**Article Summary:** Christian views of political life have been shaped in a variety of ways over time, with differing understandings of the role and responsibilities of government and of how Christians citizens ought to exercise their earthly citizenship. In this article, William Edgar considers these currents in the context of thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, and others, and outlines the theological and philosophical context for CPJ’s distinctive approach to political life.

Edgar shows how CPJ grounds its thinking in the biblical doctrine of creation, as it applies to a world that is expanding and shrinking at the same time. In so doing, CPJ advocates for the legitimacy of a plural society that upholds human flourishing, the call to justice for all, and the freedom to worship according to conscience.

**Author bio:** William Edgar is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

**Article Title:**

**A Biblical Vision for Political Life**

As a new Christian, I was not very happy with some of the versions of political and public policy I encountered. But when I attended seminary, I was classmates with someone who would turn out to be one of the most fertile political thinkers of our time—James Skillen. We became good friends and remain so to this day. Along with Jim and a few other colleagues, I became convinced of the Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian approach to political life,1 and I’ve remained in this camp ever since.

The overarching vision of the Center for Public Justice, which draws on these approaches, is easily stated, though not always easily applied. It centers on a biblical understanding of the order of creation. And chief among the concerns within the creation order is justice. Jim Skillen puts it this way: the criteria for realizing public justice arise “from the struggle to articulate a creation-order political philosophy for a differentiating society in a shrinking world.”2

This rather pregnant definition means that we ground our thinking in the biblical doctrine of creation, as it applies to a world that is expanding and shrinking at the same time. Two major components inform our understanding of creation, and of public justice at its center: anthropology and history.

*Anthropology.* Human beings are created in the image of God. This has enormous implications for our philosophy of life and for our understanding of public justice. The
primary calling of humankind is to worship God by ruling over creation. God calls us in
the “cultural mandate” (Genesis 1:26-31; Acts 17:27) to have a proper dominion over this
world and also to spread out over the planet in order to seek and find God. Being made
to reflect God means there is a fundamental equality in all human creatures, despite
appearances and circumstances. Because of that, justice must be the same for everyone.

The expression creation-order refers to the universe and its design as it was originally
given by God at the dawn of time, and it remains to this day. Identifying the different
elements of this order is not limited to reading the first two books of Genesis, though
they are foundational. The creation is described throughout the Bible, both in the Old
and the New Testaments. Sometimes we have a direct window onto the operations of
God’s world, as we do in Job 38-41, or Psalm 104. More often, an understanding of
creation is woven into the fabric of the many books in Scripture, given as a standard or
norm for human thought and behavior. Almost always, there is an historical and
institutional component to the creation order.

The intrusion of sin into this creation order is profoundly traumatic. Every aspect of life
is affected. Yet sin’s invasion has not been able to threaten the integrity of creation. Thus
politics, and every other good endeavor, are still grounded in the creation order.
Government does not receive its raison d’être because of sin. Contrary to many views,
including ones I encountered as a new Christian, the state is not a necessary evil. We are
created, among other things, for political life.

**History.** Even if there had never been a fall, history was meant to take the human race
from one economy to another. We were meant to advance from the state of perfection in
the Garden to a state of consummate bliss which the Bible calls eternal life. As it
happens, sin did enter in and everything became vulnerable. Although harsh and
tyannical political orders appeared, the purposes of the original cultural mandate not
only were maintained, but enhanced and finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Psalm 8:5-9;
Hebrews 2:5-9; Matthew 28:16-20; Revelation 21:22-27).

Though the shape of human society has been modified down through the ages,
government is always by divine appointment (Romans 13:1-7). Even after, or especially
after, Christ’s resurrection from the dead, in him all things hold together (Colossians
1:15-20). The fact of the inauguration of a new order means history is moving toward its
final goal. We are full participants in this historical unfolding, which includes mankind’s
governing responsibilities.

Within this historical development various institutions have developed. Human life does
not consist of an amalgam of biological existence. It is shaped not only by our individual
relation to God and to each other, but by certain collective units, such as the family, or
the state, or the church, or business ventures. In Kuyper’s vision, each of these institutions were spheres that had their own sovereignty under the rule of Christ.

**Faith and Politics Over Time**

These two important components (anthropology and history) have informed Christian views of political life in a variety of ways over time and have given rise to different understandings of the role and responsibilities of government and of how Christians citizens ought to exercise their earthly citizenship.

The first opportunity for Christians to think through their position on politics was in the context of Christendom—the thousand-year-plus period from Constantine’s declaring Christianity a legal religion to the dawn of the modern age. Although there were great achievements during this time, the favored Christian model for government was based on the Roman imperial system, with a confusion of church and state. This led to many struggles to try to honor the need for government while placing the Christian’s basic identity in the heavenly realm.

Augustine (354-430) taught that we might make some use of the goods in the City of Man as long as they were somehow related to “heavenly peace” in the City of God. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that government belonged to the natural world, but that the church, grace, and revelation are super-natural. Remarkable as were these giants, they both started from the assumption that the present earthly order, including politics, is at best a concession to sin, which needs to be overcome or eclipsed in order to be closer to God.

The next major phase of Christian political thinking occurred with the rise of the modern state after the Reformation. Here, nationalism became prominent. Sometimes this yielded a Christian nationalist identity, and sometimes a more secular one. While many laudable benefits arose from this configuration, including the separation of the spheres, so did great insufficiencies. Some Christians sought to identify a particular country as a Christian nation. While some countries may have elements of a Christian culture, to somehow enforce a particular confession, be it Christian or otherwise, on a post-resurrection society is to attempt to return to the time of Moses or King David.

Ironically, it is often in reaction to this kind of misguided nationalism that many have argued for a privatized, ineffectual faith. I would contend that one of the obstacles today to upholding public justice for all is the kind of liberalism espoused by John Locke (1632-1704). He taught that the individual was absolutely free and the only reason for institutions such as government is to preserve our right to property. This has led to an
exaggeration of what Charles Taylor calls the “sovereign self,” with the interminable battles for individual rights.⁵

**CPJ’s Vision for Political Life**

Within these various approaches to faith and political life, the Center for Public Justice has advocated for the legitimacy of a plural society in which human flourishing, the call to justice for all, and the freedom to worship according to conscience are all encouraged. Going back to the two basic principles of anthropology and history, we argue that the purpose of government is not to separate believers from unbelievers, nor to give special privileges to believers, but to uphold justice for all, since all are in God’s image and all participate in a history where the wheat and the weeds are growing up together (Matthew 13:24-30).

To be sure, this is a Christian conviction, but we don’t require people to accept the gospel before enacting justice. Magistrates are appointed by God whether they acknowledge that or not. And God has left clear witnesses to his providential care whether people recognize it or not (Acts 14:16-18).

By pluralism we do not mean relativism. We mean that each institution has its own integrity and its own purpose before God. And because of that, each institution derives its norms from Scriptural principles, again, whether acknowledged or not. Thus, the state has a legitimate sovereignty. It should not be too large, claiming more and more power over other spheres, such as the church or the family or the market. Neither should it be too small, acting only as a sort of referee for people to do as they like.⁶ The church has been rightly uncoupled from other spheres, and rather than this leading to secularism, this differentiation has the potential of clarifying the responsibilities of each sector, but always under the lordship of Christ.

So as we consider these principles in light of our current political divisions and discord, how and where can CPJ and its hopeful vision for political life make any kind of impact? What are some areas in need of further study in order to make a more lasting contribution? I would suggest these three:

1. In the introduction of this article, I referred to “in a shrinking world.” There is considerable debate about the implications of globalization, a topic that Robert Joustra attends to later in this series as he considers a Christian perspective on international relations.⁷ The Center for Public Justice should take an active part in that debate.⁸ Though based in America, our concerns are truly global. Our principles have important implications for world trade, international relations, immigration, and issues of justice.
across many borders. And we ought to have a special heart for persecuted peoples around the globe.

2. Another area needing more robust and engaged dialogue is human sexuality. While some have accused Christians of being obsessed with this, we need look no further than legislation about marriage or the recent debates about transgendered people in the military to see that issues of gender and human sexuality figure largely in our national debate. One place where the Center for Public Justice can contribute is to advocate for the proper place for creation-order institutions in relation to civil rights.9 Chelsea Langston Bombino and Stanley Carlson-Thies discuss this and the related work of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance in their article for this series.

3. A final area requiring our engagement is in putting forth a winsome and persuasive apologetic for this vision for public justice. We need good ways to convince our fellow human beings of the biblical understanding of justice and the right roles of government and citizens together in upholding it.

We have been assigned to this particular time and place by the grace of God. Rather than retreat out of fear or move ahead out of ressentiment, we should do our work with great confidence, knowing that God loves this world, including its political features, far more than we do. Thus may we joyfully work his works “while it is day” (John 9:4).

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1 Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was the seminal figure in the revival of Calvinism in the 19th century. Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), a follower of Kuyper, was professor of jurisprudence and a remarkable commentator on Western thought.


6 Many questions arise here. One of them is how much right the government has to encourage faith-based initiatives without endorsing a particular confession. CPJ associates Stephen Monsma and Stanley Carlson-Thies have done extensive work on this area. See their *Free to Serve: Protecting The Religious Freedom of Faith-Based Organizations*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015. But not everyone is convinced.


8 Lots has been done, particularly by friends of CPJ such as Bob Goudzwaard, with Mark Vander Vennen and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crisis*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. But there is room for more.