

# Civic Responsibility for Christians

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Often when I talk with other Christians about politics and they learn that my full-time job deals with civic education and public policy research, they will say something like, "That's nice; I'm not into politics, but I'm glad you like it. My thing is computers [or banking, or music, or volunteering at the homeless shelter]."

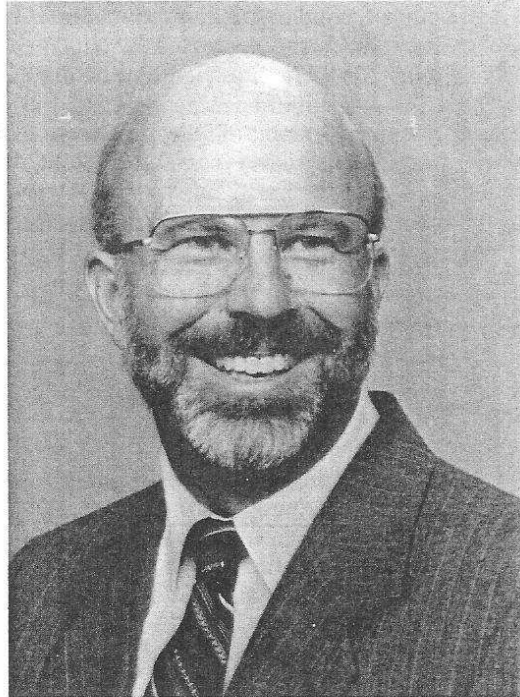
This kind of response seems to imply that my work in public affairs is a personal vocation or hobby not necessarily related to the vocations of others. The people with whom I talk may sense my seriousness and see that my work is an integral part of my life. But they do not expect me to be "into" computers, or banking, or music any more than they think I should expect them to be "into" politics. Politics and government are my peculiarity. Theirs is something else.

While it is certainly true and proper that not everyone should pursue a full-time vocation in political life, or computer science, or music, it seems to me that there is something mistaken about the response I often get from others. Not everyone will be called to a full-time political job, but doesn't everyone bear some civic responsibility?

In fact, I want to suggest, by reference to some biblical passages, that all Christians do have a civic responsibility that can be properly fulfilled only if we work at it together. Perhaps only a few will be called to give leadership and to pursue the work full-time, but civic obligations fall to every Christian as well as to all other citizens.

## The Vine and the Branches

Consider first Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15 about the vine and the branches. Jesus wants his followers to bear fruit as evidence of the new life he is giving them. In Jesus (the vine) there is no place for



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dead or fruitless branches. They will be cut off. In developing this metaphor, Jesus makes the radical statement, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (vs. 5).

Jesus does not say, "Apart from me you can't get to heaven," or "Apart from me you can't be a good evangelist." He says, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Life in the vine is all-embracing. There is only one kind of sap that runs through the vine to the branches—the sap of life that God gives. There is not a "secular" sap for weekdays and a "sacred" sap for Sundays. Therefore, anything we do, any responsibility we bear, ought to be pursued in a way that is obedient to Jesus in keeping with his fruit-bearing admonitions and empowered by the life-giving Spirit.

This passage in John is not about politics in particular, but neither is it about any other area of life in particular. It is about life as a whole, about practicing love for one another as an expression of God's love for us. John nevertheless takes for granted, just as Paul and other apostles do,

that the people whom God is grafting into himself, like branches into a vine, are people who are part of marriages, families, businesses and other organizations, and, yes, civic communities. Since we can do nothing apart from Christ, the conclusion to be drawn from the metaphor of the vine and the branches is that our love for spouses and other family members, our hard work and faithfulness on the job, and also our civic responsibilities must bear fruit to the glory of God.

Therefore, Christians have no choice but to ask how they ought to fulfill their civic responsibilities as members of the body of Christ—as branches in the true vine. Some of the members of that body may be called to public office, even to high public

office. In those offices they will be required to seek justice for all citizens as they deal with hundreds of different laws and policies. Where will they get the wisdom they need for such a job? How will they be trained to distinguish public good from public evil, political right from political wrong, justice from injustice?

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The answer, it seems to me, is that Christian public servants need to be nurtured, encouraged, assisted, and held accountable by other members of the body of Christ—by Christian teachers and elders, by other Christians who have also been called into full-time public service, and by Christians whose full-time jobs are not in politics but who bear civic responsibilities nonetheless.

The very fact that public servants

are, in most cases, representatives of the body politic, means that they are tied to citizens through votes, through fund-raising for elections, and in countless other ways. Political officeholders do not function in a vacuum. Therefore, Christian public servants will be left without sufficient biblical wisdom and God-given resources if they are not tied to a community of Christian citizens who take public life seriously and help Christian public officials to serve faithfully in public office as people who are living branches in the vine of Christ.

### Christians Working Together

A second passage of Scripture that is very important in this connection is Hebrews 10:19-25. Here, as in John, the passage does not speak about politics and government in particular any more than it speaks about family life or employment in particular. It is an admonition to Christians to keep on meeting together, and organizing together, in order to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." This amounts to much more than a command to be faithful in attending worship services. The great need Christians have is for mutual encouragement so they can learn *together* how to pursue love and good deeds.

The passage sets no boundaries to "love and good deeds." This is not a matter merely of good Sunday church programs or of volunteer work on Saturdays. Anything and everything Christians do in all areas of life should arise from concerted, often organized, efforts to pursue love and good works as unto the Lord.

As the writer to the Hebrews says earlier (5:11-14), Christians need to move beyond milk to solid food, to adult food. "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

How are Christians supposed to learn how to do what is right in business or in parenting, in farming or in politics, in art or in journalism? Only by constantly training them-

selves to be able to distinguish good from evil in each of these fields. And how can that be done if each Christian tries to function separately, alone, without locking arms with other Christian businesspeople, parents, farmers, citizens, artists, or journalists? It simply cannot be done. The writer to the Hebrews warns against the habit of failing to meet together regularly (constantly) with fellow believers.

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### Jesus tells his disciples that he expects some heavy-duty fruit bearing from them.

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So my argument for Christian civic responsibility is actually an outgrowth of a wider argument for a healthy Christian community, for the living body of Christ, for the people of God alive in the vine. At the center of the Christian life is total service to God through Christ in all things. Nothing can be left to the side as unimportant to God. Apart from Christ we can do nothing—nothing proper and good, nothing pleasing to God, nothing good for us and our neighbors. But to be alive "in Christ," as branches are alive *in* a vine, is to live in a fruit-bearing community with all the other branches.

Shifting to the metaphor of locking arms together (as in "encouraging one another"), we should read the Hebrews passage to say that Christians ought to meet together regularly, as often and as intensively as necessary, even at times in specially designed organizations, in order to be able to learn how to discern the difference between good and evil in every sphere of life.

### Our Obligation to God

Christians today often act as if they can live responsibly before God simply by following their hunches or going on instinct. No one needs to teach us what constitutes good and bad politics! No one needs to help us learn the difference between good and bad habits of consumption! We often treat politics, journalism, art, and many other areas of life quite

casually, as if they were relatively insignificant from a Christian point of view. But that is a foolish mistake. All of these human responsibilities represent callings from God and obligations to God. None can be treated lightly without showing disrespect to God, who is Lord of all.

Show me the parents who spend only an hour or two at home each month, and I'll show you a family in crisis. Take me to a business enterprise where the managers drop in only once or twice a year, and I'll show you a chaotic enterprise. If we visit a political society in which government operates by means of hunch and intuition, I'll show you a political system that is fast becoming a "disorder"—like the one we are increasingly witnessing here in the United States.

If we as Christians do not engage in politics and government with new energy and dedication as people who recognize that apart from Christ we can do nothing and as people who practice meeting together continually to spur one another on to love and good works, then we should not be surprised to find that our political system will continue to disintegrate. But even more important, we should not be surprised to find that God will be cutting more and more dead branches from his vine.

We can pretend all we want that God is happy just to have innocent little children surrounding him—newborn children who drink nothing but milk while they pray for the kingdom to come. But in reality Jesus tells his disciples that he expects some heavy-duty fruit bearing from them. And the writer to the Hebrews calls for nothing less than maturity. The Christian life is an all-or-nothing life. Christ is Lord of all. Politics and government are an important part of that "all." Therefore, we should move on to the meat of God's Word and learn how to serve him and our neighbors maturely in politics and government as well as in every other area of life.

*Dr. Skillen is the executive director of the Center for Public Justice. His newest book, to be released in November by Baker Book House, is Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community.*