



“IN . . . THE WORLD” [UNTITLED] (1985)

By James W. Skillen

Frequently someone will ask me if I think the country would be better off if more Christians entered public office. My response is seldom an unequivocal yes. Why my hesitation?

How would you respond to the following question?: “Wouldn’t we all be better off if more Christians were teachers, farmers, and journalists?” Or reshape the question slightly by putting it this way: “If a group composed entirely of Christians got together to organize a school, wouldn’t they be creating a Christian school?”

Most of us would respond rather quickly, I suppose, by saying that it all depends on whether the Christians involved know anything about teaching, farming, business, journalism, and so on. In other words, if Christians without talent for, or knowledge of, education try to organize a school, it will probably not be much of a school. Therefore, it will hardly be a *Christian* school. Returning, then, to law and politics, one’s answer to the question about Christians in office really depends on how one understands the connection between Christianity and the nature of those public offices. If Christians who have no talent for public life end up filling public offices, then the results could be very bad indeed.

The first conclusion we can reach, therefore, is that a general confession of faith in Christ is not *sufficient* to qualify a person for public responsibility. But where does this conclusion lead us? Are we saying that one’s Christian faith is simply a private, personal irrelevancy when it comes to the great secular matters of law, politics, education, farming, and business? Doesn’t that conclusion promote the very secularization of life that many Christians now want to oppose? Are the standards for judging competence in education, farming, law, politics, and journalism unrelated to Christian faith? If we say that a general confession of Christian faith is not sufficient to qualify someone for public office, aren’t we forced to conclude that it makes no difference whether Christians or non-Christians fill public offices as long as they have sufficient expertise in their field?

No, I am convinced that we are off on the wrong track if we force this kind of “sacred/secular” division onto our life in this world. Rather, we should

reconsider the meaning of “Christian faith” and what we mean by professional “competence” to fill an office or a job.

First, what does it mean to make the general confession that Christ is Lord? It should mean that we are ready to follow Jesus Christ as disciples, willing to obey him in all things. Following Jesus entails obeying God’s commandments (I John 5:1-5), bearing fruit as branches in his vine (John 15:5-8), and doing everything to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31).

What is the cause of Christ that we should promote if we confess him to be Lord? The New Testament makes clear that Christ’s cause is nothing less than the restoration and reconciliation of the whole creation. The world of social and political affairs, of farming and business, of family life and worship—all of these Christ claims as his own (Matthew 28:18; Romans 12:1-8; I Corinthians 15:20-28; II Corinthians 5:11-21; Colossians 1:15-20). A confession of faith in Christ, therefore, is not a private irrelevancy disconnected from the realities of life. Rather, allegiance to Christ as Lord means an allegiance to his reign over everything on earth because he is the one in whom and for whom all things were created in the first place (John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-2). To confess Christ is to accept responsibility for life in this world on his terms. It means plunging into the reconciling stewardship of all areas of life. Following Jesus demands just the opposite of treating public life with secularizing carelessness; it demands that we find out how to serve God in public on his terms.

Now let’s turn back to consider what we mean by “competence” to fill an office. Although it is true that both Christians and non-Christians have gifts and talents and insights for politics, law, farming, journalism, education, and all the rest, it is also the case that people develop and orient these God-given abilities in different ways—either in service to God or in sinful disobedience to him. At issue is precisely *how* politics and law should be shaped by human beings. By what standards or criteria should the judge or elected official make judgments? How should government act in order to do justice? These questions cannot be answered by some neutral, technical rationality. Everyone does not agree about

the criteria for making these judgments. Precisely here is where a Christian vision of life, articulated by those with special gifts and competence in public affairs, needs to work its way out in shaping law and government.

God did not create his world one way and then send his Son into that world on terms that were unrelated to the original creation. The judge and redeemer, Jesus Christ, is the Word of God through whom everything was created. The one who created men and women with talents and abilities for farming, teaching, and developing the art of government is the same God who is redeeming the world through Jesus Christ.

How, then, do I answer the original question? If those to whom God has given wisdom for discerning and doing justice will enter office with the purpose of allowing their abilities to be guided by the creative and redeeming work of Christ, then, *yes*, I believe our country and the world will be better off. But, on the contrary, if people without redemptively-guided, creationally-given competence for law and politics enter those offices, even if they are Christians, and especially if they try to separate their faith from their politics, then, *no*, I don't think we will be better off.

The scorecard we need is biblical revelation illuminating the true nature of the creation, guiding those with God-given gifts and talents into vocations where they are most competent to fill their calling in Christ.

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