

**Living as Citizens Worthy of the Gospel:  
Citizenship, Religious Liberty, and Political Engagement  
A Statement for Bethlehem College and Seminary**

Approved by the Board of Trustees, October 6, 2023

“Only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.... But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:27; 3:20)

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matt. 5:13–14)

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Heb. 13:14)

Bethlehem College and Seminary is a confessional, church-based educational institution that exists to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. The school’s leadership, faculty, and staff are united around our glad embrace of a robust Affirmation of Faith, which is shared by our governing churches, Bethlehem Baptist Church and The North Church.

As an institution of higher education, Bethlehem College and Seminary affirms the academic freedom of the school’s faculty, who commit to the highest standards of integrity, academic rigor, and biblical excellence in their teaching and scholarship, wholeheartedly affirming the Lordship of Christ over all of life and thought. The institution allows faculty and staff to hold a range of views on matters not addressed in the school’s Affirmation of Faith, while submitting all such positions to the authority of the inerrant and infallible Word of God and faithfully carrying out the school’s mission with God’s help.

This statement clarifies the institution’s stance regarding (1) Christian citizenship, (2) the proper role and limits of government, (3) the necessity of religious liberty between Christ’s first and second comings, (4) wise political engagement, and (5) the mission of the church and the kingdom of Christ. We recognize that Christians, past and present, have held a range of views about these and many other matters and that members of our school community have different emphases and convictions concerning political theory and engagement. Our intention is not to require unanimity on all such matters but to express the vision of the governing board of the school. This position paper provides guidance regarding the institutional ethos that we seek to cultivate while aligning with the historic commitments of our governing churches and other Baptist confessions. We affirm that individual Christians, who are strengthened in their God-centered worldview by a healthy, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated local church, can and should act on their consciences in the full range of civic life while maintaining their supreme allegiance to Christ and his kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Guidelines for Political Involvement,” January 2012.

### **(1) Earthly and Heavenly Citizenship**

We believe that Christians may enjoy and exercise the various duties and privileges of citizenship in the United States or other nations while recognizing that our deepest, truest citizenship is in heaven. Consequently, we reject any attempt to fuse together one's national or political identity with one's Christian identity in a way that equates or conflates allegiance to country with allegiance to God. Christians should pray for and promote the welfare of their earthly city while living as elect exiles and, when necessary, enduring suffering for the cause of Christ. Jer. 29:7; Matt. 5:10–12; Phil. 1:27; 3:20; Acts 16:37–38; Eph. 2:19; Heb. 11:13–16; 1 Pet. 1:1.<sup>2</sup>

### **(2) The Proper Role and Limits of Government**

We believe that civil government is appointed by God for the interests and good order of human society. God has given to civil government, not to individuals or to the church, the duty to “bear the sword” for the purpose of administering justice and promoting peace, safety, and order for its citizens, that Christians may lead godly and dignified lives. Conversely, Christ has assigned to his church, not to the state, “the keys of the kingdom,” authorizing the church to proclaim the gospel and to recognize and remove church members. It is right to pray for, honor, and submit to the civil government except in matters that oppose the revealed will of God or are beyond its jurisdiction. Civil authorities should not use force or coercion to compel conversion to Christianity (or any other religion), since genuine saving faith cannot be coerced but is a work of divine grace expressed in voluntary response to the gospel. Matt. 16:19; Acts 5:29; Rom. 13:1–4; 14:10–12; 1 Tim. 2:1–4; 1 Pet. 2:13–17.<sup>3</sup>

### **(3) Religious Liberty**

We believe that every human being may have direct relations with God and is responsible ultimately to God alone in all matters of faith. We believe that the church and civil government should be kept separate—not in the sense that religious institutions are exempt from the state's laws or that Christians and biblical teaching should be excluded from political processes, but in the sense that God has given the civil government and the church distinct functions, authorities, and jurisdictions. Neither the church nor the government should wield the other's authority, and the church should be free from the mandates of the state in matters of doctrine and practice. Matt. 22:21; Rom. 14:7–9, 12; 1 Tim. 2:5.<sup>4</sup>

### **(4) Political Engagement**

We believe that Christians positively influence society by preserving and proclaiming what is true and good and by exemplary conduct that glorifies God in every sphere of life. It is appropriate for

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Piper, “[Tolerance, Truth-Telling, Violence, and Law: Principles for How Christians Should Relate to Those of Other Faiths](#),” *Desiring God*, August 2002; Bethlehem Baptist Church, “[Ethnic Harmony Affirmation and Denials](#),” February 2021, Article 9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Piper, “Tolerance, Truth-Telling, Violence, and Law;” Cf. [The New Hampshire Confession of Faith](#), Article XVI; Jonathan Leeman, “[The Relationship of Church and State](#),” *The Gospel Coalition*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bethlehem Baptist Church, [Congregational Affirmation of Faith](#), Article X.

Christians to act on their consciences in the full range of civic life by opposing the moral evils that the Bible denounces and supporting moral virtues that the Bible upholds whether or not they are “political” issues. Examples of faithful civic engagement may include, but are not limited to, voting in local or national elections, serving on jury duty, advocating for public policy, engaging in peaceful protest, or holding elected office.

We believe that when opposing the moral evils that the Bible denounces and supporting moral virtues that the Bible upholds, Christians should distinguish between clear biblical commands (e.g., the prohibition of murder or theft) and less clear matters that require prudential reasoning (e.g., immigration policy). Fellow believers should agree on what the Bible clearly commands, while recognizing Christian freedom on issues that are less clear and call for practical wisdom. Matt. 5:13–16; Rom. 14:13–23; Titus 3:8; Jas. 3:13–18.<sup>5</sup>

### **(5) The Mission of the Church and the Kingdom of Christ**

We believe that the mission of the church is the Great Commission: “Make disciples of all nations” by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and by teaching them to observe everything that Jesus commands us. God has commissioned local churches, acting corporately, to promote the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the joy of all peoples, to teach everything Jesus commanded, and to be zealous for good works. While Christians individually and collectively seek to bring the powerful love of God to bear on this broken world and care about alleviating present earthly suffering, we care especially about alleviating eternal suffering by proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord and calling all to repent and believe.

We believe that Christ will be revealed at the end of history as King of kings to judge evil, save his people, and consummate his kingdom. In the present age, between his first and second comings, Christ’s saving rule advances by the proclamation of the gospel and the sovereign act of God, who transfers people of every nation and tribe from the authority of darkness to the authority of Christ. Matt. 28:19–20; John 18:36–37; Rom. 10:14–17, 15:18; Eph. 4:11–12; Col. 1:28; Titus 2:14; Rev. 17:14.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bethlehem Baptist Church, “[Ethnic Harmony Affirmation and Denials](#),” Article 9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bethlehem Baptist Church, “[Ethnic Harmony Affirmation and Denials](#),” Article 10. See also John Piper, “[My Kingdom Is Not of This World’: The Lordship of Christ and the Limits of Government](#),” *Desiring God*, June 2023.