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Fear God, Honor the Emperor

1. A Statement by Evangelicals and Catholics Together by *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* November 2022

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement urged resistance to laws that enforced racial discrimination. They appealed to natural law and God's law, with the aim of reforming our civic order in accordance with transcendent standards. In our time, the rule of law denies nature and usurps the authority of God, making the powers of this world into the supreme lawgivers. In 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States took political possession of the institution of marriage, redefining it so that men may marry men and women may marry women. The same has been done in other jurisdictions in the West. More recently, the Court adopted the view that men who wish to be regarded as women, and women who want to be seen as men, must be accorded protection against discrimination.

This refusal to acknowledge nature and recognize divine authority puts Christians, and all citizens, in a perilous position. For when transcendent truth is denied, whether natural or revealed, the once fitting and proper instruments of civil authority become absolute. They are deified as all-powerful idols.

Secularism encourages political absolutism. It removes religious authority from public life. In doing so, it claims to secure neutrality in civic affairs. We are told that this ostensible neutrality brings religious freedom and allows for a social contract based on needs and interests shared by everyone, without regard to theological convictions. Yet secularism's promise has shown itself to be hollow. It is a metaphysical project with political consequences, engaging in soulcraft by another name.

A society that makes no reference to God implicitly claims that all the goods worth pursuing can be found in this life. Consequently, it sponsors a regime that privileges—and at times imposes—its purely immanent and this-worldly projects and ambitions. On the one hand, therapeutic ideals of self-invention insist that individually determined projects and modes of self-expression have final authority. Our social policies must pay homage to the sovereign self, even if it means violating the sanctity of life and denying the moral truth inscribed upon our bodies as male and female. On the other hand, the regime accords our bodies a defining role. Powerful ideologies concerning race, intelligence, and sexual desire insist that we are defined by our biology.

This seems a contradiction: A self-chosen identity that denies the authority of the body is privileged alongside an identity politics that accords the body supreme significance. But these two understandings of identity have in common a repudiation of transcendent authority. The expressive self rejects the demands that moral truths place on our freedom; God's creation must not hinder self-creation. Identity politics rejects God's transcendent call and bids us accept our place in the prisons of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

In Genesis we read: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (1:27). We are not simply bodies; the human person is stamped by the image of God. But neither are we purely spiritual beings who transcend our physical condition. Our souls animate our bodies, which are formed in

accord with the divinely ordained difference between men and women. We are at once capable of transcendence and firmly rooted in God's creation.

When political authority no longer serves something deeper—the moral order—or something higher—the promise of transcendence—it becomes sheer power. Liberty becomes grandiose self-invention, an ideal that masks our captivity to anxiety and our vulnerability to social control. In a world unable to acknowledge the laws of nature and nature's God, traditional limits on state power fall away—and without moral authority or divine authority to anchor human affairs, we turn to the state as our only hope, inviting it to become all-powerful in order to hold everything together.

As Evangelicals and Catholics, we regard our political inheritance as noble. The best of our constitutional and civic traditions draw upon Christian sources. But secularism has spent down the Christian inheritance of the West. It is urgent, therefore, that we recover a biblical understanding of government and of our duties as citizens. The Christian tradition affirms two sources for the right ordering of human affairs: Temporal authority ensures peace and tranquility in the civic realm, and spiritual authority guides and governs souls toward the end of their salvation in Christ. The two authorities—"two swords," as the Christian tradition sometimes puts it—are distinct. But both are required. A political community that does not accord proper scope to political judgments about our temporal well-being becomes a theocratic parody. A society that refuses to acknowledge God's call for us to cleave to him in faith cannot sustain the authority of men, and will devolve into anomie and ceaseless struggles for power.

The Church is a community in exile. Justin Martyr observes: "Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world." We journey as pilgrims toward the final consummation of the created order, when Jesus, whom the Father has raised from the dead and seated at his right hand, will return in glory, with all things under his dominion (Acts 2:22–36; see, also, Ps. 110). As Christians, therefore, we recognize no worldly authority as ultimate. The words of St. Peter before the priestly council in Jerusalem must serve as the foundation of any Christian understanding of citizenship: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Our constitutions, governments, civic traditions, and institutions do not operate independent of God's authority. Even now Jesus is Lord. Human affairs are ordered in God's providence toward their final end in Christ, to whom all things have been made subject. Christians cannot accept the secular conceit that the legitimacy of government stems solely from a social contract or the consent of the governed, however useful such concepts may be as part of a fully developed political theology. St. Paul is unequivocal: "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1).

The particular purposes for which God has instituted temporal authority are not transparent to our understanding. We are not privy to God's designs. As believers, we must resist shallow judgments that too quickly baptize (or demonize) political movements and public personalities: "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:34; Isa. 40:13). Moreover, the Church has functioned in a remarkable variety of regimes. There is no Christian system of government. Nevertheless, Scripture and the Christian tradition offer a general account of the legitimate purposes of civil authority.

After insisting that every person is rightly subject to governing authorities, St. Paul explains that governmental authority is ordained by God for the sake of restraining sin. Civil authorities exist to promote good conduct and punish bad conduct. They bear the sword of coercion as agents of God's

judgment against the actions of wrongdoers, chastising the wicked. This is an important office. A society that fails to deter murder, theft, and other crimes does not deserve our loyalty. This does not mean that a regime must be perfect. Insofar as wrongdoing is prohibited and grave transgressions of the moral law are not overlooked, we must provide our support, according the respect and honor due to civil authority (Rom. 13:1, 4–7).

The First Letter of Peter makes a similar argument: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (2:13–15). God has given the power of the temporal sword to those who rule so that wrongdoing is met with firm rebuke and the wicked do not lead others astray. History has seen governments that rage against God’s law. If the rule of law perversely turns against morality and justice, civil disobedience may be required, and even rebellion may be justified. But if temporal power is used properly, Christians are called to be the most loyal of citizens. Christians need not be blind to the injustices that characterize all regimes in our fallen world. We may be active in efforts of reform. Yet when the temporal sword seeks to honor God’s intentions, however imperfectly, we must not foster rebellion or simmering dissent.

Restraint of sin allows civil authority to secure the good of peace. As Augustine makes clear, the peace of the earthly city does not rest in the harmony of wills that comes about when we honor and worship God in one accord. This peace is found only in the City of God, when love of God has conquered love of self. In our pilgrimage toward that end, we can experience a foretaste of this peace, most often in the life of the Church, but also in civil affairs, when we join together to achieve common ends. But Christians recognize the limits of political ambition. We accept that we must function in political, economic, and social structures that presume a preponderance of self-love. Often, the only realistic alternative is to moderate the destructive effects of self-love “by a kind of compromise between human wills” (*City of God*, XIX.17). The well-regulated marketplace can control greed. The rule of law can constrain the powerful. The pain of want, if allowed in proper circumstances, can motivate the indolent. As St. Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10).

Too often, modern Christians chafe against the limits of earthly peace. We undervalue its relative good, disparaging it in comparison to the ideal of true harmony and integral solidarity that characterizes the City of God. Some fall into a theologized activism, urging the inauguration of the New Jerusalem here and now. But the Church is the sole custodian of God’s heavenly peace that passes all understanding—not governments, constitutions, civic institutions, or legal traditions. A failure to recognize the limits of earthly peace can lead to the exasperated refusal to countenance God’s delay of the final consummation. The result is a social Pelagianism, a political works righteousness that seeks to confect heavenly peace out of human movements, ideologies, and efforts. Some of the greatest crimes of the modern era have been committed by those who imagined themselves capable of transcending, through social engineering and revolution, the mediocrity of the earthly city, which is always hobbled by self-love.

The Pelagian rebellion against the limits of earthly peace is mirrored by a social Donatism, a perfectionism that will not be sullied by worldly loyalties. We wash our hands of the sin-infected institutions that govern society, insisting that our civic covenants make no legitimate claims upon our soul. Like the zealous social activist, the Christian purist often makes correct judgments about the inadequacy of even the best governments. Augustine observes that as the peace of the earthly city rests

in the absence of violence, it is not a true peace. But we must not scoff at the negative peace of the earthly city. Rather, as Augustine teaches, we are called to make good use of the relative tranquility of a well-ordered society, neither disturbing it with utopian dreams nor spurning our duty to honor and protect its limited but genuine goods.

Our different traditions have different views of the degree to which faithful Christians can exercise the office of the magistrate. Some of us believe that a life of discipleship forbids the use of lethal force, which backstops civil authority. But we agree that civil authority is ordained by God. And we agree that our commitment to the triumph of Christ's peace need not contradict our loyalty to the civic order, however imperfect that order may be.

God institutes government and invests its officers with the sword of coercion for more than the restraint of sin. In explicit laws and informal social mores, we are guided to honor that which deserves to be honored. Good government has an interest in forming the souls of those under its dominion. To govern in accord with God's purposes is to teach. "Would you have no fear of him who is in authority?" writes St. Paul. "Then do what is good and you will have his approval" (Rom. 13:3). Those who rule must promote virtue, not just in and through the majesty of the law, but by supporting institutions that teach good habits and inculcate noble sentiments: marriage, domestic life, schools, community organizations, and more. Calvin wrote that God has ordained secular authority to serve as "protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility," and that this end cannot be achieved "unless due honor has been prepared for virtue" (*Institutes*, IV.xx.9).

Modern liberalism often promotes the dangerous falsehood that the best society must be indifferent to the true ends of the human person, caring only for rights and not concerning itself with virtues. This notion is both unworkable and unjust. The negative peace of society requires a settled order, and every kind of order organizes actions, beliefs, and sentiments toward particular ends. Liberalism invariably seeks ends. A social order is liberal insofar as those ends are modest rather than heroic: immanent concerns about security of our persons and property; freedoms of speech, association, and assembly in the civic realm; economic growth and material progress.

Whether this modesty is wise is questionable. As Augustine famously noted, our hearts are restless. We seek transcendence, and thus it is imprudent to deprive our social order of ambitious ends such as communal solidarity, honoring a shared heritage, celebrating heroic virtue, and serving God. Christians can certainly adopt the concepts of individual rights and limited government. But appeals to political "neutrality" with respect to the good rest on a false conceit. Every regime engages in soulcraft, the liberal regime no less than non-liberal alternatives. The low spiritual ambitions of the liberal political tradition cannot be sustained in the absence of non-liberal traditions and institutions, which leaven society with heroic ideals that speak to the human desire for transcendence.

John Paul II often insisted that the Christian faith, if lived authentically, nurtures a profound wisdom about what it means to be human. As "experts in humanity," we are called to encourage and guide government policy and social development toward a greater and more perfect formation of character among our fellow citizens. In our counsel to leaders, involvement in elections, and activism in civil society, we must always maintain a judicious awareness of the fallibility of sin-infected reason and the force of self-love. This awareness should moderate our ardor and make us generous to our political adversaries. But the proper liberality of our witness cannot be an excuse for failing to propose and advocate for laws and

mores that accord with a Christian understanding of human dignity.

Our advocacy is not a violation of the “separation of church and state,” a much-abused slogan. Nor does it entail “imposing” our faith on others. Catholic appeals to natural law and Protestant appeals to the orders of creation are part of a reality-based wisdom that is available and applicable to every human being. Our fallen condition often clouds our reason. Fortunately, Christians in the public square are illuminated by Scripture, which among its teachings provides clear and forceful restatements of this universal wisdom. Our reliance on Scripture for clarification does not make our witness “sectarian” or inaccessible to non-believers. Because we are rational creatures, what Catholics call “natural law” and Protestants call the “orders of creation” frames the thinking of every person, however tacit and imperfect his moral knowledge may be (Rom. 2:15). Prohibitions against murder and theft, the duties of children to their parents, the sanctity of marriage, chaste sexual norms, and other moral principles are widely affirmed in many cultures and religious traditions, a testament to their universality.

Despite superficial and uninformed talk about “cultural differences,” virtues of self-mastery, dutifulness, fortitude, sobriety, chastity, and many other admirable qualities are endorsed by the great moral and religious traditions of the world. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. This call has social as well as personal dimensions. In the earthly city, we have a duty to seek to implement those laws, norms, and institutions that show promise of guiding citizens toward virtue and promoting a more just and equitable society.

The duty of religion is also universal. At the beginning of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul observes that all human beings owe reverence to God, whose eternal power and deity are evident in creation (Rom. 1:20). A good society must therefore encourage a disposition of reverence. “No government can be happily established,” Calvin warns, “unless piety is the first concern” (*Institutes*, IV.xx.9).

The failure to promote authentic religious belief and observance has contributed to ideological fanaticism. If we are not encouraged to acknowledge a transcendent source of our existence, we will give ourselves to ersatz beliefs that make idols of temporal goods and political goals. A wise legislator seeks to conserve important practices, including those that promote the virtue of religion. Good government may entail laws requiring a moment of silence at the beginning of the school day or laws that honor the Sabbath. These and other measures encourage the virtue of religion, and they must not be dismissed by the false claim that public acknowledgement of our Creator amounts to “evangelizing” on behalf of a particular faith.

One of the perversions of secularism is its redefinition of our highest end as finite and temporal. Thomas Hobbes stipulated that man’s foremost concern is to fend off death and secure physical survival. Other modern thinkers have given precedence to unrestricted freedom, saying that our greatest ambition and deepest satisfaction come from attaining the power to define the highest good for ourselves. Still others urge ever greater utility or champion “progress.” The dour vision of Hobbes and the ideals of freedom, utility, and progress seem very different. But all are worldly ends to be achieved within the temporal order. Insofar as these temporal goods are proclaimed as our highest and final ends, the sword wielded by civil authority, which governs the temporal realm, knows no limit. For this reason, a society that does not encourage the virtue of religion, the habits and sentiments that cause men to see and seek their fulfillment in something that transcends our mortal frame, will tend toward tyranny.

Biblical revelation underlines the radical insufficiency of worldly authority, even when that authority is exercised wisely. It imposes a strict limit: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21, Mark 12:17, Luke 20:25). Our eternal destiny is in God’s hands. Government authority has a duty to encourage religious practice, but it can never be used to compel faith.

We must distinguish between encouragement and compulsion. Christians cannot be indifferent to the salvation of others, however profoundly aware we are that salvation is in God’s hands, not ours. As John Paul II insisted, “The Church proposes, she never imposes.” Martin Luther recognized that the gospel conquers by the power of its proclamation, not through coercion. Nevertheless, if Christians are in positions of public responsibility, they ought to support the mission of Christ. This requires prudential judgment about what best accords with legal traditions, public sentiment, and Christian resources in a particular time and place. The provision of tax exemptions for religious organizations, special visas for clergy, and distinct articles of incorporation for houses of worship are among the many ways in which governments in North America support Christian witness. Other societies adopt different means, such as state-funded subvention and special legal status for a designated church. In earlier ages, the means for encouraging the Christian faith were more fulsome. Some involved substantive penalties for those of different faiths, uses of state power that crossed the line into coercion.

We make different judgments about the degree to which the state should support the proclamation of the gospel. The Catholic Church and some Protestant churches have a long history of state sponsorship. Other Protestant traditions, rooted in dissent from established churches, are skeptical of these arrangements, emphasizing the persuasion of the Word. All of us recognize that close cooperation between civil authorities and church leaders can make the Church vulnerable to capture by temporal power, as well as breeding complacency, the enemy of missionary zeal. Nevertheless, we agree that, guided by wise judgment, it is fitting for Christians to urge civil authority to sustain a public square congenial to the proclamation of the gospel. Jonathan Edwards believed that civil rulers should “encourage virtue and piety” and “promote religion and virtue in [their] land.” The ways of fulfilling this duty are extremely varied. In our time, a light touch may be the wisest course. But Edwards’s claim is sound. The best society seeks the happiness of its members. Our supreme happiness, found in eternal rest in God, depends on his grace and our free response. Both are beyond the competence and capacity of any worldly authority. But civil authorities should ensure the freedom of the Church to make disciples.

We too easily divinize temporal institutions, governments, and ideologies. This temptation is endemic to the human condition. As the Bible teaches, worldly authority is rooted in God’s authority (John 19:11). For this reason, its forms and expressions are rightly seen as having a sacred dimension worthy of our regard. This correct and enduring intuition is evident in the rituals that continue to govern court proceedings, legislative sessions, inaugurations, and other government functions. But we must be vigilant in resisting the danger of idolatry.

The early Church was clear-minded in its refusal to participate in the Roman imperial cult. In our time, governments do not require outward signs of religious obedience. Nevertheless, they pretend to account for every good worth pursuing, whether goods of physical survival, plenary freedom, maximal utility, or material progress. This pretension can characterize nationalist movements and programs of cultural revival, as well as globalist programs. These conceptions accord to human government an absolute authority to secure the purportedly most important ends. The Leviathan makes gospel promises. Only the

state can keep us safe! Only the state can guarantee freedom! Only the state can secure equality! Only the state can restore our unity and guard our heritage! Only that state can provide for all our needs!

The totalitarian tendency of modern politics arises from utopian social movements that are eager to usher in the perfect peace of true concord. These movements usurp God's role as the author of our final consummation by claiming to serve History, Science, Humanity, Progress, or some other supposedly supreme authority. We must firmly resist these eschatological pretensions. Our hope is in the living God, not in carved statues of birds or reptiles (Rom. 1:23)—nor in theories of history, myths of racial superiority, supposedly scientific methods of social management, economic models of frictionless exchange, therapeutic promises of self-realization, or dreams of limitless self-invention.

Christians must resist the modern sacralization of politics, and the most important way to do so is with an unflagging insistence upon the liberty of the Church. The Church—not regimes, governments, constitutions, scientific progress, or revolutionary movements—is God's chosen instrument for realizing his final purposes for the human race. The community of believers raises up Christian leaders, institutions, and movements that rightly seek to bring society into conformity with God's truth. It is proper to speak of a Christian political witness, the advocacy of laws and policies that serve Christian ends. Although prudence requires us to adapt to circumstances, Christian political witness can be pursued under any type of government, righteous or unrighteous. Christ exercises his lordship at every moment in history.

By contrast, political authority has clear limits. We firmly reject any attempt to reduce the gospel to a tool for political, national, or technocratic projects. As Evangelicals and Catholics, we disagree about the proper forms of godly church governance. But we are united in our conviction that our common life in Christ cannot and must not be subordinated to the needs and purposes of worldly governance, however well designed and virtuously executed.

The West faces severe challenges. Birth rates have fallen and “deaths of despair” have risen, suggesting that Westerners place little hope in the future. Consumer culture, banal entertainment, and digital addiction numb us. Polling indicates record levels of distrust in leading institutions. Large swaths of the populace are angry, frustrated, and cynical. In this environment of decadence and despair, movements have emerged that seek the most remarkable transformations. Their ambition is millenarian: to destroy all forms of exclusion and discrimination. Today's rage against the past is amplified in assaults on the limits of nature. Transgenderism represents the latest and most explicit stage in the secular modern project of freeing us from our condition as God's creatures. The combination of despair and revolutionary fervor is paradoxical, but both are rooted in similar cultural-spiritual idolatries. They share a common immanent frame, the insistence that only temporal things matter.

The tyranny of the immanent frame demoralizes us spiritually, for it teaches that there are no transcendent truths. The hostility to transcendence empowers the political Leviathan to restructure society to serve this-worldly gods. The Covid-19 pandemic posed great challenges, requiring civil authorities to make decisions under pressure and with limited knowledge. As events unfolded, however, in some jurisdictions religious practice was deemed non-essential for extended periods of time, a measure that elevated health to the status of our highest good. We risk a similar subordination of higher goods to lower goods as our societies increasingly organize themselves around self-determination, inclusion, and material well-being.

Against these tyrannies of immanence, we are called to be implacable witnesses. The health of the body is a good, but not the highest good. A legal regime of rights that accords us scope to define the contours of our lives is a good, but not the highest good. A capacious culture of tolerance and due regard for the feelings and sensitivities of others is a good, but not the highest good. Amelioration of suffering and postponement of death are good, but not the highest good. Union with God in faith is alone the highest good. Attaining this good frees us from bondage to idols, allowing us to seek the relative goods of physical well-being, social tranquility, and authentic self-possession in the right ways. For this reason, the first freedom in a well-governed society must be religious freedom.

Today's strange atmosphere of despair and tyranny stems from our societies' failure to recognize that our destiny with and in God is of the highest importance. The countries of the West have been transformed over the last two or three generations. We may judge our nations no longer "Christian" and think it unwise to pretend that we can restore a Christian cultural consensus. In this regard, we may disagree—less as Evangelicals and Catholics than as individuals. But we agree that no polity can endure if it acknowledges only those goods prized within the immanent frame. The authority of the magistrate comes from God. If our society systematically rejects God's authority, which is evident in creation and proposed in revelation, then we will be unable to sustain the legitimate authority of government. A godless society is held together by naked power.

In our time, the most pressing civic duty for Christians is to insist upon the lordship of Christ. We must witness against the idols of this world. As was the case in the early years of the Church, when the cult of the emperor demanded loyalty, so today our most powerful witness will be the act of refusal. Christians are called to obey the magistrate. But we must first honor God, never bending the knee to civil authorities, institutions, and movements that require us to serve their immanent ends—today's temporal "lords"—as if they were ultimate.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI notes the Augustinian truth that our hearts are restless: "Man is constitutionally oriented towards 'being more'." When Christ returns in glory, he will judge all things and order them toward their final end. There will be no need for governments, courts, and other human institutions. In the final consummation, creation will attain the "more" and rest in God's peace. In the time that remains, we are called to be witnesses who break the immanent frame, ensuring that it does not become an iron cage. Jesus teaches that we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6:24). And we cannot serve God and Health. Or God and Utility. Or God and Progress. Or God and Science. We must hear anew that God alone claims us: Our Lord wants us entire, heart, mind, and soul.

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