

## **A Christian Perspective on Our Public Life**

In his 2005 book, “Politics as a Christian Vocation,” University of Chicago theologian Franklin Gamwell argued that Christians in a democratic society have a calling to be actively engaged in politics, understood not as some specialized profession but rather as political activity that deliberately attempts “to influence or help shape political rule and, thereby, to determine the consequences of political order for all affected by it.” I quite agree.

Clearly, Gamwell means by politics more or less what is widely regarded as active citizenship in a democratic republic. He is emphatically not calling for rabidly political partisanship. Christians ought not become too closely allied with any political party or candidate. They all fall short.

Moreover, neither Gamwell nor I envisions some kind of Christian dominance of society. Power tends to corrupt Christians just as much as, if not more than, everybody else.

I find that some metaphors Jesus used to refer to his disciples capture the sort of role that Christians might hope to play in society and its political life. These include salt, light, and leaven. Salt acts as seasoning and preservative, light illumines and helps show the way, and leaven (i.e., yeast) expands and transforms. Each of these metaphors suggests an important contribution to a much larger whole. Apart from the whole, however, salt, light, and leaven are virtually useless.

In this column I often try to provide a Christian perspective on our public life. In the recent mayoral campaign a major issue centered on what our community ought to be doing about homelessness and the need for shelter. I supported the candidate whose approach I believe will more effectively minimize the numbers of homeless. However, I believe the other candidate, who recognized major contributions made by some churches to saving and improving lives by providing overnight, low-barrier shelter, also recognized the need for a coordinated, collaborative, community-wide response to the problem.

Portions of the Christian community have provided critical stop-gap services to meet immediate shelter needs. But a much more comprehensive and sustainable effort is needed. Local citizens and their government must be persuaded to take responsibility and find ways to meet immediate needs while putting in place longer-term policies, programs, and facilities that are supported by the community at large. In short, there’s need for further transformation in thinking and action about how to address and resolve the problems of shelter and homelessness in our town.

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