

wherever and whenever this occurs, Christians are in all essentials at one with other religious believers.

In the end, we hold, God’s love and its calling provide the only basis for justice. Any view of justice inconsistent with or independent of God’s will is, in fact, defenseless. Some of our fellow citizens, we recognize, affirm a principle or principles of justice similar to our own and do so believing that grounds for these principles are entirely humanistic or this-worldly. We are grateful to join with them whenever we share political purposes. But they have, we believe, cast our common affirmation adrift, leaving our shared purposes without an anchor. Principles of justice are secure only because they articulate the “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God” and assign to politics its part in God’s beloved community.

Politics, then, is concerned with the most general structures of mutuality and the conditions they provide. We have in mind conditions of safety, health, and self-respect; material goods and opportunity to work; education; cultural richness; beauty and integrity in the environment; a rewarding pattern of human relationships, including freedom of association; and a community of democratic rights, including religious freedom. Because the flourishing of all deepens insofar as all contribute, the principle of justice is this: maximize the general sources of empowerment to which all have equal access. This is the deepest reason for striving throughout our political history to make government “by the people, for the people” more complete—so that each may contribute to the flourishing of all. Insofar as general sources of achievement are equally available, the common good has been achieved, and thus the call to justice may also be stated: maximize the common good.

Convinced that Christian faith prescribes a community of love, we here reject the principle of minimal government restricted mainly to protecting liberty. Those fellow citizens for whom that principle is supreme have, we believe, a deficient view of justice—which leaves the true freedom of individuals impoverished and the potential for our democratic community wasted. We humans are given to each other so that we may flourish together, each becoming the beneficiary and the benefactor of all. At its best, democracy embodies even while it ministers to such mutuality, and democratic government is itself a gift we should embrace for freedom within the beloved community.

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# PROTESTANTS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

*“People of faith advancing justice in public life”*

October 2010

## Statement on Government

### GOVERNMENT AGAINST INTERFERENCE

With the change in our Republic’s leadership, debate about the government’s proper role in our society has again become prominent. President Barack Obama’s pursuit of legislative action for economic recovery and, perhaps above all, for reform in health care delivery are among the more vivid events energizing this debate. But the issue transcends those specific purposes and involves basic differences about the task properly assigned to democratic government. Our intent in this statement is not to criticize or defend any specific actions taken by the Obama administration. We seek, rather, to articulate a view of government’s role authorized by Christian faith.

On our understanding, government is the set of institutions and activities through which democratic citizens and their representatives legislate, interpret, and enforce norms and policies that provide a framework for society as a whole. In this sense, government is a “second-level” organization because it constructs the most general order within which all “first-level” associations and organizations (for instance, families, business firms, religious communities, and so forth) are united in one society. Also, we take “justice” to mean the norms and policies this second-level organization ought to provide as a framework for the society. The principle or principles of justice define the proper responsibilities or purpose of government.

Hence, a fitting address to the present question depends on what justice truly requires. Moreover, our public debate about the proper role of government is best approached, we believe, by contrasting two major views of justice. Both agree that democratic government should be crafted to care for the freedom of its citizens. But the two differ on the relevant meaning of freedom and thus on the purpose of government. To signal the disagreement, we will call these accounts “government against interference,” on the one hand, and, on the other, “government for access”—and we will seek in summary form to clarify the difference.

On one long-standing American view, government’s overriding task is to protect the liberty of its citizens. In this context, freedom is defined as individual liberty, and it means freedom from interference, the freedom of an individual or family to decide what its interests in life will be and to pursue them without coercion by others, including coercion by the government. To be sure, no person or family has an unlimited right to such freedom because government should safeguard the liberty of all. Each is properly free only insofar as she or he does not interfere with the freedom of others and, therefore, justice means equal liberty for all citizens. On this view, then, what should be equal is the greatest possible freedom from any and all kinds of interference; finally, that is the only proper aim of the government,

If we consider only our national government, this first view can claim some support from the very beginnings of our country. The architects of our Republic sought a form of government without the corruption they saw in Old World politics, where special power for the one or the few, for a monarch or an aristocracy, continued to shape European politics. In addition, American revolutionaries were acutely mindful of what they took to be tyrannical treatment by the English King and Parliament. Committed to rule by the many—by “we the people”—our founders were especially concerned to defend the people from coercion by rulers, so that freedom from governmental interference assumed central importance.

At the same time, the Constitution of 1787 debased its own democratic commitment through crimes against Native Americans and through failure to include all the people. The states could and did exclude women and the poor from political participation, and the framers accepted a devil’s pact with slavery, even if many of them also hoped that, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, slavery was “in the course of ultimate extinction.” These failures have destined our

politics fitfully to pursue their redress over more than two centuries. Excepting a very few, all Amendments to our Constitution following the Bill of Rights have been designed to make government “by the people, for the people” more complete. This political history might be seen as working out an initial ideal in which government’s role is to protect all from interference—and, especially, from the coercion of government itself. At least, this is the story told by those for whom government’s task is mainly or solely to guarantee rights to life and liberty, whereby each person may then pursue her or his own happiness in her or his own way.

Focused on the most extensive possible liberty, advocates of this first view typically support a free-market economy without significant governmental regulation. Economic transactions should be voluntary exchanges because, thereby, each participant is free to pursue what she or he wants—and, more generally, a free-market economy is said to be controlled by consumer preferences. In line with this hands-off policy toward economic activity, the government’s responsibility overall is more or less exhausted by securing the national defense, enacting and enforcing the criminal law, and providing rules for social interaction that defend the rights of each person to equal liberty. Typically, advocates of this view also allow that government—at least, local government—must assume special obligations for the protection of children and, more often than not, include therein the provision of effective public education.

Summarily stated, then, government against interference means a minimal government, one that seeks to maximize voluntary relationships in the society. This follows, we are told, precisely because protecting individual liberty is the overall goal. To this end, government as a second-level organization is granted the legitimate use of coercion only insofar as its use will maximize the liberty of all.

GOVERNMENT FOR ACCESS

However deep in American history we find “government against interference,” the view that government’s overriding purpose is the greatest possible liberty, it is not implied by the nature of democracy or mandated by our political constitution—and this view has been challenged, especially since early in the twentieth century, by a second alternative, for which

government’s task is to promote the empowerment of its citizens. In this context, freedom is defined as empowerment, and it means the freedom gained through access to sources of individual achievement. A person’s power to achieve is enriched or enfeebled depending on her or his physical, personal, and social situation, and justice prescribes a framework of norms and policies that promote proper access to sources of empowerment.

To be sure, every individual must decide what to do with the possibilities circumstances offer, and this is the moral freedom we all exercise whatever our situation. Having made the most of your own previous opportunities generally increases your capabilities now. But our moral choices are taken amidst greater or lesser opportunities that are determined by our larger context. Although this context is shaped in part by what we have done in the past, a person’s own past decisions are simply one source of her or his present empowerment, and the wider physical circumstances and human associations (familial, neighborhood, economic, social, and political) to which a person has access are typically more significant.

At stake between these two views—government aimed only at liberty and government aimed at empowerment—is a choice: is the freedom we seek for all only the absence of interference, or is liberty in that sense part of a larger meaning?

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The second view includes the importance of liberty. Above all, the democratic rights shared by all members of “we the people” must always be protected and cannot be limited by any other governmental purpose. These are the liberties properly guaranteed to every citizen by the political constitution, for instance, rights to conscience, bodily integrity, and use of personal property, along with the political liberties, rights to freedom of speech, of press, of assembly, and to due process and equal protection of the laws. The only proper limits on such rights are those required to protect the equal constitutional liberties of others. Moreover, freedom from interference generally in social and economic activity is a significant value. But justice is not defined as the greatest possible freedom from any and all kinds of interference because this is not sufficient to the pursuit of happiness. Within the limits established by constitutional liberties, the larger meaning of freedom is empowerment, access to the opportunities that also require favorable circumstances and associations.

Still, this more inclusive view of freedom, some may insist, does not oppose minimal government. The two are consistent, we may be told, because empowerment properly occurs principally through nongovernmental associations—for instance, the family, religious communities, charitable organizations, and participation in the free market economic system. Perhaps the nature of earlier American society gave some plausibility to this conclusion. When our country was principally rural, modern technology was still undeveloped, most interactions were face-to-face or limited to local communities, and larger institutions were relatively few, resistance to governmental activities promoting empowerment may have been more reasonable.

Perhaps—but we doubt it. If constraint on the federal government made sense during the nation’s earlier years, the empowerment of all was not served without aid from state and local governments. Moreover, we expect, earlier and more simple American society in fact allowed the exploitation of many, the poor and vulnerable, by a favored few. In any event, major change has occurred since the Civil War. Industrial, technological, and cybernetic revolutions have altered the social landscape. Institutions and institutional systems—in economics, transportation and communication, medicine, social services, education, and political participation—have produced unprecedented scope and complexity in our web of relationships. If supervision by voluntary associations, or even by state and local governments, was ever viable, it is now transparently insufficient to promoting the empowerment of all.

Given this second meaning of freedom, moreover, justice has always meant access to empowerment—even if, in some settings, the government was wise to refrain from direct action and rely on private organizations. In this respect, the provision of public education is illustrative. If private schooling in fact provides adequate education to all children, government may be wise to refrain from providing a public school system. But when, for whatever reason, private schooling is no longer adequate, government’s abiding obligation to insure educational opportunity calls for access to public schools. More generally, then, if government’s abiding obligation to promote empowerment for all citizens was, at an earlier time, consistent with significant reliance on nongovernmental organizations, voluntary oversight is, given the major social changes we now inherit, no longer adequate. Government for access becomes a servant in our pursuit of justice.

Because American citizens face these alternative views of justice and governmental responsibility, they are bound to decide, either deliberately or by default, about the basic terms for our political community. Christian faith, we believe, clarifies why government for access is authorized by the ultimate context of our lives and, further, how the principle of justice should be understood.

Christians affirm Jesus Christ as the revelation of God’s all-embracing love, which calls us to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength by loving all whom God loves, all our neighbors as ourselves. This is God’s purpose for all humans, and God gives this purpose to us because God loves us, as an expression of God’s abiding concern that all people should live abundantly. As a loving parent wishes for her or his children a good life, so God calls us to love one another because God wills for each of us the best possible life. It follows that human life is fulfilled in a community of love, where each receives from and gives to others the chance for greater flourishing.

For Christian faith, then, the chance to flourish is a gift we receive from our context, above all from our human context and especially from the communities in which we are set. The conditions of achievement depend on what other people give to each of us, and we make the most of our opportunities when we direct our activities to the empowerment of all. Flourishing, in other words, depends on the mutuality God makes possible by giving us life together—and mutuality is the purpose of the whole human community, shaped like circles within circles from family and neighborhoods and voluntary organizations to institutions of work and culture and encompassing social structures. Mutuality imprisoned is mutuality impoverished. In the pursuit of happiness, we are decidedly all in this together, and we are called to maximize mutuality—or to pursue the beloved community.

Although this vision of life under God is disclosed for Christians in Jesus Christ, we do not believe that only Christians can have it. To the contrary, the true God is present in the innermost awareness of all humans, and Jesus Christ illuminates with clarity and power the gift of God’s all-embracing love that all people already receive in their deepest experience. This is why loving our neighbors as ourselves is a calling to all humans, and the beloved community properly directs all persons toward mutuality. Further, we believe that God’s gift and calling may also be illuminated in the origins of other religions with the same clarity and power we find in the origin of Christian faith—and