
PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

People of faith should always ask themselves two questions:

- *What should I do to be a good citizen where I live?*

- *What should my city, state, and nation do for me?*

Both of these questions are about debts. One is the debt I owe as a believer in God to share light and life in the places where I live and work. The second is about the debt a nation or city has to its citizens. What do I have a right to expect from government and society?

Whether I live in a busy city or in a quiet country village, my role as a Christian is portrayed simply and directly in the Bible. I am to remember who I am—one who is loved by God (Deut. 5:12-15) and who is to share the good news that deserves remembering: news of God's love and light toward the whole world (Phil. 2:14-16).

This means I am to be a human model of hope in the place where I live. What is remarkable is that this person-to-person infection of hope has always been God's strategy for changing societies. It is the way hope is communicated and experienced. The challenge for me as a Christian is to be, in a steady and wise way, an influence for good, whether in the city or in a small country town.

Behind Enemy Lines

The big question concerning such a mandate is this: can I be a Christian presence of hope in a society that is

hostile or apathetic toward hope? By the grace of God, the answer remains yes. It is a fact that Christians do quite well and prove very durable in harsh settings.

God has given us a chance to be a generous presence of moderation in bitter and angry places, because we know of the generosity of God

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himself. This gift of moderation is one of the most useful we have to share in the places we live and work.

I believe we have our most lasting impact when we model a generosity of spirit that has its source in the goodness and faithfulness of God. A lifestyle that shows a positive human presence has more permanent influence in changing bad situations than a lifestyle full of complaints and protest against the faults of other people.

But what about the second question: *What does the government owe me?* Ours is a country of laws and elected governance. We are therefore able to look to a grand constitutional vision, which is the mandate

for those who govern and we who live together in a common country.

A Constitutional Consensus

In its simplest terms this constitutional vision promises four things: fairness, freedom, the commitment to serve the common good of the people, and protection from those who do harm. As a Christian I am grateful for this constitutional consensus. I do not expect, nor is it healthy for me to demand, more than these four promises. I should not have an advantage over others, nor others over me.

This means that because of freedom and fairness, I should not as a Christian expect the civil government to favor my faith over that of others—or the faiths of others over mine. I further believe that this freedom-and-fairness principle argues against government-mandated prayers in public schools. Yes, it is our task as believers to share faith and teach prayer. Yet our faith in the goodness and faithfulness of God does not need special protection. It does well in the open marketplace, in a climate of fairness and freedom—just as it brings hope in the climate of injustice and oppression.

Because of the second two mandates—the commitment to serve the common good of the people, and protection from those who do harm—we expect a fair trial if charges are made against any person. A jury of our peers should promise to fairly weigh evidence, and then both accused and accuser should trust that such an evaluation by a jury of peers will best serve justice. Frankly, I do not believe that

juries should be sequestered for long trials in what amounts to a desperate and unrealistic attempt to ensure fairness. The better approach, I believe, is for the jurors to pledge their fairness—then let them live as normal citizens who enter the courtroom each day to listen to evidence and then decide.

Citizenship and faith need not oppose each other. Society needs people who hope in God, and the people of hope need a place to share their best gift. ♦



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