

**Article Summary:** Over forty years ago, James Skillen and a number of others began to dream about an organization for Christian political action. Their discussions and labors eventually brought about the founding of the Center for Public Justice, with the goal of developing a Christian mindset for civic responsibility.

This wide-ranging conversation with Skillen explores the cultural and political climate when CPJ was founded and the engagement of Christians with politics at that time. Skillen compares this to our political currents today, and demonstrates how vital the work and vision of CPJ continues to be in challenging how most Americans, particularly Christians, think about political life.

**Article Title:**

**A Conversation with James Skillen**

**Author byline:** **James Skillen** is the founder and former president of the Center for Public Justice. Skillen spoke with **Katie Thompson**, Program Director and Editor of *Shared Justice*.

***K: You helped to launch CPJ forty years ago. What were you doing in the years prior that led you to create an organization like CPJ?***

J: I first became acquainted forty-five years ago with people who were dreaming up an organization for Christian action. They started in the late 1960s and called their first efforts, to which I was then introduced, the National Association for Christian Political Action. From 1972 to 1977, several of us were asked to try to answer questions that had arisen in debates about what was intended with the words "Christian," "political," and "action." In 1977, we came up with a new name (The Association for Public Justice), a clearer aim, and the plan to set up an office in Washington, DC as soon as funding allowed. From 1973 until 1982, when I became the full-time director of the Association for Public Justice, I taught political science and philosophy at three Christian colleges while also becoming more and more involved each year in building the organization that was eventually called the Center for Public Justice.

***Why was the name “Center for Public Justice” chosen?***

In 1990, we chose the name Center for Public Justice to give it more of an identity as a generator of programs and policy proposals. That seemed to fit better for the Washington arena. As for the words "Public Justice," they were intended to call attention to the principled norm that ought to be recognized as the standard of

judgment for governing responsibility. We wanted to get at what's required for the polity and for civic responsibility.

Public justice has the ring of a norm or a standard. It's the belief that governments, courts, judges, legislators, etc. ought to do justice. We decided to put "public" and "justice" together, knowing that some people will think only of criminal justice, while others will have no idea what public is. It is meant to raise the question: "What is public justice?" And that's where we want to begin: we want to explain what it means. It'll always come to the relationship of citizens to government, and the responsibilities of governments in their branches and federal levels to the task of the public good.

***What was the political and cultural climate like when CPJ was launched? Why was an organization like CPJ needed at that time?***

Evangelicals were just beginning to become politically active, primarily over concerns about the moral climate of the country related to abortion, curriculum in schools, and in moving away from what was considered the true (legitimate) America (of the 1950s or the nineteenth century). The late 70s were when Jerry Falwell started the Moral Majority and when Evangelicals began to align with Catholics over abortion. Those of us starting APJ felt it was all too shallow. It took too much for granted about the health of the American political system and picked only a few issues. A citizens' movement needs to address the justice and injustice of the republic as a whole and deal with particular issues in a larger context of what a republic should be.

***What were you observing about Christian political engagement when you founded CPJ? What about CPJ's vision for and approach to political life did you think was necessary for Christians to act upon? How receptive did you find people to be to this approach?***

For the most part, I have to say, the attention of people was on either trying to get moral America back from secularists and others who were "stealing" it, or trying to push the country forward, following on with the Civil Rights movement. Since the latter included "abortion rights" and meant government spending more money for social causes, most Evangelicals lined up with Republican conservatives, and thus Ronald Reagan. Left-of-center Evangelicals and most mainline Christians focused on social and economic justice issues, thus, efforts to hold on to or recover the Roosevelt and LBJ coalitions.

During the 80s, after I got to Washington, I studied and met with Christians (and others) from all sides and wrote my book *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* to try to show the approach that APJ was taking. APJ did not win much of a following from Evangelicals because most thought we weren't American enough, or

not focused on pro-life enough, or were doing too much thinking and not lobbying enough, and so on.

***What issues captured your heart in particular over the years of your association with CPJ? What was CPJ able to uniquely contribute to them?***

These questions can't be easily or quickly answered. We chose to focus at the outset on an answer to the arguments over parent choice, schooling, government's responsibility, and religious freedom. The idea was to take a hot issue (and one that is always in debate) and try to show how structural and confessional pluralism point the way to a just resolution of many of the problems.

That work unfolded in detail with Stanley Carlson-Thies's work from the early 1990s up to the present. We also took up issues of land use, food, and farming when world hunger became a big concern so we could get at some economic and social issues from our point of view.

Because of the nuclear weapons debate in the 80s, the continued hangover of the Vietnam War debacle, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of international terrorism, I became increasingly interested in, and concerned with, international affairs and American foreign policy.

And through all of this, my primary concern through CPJ was with trying to shape a Christian mindset for civic responsibility. Too many people see that kind of work as too intellectual and not practical enough. But I think it is the most urgent challenge we face, and the last years, since George W. Bush up through Donald Trump, confirm my conviction. The country is in a real mess on many fronts and the approaches being taken to "solve the problems" are at best putting on a few bandages and at worst are merely turning politics into symbolic warfare with words.

***What are some of CPJ's most enduring guiding principles that have as much relevance today as they did forty years ago?***

Our deepest guiding principles challenge the way most Americans, including Christians, think about political life. The liberal tradition has given us the belief that the freedom of individuals is the foundation of politics and that government exists to protect the life and property of individuals. American liberals and conservatives are indebted to that tradition. Libertarians are the most radical on the right. Those on the far left believe if people are to be free as individuals, then government ought to do as much as necessary to give them equal opportunity. But for both wings, everything still boils down to just two actors: government and individuals.

But CPJ has always contended that the political community is a *res publica*—a public thing (we get our word “republic” from those Latin words). Taking those words seriously means that a republic is an institutional community in its own right, distinct from business, family, church, and others. Government of a republic exists to uphold the common good and not merely to protect the lives and properties of individuals.

That’s where our idea of principled pluralism comes in. In everything we’ve done through CPJ, we’ve tried to show that the reality of the American republic is more complex than the ideology of liberalism would have it. We live in a complex social order. Human beings do not function as autonomous individuals but as family members, as students and teachers in schools, and in many other relationships, so when a government governs, it needs to take into account and do justice to the diversity of other responsibilities people have.

***Looking back, what hasn’t changed about the national conversation since CPJ’s founding? And looking ahead, what are some new challenges? How can CPJ continue to be a faithful witness to what Christian political engagement in the public square can look like?***

The crisis of political life and the serious inadequacy of the ways that Christians address it is worse now than it was then, in my estimation. That is one big change. In addition, I think it is clearer now to many of us than it was forty years ago that our American political crises are more and more related to the changing world. Nations are increasingly interconnected and interdependent, and I don’t see most American Christians coming to grips with that. I think young adults in particular are going to have to dig deep, to gain a solid historical and religiously deep understanding of what is going on in the country and the world today, guided by a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the Bible (gained through serious communal discussions and action).

The challenge of being a Christian community in the world today is to serve God with wisdom and love in the actual world in which we live. We should not pretend that the responsibilities of the Christian life can be exercised through superficial efforts. Nor should we live and act as if we bear the burdens that only God can bear. Christ has given us a light yoke. We must simply wear it with delight and let God make use of us, but that entails the serious exercise of all the responsibilities God has given us.

***You reference the need to study the Bible, and you’ve written extensively about the biblical theme of justice. How has that shaped CPJ’s perspective on the high calling of government for upholding justice?***

In many ways, learning to walk in the light of the Bible is a life-long task for all of us (read Heb. 5:11-6:3 on maturity). What I discovered behind the questions many people would ask me was the assumption that political life is not an essential part of what it means to be human. If you ask typical Christians what they view as their responsibilities before God, they'll mention things like being a part of a family, belonging to a church, working hard, being a good person. But it's highly unusual if anyone mentions "contributing to the life of the civic polity of which I'm a part."

Most Protestants are deeply indebted to Augustine who believed that political life is not part of our created nature. I'm convinced that's wrong. It comes back to what it means to be creatures on biblical terms. In western Protestantism generally, particularly in our American individualistic society, we read the Bible as the story of salvation—that Christ is the Savior who has come to save sinners for eternity. Who are humans in this story? Apparently, they are sinners in need of God's saving grace. But the biblical story is bigger than that. How do the beginning of the Gospel of John, Colossians, and Hebrews, introduce the Savior? They introduce him as the one in whom "all things were created and hold together." He is not first of all the Savior, but the mediator of creation to reveal the glory of God.

And who are human beings? Our identity is not first of all that we are sinners, utterly devoid of worth. Rather, we are, first of all, creatures made in the image of God. We have become sinners, through and through, and certainly need to be cleansed, forgiven, and restored to life. But our identity, first of all, is that God created us for a very high purpose (read Ps. 8).

My argument is that we have to re-read and understand the big story of the Bible, which tells the story of the revelation of God's glory, and part of that revelation is the creature made in God's image to govern the earth. We are by nature, by created character, intended to be political creatures.

If it were true that government and politics exist only because of sin, then we would expect to find no reference to government and politics in the new heavens and new earth. But when Isaiah and John (in Revelation), for example, describe their visions of the creation's fulfillment after sin and death have been destroyed, they tell us something different. What they see is that the new heavens and new earth will be a kingdom, a new Jerusalem. Christ is the king, and his people govern and rule with him. He's on the throne. Therefore, our identity as political creatures, called to participate in just political communities on earth, isn't an afterthought God invented in response to sin. It is one of the ways our responsibilities reveal something about who God is and of what that means for the image of God.

***So what are the implications of this for us as we strive to develop a Christian mindset for civic responsibility?***

We've been created and called by God to govern and develop the world. We should ask together, "What talents, gifts, or interests has God given each of us? What's crucial for us to address now?"

How are Christians going to be able to think through and pursue civic vocation if each is alone in his or her own thoughts and feelings? Often people give politics little thought until a week before an election. But even if you're just a passive citizen, you are accepting the laws and government under which you live. And if you simply keep that at bay as unimportant, or try to bracket it out of your mind, you're contributing to the perpetuation of injustice if justice is not being done. Not everyone has to be a political activist, but we all need to work together for just political communities as part of our service to God and neighbors.

If Christ is calling us out of habits of death to habits of life, then he's calling us not just to eternal life beyond this world, but to the renewal of our lives and labor on earth in anticipation of Christ's fulfillment of creation. Every good law that's passed is a contribution to the kingdom that's being built. God is working in and through us in every area of our lives. Every little thing we do as an offering of thanksgiving to God for the renewal of our lives, including our work as citizens to promote public justice, is kingdom work in service to the King.