

Why “Presbyterian” will never be a political party

and other insights from
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Social Witness Policy,
compiled in 2026 for the
250th Anniversary of the
United States of America

- 1. No political party or system can embody God’s will.** Humans are fallible, which is why we put our faith in God. Out of that faith, we prophetically call our civil leaders to act with justice, mercy, peace, and freedom for all of God’s creation.
- 2. God alone is Lord of the conscience.** Our primary allegiance is to God, not to any civil or human authority — which means we don’t want the government anywhere near our beliefs or practices, except to secure our (and everyone else’s) religious freedom.
- 3. True faith requires freedom.** Faith cannot be coerced or commanded by any human authority (Gal. 5; John 8; Rom. 8). Religious liberty gives all of us the freedom to follow God.
- 4. We need civil government for life together in community.** Civil authority is a gift from God to restrain wrongdoing and promote peace, order, justice, and freedom (Romans 13).
- 5. Our obedience to civil governance is conditional.** Christian allegiance is to God. When human leaders act unjustly or engage in wrongdoing, Christians are called by their faith to resist (like Jesus and Paul did).

Curious? Want to learn more?

*The strikingly relevant points above were summarized from “[God Alone is Lord of the Conscience](#),” a PC(USA) social witness policy from 1988. On the following pages, you’ll find an excerpt that includes the full **biblical and theological foundations** for Presbyterian understandings of **religious liberty** and **church/state relations**.*

Religious Liberty and Church/State Relations

Resources from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Social Witness Policy

In 1988, the 200th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted “[God Alone is Lord of the Conscience](#),” a policy statement about religious liberty. Nearly four decades later, that wise discernment of our Presbyterian predecessors in faith continues to offer wisdom and guidance for contemporary questions about democracy and religious freedom as we mark the 250th anniversary of the United States.

The following biblical and theological reflections are excerpted from “[God Alone is Lord of the Conscience](#),” p. 50–58.

Biblical and Theological Reflections

In reflecting on how Presbyterians should understand relationship to their government in the present age, we are tempted to look everywhere but the Bible. After all, our government is democratic—unlike the monarchies and empires of the biblical world—and highly complex. Yet the state is still part of God’s world, and the Bible has something to say about it. We see the state through different eyes than those who lived in biblical times, yet the truth about God’s world and the truth about God’s love for the world that they saw still guides us. Along with Paul, we see the state as a necessary instrument for creating an ordered world in which we can live, work, and worship. Also with Paul, we believe that we are called to freedom, and we therefore value religious liberty. Along with the Old Testament prophets, we believe that the church has a vision of what God wants for the world, and we feel compelled to share that vision with society, and the political realm. Along with Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and the apostles, we understand that the governing powers must sometimes be resisted.

The picture of church-state relations that we can fairly derive from these biblical examples and principles is thus a subtle and complex canvas with many shades and nuances. From our perspective, we see biblical affirmation for the representative democracy in which we live and for its constitutional arrangements regarding religious liberty and relations between church and state. Yet we see free and vital faith in other polities and do not doubt biblical warrant for these as well. As Reformed Christians, we feel a biblical challenge to seek in the public arena to give earthly reality to the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God, while respecting the liberty that the Bible affirms for those whose vision differs, and we rejoice to live in a state that protects our

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Biblical and Theological Reflections

freedom to do so. Yet we know that many faithful Christians seek withdrawal from the world rather than engagement with it, and do not doubt biblical warrant for their views.

The world of church-state relations, viewed from a wholistic biblical perspective, is thus a world of tensions and choices in which we must respect the need for order, on the one hand, and for liberty—most specifically including religious liberty—on the other.

1. Religious Liberty

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Religious liberty in its current meaning was unknown in the world of the Bible. It would be wrong to assert direct biblical sanction for either religious toleration or religious diversity on the basis of Paul’s passionate assertion or his later echo to the Galatians, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters” (Galatians 5:13). And yet it seems undeniably true that the spirit of liberty in faith so precious to us today is the consequence, centuries later, of that liberty of the spirit proclaimed and lived with such clarity and conviction in the first century.

Liberation is at the heart of the Christian experience of God as freedom is the necessary dynamic of faith. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free (and) if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:31, 36). In more than fifty references in the New Testament, the early apostles probed the meaning and dimensions of “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). Apart from freedom there is no faith; in the absence of liberty, there is no present Lord: “Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (II Corinthians 3:17). Karl Barth echoes this profound simplicity in his definition of the church: “The church is the fellowship of those who are freely called by the Word of grace and the Spirit and love of God to be the children of God” (*The Christian Community and the Civil Community*, page 173).

Liberty, then, is the substance of God’s gift to us through the Lord and the Spirit. But there is another dimension to our understanding of religious liberty, concerning not only the substance but the structure

and source of the Spirit’s gift. Religious insight and faith come from God, who exists over and beyond the powers and principalities of earth. Such insight and faith are recognized and received; they can neither be commanded or controlled by civil authority, military power or religious piety. Of this overarching reality, biblical faith is supremely and unshakably confident. In hundreds of references in both Old Testament and New, the Spirit (or Word) from God, recognized as the source of authentic insight, is understood to “blow where it will” (John 3:8). “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as counselor has instructed God?” (Isaiah 40:13).

There are no foolproof human mechanisms by which to test the authenticity of insight claimed to be from God. Even officially certified mainline religious officials can be prophets of a lying Spirit (I Kings 22) or “blind leaders of the blind” (Matthew 15:14). There are many biblical reminders of the capricious and surprising manner in which the Spirit or Word is manifested in unusual ways and unexpected people. Jesus reminded his disciples of the unreliability of all human criteria for validating the presence of the Spirit as he told them of the surprises that awaited at the final accounting (Matthew 25). In Martin Luther’s paraphrase of Jesus’s words in Matthew 21:31, the thieves and prostitutes go into heaven ahead of the doctors of the church. And Rahab the Harlot made the mighty roll call of the faithful in Hebrews 11.

“The Spirit of the Lord came upon” Baalam (Numbers 24:12), Joshua (Numbers 27:18), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Jephthah (Judges 11:29), Saul (I Samuel 10:10), David (I Samuel 16:13), Azariah (II Chronicles 15:1), Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1), Jesus (Mark 1:10), Stephen (Acts 6:5), Peter (Acts 4:8), and Paul (Acts 9:3).

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Wherever faith occurs—in William, Pablo, Ivan, Chang, Teresa, Susan, or Helga, and just perhaps in the Scientologist, the Hare Krishna, the follower of Rev. Moon or Joseph Smith—the Spirit must be credited. There is a powerful biblical logic that holds us back from overmuch attempt to sort it all out, summarized in Jesus's parable: "Let all grow together until harvest time, lest in pulling the weeds you root up the wheat along with them" (Matthew 13:29).

Here then is the second dimension to the biblical grounding for religious liberty: a combination of conviction that the source of authentic religious insight is beyond earthly power to compel or control, and attention to the biblical warning to be skeptical of human judgment as to the validity of faith or human attempts to regulate it. Liberty—freedom—is the Spirit's way as well as the Spirit's gift.

For almost two hundred years, Presbyterians in the United States have given theological expression to these biblical principles in their constitutional documents, as the first of the historic principles of church order:

That God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to God's Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.

Therefore, we consider the right of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.

The worship and service of God are ultimate and profoundly personal commitments, ones which the state may not legitimately infringe. Any attempt to subvert these most basic and personal freedoms, either to control and direct the church or to restrict or proscribe the right of individuals to believe or worship in certain ways, seeks human political control of a God-given gift.

Such control can sometimes be sought by religious adherents themselves who want to have civil power—the power of the sword—used to mandate their particular orthodoxy and penalize all other religious views. In the seventeenth century, Roger Williams, a minister who believed that the state should provide order and peace for its citizens but leave them free to make up their own minds about religion, was forced to leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony operated by

Calvinist Puritans on just such theocratic lines. He went on to found Rhode Island where religious freedom became the rule.

"Can the sword of steel or arm of flesh make men faithful or loyal to God?" Williams asked. Does God really want governments to require outward loyalty and faithfulness to the church when the "inward man is false and treacherous?" And since "civil and corporal punishments do usually cause men to play the hypocrite," how can the government know that those from whom it forces confessions to orthodoxy really believe what they are confessing? Williams pointed out that because "the world is situated in wickedness, and consequently according to its disposition endures not the light of Christ," as the First Letter of John says, then the civil magistrates cannot perceive God's will and enforce obedience to it without making mistakes. Magistrates have no right to compel obedience to their human and therefore flawed vision of what God wants for the world. Rather they must stick to their own business—the business of governing—and do what they can within that sphere to foster peace, order, and justice. It is a misuse of their mandate to govern to enforce religion.

The religion clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States prohibit governmental establishment or support of religion and guarantee the free exercise of faith to religious groups and believers, paralleling the convictions expressed in the 1788 Presbyterian principle quoted above. Presbyterians and all Americans are thankful to be governed in such a polity, committed to respect and defend religious liberty. But in the final analysis, our biblical and theological understanding of that liberty is that we have it as a gift from God and not at the sufferance of the sovereign. A recent General Assembly put the matter succinctly:

Freedom of faith is not finally a gift of governments, but of God. That is in fact what makes authentic faith such a threat to the governments of this world that they instinctively seek ways to contain and control it. The church must witness to its faith and vision, regardless of whether that witness is protected by the world's laws. In the absence of legal liberty, the church will suffer persecution for its faith, but legal liberty is not the source or the precondition of faithfulness. The church does not denigrate such freedom, but it does not depend on it. The church does not seek persecution but is willing to accept it. (*Minutes*, 1983, Part I. page 371.)

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2. State and Citizen: Their Mutual Responsibility

The Apostle Paul's reflection on the relationship between the state and its citizens in Romans 13 is one of the primary, explicit biblical texts. Paul, who dedicated his life to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in a hostile world, learned much about the relationship of a citizen to the state and experienced for himself the painful ordeal of a person caught between his duties of God and his duties to the state. The Roman government blocked his ministry as best it could and finally, it appears, put him to death.

Paul advised the members of the Christian community at Rome to "be subject to the governing authorities...not only to avoid God's wrath but for the sake of conscience" (Romans 13:1-5). Paul explained that all authority, including civil authority, comes from God:..."[T]here is no authority except from God, and those that have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:1-2).

The point is that God has provided for civil authority to enable a life together of people born with original sin, who, if unrestrained, would harm each other. Civil authority is a gift of God to meet a human need. Jesus recognized that even Pilate's authority came from God, even though Pilate used it to condemn him unjustly: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above ...," Jesus said. God's gift of civil authority, however, does not mean that we are required blindly to obey. Paul, the apostles, and Jesus himself disobeyed sometimes. A closer look at Romans 13 shows that God's gift of civil authority does not raise government authority above challenge; rather it requires those who govern to use their power properly.

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities:" Paul told the church at Rome (Romans 13:1). As the Swiss theologian Karl Barth pointed out in 1938, Paul's Greek word translated as "be subject to" does not mean to be directly and absolutely subject to someone but to respect that person as that person's fidelity to his or her office demands. Accordingly, one's submission to a ruler is

determined and conditioned by the ruler's submission to the function that God intends rulers to perform. Paul assures us that the ruler's function is established by God to provide peace and order. Hence Paul calls Christians to respect the state because it is the vehicle for mediating the God-given gifts of peace, order, and justice which allow the state's citizens to live and work in freedom, and the church to carry out its task of proclaiming salvation. Thus Christians are called to support and respect the state not because it is the state but because it exercises a necessary function in the world that God created: It is intended to assure peace, order, justice and freedom.

Romans 13 shows that God's gift of civil authority does not raise government authority above challenge; rather it requires those who govern to use their power properly.

A better translation of the Greek term often rendered as "be subject to" or "submit" might be "order yourselves under." Paul could have chosen a Greek term that implies unqualified obedience. If he had, we might be able to say that Paul tells us to obey the government even when it is grossly wrong. But he did not. He avoided that term, which he used elsewhere to describe the unqualified duty that Christians owe to God, and instead chose another to describe the duty owed to the state. Far from counseling blind obedience, Paul was warning the state that it must be faithful to its calling, for the citizens' duties to it are conditioned upon that faithfulness. When unjust, the state still provides a vehicle of order, but is not entitled to acquiescence in its unjust acts.

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All of the apostles came to know from their own experiences that obeying God could at some point require them to disobey the emperor. Peter and the others, jailed by the Sanhedrin—the Jewish council, which the Romans allowed to govern religious matters—refused the Sanhedrin’s order to stop preaching Jesus Christ. “We must obey God rather than men,” they replied (Acts 5:29). When the authorities’ orders squarely conflicted with the apostles’ religious duty, they followed God.

Paul did not meekly submit to direct Roman authority when it was not exercised properly. The Romans beat him at least three times. (II Corinthians 11:25). In Philippi the Roman magistrates not only flogged him but threw him into jail unjustifiably (Acts 16:22–24). Paul did not suffer these wrongs passively. Rather, he demanded justice. When the magistrates in Philippi told him to leave quietly the morning after they beat and imprisoned him, he refused. Not until the magistrates came personally to apologize for mistreating him would Paul leave the city (Acts 16:35–39). Paul must have known that Jesus himself had defied Roman power. Herod had tried to interrogate Jesus, but Jesus refused to answer (Luke 23:9). He also remained silent before Pilate when the Jewish high priests and scribes and the Roman procurator accused and questioned him (Mark 15:5).

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Paul’s attitude toward the state was positive. He saw that it played an important role in God’s creation, but he was not afraid to measure the state by the standards of love and justice and to act when it fell short. The ruler “is God’s servant for your good,” Paul wrote (Romans 13:4). “Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath, but also for the sake of conscience” (Romans 13:5). Being “subject,” as we have seen, means giving thanks for the function that government serves. As Paul’s own life shows, however, it does not mean obeying blindly

if government does not act for good but for ill. The duty of obedience is conditioned upon the state’s faithfulness to its own duties.

There are other New Testament references to the subject, more casual and less nuanced than Paul’s discussion in his letter to the Christians in Rome. The First Epistle of Peter encourages Christians in Asia Minor to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him... Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (I Peter 2:13, 17). And Titus is advised to remind his congregation “to be submissive to rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1). The context for both these admonitions is very explicitly the issues of pastoral discipline and public acceptance that the struggling new Fellowship of the Way of Freedom faced from the beginning: “For it is God’s will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free persons, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil” (I Peter 2:15–16). The character and weight of the pastoral advice to Titus is clarified by a look at other phrases in the same sentence: “Remind them...to be ready for any honest work...to avoid quarreling...and to show perfect courtesy toward all” (Titus 3:1–2). Good advice then and now but not major doctrinal formulation. The phrase “for the Lord’s sake” conditioned and grounded all such behavioral advice; “that the Word of God may not be discredited” (Titus 2:5) was its stated motivation. Obedience and honor to God—not to the emperor and his governors—was the fundamental dynamic.

Such advice is not unique to the New Testament, of course. The book of Proverbs says that one should “fear the Lord and the King and...not disobey either of them, for disaster from them will arise suddenly, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?” (Proverbs 24:22). The writer knew however that “it is an abomination of kings to do evil for the throne is established by righteousness” (Proverbs 16:12) and also something of the contingent authority of the sovereign: “By me kings reign and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule and nobles govern the earth” (Proverbs 8:15–16). And in an extraordinary display of ambivalence, the Old Testament contains a remarkable record of “those days (when) there was no king in Israel (and) everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25); “when the Lord your
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God was your king,” (I Samuel 12:12) understood to rule without mediators. And when a rebellious and idolatrous Israel insisted upon an earthly sovereign to govern them “that we also may be like all the nations,” God tells Samuel, “they have rejected me from being king over them...you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them” (I Samuel 8). The profile of government as both burden and blessing has rarely been so starkly illustrated.

John Calvin was deeply persuaded by the biblical teachings that see civil authority as a gift from God:

Subjects ought to be induced to submit to princes and governors not merely from a dread of their power...but because the obedience which is rendered to princes and magistrates is rendered to God, from whom they have received their authority.

Subjects approve their obedience to them in submitting to their edicts, in paying taxes, in discharging public duties and bearing burdens which relate to the common defense, and in fulfilling all their other commands.

If there is anything in the public administration which requires to be corrected, let them not raise any tumults, or take the business into their own hands...but let them refer it to the cognizance of the magistrate who is alone authorized to regulate the concerns of the public.

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Yet Calvin also taught that civil servants had a duty to resist the “violence or cruelty of kings.” Though he was very careful in admitting challenge to the properly appointed authorities, he recognized that God had overthrown rulers and dropped a thinly-veiled hint:

But whatever opinion be formed by acts of men, yet the Lord equally executed his work by them when he broke

the sanguinary scepters of insolent kings and overturned tyrannical governments. Let princes hear and fear.

Mere obedience, then, is clearly not the end of the matter for Calvin. In the remarkable concluding section to the Institutes, he makes clear and explicit the exception to the presumption of obedience.

But in the obedience which we have shown to be due to the authority of governors, it is always necessary to make one exception, and that is entitled to our first attention—that it does not seduce us from obedience to God to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty all their scepters ought to submit. Indeed, how preposterous it would be for us, with a view to satisfy men, to incur the displeasure of God on whose account we yield obedience to men...If they command anything against God, it ought not to have the least attention; nor in this case ought we to pay any regard to all that dignity attached to magistrates, to which no injury is done when it is subjected to the unrivalled and supreme power of God.

Calvin knew that he was not dealing with abstract theological principles. He understood well the political consequences of fidelity to the exception he recognized:

I know what great and present danger awaits this constancy, for kings cannot bear to be disregarded without the greatest indignation; and “the wrath of a king,” says Solomon, “is as messengers of death.” But since this edict has been proclaimed by the celestial herald, Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than men,” let us console ourselves with this thought: that we truly perform the obedience which God requires of us when we suffer anything rather than deviate from piety.

Civil government is a gift from God that we thankfully order ourselves under. But the government’s job is to be God’s servant for our good, to order public life rightly and to punish the wrongdoer so that society might live in justice and its members might live in safety (Romans 13:4–6). When the government ignores or corrupts its role, flouts justice and endangers peace, it is no longer fulfilling the purpose for which God gave us the gift of civil authority. When that happens, Christians, one by one and as the church, must search consciences and seek the Spirit’s guidance to discover what it will mean in a particular time to obey God rather than men.

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3. The Church's Role in Civil Society

In the Reformed understanding of Scripture and faith, the church is called to bear witness in the civil society to the insight and vision freely given by the free Spirit. The church attempts to function as a sentry, to cry out when it sees something amiss, and also to prepare its members to serve peace, justice, and order in the vocations and governance of the common life. The roots of this instinct to speak truth to power run deep in the biblical heritage, which understands the requirement to come from God and not from political ideology or ambition. “And the Lord sent Nathan to David” (II Samuel 12:1) with a message about the king’s stewardship of the authority given by God: “Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?” (II Samuel 12:9). In contemporary terms, it is God who commissions the lobbyist: “The word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, ‘Go, show yourself to Ahab’ (I Kings 18:1). And when the king, frustrated and weary over his three year struggle with the prophets of the Lord in which many had died (I Kings 18:13), angrily denounced Elijah’s meddling in governmental policy, he got the still relevant reply, “I have not troubled Israel, but you have because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord” (I Kings 18:18). The government must be called to account when it misuses its God-given authority and ignores or subverts its God-given responsibilities.

The Old Testament prophets are properly seen as the major source of biblical definition and support for this function, even though they often did not make the translation from religious to governmental language we know is required in our circumstances. During the unusually peaceful and prosperous reign of Jeroboam II, who was king of Israel from 786–746 B.C., Amos assailed the state for its oppression and injustice, even in prosperity:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring, that we may drink” (Amos 4:1)... [B]ecause you trample upon

the poor and take from him exactions of wheat, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and turn aside the needy in the gate (Amos 5:11–12).

Amos publicly pronounced God’s judgment on the king, who represented the state, because the state failed to fulfill its role. Even though peace and prosperity reigned, oppression and injustice were everywhere, and Amos drew upon his vision of God’s ways to condemn the king’s actions.

A generation later, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria and the Southern Kingdom of Judah worried about the monster lurking on its northern boundary, Isaiah of Jerusalem took the state to task for its greed, injustice, and oppression of the poor. “Your princes,” he said, “are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them” (Isaiah 1:23). Isaiah saw the rich profiting by exploiting the poor. “What do you mean,” he asked, “by crushing [God’s] people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Isaiah 3:15). He pronounced woe to those who “decree iniquitous decrees”...“turn aside the needy from justice, and...rob the poor of [God’s] people of their right” (Isaiah 10:1–2). Isaiah predicted that God would send an enemy from the north, perhaps the Assyrians, to punish Judah for its sins. What was needed, he said, was a king who would provide justice and compassion, who “with righteousness...shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isaiah 11:4).

Isaiah saw the king as an instrument of God’s providence, a divine provision for peace, order, and justice. He also saw God as continually involved in the king’s affairs. God raised up prophets to call for change and, if that failed, might even send the dreaded Assyrians. Isaiah saw God as a living God

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involved with the people. A prophet, therefore, had to act as a sentry for the state. He could not resist proclaiming God's judgment on oppression and injustice. Isaiah did not want to do away with the king or to assume the king's role himself. On the contrary, says Old Testament theologian Gerhaard von Rad, "he looked for a king who would bring peace and righteousness. Much the same can be said for Amos and Micah." Jeremiah and Zephaniah also stood in that tradition. They conceded the king's role—indeed, they saw kingship as a gift from God—but expected the king to carry out his duties with justice and compassion. They reached this view because they knew that the whole world was God's. The king was responsible as a steward of a part of God's world to govern it properly, and the prophets kept him accountable. While they assailed him for infidelity to God's commandments, we would seek to point out his failure to fulfill his God-given function as a ruler. We would translate our vision into the language that the government understands.

Presbyterians affirm a duty to witness to government based on a vision of the promised kingdom. We do so out of obedience to God's Word and Spirit as best we can understand and follow it, but we do not seek to capture or manipulate the coercive power of government to impose our religious vision on the whole society. We advocate our views about sound policy for the public as vigorously, specifically and persuasively as we can, but we do not form a Presbyterian Party. We seek to influence electoral and governmental choices and to make our voice heard and heeded in the political process, but we do not run our own candidates for public office. Though we may have prudential reasons for avoiding direct political authority, there is a theological basis for our reticence. The church compromises its calling to provide a vision of God's intended order by succumbing to the temptation to wield political power directly, just as the state subverts its calling if it seeks to become the final source of vision and meaning in the society.

Exactly fifty years ago, in 1938, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted a report proposed by a Special Committee on the Amendment of the Confession of Faith regarding civil government. Though the proposal later narrowly failed official ratification by the presbyteries because some did not vote, one section provides an excellent

theological summary of the church's duties toward the government: It is the duty of the Church to pray for the government and for the people to whom it pertains; to uphold the civil and religious liberties of all citizens; to support the policies of the government when they are in accord with the standards of righteousness revealed in the Word of God and to bear witness against such policies as depart from these standards. ... The Church must educate its members as Christian citizens, cultivating within them a conscience sensitive to all forms of oppression, injustice and social maladjustment and inspiring them to bring about their correction. The Church must quicken and instruct the public conscience..." (Minutes, 1938, Part I, p. 47).

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Conclusion

Presbyterians give thanks to God for the gift of civil government, which is intended to bring order to our world, to provide a framework in which we can live together in peace and search for fulfillment. We believe, as Paul said, that we are called to freedom, and that government should recognize freedom as an important resource for its people. We believe in saying "yes" to the overall role that government plays, even though we may be called to say "no" to the government in a particular time and place. We believe that we have a vision of the coming kingdom of God, which we should announce to the world in terms of justice, compassion, and peace, although we refrain from infringing others' freedom by seeking to impose our religious views on our society. We believe that we should stand guard as sentries and cry out against abuse, but never forget that the church must always claim independence for itself and never seek to undermine the independence of the state.