



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

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### Citizenship as Craft

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A nurse reaches out to her pastor about struggles at work. It may be an ethical quandary, or fatigue, or the emotional cost of repeatedly encountering trauma. Her pastor will likely listen with care and pray with her. If the nurse's job situation is a healthy one that is suited to her talents and in an environment with appropriate boundaries, her pastor might affirm her calling to nursing, acknowledging the complexities and challenges wrapped up in the vocation. Her pastor may even invite her to share her gifts in a community health care or parish nursing initiative. Similarly, this pastor might exhort a congregant who is a local business owner to lean into his line of work, thank God for it, and practice it as faithfully as he can even when it involves tough choices.

In recent years, segments of American Christianity have experienced a revival of the theology of work. Work-honoring organizations, trainings, conferences, and even music productions have developed to support Christians in their pursuit of God's call through work. Theologies of work affirm labor as fundamental to our humanity. God worked, separating night from day, forming the dry land, and breathing life into humankind. As beings who bear the image of God, we also work. Though the Fall marked work with toil, work is fundamentally good. Even the most ordinary or mundane work—managing spreadsheets, changing bedpans, or pouring concrete—is as valuable to God as our spiritual pursuits. Indeed, it is through work that God allows us to partner with him in redeeming and sustaining creation.

#### **Citizenship and a Theology of Work**

A revived theology of work has had limited impact, however, on one sphere of work: citizenship. A Reformed reading of Genesis suggests that the work through which we manifest the divine image encompasses many tasks, among them marketplace work, creative expression, family-tending, and political work. The Genesis account suggests that that God's delegation of authority, including political authority, is intrinsically connected to the creation of human beings in the image of God.

Christian political scientist David Koyzis puts it this way: “the image of God is a grant of responsibility to all persons—male and female, rich and poor, prince and peasant—as stewards of the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The value of political work is clear. We need public rules, roles, and decisions to support and coordinate the wonderfully diverse aspects of human life that God has created. Government exists to put into law those rules, roles, and decisions that are mandated by public justice. Yet many Christian leaders have treated our political calling as a second-class one, flinching and denying its import even as powerful and not-altogether godly political currents have swept through our congregations.

Were congregants to reach out to their pastors about the tough choices or emotional toll of their involvement in a political party or advocacy effort, they might likely hear a different message than the nurse or business leader. Don't take politics *too* seriously. Christians should set their hearts on spiritual kingdoms rather than earthly ones. Maybe it's time for a fast from politics and, for heaven's sake, keep it out of the church.

The advice that Christians separate themselves from politics or adopt a posture of aloofness from its practice sometimes extends from a vision of church and state locked in inevitable and epic rivalry. But what if politics were not necessarily a dramatic battle for allegiance, an epic choosing of sides, but rather something more mundane? What if politics were more like a job? What if citizenship is a craft?

The sociologist Richard Sennett describes craftsmanship as the quest to do a job well for its own sake. Engaging in a craft requires the cultivation of attention, skills, and processes. It commands a focus on the work itself and draws attention away from the self. Certainly, a craftsperson must attend to the purpose of her work but she may also find grace in its execution as well.

With respect to politics, the craft involves listening to the interests, needs, convictions and desires of ourselves and our neighbors—in the light of God's will for a flourishing human society. It involves grappling with historic injustices and finding ways to make them right. It involves the search for and forging of common goals, and then deciding which ones require government to realize them, and, if so, how. These activities, together, enable communities to develop public rules and assign roles in ways that honor the image of God in each person and promote, as much is possible, God's intentions for human community on earth.

## **Cultivating the Craft of Citizenship**

Over the past year, the Center for Public Justice has been exploring ways to teach the craft of citizenship as an expression of the divinely given vocation to steward and order the earth. Currently, the Center is piloting a small group study called *Political Discipleship*. Using this curriculum, each group undertakes one important civic task: generating and asking thoughtful and thought-provoking questions of political office-holders. After nine sessions of study and collaborative work, each group will meet with an official—a city-councilperson, an administrator, a state legislator, or member of Congress for civil dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> David Koyzis, “[Authority, Citizenship, and Public Justice](#),” *First Things*. 9/12/2015

The first half of the study sets a context and goal. Participants reflect on God’s purpose for politics and the biblical visions of flourishing toward which our politics should strive, and they grapple with their own political autobiographies and listen to others. The second half of the study guides groups in the hard work of discerning what flourishing could and should look like in an area of our political life—be it the welcome of refugees or proper provision of criminal justice. It also provides tools that might help groups address the difficult question of the role of government in the particular situation.

As James K.A. Smith’s *Awaiting the King* observes, each of us has been deeply *de*-formed by our political culture. This deformation trickles down to the level of habit. We may turn on the same television channel or news program day after day. We rehearse the same political arguments and debates with friends and family. Our affinity for one political party over another may have roots in family identity, custom, or choices made long ago. Many of us have rested too much of our self-esteem with membership in a political tribe.

In place of our default political habits, we need re-formed habits that might help us better steward political power. Life together in the church is the starting point for such a re-formation. Church invites us into the body of Christ, where many different members are all part of the same body. When our primary identity is hidden in Christ and each person valued as a member of the body of Christ, Trump-supporters and Clinton-supporters [can teach Sunday School together](#).

In *Political Discipleship*, we encourage those formed by church to extend the habits learned there to the political sphere. If we can teach Sunday School together with those of differing political identification, can we also listen to each other’s political autobiographies? Might we also identify shared purposes, discern and deliberate and ultimately act together? *Political Discipleship* scaffolds this process, grounding it in prayer and reflection so that, slowly, we might separate our own political allegiances from God’s intentions.

*Political Discipleship* is not a book study that, say, reforms our thinking about a political issue or stirs our emotions. Though such studies are necessary, if we are to pursue God’s call to citizenship and be re-formed politically, we also need to practice it. *Political Discipleship* asks participants to practice citizenship with real stakes, to dialogue with each other about issues that matter, and to engage those with actual political power.

Christian citizens, even well-formed and well-meaning ones, will not always arrive at the “right” answer. We may choose poor candidates or ineffective policies. We are short-sighted, selfish, and easily seduced. As in the practice of any craft, mistakes and failure litter the path of discipleship. What God demands of us is no more or less than what he desires for any of our vocations: that we commit to our work as an expression of God’s image in us and when we fall short, confess, repent, and try again.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and Christian mystic, argued that to desist from a task in the face of error and difficulty is actually an expression of pride, not humility. Instead:

The thing to do when you have made a mistake is not to give up doing what you were doing and start something altogether new, but to start over again with the thing you began badly and try, for the love of God, to do it well.<sup>2</sup>

If work's goodness applies to the work of citizenship, then, like the exhausted nurse or the conflicted business leader, we can acknowledge the inherent complexities and anxieties of our work without abandoning it altogether. If we feel our citizenship is flawed or our community is off course politically, the remedy need not be to deny our calling to citizenship, but to commit to learn to do it better.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds*.