Thirty years ago, the Association for Public Justice (APJ) was launched with the aim of organizing Christians for public service—service not as an interest group but as a public-justice mission. At the time, many citizens were arguing about the consequences of the Sixties, about the future of the Civil Rights movement, about failure in Vietnam, and about abortion, taxes, the Soviet Union, and more. Yet little attention was directed to the underlying responsibility of citizenship itself.

Church lobby groups continued their work and new interest groups began to spring up to try to stop abortion, or to uphold family values, or to feed the hungry, or to protect the environment. But questions about the relation of religion and politics and about the very nature of government’s responsibility were not at the forefront of most of these interest groups.

In fact, most political engagement of the last 30 years has reflected traditional American pragmatism in addressing issues of great moral or economic concern. Citizens take government for granted either as a means to achieve other ends or as a menace to freedom. Americans, including American Christians, love the nation but tend to look with suspicion at government unless it can solve the problems and deliver the goods they demand of it.

A Changing World

Today, we face a very different world situation but without much change in the American political mentality. The imbalance of global wealth between rich and poor is far greater than it was 30 years ago. Global warming, sex trafficking, and AIDS get more attention now than abortion and civil rights. Terrorism, Iraq, and the crisis in Darfur make the headlines while Nicaragua, Vietnam, and the Cold War have been forgotten. Yet the same political concerns dominate American thinking: how to keep the economy growing; how to protect our country from the enemy du jour; and how to keep America Number One in the world.
After about a decade in Washington, the Association for Public Justice morphed into the Center for Public Justice. The time had come to delve more deeply into the reason for the absence of Christian political vision in the United States. It was time to articulate more fully the principles of public justice, which demand that we go beyond interest-group pragmatism and civil-religion. From that time forward, the Center’s work advanced not only at the fundamental level of developing a Christian public philosophy but also with respect to demonstrating the significance of standards of justice for education and welfare reform, for family and marriage law, for foreign and defense policies.

Looking to the Future

While we believe that APJ and the Center have achieved a great deal during the last 30 years, the Center is still very much at the beginning of its mission. The aim to build a broad and coherent program and a mature constituency of public servants, with policy insights and recommendations across the full spectrum of government’s responsibility, is still far from being realized. But solid foundations have been laid and we are as determined as ever to keep asking the important questions about how to be of service at the juncture of principle and policy, of government capabilities and government obligations, of civic responsibility and service to God for the good of our neighbors. We are excited about our calling as we plan for the future.

It seems today that the foundations are shaking everywhere—not only from earthquakes and hurricanes but also from the loss of confidence in basic institutions of government, church, education, finance, and industry. Everything appears to be up for sale; popular leaders are here today and gone tomorrow; the world is shrinking; economic power is shifting to the East; Christianity’s center of gravity has shifted southward. In a world like this, where only God can provide security while he shakes the earth, the Center for Public Justice wants to continue, with your help, to seek out paths of justice both for governments and citizens. And we hope that 30 years of trust invested in the Center will encourage more citizens and public officials to offer themselves in constructive public service for the common good.

Happy New Year, and cheers for what we hope and pray will be thirty more years of cooperation in the cause of public justice.

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