THE GOOD CITIZEN

How to Be a Gospel-Centered Citizen in Post-Christian America

The Good Citizen Project

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"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Jesus of Nazareth (Mt. 5:16),

1st Century Roman Subject

“Whatever makes men [and women] good Christians, makes them good citizens.”

–Daniel Webster,

19th Century American Statesman

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The Problem

Most church leaders and other committed Christians I meet desire to build relationships with their elected officials and impact the life of their city, state and nation with the gospel. But, cultural pressure, partisan politics and culture warring have left many Christians and especially church leaders conflicted about their role in public life.

They ask these questions: “Should we engage at all?,” “Haven’t we lost the culture war?” and **“How can we engage elected officials and public life without jeopardizing the gospel?”**

I launched The Good Citizen Project to answer these questions and to equip church leaders and other committed Christians to faithfully and effectively engage public life in our post-Christian culture (Matt. 28:16-20; Matt. 5:16).

In this resource, I will draw on (1) my own, multidisciplinary experience and (2) the experiences of other church leaders and committed Christians and set out a game plan designed to help you and your church impact public life without jeopardizing the gospel.

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The Plan

As Christians, we are called to proclaim and live out the gospel in every area of our lives, **including in our role as citizen of the United States**. (I Peter 2:13-17).

But, our role as citizen is an increasingly complicated one in our distracted and, at time, hostile post-Christian culture. So, how can we be gospel-centered citizens now?

Here's the plan, which we created after working with and observing Christians from around the country engage the public square in God's way and for His glory:

Step #1
Understand Your Biblical Role
Step #2
Stay Current on Recent Developments
Step #3
Build Relationships with Elected Officials
Step #4
Solve Community Problems
Step #5
Engage Public Life with a Focus on the Gospel

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Step #1
Understand Your Biblical Role

Will you think with me for a moment about a church's and an individual Christian's role in a community and the public square? Most Christians know what their role is or at least should be inside their church, school or home. But, many Christians exhibit much less clarity about their role outside the church's walls. We really need to nail this down! Scripture sets out four roles for the church (as a movement of believers) in a community and in the public square:

Role #1 The Light

The church has a single priority: the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). We should be making disciples who make a difference every day everywhere.

Role #2 The Heart

We should be making a key difference in the spiritual, physical and even economic problems of the community (Matt. 5:16).

Role #3 The Conscience

We should provide our communities with an accurate moral compass (Matt 5:13-14).

Role #4 The Guide

We should guide our communities into a purposeful, bright future (Jer. 29:7).

Step #2

Stay Current on Cultural and Legal Developments

As we engage in public life, we will encounter common questions and misconceptions about the Christian faith. We should be prepared to confidently and persuasively answer them.

Our focus here is not on providing a lengthy, intellectual defense of the Christian faith. Rather, it is on providing practical answers to equip Christians to share Biblical truth with their neighbors. Here are 6 key issues that we must be prepared to address:

#1 Christ's Exclusive Claim Concerning Salvation
#2 The Christian Sexual Ethic
#3 The Problem of Pain, Suffering and Evil
#4 The Dangers of Personal Autonomy
#5 The False Clash Between Science and Religion
#6 The Crusades, Slavery and Discrimination

For practical responses to these tough questions, consider picking up a copy of our resource *Persuasion Points,* which is available on Amazon in print and Kindle versions.

Step #2 (cont.)

Stay Current on Cultural and Legal Developments

The church in the United States still enjoys significant freedoms and is largely unregulated in its ministry activities. So, we need to shift our mindset from quietly "chilled" to vigilantly confident.

That said, we should be informed and vigilant about legal standards affecting the following (these areas affect efforts to live out the Gospel in local communities and the public square):

#1 Land Use
#2 Tax Exemption
#3 Education
#4 The Church's Role as Conscience
#5 The Marketplace

For a more detailed analysis of these five issues, read Chapter 5 of the *The Bold Church Strategy*, which is available on Amazon. **In summary, the Apostle Paul often used his knowledge of Roman law to further his ministry (Acts 16, 22 and 25). So, be like Paul--use the law as a tool rather than an excuse!**

Step #3

Pray for and Build Relationships with Elected Officials

Unlike many Christians around the world and throughout history, we have almost-magic powers (citizenship and the right to vote) that open the doors to the offices of elected officials.

Many Christians have overlooked this opportunity and do not regularly meet with elected officials to pray and partner with them to solve problems. Here's how to jumpstart this practice:

#1 Ask for a Meeting with Your Elected Official at their Office. Arrange a meeting with your elected official by contacting their staff.

#2 At that Meeting, Ask How You Can Pray for Them. Ask if you can pray for your elected official about the stresses of their office and (if they volunteer this information) their personal lives.

#3 At the Meeting, Ask How You Can Partner with Them. Ask them about the big problems in their district and how you and your church can get involved in solving them.

#4 Make it a Habit to Stay in Contact with and Visit your Elected Officials. Prioritize this practice moving forward.

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Step #4

Strategically Solve Community Problems

If you and your church engage in and help solve your community's toughest problems (like the drugs crisis, the foster care crisis, etc.), your community will take notice. So, how can you and your church strategically impact these problems? Here's the plan:

#1 Identify the Greatest Challenges and Opportunities. Ask community leaders to help you identify the greatest problems in the community and the "holes" where you can make the greatest difference.

#2 Identify your Natural Bridges into the Community. Identify the existing connections you and your church have with the community (such as teachers, policemen/women, business leaders, coaches, etc.) or at least an issue that you are inclined to address.

#3 Identify Community Partners. Look for individuals, organizations and even other churches that are already working on the problem you've identified and work with them.

#4 Work Strategically to Solve Problems. Do the hard work of making a difference with a focus on the gospel. Dream big, move decisively, fail fast and never quit.

Step #5

Engage in Public Life with a Focus on the Gospel

Over the last about 100 years, the church has employed two primary strategies in engaging public life. From about 1920 to 1970, the church largely withdrew from public life. From about 1970 to the present, the church has engaged in culture warring (often motivated by fear and self-preservation). Neither strategy has worked.

It's time to try a third way (rather than swinging back to withdrawal): we should live out the gospel in the public square with the ultimate goal of making disciples and seeking the common good.

We should not shy away from important topics where Scripture speaks clearly, and we should confidently promote Biblical solutions to our most enduring problems. If we believe that the gospel changes everything and that the Bible is God's design for human flourishing, then we should model and promote biblical principles in the public square!

For more information on how to do this and for application of these principles to current topics, check out our podcast! Next, let's review.

Summary

How to be a Gospel-Centered Citizen in Post-Christian America

Here are those five steps:

#1 Understand your Role. Think through your four roles in your community and the public square and determine to live them out.

#2 Stay Current on Cultural and Legal Developments. Master the skill of persuasively applying Christian truth in public life and stay current on relevant legal standards so you can confidently impact your community.

#3 Pray for and Build Relationships with Elected Officials. Be intentional about praying for, meeting with and partnering with your elected officials.

#4 Strategically Solve Community Problems. Strategically identify and work to solve your community's worst problems.

#5 Engage in Public Life with a Focus on the Gospel. Seek the common good in the public square by confidently promoting biblical principles.

Next, I want to point out a few benefits of engaging your community and the public square.

The Benefits

We should impact our cities and the public square with a single motivation: love for our neighbors. That said, I have observed benefits of engagement in public life that can make a key difference in three areas of concern for Christians.

#1 Church Growth. Churches that significantly impact their communities are often more successful in their efforts to reach younger generations, improve church finances, resolve church conflict and make connections/converts. Note: This often takes time, but so do most discipleship efforts.

#2 The Right of Conscience. The best way to defend religious freedom is to use it. Community impact efforts show our neighbors that our faith makes a difference outside the Church's walls.

#3 The Country. America, at its best, has embraced an ordered liberty built on the foundation of Judeo-Christian principles. When the Church makes great disciples who make a difference, it builds God’s kingdom and, at the same time, makes great citizens who are indispensable to the American future.

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Resources

The Bold Church Strategy - full-length book on Amazon; just type in the title of the book in the search bar.
The Good Citizen Podcast - available on iTunes, Google Podcasts, etc.
Persuasion Points – small group or individual Bible study with practical responses to culture's toughest problems. Available on Amazon.
TGCP Community Impact Assessment – an assessment designed to help you assess and improve your church's community impact.
TGCP Legal Partnerships – we partner with ministries so they can confidently impact their communities.
Speaking – we routinely speak at churches, conferences and other events. For updates on Gospel-centered citizenship, visit us at and sign up for email updates at www.goodcitizen.us!

About Josh Hershberger

Josh Hershberger is an attorney, minister and advocate for Christian ideas in public life. Josh represents churches and Christian ministries throughout much of the United States, serves as a teaching pastor at his church in Hanover, Indiana and speaks at churches, conferences and other ministry events about living out the Gospel in a post-Christian culture.

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