

For the Health of the

Nation

An Evangelical
Call to Civic
Responsibility

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For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility

A resource of the National Association of Evangelicals

The mission of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) is to honor God by connecting and representing evangelical Christians. Founded in 1942, the association represents more than 45,000 local churches from 40 denominations and serves a constituency of millions. For more information about the NAE, visit **NAE.net**.

The original version of “For the Health of the Nation” was adopted by the NAE Board of Directors on October 7, 2004. Along with board resolutions, “For the Health of the Nation” serves as the platform for NAE’s government relations work. While the underlying principles of the document have not changed, the NAE Board of Directors updated and adopted this revised version on March 8, 2018 in light of the shifting American context. Concern about racial injustice is noted in the original document, but is further elaborated in the updated edition through a new section on racial justice and reconciliation. For more information on “For the Health of the Nation,” visit **NAE.net/forthehealth**.

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For the Health of the Nation

Introduction

The concerns we face in the United States are great, but they are not greater than God. In creation, God called humans to just and compassionate governance. In reverence to God and with love for others, evangelical Christians engage in the public square — not for our own sake but for the health of the nation and world.

Our responsibility to society is grounded in the truth that all people are made in the image of God. Though we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, we can find full restoration in our living Lord. Truth that brings life leads to flourishing and results in ongoing hope that guides our day-to-day approach to civic engagement.

We also engage with a gracious and winsome spirit. We should not echo the rage and disrespect that typifies much of today's political debates. Indeed, as the combative nature of 21st-century public discourse threatens meaningful efforts for the common good, the tone of our engagement will be as strategic as our involvement. Evangelicals of all political persuasions and backgrounds must demonstrate that differing opinions can be handled without demonizing, misrepresenting or shaming.

Therefore, in challenging and in equipping evangelical Christians to be involved in policy making and discourse, the National Association of Evangelicals emphasizes that our involvement should model the servant call of our faith and the care and concern for the other. In so doing, we may find our political efforts not only strengthen the social fabric of our nation but also rebuild the plausibility of the Christian faith in the minds and hearts of our culture.

The NAE was formed in 1942, in part, as a response to theological liberalism and rising fundamentalism. Centered on a standard set of beliefs (see the NAE Statement of Faith), NAE's founders sought a space for thoughtful and biblical engagement with each other and with culture. We continue in this tradition as we advocate for effective public policy.

Evangelical Christians will not always agree on the specifics of governance or the best roads to social reform. However, from our understanding that all people are made in the image of God, we do hold many callings and commitments in common, including: protecting religious freedom and liberty of conscience; safeguarding the nature and sanctity of human life; strengthening marriages, families and children; seeking justice and compassion for the poor and vulnerable; preserving human rights; pursuing racial justice and reconciliation; promoting just peace and restraining violence; and caring for God's creation.

While these issues do not exhaust the concerns of good government, they provide a platform from which evangelicals can engage in common action. In view of our civic emphasis to engage the public square with conviction and love, and in light of the aforementioned commitments held by evangelicals, we present the following principled framework that seeks to be comprehensive and consistent, and seeks to serve as a basis for cultivating thoughtful evangelical public engagement.



The Basis for Christian Civic Engagement

We engage in public life because God created our first parents in his image and gave them dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:27–28). The responsibilities that emerge from that mandate are many, and in a modern society those responsibilities rightly flow to many different institutions, including governments, families, churches, schools, businesses, unions and civic associations of many kinds. Just governance is part of our calling in creation.

As members of the community of God, we are called to be obedient to his commands. The will of God is revealed to us through the words of Jesus who told us that the most important commandment is to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36–39). As Jesus explained in the parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbors include those who are most different from us — socioeconomically, racially and religiously (Luke 10:25–37). Loving our neighbors as ourselves includes ensuring that they, as we, have the freedom and opportunity to enjoy the fruits of God’s presence and kingdom.

As bearers of God’s image, human beings have intrinsic dignity independent of how they behave in this world. Even when people — exercising their civil freedoms — choose paths antithetical to the gospel and to biblical teaching, they retain a dignity that is undiminished, because it is derived from God. Accordingly, government may properly protect some actions that, while not directly threatening other people, violate Christian ethics. For the sake of domestic peace in a pluralistic society, we do not insist that all sin be outlawed. While we continue to oppose same-sex marriage, for example, there is no longer a societal consensus on standards of sexual morality. We seek to preserve basic freedom for all and affirm equal human dignity for those with whom we may have profound differences.

As Christians, we also believe that the lordship of Christ extends not just to us as individuals, but to society as a whole. We believe that God created the world, and all of life is subject to him (Colossians 1:16–17). We believe that there is not

a square inch of God's creation over which he does not exercise dominion. We are therefore called to recognize the lordship of Christ and to engage with all of society to demonstrate and live into this truth. To restrict our political concerns to matters that touch only on the private and the domestic spheres is to deny the all-encompassing lordship of Jesus (Philippians 2:9–11).

We experience the kingdom of God here on earth even as we recognize the “already but not yet” nature of this reality. Following in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus announced the arrival of God's kingdom, or God's reign or rule (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). This kingdom would be marked by justice, peace, forgiveness, restoration and healing for all.

Though we experience many of the blessings of God's reign and see initial signs of restoration, we continue to suffer many of the results of the fall. We know that we must wait for God to bring about the fullness of the kingdom at Christ's return. But in the interim, the Lord calls the Church to speak prophetically to society and work for the renewal and reform of its structures.

The Lord also calls the Church to practice the righteous deeds of the kingdom and point to the kingdom by the wholeness and integrity of the Church's common life. This requires us to demonstrate God's love for all, by crossing racial, ethnic, economic and national boundaries. It also often involves following Jesus' example by suffering and living sacrificially for others.

God calls us to bear fruit wherever he plants us. We are commanded to seek the peace of the cities where we live, fully recognizing that we are not there by accident but by the sovereign will of God, and he is able to use every situation for his glory (Jeremiah 29:5–11).

Additionally, we are called to love, to seek unity and to proclaim a message of peace (Romans 12:9–18). Therefore, as Christian citizens, we believe it is our calling to help government live up to its divine mandate to render justice (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). From the teachings of the Bible and our experience of salvation,

Christians bring a unique vision to our participation in the political order and a conviction that changed people and transformed communities are possible. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are compelled outward in service to God and neighbor.

Our goal in civic engagement is to bless our neighbors by making good laws. Because we have been called to do justice to our neighbors, we foster a free press, participate in open debate, vote and hold public office. When Christians do justice, it speaks loudly about God. And it can show those who are not believers how the Christian vision can contribute to the common good and help alleviate the ills of society.



The Method for Christian Civic Engagement

Every political judgment requires both a normative vision and factual analysis. The more carefully and precisely we Christians think about the complex details of both, the more clearly we will be able to explain our views in dialogue with others. A rigorous, persistent commitment to search for and submit to the best available factual information is essential.

Every normative vision has some understanding of persons, creation, history, justice, life, family and peace. As Christians committed to the full authority of Scripture, our normative vision must flow from the Bible and from the moral order that God has embedded in his creation.

Evangelical Christians seek to submit to the authority of Scripture in every area of life (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Nevertheless, many contemporary political decisions — whether about environmental science, taxes or international trade — deal with complex sociological or technological issues not explicitly discussed in the Bible.

The resources of the whole Christian community are needed to understand our society and wisely apply our normative vision to political questions. Policy and subject matter experts will be called to do detailed social, economic, scientific, historical, jurisprudential and political analysis. Scholars and ethicists can shed light on the relevant biblical and theological resources. Only if we deepen our Christian vision and also study our contemporary world can we engage in politics faithfully and wisely. Pastors and other church leaders must prepare their people to engage as citizens and, where appropriate, should themselves speak prophetically on behalf of their congregations and denominations. The Church's collective voice should be loving, reasoned, truthful and nonpartisan.

From the Bible, experience and social analysis, we learn that social problems arise and can be substantially corrected by both personal decisions and structural changes. On the one hand, personal sinful choices contribute significantly to destructive social problems, and personal conversion through faith in Christ and

Christian discipleship can transform broken persons into wholesome, productive citizens (Proverbs 6:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Titus 3:3–8). On the other hand, unjust systems also create social problems, and wise structural change (e.g., legislation that strengthens families or increases economic opportunity for all) can improve society (Amos 5:10–15; Isaiah 10:1–2).

Therefore, Christian civic engagement must seek to transform both individuals and institutions. While individuals transformed by the gospel change surrounding society, social institutions also shape individuals. While good laws encourage good behavior, bad laws and systems foster destructive action. Lasting social change requires both personal conversion and institutional renewal and reform.

The Bible makes clear that God cares a great deal about the well-being of marriage and the family, the sanctity of human life, justice for the poor, human rights, care for creation, peace, religious freedom and racial justice. While individual persons and organizations are at times called by God to concentrate on one or two issues, faithful evangelical civic engagement and witness must champion a biblically balanced agenda.

HUMILITY AND CIVILITY

As sinners who are thankful for God's grace, we know that we do not always live up to our civic responsibility. Christians must approach political engagement with humility and with earnest prayer for divine guidance and wisdom. Power structures are entrenched, and perfect solutions are unobtainable. Cultural changes produce problems that are often not amenable to legislative solutions, so we must not expect political activity to achieve more than it can. Because social systems are complex and our knowledge is incomplete, we cannot predict all the effects of laws, policies and regulations. As a result, we must match our high ideals with careful social analysis and critical reflection on our experience in order to avoid supporting policies that produce negative consequences.

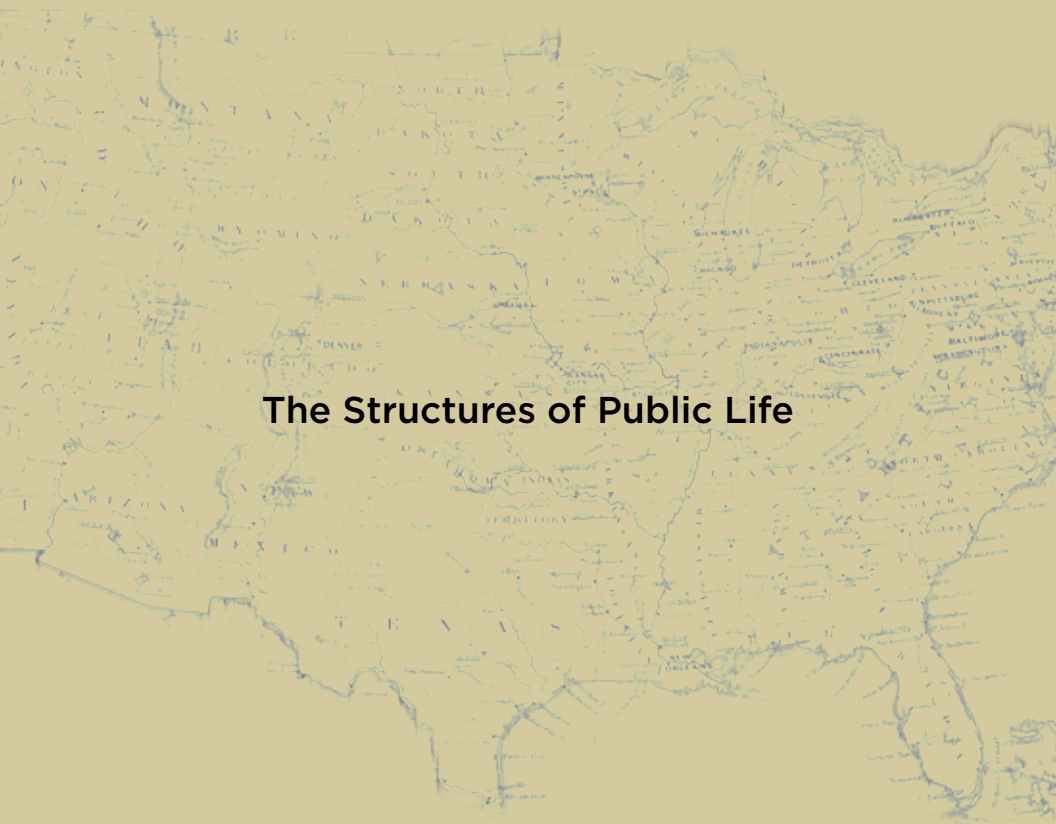


The Bible makes clear that God cares a great deal about the well-being of marriage and the family, the sanctity of human life, justice for the poor, human rights, care for creation, peace, religious freedom and racial justice.

In addition, we will differ with other Christians and with non-Christians over the best policies. Thus we must practice humility and cooperation to achieve attainable goals for the good of society. We must take care to employ the language of civility and to avoid denigrating those with whom we disagree. Because political work requires persuasion and cooperation with those who do not share our Christian commitment, we must offer a reasoned and convincing defense of our goals and proposals.

As Christians who respect the image of God in all people and who confess our own limitations, we will seek to listen respectfully and carefully to those who disagree with us. In this way, Christians can model a way forward in times of bitter polarization and dangerous gridlock.

When we as Christians engage in political activity, we must maintain our integrity and keep our biblical values intact. While we may sometimes settle for partial solutions, we should not compromise core principles. Individual evangelicals rightly engage in supporting legislation, candidates and political parties. But we must remember that biblical faith is vastly larger and richer than every limited, inevitably imperfect political agenda and that commitment to the lordship of Christ and his one Body far transcends all political commitments.



The Structures of Public Life

In the beginning, God invited human beings to partner with him in the governing and care of creation (Genesis 1:28–30). Throughout history, human beings have responded to this invitation primarily through various organizational frameworks, including family groups, tribes, clans, kingdoms and empires, and now in the modern period through an interconnected network of nation-states. Today we live in a complex society in which few people are directly involved in governing and in which complicated problems do not readily yield straightforward solutions.

Yet God has ordained a proper sphere for government and given it authority to maintain public order, to restrain human evil and to permit space for human flourishing (Romans 13:1–7; Matthew 22:15–22; Titus 3:1). Human beings work out their different ways of obeying God’s call as spouses, parents, workers and participants in the wide variety of human networks. Some are called to particular roles of governance.

We are told explicitly to pray for those who carry out the responsibilities of government (1 Timothy 2:1–2). The Bible provides multiple examples of individuals who were called by God to positions of public responsibility for the purpose of alleviating human suffering and promoting the general welfare. This includes not only those like Moses, Joshua, Saul, David and Solomon who ruled the people of Israel, but also Joseph, Daniel and Esther who were called to exercise authority in the midst of Gentile kingdoms.

REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

In the United States, we are part of a modern representative democracy with roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, English Common Law and the European Enlightenment. In this tradition, the authority and legitimacy of government grows directly from the consent of those who are being governed. Thus, as citizens in a representative democracy, we have the privilege and the responsibility to participate

in the governing process and to hold our government responsible to its proper sphere of authority.

While we affirm that God can work for his purposes through all forms of political organization, we believe that representative democracy offers the best potential for honoring the fact that every individual is made in the image of God with capacity for creativity, responsible decision-making, pursuing the conditions of biblical justice, and caring for the natural world that God has made. We are grateful for a constitutional system that provides for separation of powers, elections, limited terms of office and multiple levels of government, all of which distributes power rather than centralizing it in the hands of one person.

To function effectively, a representative democracy requires the active participation of the people, informed by a free and fair press. Public policy should protect the voting rights of all adult citizens, the integrity of the electoral process and the transparency of campaign financing. Where voters are divided into districts, the boundaries should be drawn without regard to partisan considerations.

As evangelicals in the United States of America, we will be held accountable for the privileges we have been given and for the ways that we have exercised our opportunities to be part of the political process. As a country, we have a historically unprecedented concentration of material wealth, military power and international influence. God has blessed America with bounty and with strength. But unless these blessings are used for the good of all, they will turn to our destruction. We will be judged as to whether we have used these resources for our own self-interest or on behalf of the larger human community.

Therefore, we must advocate for policies that offer the most potential for creating the conditions of human flourishing not only for Americans, but also for all those in the human community. For example, we must be advocates for religious freedom, not only on our behalf, but also on behalf of people of all religious persuasions and none in the United States and abroad. We welcome refugees and

others who seek protection and opportunity within our nation.

Even as we recognize the privileges afforded to us by participating in a representative democracy, we acknowledge that God is the ultimate source of all true authority, legitimacy, law and liberty. We must never mistake participation in the political order of our country with participation in God's kingdom that transcends time and space and draws together those from all nations and times who have given their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

While we are in this world, we must discern how our obligations to earthly government fit with our obligations to God's eternal order. We must seek to "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25). And, perhaps most difficult of all, we must discern when government has exceeded its appropriate biblical authority and resist even at great personal cost (Daniel 3:16–18, 6:6–10; Acts 5:27–32). A good government preserves the God-ordained responsibilities of society's other institutions.



1. Protecting Religious Freedom and Liberty of Conscience

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God has ordained the two coexisting institutions of church and state as distinct from the other with each occupying its own center of authority under a sovereign God (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17; Mark 12:13–17; Ephesians 4:15–16, 5:23–32). We affirm the principles of religious freedom and liberty of conscience, which are both historically and logically at the foundation of the American experiment. They are properly called the First Freedoms and are vested in the First Amendment, as well as in our state constitutions and in both federal and state legislation and established jurisprudence.

The First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of religion, speech, press, association and petition provide the political space in which we can carry out the differing responsibilities of disciple and citizen. Because human beings are responsible to God, these guarantees are crucial to the exercise of their God-given rights. As God allows the wheat and weeds to grow together until the harvest, and as God sends the rain on the just and on the unjust, so those who obey and those who disobey God coexist in society and share in its blessings (Matthew 5:45, 13:24–30). This "gospel pluralism" is foundational to religious freedom for people of all faiths and none.

Religious freedom encompasses far more than freedom to worship. The distinction between church and state does not require people to put aside their beliefs when entering the public square or to otherwise suspend the open practice of their religion. People should have equal access to public forums, regardless of the religious content or viewpoint of their speech. Likewise, judicial standards should protect religious belief, expression and observance, whether or not compelled by or central to one's religion.

The First Amendment's Establishment Clause is directed at government and is a restraint on its delegated powers alone. Thus, for example, the clause does not shield individuals from exposure to the religious views of nongovernmental speakers. Religious exemptions from regulatory or tax burdens borne by others do

not violate the Establishment Clause, for government does not establish religion by leaving it alone.


When government assists nongovernmental organizations selected without regard to religion (e.g., as part of an educational, social service or healthcare program), the aid does not establish religion nor do religious organizations receiving aid become “state actors” with constitutional duties. Government officials and courts should respect church autonomy in matters relating to doctrine, polity, church discipline, clergy and staff employment practices, and other matters within the province of the church and other religious organizations (Acts 18:12–17). As one feature of this autonomy, it is proper when civil authorities refuse to decide the validity, importance or meaning of religious propositions or questions.

Governments must uphold the religious freedom and human rights of all Americans. If governments consider extending new rights to people in contexts such as employment, housing and retail commerce, it is vital that strong provisions be included to safeguard the freedom of religious organizations and individuals to follow their conscience and beliefs. This should also include religious educational institutions, which play an important role in society. Students and graduates should not be threatened with loss of financial support or professional credentials because they choose to attend schools that observe religiously based beliefs and codes of conduct. Recognized religious student groups on secular campuses must be free to choose leaders with compatible religious commitments.

Religion is not just an individual matter, but also encompasses rich communal traditions of ultimate beliefs and practices. We resist the definition of religion becoming thinned out to a personalized spirituality or flattened out to comprise anything that passes for a serious conviction or sincere concern. Freedom of religion is not limited to freedom to assemble as groups for worship in a building specified for worship but also includes freedom to hold and express religious views that may not be widely accepted in our culture.

1. Protecting Religious Freedom and Liberty of Conscience

Evangelical concern for religious freedom does not stop at our nation's borders. Religious persecution is closely linked with the violation of other human rights, and often leads to civil unrest and violent conflict. American diplomats are mandated by law to place a high priority on the promotion of religious freedom, which is in the mutual interest of every nation. This task is made easier when we maintain exemplary treatment for religious freedom here at home. As evangelicals we are particularly concerned for fellow believers facing persecution in other countries, while also advocating for the protection of all people regardless of their faith.



2. Safeguarding the Nature and Sanctity of Human Life

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Because God created human beings in his image, every human life from conception to death bears the image of God and has inestimable worth (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, Christians must be committed to a consistent ethic of life that safeguards the essential nature of human life at all stages, with a special concern to protect the lives of the most vulnerable. The unborn, the very young, the aged, those living in poverty, the chronically or terminally ill, those with disabilities and those with genetic diseases deserve our particular care and protection. Our public policy agenda should reflect these broad commitments.

Abortion is the most familiar assault on the sanctity of human life. The Bible reveals God's calling and care for persons before they are born (Psalm 139:13), and each life lost is a unique creation made in God's image who might have blessed our society in extraordinary ways.

Approximately half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, and many of these are aborted. Any serious attempt to reduce the number of abortions must therefore come to terms with unplanned pregnancy, the pandemic of extramarital sex and the complex issues surrounding contraception and other family planning methods. The Church is understandably reluctant to recommend contraception for unmarried sexual partners, given that it cannot condone extramarital sex. However, it is even more tragic when unmarried individuals compound one sin by then destroying the precious gift of life.

Euthanasia, the destruction of human embryos for research, and unethical human experimentation also transgress the essential nature of human life and violate the God-given dignity of human beings. God has blessed us with the capacity for scientific inquiry. Christians should support medical research such as biotechnology, neuroscience and nanotechnology that can ease suffering and cure disease as long as it does not undermine human dignity. But where the negative implications of such research, experimentation and other emerging technologies are unknown, both public and private policies ought to err on the side of caution.

Christians should also support medical research that uses non-embryonic stem cells and other ethical avenues of research to promote human health. However, we must work toward bans on human cloning and embryonic stem cell research and for laws that prohibit discrimination based on genetic information. Our public policy decisions must respect life and promote the flourishing of each person in every life stage and condition.

Death is a significant transition that we all ultimately face. The physical and emotional suffering that may precede death can be a very grievous experience. While we firmly believe in mercy, compassion and allowing natural death, we also believe there is a profound moral distinction between allowing a person to die on the one hand, and killing on the other. As evangelicals, we deny that there are any circumstances that justify euthanasia.


Instead of supporting legislation allowing physician-assisted suicide, Christians should focus on improving care for the dying and increasing access to high-quality palliative or hospice care to alleviate needless suffering. We should further advocate within our churches for responsible advance care planning.

We welcome medical advances that promote human life and health. Yet, Genesis portrays attempts to transcend God-given human limitations as rebellion against God (3:1–19, 11:4–9). These impulses are behind some life extension technologies, genetic modifications and biotechnologies that treat the human body as a commodity. We likewise face the temptation to medically intervene in all aspects of life, employing drugs and other technologies not to save lives, but to inappropriately alter cognitive and physical performance or gender identity. Christians must exercise discernment as we witness to the sanctity of human life and warn against the dangers of dissatisfaction with human limits.

We urge evangelicals with specialized scientific knowledge, Christian scholars and church leaders to explore the questions that emerge at the intersection of human life and technology and to help Christians and policymakers develop ethical

2. Safeguarding the Nature and Sanctity of Human Life

responses. As genetic and reproductive technologies become more sophisticated, society must create a consensus on what is good and what limits we should place on irreversible human modification. The uniqueness of human nature is at stake.



3. Strengthening Marriages, Families and Children

Throughout the Bible the family is central to God's vision for human beings and human society. At creation God established marriage and the family as one of his first acts (Genesis 1:27–28, 2:23–25). God revealed himself to us in the language of family: adopting us as his children (Romans 8:23; Galatians 4:5) and directing us by the Holy Spirit to call him Abba Father (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Church is described with familial language (Matthew 12:48–50; Colossians 1:2; Hebrews 2:11), indicating that we are to embrace fellow members as brothers and sisters in Christ. Marriage as a lifetime covenantal relationship between one man and one woman is a normative biblical symbol of God's relationship with his people (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:20, 31:32; Ephesians 5:23, 31–32). We also celebrate the value of single men and women to the church family (1 Corinthians 7:32–35) who often dedicate themselves to vocations that bless the church and the world. Churches should offer them special care and support as they carry out these ministries. Family life reveals to us something of the nature of God as human families mirror, however faintly, the relational love of the Trinity.

The mutuality and service of family life stands in contrast to an emphasis on personal freedom and rights. Marriage, sexuality and family life are fundamental to healthy societies. Whether married or single, it is in families that we learn mutual responsibility and live together with our commonness and distinctions. In families we learn the give-and-take of living together, love and trust, justice and mercy, and denying ourselves for the well-being of others. Thus the family is central to life together as diverse people in society.

Human beings are relational in nature (Genesis 2:18; 1 Corinthians 12:12). Nurturing of children and the formation of mature citizens is first and foremost the role of families and churches. But other social institutions, including government, play important roles in encouraging healthy family life and the well-being of children. Government does not have the primary responsibility for guaranteeing

wholesome family life, but it should understand that people live in families and are more than autonomous individuals.

Good family life is so important to healthy human functioning that we oppose government efforts to trespass on the integrity of the family; for example, by encroaching on parental responsibilities and rights to educate their children, separating nuclear families through deportation or creating economic disincentives to marriage. Similarly, labor, housing, healthcare, tax, immigration and education policies concern not only individuals but can significantly affect families. We commit ourselves to work for laws that protect and foster family life. Violations of the integrity of the family threaten public order. In order to strengthen the family, we must promote biblical moral principles, responsible personal choices and wise public policies.


God's design for marriage and family should be clearly expressed in our churches. Christians should model healthy marriages in which a man and woman honor their vows to lifelong sacrificial service to each other and loving nurture of any children that God brings into the family. At the same time we recognize the constitutional freedom of all citizens, knowing that in our democratic and pluralistic society this freedom may lead to legal rights and personal choices that undermine healthy family life. In the midst of such a culture, we seek to embody biblical standards and to be a voice for those standards, while recognizing that people may choose contrary paths.

Social policies should take into account both the dignity of human beings and families, as well as their brokenness. Many social evils — such as alcohol and drug addiction, gambling, credit card abuse, pornography, promiscuity, domestic violence, sexual abuse, easy divorce and abortion on demand — can represent the abandonment of responsibility or the violation of trust by family members, and they seriously impair the ability to function in society.

The Church should play a vital role in restoring families to wholeness, and

3. Strengthening Marriages, Families and Children

government should provide protection in cases of abusiveness and personal harm that can occur in families. Churches and governments should also support families and children who encounter societal challenges such as poverty, homelessness, racism, inadequate schooling and environmental degradation. We will work for measures that strengthen the economic viability of marriages and families, especially among the poor.



4. Seeking Justice and Compassion for the Poor and Vulnerable

4. Seeking Justice and Compassion for the Poor and Vulnerable

Jesus summed up God's law by commanding us to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:35–40). By deed and parable, Jesus taught that anyone in need is our neighbor (Luke 10:29–37). God created all people in his image. The inherent dignity that rich and poor alike possess leads us to share our resources with one another — particularly with those in need.

God identifies with the poor and says that those who “are kind to the poor lend to the Lord” while those who oppress the poor “show contempt for their Maker” (Psalm 146:5–9; Proverbs 19:17, 14:31). Jesus said that those who do not care for the needy and the imprisoned demonstrate by such lack of action that they are not his followers (Matthew 25:31–46). The vulnerable include not only the poor, but those with less power, such as women, children, the aged, persons with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, minorities, the persecuted, prisoners and victims of human trafficking.

Moreover, God measures societies by how they treat the vulnerable and powerless. His prophets call his people to create just and righteous societies (Isaiah 10:1–4, 58:3–12; Jeremiah 5:26–29, 22:13–19; Amos 2:6–7, 4:1–3, 5:10–15). The prophetic teaching insists on both a fair legal system, which does not favor either the rich or the poor, and a fair economic system, which does not tolerate perpetual poverty. It also forbids usury and predatory lending that harms the poor (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; Ezekiel 18:7–9). Economic justice includes the mitigation of suffering, the promotion of equality of opportunity and the restoration of wholeness.

The Bible condemns gross disparities in opportunity and outcome that cause suffering and perpetuate poverty. God wants people to have access to productive resources, so they can care for their economic needs and contribute to their community. For example, children need a high-quality education in order to fully develop their God-given talents. Access to proper nutrition, shelter and health care are also important ingredients in helping people transcend poverty.

Our social safety net must aim to provide opportunity and restore people to self-

sufficiency. Adequate funding for food, shelter and health care should be maintained so that those who cannot care for their families and themselves receive the support they need. We urge Christians who work in the political realm to shape wise laws pertaining to the creation of wealth, wages, education, taxation, immigration, consumer protection and health care that will protect those trapped in poverty and empower them to improve their circumstances.

Since family systems are also important for nurturing healthy individuals and overcoming poverty, public policy should support families and marriages. Governments should hold parents responsible for the maintenance of their families, enforcing the collection of child-support payments, and should protect family members from physical and sexual abuse. Immigration policies should prioritize family unity and avoid separating families by deportation or detention. Criminal justice reform should consider how over-incarceration breaks up families.

We further believe that care for the vulnerable should extend beyond our national borders. American diplomacy and trade policies impact the poor. We urge our leaders to negotiate trade agreements that broadly benefit those of modest means while protecting human rights and the environment. We also believe effective aid and other initiatives for the reduction of global poverty should be a central concern of American foreign policy. We support strategies that encourage honesty in government, correct unfair socioeconomic structures, empower the poor, promote local entrepreneurship and grassroots economic development, protect refugees, and welcome immigrants. Government should continue to partner with effective international aid agencies, including those that are faith based.

In many parts of the world, extreme poverty, disease, famine, environmental degradation, persecution, civil war, and weak or corrupt government create the conditions in which large populations become vulnerable. We support Christian agencies and government policies that promote healthy communities and just, democratic structures.



God identifies with the poor and says that those who “are kind to the poor lend to the Lord” while those who oppress the poor “show contempt for their Maker.”



5. Preserving Human Rights

Because God created males and females in his image, we are endowed with rights and responsibilities. In order to carry out these responsibilities, human beings need life, liberty, justice and security, along with the freedom to form associations, formulate and express beliefs, and act on conscientiously held commitments. Governments are responsible to protect these basic human rights. Insofar as a person has a human right, that person should be able to appeal to an executive, legislative or judicial authority to enforce or adjudicate that right.

Even when people choose paths contrary to biblical teaching, they retain God-given dignity. A person's legal rights often entail freedom to choose wrongly or to sin, particularly when the rights and well-being of others are not directly harmed.

As recipients of God's gift of embodied life, people need food, nurture, shelter and care. While it is not the primary role of governments to provide everything that humans need for their well-being, they must provide for the general welfare and promote the common good. Governments are also obligated to ensure that people are not unjustly deprived of their inalienable rights and fair opportunities to meet their needs. Governments can play a significant role in convening private institutions to work together to promote human welfare.

American foreign policy should encourage respect for human rights and prudently employ sanctions against countries that abuse or deny such rights. We urge the United States to cooperate with other countries in encouraging strong democracies and civil societies in all nations.

Because the Creator gave human beings free will, religious liberty — including the right to change one's religion — is foundational and must be respected by governments and societies. Religious liberty includes the right to freely present, share, discuss and critique various religious viewpoints both privately and publicly. Christians support this freedom not only for itself, but for other religions as well. Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are closely related to religious

liberty. For example, people must be free to express their vision for a just social order without fear of torture, persecution or other reprisal.

Human life is embodied, and the well-being of persons is tied to their physical existence. Therefore, every human has the right not to have one's life taken unjustly, the right not to have one's body mutilated, and the right not to be abused, raped, violated, molested, maimed, tortured or starved. The right not to be arbitrarily detained and the writ of habeas corpus are also based specifically on the concept of bodily rights.

All people must be protected from sexual harassment and violence regardless of their gender, race, age or socioeconomic standing. Businesses, schools, churches and government should foster environments of respect and protection and have confidential avenues for reporting inappropriate behavior without fear of retribution. Those who have been violated need encouragement and support as they recover. We affirm efforts to help women have a stronger voice against sexual harassment and abuse. As Christians, we should treat each other with love and purity (1 Timothy 5:1–2).

We are guided by the Bible to be particularly concerned for the plight of refugees — individuals who have been forced to flee their countries due to oppression, violence and persecution. We urge churches and ministries to continue welcoming, resettling and assisting in the integration of refugees. We call on governments to offer resettlement opportunities to refugees who are unable to return to their homes, with a particular priority on the most vulnerable and family reunification.

Human rights also extend to those accused of crimes, persons locked up behind prison walls and those who have a criminal record. Our misguided response to crime has neglected victim restitution while locking up more of our citizens — particularly racial minorities — than most other nations. This has pervasive, devastating and long-lasting human and financial consequences for individuals, families and society at large.

5. Preserving Human Rights

We can prevent crime by cultivating the “seedbeds of virtue,” including healthy families, churches, neighborhoods, schools and other sources of moral formation. Our criminal justice system should provide for meaningful participation of crime survivors, fair and proportional punishment of offenders, protection of prisoners’ safety and human dignity, rehabilitation of offenders and help with reintegration into society as contributing citizens. We urge churches to celebrate redemption by helping survivors of crime to heal and forgive, and by welcoming those who have paid their debt.



6. Pursuing Racial Justice and Reconciliation

The Bible uniformly teaches the essential dignity of all humans and the shared desire to belong in community. Yet, the devastating reality of sin results in denigration and alienation. Christians affirm that the gospel brings reconciliation not only between God and humanity, but also among estranged groups of people (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14–18; Colossians 3:11). God will ultimately form a new humanity from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9).

In light of this biblical vision, racism is an affront to the value of individuals created in God’s image and to the divinely designed diversity of redeemed humanity. This denial of personhood and belonging runs contrary to the peace and unity that God intended in the beginning and that the Bible depicts as our destiny.

Racism appears in beliefs or practices that distinguish or elevate one race over others. When accompanied and sustained by imbalances of power, prejudice moves beyond individual relationships to institutional practices. Such racial injustice is the systemic perpetuation of racism. Its existence has unfairly benefitted some and burdened others simply due to the color of their skin and the cultural associations based upon perceptions of race.

The United States has a tragic history of genocide against Native Americans, the cruel practice of enslaving Africans, and the unjust segregation and exploitation of immigrants and the descendants of slaves. While the United States has made significant strides toward legal and social equality in principle, the legacy of racism and implicit racial bias still leaves many Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics and other ethnic minorities vulnerable to a variety of social ills. Our churches have a special responsibility to model good race relations (Romans 10:12). We believe Christians should support well-conceived efforts that foster dignity and responsibility and rectify the effects of our racist history, including the disproportionate impact of poverty, incarceration and educational inequity.

America has made substantial progress in legal and social equality, but much work remains to address overt racial enmity and passive indifference. While people

of good will and of good faith may differ on particular policies, we urge followers of Jesus to engage in serious and sustained efforts to combat racism.

We confess and repent of the Church's role in justifying or ignoring racism and racial injustice, and call on Christians of all races to reject white supremacy. We lament their continued existence within the Church and in society, and we resolve to pursue healing and reconciliation.


We encourage American Christians to understand more fully the historical and contemporary facets of racism in our country: the tragic mistreatment of Native Americans, the expressions of anti-Semitism, the impact of slavery and segregation on African Americans, the exploitation of Hispanic Americans and other immigrants, the exclusion and internment of Asian Americans, cultural beliefs about white racial superiority with respect to ethnic or racial minorities and more. These have created and reinforced complex economic disparities and social inequalities.

We seek an end to racial injustice by advocating for policies that respect and affirm the dignity of all races and ethnicities, that seek to redress the wrongs perpetrated and that achieve just outcomes in both church and society. We also commit to developing leadership that reflects the diversity of our communities and provides further opportunities for racial reconciliation.

Racial injustice denies a significant segment of our population full participation in our society and prevents our nation from fully realizing its stated aspirations. Those who are racist or racially indifferent remain trapped in a false sense of self and others, blinding them to the sense of community that democracy requires. The nation will flourish when people of all races and ethnicities are able to contribute equally to society. For this reason, we support strong protection of the voting rights of all citizens and oppose efforts to suppress voter participation. As Christians are ambassadors of reconciliation, we have a unique and compelling call to provide leadership for the benefit and dignity of all (2 Corinthians 5:16–20).



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7. Promoting Just Peace and Restraining Violence

Jesus and the prophets looked forward to the time when God's reign would bring about just and peaceful societies in which people would enjoy the fruits of their labor without interference from foreign oppressors or unjust rulers. This biblical vision calls for more than the simple absence of violence.

The pursuit of peace requires the patient cultivation of relationships among world leaders, diplomats and citizens that are based on respect and understanding. Modern travel and communication advances permit greater contact among people of different countries, which can lead to constructive engagement in the areas of trade, education, development, environmental protection and cultural exchange. Christians can play a unique role through our relationships in the worldwide Body of Christ and our shared missionary outreach. When we focus on positive opportunities for mutually beneficial relationships, we will be less likely to support violent conflict.

While Christians recognize that God does not call us to bring his kingdom by force, we agree that governments should protect and restore just and peaceful social orders. Believers have long differed on what that should look like in practice — when governments may use force, and whether Christians ought to participate in government-authorized force to defend their homelands, rescue others from attack or liberate other people from oppression.

The peaceful and just settling of disputes is a gift of common grace that requires sustained human action. We urge governments to pursue domestic, foreign and security policies that encourage justice and peace by preventing conflict. We urge governments to thoroughly pursue nonviolent paths to peace. If governments use military force, they should deploy it justly in the service of sustainable peace and not to serve narrow national interests.

Governments should at a minimum restrain violence by applying classical just war principles, which are designed to clarify the limited conditions under which military action is justifiable, and establish standards of right conduct in fighting



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a war. These principles apply to military decision-making and congressional deliberations on the declaration of war or authorizing use of force, and to the critical evaluation of past military action.

We gratefully acknowledge the sacrifices of service members, veterans and their families. They often face profound levels of emotional trauma and moral injury, in addition to the more widely recognized physical wounds and disabilities. We urge governments to recognize and address the multifaceted needs of victims and survivors of armed conflict. We continue our partnership with the military by providing qualified chaplains to all three branches of our military.

We urge followers of Jesus to pray for, support and constructively critique government leaders who bear these responsibilities. As followers of Jesus, we should model and promote mutual respect that leads to just transformation of conflict across boundaries of nation, tribe and religion. As such, we urge the Body of Christ to engage in sober, practical peacemaking, nonviolent conflict resolution and citizen diplomacy at local, national and international levels.

The possession and threatened use of nuclear weapons merits special attention due to their unique destructive capacity and threat to civilian populations. A growing body of Christian thought calls into question the acceptability of nuclear weapons as part of a just national defense, given that the just war theory categorically admonishes against indiscriminate violence and requires proportionality and limited collateral damage. The very weapons meant to restrain evil could potentially destroy all that they were intended to protect, which begs the question whether they can be normatively employed toward a just end.

Accordingly, we support a no first use policy, a continuing ban on nuclear testing, removing nuclear weapons from hair trigger alert status, efforts to secure mutual reductions in current nuclear stockpiles, and ongoing dialogue on the effects of possession and threatened use of nuclear weapons.



8. Caring for God's Creation

We are called as followers of Jesus to embrace and act responsibly to care for God's earth while we reaffirm the important truth that we worship only the Creator and not the creation.

Since the beginning, creation witnessed the majesty and presence of God (Romans 1:20). God gave the care of his earth and its species to our first parents. That responsibility has passed into our hands. We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part. Although there are natural factors that are beyond our control, the ecosystem is not so vast and complex as to be impervious to human activities.

We are not the owners of creation; rather, "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Christians acknowledge creation care as an act of discipleship; we are stewards of the earth, summoned by God to "work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). Our uses of the earth must be designed to conserve and renew it rather than to deplete or destroy it.

Scripture describes the good, sustainable earth, full of feedback mechanisms and cycles that are created to provide abundant physical life; but through our sin we have polluted and defiled it (Isaiah 24:4–6). We have depleted and devastated many of creation's resources instead of working to conserve and live in balance within the created order. We have polluted the air, water and soil with thousands of harmful chemicals. This has led to a great loss of bio-diversity, which threatens quality of life now and even more for future generations.

Climate change is a threat multiplier. It increases the harm from desertification, pollution and other damage to creation. It especially impacts the poorest of God's children in the world. Food and water insecurity and vector-borne diseases force migrations, increase conflicts and make daily life more challenging in the developing world. In the United States, it increases disease spread and asthma attacks, causes sea level rise and flooding, melts permafrost, lowers air quality, increases drought and fires, and adds severe weather threats.

The Bible teaches us that God is not only redeeming his people, but is also restoring the whole creation (Romans 8:18–23). As the redeemed people of God, we are called to follow our Risen Lord and to restore creation as we prepare for our Lord's return. Just as we show our love for the Savior by reaching the lost, we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation.

Clean air, pure water and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order. Therefore, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from environmental degradation and from human suffering that it causes. This includes both adaptation to environmental threats and mitigation of the consequences. Because natural systems are extremely complex, human actions can have unexpected side effects. We must therefore approach our stewardship of creation with humility and caution.

We urge Christians in their personal lives and within their Christian community to live in creation-friendly ways by using energy efficiently, conserving resources, considering the environmental impact of consumer purchases and experiencing the joy of contact with nature.

We urge governments to support energy efficiency standards, decrease our carbon footprint, reduce pollution, provide safe drinking water, encourage sustainable use of natural resources and ensure proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats. Both government and the private sector should also increase investment in adaptation to the effects of climate change, particularly as it impacts the most vulnerable people in our country and around the world.



Just as we show our love for the Savior by reaching the lost, we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation.



Our Commitment

We call on all Christians to be truthful in their dialogue, to be civil in their tone both in personal conversation and on social media, to become informed and to vote, as they regularly communicate biblical values to their community and government representatives. We urge all Christians to take their civic responsibility seriously even when they are not full-time political activists so that they might more adequately call those in government to their task. We also encourage our children to consider vocations in public service.

We encourage those who engage in political and social action to do so in a manner consistent with biblical teachings. That means, among other things, that all our political activity must reflect honesty, civility and respect for opponents. We also call on Christian leaders in public office or with expertise in public policy and political life to help us deepen our understanding so that we might better fulfill our civic duties.

We call churches and ministries to cultivate commitment to public justice among their members. Seminaries and Christian colleges have a special obligation to instill in future leaders a sense of civic responsibility. We call all Christians to a political engagement that aims to protect the vulnerable and poor, to guard the sanctity of human life, to further racial reconciliation and justice, to strengthen family life, to care for creation, and to promote justice, freedom and peace for all.

We commit ourselves to regular prayer for those who govern, that God may prosper their efforts to nurture life, justice, freedom and peace.

