



In Service
November 9, 2022
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We're in limbo as a nation. As I write this, some of our elections are finished; other votes are still being counted. We don't know the outcome of pivotal races or ballot questions. We don't know the future policies or agendas that our country will pursue. In this space and time, a lot is up in the air, including whether our path forward will be consistent with our Christian beliefs and values.

It's a limbo of our own making. Our Founding Fathers set up a representative system and enshrined the separation of church and state. The first amendment to the US Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It anticipated and seeks to prevent the overreach of government to abridge our religious freedoms. In this month of elections and All Saints Day, we also commemorate Veterans Day, honoring those who fought and continue to fight for the preservation of that right, among others in our hallowed Constitution.

In this context in which the state's authority is limited as it pertains to the establishment and free practice of religion, I wonder how religion might be similarly constrained. At the individual level, of course, we can vote on initiatives according to our faith and back candidates whom we believe will lead in a way compatible with our religious beliefs. We do not relinquish our faith at the ballot box.

We've seen clergy running for office locally and nationally. They bring an important perspective and voice to our democratic decision-making, as would a veterinarian, a stockbroker, or a restaurant owner. Where I personally grow leery is when our democracy is seen as a tool to impose Christianity above all other faiths. It goes back to our intentional limbo, in which we limit the authority of the state with respect to religion.

Our Presbyterian roots – back to Calvin – acknowledge this same tug-of-war. “As Reformed Christians we stand in support of a theological tradition which honors government as a good, and stand in opposition to those who see government as a necessary evil, or worse. The casual denigration of government, the reflexive rhetorical impulse to understand government as an alien force that stands against us, must be resisted in the strongest terms if we are to be faithful to our theology.” [Honest Patriotism](#), pp. 11-12 (approved by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)).

However, we do not owe absolute obeisance to our government. “Neither, of course, does the Reformed tradition embrace an uncritical endorsement of government in all its actions. ... The church, then, has a duty to the state: to maintain a prophetic voice, with which to constantly remind the state of its calling.” We intentionally stay in limbo: “So we, in the Reformed tradition, understand the institution of government to be ordained by God, and therefore sanctified; but we also understand its propensity, as a human institution, to sin... The history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States has been a history of the embracing of democratic institutions and forms of government as the most effective ways of maintaining a government which resists this temptation and is faithful to its calling.” *Id.* Our denominational statement quotes Karl Barth: “As disciples of Christ, the members of His Church do not rule: they serve.” May we, as faithful disciples, continue to seek ways to serve all people, as elected officials or in our democratic choices of who and what we support.