions, if not outright conflicts, between the powerful and those who lack power, and often between ethnic, religious, regional, and interest groups.

Nor are these tensions restricted to the internal affairs of states. Increasingly, the struggles are between and among states internationally. There are different cultural and civilizational dynamics at work in the world that have shaped and continue to shape political life. There has been, for example, the extensive and long-term shaping power of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and other centuries-old religions.[3] There have also been newer religions and ideological movements that grow from and often conflict with older religious traditions and also defy the borders of today's states.[4] In addition, due to rapid population growth and technological changes in the past century or two, we witness mounting international difficulties in trade, environmental pollution, the sale of arms, and access to energy, water, and food resources. In times of war, persecution, drought, and famine, massive migrations take place as people seek refuge, freedom, and economic opportunity. There is

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[2] There are many histories of the church, government, and political thought that cover this. See, for example, Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); S. E. Finer, *The History of Government*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997–1999); and an overview in James W. Skillen, *The Good of Politics: A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 47–114.

[3] See Peter J. Katzenstein, "Civilizational States, Secularisms, and Religions," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145–65; and Rex Ahdar and Nicholas Aroney, eds., *Shari'a in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4] See David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); and Jonathan Chaplin and Robert Joustra, eds., *God and Global Order* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

also the ever growing number of corporate and non-government organizations with an international character ranging from aid and development organizations to terrorist groups, from churches to banking corporations, from sports associations to drug and sex-trafficking rings.

I mention all these things to remind us that Christian engagement in public service, which is part of our witness to the lordship of Christ, must face up to the full reality in which we live. It will not be enough for Christians to concentrate on only one or two matters of great concern such as religious freedom, humanitarian relief in times of crisis, and protection of the unborn. We must develop a more comprehensive understanding of the normative obligations of governments and citizens both in contrast and relation to the different responsibilities that belong to families, churches, schools, business enterprises, and international public and private organizations. Only if we gain greater clarity about the responsibilities that governments should and should not exercise, will we be able to gain perspective on how they should deal justly within the public commons as well as in relation to the non-government organizations and institutions that exercise different kinds of responsibilities.

My focus in this essay is primarily on the witness of Christians in their capacity as citizens in relation to their governments. Yet we should not overlook that the words "public square" and "public life" often refer to something broader than political life. The word "public" can have a narrower or broader meaning. Often, in a country like the United States, people think of family life, church life, and most personal relationships as private matters, whereas life in the larger business world, in print and television media, in commerce, and in politics is thought of as public life. Regardless of how narrowly or broadly the public realm is understood, humans always bear responsibility to do justice to one another in ways appropriate to each organization and relationship. Doing what is right with one's children, among members of a church, and between employees and employers is obligatory for Christians everywhere, for it is an extension of the obligation to love our neighbors.

At the same time, I would argue that a family or a church, a business corporation or an art museum does not exist for the purpose of doing justice. Each has its own purpose that is distinguishable from the others. Of course, within each of those organizations or institutions the norm of justice holds members accountable to one another while they seek to achieve their purpose. But the doing of justice in those cases is an accompanying responsibility, not the reason for their existence. By contrast, a political community of government and citizens exists precisely to do justice. It does not exist to raise children or to produce products for a market; it does not exist as a worship community or for the purpose of developing agricultural and artistic

talents. That is why I am choosing to focus on the "public square" as constituted by a political community of citizens under government. And it will become clear in what follows that one of the most important questions of justice for a political community—a state—is how it should be related to the human responsibilities that are *not* political in character. If human beings function as citizens in the political realm, they are always more than citizens. They are simultaneously family members and may also be farmers or bookkeepers, artists or scientists, teachers or journalists, engineers or nurses. How should the political community be organized so that it does justice to human beings in their full, multidimensional identity as both citizens and more than citizens? This question is most urgent for those of us who recognize that we, created in the image of God, bear witness to Christ in all that we do—in all the different capacities and responsibilities of our lives.

This last question of what a just state should be is first of all a question of *constitutionalism*. That is to say, we are dealing here with the matter of how a political order should be constituted. This is the foundational question of political life. In internationally recognized legal terms it is the question of the *basic law* that sets the terms for government and citizenship. At the start it is necessary to answer the question of what governments and citizens should be responsible to do, in contrast to what parents, teachers, business owners, or scientists should be responsible to do. What are the proper responsibilities of government, and what are the boundaries of the exercise of its authority and power? In other words, how and on what terms should a political community be *constituted*?

The matter of constitutionalism is not simply one of writing a carefully worded document. Many constitutions have been written in many countries, but some of them remain little more than paper on a shelf. They have little to do with the structure and functioning of the states they are supposed to constitute as basic law because the actual patterns of the political order do not resemble the terms of the document. Undeveloped citizenship among people who are primarily governed by local tribes may leave a central government powerless. An authoritarian government that is not held accountable by courts of justice and an independent legislative body may function without regard to what the written constitution says. Many authoritarian and totalitarian governments rule arbitrarily outside of any law regardless of what the written constitution might say.[5]

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[5] On the diverse structure of society just outlined, and on principles of a just constitutional order to be discussed in what follows, see Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Finer, *The History of Government*, vol. 3; Jeanne Heffernan Schindler, ed., *Christianity and Civil Society: Catholic and Neo-Calvinist*

In light of this reality I would like to outline two fundamental principles that I believe should be binding on and within any political community. It will not be enough to think of these principles as something merely to be written into a constitution; they are in the first place principles that need to be owned by citizens and woven into the fabric of their political culture. For that reason a Christian witness in the public square must be educationally as well as politically active. Even in countries like the United States, which has an old and still operating constitution, and Indonesia, which has a relatively new and not yet fully operative constitution, these two principles will challenge what is inadequate about those constitutional systems. And in countries that are far from having an adequately constituted public order or are failed states, these principles can point in the direction of what, in my view, needs to be done in order to build more just communities of governments and citizens.

The first principle arises from the very character of the created order—God's creation. God not only made many different kinds of creatures but also gave humans a wide range of responsibilities. To begin with, think of the diverse responsibilities arising from the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28–29, to be fruitful and fill the earth and to have dominion over it. Marriage leads to children and families, which entail training, education, and the creative development of speech, imagination, and extensive involvement with all other creatures. Learning to tend sheep or farm a field are among the many different kinds of agricultural responsibilities. Enjoying the food provided for us leads to an extremely wide range of culinary artistry. Teaching young people has led to the building of schools, universities, and research centers. As the human generations unfold and the work of earthly stewardship develops, humans invent tools, build houses, organize choirs for music making, engineer bridges, design water and sewage systems, invent astronomical instruments, and create complex institutions. Through these actions, which require cooperative, coordinated teamwork, stewardship becomes possible.

Consequently, at the very foundation of the just governance of political communities there must be the recognition and protection of the diverse non-political responsibilities of human creatures. Governments do not create families and entrepreneurial inventiveness; they do not create scientific exploration and the arts of teaching and learning. These capabilities arise from creatures made in the image of God, called to be servants of the Creator in all kinds of ways. This means, constitutionally speaking, that as a matter of

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Perspectives (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); and James W. Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 59–109.

principle both public law and governing officials are obligated to recognize and do right by all that is *not* governmental in human society as well as doing right by the political community itself. Over the years I have referred to the normative principle behind this obligation as "structural pluralism." There may be better words to use, but it means quite simply that a just political order must do justice to the differentiated order of creation, including the diverse responsibilities and institutions of human life. A state's constitution must, as a matter of principle, view all of these creatures and responsibilities as a "structured plurality." Among other things this means that both totalitarianism and individualism violate the just organizing principles of constitutional law. Every kind of authoritarianism from above the law and every means of reducing human society to individual rights and freedom alone must be rejected as a way of ordering and governing a political community.

This very brief introduction to a basic principle of Christian public witness does not imply that there is only one model of constitutional order for the whole world. There can be different ways to organize political life under the rule of law. The boundaries of a state as well as the boundaries of other organizations and institutions must be recognized if public justice is to be established and upheld. Essentially, the work of law begins by correctly identifying the distinctive identity of persons, institutions, and nonhuman creatures. The law, governments, and judges cannot do justice to both profit and nonprofit organizations without proper criteria for distinguishing them from one another. The law cannot do justice to a school if it treats it the same as a business corporation. Justice cannot be done to church institutions if they are treated like banks or symphony orchestras.

It seems to me that Christians should readily understand and promote this principle, which is founded in the very order of creation. By God's mercy and grace most people in the world find repulsive the slaughter of the innocent. Arbitrary, authoritarian governments are not typically lauded as legitimate. The crushing of human aspirations, the toxic destruction of air, water, soil, and plants that degrades animal and human life is not usually praised as something governments should encourage and promote. My point here is simply that the constitutional principle of structural pluralism comes not from the will or imagination of a sectarian group or as an outcome of interest-group brokering; it bears witness to the order of reality, which Christians recognize is God's creation. By God's grace, the norms of the creation's order that obligate us in all of life continue to press upon everyone, regardless of whether we choose to heed them.

The second principle I want to put forward is grounded in the loving mercy and gracious patience of God in response to human disobedience

and defiance of God. We all deserve God's just punishment, which according to the Bible is exemplified by the curses promised in Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut 11:26–29). The most dramatic biblical accounts of such judgment include the great flood (Gen 6–7), the driving of Israel and then Judah into exile because of their violation of God's covenants (e.g., Isa 8–9; Jer 22, 25, 39), and most climactically, the crucifixion of Jesus, who bore the sins of the whole world in his death. Yet throughout the Bible, even as we hear of the deserved judgment of the unrighteous, we also hear the cries of psalmists and prophets, asking God, why do the righteous suffer and the unrighteous prosper? How is that just? There is great mystery in God's withholding of judgment from those who deserve it. Yet the good news that comes with that withholding of judgment is God's call to sinners to repent, a call made possible by Christ's death for us while we were all running in the wrong direction in our sin.

One of the parables of Jesus, a parable that Jesus himself interpreted for his disciples, is that of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. That parable is as complete an account of the mystery of God's mercy as I think we find in the Gospels. It is a parable of the kingdom and has to do with the whole world. It is the world in which the master authorized the planting of good seed. But mysteriously (as regards our understanding) the devil is at work and weeds (tares) start growing up with the good plants. That kind of evil should not exist in God's good world. The most natural thing one can imagine is that the field workers report this travesty to the master and ask for permission to pull up the weeds. But the master says, "no." The explanation is twofold. If an attempt is made to pull up the weeds, some of the good plants might be destroyed, and it is not the responsibility of the workers to do the separating. Jesus explains that the good plants represent the children of the kingdom, and the weeds came from the devil's hand. At the end of the age, God will send his angels to do the separating.

Why has God allowed the devil to sow bad seed and allowed the weeds to continue to grow with the good plants? That is a mystery only partly explained by Jesus when he says that such judgment will come at the end, not now. At the end of this age "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil" (Matt 13:41 NIV). All that we need to know is that the separation of good plants from weeds at harvest time will be done by the angels at God's direction, not by us. The implication, stated in the parable itself, is that the wheat and weeds will, consequently, grow up together in the same field of the kingdom, enjoying the same rain and sunshine, until the end. And that is simply a restatement of God's patience and mercy in allowing

sin and evil to persist in this world until God brings about final judgment. We might think this is a mistake, an unjust one, but from the viewpoint of the good plants, it is an act of God's mercy and grace, and it gives time for evildoers to repent. As we know from the further teaching of the apostles, God's patience allows for the gospel to go out to the whole world, calling sinners everywhere to repent and believe the gospel. Why has God chosen to do things this way? We do not know, but we are to trust what Jesus tells us and what the Spirit guides us to do.

This parable, which has immense implications for politics and government, fits perfectly with something else Jesus taught, according to Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains that it is one thing to love one's neighbor, but the high calling of the faithful should be to "love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44 ESV). In doing that, Jesus says, it will show that you are children of "your Father in heaven." For what does the Father in heaven do? "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (vv. 45–46). Do not stop at loving those who love you, says Jesus. Even pagans do that. Instead, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). What this reveals about God is that he does not just love those who already return that love; God loves even his enemies. And we are to be like our Father in heaven and act that way too. Part of the mystery of God's loving patience is that it reveals something of who God is and something we are to emulate by acting in the same way.

Now, when I say that there are immense implications here for Christian witness in the public square, I mean, first of all, that we need to look at all our neighbors through the eyes of the two biblical passages just mentioned. Among other things, it means that we should recognize that we are not responsible to separate the righteous from the unrighteous in public life. Politically speaking, in other words, the Christian way of life entails our adherence to the second important principle I am introducing here, namely, equal treatment under public law of all citizens in a political community without discriminating among them for reasons of their faith. God's rain and sunshine come on all of us alike. We should acknowledge this reality as an exhibition of God's grace. This does not mean that there should be no laws and no criteria of judgment about what is lawful and unlawful in the political arena. It simply means that good citizenship, sound governments, and just laws require equal place and treatment of all citizens within that public order. The political community of citizens and government under law is not an ecclesiastical community of faith; it is not a family or a business enterprise. It is a public-legal community for all. The same civil and criminal

laws should apply equally to every person. Citizens who profess faith in Christ should be treated no better or worse than other citizens.

My preferred designation for this second principle is "confessional pluralism," which is a somewhat richer phrase than "religious freedom." It means not simply that individuals should have the right to worship as they please or to speak freely of their faith. It means that as a matter of principle, governments should do justice to all citizens both in giving them unprejudiced treatment in the public square and in recognizing their right to the exercise of their religious convictions in nongovernment organizational ways. This is one of the points at which the two principles of pluralism reinforce each other. The multiple responsibilities that humans exercise in family life, education, publishing companies, the arts, and so forth, require recognition and just treatment as nongovernmental responsibilities. That is the structural pluralist principle articulated earlier. And those who exercise those diverse responsibilities along with their civic responsibilities should be treated without discrimination with respect to their basic beliefs, their different faiths.

Confessional pluralism is not a principle for the church. Churches and other faith communities are organized around particular commitments of faith for membership. It would make no sense to say that a church should include in its membership any and every person of all faiths. That would be like saying that a business enterprise should treat as a paid employee anyone who wants to work in it regardless of the person's capabilities and fitness for the job. It would be like saying that a football team should include athletes from any sport regardless of the athlete's ability to play football. Diverse nongovernment responsibilities are particular and distinct by their very nature. A church community is a community of faith in Jesus Christ. Part of what constitutes a just political order, which should treat all citizens equally, is the principle of confessional pluralism, which means recognizing that nongovernmental organizations of faith need to be free to be themselves. Confessional freedom means is that citizens should have the same treatment from government with regard to their diverse responsibilities in society, and since government should not have the authority to decide what the true faith of all citizens should be, its obligation is to give equal treatment to all regardless of their faith. That is one of the differences between a church and a state.

These two principles just introduced are not sufficient to account for a full, normative description of how a constitutional political community should be organized. Taking into account both the order of creation and God's mercy and patience in response to the negative effects of sin in all of life is only the beginning of a Christian witness in the public square. Many additional, important distinctions will have to be made, for example, between civil and

criminal laws, between procedural and regulatory rules, between policies of benefit directed to the commons and those directed to particular social purposes. The responsibilities of police and military forces must be carefully stipulated to determine justifiable use of force by governments and the penalties for misuse of force by private persons as well as public officials. Internal to the life of a political community, countless decisions must be made by lawmakers, executives, and adjudicators about how to support the education of citizens, along with the building and maintenance of infrastructures such as roads, sewers, and energy grids. The kinds of governmental and nongovernmental responsibilities that arise in any country will depend on how broadly or narrowly the people have developed their talents, organizations, and economy. This is not the place to try to explain or offer arguments about any of this. Yet I mention them because government and politics are about more than just retributive justice and the restraint of public evils. They are also about the administration and coordination of life in the public square to maintain a healthy commons where justice can be done to every citizen, to the diverse range of nongovernmental responsibilities, and to the common good of the political community itself.

Governing is an art. Though the purpose of public governance is different from that of every other institution, it has some characteristics similar to any large institution—a university, or a business corporation, or an international bank—that requires mastery of the arts of administration, coordination, organization, and promotion. Not every citizen will be able to master or even understand the requirements of good government and of good laws, but we all have obligations, as citizens, to make judgments about qualifications for public office and the evaluation of just and unjust laws. This is where a Christian witness in the public square depends in part on the contribution of those who are able to focus their attention full-time on these matters and thereby assist Christians in understanding them and gaining civic wisdom. There are Christians who have the ability and God's calling to dedicate themselves to political and governmental life. They can thereby help to educate fellow citizens in the responsibilities of citizenship. Most of us understand that Christian witness would be very weak indeed if there were no pastors or teachers and no congregations of worship and fellowship. Following the Christian way of life is not something each individual believer can do on his or her own. From this it follows that Christian witness in the public square is not something that can be achieved by each individual Christian citizen acting alone. For that witness to be wise and mature it requires communal efforts in prayer, civic education, policy research, and judicious criticism of existing laws and of those who serve in public office.

In sum, this essay has been an attempt to encourage fellow Christians to take seriously the admonitions of Jesus, Paul, and the Letter to the Hebrews to grow in maturity and the habits of righteousness. To grow in that way includes learning to discern the difference between good and evil in every sphere of our responsibilities. The words from Jesus are many and varied, including, for example, the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt 5:6 ESV) and the admonition to love even our enemies, which is closely related to, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:44, 48 ESV). Paul urges the Thessalonians to "test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:21–22 ESV). And the author of Hebrews, urging his readers to grow up into maturity, says that the "teaching about righteousness" is not grasped by the immature but only by those who can eat "solid food"—those who "by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:13–14 ESV). Much of this New Testament teaching carries forward what we find in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. And it is all part of the high importance of building up the body of Christ, strengthening its ability to be a faithful, maturing, and enduring witness to the lordship of Christ over all things. May this be our desire, part of what we hunger and thirst for, and what comes from our hearts every time we pray for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10).

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