I would like to commend and thank Dr. Stronks for boldly taking on this important and timely subject. She has developed an intellectual framework for engaging today’s increasingly complex and controversial public policy challenges. Her Theology of Citizenship that seeks justice for all people is based upon the concept of political pluralism and its underlying requirements of institutional and confessional pluralism. She presents a biblically-based rationale for why we, as reformed Christians, have a responsibility to engage in such a theology of citizenship.

Dr. Stronks’ use of jurisprudence and “strict scrutiny” to realize political pluralism provides a civil mechanism for people of various worldviews to coexist, assuming civil and open discourse is operational. In her closing comments, she challenges the Calvin College community not only to assist in further developing a theology of citizenship, but also to be courageous and to actively engage in the process of promoting public policy that seeks justice for all.

In the next few minutes, I will offer a few observations of where I believe her approach has merit, but I also am compelled—in the spirit of academic debate—to provide a few critiques of where I believe it falls short, or in some aspects, goes too far.

Dr. Stronks’ theology of citizenship provides a practical tool for the collective and the individual to evaluate personal beliefs and religious values in the context of what society, or culture, is advancing. She demonstrates how strict scrutiny, while secular in origin, can be applied through a faith lens. Those of us who are privileged to be US citizens are truly blessed to have had strict scrutiny as an operational paradigm for our government and justice system. As Dr. Stronks points out, as Christians we have benefited more often than not from this form of jurisprudence.

I agree with Dr. Stronks’ premise, or perhaps conclusion, that to effectively engage controversial issues one must understand both (or all) sides of the issue. Having personally spent nearly two decades participating in the public policy process, I know it is incumbent upon all parties to debate and forge policy with full knowledge of what and why people believe the way they do and, most importantly, how a subsequent decision will affect all parties. Calvin College, I believe, has a profound responsibility and opportunity to develop in our students the intellectual curiosity to understand the whole issue and the confidence to reach an informed and theologically sound conclusion. Further, for Calvin College to promote a global open society, it needs to develop in our students an ability to understand and work with multiple citizenship models, particularly since many regions of the world do not embrace the same ideals as we do in the United States.

Despite these positive attributes, I believe Dr. Stronks’ theology of citizenship, as presented today, is incomplete. Early in her lecture, she indicates that she is “persuaded that Christian citizenship that emphasizes the rights of others to live and flourish in accord with their own worldview is a necessary part of Christian witness in a broken but redeemed world.” I can accept necessary, but I do not believe such a model for citizenship is sufficient. It is interesting
that in a paper that proposes a Christian theology of citizenship for a complicated world, there is no mention of the Great Commission. Christ’s injunction in Matthew 16:20 is in tension with the deferential political pluralism that Dr. Stronks explicates. So is Paul’s description of the Christian’s posture toward competing worldviews in 2 Corinthians 10:1-6.

Dr. Stronks’ theology appears to place the pursuit of justice as the prime objective of Christian witness. Yes, God calls for us to love our neighbor. And she provides the biblical connection for how pursuing justice for all fulfills this commandment. At the same time, though, as Christians we are called to be passionate for Christ and to avoid being “lukewarm.” The letters of Paul and the book of Revelation deal harshly with tepidness. Paul’s personal example is more confrontational than pluralistic. In Acts 16:16-24, Paul is imprisoned for undermining Roman customs; Acts 17:16-33 provides the account of Paul’s great discourse on Mars Hill; and in Acts 19:23-41 the Ephesians riot because of Paul’s challenge to pagan religious belief and practice. Christ himself in Matthew 10:34 states “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

I also believe Dr. Stronks may be overreaching somewhat when she describes her version of political (and confessional) pluralism as consistent with the Reformed tradition. Yes, it is a great tradition of the Reformed faith to accept confessional pluralism (i.e., embracing multiple biblically-based confessions, such as the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort). However, let us not confuse confessional pluralism with doctrinal, or theological, pluralism. Calvin, Knox, Cromwell, many of the Puritans, Rutherford, Mather, the early Princeton theologians, Kuyper and Schaeffer would certainly disagree with conflating confessional and theological pluralism. As Dr. Le Roy, in his monthly newsletter, has so poignantly put into good use the words of Kuyper: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

A more complete summary would acknowledge that the Reformed church has always recognized that the church is a strictly spiritual institution that does not exercise direct political power and whose weapons are primarily spiritual. However, its activities do and should affect culture, business, and politics; and Christians will necessarily be transformational (salt and light), not merely accommodating in their dealings with non-believing cultures and people. Again, sphere sovereignty has its place, but God has declared dominion and sovereignty over His entire Creation.

The title of Dr. Stronks’ paper is "Educating for Shalom." But the biblical concept of shalom is intertwined with the person and work of Jesus, the Sar Shalom or Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6-7). The government is on His shoulders, and He establishes judgment and justice. His reign over nations and rulers is exclusive (Psalm 2). The biblical concept of shalom is strikingly specific and objective, so its invocation in a theology endorsing a strong view of pluralism seems a bit incongruent.

Given the Great Commission, and knowing the One Truth, how can we accept theological or cultural pluralism?

Now, I do not believe Dr. Stronks is advocating a tepid application or even a subordination of our Christian faith; nor do I think she is suggesting we promote pluralism or ignore evangelism. In fact, I believe she is calling on Calvin College to help further develop and refine how we, as Christians, can best respond to God’s entire claim on our life and His creation—even in the
realm of citizenship. Calvin College has a great tradition of reverently engaging the more complex issues of integrating faith, knowledge, and life. An excellent example from my field of science is the examination of the apparent conflicts between Special and General revelation. I believe Dr. Stronks’ challenge to be courageous and engage the complex issues in the domain of citizenship are spot on. If not Calvin College, then who?

But in so doing, let us remember that in a complicated and fallen world, pluralism may often be the best approach as a prudential matter (e.g., the Peace of Westphalia was essentially a pluralistic solution to the Thirty Years War). But, pluralism is a slender principle on which to singularly construct a distinctively Christian theology of citizenship.

Moving away from the theological construct, let me also comment on the legal or case law she uses in her lecture. As presented, Dr. Stronks’ legal discussion is incomplete, as it begins in 1878 and moves quickly into 20th century Establishment Clause and Free Exercise cases. The Framers, however, laid the constitutional boundaries between church and state in a radically different manner. There was no "strict scrutiny" analysis for the first 175 years of the nation’s history because such questions were left to the States to adjudicate as they deemed most appropriate. The First Amendment only applied to the Federal government, and majorities in the States enacted a significant amount of legislation touching upon morals and religion, up to and including formally established churches (Congregational in New England and Anglican in the South) until as late as 1877. By omitting this history, she unintentionally creates a misimpression that our constitutionalism has always been more pluralistic than it really was.

Dr. Stronks’ description of the Court’s application of strict scrutiny in Free Exercise cases also may be overstated. She acknowledges, in Reynolds v. United States (1879), that the Supreme Court held that Utah could constitutionally prosecute and convict Reynolds (who was Brigham Young’s secretary) of polygamy despite his pluralistic Free Exercise objection because it was a neutral law that incidentally impacted a religious practice. The Reynolds construct remained the law until the Court adopted an expansive view of the Free Exercise Clause in the strict scrutiny standard announced in Sherbert v. Verner (1963).

But the Court abandoned the strict scrutiny standard in Employment Division v. Smith (1990) and since then it has not been the constitutional standard. Since 1990, the constitutional standard has been that "generally applicable, religion-neutral laws that have the effect of burdening a particular religious practice need not be justified by a compelling governmental interest.” Granted, in response to the Smith decision, Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which essentially restores the strict scrutiny standard in Free Exercise cases. But RFRA is applicable only against the Federal government (not against state and local government actions), and it is a statutory rule, not the constitutional standard.

I recognize that Dr. Stronks is neither advocating that her theology of citizenship abide by current constitutional standards nor is it required to do so. I believe she simply offers strict scrutiny as an intellectual framework for people of multiple faiths to collectively think through these complicated issues. Ultimately, resolution of the vexing issues before the courts and facing us as Christian citizens will be decided with great care and debate from all sides. As she points out, we have an obligation to engage boldly and knowledgeably with these issues.

As I move to close, I must admit that it is easy to be a critic, particularly when one isn’t pushing the current state of intellectual thought and translating it into application as Dr. Stronks has done in her theology of citizenship. I, too, face similar challenges as I conduct business in over
40 different countries. Pluralism, or even placing my religious convictions on a shelf and ignoring the Great Commission while I do my business, is the easiest and sometimes most expedient approach. But, that is not what God has called us to do. That is not fully bearing the name of Christ. Dr. Stronks is taking on the extremely complicated topic of integrating faith and citizenship; it is an endeavor that is bursting with challenges. I commend her and encourage her to continue to engage the Christian community, especially Calvin College, in this absolutely essential discourse.

My critique is not intended to refute her theology of citizenship but rather to provide constructive commentary in the spirit of refinement. As a Christian community, we cannot avoid the realities of this fallen world. We cannot live in isolation. We must find ways to be “salt” and “light.” We must find ways to effectively advance God’s Kingdom throughout His entire creation.

Citizenship is complex. As Christians, we have an obligation to engage in it, even if it is messy and difficult. As Dr. Stronks’ lecture effectively points out, citizenship is a fertile domain in which we can manifest Christ’s love and promote justice. It also is a domain in which we need to stand firm in the name of Christ. This apparent conflict is an ideal subject for the Calvin College community to debate, to engage in, and in so doing to advance God’s Kingdom.