



HONEST PATRIOTISM

**and two shorter resolutions
on faith and politics**

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*Approved by the 223rd General Assembly (2018)
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Faced with an unprecedented crisis of public dishonesty and chauvinistic nationalism, the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approves the following affirmations and directions for its mission and witness:

Affirmations

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) acts to lift up our church's long commitments to active civic engagement, responsible citizenship, and prophetic witness; believing these commitments to be rooted in our faithful response to God's call for Christians to be stewards of creation; and witnessing the corrosion of democratic institutions.

The phrase "honest patriotism," popularized in Donald W. Shriver's 2005 book, *Honest Patriots*, means "loving a country enough to remember its misdeeds."¹ Such misdeeds are usually those times and places where particular groups were denied "equal protection under the law." Just as the ancient Hebrew prophets stood up to kings and queens, so have Christians understood the prophetic calling to entail a moral freedom to challenge the misuses of power, even within the church or state themselves, "in season and out of season." Honest Patriotism is thus a check on the exclusivist nationalism that otherwise denies equal respect to other peoples, conceals injustices committed by one's own side in any conflict, and makes reconciliation and common action harder to achieve both in the United States and abroad.

Drawing on our Reformed Christian reading of scripture and our church's Preliminary Principles, which influenced democratic revolutions in Britain and the United States, this resolution addresses the vital freedoms of the First and Fourteenth amendments to the U. S. Constitution and their application to changes in the nature of communications, media, and the public square.

We make this statement out of concern for both the God-given rights of persons and for the cultural commons that allows for the open transmission of our values and convictions.

1. We affirm and honor the work of citizens of the United States who have chosen public service as part of their vocation. This includes, but is not limited to, civil service employees, members of the judiciary, and our elected representatives in the Legislative and Executive branches of our national government. Public employees of local and state governments also serve the common good. We further affirm, as part of our Reformed tradition, that their work is part of God's design for the governance of creation.
2. We affirm the imperative for honesty in the public statements, proceedings, publications, and theological witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recognizing that our faith is based, at its core, on a commitment to truth. In like manner, we call upon all citizens, as well as governments, to recognize commitment to truth as a core value and to be vigilant in demanding honesty in our public and private interactions. Christians must scrutinize news sources and reject those that oversimplify or sensationalize conflicts and demonize other human beings and peoples.
3. We affirm the protection of the freedom of speech, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. We recognize that meaningful civic engagement is dependent upon the protection of this freedom, which keeps our engagement lively, meaningful, and prophetic. As this freedom involves clashing ideas of what is true and false, the United States' legal tradition makes it the responsibility of citizens and their elected representatives to develop measures of public accountability for truthfulness in the public square in all its forms: over public airwaves, through cyberspace, and through proactive requirements of public disclosure by government agencies and publicly chartered profit and nonprofit entities.
4. We affirm the widest possible public access to information and to the

products of cultural activity. We recognize that such freedom to listen is vital to the free exchange of ideas and to the practical application of freedom of speech. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempt to limit this free exchange, including but not limited to, monopoly ownership of media outlets and the dismantling of net neutrality. This excludes only the production and promotion of hate speech, designed to exclude others from such access or endanger their persons and property.

5. We affirm the rights of all citizens to freedom of assembly. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempts to abrogate this freedom, including, but not limited to, attempts to criminalize, manipulate by false information, or in other ways delegitimize peaceful protest. New forms of surveillance by drone and electronic means, as well as increased use of military equipment by police forces, require increased public accountability of all policing and security agencies. Similarly, data gathered from electronic devices about personal communications and purchasing history should be governed by privacy protections and not used commercially or otherwise without permission.
6. We affirm the freedom of the press, guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempts to abrogate this freedom, including, but not limited to, threats, intimidation, and the denial of access to certain members or organs of the press for partisan reasons.
7. We affirm the rule of law as inseparable from our Reformed commitment to truth. Recognizing that human law is a human creation and therefore subject to error, we nonetheless affirm the democratic principle of equal protection under the law, as enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Institutionally, this equal protection is guaranteed by an independent judiciary, the maintenance of which must continue to be a national priority. This has customarily meant laws to insulate judges from partisan politics as well as the use of objective qualifications in their selection, both of which approaches this assembly would endorse.

8. We affirm the need for free critical inquiry that is unhampered by censorship. Commitment to integrity and to the truth must also extend to those whose vocation it is to seek out the truth and to add to the store of human knowledge. We therefore oppose any governmental, educational, or other institutional restrictions on the initiation, maintenance, or publication of research.
9. We affirm the right of citizens to participate in the democratic process. Fundamental to that process is the right to vote. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in affirming its commitment to honest patriotism and responsible citizenship, therefore opposes any efforts to restrict participation in elections, including, but not limited to, voter suppression initiatives and racially based and/or partisan gerrymandering.

Directions for Its Mission and Witness

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) further approves the following measures for consideration by its members and congregations and action by its agencies.

1. In order to faithfully model civic responsibility and engagement, the members and congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are encouraged to be active in civic life, engaging in critical and constructive discourse and prayerfully considering the import of the Gospel message to our body politic.
2. In order to faithfully model honest and open governance, all councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), from local to national, are encouraged to be open and transparent in their decision-making processes. At the same time, church procedures and expectations of staff and volunteers should not infringe upon the privacy and autonomy that support freedom of Christian conscience.
3. In order to faithfully model freedom of expression, all councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), from local to national, are encouraged to seek out and learn from diverse perspectives, and to examine

their current practices so as to ensure no voice is silenced, however unintentionally.

4. In order to faithfully model full participation in governance, all councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), from local to national, are encouraged to make whatever accommodations necessary to ensure the full and active participation of members in the decision-making process of the church. These accommodations may involve, but are not limited to, the dissemination of relevant materials, the translation of said materials into appropriate languages, and the scheduling of meeting times for deliberation. All councils should consider part of their leadership to include a convening function designed to bring together leading thinkers in public conversation and constructive debate to engage members across the larger church in discerning what mission and discipleship entail.
5. In order to faithfully model critical inquiry, colleges and universities historically related to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are encouraged to continue to honor the role of the humanities, including the teaching of religion and ethics, in their curricula, so that the complex values of culture and society can be better understood.
6. The Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness, and other ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are directed to advocate and witness for policies consistent with the affirmations above.
7. Presbyterian elected officials and other civil servants are invited to respond to the affirmations and background statement and to participate in briefings, seminars, and adult education programs that may educate and engage our members.

Grounding and Charge:

These affirmations draw on a long tradition of Reformed involvement in the political arena. We are cognizant that we live in a time and place where it is incumbent upon us to speak boldly. We also know that we

speak along with a great cloud of witnesses who have come before us. Nothing that we affirm here is wholly new, in the sense that our tradition has always viewed the faithful guardianship and exercise of our rights as citizens to be central to our mission.

The issues we address here have been the subject of the social witness policy of our denomination for generations. The 195th General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the report, *Reformed Faith in Politics*. Claiming that we are “inevitably political and religious,”² that report outlines the theological and biblical rationale for our commitment to good government and “[a]ffirm[s] responsible participation in politics as an indispensable part of the calling of all Christians.”³

The 200th General Assembly (1988) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the policy statement, *God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience*. A comprehensive examination of religious liberty in both historical and contemporary contexts, this statement likewise endorses a robust Presbyterian voice in our political system, and calls us as a denomination to safeguard such participation. The report asserts:

... it is a limitation and denial of faith not to seek its expression in both a personal and a public manner, in such ways as will not only influence but transform the social order. Faith demands engagement in the secular order and involvement in the political realm.⁴

More recently, the 218th General Assembly (2008) approved a policy statement on voting rights and campaign finance reform, *Lift Every Voice*,⁵ which was updated in 2016 to include recent Supreme Court cases.⁶ The assembly spoke forthrightly to recent decisions that allow virtually unlimited and undisclosed sums to be spent in elections, and to decisions that weaken protections for minority voters.

It is in such a spirit and with such a faith that the above affirmations are offered. They are congruent with the long tradition of Reformed theology regarding the political order, and they both build upon and are dependent upon the stated policies of the denomination. Yet, in offering them now, we recognize an urgency of time and place. We believe that in moments such as these, when core values of robust democratic participation in the life of the commonwealth are under threat, we are called to claim our heritage and to offer our witness.

RATIONALE

Part I: Honesty as a Reformed Christian Value

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (Eph. 4:25)

Honesty is a paramount biblical virtue. Of the advice and guidance given to the various early Christian communities in the epistles, the exhortation to be truthful to each other resounds in its repetition (see, e.g. 2 Tim. 2:15; Col. 3:9; 1 Pet. 3:10–12). This theme is echoed in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The *Book of Order* states:

That truth is in order to goodness. ... [N]o opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a [person's] opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. ... (Book of Order 2017–2019, F-3.0104)

Why must Christians be committed to the truth? First, we are so committed because we are commanded to be. In the foundational moral law of the Decalogue, we are commanded not to bear false witness (Ex. 20:16). In his commentary on the ninth commandment, John Calvin makes it clear that we should not construe this commandment narrowly simply because its wording appears to apply to judicial proceedings. Calvin writes, “The purport of this commandment is, since God, who is truth, abhors falsehood, we must cultivate unfeigned truth towards each other.”⁷

The command for honesty is not arbitrary. Calvin taught that the law has a threefold purpose: to convict us of sin, to restrain social evil, and to help us to grow in righteousness and in gratitude for grace. It is this third purpose of the law, that it makes us better Christians, which Calvin claims as the principle purpose.⁸ Biblically this understanding of honesty, that it is central to our moral growth and character, is perhaps best represented in the book of Proverbs, a collection of advice on moral behavior. The rewards of honesty and the perils of dishonesty are a constant presence throughout Proverbs. A brief sampling includes:

“There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.” (Prov. 6:16–19)

“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out.” (Prov. 10:9)

“The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.” (Prov. 11:3)

“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.” (Prov. 12:22)

Christians are committed to the truth, secondly, because dishonesty displays a fundamental lack of respect for other persons. Dishonesty is a means to control, to master, to gain at another’s expense. As such, it violates the command to respect the dignity all of God’s creation. When we lie to another person, we treat them as a means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves. We deny the truth that all persons are created in the image of God. From Calvin again, we read, “... we must not by calumnies and false accusations injure our neighbor’s name, or by falsehood impair his fortunes; in fine, that we must not injure any one from petulance, or a love of evil speaking.”⁹

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly for a discussion of honesty and civic responsibility, dishonesty corrodes trust—a crucial ingredient to a functioning community. Robert Bellah, et.al. note, in the beginning of *The Good Society*, “Democracy requires a degree of trust that we often

take for granted.”¹⁰ Drawing on H. Richard Niebuhr’s work in *The Responsible Self*, Bellah and his colleagues note that distrust weakens our ability to participate responsibly in the world around us, leading us to “rupture, not strengthen, the solidarity of the community or communities we live in.”¹¹

This worry about the breakdown of our communities also animates the pronouncements of the Hebrew prophets when they warn about the dangers of cultures where truth is not valued. From the prophet Jeremiah:

Beware of your neighbors, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer. They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the Lord. (Jer. 9:4–6)

Finally, when we speak of honesty as a Christian virtue, we must speak with humility about the human capacity to know the truth. Our social location, our cultural assumptions, our traditions all color the way in which we apprehend what is true. These same conditioning factors can lead us into error with regard to truth. Our historical “truths” have at times supported practices and beliefs that clearly run counter to our call as Christians. We have endorsed human bondage, disenfranchisement, and oppression. So we must own that we do not know the truth as God knows the truth. Our own reformation is a continual process.

To be clear then, we can be honest and at the same time be in error. The ethical mandate for honesty recognizes the limitations of our intellects. The command, therefore, is to sincerity, to not deliberately mislead, to correct errors when we are made aware of them, and to allow others to do so as well. Honesty admits of error, but does not tolerate deceit.

Part II: Patriotism¹² as a Reformed Christian Value

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. (Rom. 13:1)

The opening verses of Chapter ¹³ of Paul’s letter to the Romans give us the most extensive reflection on the role of government to be found in Christian scriptures.¹³ Although Paul’s words have been used at various times to demand unquestioned obedience to the state, the Reformed tradition has used Paul’s reflections as a base for a different reading of civil society—one that respects the state as ordained by God but also demands that citizens participate in the ordering and maintenance of the earthly community.

If honesty is a virtue common to Christian theology generally, civic participation is especially, if not uniquely, a mandate for Reformed Christians. Again, Calvin is instructive here. He devotes the final chapter of the *Institutes* to civil government and makes it clear from the outset that its institutions are ordained by God for the good of humanity, writing:

“... it is perfect barbarism to think of exterminating [civil government], its use ... being not less excellent than that of bread and water, light and air, while its dignity is much more excellent.”¹⁴

Calvin explicitly rejected the competing and contemporary Anabaptist vision of the state as diseased and worth avoiding. He clearly stood opposed to the vision that “civil government is a polluted thing with which Christians should have nothing to do.”¹⁵ This claim has contemporary relevance as well. As Reformed Christians we stand in support of a theological tradition which honors government as a good, and stand in opposition to those who see government as a necessary evil, or worse.¹⁶ The casual denigration of government, the reflexive rhetorical impulse to understand government as an alien force that stands against us, must be resisted in the strongest terms if we are to be faithful to our theology.

Neither, of course, does the Reformed tradition embrace an uncritical endorsement of government in all its actions. We do not stand for the Divine Right of Kings (or Presidents). The State “can assume the face and character of Pilate.”¹⁷ The church, then, has a duty to the state: to maintain a prophetic voice, with which to constantly remind the state of

its calling.¹⁸ The confessions we have embraced are explicit reminders of our duty in this regard.¹⁹

So we, in the Reformed tradition, understand the institution of government to be ordained by God, and therefore sanctified; but we also understand its propensity, as a human institution, to sin. One of the most grievous sins to which government is prone is the usurpation of power to which it is not entitled, particularly in the form of subjugation. The history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States has been a history of the embracing of democratic institutions and forms of government as the most effective ways of maintaining a government which resists this temptation and is faithful to its calling. We have relied on the principle, enumerated by John Locke and others, that we are all, first and foremost, created by God. As such, we believe there is a certain dignity within ourselves that cannot be violated.²⁰

Reformed Christians have been instrumental in demanding that, whatever form of government we establish, the proper role of government is its service to the people. To this end, it must respect the rights of its citizenry. Karl Barth writes:

As disciples of Christ, the members of His Church do not rule: they serve. In the political community, therefore, the Church can only regard all ruling that is not primarily a form of service as a diseased and never as a normal condition.²¹

Since before we were a nation, Presbyterians on this continent have been vigilant in securing the active voice of the citizenry in their own governance. Since Rev. Francis Makemie's struggles against the royal governor of New York, this church has been clear that the vocation of our government is best served by the free participation of the people whom it serves. We stand committed to the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights of our Constitution and referenced in the affirmations above.

If we are honest in assessing our history, both as a nation and a church, we must also repent of our own complicity in denying such free

participation to entire groups of our population, both through law and through practice. This is precisely the test presented in Donald Shriver's *Honest Patriots*, which describes our history with Native and African Americans and compares our country's efforts at honest memory with those of Germany and South Africa.²² We have been a country, and we have been a church, which has paid scant attention to the voices of people of color. We have been a country, and we have been a church, which has paid scant attention to the voices of women. We have been a country, and we have been a church which has paid scant attention to the voices of LGBTQ persons. In the words of Letty Russell, we have operated in a "patriarchal paradigm of reality" that "accept[s] the marginalization of the powerless as a given."²³

When we see such marginalization of voices in our congregations, we must correct it. When we see such marginalization of voices in our civic life, we must combat it. Our "Brief Statement of Faith," found in the *Book of Confessions*, calls us "to hear the voices of peoples long silenced."²⁴ Only active listening to voices from oppressed communities, undertaken in a spirit of repentance, will lead us forward. Without the collective knowledge and wisdom found in these communities, our responses will always be inadequate. As James Cone notes, "The grounding of Christian ethics in the oppressed community means that the oppressor cannot decide what is Christian behavior."²⁵

Committing ourselves to honest patriotism means an uncompromising attention to full democracy. It means that our government must protect the full participation of all of its citizens. And the most direct means that democracy gives us of making all voices heard—the vote—must be protected without qualification. This is a bare minimum of what we must expect from our government.

As Reformed Christians we believe that our government has responsibilities to its citizens, that honest patriotism must be a virtue of those whom we call to positions of leadership. What responsibilities do we as the church, then, have to our government? In addition to the respect owed to the institution of government as established by God, we owe the government our intercession, our active participation, and our prophetic critique.

So first, we must pray for our government. Because we profess to believe in the power of intercessory prayer, because we profess to believe that God hears the prayers of God's children, our prayers for those institutions and those people to whom we entrust our governance are vital. Karl Barth writes, "The Christian community prays for the civil community. It does so all the more since the civil community as such is not in the habit of praying."²⁶

But intercession through prayer, in and of itself, is not enough. Barth goes on to remind us that in making our civil community the object of our prayers, we assume responsibility for that community. We would not be taking our responsibility seriously, says Barth, if we did no more than pray.²⁷ For the Reformed Christian, active participation in civil society is not a luxury. It is not a right we can choose to exercise or not as our whims may drive us. It is part of our calling as Christians to be active participants in God's ordering of the earthly commonwealth. Robert McAfee Brown, in his book *Spirituality and Liberation*, gives us a powerful statement of the connection of prayer to civic participation. He writes:

A prayer of intercession may be a trip to the city jail to provide bail for someone wrongly arrested because of having the wrong skin color; and act of praise of God may be the affirmation of a Laotian child's success in the English as a Second Language program...a blessing may be the gift of time and money that enables a woman victimized by sexual harassment to secure legal help; a prayer of adoration may be the formation of a political coalition to fight a specific injustice at city hall.²⁸

Bearing our civic responsibilities as Christians in mind, we must also at times, in our role as active Christian members of a civil community, take seriously our prophetic role. Because we understand the state as ordained by God we must, in all humility and acknowledging our own propensity for error, call the state to task when it fails in its obligations. Calvin, as deferential as he at times was to governing authorities, minced no words in challenging them when they violated their obligations. He writes:

... even magistrates ought to do their utmost to prevent the liberty, of which they are appointed guardians, from being impaired, far less violated. If in this

they are sluggish or little careful, they are perfidious traitors to their office and to their country.²⁹

At times, this prophetic role may take the form of both conscientious objection and civil disobedience. Because no state acts consistently with the demands of justice at all times, because we acknowledge the power of sin not just in our individual lives, but also in our institutions, there will be times when we cannot, in good conscience, participate in or endorse an action or a policy of our government. At such moments, with full knowledge of the civil consequences of our actions, we may be called to resistance.³⁰ Our prophetic critiques may lead us to moments of discomfort and even danger.

We offer the affirmations above in the spirit of these obligations—intercession, active engagement, and prophetic critique—that the church holds towards the government.³¹

Finally, we acknowledge that the church, if it is to call itself honest, must model in its own practices and institutions the same virtues to which it calls the government and broader society. As a human institution, we acknowledge our own participation in sin and the need for corporate confession. Where we demand honesty in our governmental institutions, we must be honest in our own work. Where we demand the protection of freedom of conscience, speech, and assembly in our civic life, we must be careful not to abridge such freedoms ourselves. Where we champion the full participation of all members, we must not create structures in our own corporate life which violate that principle. Where we demand social justice in our broader culture, we must not be timid in our critique of our own shortcomings. Returning to Karl Barth for a valediction:

Perhaps the most important contribution the Church can make is to bear in mind in the shaping of its own life that, gathered as it is directly and consciously around the common centre, it has to represent the inner within the outer circle. The real Church must be the model and the prototype of the real State. The Church must set an example so that by its very existence it may be a source of renewal for the State and the power by which the State is preserved.³²

ENDNOTES

1. Shriver, Donald W. Jr. *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
2. ---*Reformed Faith and Politics* (New York and Atlanta: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1983) 2. See https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2-reformed_faith_and_politics-1983.pdf.
3. *Ibid*, 16.
4. *God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience: Policy Statement and Recommendations Regarding Religious Liberty* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1989) 48. See <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-god-alone-is-lord-1988.pdf>.
5. See <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2-votingrights-2008.pdf>.
6. See <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Election-Protection-and-Integrity-in-Campaign-Finance-2016-ACSWP.pdf>.
7. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995) Book II, Chapter VIII, 352.
8. *Ibid*, Book II, Chapter VII, 309.
9. *Ibid*, Book II, Chapter VIII, 352–3.
10. Robert N. Bellah, et. al. *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 3.
11. *Ibid*, p. 284. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 199ff.

12. The term patriotism carries with it a great deal of baggage including its etymological root in the word patria (fatherland). Aware of the problematic gendered nature of this term and the patriarchal heritage it may embody, we nonetheless hope to reclaim a type of love of country that has traditionally been denoted by this term. As will become clear, we see such love of country manifest particularly through civic engagement and active citizenship, which includes prophetic critique. We also note that such patriotism must always be constrained by our obedience to God.
13. For further reflection on Paul's theology of church and state as reflected in the letter to the Romans, see also *Reformed Faith and Politics* (New York and Atlanta: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1983) and *God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience: Policy Statement and Recommendations Regarding Religious Liberty* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1988).
14. Calvin, Book IV, Chapter XX, 652. See also John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849).
15. John McNeill, "Editor's Introduction," *Calvin: On God and Political Duty*, ed. John T. McNeill (New York: MacMillan, 1950) XII.
16. For a rich treatment of the various strands of Christian theology on engagement with the world, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1952).
17. Karl Barth, *Community Church and State: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968) 157.
18. André Biéler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrman (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964) 23–24.
19. In particular, see The Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Confession of Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*.
20. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 270ff.
21. Barth, 177.
22. *Ibid.*, at note 1.

23. Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 35.
24. “The Brief Statement of Faith” in *Book of Confessions, Study Edition* (Geneva Press, Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996) 341–42.
25. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975) 208.
26. *Ibid.*, 159.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988) 134–35.
29. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XX, 657.
30. For a full treatment of PC(USA) policy on conscientious objection and civil disobedience, see *God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience: Policy Statement and Recommendations Regarding Religious Liberty* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), especially 20f and 90ff.
31. With regard to the contemporary “carriers” of the four freedoms of the First Amendment, this resolution cannot do justice to the complexities of intellectual property law or the ways that “culture war” issues have been increasingly revived in political debate. A creative synthesis of political and cultural thinking on the “cultural commons,” however, can be found in Lewis Hyde’s, *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership* (2010), which devotes much of its attention to updating the concerns of the U.S. founders in today’s cultural and media environment. There have also been proposals that an analogue to a nonpartisan “consumers’ union” be developed to rate the truthfulness of media outlets. Others favor returning to an updated version of the “fairness doctrine,” which required public broadcasters to present at least two sides of contentious issues.
32. Barth, 186.

A CHRISTIAN DECLARATION AGAINST AUTOCRACY

“The Presbytery of Hudson River overtures the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to affirm the following declaration and offers it as a resource to congregations:

“As confessing Christians,

“We trust God, whom we know through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray as others pray in other names

“We are obligated to declare our concerns about the direction towards autocracy that our country is taking.

“We say Yes to God’s power of love and justice for the neighbor as well as the self; and we say No to demonic power that urges hate of the other, scatters blame, and creates civic discord.

“We say Yes to our imperfect democracy with one person, one vote, and No to any corruption of our elections.

“We say Yes to universal health care and No to care based on the ability to pay.

“We say Yes to safe schools, houses of worship, and public gathering places; and No to civilian access to assault and/or military-style weapons.

“We say Yes to core human values and No to dividing our humanity by ideology and partisanship.

“We say Yes to bridges and preservation of families and No to walls.

“We say Yes to affirming and celebrating the full spectra of human identity and No to discrimination and bigotry.

“We say: “In life, and in death we belong to God.”

Rationale:

Our Reformed tradition has, from its inception, claimed a vigorous role for the church in public life. Our tradition affirms that government is a good, created by God for the right ordering of the earthly realm. We also acknowledge that government, as it exists on earth, is a human institution, and thus subject to the debilitating effects of human sinfulness. At those times when our government acts to violate norms

central to what we believe, we claim the right to raise our voices prophetically against those policies that do so.

John Calvin, in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, speaks with clarity about the authority of the state, but also of its limits. He writes:

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him [sic] to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their scepters must bow.¹

If Calvin's language is difficult for 21st century Christians to parse, existing as it does in a vocabulary of absolute monarchy, Karl Barth extends Calvin's claim to a 20th century context, and places on the church an obligation. Barth writes:

If the State has perverted its God-given authority, it cannot be honored better than by this criticism which is due to it in all circumstances. For this power that has been perverted, what greater service can we render than that of intercession?²

The *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.) contains two documents from the church's history in the 20th century that took the prophetic role of the church seriously and dared to speak truth to power. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, written in response to the dehumanizing policies of the National Socialist Party in Germany, and the Confession of Belhar, written to stand against the apartheid policies of the government of the Union of South Africa, are both vibrant and living witnesses to the power of our theological tradition and the weight of the responsibilities we claim as Christians living in the body politic.

Drawing specifically from the work of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor bodies, these words from The Confession of 1967 resonate particularly:

The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of man [sic] in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God's purpose rather than man's [sic] schemes will finally prevail.³

We also claim our prophetic vocation as the people of God in these words from A Brief Statement of Faith:

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.⁴

Our theology calls us, as Presbyterians, to be active participants in the political life of the world and to speak when fundamental tenets of our faith are being violated. At such a time as this, the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John guide us:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (Jn. 15:10–12)

ENDNOTES

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995) Book IV, Chapter XX, 675.
2. Karl Barth, *Community, Church and State: Three Essays* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968) 139.
3. The Confession of 1967 in the *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, 2016) 290–91, 9.25.
4. A Brief Statement of Faith in the *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, 2016) 312, 11.4, Lines 65–71.

A RESOLUTION AGAINST RACIST NATIONALISM

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

1. Approve(d) the following resolution:

“The 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) strongly condemns the unjust, racist disparagement of people and entire nations, promoted by politicians and government officials at all levels in the mistaken effort to place “America First.” As Christians, our call is to bring to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19) the good news that God loves all people equally. We call upon our national leaders to lead by that principle. We pray that God may open the minds and hearts of the American

people to understand that the real problems they face result from real causes and not from the presence of demonized “others.” We commit to working with people of good will, regardless of political or religious affiliation, in a collective effort to solve the real problems facing our nation and the world. We ask forgiveness from those who have been hurt by hateful rhetoric and harmed by unjust government policies. We acknowledge our responsibility and urge our elected officials to speak out against hate and “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8).”

- 2. Direct(ed) the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) to send this resolution to the president of the United States and to each United States senator and representative.**
- 3. Direct(ed) the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through Presbyterian World Mission, to send this resolution to world mission partners.**
- 4. Encourage(d) PC(USA) pastors and congregations to publicize this resolution in their communities and with officials of local and state government.**

Rationale:

Valued members of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations and mission partners abroad are from countries that have been disparaged in the recent debate over immigration. Our friends deserve to hear from us a renewed commitment to stand with them in a relationship of equality and genuine Christian love. Seeking cooperation among “people of good will, regardless of political or religious affiliation,” this statement is nonpartisan and does not focus on remarks by any one individual. The problem is bigger than one comment by one man. It is a problem in which, under a democratic form of government, all citizens share some measure of responsibility. Acknowledging our share and asking forgiveness may serve as an example for others.

The Role of Social Witness Policy Statements in Church & Society
Honest Patriotism and the two shorter resolutions were approved on June 22, 2018, at the 223rd General Assembly, meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. These resolutions are commended as guidance to

the free conscience of all members, congregations, and councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), thus they are advisory and not compulsory. The policy sections, however, are directive to the agencies and staff of the General Assembly, including the Presbyterian Mission Agency, its Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, and its World Mission ministries. These statements are distributed to members and all persons of good will as part of our Reformed Christian belief that just governments are instituted to be God's agents for human good, and that disciples of Jesus Christ are to pursue "social righteousness" as well as other gifts of the Spirit.

NOTE

This booklet contains the text of the Resolution on Honest Patriotism, Item 11-17, adopted by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), available online at: <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000402>. It has been laid out for ease in congregational and personal use by the Communications office of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and is also free download at: presbyterianmission.org/resources/topics/acswp. Print copies can be ordered for \$2 each from: www.pcusastore.com PDS# 24-052-18-002



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