

**Vol. 5, 2017 - Looking Back, Looking Forward: Celebrating CPJ's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**  
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**Article Summary:**

Contributing Editor Vincent Bacote starts off our special fall series celebrating the Center for Public Justice's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a reflection on CPJ as an expression of holistic Christian discipleship. Bacote argues that the current political climate raises these two important questions: "What is a disciple of Christ to do in this climate of division, fear, cynicism, and confusion?" and "How is the Center for Public Justice a discipleship movement that provides guidance at this time and beyond?" Responding to these questions, Bacote explains what political discipleship means and discusses four distinctives of the Center for Public Justice that can guide Christian citizens in their stewardship of God's world and their pursuit of justice for all.

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**Article Title:**

**CPJ as a Discipleship Movement**

This fall's *Public Justice Review* features a series of articles highlighting some of the distinctives of CPJ in articles that explore CPJ's approach to international relations, religious freedom, education, and economic justice. As the Contributing Editor for this series, it has occurred to me to consider the Center for Public Justice as one expression of holistic Christian discipleship.

While a focus on discipleship might initially incline us to think about the process of internal spiritual maturation, questions of public and political concern are *equally* important to disciples because our private lives interface unavoidably with matters of common, public good. Moreover, while Christians in the United States, at least since the 1970s, have expressed a range of opinions on the proper disposition and priorities for public/political life, we are in one of those *kairos* moments where our attention is heightened and the stakes for our political life seem particularly high. *Kairos* is a Greek term that means "opportunity" or "season," and people speak of "*kairos* moments" as times of opportunity.

The current political climate is actually not something that has sprung up unexpectedly; rather, it is laying bare already existing fears, tensions, and confusion about the prospects for our common life in the United States and beyond. Perennial concerns about race, immigration, economic disparity, public education, sexuality, and military conflict are among the issues that continue to vex us. In the United States, this vexation tends toward frustration and despair because of our mythic ideal of a nation that purports to offer a dream of good, comfortably self-determined life to all of its citizens. The intensification of our discourse through the avalanche of social media further heightens this situation with a seemingly ceaseless flow of information about the multiple problems that ail our life together.

### **What Is Political Discipleship?**

The fortieth anniversary of the Center for Public Justice therefore arrives at a time of tremendous opportunity for us to consider its unique contribution to the broader conversation on faith and political life. It may seem strange to say that the phrase “for such a time as this” is apt for this moment, but I contend that it is truly a ripe moment for reflecting on the possibilities of political discipleship seen in the aims of the Center for Public Justice.

Before looking at some specific dimensions of “CPJ-brand political discipleship,” let me make clear how I understand the meaning of discipleship and connect it to political life. Matthew 28:18-20 is one of the central biblical texts for thinking about discipleship and Christian mission, and the verb is “make disciples.” One of the key ways for cultivating disciples is teaching them “everything” conveyed by Jesus; this includes Jesus’s emphasis on his fidelity to the divine revelation prior to the incarnation-- what we now call the Old Testament. In that earlier revelation is both a human commission for stewarding God’s world (Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8) and a commitment to justice (Micah 6:8).

In this light, proper Christian discipleship requires attention to politics as one dimension of our stewardship of God’s world and the pursuit of justice as another. These commitments are not in tension with an emphasis on personal, internal transformation. Indeed, they are part of a larger holistic discipleship where God’s people encounter the inbreaking of God’s kingdom within themselves and externally express their commitment to the kingdom in a multifaceted manner that includes political life.

### **CPJ’s Distinctive Approach to Political Discipleship**

The current *kairos* moment prompts us to ask the general question: “What is a disciple of Christ to do in this climate of division, fear, cynicism, and confusion?” and in particular “How is the Center for Public Justice a discipleship movement that provides

guidance at this time and beyond?” The answer would really require a book-length response, but I will present briefly four ways that Center for Public Justice distinctives are expressions of discipleship that speak to this moment.

CPJ’s first distinctive is found in the last two words of its name: Public Justice. CPJ’s emphasis on *public justice* stresses the limits of government while also highlighting the role of government in facilitating human flourishing by “promoting the well-being of an entire society in right relationship with the larger world that God made.” At first glance, this may seem to be merely a matter of Christian political philosophy, but it has direct connection with the trajectory of discipleship.

Christians carry out their lives in society as citizens of towns, cities, states, and nations, and while this citizenship is not their ultimate allegiance, their commitment to God and to God’s world implies attention to the questions of the proper role of government. This is important whether citizenship provides opportunities to participate in government or even when there are great limits to citizen influence on government. The United States is a republic where citizen participation is a great opportunity and a vital responsibility; Christians committed to public justice recognize the discipleship opportunity in helping urge the government toward the creation and implementation of policies that enable flourishing for all, individuals and institutions alike.

A second distinctive of CPJ is expressed in its aspiration “to foster a new politics, a renewed sense of public responsibility among citizens, and a forward-looking, comprehensive approach to public life that will lead to a more just republic and international order.” Our country’s rigid partisanship rooted in political ideology is one of the greatest challenges in the current climate. The commitment to political parties, interest groups, and pristine political philosophies (whether conservative, progressive, or libertarian) has facilitated an approach to political engagement often focused on a narrow range of issues and away from the larger question of the framework of our public life and its operation.

CPJ’s more comprehensive pursuit does not deny the need for attention to issues or engagement with various political philosophies but seeks to reorient our attention and energy toward a greater understanding of the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of citizenship committed to the common good. As a matter of political discipleship, this aspiration emerges from a commitment to a just public order that protects all persons and enables increasing opportunity to enjoy true human freedom. This distinctive pursuit of justice is intentionally collaborative and non-ideological, with the hope that citizens will come and reason together and engage the precious yet difficult task of seeking justice for all. In this *kairos* moment, both Christian discourse and practice need to have this “common” emphasis.

Third, the word “international” in the quote above has particular implications. One of the great challenges in the past and present is the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. While patriotism at its best is an expression of love and commitment to one’s country, nationalism is a step (or leap) beyond where either the nation is seen as God’s chosen people or the nation itself is seen as worthy of primary loyalty. To return to the earlier Matthew 28 text, the discipleship commission is global in scope (in Acts 1:8 it is expressed as “to the ends of the earth”), which implies that the family of disciples is worldwide.

Indeed, both the great commission texts as well as eschatological texts (e.g. Rev. 5:9, 7:9) present us with the truth that “our people” are all over the world. This family of disciples with a primary loyalty to our Triune God ought to have both a love for their country and deep concern for the national interests of the countries where their fellow disciples reside. In some countries around the world, we are seeing forms of populism and nationalism emerge in response to economic and political globalization, including some (others might say many) in the United States. This is a time and opportunity for Christians to urge consideration of the good for both our nation and others.

Fourth, CPJ is often associated with its commitment to principled pluralism. One aspect of this commitment is resistance to nationalism expressed as follows:

The Center's philosophy of principled pluralism flows directly from its conviction that governments have not been ordained by God for the purpose of separating believers from unbelievers, giving privilege to Christians and the church, or serving the interests of one nation over others. This is a religious conviction that mandates publicly established religious freedom for all. Governments have the high calling to uphold public justice for all people living within their territories. States are not churches or families; public officials are not national theologians or clergy. States are public-legal communities that exist for the protection and enhancement of the common good.

Principled pluralism is committed to the flourishing of individuals and communities around the world, including an emphasis on the right for those who aren't Christian to freely practice their religion. Within this lies a disposition that emerges from a political discipleship that has no need for the pursuit of a Christian theocracy or other form of triumphalism. While there is a clear emphasis on participation in society with the aim of seeking an increasingly more just nation and world, there is also the recognition that Christians, while made alive by God's Holy Spirit, do not see with the kind of clear vision that we will only have when the kingdom of God arrives at the end.

This recognition yields a humility as we seek the common good with our fellow citizens. When there are opportunities to steward political power, we seek the wisdom to hold it lightly and steward it well, resisting the temptation to give in to the distortions that have overcome many before. In the current climate, Christian concerns about the loss of power and influence in society (or the price of getting close to power) are at a fever pitch. Disciples have an evangelism opportunity here, or perhaps it is more of an opportunity for Christian formation? Can we help other Christians see the good in protecting the rights of all and seeking the good of even those who oppose us?

Forty years ago, others sensed a *kairos* moment, as our interview with CPJ founder James Skillen later in this series will show, and began what became CPJ. Perhaps even more so now than then, we must consider the opportunities of political discipleship that are before us. Let us seek to live in faithfulness to God, committed to stewarding God's world with a humble but fervent pursuit of justice in the interest of the common good and glory of God.