



INTRODUCTION

I'VE WRITTEN THIS little book to my past self. Two years ago, if you'd asked me, "Must government promote Christianity as the only true religion?" I would have said, "Absolutely not." At that time, I had read a good bit about Christian politics, but most of those books had been written relatively recently. At some point I realized, *You know, I should read more of the old stuff*. I wanted to follow C. S. Lewis's advice to let the clean sea breeze of the centuries blow through my mind by reading old books.¹ Well, those old books pulled a fast one on me. Gradually, then suddenly, I started seeing Scripture in a new light. I realized that my previous way of thinking was wrong. Now, I *do* think that the government must promote Christianity as the only true religion, as crazy as that sounds. I did a complete 180-degree turn. This little book is my attempt to share what persuaded me. If I had a couple hours with James from 2023, what would I want to tell him? What would he need to hear? I've tried to lay out the main ideas in a short book that can be read in one or two sittings.

Actually, it is very important that you try to read this booklet in one or two sittings. If you read a little bit and then stop, you might walk away thinking that I'm out of my mind. Some parts of the book are a bit like vinegar. If you taste it on its own, it's terrible, but next

1. C. S. Lewis, Preface to *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 11.

time you're making a soup, add a little dash and tell me if it doesn't taste twice as nice. I want you to judge my soup, not my vinegar. That means you need to put all of the ingredients together and let them stew before you taste. Read a chapter or two and you might feel concerned about what I'm saying, but read the whole thing and you just might love it—or at least respect it.

It's high time I offered some definitions. What do I mean when I say, "Government must promote Christianity as the only true religion"? Each word is important. Let's unpack them one at a time.

The Key Definitions

By "government," I mean leaders who are called to hold offices of authority over civil matters. Theologians often call these people "civil magistrates." You might think of mayors, county commissioners, sheriffs, governors, judges, senators, representatives, appointed secretaries, presidents, and more. As you can tell, the word "government" has a broad meaning. Basically, it includes everyone who holds a position of authority over what happens within our towns, cities, counties, states, and country.

By "Christianity," I mean "the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest." That's the definition given by the Westminster Confession of Faith (23.3), and I think it is a good one.² I do not have in mind any particular church institution, denominational organization, or set of cooperating congregations. Moreover, when I call Christianity "the only true religion," I'm reiterating the teaching of Jesus. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," said our Savior. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

2. Throughout this book, I will use the 1788 American version of the Westminster Standards. The American Presbyterians made significant adjustments to the sections on the civil magistrate. However, I intend to show in this book that the American version still teaches that government officials have a moral obligation to promote true religion. On this point, both versions of the Standards agree.

By “must,” I’m referring to a moral duty. I’m not saying, “It would be *nice* if government officials did this or that.” I’m not saying, “*Ideally* they should do thus and so.” When I say *must*, I mean *must*. They are obliged before the face of God to abide by this standard of behavior. In technical terms, this moral duty is *deontological*. That means government officials must abide by this divine obligation regardless of the potential consequences. They must do their duty. Period. Point. Blank.

However, the *way* someone goes about fulfilling his duty will depend greatly upon the circumstances. In this way, the duty of officials to promote Christianity mirrors the duty of children to honor their parents. Both duties are unchanging, immutable, and unqualified. Nevertheless, situational considerations matter. As a child, what if your parents are alcoholics? What if your father is bipolar? Or your mother has borderline personality disorder? What if your parents aren’t Christians at all? These are *tough* questions. Whatever answer may be right, we know one answer that is wrong. No matter how broken or sinful your parents may be, children must never fail to honor their parents. Of course, the way they honor their parents will look quite different from kids with healthy and godly parents, but both sets of children have the same basic duty. Similarly, the situations of different government officials will shape how they fulfill their duty before God. The mayor of New York City should not take the same approach as the mayor of Vidalia, Georgia (my hometown). Still, both officials have the same basic duty to promote Christianity as the only true religion.

By “promote,” I mean the activity of encouraging, supporting, advancing, or furthering the progress of something.³ It is also a very

3. I did not pick the word “promote” at random. It has historical precedent in the Reformed tradition. As John Murray put it, the “state must promote the interests of the kingdom of God.” Matthew Henry, in his commentary on 2 Samuel 23, says that civil officials must “promote the fear of God (that is, the practice of true religion) among those over whom they rule.” John Owen says that rulers are commanded “to serve the Lord, in promoting the kingdom of the

broad term. The word says a lot about *what* you accomplish and very little about *how* you accomplish it. Stated differently, you can promote something in many, many different ways. A marketing agency might *promote* a product by advertising it. A college professor might *promote* an idea by arguing for it. A parent might *promote* good behavior by rewarding it. In the context of government, officials may use laws to promote something, but legislation is not their only tool. In fact, they use another much more powerful tool: social customs. Through influencing social customs, government officials shape our shared world. They shape our time with national holidays or other special days of the year. They shape our spaces with monuments, memorials, roads, zoning, and public buildings. They shape our ideas with their public speeches. In all of these examples and more, government leaders use their powers to promote certain ideas and behaviors, for better or worse.

In this book, I remain relatively neutral on *how* officials should promote Christianity. Should they pass this law or that law or no law at all? Which social customs should they shift? What actions should they take? The answers to these questions depend upon the circumstance. They also depend on what kind of civil officials we have in view. Are we talking about sheriffs, judges, mayors, senators, or the President? All of those offices involve various kinds of powers and limits on their powers. For the purposes of this book, my answer to the *how* question is simple and straightforward: However they promote Christianity, they must ensure they promote it with *love*, *strength*, and especially *prudence*. Beyond these general principles, I offer a few illustrations, but they're intended merely as illustrations. I do not mean to bind anyone's conscience to specific political plans,

Lord Jesus Christ." John Murray, "The Relation of Church and State," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 254; Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.), 5650; John Owen, "Of Toleration: And the Duty of the Magistrate, about Religion," in *The Complete Works of John Owen*, vol. 18, ed. Martyn C. Cowan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 389.

policy tactics, or strategic maneuvers.⁴ Hence, the thesis of this book may sound radical at first, but it's actually rather modest.

Lastly, I need to define the phrase “public good.” I’ve not used the phrase yet, but it will play a critical role in my argument. Stated succinctly, the public good is that which leads to human flourishing and happiness among a society of people as they live life together in community. It is a synonym for other phrases like *the common good*, *the general interest of the community*, *public benefit*, or *the people’s welfare*. The idea of the public good has been a permanent fixture in the Western legal and political tradition. It is perhaps best captured in Cicero’s famous Latin phrase, *Salus populi suprema lex esto*. In English, the phrase reads, “The welfare of the people shall be the supreme law.”⁵ Over time, it became one of the most foundational principles of law.⁶ The Founding Fathers of America inherited this principle as well.⁷ It is explicitly stated in the Preamble to the Constitution, which states that our American form of government was established to “promote the general Welfare.” In short, the government does not exist for the sake of itself. Rather, it exists for the sake of the common good. Its duty is to secure the general interest of the community. Its purpose is to promote the people’s welfare. In the

4. Moreover, I’m certainly *not* suggesting that the way other civil leaders did it in the past is how we must do it today. We do not live in Calvin’s Geneva. Our leaders must make proposals that fit our present context. They can’t merely lift a practical solution from a history book and expect it to work. Different times call for different measures.

5. Commenting on this phrase, the magisterial Baptist theologian John Gill said, “The principal care and concern of a king is the welfare and safety of his people, that they are secured in their lives, liberties, and property; that they live peaceable and quiet lives, unmolested by any; that they dwell safely, every man under his vine and fig tree, as Israel did in the times of Solomon; the maxim of the Roman orator is a very good one; ‘*Salus populi suprema lex esto*.’ Let the safety and welfare of the people be the supreme law of government.” John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, abridged by William Staughton (Philadelphia: Printed for Delaplaine and Hellings by B. Graves, 1810), book 4, chapter 4, section 2a4.

6. See Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2022).

7. See William J. Novak, *The People’s Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

words of the Westminster Confession, civil government exists for “the public good” (WCF 23.1).⁸

But what does the public good include? For thousands of years, jurists have offered a variety of elements. Yet they’ve remained remarkably stable over time. In the ancient world, it was defined as “to live honourably, not to harm any other person, to render to each his own.”⁹ Centuries later, the Italian lawyer Giovanni Botero (1544–1617) defined it as “abundance, peace, and justice.”¹⁰ Around the same time, the English theologians at the Westminster Assembly defined it as “piety, justice, and peace” (WCF 23.2). As recently as the 1950s, our own Supreme Court defined it as “public safety, public health, morality, peace and quiet, law and order.”¹¹ All of these options are slightly different, but they are all pointing in the same direction. The public good includes all the various things that a community of people need to flourish in society together.

The Public Good and Religion

The public good has also carried inherently religious connotations. As Calvin notes, no one discusses “the public welfare” without “beginning at religion.”¹² Moreover, “this fact has always been observed by universal consent of all nations.” For example, the

8. When the American Presbyterians adopted the Westminster Standards in 1789, how did they conceive of the “public good”? Like most Americans of their day, they held “a Protestant communal understanding of the good.” In other words, they defined the public good as that which subserved the best interests of the community. Moreover, the “best interests” of the community were defined by a Reformed reading of the Bible, according to which the spiritual condition of the public mattered above all else. They were not secular, liberal, materialistic, or individualistic. See Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). The above quote is from page 16.

9. T. Lambert Mears, *The Institutes of Gaius and Justinian* (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2013), 255.

10. Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State*, ed. Robert Bireley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 43.

11. See *Berman v. Parker*, 348 U.S. 26 (1954).

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.20.9.