James Skillen is the founder and the former president of the Center for Public Justice (CPJ).

Abstract: This is the second in a two-part interview with James Skillen, the founder of the Center for Public Justice (CPJ). CPJ’s Chelsea Langston Bombino discusses with Skillen the themes of his newest book, *God’s Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled* (Wipf and Stock, 2019) and how these themes connect to institutional pluralism, including the diverse spectrum of faith-based civil society organizations with varying mission focus areas. In his new book, Skillen explores how every part of human life, including the associational relationships and organizations we form, point beyond themselves to God’s purposes for creation and its fulfillment through Christ in the age to come. The first article of the two-part series explored both the perspectival and practical implications of this new body of work for sacred sector institutions. This article will expand on those themes, with a particular emphasis on how the creation story both reveals and anticipates the fulfillment of all things in the sabbath glory of God. In particular we focus on what Skillen identifies as the sixth-day identity of human creatures exhibited in associations and institutions. We take up complex questions about human organizations, specifically faith-based civil society organizations, that resist easy answers. We also attempt to make explicit how these biblical themes can impact and shape institutions that are established on the basis of explicit confessional principles and for distinctive confessional purposes.

Editor’s Note: This is the second in a two-part interview with James Skillen (JS), the founder and the first director of the Center for Public Justice. Chelsea Langston Bombino (CLB), director of CPJ’s Sacred Sector initiative, interviewed Skillen regarding the themes of public justice in his newest book, “God’s Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled” (Wipf and Stock, 2019) and how those themes relate to the just ordering of a diversified society, which includes faith-based organizations of civil society.

Our first article explored the complex biblical concepts of individual and communal vocations as they relate to imaging God. Here we will expand on those themes with a particular emphasis on how the creation reveals something of the larger meaning of God’s purposes in anticipation of the fulfillment of all things in and through Christ Jesus. This article focuses particularly on the biblical identification of humans as God’s sixth-day creatures, and explores some difficult questions about human institutions that resist easy answers. Specifically faith-based civil society groups. Here, as
in part 1, we attempt to make explicit how these biblical themes can impact and shape institutions that were formed on a confessional basis to offer particular social purposes.

**CLB:** Jim, one major theme in your book is about the identity and responsibility of humans as sixth-day creatures in God’s seven-day creation order and what that means for our relationship to God and God’s purposes for us. I would like to introduce readers to an excerpt from *God’s Sabbath with Creation* that specifically focuses on these ideas, and then ask you to reflect on their implications for diverse civil society groups in our pluralistic society today. Consider this except from chapter 32, “All the More As You See the Day Approaching.”

> As we have argued throughout this book, the household of faith, the bride of Christ, is not merely an institutional worship community, in the sense of the denominational churches of today. Biblically speaking, the church is the body of Christ, the people of God—those called to follow Christ with their entire lives in every sphere of responsibility. All that God has given us to do in every kind of work and service is implicated in God’s call to the sons and daughters of the first Adam to turn from their wicked ways and follow Christ in all things. Living in this way is quite continuous with the way of life to which God called Abraham and Israel (see Hebrews 11). To think of the church simply as a “religious” organization alongside “secular” (non-religious) organizations is to misunderstand the identity of God’s people. According to Stanley Stowers [*A Rereading of Romans*], it is a modern concept that religion is ‘an essentially private sphere of personal belief and activity separate from politics, economic activity, and ethnicity.’ Jews in Paul’s time understood God’s covenant ‘as the religious-social-political-legal constitution of the Jewish people, a basis both for the temple state in Judea and for the Jewish communities in the diaspora . . . I am convinced that Paul understood the law in the same general way.’ Discipleship of Christ, therefore, needs to be understood as an all-encompassing way of life, following on from the way of life to which God called Israel. Christ has come to fulfill all of God’s covenant promises and obligations; he doesn’t call his followers only to a new way of worship, but rather to a comprehensive way of righteous living on the way to creation’s fulfillment.

> Another point to emphasize about ‘gathering together’ is made by Paul Ellingworth [Epistle to the Hebrews]. The rarely used Greek word we translate ‘gathering together’ or ‘assembling’ is only used in the Bible in ‘eschatological contexts.’ In other words, it connotes ‘the final assembling of God’s people,’ the kind of assembling Hebrews speaks of in 12:26—‘you have come to Mount Zion, to heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.’ This contrasts with Israel’s assembly around the ‘mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire’ (Hebrews 12:18, TNIV).

**CLB:** I wonder if you could talk about the notion that humans are God’s sixth-day creatures and how that relates to human institutions such as marriage/family and many others, including civil society institutions such as the Center for Public Justice. What type of connections do you make
between humans as sixth-day creatures and the types of institutions humans establish and shape?

**JS:** First, a word about humans as God’s “sixth-day creatures.” When you read Genesis 1:26–31, you see that after God created animals and humans and blessed the humans with the call to be fruitful and increase in number and to govern the earth. After that comes the further words of blessing of food to eat. Then when all of that is said and done, the passage closes with God’s assessment that everything created is “very good,” followed by, “And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.” Humans, then, are the creatures of God’s sixth creation day. The entire first part of my book attempts to show that the creation days are not our days, but God’s days, and cannot be measured by the time that marks our days. Everything, including time, sun, and moon, are creatures of God.

Let me give just one example of the difference. When we say it is Tuesday, we know that Monday is past and Wednesday has not yet come. But Genesis 1 presents us with an architectural picture of God’s creation days. The light and darkness of God’s first creation day continue when God then separates the above from the beneath, and both of those creation days continue when dry land and water are separated and the land brings forth vegetation. The same pattern continues. Each of God’s days in the building project supports and provides hospitality for the days that follow. And the creation and blessing of humans—God’s sixth creation day—depends on the hospitable support of all previous creatures. Thus, it becomes apparent that as long as vegetation keeps vegetating, and the sun and moon remain in their orbits, and humans keep reproducing, God’s third day, fourth day, and sixth day are still unfolding together, interdependently. The same can be said of all of God’s days. Time, as we think of it, is not the primary meaning of the word “day” in the passage. The focus is on the content, on what is created. In our language this still shows up in some of our expressions, such as when we say “it is dinner time” or “bedtime” or “harvest time.” We don’t ask, “at what minute will the dinner begin and when will it end.” We ask “what’s for dinner?”

While that is too brief a summary, the point is that the human generations that continue reproducing even now are all God’s sixth-day creatures. All that God created and blessed humans to do is not yet completed. All that is contained in verses 26 to 31 of Genesis 1 is still developing, so the wrap-up phrase about the evening and morning of God’s sixth day has not yet been sealed. The calling God gives humans in Genesis 1 is to fill the earth and govern it. So the “reproduction mandate” addressed to Adam and Eve embraces all of their offspring. We might say that God’s sixth creation day should be called “the animal and human generations day” which includes all that God called the human generations to do. And therefore, all of God’s creation days are unfolding together simultaneously and as they look toward and build toward God’s sabbath fulfillment of creation. God’s “very good” creation has certainly been darkened and degraded by our sin, and but for the grace of God, all would be lost. Yet throughout the Bible you see the story of God acting by judgment and blessing to cleanse us of sin in order to make possible the dwelling of God with us and us with God. The creation story is not only or primarily about the beginning, or the start of things. It is about what God creates and the dynamic
unfolding of all creatures from the beginning to the fulfillment of God’s purposes with creation. The Bible’s sin and salvation drama in which we find ourselves even today takes place within the all-encompassing creation-to-fulfillment drama.

Whether or not every person recognizes or accepts it, we all live before the face of God in everything we do and in everything that takes place. Humans are by our very nature religious creatures, whether we worship and serve the true God or false gods. And that is why it is important for us to recognize the human character and responsibility of every relationship, every association, every organization and institution. Each one of those either advances or degrades the healthy, just, and loving development of the multi-generational, multi-vocational community of humankind that God created.

The meaning of God’s purpose and love for creation is ultimately a great mystery. We cannot stand outside of the mystery but only accept that we are a highly honored part of it as God’s chief stewards on earth. And the way we are to grow in the knowledge of God and ourselves in this age, according to the Bible, is to hear and obey God. That means giving ourselves over to Christ by faith in obedience and learning to exercise all of our responsibilities in this age in repentance from sinful ways and acceptance of God’s forgiveness and love in Christ. In that way of life, we learn that it is precisely through our service to God and neighbors in every sphere of responsibility, in every relationship and institution that expresses our humanity as that we are created to be the revelatory servants of God and neighbors.

CLB: In God’s Sabbath with Creation, you write: "To think of the church simply as a “religious” organization alongside “secular” (non-religious) organizations is to misunderstand the identity of God’s people. According to Stanley Stowers, it is a modern concept that religion is “an essentially private sphere of personal belief and activity separate from politics, economic activity, and ethnicity.” Can you discuss how this concept applies, both to explicitly Christian civil society organizations and churches, and to other civil society groups that are not explicitly religious?

JS: Well, let’s start with CPJ itself. CPJ is an organization that has an explicitly Christian faith-based mission to work for just public policies and promote civic responsibility among citizens and public officials. The first thing to recognize is that civic responsibility in and for political communities is one of the major responsibilities we have. We also raise families, buy and sell goods, write books, farm fields, and so on. CPJ has a political vocation not an ecclesiastical vocation or a parental vocation or a literary vocation. But now consider a second thing: humans exercise their civic vocations from different points of view with different basic commitments, ideals, and basic beliefs. For some civic groups the underlying commitment is to advance liberalism or socialism or pragmaticism. For others, the basic belief and point of view is atheist, or Christian, or Jewish, or Muslim. Those different basic commitments, motives, and ideals often make a big difference in how they approach politics. Human identity and functions are the same for every human, but the basic beliefs, motivations, and standards among them may be very different.
Our basic beliefs, or deepest commitments operate at a religiously deep level even if many people don’t consider themselves “religious.” Or governing ideals typically function at a deeper level than the various vocational responsibilities we have. Most people exhibit the deepest commitments that shape them in raising their children, in making judgments about important relationships like marriage and friendships, and in belonging (or not) to a church or synagogue. It is actually confusing, then, if we speak of religion or faith as an organizational activity distinguishable from family, schooling, leisure, banking, science, and art. The deepest beliefs and convictions we hold shape us in everything we do in one way or another. Christian faith is not simply something we exercise in church or in attending a Bible study. Its identity is not confined to a church organization. Christianity, biblically speaking, is a way of life, not merely a way of worship.

So on the one hand, we should not be embarrassed about living openly as Christians in all areas of life, recognizing that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. At the same time, we should be equally as intent on taking every vocation seriously. Everything in God’s creation is important, meaningful, revelatory. We should be even more diligent than other people in engaging carefully, thoroughly, caringly, and neighbor-mindedly in the arts and sciences, businesses and social service organizations, political communities and publishing companies. And we should do this in the grip of our faith in Christ, the Alpha and Omega of creation, who has given us these responsibilities and is the judge and redeemer of all things.

CPJ has every good reason to cooperate and engage with other civic organizations in the common bond of the political community that we share with all other citizens. Yet at the same time, we should not hesitate to develop and account for the distinctive insights we have regarding the norms and standards that should be heeded in trying to promote a just republic. We should be bold and definite as well as humble and kind when explaining why we can or cannot cooperate with other organizations on particular projects or issues.

**CLB:** Nonprofits, both those grounded in Christian faith, and those guided by other basic beliefs (whether thought of as “religious” or “secular”), have the capacity to contribute to the constructive advancement of what is good and just in human society. Based on the themes expressed in your book, can you elaborate further on how both explicitly Christian institutions and non-Christian institutions can advance responsible human action in the service of God and neighbors?

**JS:** Let’s work with some analogies. Consider a family where the family members are all Christians, while in a neighbor family none are confessing Christians. We should first recognize that family life is part of God’s creation. The family is not determined first of all by the faith of its members, but by its identity as a family. And in such an institution, to the degree that the family members are sharing the love and healthy development of their family, they are contributing to God’s purposes for creation, whether they acknowledge God or not. Moreover, sadly, many families whose members confess Christ violate some of the standards of family love and care. We are all sinners, believers and nonbelievers alike. We all live by the grace of God.
who calls us to repentance and right living. That’s why we should never think or say that because we are Christians we are the ones on God’s side. Our Christian confession should be (and our actions should demonstrate) that we recognize we are sinful creatures, and we have turned to God in Christ to show us the way of repentance and redirection in all that we do as friends, family members, citizens, scholars, farmers, engineers, and so forth.

A civil-society organization such as the Center for Public Justice, like a family or a business enterprise, should be clearly focused on its reason for existence. There is even good reason to be hesitant about naming such an organization “Christian”. That can easily be misunderstood today and can distract from what the organization exists to do. When we gave the name to CPJ it was in order to indicate what the organization was created for. If it is able, through high-quality work for public justice, to contribute to constructive reform of the American republic, and to help educate citizens to act with greater insight into the demands of justice, then our fellow citizens may be able to see those good works and glorify our Father in heaven. A Christian family must grow as a loving family; that doesn’t happen simply by calling itself Christian. One of the reasons why so many Christians and Christian institutions are mocked for their hypocrisy is that they talk too much about being “Christian” while sinning royally, sometimes worse than non-Christian neighbors.

My primary point is that everything about the lives of those who confess Christ is about what God created us to be. And our sins are our failure to do what God calls us to do. God’s judgment of sin and merciful dying for the sins of the world are in order to overcome the degradation of created life and restore it, including human responsibility, to the glory of God. Everything about our human talents, capabilities, relationships, institutions, and vocations should be full view as we learn to live in Christ as repentant sinners, knowing that only by the grace of God are we restored to life. Christian faith, actions, organizations, vocations are not something alongside secular life and actions. We should distinguish church from state, family from a business enterprise, a school from a publishing company; but those creation-diversity distinctions are entirely inappropriate for distinguishing Christian vocations from non-Christian vocations.

If we ask about the different perspectives and basic beliefs that Christians and an non-Christians have, we are then asking about what guides human beings in the way that they engage in politics, family life, education, business, and more. Human responsibilities we all share; but how we go about exercising those responsibilities might be quite different and even at odds with one another.

CLB: In your book you write: "That which is revelatory in God’s relations with humans is dynamic, not static, mounting up in anticipation of the fullness of that meaning still to be unveiled." How does this dynamism apply to diversity of nonprofits and other civil society groups apply to the pluralistic society in which we live in America today? How does this relate to the idea that in the unfolding of generations, social and human institutions are still unfurling as well?
JS: Every marriage that shows true marital love exhibits something of Christ’s love of his Bride, even if the couple does not know and confess anything about Christ in relation to their marriage. But Christians should recognize that a truly loving marriage does reveal something about Christ’s love for his bride, and therefore anticipates the full revelation of that climactic marriage in the age to come, in God’s sabbath with creation. Every academic institution where truth is taught and upheld is revelatory in anticipation of the resurrected Rabbi Jesus gathering together all of his students for continuing educational delight in God’s sabbath glory. No marriage, no academic enterprise, no other vocation in this age will fully reflect the fulfillment of God’s creation. Yet all of these diverse vocations, developed rightly, do, in a dynamically developing way, reveal something important about what each anticipates in the fulfillment of God’s creation.

Reflecting on the unfolding human generations, the author of Hebrews says that even though all the faithful referred to in Hebrews 11 “were commended for their faith, but they did not receive what was promised,” because God “had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). That is a picture worth a thousand words of the dynamic, revelatory journey of faithful humans that points ahead to, and will be part of, the fulfillment of God’s promises in the seventh-day sabbath of God’s creation. The picture here is like the simile Paul uses in speaking of the resurrection harvest: Jesus’s resurrection is the first fruits to be followed by others until the full harvest is complete. There is an ongoing unfolding of the faithful generations, each building on what has been done in the past. The faithful along the way are commended for their faith, but they will not receive their award until all of the faithful of all ages receive it together. The resurrection harvest is not complete until everything has been harvested. Therefore, we need to live our lives with eyes wide awake to the revelatory reality of which we are a part. This means much more than looking ahead to achievements and rewards in the future days and years in this age; it means eyes wide open in expectancy to the “not yet” of the age to come, which will be the fulfillment of all earthly times and human generations. The greatest love we have for our spouse, our children, our friends, should make us thirsty not only for love’s future but also for love’s fulfillment. The agony of defeat and the pain of sin are still with us and in us, yet the end of sin and pain is coming, when God’s “very good” creation is fulfilled through Christ’s second coming that will seal the harvest’s fulfillment.

In Exodus 20:8–11, where God tells Israel to keep the sabbath—the seventh day of each earthly day—they are commanded to mirror God’s rest on the seventh creation day. On each earthly sabbath Israel was to rest from work and gather to offer up their gifts and tithes, their sin offerings and thank offerings. That day is set apart, made holy, not because it belongs to God while all other days belongs to Israel, but because the sabbath day is to remind us that all of our days belong to God, that the days for work and a day of rest are all gifts from God, and that all of our work is to be offered up with thanksgiving. Humans cannot create and secure their own future. Only God can do that, so take off every seventh and relax in God’s love and promises. In bringing a tithe to God, we are giving thanks that everything we are and have belongs to God, not only the tithe. This is the biblical pattern of “part for whole.” The priesthood, the pastoral
role, is to remind us that the whole people of God is to be a kingdom of priests, a people set apart, a holy people.

In Christ we can already see, by faith, the promised fulfillment of God’s sabbath day coming. We labor now not to secure our future but out of joy that God will establish the work of our hands (Psalms 90:17). We don’t earn the sabbath; it is God’s gift. Yet it is precisely through all of our vocations in this age that we offer up gifts and thanksgivings to God whose blessing is to welcome the faithful into the divine sabbath (Hebrews 4:9–10). Therefore, relax, give thanks always, and get to work in revelatory anticipation of celebrating the glory of God.

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