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Public Justice After the Resurrection

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Although I was born Canadian, my first political memory is American. My family was just beginning to experiment with televised news, on a little rabbit-eared black and white set, smaller than my computer monitor, nestled in the corner of our immigrant, farm house kitchen. On that day, in January 1986, on its tenth flight the Space Shuttle Challenger broke apart 73-seconds into its flight, killing all seven of its crew, and grounding the entire shuttle flight for nearly three years. The failure was an O-ring seal in its right solid rocket booster which failed after liftoff, eventually cascading a series of failures which caused the orbiter to break apart.

It was a moment of odd grief, for human lives certainly, but also for something else, something harder to explain: something about the soul of our public efforts, what they are for, and why they matter.

I would later learn stories about the Canadian armed forces, the role they played in liberating my parent's home country in the War, the heroism and sacrifice of its people. That was politics, too, and I knew the justice and mercy my parents found at the hands of those Canadian men and women was a familiar kind of politics, a restraint of evil, a moral force for right against the atrocities of wrongs. But the first vision of politics I had was not about the restraint of evil, it was not even about the tragedy of the lost men and women of the Challenger. It was about a public, political effort to achieve some collective good, not just a restraint of sin, not just *against* something, but *for* something bigger than our own, individual selves. That was the politics I saw as a boy in the terrible disaster of the Space Shuttle Challenger: that these public projects were a dangerous, costly game, but they were worth our effort, worth our sacrifice. And that was the United States of America I saw too: a nation with the audacity to build and send men and women to space, to pioneer institutions of peace and cooperation, to amass extraordinary wealth, while at the same time creating the most sublime art and music. We need that hope in politics again, today, one which speaks to the call of public justice as more (but not less) than a restraint on evil, but also about a polis for something, something that matters, about important truths, truths the United States of America once called "self-evident." We must refresh that evidence today.

This [little magazine](#) has a small, but distinguished history in that work. I stand in a line including Jessica Wright, Michelle Kirtley, and Jim Skillen; a longer line still stretching to Richard Mouw, Al

Wolters, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Bernard Zylstra; and farther back to Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, John Calvin, and their like. It is intergenerational work, the living faith of the dead, “old wine in new wineskins.” And we talk about our mission in those kind of big, audacious terms: **connecting public justice to public policy, equipping citizens to pursue God’s purpose for our political community.**

In this introductory manifesto beginning my time at the *Public Justice Review* I want to connect, as it were, how this thing we call public justice might fit with the provisional work of public policy, and how this perspective can meaningfully, and purposefully, equip not only Christians but citizens for the public work of the American project. Contrary to the declinists and the pessimists, we are ruthlessly optimistic about that project, and we hope you’ll join us in a clear-eyed but unflinching vision for its own intergenerational reformation and renewal.

Christ the King: Public Justice after the Resurrection

On Christmas Eve of 1968 Apollo 8 and its astronauts – Commander Frank Borman, Command Module Pilot Jim Lovell, and Lunar Module Pilot William Anders – [held a live broadcast from lunar orbit](#). The broadcast ended with the crew taking turns reading from the first chapter of Genesis, including some of the most extraordinary verses in Scripture – let there be light – and concluding – it was good. Here, in lunar orbit on that Cold War Christmas Eve, these astronauts made public confession of what many of us still believe is one of two essential roots of public justice: God’s good creation and his good design.

It does not take awfully long, of course, for that good creation, that good design, to go terribly wrong, creating the unbearable paradox that most of us simply live our lives within day-to-day: the beatific sublimity of sunsets, sonatas, and Swiss chocolate, the heart rending terror of decay, disease, and death. Cornelius Plantinga describes sin as [Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be](#). For most, the general revelation of a life simply lived is enough to know and feel that tension, that paradox, that these terrors and griefs do not belong here, they are alien imposters.

And it is hard to know how to live well together in that paradox. In his mercy, God offers something of a love letter to his lost creation: the Law. In the Law, the designer of the universe offers some clues on how people should live in it for things to go well for them. Like disassembled furniture without instructions, some of these rules can seem intuitive: do not murder. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. But life gets a bit more complicated than Ikea and there are also some rules not to be missed that would be harder to MacGyver: you shall have no other gods before me, do not misuse the name of the Lord your God, and so on. The people of Israel are chosen to be a people of that Law, a chosen nation to model and witness to what life done together right, *by creation’s design*, can look like. It does not go well.

Enter Jesus Christ, the second root of that same tree of public justice. Jesus Christ, the perfect man, who comes embodying the Law, removing not one stroke from it, but opening its purposes for the people of God to live together in justice. The saving work of Jesus Christ is far more than merely political, but it is *also political*. The kingship of Jesus radically transforms the task of political authority laid out in creation, and fundamentally transfigures justice laid out in the Law.

First, the kingship of Christ moderates any pretensions to royal earthly authority. This matters because in the old covenant with Israel it was the duty and obligation of David's royal lineage to ensure proper worship, to root out disbelief and disobedience to God's Law, to "cut down the Asherah poles" and "put to death the priests of Baal." This judgment still rests with the office of King David, but the new King, Jesus Christ, does not empower his regents and stewards to exercise judgment which only rightly belongs to him. Only Christ calls people to himself. Only Jesus turns hearts to obedience, and no mere earthly steward possesses either the authority nor the sovereignty over the human heart to turn it one inch toward Christ. While the primary effect of sin, religious or directional pluralism, persists human politics is not possessed with the right to resolve this. That right belongs to a day and [a King who waits](#).

Second, the kingship of Christ opens up the fullness of creation's cultural pluralism. The holiness of God and his judgment on sin, poured out in the person of Jesus, meant that the fulness of the races, cultures, and peoples could never be brought into the Kingdom of God until Christ's resurrected reign. In the Old Testament we read of antecedents of Christ's coming, cosmopolitan kingship, in people like Rahab and Ruth, but they are grafted into Israel. Christ the King, instead, calls all cultures and peoples into himself and his Kingdom, as they are, what Bob Goudzwaard calls the first truly catholic globalization, the Church. Where circumcision brought people and culture into conformity with Israel, baptism removes not one single cultural manifestation that cannot be reclaimed and repurposed toward the kingdom of God. Moabites come as Moabites into God's kingdom, Hittites as Hittites, and – yes – even the Dutch as Dutchmen. Christ's kingship opens up cultural pluralism, the lost treasures of creation, brought back and restored to our political and social life by the work of Jesus. Salvation and relationship with God is no longer exclusive to the Jews.

Finally, God's design is radically revealed in the person of Christ as all nations are brought into the work of unfolding culture, politics, and the structures of creation. Structural pluralism, the dynamic, immediate authority that God grants to all the spheres of human life, is a root and ground for political life. Each created sphere of life with its own internal norms and laws is ruled by Christ directly (sometimes called sphere sovereignty), not with priestly intermediaries and not with fear of wrath, but with direct access to the throne and with faith and hope, because of the finished work of Jesus. The first word of this new politics is that of the angels in Bethlehem, "Be not afraid" and its last is that of the triumphant Christ in Revelation, "Behold, I am making all things new."

This story is what we mean by public justice. Oliver O'Donovan opens his remarkable book *The Desire of the Nations* saying that he embarked on a study of Scripture to understand the kingship of Christ and ended up with a defense of Christendom. In making that same study, we might end up with a defense of [the Christian diversity state](#), and its mandate of political authority to steward religious pluralism, cultural pluralism, and structural pluralism. There are tensions here, to be sure, between the work of politics to steward "creational law," depending on the thick confessional vision of Scripture while maintaining "religious pluralism." These are the *principles* that moderate the foregoing *pluralism* (hence, principled pluralism). But principled pluralism is still very far from Christendom, and this opens up a pluralistic space for politics after the resurrection to work out, with fear and trembling, what balance to strike, what deals to make, and how – after all – to make this great big vision of the Kingship of Jesus Christ practical in the work of public policy.

Is the Devil in the Details? Making Peace with Proximate Policy

The balance of this in-between the cross and judgment vision of politics, where we have exegetical clues on how to live justly or what it means to flourish but must moderate our use of political power to impose it, is a hard one to strike. The devil, as *Comment magazine* has put it, [is in these details](#).

Some elements of what we have just described as public justice seem clear: disestablishment, for example, could be one (though not the only) example of freedom of religion or belief. Freedom of association is another seemingly good example of a state stewarding cultural and structural pluralism. Written constitutions and separations of powers which together safeguard against the concentration of power which might threaten any of the above, religious, cultural, or structural pluralism, seem like a rather good idea. This may seem happily uncontroversial, but it was not always so, and it certainly need not remain so. It is good to refresh and justify what may even seem “self-evident” to us from time to time.

But other features of political life are a good deal less obvious. A *public justice* perspective recognizes that God’s laws are given both for his glory and the good of human society. It should be our expectation, then, that the more we conform to the designer’s intent for our social and political lives, the more our societies will be balanced, just, and flourish. But there are real limits to what secular public policy can and should try to accomplish in this regard. Murder and theft are simple ones. But envy? Adultery? The LORD’s day? How political power and public policy should relate to these designs immediately plunges us into the depths of an intergenerational culture war.

Here is a tricky balance between a recognition that this command is for all people’s good (not just Jews or Christians), and that these laws responding to the Law, probably make for better public justice. But the naked legislation of Scripture has been struck down in many jurisdictions in part because of its violation of religious pluralism.

Or, working the other way around, what would a public justice approach meaningfully contribute to debates over the minimum wage? Or what about humanitarian intervention? Paid family leave? [We are the beneficiaries of broad principles and long traditions of theological and political reflection](#), but these specific questions of policy have neither obvious nor necessary answers. Reasonable Christians can and do disagree. This hardly leaves us afloat; public justice can and does meaningfully shape the context of the debate, its means and outcomes. But it does not prescribe one thing, or even always the same thing, depending on context, culture, and history. It takes patience, and it presumes mistakes.

You may not have noticed that *Public Justice Review’s* website carries a new disclaimer:

The articles in the *Public Justice Review* do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do not expect our readers will agree with all the arguments they find here, but we believe that within the broad tradition of what we call *public justice* we can do more by providing a forum for the debate and exchange of Christians, within those bounds, to work out public policy faithful to God and in service of our neighbors. We do not necessarily share the views expressed, but we do accept responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.

PJR is the Center for Public Justice’s sandbox: it’s where we recognize that the sometimes-provisional task of connecting public justice to public policy will mean we need a community to peer review us, to challenge us, to correct us. Mistakes will be made. But *far better* that CPJ have such a space to think

out loud and make mistakes than advance projects and policies whose arguments aren't the best they can be.

Public Justice as our focus concentrates us in two ways: (1) we are unapologetically American, political, and even a little wonkish in our passion for good public policy; (2) and we approach that sphere of issues from a Kuyperian posture, with all its presumptions and debates. The discipline of *Public Justice Review* is where our think tank plants its oars decisively in the water of our political culture, keeping us from being swept downstream by the idols of our time. We invite you to help us row.

What does Jerusalem have to do with Washington?

These are polarizing and [tribal times](#), and Christians in America are hardly the exception, we are very nearly the rule. [We could do worse than recover the art of persuasion](#), as our board member Anne Snyder writes for *Comment magazine*.

This, at least, is not just work for the world of politics. PJR hopes to equip not only people like us, wrestling with the minutia of public policy, but Christians and citizens trying to think and act with a Christ-centered posture for public life. We are hardly alone in this work, whether its thinking about immigration, the second amendment, freedom of religion or belief, and so on – we will be tackling issues that don't just polarize wonks and pundits, but family dinners and drinks with friends.

How unexpected, in a way, for the banal considerations of public policy to have become the stuff of such existential weight, and – also – how impoverished. Although PJR is ultimately about politics and public policy I would not want that to somehow be a stand in for “culture” or “art” or “faith” or “mystery” ([for example](#)). I teach at a Christian college and specifically insist politics majors do a double-major: good politics, good public policy, is a servant. Public policy *enables* the good, it helps people love people, it is crucial, but what a sad, shallow public life we would have if it was the panacea.

Our conversations here should therefore be liberally salted with not only the provisional nature of politics, but also with the necessary fear and trembling of connecting public justice to public policy. We start there, in a space of grace, and we go out from it into what I am sure will nonetheless be some strong, but civil disagreements.

I expect to get some very unpleasant emails. I intend, with the help of better people around me, to moderate that unpleasantness, to respond and work within our organization, to make sure that the very best of the Christian social and political tradition refines our work. If that is your work too, or if listening in and contributing encourages you, challenges you, helps you to better understand things like political discipleship, then thanks be to God.

In this series, all of the big things I've introduced in little ways that make up our mission - public justice, public policy, and the equipping of citizens – will be tackled by some of our best friends and closest confidants. We'll hear from Richard Mouw on what public justice is, and how and whether it relates to social justice. We'll hear from Kevin den Dulk on a public theology of public policy, we'll hear from Kirsten Deede Johnson on what it means to “equip” people for justice, we'll hear from Kyle

David Bennett on the “posture” of public justice, we’ll look at the “design” of public justice with Sean Purcell, and we’ll hear from our own CEO Stephanie Summers on where help is needed.

Help is needed, and I hope PJR will be part of that. I hope you will be too.

To respond to the author of this article please email PJR@cpjustice.org. The articles in the *Public Justice Review* do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do not expect our readers will agree with all the arguments they find here, but we believe that within the broad tradition of what we call public justice we can do more by providing a forum for the debate and exchange of Christians, within those bounds, to work out public policy faithful to God and in service of our neighbors. We do not necessarily share the views expressed, but we do accept responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.