AOSIS

Shaping Christian citizenship in diverse societies through family, church, and school educators

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Authors:
Nicolaas A. Broer[1]
Johannes L. van der Walt[1]
Charl C. Wolhuter[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Unit for Education and Human Rights in Diversity, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Nicolaas Broer,
n.a.broer@live.com

The study examined the role of family, school and church educators towards cultivating Christian citizenship in children up to the age of 16 amid increasing societal pluralism. It was undertaken in response to a global moral crisis marked by social fragmentation, secularisation, and diminished civic participation. Within this context, the article explored how Christian moral formation, grounded in divine command ethics and virtue ethics, could contribute to social renewal. Christian citizenship was considered a response to the societal need for individuals who integrate moral integrity, faith, and civic responsibility. The objective was to determine how parents, church leaders and teachers could foster the development of Christian citizens who engage constructively with a diverse society while remaining faith-rooted. The study focused on the potential of Christian (inclusive and compassionate) education to address moral decline and civic disengagement, cultivating virtues essential to democratic and inclusive participation in society. A conceptual, normative research methodology was employed, drawing on theological, ethical, and educational literature. Divine command ethics and virtue ethics were analysed as complementary frameworks for Christian moral education. The study evaluated the application of these frameworks in the family, church, and school contexts, identifying key virtues and strategies for effective moral formation. The article relies on critical engagement with Scripture, classical philosophy, and contemporary scholarship. The study indicated that families nurture moral character through modelling and habit formation; churches instil civic virtue through theological instruction and social outreach; and Christian schools integrate biblical ethics into citizenship education. Families, churches, and schools face contemporary challenges, including pluralism, digital distraction, moral relativism, and political polarisation. Nevertheless, when consistently aligned with a virtue-based ethical framework, these institutions can significantly contribute to the moral and civic formation of children. The study concluded that Christian citizenship can be meaningfully fostered when education in family, church and school is grounded in both the divine command and virtue ethics. These frameworks support the development of moral character, civic responsibility, and respectful engagement with societal diversity. Intentional collaboration among family, church, and school strengthens this process, enabling children to grow into compassionate, just, and principled citizens.

Contribution: This article contributes to the scholarly conversation on moral and citizenship education by proposing a Christian ethical model, rooted in divine command and virtue ethics. It offers a normative framework for integrating Christian faith with civic responsibility, aligning with the journal's focus on education, human rights, and diversity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Christian citizenship; citizenship education; civic responsibility; divine command ethics; education; moral formation; religious pluralism; virtue ethics.

Introduction

Problem statement and aim

The convergence of pressing societal challenges signals a profound crisis in the moral and relational fabric of contemporary societies worldwide. Converging global crises have intensified interpersonal societal challenges, notably social fragmentation, discrimination, inequality, hate, and declining civic participation (United Nations 2024:14). Shocks, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, economic downturns, and climate-induced disasters have not only exacerbated material deprivation but also eroded social trust and cohesion. Inequalities within and between countries have deepened, fostering resentment, exclusion, and social divisions. Marginalised groups, including women, youth, and displaced populations have faced

heightened discrimination and barriers to full societal participation. The rise of hate speech, polarised discourse, and declining tolerance further signals a deterioration in the quality of interpersonal relations. Declining civic engagement, including reduced participation in democratic processes and community activities has been identified as both a cause and a consequence of weakened social bonds. Without concerted national and international efforts to promote inclusive development, participatory governance, and social protection systems that reduce inequality and foster solidarity, societies in general risk entering a vicious cycle of distrust, alienation, and systemic instability (United Nations 2024:14). Strengthening civic education, community networks, and platforms for inclusive dialogue – in conjunction with the formative roles of family, church, and school in nurturing values of justice, trust, and solidarity – is essential to counteract these worldwide trends and rebuild the social fabric necessary for sustainable and resilient development.

Considering the urgent challenges mentioned above, there is a critical need for educational approaches that not only equip individuals with knowledge but also cultivate moral virtues and the social responsibility necessary to rebuild the fractured fabric of society. Religion plays a significant role in addressing contemporary societal challenges by providing moral frameworks that guide behaviour and promote collective action (Alshehri 2024:196). Faith-based organisations and religious leaders actively engage in alleviating poverty, advocating for human rights, and fostering social justice, often influencing public policy and community development. Through interfaith collaboration and ethical teachings, religion-based institutions tend to contribute to conflict resolution, social cohesion, and the pursuit of a more equitable society. Christian formation in family, church, and (if and where legally allowed) in schools aims to address pressing societal issues by fostering the moral and character development of individuals grounded in Christian faith values, such as love, justice, honesty, forgiveness, and empathy. Through its emphasis on social responsibility and community engagement, Christian education aims to foster social cohesion, promoting solidarity, trust, and prosocial behaviour (Costandius & Alexander 2020:369). It also works toward catalysing social justice, nurturing a critical awareness of inequality and advocating for fair and inclusive societal structures (Hura 2024:33). Christian formation (education) is also aimed at promoting conflict resolution and reconciliation by cultivating virtues that facilitate peaceful coexistence and the healing of societal divisions (Auh & Kim 2024:5). As centres of community development, Christian educational institutions, whether relegated to the private sector or allowed in the public sector (such as in the Netherlands), foster, in principle, collaboration and civic participation that support social integration and service. Finally, by embedding ethical principles (such as honesty, integrity, forgiveness, and reconciliation) into sociological understanding, Christian formation aspires to enrich social theory and practice by offering a value-driven perspective aimed at building more compassionate, equitable, and resilient communities. In this way, Christian formation emerges not merely as a means of religious instruction but as a transformative social force, capable of contributing profoundly to societal renewal and the strengthening of the moral and relational fabric.

The importance of raising children as responsible Christian citizens in a pluralistic society remains a central concern not only for Christian education but also for families and churches. The role of educators in shaping moral character and civic responsibility is widely acknowledged (Auh & Kim 2024:3). The research question that reflects the problem statement and guides this discussion on the role of educators in family, church, and school in fostering Christian citizenship, is: How could and should educators within the family, church and school contexts contribute to the moral formation and civic responsibility of children through the cultivation of Christian citizenship in a diverse and pluralistic society?

The authors regard the divine command ethics as the most important ethical and moral approach for Christians, being the philosophical and theological background for understanding this process.

The primary aim of this theoretically oriented article is to contribute to the scholarly discourse on how Christian formation (education) can serve as a moral and social resource in addressing the complex challenges confronting contemporary societies. Rather than focusing on a single national or cultural context, the discussion is intentionally framed in universal terms, addressing the societal fabric in its broadest, global sense. By integrating theological, ethical, and sociological perspectives, the authors aim to provide a conceptual framework that can guide educators in families, churches, and schools in fostering moral formation, civic responsibility, and social cohesion. In what follows, we aspire not only to deepen academic understanding but also to inspire educators to contribute to more equitable, compassionate, and resilient communities across culturally diverse and vibrantly pluralistic societal settings, where differences of ethnicity, faith, and worldview are recognised as sources of mutual enrichment.

Research method and structure of the article

The article adopts a conceptual and normative research methodology, drawing extensively on theological, ethical, and educational literature to address how Christian citizenship can be cultivated within a diverse and pluralistic society. Rather than relying on empirical data, we systematically analyse key ethical frameworks, particularly divine command ethics and virtue ethics, as the foundational basis for Christian moral education. These frameworks are contextualised and explored within the practical spheres of the family, church, and school, which are identified as the primary institutions of moral and civic formation. Through critical engagement with scriptural sources, classical philosophical thought, and contemporary scholarly work, the article constructs an argument for integrating faith and civic responsibility.

The article unfolds in several sections. It begins with an introduction, outlining the societal crises that necessitate renewed moral and civic formation and also presents the research question that guided the inquiry. This is followed by an outline of the theoretical framework of the investigation, in which divine command ethics is presented as the overarching moral foundation, and virtue ethics is explored as essential for character development. The three sections that follow, examine the distinct roles of the family, the church, and Christian schools in fostering Christian citizenship, each analysed in terms of their educational, spiritual, and societal functions. Within these sections, we assess contemporary challenges like secularisation, moral relativism, and religious pluralism, and propose ethically grounded strategies to address them. The article then discusses the implications of the outcome, highlighting the need for intentional, virtue-based moral education that is responsive to modern societal tensions. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the key arguments and affirms the value of integrating Christian faith with civic engagement to develop responsible, compassionate, and principled citizens.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Divine command ethics as the overarching framework for education

Christian thinkers have identified three primary forms of Christian ethics: (divine) command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. *Narrative ethics* centres on the redemptive history of humanity, teaching moral understanding through the unfolding story of salvation. *Virtue ethics*, as explained below, focuses on the inner character of the regenerated believer, drawing from passages such as Romans 5:1–5, Galatians 5:22–23, and Colossians 3:12–17 (Frame 2008:31). For this discussion, (divine) command ethics is considered the overarching ethical framework. Divine command ethics is the practical and ethical application of the divine command theory. This theory is a meta-ethical position which holds that moral rightness and wrongness depend entirely on God's will or commands (Adams 1999:33; Quinn 1978:289). Within this framework, moral obligations exist because God decrees them, and actions are morally impermissible when he forbids them. The theory maintains that God's nature is perfect, and therefore his commands necessarily reflect ultimate moral truth. Divine command ethics translates the meta-ethical claim into concrete moral directives for human conduct. These directives focus on what God commands or expects of Christian believers, guiding them toward living morally, which includes being virtuous, responsible, mutual, and mindful of consequences. This way of life is characterised by compassion, empathy, reciprocity, non-judgement, care, justice, and fairness (cf. Baijnath 2017:201–202). Divine command ethics is a form of deontological ethics as it emphasises duties and moral obligations (Pinker 2019:416). Whereas divine command theory addresses the *foundation* of morality (why something is morally binding), divine command ethics focuses on the *content* of God's moral

requirements and their implications for daily life. In the context of Christian education (in family, church, and school), divine command ethics thus functions as a normative framework that guides educators' moral decisions, aligning their pedagogical practice with what, according to them, is understood to be God's revealed will.

It is widely recognised that children are educated in alignment with their educators' lives and worldviews, their assumptive values, or framing beliefs. These beliefs, according to Sacks (2011:33), stem from a form of intuitive, emotional-cognitive understanding – 'knowing with the heart' (Stoker 1967:233). While not explicitly taught, these beliefs provide structure, direction, and orientation to the educational process. A substantial part of an educator's (whether parent, teacher, counsellor, or religious leader) framing beliefs relates to their moral discernment – how they differentiate between right and wrong, good and bad. Educators typically instruct in ways that reflect such moral convictions (Stoker 1967:232).

Stoker (1967:233) further distinguishes between the intuitive nature of framing beliefs and the more intellectual process of selecting ethical systems and corresponding moral standards. In contrast, Frame (2008:10) views ethics and morality as integral components of an individual's life and worldview, rather than separate elements. The term *ethics* encompasses the general principles by which a person understands moral issues, as well as the value system that influences a person's actions and deeds, in the case of the issue under discussion in this article, without the deontological norms and values of divine command ethics. The terms *morality* and *morals* refer to the right and the wrong, the good and the bad of a person's actions, regarding the value system that drives a person's actions and deeds from *within* (Thomson 2018:3). Ultimately, the significance of ethics and morality in education lies in their spiritual implications: they serve as the criteria for discerning which pedagogical actions and attitudes, according to the moral value system(s) of the educators, are likely to receive God's blessing.

According to Naugle (2012:51, 76), biblical morality, irrespective of how it is understood or interpreted, flows from divine command ethics in that moral directives are rooted in God's will and nature, and are presented to those in covenant with him for their obedience. Within this framework, actions forbidden by God are morally wrong, and those he commands are obligatory. Human beings are inherently moral because they are created in the image of God. As such, all people, without distinction, are capable of love and care, because God is love (Jn 1 4:8).

There is a divinely ordained order to how people are to love. The first great commandment calls humans to love God, and the second instructs them to love others as they love themselves (Lv 19:34; Dt 6:5; Mt 22:34–40; Lk 10:25–28). Scripture thus provides educators with divine commands that shape their moral decisions in interactions with younger generations. However, this does not absolve educators of their responsibility to seek a sound translation

of these commandments into parenting practice. It is God's commands that define the virtues educators are to pursue and nurture in children, and which serve as a standard for evaluating moral behaviour (Frame 2008:14, 31). There are things one is expected to do, and others not to do, whatever the consequences (Sacks 2011:123). The divine command theory asserts that moral distinctions – right and wrong, good and bad – are determined solely by God's decree (Baggini 2020:151). Christians believe that people are morally responsible agents who, in all that they do, remain answerable to God (Sacks 2011:153, 289).

The Old and New Testament play a central role in the divine command ethics. As Mitchell (2013:66) states, they are 'the norm of norms that is itself not normed' – the ultimate standard by which all other norms are measured. For the Christian educator, the Bible reveals the ethical foundation for discerning right and wrong, good and bad. All moral instruction must be evaluated against the canon of Scripture. This is reflected in Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:14: 'The entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself.' This ethical command echoes in Jesus's Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20, in which he instructs his followers to 'teach them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Van Brummelen 1994:31). Koshy (2018:19) interprets this command as a redefinition of the significance of the 'other', highlighting the interconnectedness between self and other. When the other is seen as part of oneself, relating to the other becomes unavoidable. Jesus framed this teaching, as all his teachings, within the context of the kingdom of God and its righteousness. This kingdom orientation reorients human purpose not toward self-preservation but toward the rule and reign of God. As Schnelle (2020:112) affirms, this return to God's kingdom defines human life by what it was initially meant to be. It restores morality as orthopraxis – doing what is right and good – rather than confining it to mere orthodoxy (teaching correct doctrine) or to religious observance in the form of ritual (Vigil 2008:205).

Virtue ethics: Indispensable for character formation

For Christian educationists and educators, the divine command ethics forms the overarching deontological framework for reflection on all the other branches of ethics. Out of the variety of moral values and systems that function under the Christian deontological umbrella of divine command ethics, we chose virtue ethics, as it focuses on character formation through the cultivation of virtues in people. It is essential to think, work, and live under such an overarching view of morality because one's morality becomes incoherent when one loses sight of the ethical foundation on which it was built. Without such a foundation, a person is left with fragments, half-remembered words such as duty, virtue, care, and honour, without any understanding of their foundational depth (Sacks 2011:147).

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is widely recognised as one of the pioneers of virtue ethics. In *Apology*, Plato (2020:154) urged his listeners to, 'seek virtue and wisdom before [they] look to [their] private interests'. In *Phaedo* (Plato 2020:200), he explores the idea that 'all true virtue' (Greek *arête*) is inseparable from wisdom. He challenges his followers, Simmias and Cebes, to consider whether virtues such as temperance, courage, and justice can exist without the presence of wisdom.

From around the mid-4th century BC, Greek philosophy, under the influence of Aristotle, developed a more systematic virtue theory of ethics. Aristotle sought to understand the ultimate purpose [*telos*] of human life and concluded that it was to achieve *eudaimonia* – a state of human flourishing or well-being. For Aristotle, happiness was not mere pleasure but a sense of fulfilment and completeness, akin to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. He argued that by cultivating virtues and striving for excellence of the soul, individuals move closer to *eudaimonia* [happiness, well-being, or flourishing] (Mitchell 2013:30).

Virtue ethics emphasises moral character over mere rule-following. It is concerned less with a checklist of right and wrong actions and more with the formation of a good and virtuous character. Actions are not divorced from character – they are expressions of it. Thus, who we are is ultimately revealed in what we do. For Jesus too, the highest moral goal was to become one's best self: your best moral self, one of the children of the Highest (Lk 6:35–36). Serving, loving, and caring for others are essential components of a meaningful and good life. Virtue is not innate – it is developed through habit. Therefore, it is wise to cultivate good habits in children within supportive environments, surrounded by parents, teachers, and mentors who encourage moral growth (Baggini 2020:23, 44, 74, 93, 107). When the apostle Paul uses the word *arēte* [excellence, virtue or goodness], he was adopting a key concept in Greek educational theory to be integrated in the lives of Christian believers as a contemporary ethos (Phlp 4:8). According to Schnelle (2020:14), he argued that love was a fundamental ethical principle because it followed from the believer's new relationship to God, led to a new self-understanding, thereby bringing about a new relationship with other people.

Virtue ethics encapsulates the idea that moral virtues, such as love, kindness, fidelity, and integrity, are elements of a good moral character. Virtue ethics, according to Frame (2008:14), is a kind of ethics that focuses on the inward character traits of a person; in other words, the moral character of the person. For Christians, and hence also Christian educators, a biblically rooted virtue ethics flows from a regenerate heart and manifests as biblical virtues expressed in the form of good works (Frame 2008:326).

Virtue ethics provides a framework for moral education in a diverse society. We regard Christian citizenship as an ethical and moral commitment that integrates faith with social responsibility. Justice, humility, love, courage, and prudence emerge as key biblical virtues for Christian citizenship.

Fostering Christian citizenship

Christian citizenship can be defined as the integration of Christian faith and civic responsibility, where individuals embody virtues such as love, justice, compassion, integrity, and service in ways that contribute positively to society. It is rooted in divine command ethics and virtue ethics, viewing civic engagement not only as a social duty but as an expression of obedience to God's will, and participation in the mission of the Kingdom of God (Mt 25:40).

Christian citizenship is specific in that it frames the idea of citizenship within a biblical-theological and moral framework, which draws directly from Scripture while also engaging theological reflection to interpret its significance for contemporary moral and civic life. Its source of morality is found in God's commands, rather than in human consensus or secular ethics, giving it an authority grounded in divine will. It understands civic life as a matter of dual belonging – according to Augustine of Hippo, being part of both earthly society and the City of God, while maintaining primary allegiance to God (Saint Augustine 2020:Book XIX, ch. 14–15). Civic engagement is guided by biblically grounded virtues that care to transform society and not merely to comply with human laws. Moreover, participation in public life is viewed as a missional calling, an active expression of service to others, and a commitment to advancing God's justice in the world.

In practice, Christian citizenship draws on virtue ethics, which emphasises the cultivation of character through habitual moral practices. Daily routines such as shared prayer, ethical discussions, and community service reinforce this virtue-based way of living (Back, Clarke & Phelan 2018:3). By engaging in consistent acts of faith such as attending church together, reading Scripture and participating in outreach programmes, believers develop a strong moral foundation that equips them to act with integrity, compassion, and the responsibility to be moral in their interactions with others (Freeks 2022:2; Pali 2024:3).

The role of the family

The family plays a foundational role as the primary socialising agent in fostering Christian citizenship. It is often regarded as the first *school of virtue*, where children acquire fundamental moral dispositions that shape their character (Arthur 2021:5). The home serves as the first environment where children learn moral values, develop ethical reasoning and experience the embodiment of Christian principles in daily life (Ginty 2022:2). Children's early experiences within the family significantly influence their later attitudes toward citizenship, including their understanding of justice and their willingness to engage in acts of service (Koopman 2015:433). When children witness and participate in acts of kindness, honesty, and forgiveness, they internalise these values, shaping their behaviour and interactions with others. The family setting provides a natural context for children to observe and internalise Christian virtues through interactions with their parents and siblings, reinforcing the importance of virtue-based living (Zuo 2024:182).

Parents play a pivotal role in modelling Christian virtues such as humility, compassion, integrity, and service (Boloje 2024:2). Their guidance and example are the foundation for their children's moral and spiritual development. Studies highlight that children who grow up in environments where Christian values are consistently practised, tend to develop a strong sense of moral responsibility (Pali 2024:4). Parental engagement in faith-based education, including reading the Bible, discussing ethical and moral dilemmas and encouraging prayer, fosters an intrinsic motivation to live virtuously (Fotescu 2014:80). When children see their parents making ethical and moral decisions based on Christian teachings, they learn to approach their own moral choices with a similar perspective (Smith 2024:5). By actively involving their children in faith-based activities, such as attending church services, participating in community service, and discussing ethical challenges, parents help shape their children into responsible Christian citizens (Arthur 2021:13; Zuo 2024:183). These practices create an environment where Christian citizenship is naturally developed and sustained within the family unit.

Theological reflections on virtue, formulated by Augustine of Hippo (354–430); one of the most influential early Christian theologians and philosophers whose works shaped Western thought on ethics, theology and the relationship between the church and society, underscore the significance of aligning personal will with divine goodness (St Augustine 2000). Parents play a crucial role in fostering this alignment by creating an atmosphere that encourages moral reflection, repentance, and Christian maturity. Conversations about faith, forgiveness, and ethical dilemmas help children integrate Christian teachings into daily life, shaping them into responsible citizens who uphold justice and compassion. According to Augustine, Christian citizenship involves dual belonging to an earthly society and the City of God, with primary allegiance to God (McDowell 2022:4). Augustine emphasises that true justice can only be realised through faith and divine grace (McDowell 2022:4). Virtue formation is not merely a human effort but a gift from God, requiring continuous alignment with his will (St Augustine 2000). Parents must guide their children in translating Christian values into civic responsibility. For example, parents who value the Christian principle of loving one's neighbour might encourage their children to participate in local community service, such as helping at a food bank, visiting the elderly, or joining neighbourhood clean-up efforts. While engaging in these activities, parents can explain how such service reflects Christ's command to care for 'the least of these' (Mt 25:40) and contributes to the common good of society. In this way, children learn to see civic engagement not merely as a legal or social duty but as an expression of their faith and allegiance to God's justice and compassion. Christian citizenship extends beyond personal morality to societal transformation through faith-

driven action (McDowell 2022:10). Families cultivate a just and compassionate community grounded in divine love by modelling humility, charity, and service.

Families play a crucial role in teaching children how to contribute to the common good, respect diversity, and practice justice in social interactions. Research suggests that active parental involvement in civic life, such as community service or charitable activities, significantly influences children's future civic engagement (Arthur 2021:17). When children participate in activities such as volunteering at shelters, visiting the sick, or helping the less fortunate, they develop a sense of social responsibility rooted in Christian values. A Christian family that cultivates an ethic of service instils a commitment to social justice and neighbourly love in children. Missional family life, where parents involve children in acts of kindness and outreach programmes, strengthens their understanding of Christian duty toward society (Pali 2024:4). These practical applications of faith help children bridge the gap between religious teachings and real-world ethical responsibilities. When they see their parents actively engaging in acts of service, they recognise that faith is not just about belief but about action. This lived experience fosters a sense of responsibility to serve others, a core aspect of Christian citizenship.

Despite the vital role of the family, contemporary challenges complicate the process of moral formation. Secular influences, digital distractions, and shifting family structures hinder the instilling of Christian values. The increasing societal pluralism often places families in tension between maintaining Christian values and embracing cultural diversity. Parents may struggle with teaching their children to remain faithful to Christian principles while respecting different worldviews (Koopman 2015:435). Balancing faith and openness to other perspectives requires intentional discussions about religious identity and moral convictions. Another challenge is the decline of intergenerational faith transmission. Studies indicate that fewer young people practice Christianity than previous generations, partly due to inconsistent faith practices within the home (Freeks 2022:1; Smith 2024:4). The busyness of modern life, competing influences, and a lack of structured faith conversations can contribute to this decline. To address this, parents must deliberate efforts to reinforce faith-centred conversations, ethical reasoning, and community involvement. Parents can help ensure that their children remain connected to their Christian identity by creating a home environment where faith is regularly discussed and practised.

To strengthen the role of the family in fostering Christian citizenship, collaboration with the church, and educational institutions is essential. Families who engage with faith-based schools, or schools that permit religious practices and church programmes, reinforce their children's moral development (Fotescu 2014:79). Children receive a cohesive moral framework that guides their behaviour when Christian teachings are consistently integrated across home, school, and church settings. Christian educators and pastors can support families by providing resources on moral formation,

organising workshops on faith-based parenting, and facilitating discussions on ethical dilemmas. Such partnerships enhance the ability of families to nurture responsible, faith-driven citizens who actively contribute to their communities.

The role of the church

The historical view of Christian citizenship is deeply tied to dual belonging – being part of a divine kingdom and a political state. Early Christian teachings emphasised that believers should be 'in the world but not of it', meaning they were to obey earthly laws while maintaining a higher allegiance to God. The concept of citizenship in Christian thought can be traced back to the Athenian origins of citizenship that later evolved within medieval Christian thought (Girma 2017:25). Augustine played a significant role in shaping this perspective, arguing that Christian citizens should act virtuously and uphold moral values (McDowell 2022:6). Christian theological thought has also stressed the importance of virtue as a foundation for sustaining liberty and good citizenship (O'Brien 2022:7). The role of Christian citizens in modern democracies has become more complex. Some scholars argue that a strict separation between church and state is an unrealistic expectation, as Christian moral values inherently shape believers' political and civic actions (Haines 2024:4). A Christian approach to citizenship today emphasises moral responsibility, community service, and engagement in political affairs, including in democratic societies where secularism often challenges religious influence (Auh & Kim 2024:8).

The church fosters Christian citizenship primarily by teaching moral and ethical responsibility based on biblical principles. It encourages members to embody virtues such as justice, compassion, and service. According to McDowell (2022:5), the church has historically emphasised that moral integrity is the foundation of good citizenship. Arthur (2021:19) also argues that the church instils virtues such as honesty, humility, and diligence, which are necessary for being responsible citizens. The church is actively addressing social justice issues and advocating for ethical governance. In South Africa, for instance, churches played a significant role in the anti-apartheid movement, pushing for justice and full citizenship rights for all people (Koopman 2015:430). More recently, churches have mobilised communities to engage in democratic processes, support human rights, and foster reconciliation (Pali 2024:5). In democratic states, the role of the church in influencing civic engagement remains important. Haines (2024:10) highlights, without reference to any specific person or office, how churches encourage their members to vote, participate in governance, and uphold moral leadership in politics.

Beyond advocacy, the church fosters Christian citizenship through community service and social outreach. Many churches run programmes to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and support marginalised groups. This service-oriented approach aligns with the biblical principle that faith

should be expressed through action (Ja 2:14–17). This aspect is particularly evident in South Africa, where churches have been actively involved in crisis response, from addressing looting-related social breakdowns (Pali 2024:6) to promoting reconciliation and nation-building. The church also shapes Christian citizens through preaching and theological instruction. Sermons and Bible studies often address civic responsibility, justice, and the role of faith in public life. O'Brien (2022:8) argues that churches provide theological frameworks that encourage believers to see citizenship as a moral duty, ensuring that societies remain just and free. Some churches encourage direct political engagement, urging believers to take leadership roles in governance or act as moral voices in policy discussions. While this has been controversial, especially concerning church-state separation, many Christian leaders argue that religious values can contribute to ethical leadership (Haines 2024:12).

The church should take proactive steps to foster Christian citizenship in an era of political, social, and cultural transformation. One of the most pressing tasks is to clarify its role in politics, ensuring that faith remains a guiding force for ethical governance without engaging in partisan conflicts. Biblical teachings on civic responsibility (such as promoting justice, helping the poor, and adhering to biblical moral principles) should be reinforced, helping congregants understand their role in shaping society while respecting the principles of democracy (Haines 2024:13). This is particularly crucial in secular societies where religious influence is waning. Churches ought to develop outreach programmes that reconnect disengaged individuals, presenting faith as relevant to contemporary societal challenges. Engaging discussions on modern issues should be framed in ways that resonate with those who see Christianity as outdated (Auh & Kim 2024:6). At the same time, the church ought to actively address the growing political polarisation that divides congregations. It is essential to foster spaces where diverse perspectives can be respectfully discussed, reinforcing a Christ-centred approach to civic discourse that prioritises unity over ideological division (Lin 2021:53). Similarly, globalisation and cultural diversity demand that churches adopt a broader perspective, integrating inclusive global values while remaining true to Christian principles. The church can promote a global Christian identity that embraces diversity by engaging in cross-cultural dialogues and forging partnerships with Christian communities worldwide (Gaus 2021:109).

Furthermore, re-engaging younger generations remains a critical challenge, requiring innovative Christian education and civic engagement approaches. Youth-led initiatives should be encouraged, connecting faith with real-world issues and using digital platforms to create meaningful interactions (Gaus 2021:188). The church should also navigate complex ethical and moral dilemmas, providing pastoral guidance on contemporary social debates while maintaining biblical integrity (O'Brien 2022:9). In addition to spiritual leadership, the church has a moral duty to combat social inequality through practical action not only in the form of charity or

social programmes but also by actively modelling and fostering virtues like compassion, civility, moderation, and justice in the public sphere, thereby addressing concrete social challenges (poverty, violence, inequality). Addressing poverty, injustice, and systemic inequities requires a sustained commitment to advocacy and service, which can be strengthened through collaborations with non-governmental organisations and community-based initiatives (Pali 2024:6). The digital age further demands that the church embrace new tools for engagement, developing virtual communities, and online educational platforms to sustain participation in faith-based civic life (Auh & Kim 2024:8). By implementing these strategies, the church can continue to shape responsible Christian citizens, equipped to navigate modern society's complexities while upholding their faith and contributing to the common good.

The role of schools

Not all public schools around the world have a policy to exclude religion entirely from the school sector. In some cases, official policy states that there should be a partnership between organised religion and schools in the education and instruction of learners. In such countries, for instance, South Africa, Serbia, and Finland, policy stipulates that public schools may permit religious gatherings and practices on school premises and during school hours, if participation is voluntary and all religions are treated equally. Christian ethics, also known as moral theology or Christian faith moral education, is generally not explicitly offered as a subject in schools and does not appear as such in the curriculum of any other subject. Being a Christian is an integral part of a teacher's identity who professes to be a Christian. Everyone's Christian religion, Christian outlook on life and the world, Christian way of treating people, Christian hierarchy of values, and Christian views on education will inform and imbue his or her teaching practice (regardless of which subject is taught) and the attitude with which he or she fulfils their professional mission, without purposely intending to do so.

In the case of Christian schools, which in many countries are private institutions, these play a crucial role in shaping students into responsible citizens who reflect Christian virtues in their civic engagements. The integration of citizenship education within Christian schools is not merely an academic exercise but a mission-driven approach to foster students who embody moral integrity, justice, and communal responsibility (Lin & Rim 2021:2). These institutions offer a unique framework for citizenship education by intertwining civic duties with religious teachings, thus ensuring students to develop a sense of responsibility for their country and faith (Costandius & Alexander 2020:365; Paige 2020:65). The curriculum of Christian schools often emphasises a citizen's moral obligations through biblical teachings such as the Great Commandments: love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Mt 22:37–39). Citizenship education is integrated with religious education to help students understand governance and their societal role through a Christian ethical lens (Lin & Rim 2021:2; Mokotso 2019:2). This approach

promotes civic knowledge and instils a moral compass that guides students in ethical decision-making and public responsibility.

The Bible provides a foundational framework for Christian citizenship education. Verses such as Micah 6:8, which call believers to 'act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God', reinforce the moral duties of Christians in society. Similarly, Romans 13:1–7 emphasises the role of government and the Christian's responsibility to be law-abiding citizens who contribute positively to their communities. These biblical principles are often integrated into the curriculum of Christian-based schools to ensure that students recognise their civic duties as an extension of their faith. However, challenges arise when citizenship education intersects with religious values, particularly in diverse and pluralistic societies. Some critics argue that blending religious instruction with civic education may result in an exclusionary approach that does not accommodate different worldviews, which explains why Christian schools often find themselves confined to the private sphere (Gaus 2021:186). Despite this, Christian schools continue to emphasise the need for inclusivity while maintaining their core mission of cultivating moral character and civic engagement through a faith-based perspective. Christian schools also emphasise the importance of civic engagement beyond theoretical knowledge. Many institutions encourage students to participate in community service projects, outreach programmes, and advocacy initiatives that align with Christian ethics. These activities provide students with hands-on experiences that reinforce their sense of social responsibility while developing leadership skills rooted in biblical teachings.

One of the fundamental aspects of Christian citizenship education is the emphasis on virtue ethics and moral development. Christian schools provide a setting where students can develop virtues such as honesty, integrity, humility, and compassion, which are essential for good citizenship (Arthur 2021:4). Unlike secular citizenship education, which may focus primarily on civic duties and rights, Christian education integrates virtue ethics to ensure that students are knowledgeable about their civic responsibilities and morally inclined to act justly. Augustine's (2000) perspective on virtue underscores the importance of moral development as an intrinsic part of human flourishing. Christian educators (cf. Arthur 2021:131) argue that civic engagement can become superficial or self-serving without moral virtue rather than genuinely contributing to the common good. This theological approach aligns with the broader educational goal of character formation, which sees virtue as a necessary component of an individual's ability to contribute positively to society (Smith 2024:5). Furthermore, Christian education fosters an environment where students are encouraged to practice virtues through service-learning projects, community engagement, and discussions on ethical dilemmas. By engaging students in activities that require ethical decision-making and compassion, Christian schools prepare them for civic participation and cultivate leaders who prioritise justice and mercy in their communities (Koopman 2015:436).

Religious education in Christian schools goes beyond traditional theological instruction. It includes moral philosophy, historical perspectives on Christian engagement in society, and practical applications of faith-based ethics. Students are often taught about the role of historical Christian figures in shaping ethical leadership, including individuals like William Wilberforce, who championed the abolition of slavery based on Christian principles. Integrating religious education with civic instruction ensures that students see their faith as an active force for societal change. Moreover, studying biblical parables and their application to real-world scenarios is essential to moral education in Christian schools. Stories such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) teach students the importance of compassion, social justice, and helping those in need. By analysing and discussing these narratives, students develop a deeper understanding of ethical dilemmas and moral responsibility, further preparing them for their role as Christian citizens.

Education for Christian citizenship within a diverse society presents both opportunities and challenges. Christian schools strive to prepare students to engage constructively in pluralistic societies, while maintaining their faith-based identity. One of the key aspects of this education is teaching students to balance their Christian beliefs with respect for religious and ideological diversity (Haines 2024:8). As implemented in religious schools, global citizenship education encourages inclusivity while fostering Christian values. Gaus (2021:185) argues that religious education should be about faith formation and to equip students to participate in international conversations on human rights, social justice, and civic responsibilities. This perspective is in line with the increasing need for Christian schools to prepare students for active participation in democratic societies where multiple belief systems coexist (Auh & Kim 2024:2).

Despite the positive contributions, challenges remain in balancing faith-based civic education with secular democratic principles. Some scholars argue that Christian citizenship education must evolve to adopt a more inclusive approach, enabling students to appreciate diverse worldviews while staying committed to their faith (Holden 2004:257). This involves re-evaluating teaching to ensure that students are well-versed in Christian virtues and prepared to navigate the complexities of a diverse and globalised society. Re-evaluating pedagogical approaches can be done by integrating teaching methods that combine biblical principles with critical engagement in contemporary civic issues, such as structured classroom debates, service-learning projects, and comparative worldview studies. These approaches are applied through curriculum revisions, teacher training, and community partnerships that help students practise Christian virtues while interacting respectfully in a pluralistic society. Christian citizenship education also addresses the responsibilities of believers in advocating for social justice. Many Christian schools incorporate discussions on poverty alleviation, human rights, and environmental stewardship into their religious education curriculum. Drawing from biblical teachings such as Proverbs 31:8–9, which calls for

speaking up for those who cannot defend themselves, students are encouraged to see their faith as a catalyst for positive social engagement. Additionally, Christian schools emphasise the development of a strong moral conscience in their students. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate societal issues and take meaningful action by incorporating biblical discussions on justice, truth, and mercy. Ethical dilemmas concerning economic disparity, governance, and human rights are explored within a Christian framework, reinforcing the connection between faith and civic duty.

Implications for family, church, and school

Christian citizenship requires integrating faith and civic responsibility, shaping individuals who engage with society justly and compassionately. Families, churches, and schools serve as key institutions in fostering moral development, yet they face significant challenges due to secularisation, pluralism, and shifting cultural norms. The increasing tension between Christian values and contemporary societal expectations further complicates this process. A divine command and virtue ethics approach, which emphasises character formation through habitual moral practice, offers a sustainable framework for addressing these challenges. This section explores the difficulties families, churches, and schools encounter in fostering Christian citizenship and proposes virtue ethics-based responses to navigate these tensions effectively.

The family to nurture virtue in a secular age

The family serves as the foundational environment for moral and spiritual development; yet modern families face numerous challenges in fostering Christian citizenship. Secular influences and digital distractions often divert children's attention from faith-centred practices, weakening intergenerational faith transmission. Additionally, religious pluralism complicates instilling Christian values while respecting diverse worldviews. Parents must navigate the tension between maintaining religious integrity and promoting inclusivity, particularly as dominant cultural narratives increasingly conflict with traditional Christian teachings. Moreover, the demands of modern life limit structured faith discussions within the home, making moral formation inconsistent.

A virtue ethics approach within the family emphasises the habitual practice of moral virtues through daily routines. Parents play a central role in modelling virtues such as humility, compassion, integrity, and self-discipline. Despite modern time constraints, family prayer, Scripture reading, and ethical discussions should be consistently practised to reinforce moral character. To counter secular influences, families could integrate digital tools into faith formation, using online resources that align with sound Christian teachings. Encouraging children's participation in acts of service, such as volunteering and community outreach, fosters a sense of social responsibility and justice. By leading through example, parents instil a deep, intrinsic motivation

for virtue-based living, ensuring that Christian citizenship is cultivated in both personal and public life.

The church as a moral guide in navigating public and private faith

The role of the church in shaping Christian citizens has become increasingly complex in contemporary society. A key tension lies in its engagement with civic affairs while avoiding political partisanship. The secularisation of public life challenges the church's influence in governance and moral discourse, limiting its ability to shape societal values. Furthermore, political and social polarisation within congregations undermines unity, making it difficult to present a cohesive vision of Christian citizenship. Churches also struggle to maintain engagement with younger generations, as digital culture and secular ideologies often divert them from active participation in faith communities.

The church should actively reinforce virtue ethics by promoting justice, mercy, and moral responsibility in civic life. Sermons and theological discussions should explicitly connect Christian virtues to societal engagement, guiding believers to act with integrity in political and social matters. The church can address political and ideological divisions by fostering respectful civic discourse grounded in shared Christian values. To counter declining youth participation, churches should engage younger generations through digital faith communities, interactive discussions, and service projects that make faith relevant to contemporary challenges. Additionally, interfaith dialogue initiatives can help Christian citizens navigate religious pluralism while maintaining a strong moral and spiritual foundation.

Christian schools to form citizens in a pluralistic society

Christian schools are critical in preparing students for civic engagement through a faith-based perspective. However, integrating Christian education with democratic ideals presents challenges, particularly in societies that promote religious neutrality in public education. Secular policies often limit the space for Christian moral instruction, and the rise of moral relativism further complicates the development of a clear ethical framework. Additionally, Christian schools must address tensions between upholding biblical teachings and engaging in contemporary social justice discussions. In pluralistic educational settings, students face the challenge of maintaining and navigating their Christian identity while interacting with peers from diverse religious and ideological backgrounds.

Despite being restricted in many countries to operating in the private sector only, Christian schools should emphasise virtue ethics in their approach to citizenship education, ensuring students develop moral character and civic knowledge. Curricular integration of biblical teachings with democratic principles can help students understand their civic duties while maintaining their faith-based identity. Service-learning initiatives, where students engage in community service rooted in Christian ethics, provide

practical applications of virtue-based citizenship. Schools must also encourage ethical reflection through discussions on contemporary moral dilemmas, helping students navigate complex social issues from a virtue-oriented perspective. Preparing students for interfaith dialogue and cultural diversity ensures they remain faithful to Christian values while respecting differing worldviews.

Conclusion

Fostering Christian citizenship in a diverse society requires confronting the urgent problem identified at the outset of this article: the erosion of moral clarity and civic responsibility among younger generations in an increasingly pluralistic and secular context. Managing the tensions between faith and civic responsibility while cultivating virtues that guide moral engagement is central to this task. The family, church, and school serve as the three formative spheres in which Christian character and public responsibility are shaped. Yet, each faces challenges from secularisation, pluralism, and shifting societal norms.

By situating Christian citizenship within a coherent theological-ethical framework (rooted in divine command ethics, virtue ethics, and Augustine's vision of rightly ordered love) this article has offered a holistic and actionable response to these conditions and challenges. In the family, daily faith-based practices such as prayer, Scripture engagement, and acts of service cultivate virtues that align the will with God's goodness. In the church, preaching, catechesis, and diaconal outreach form a worshipping community that sustains moral discernment and mobilises believers for justice, reconciliation, and proactive civic engagement. In the school, integrated moral education, service-learning, and critical engagement with contemporary issues, connect faith with civic knowledge and practice.

Together, these institutions create a coordinated environment that equips believers to participate in public life with integrity, justice, and compassion, contributing to the common good while remaining faithful to Christian principles. Such an approach enables Christian citizens not only to navigate the complexities of the modern world but also to transform it – offering a theologically grounded and practically viable answer to the societal challenges from which this article began.

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