

This essay by [Melissa Kirkpatrick](#) is the third in a new series that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

THE REFORMED ANSWER TO ELECTIONS (OR ELECTION): GET TO WORK

"The stress of our worries will kill our spirits."

This past Sunday, Leon Butler, preaching at John Calvin Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, spoke the truth. For many, the days following a bitter political campaign and election have brought no peace and no release from despair. Anecdotal stories report that churches were a little fuller this past Sunday. Spiritual succor sought in the immediate aftermath makes sense. Many of us are having a hard time right now with the idea that God would choose to have much at all to do with American politics.

Perhaps, however, it is to us that the charge is given. When we as Reformed Christians talk about election, we have something else in mind: God's election of us to salvation, to sacrifice, and to service. We who draw on the Reformed heritage have heard the call to unity and action many times over our history.

John Calvin talked about government leaders and magistrates being called by God to their tasks. Magistrates are to remember always that they should represent, in themselves, as best they can, the image of God's providence. And he calls for all to support wise and just leaders, as together we seek what is good and restrain what is wicked. Still, besides protecting the integrity of the church and its rules, protecting public peace and order, ensuring the protection of property and honest commerce, there is yet one more thing to be noticed. Calvin *assumes* the first part of government's role. And it is what seems to me a greater thing, suggesting that civil government ensures that all people can "breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm" (Institutes, IV.20.3). That is a pretty big job right there.

While Calvin's Geneva could not be said to be friendly to vanity and vice (no cards or dice, no taverns, no make-up(!), no excessive finery), the city, as part of its consolidation of the Reformation in the city, established a central hospital, which provided care for orphans and the elderly, food for the poor, and even a place to stay for travelers who could not afford other lodging. Even the great influx of French Huguenot refugees over time strained this social welfare system, but did not defeat it.

John Winthrop's famous sermon on the *Arabella* called the Puritan colonists to an ideal of community that was just that — an ideal, almost impossible to practice. But his words lay out the goal of working with and caring for one another that we can acknowledge as our responsibility:

“...to do Justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God, for this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly Affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, we must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality, we must delight in each other, make others Conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor, and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the work...”

From the Puritans in 1630, readying themselves to create community in the New World, however flawed that settlement proved to be on so many levels, to the modern struggle for human rights is not quite as long a way as one might think. We can draw wisdom from the South Africa of our own time and the words of the Belhar Confession. Offered to the global Reformed church at the end of apartheid, the confession contains themes of justice and reconciliation and “the call to the whole church toward holy action, transformation, and life.” (Introduction to the confession in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions). Its words echo Winthrop's call to unity and care. In small part: “...that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged...that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need...that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

One of my favorite (probably apocryphal) anecdotes first heard in lectures by a great church history scholar illustrates the ferocity of that call to witness and work for God's reign. From a Spanish soldier who'd had experience in the matter, this statement: “I would rather face a whole army than one Calvinist convinced he is doing the will of God.” Perhaps we dare not make such a claim, knowing what flawed people we are. But we have been called to the service of God in the world and should be finding ways to pursue it.

Johanna van Wijk-Bos in *Reformed and Feminist*, asserts that we cannot accommodate ourselves to existing structures and expect them to change. “The way to begin the adventure of change is by the way we operate, by teaming up differently, together, against the odds, in devotion, in power, and in love.”

We people of God, as Leon Butler said, can't survive one minute without hope. And we need that hope. Our task is ongoing, our need for strength is profound, and the need for creativity is great. In a small way, our charge may be summed up in the lyrics from a song originally written for a liturgy conference in Hawaii and heard often at youth conferences in the last few years:

*“Weave one heart from the many strands;
God be praised through our working hands.”*

Elections or election, we have now and will always have work to do.