Reformed Christian Citizenship in America

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One Thursday morning more than ten years ago, I was riding the elevator up from the basement of a Washington, D.C., congressional office building with my boss, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from western Michigan. As the elevator climbed to the first floor, its doors opened and I stepped two other members of Congress, each from a different southern state. They were acquaintances of my boss because they were in the same political party and had been elected to the House the same year. All three had attended the weekly members-only prayer breakfast held Thursday mornings in a small meeting room in the U.S. Capitol building. As the two southerners entered the elevator, one of them said to my boss, "Wasn’t that an inspiring story that Bill (a representative who had given his Christian testimony at the prayer breakfast that morning) shared with us? I really admire his ability to tell his story." My boss allowed that yes, Bill did provide a moving personal testimony and that he seemed to be a very vocal Christian. The other representative chimed in, "Yes, and the great thing about Bill is that he never lets his faith get in the way of how he votes."

My boss smiled weakly. At that point the elevator reached the fourth floor and the two others filed out to their offices. As the two of us continued the ride up, my boss joked, "Well, Doug, you can sure tell that they’re not Reformed." I smiled back and commented how sad the second representative’s comments seemed to me, although he had intended them as a compliment to Bill.

The relationship between Christian faith and American politics is a difficult and confusing issue, even for confessing Christians who work in politics. Part of the confusion stems from competing definitions of the key terms at issue—faith and politics. Is Christian faith a private matter with few clear implications for political behavior, or is it something closer to a comprehensive worldview that has quite specific social and political implications? Is politics so evil and dirty that Christians should shun all involvement, or is politics a critical creational structure crying out most for redemptive activity because politics maintains the boundaries between and coordinates the relationships among all the other orders of life? Different conclusions often result from different definitions of key terms, and then disputes among perspectives become so much talking past each other.

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generally, his framework is often applied by others, as he did so himself, in culture. While Niebuhr's goal was to address Christian views toward culture describes five possible approaches of Christians and the church to secular discussing Christian attitudes toward the narrower field of politics. In politics, a "Christ of culture" stance would tend toward uncritical support for mainstream politics and policy. When *Christ and Culture* was first published, the conflict between the two political parties seemed ideologically less extreme and verbally less combative (Truman Democrats versus Eisenhower Republicans). Mainstream politics was pretty, well, mainstream. As such, Niebuhr identified liberal Protestantism as conforming most closely to the "of" approach. Today the picture might be slightly more complicated. There now seem to be two groups of Christ of culture denominations: a liberal mainstream Protestant group still comfortable with the (dwindling) moderate factions in both political parties; and a conservative evangelical and fundamentalist group that supports the far right of the GOP.

A second Christ/culture approach Niebuhr offers is "Christ above culture," where ecclesiastical authority is directing or instructing the leaders of secular culture. In politics, of course, this would appear when organized church bodies try to, and may actually, direct government policies and officials. Niebuhr identified this approach as chiefly characteristic of the Catholic church, as its brand of the two-kingdom theory claims clerical superiority in many social and political matters. American political history has largely avoided "above" displays, although not without attempts by self-assured clerics from both the Catholic church and many Protestant assemblies.

A third general approach Niebuhr identified is "Christ against culture." In politics, this would be exhibited in church bodies and individual Christians having as little to do with the political world as possible. In the view of "against" adherents, the realm of politics is especially evil. Christians should avoid political involvement for fear of imperiling their own salvation. While separatist, the "against" stance is not irrelevant to the political world. On the contrary, this radical perspective most strongly judges secular politics and often presents a ringing critique of politics as usual. At the time of his writing, Niebuhr identified the Anabaptist tradition as most closely resembling this alternative. That view still seems to hold today, even among Anabaptist groups actively engaged in social justice. The politically aware and socially active Christians, including the well-intentioned southern representative my boss and I encountered in the elevator years ago.

Reformed Christianity and American Politics

The major prerequisite for effective Christian citizenship from a Reformed perspective is knowledge about relevant religious and political traditions. Under this heading there seem to be four key issues. The first issue is knowing the basic Reformed perspective on cultural and political involvement generally and how it differs from other Christian perspectives. A second area of concern is how this perspective might apply in the United States. A third issue is organizational, that is how Reformed Christians might organize differently from other Christians in seeking to affect American politics. The last issue is the unique characteristics of American governmental and political machinery.

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A fourth traditional Niebuhrian option is "Christ in paradox with culture." This perspective, lying historically within the Lutheran tradition, supports politics and yet simultaneously holds that it is fundamentally corrupt. Politics may be participated in by Christians, but such participation brings with it personal sin and guilt. "Paradox" Christians must accept this guilty participation and pray for God's grace to deliver them from the consequences of this sinful action, while fulfilling the legitimate requirements of the state on Christians.

The final option offered by Niebuhr, which he preferred and which is in the broad Reformed tradition, is that of "Christ transforming culture."
American Religious/Political Tradition

The above discussion is well-tilled ground. But to proceed this far in the discussion opens a more difficult set of questions. Toward or back to what should Reformed Christians call America? Are we seeking a "Christian America," a nation which may or may not have existed at an earlier time in our history? Even if we can discover a beneficent "Christian America" in our history, can we really restore it in the far more secular and complex society of today? And even if we could return to such a state, should Christians limit the rights of Americans of other faiths, or of no professed faith at all?

Again, there are no obvious answers, but it does seem that in thinking about a "Christian America" Christians have three basic options. The first option, at one end of a spectrum, is to try to create (or recreate, depending on one’s view of America’s founding history) a Christian America in which the God of the Bible, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and other scriptural teachings are clear and explicit elements in the laws and institutions of our politics and government.

Many commentators, most of them critics of mixing Christianity and politics, seem to imply that this is the only option available to serious Christians seeking political expression of their religious views. And current Reformed thought is not immune to this view. The Christian Reconstructionist movement has as its basic objective restoring biblical principles to American government and politics.3

The second option, at the other end of the spectrum, is to assert the total independence of Christian faith and secular politics. This option would define Christianity as an assent to certain theological truths that affect personal conduct, but do not extend to social and political questions. Such a Christianity is personal, private, and intellectual; politics is in a separate public sphere operating under its own rules. It is this option, unfortunately, that most approximates the dominant culture’s view of the relationship between Christian faith and American politics—that Christianity is acceptable as long as it has no political impact. It is also the option that Reformed Christians, with their more comprehensive view of God’s creation intent, most clearly must reject.

The third option is to seek what some circles of Reformed thought call "worldview pluralism." This seeks a political environment in which Christians openly debate and defend their political activities and policies in explicitly Christian language where these arguments have currency in political discourse.4 There are three underlying premises in this option. The first premise is that all persons, even those who claim they are not religious, operate with a worldview that functions like a religious faith. Second, it holds that it is best to have these worldviews in the open. This option also admits that even Christians may have mistaken notions about the policies and politics they advocate, and that they, and the public generally, would benefit from principled but non-Christian criticisms of what Christians define as Christian political action.

This third option has wide currency among Christian political scientists and political thinkers of the Reformed persuasion, and it has much to commend itself. But how this might actually emerge in the United States seems problematic. The notion of "worldview pluralism" feels vaguely ideological, foreign to an American political culture that understands itself as non-ideological, pragmatic, and individualistic.

Of course, each possibility sketched out above is quite broad. Each option contains nuances that can create differences of opinion even among those who fall into the same general category. It seems, however, that the first option to seek a Christian America in which Christianity is the officially preferred religion, is both implausible and undesirable; that the second option is obnoxious to Reformed Christians even though prevalent in public debate; and that the third option is difficult but perhaps not impossible to achieve if there is more work done on the special requirements of American political action and discourse.

Reformed Christian Organization

The third issue in effective Christian citizenship is the organizational one—how Reformed Christians might organize differently from other Christians in seeking to affect American politics. This may not seem at first impression to be a central issue in Christian citizenship, but, as someone with experience in practical and tactical politics, I argue differently.
There are a few basic alternatives in organizing politically. First, Christians can enter politics as individuals and seek to influence politics alone, with each person seeking God’s guidance to make the right decisions or to advocate for the right policies within the political system. A second option is for Christians working in professional politics to combine for mostly personal support. Examples are elected members of Congress meeting together for mutual personal encouragement and support (such as the prayer breakfast mentioned above) or a group of lobbyists meeting together for prayer and Bible study. A third organizational option is for individual Christian politicians and activists to meet together to examine the political, rather than merely personal, implications of their faith. An example of this activity might be politicians trying to hammer out an agreement on, say, abortion policy or an environmental issue based on their Christian principles.

A fourth option is for Christian political professionals to set up explicitly Christian political organizations, such as Christian political parties, interest groups, or labor unions to compete directly with parallel secular political organizations which now dominate American politics. Finally, Christian organizational structures could be organized and operated by the clergy of one or more denominations, who would articulate what they interpret to be God’s will on behalf of all denominational members (including, presumably, denominational members who are political professionals).

Reformed doctrine and practice should not be forgotten in contemplating these organizational issues. We hold to the priesthood of all believers and have a strong history of lay influence in church matters. The option expressed most frequently by Reformed political scientists is option four—for Christian political professionals to set up Christian political organizations to compete head-to-head with secular groups in all aspects of politics. This option is often advocated by those who point to its measured success in Canada and some European nations, especially the Netherlands.5

While this option is arguably the truest Reformed position, it has two serious problems in today’s America. Our tradition of American individualism and our constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state (at least as it has been misinterpreted by the courts and many politicians) make such political organizations immediately suspect, and targets for marginalization and delegitimation.

The prime example of this option is the Christian Coalition, a lobbying and voter education organization with a strong grassroots system, built around one version of an explicitly Christian agenda. The coalition has had more difficulty in having its organizational structure accepted as legitimate than it has enacting its agenda. But while Reformed Christians may have strong disagreements with some of the conclusions reached by the coalition (most of which refer back to the issue raised above of how “Christian” the United States was, should be, or can be), its organizational strategy is clearly within the Reformed tradition.

Generally, however, Christians in America have not chosen this most Reformed of options. Most Protestant denominations (and the Reformed Church in America at least partially) have instead chosen option five (what might be called the “Catholic” option)—clergy-led institutions issuing pronouncements on political issues. The practical problem with these pronouncements is that they influence almost no one in politics. No politician worthy of standing for reelection believes that a majority of Methodists (or Presbyterians or African Methodist Episcopal, etc.) agree with the policies articulated by the official church bodies charged with issuing these pronouncements. Most politicians give these pronouncements the attention they deserve—little.

A more difficult but arguably more effective approach is option three—seeking to energize professional politicians who take seriously the Reformed tradition to join together in an attempt to articulate an agreed-upon position on a particular political issue. The difficulties of such an approach should not be underestimated. Few issues will find such a consensus, and agreement will often be difficult to reach. Those issues that obtain a consensus might not make much headway in the secular political world. This may frustrate Christian political activists, but these unsettled issues are witnesses to the larger truth that most political positions on complex issues are not easily defined as “Christian” or “unChristian,” even by experts in the field.

I find particularly unreformed the notion that clergy have some special expertise on political issues. Reformed polity and theology suggest quite the opposite—in our tradition it is expected that laymen and laywomen may and do contribute significantly to theological debates. In synodical meetings of Reformed denominations, farmers, plumbers, bankers, insurance salespersons, realtors, and dress designers stand with ministers and theologians in debating controversial theological and ecclesiastical issues. Indeed, to see the laity debate such issues is a sure sign of our commitment to the central Reformed tenet of the priesthood of all believers. Too often we seem to exchange the priesthood of all believers for something like “the pervasive wisdom of the priesthood,” a position far closer to the operating doctrine of the medieval Catholic church from which reformers rebelled. Far better for us Reformed Christians is to urge our fellow believers who practice politics, of whom there are many, to tell us how they view—through the spectacles of their faith—the most controversial issues of public concern.6 This expectation also implies a clear duty for our educational institutions, especially Christian colleges in the Reformed tradition, to educate for effective political action.
The fourth topic with which Reformed Christians need to familiarize themselves for effective citizenship is the unique character of American government and political machinery. I remember receiving in a congressional office a letter from a constituent who wrote to my boss (a U.S. representative) complaining about her neighbor’s barking dog—could the congressman do anything about it? Readers will immediately understand a barking dog as a local matter outside a U.S. representative’s jurisdiction. But politicians are routinely asked to address issues that, upon careful thought, might more effectively be addressed elsewhere. And no public officials, at least in my opinion, get asked to intervene in more inappropriate areas than do officials of the national government.

The American political structure prefers local and non-governmental solutions to social problems. Effective Christian citizenship in America means working with, not against, this structural preference. Let me briefly review what I think are three key elements in the American political structure.

First is the notion of limited government: a restricted national government as part of a federated system emerging from a society that looks primarily to vigorous voluntary efforts concerning social justice. The founders of our nation feared all government, and especially the national government. They saw that government could take away individual liberty, potentially imposing values and laws alien to local understandings of liberty and justice. This danger of governmental tyranny increased the larger, more powerful, and more distant the government was from the people. Our Constitution checks and limits our national government, setting the House against the Senate, the Congress against the president, the judiciary against the political branches, all to keep the national government small in scope and power.

This constitutional system has worked as intended—too well, in the minds of many frustrated by continuing social problems and the constant infighting of national politicians we see every day. But any fair reading of the Founders’ writings shows that this infighting was intended. They saw it as preserving, not frustrating, the ability of Americans to pursue liberty and justice in their own communities.

The American system limits state and local governments far less. Our Constitution reserves to the states, and to the people, the powers it does not delegate to the national government. The Founders also depended upon vigorous non-governmental action to address social problems of equity, fairness, and compassion. They clearly thought that issues of what we would call social justice would and should be addressed, but they wanted these addressed at levels closer to the actual problems—by local governments and local voluntary organizations.

Our nation has a limited central government. It is flexible and can be adjusted. But it functions best over time when the basic structure is respected. This truth, however, does not imply that the levels of government, taken together, cannot be a force for good, or that all governmental entities should ignore social or economic inequities. But it does demand some creativity and implies some guidelines for our expectations. What this means in a practical sense is that there is tremendous power to address issues of social concern, but doing so usually entails moving away from the central government.

The second structural element is the basic economic purpose of the national government. While this is subject to some debate, the historical record seems clear that a major purpose was to encourage general economic growth by promoting free commerce among the states and between our nation and other nations. The Founders wanted a commercial republic. They also did not want a welfare state. They did not want the national government to redistribute income from the rich to the poor, even though they were well aware that such efforts were then being tried in other nations and would be popular with the masses of Americans. The U.S. system did evolve (with strong help from early Supreme Court decisions on interstate commerce cases) into a nation of unimpeded interstate and international commerce, thereby rapidly increasing overall national wealth. For good or ill, our political system is one that naturally helps us "bake bigger economic pies," but makes it hard for politicians to "slice the pieces" more fairly.

A third critical element of our political culture is its individualism and competitiveness. American culture rewards the rugged individual, the "self-made man (or woman)" who succeeds through much pluck and some luck, and not through government handouts. The American myth rewards freedom, which we prefer to see as freedom to succeed, but it also implies freedom to fail. Our rhetoric supports equality, and it is an equality of opportunity and not an equality of result. We love "fairness," which to us means giving everyone a chance to start the race but not ensuring everyone wins. We believe we are a meritocracy, that people who reach the top in their fields are better (at least in that field) than the rest of us.

American Christians may not like the characteristics of a limited, central government, its commercial focus, and the individualism and competitiveness of our history. Indeed, there is much in these and other elements of our tradition that Christians may and should criticize. Many thinkers in the Reformed tradition have undertaken thorough criticisms of these elements, and their work is worth reading and taking to heart. Materialism and individualism, at least in their extreme forms too prevalent in contemporary American culture, are certainly contrary to much gospel teaching.

But this essay is intended to provide some guidance for effective Reformed political action in today’s American political society, as that society is, and not
as some may like it to be. Many Christians working on social justice issues despair that America does not have a larger national government that can undertake national health care, build and manage government housing for all, or guarantee employment for everyone. If one is waiting for American political culture and institutions to change for progress on these issues to occur, one is going to be in despair for a very long time, and not much is going to be done in the meantime.

It is precisely at this point where many despair that I find reasons for optimism. Effective Christian citizenship will work with the structural characteristics of American political institutions. Reformed Christians believe it is possible to be "in" the world but not "of" it, and effective political action demands it. Surely our national government is not about to enact national health insurance, but neither will it prevent efforts by Reformed Christians in local congregations to create local organizations to deliver health care effectively to everyone in their area who needs it. Washington, D.C., is not about to build more government housing, but who is to prevent Reformed Christians in communities with housing needs from greatly increasing the stock of adequate housing?

Non-national, non-governmental solutions have both moral and efficiency benefits. On the moral level, one clear biblical message is that we humans tend to avoid direct responsibility for our fellow citizens. Someone in the crowd asked Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" not really wanting to find someone to help, but rather to avoid it. Jesus answers us through the parable of the Good Samaritan that our neighbors are, simply, our neighbors. We should care directly and personally for each one whom we encounter, giving whatever is needed in the most direct and effective manner, out of our own resources. Of course, in many cases this aid will not be enough to affect problems more than marginally. At the same time, the essential first step of all effective Christian social action is personal action. We do, after all, "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling." We do not apply for salvation to a bureaucracy.

Direct action provides insight into how complex social problems are and how difficult they are to solve, even up close and with high levels of commitment. This insight into ourselves and the problems we see should adjust our estimations of our own wisdom and power, and of our expectations for government. Curiously, compassion and generosity in public officials seem to be measured more by what they promise to do in the future in faraway capitals for the faceless poor with other people's time and money, than by what they have done or are doing for the personalized poor in their own communities with their own time and money. Christians know better, and the prevailing attitude seems contrary to biblical teaching and Reformed theology.

Arguments for efficiency, it seems to me, also discourage looking for new and bigger national programs to ameliorate many social problems. What is now occurring in private enterprise is instructive to anyone concerned about social justice. In business, the large top-heavy corporation now often loses out to the small, "flat" well-managed upstart. Large private bureaucracies do not move swiftly enough to meet changing market demands. Successful ones reallocate resources efficiently and move quickly to meet emerging demand. These are mostly small enterprises, or a few large businesses that have overcome the natural disadvantages of large size. In business, bigness is now often recognized as the major obstacle to creativity and responsiveness.

What is true for business may be increasingly true for government. National governmental programs are notoriously bureaucratic, rigid, slow to get started, and slow to adjust. A few decades ago there may have been an argument that expertise to address key social problems was so scarce, the problems so complex, the commitment to solve them so narrowly held, and the solution so overwhelmingly financial, that an overarching bureaucracy was needed to house all this expertise, power, and commitment. That argument is invalid now (if it ever was valid), especially with the information available because of the revolution in technology. The key to social justice in the future will be the ability to scan the globe to find what works well, to believe one can adapt the successes to local conditions, and to have the freedom to do so. In such a future, government may facilitate the exchange, but will not and should not control the program.

Christian Politicians

So far this essay has addressed American politics from the perspective of the citizen, suggesting that effective Reformed citizenship in America requires a familiarity with appropriate theological and political traditions and a willingness to work within the constraints imposed by those traditions. This essay also promised to address how citizens might evaluate politicians seeking their votes.

My advice to Christians evaluating candidates for public office is to ask themselves whether the relevant candidates have a vision, a political strategy, and a personal record that seem appropriate for the office they are seeking. A few comments about each item will introduce these ideas.

At the level of vision, Christians should ask what type of nation, state, or community candidates are suggesting will be created or sustained through their efforts in office. Does that society conform with the citizen's own view of what Christianity demands?

The reader can infer my own position that these "visions" will differ depending upon the office the candidate seeks. During a recent presentation I was making to an adult Sunday school class, I was asked my partisan preference. I jokingly replied that I might likely run as a Christian socialist if I were seeking to be on the council of a small village, and as an ideological libertarian conservative if I were running for national office. My response was
lighthearted, but it reflected my conviction that one does justice and seeks mercy in the concrete local situation, not in the abstract national program. In the last fifty years, economic redistribution issues have become the province of the national government and national political debates, allowing individual citizens and local officials to avoid addressing them at the level they would have the most meaning politically and morally.

The second thing Christian citizens should look for in evaluating a candidate is the candidate’s strategy for implementing his or her vision. Does the strategy make sense for the office the candidate is seeking, or is the candidate promising to deliver on matters he or she will not possibly be able to? Is the candidate addressing real issues he or she will face in the desired office, or is the candidate raising false issues to gain votes or avoid scrutiny?

While our constitutional system encourages separate and competing institutions, our political practice has devised integrating institutions, namely political parties, which (ideally) present visions of American society and strategies to achieve them. Despite the failings and public distrust of political parties and partisan politics, Christian citizens would do well to examine what political parties say about the responsibilities of various levels of government.

My favorite anecdote to distinguish between a Democrat and a Republican is this: A Democrat, when confronted with a problem, asks first what the federal government can do about it, then what state government can do, then local government, then a community group, then the family, and lastly the individual. A Republican, so it goes, asks the same questions but in the opposite order.

Political parties are obligated to present reasonably coherent strategies to address problems facing American society, to ask and seek the best answer to the questions in the preceding paragraph. Parties ought to distinguish between problems that can be solved by politics and those problems that are beyond political resolution. For those problems a party claims can be solved by politics and those problems that are beyond political parties say about the responsibilities of various levels of government.

My third suggestion is to examine the personal record of candidates. By this I mean both the candidate’s public record in other political office or in community affairs, and at least some information about the candidate’s personal life. I will be one of the first to assert that in too many elections today too much attention is focused on private, personal, and long-past mistakes that have nothing to do with a candidate’s current fitness for office. A long-ago divorce, a lone drunk-driving charge of twenty years ago, an assertion by the candidate’s third grade teacher that he once cheated on a math test, and other such items are, in isolation, largely irrelevant for most public offices. At the same time, a long pattern of troubling incidents, individually irrelevant, may add up to a legitimate issue. After all, voters are not electing mere automatons to take positions on previously known issues. They are choosing reasoning human beings who will be called on to make complex judgments on many issues that cannot be anticipated before elections. As such, character matters.

Conclusion

In closing, I offer an admonition about the limits of politics. Politics is not everything, and it may be inevitably corrupting to someone consumed by it. A candidate or a citizen whose life completely revolves around politics is to be avoided. As a political scientist, I oppose term limits on public officials. Good public servants are simply too rare to require them to leave after a few years in office. While I oppose official term limits, as a Reformed Christian I do support what I might call “personal time” limits. I look for politicians who take the time to pay attention to their families, who have developed outside interests that are not political, who take time off every week, year, or within their careers to cultivate the other areas of life. Whether one uses the commonplace term of leading a “balanced” life, or the Kuyperian term of maintaining “sphere sovereignty,” evidence that life is more than politics is crucial. There is something tragic, even hypocritical, about Christian politicians and activists consumed by their political activity. As Jesus said, we should give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. The “caesar” of politics is important, but a full Christian life is far more than mere politics.

ENDNOTES


2. This remains true even though newer Christian political movements such as the Christian Coalition have recently adopted much of the theoretical language developed and long used in Reformed circles. Much of the literature of the Christian Coalition, and the several books written recently by its leader Ralph Reed, Jr., quite clearly use many of the themes concerning Christian perspectives on politics that Reformed academics have used and developed for years. Whether these groups have faithfully worked
out the policy implications, or merely used the language to cloak their usually conservative views in religious jargon, is another and more controversial matter.

3. For a brief articulation of the reconstructionist (or "theonomic" movement, see Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Theonomic Position," in Gary S. Smith, ed., *God and Politics*.

4. A strong spokesperson for this view is James Skillen, a scholar and rather prolific writer who serves as Executive Director for the Association for Public Justice in Washington, D.C.


6. In this regard, the new "Call for Renewal" movement, organized by moderate and liberal evangelicals might develop into a force through which Christians can get politicians to address policy, political, and governmental issues in more explicitly Christian language.


8. Most term limit bills would also allow a single-minded politician to remain in politics for life, as long as he or she jumped around to different offices. I fail to see the advantage of an obsessed politician hopping from one office to another, complying with the letter but certainly not the spirit of the laws.