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Many Christians have understood the call of Christ to be salt and light of the world (Matt. 6:13-16) to involve, not merely the proclamation of the gospel, but also the mandate of exerting a moral influence on the culture in general, and on specific social attitudes, practices and institutions. While Christians recognize that people will only accept a Christian morality when they have embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ, we also believe that God's call to his people to seek justice (Is. 1:17) includes the charge to do and to promote justice and righteousness in the nations in which God has placed us (Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8). We are aided in this by God's not leaving himself without testimony to the nations (Acts 14:17), and by writing his law upon the hearts of all men and women (Rom. 2:14-15). However Christians may differ on the nature of a point of contact with non-Christians, and on the means of public engagement, most of us accept that there is a divine calling to be agents for the peace and *shalom* of the nation within which God has placed us (cf. Jer. 29:7).

This paper presents the framework and key doctrines relevant to public moral engagement as found in that branch of the Reformed tradition shaped by Abraham Kuyper and his disciples, often referred to as the neo-Calvinist tradition. While I do not claim that all those following in the legacy of Kuyper agree on all aspects of public

engagement, there are general features that characterize this legacy. This paper indicates what they are. The thesis of this paper is: Christian ethics is public ethics because it is creational ethics. That is, Christian ethics has a place in the public arena because it is the articulation of the creational moral order that constitutes and guides all human beings. Neo-Calvinism considers the creation order as foundational. The fall of creation and its redemption must be understood in relation to this foundational doctrine. But the creational order also shapes the nature of Christian involvement in the public domain. The final section of this paper will highlight some implications of this for involvement in public life.

While this paper draws largely upon the thought of those in the Kuyperian tradition, it also draws on the insights of those who might not identify themselves as Kuyperian. Their work, I argue, provides support for the Kuyperian tradition, specifically, for its emphasis on the significance of creation and the creational order for the understanding of the normative patterns of human life within the world. My aim is to present a moral theology supporting Christian ethics as creational ethics, and thus as the necessary foundation and framework for moral involvement in public and political life.

The Creational Moral Order

The foundational doctrine of the Christian faith is that the triune God created the heavens and the earth. A Trinitarian theology of creation *ex nihilo* affirms that God created the world in an act of divine sovereignty and freedom to be something other than God himself. While theology affirms the dependence of the world upon God's sustaining hand, this providential activity of God serves to uphold what God's creative

act established, namely, the world as a realm of being in its own right.[1] There are numerous implications about the world that theologians have drawn from the Christian doctrine of creation by the triune God.[2] For the purposes of this paper I will highlight two: the orderliness of creation and its purposefulness.

First, Christian theology affirms the *orderliness* of creation. The world that God creates is a cosmos, that is, a world in which there is harmony and order in the way the creatures function and in their interactions with each other.[3] This order evident in creation is not merely the lawful character of this world to which all creatures are subject, but it is also the inner constitution of things. Order comprises the very being of all the diversity of creatures in the world. A creature is the creature that it is by virtue of the order or structure of its very nature.[4]

One can draw a distinction between the creation order as it operates in non-human creation and as it operates in human creatures. Non-human creatures are subject to this order immediately and directly. This natural order is what the natural sciences investigate. As physical creatures, humans are subject to many of these aspects of

[1]Colin E. Gunton observes that the doctrine of creation affirms that the world "can be itself, that is to say, free according to its own order of being" (*The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. [London: T & T Clark, 1997], 142-43).

[2]These include the world's goodness, non-divinity, unity, variety, orderliness, dependability, openness to change, and potential for development. For example, see discussions by Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 160-78; and Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, New Studies in Constructive Theology, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids/ Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 8-12.

[3]See Craig Bartholomew, "A Time for War, and A Time for Peace: Old Testament Wisdom, Creation and O'Donovan's Theological Ethics," in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically – A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, Albert Wolters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 97; and J. Richard Middleton, "Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (July 1994), 265.

[4]See Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 49.

creation that govern all material beings. However, men and women have unique abilities that distinguish them from all other creatures. These are evident as the human capacity for language, logic, economics, social relationships, aesthetics, religion, etc. And, of course, there is that aspect to which we are directing our attention here: the ethical aspect of life. What is unique about these human aspects of the creation order is that we have the freedom of the will to choose to be subject to the laws of God or we can choose to violate them.[5]

Thus, as we consider the particular realm described as ethics, we can understand it as life in accordance with the divinely created moral order for humanity. As O'Donovan states, the way that God has ordered human life determines how we ought to behave.[6] We are called to yield to God's order, and to take our place within it.[7] Christian ethics is not, then, the imposition of a partisan Christian morality upon an amoral or unknowable sphere of life. Rather, ethics is the convergence between the way the world is, that is, the moral order that God has established for human life, and the way that humans ought to behave in the world.[8] H. H. Schmid says it concisely: "Whoever does what is right conforms to the created order."[9]

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[5]The important point here, made by Christopher J. H. Wright, is that creation contains the fundamental order which shapes our lives in history (*Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995], 120).

[6]Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 17.

[7]O'Donovan, 23.

[8]William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 23.

[9]Schmid, H.H., "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," trans. Bernhard W. Anderson & Dan G. Johnson, in *Creation in the Old Testament*, *ed.* B. W. Anderson (London and Philadelphia: SPCK and Fortress, 1984), 106. See also Bartholomew, "A Time for War," 91.

One of the main reasons that this understanding of creation and of the creational moral order has been depreciated in recent years is that the tradition of Old Testament studies influenced by the Wellhausian perspective, and its various reformulations in the twentieth century, has regarded the theme of creation as secondary to the themes of the election and redemption of Israel (as found in the Exodus texts and similar texts in Israel's history). Von Rad, who influenced a whole generation of biblical scholars, viewed the doctrine of creation in the Old Testament texts to be always related and subordinate to the interests and content of the message of salvation.[10] The early thought of Walter Brueggmann reflects this negative view of creation theology. He claims that creation theology performed the political function of legitimating the existing social order during Israel's united monarchy by rooting it in creation, thereby promoting the politics of social domination and injustice. In contrast to this, the Mosaic-prophetic tradition in scripture kept alive the notions of the liberation of God and social justice.[11]

In recent years, Brueggeman has changed his views on creation theology for two reasons. First, he accepts the argument that creation theology provides the basis for criticism of social injustice, and the hope for an alternative future in which God's intention will be restored. While creation theology has been used to oppress people by legitimating the *status quo*, creation theology provides an orientating vision of life that sustains ordinary social life and that also critiques the existing social order if it fails to fulfill God's creative intent.[12]

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[10]Gerhard von Rad, "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernard W. Anderson, Issues in Religion and Theology 6 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 56-60.

[11]An article which presents his early thought is Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Bibilical Literature* 98 (1979), 161-185.

[12]This criticism is found in J. Richard Middleton, "Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann," *Harvard Theological Review* 87/3 (1994), 257-77. Brueggemann's

Secondly, Brueggemann has been influenced by the growing body of Old Testament scholarship which demonstrates that the theme of creation is not only an early core theme of the Bible, but also one that presents the world as ordained by God to be a place of goodness, harmony, and fruitfulness. God sustains his creation so that it might be his domain of justice and righteousness. Where sin has distorted and corrupted the world, God's mighty acts of redemption serve his intention to restore it to its original goodness and order. A key component of God's covenant of redemption with his people is the giving of the Torah. The commandments cultivate, not merely a way of life consistent with the goodness of creation, but they also promote social justice and liberation in humans.

An Old Testament scholar who has highlighted the significance of the theme of creation is Terence E. Fretheim. He maintains that God was at work in the world on behalf of his creational purposes before Israel came into being, even though Israel did not become fully aware of this until after the exodus.[13] "The deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of the entire creation."[14] The ultimate goal of redemption is to liberate humanity from all the destructive and corrupting effects of sin and evil in the world, whoever and whatever may cause them.

This recognition of the primacy of creation also has been found to have significance for the existing social order. H. H. Schmid points out that in the ancient Near East creation was concerned, not so much with the origin of the world, as with the

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acceptance of Middleton's critique is found in Walter Brueggemann, "Response to J. Richard Middleton," *Harvard Theological Review* 87/3 (1994), 287-89.

[13]Terence E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus," *Interpretation* 45 (October 1991), 355-56.

[14]Terence E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991), 392.

present world, including the political and legal order of society. This is reflected in the instructions to Israel in the Torah. When humans experience harmony and well-being – for example, the blessings that God promises his people in Deut. 28 – they experience the harmonious world order given in creation.[15] William Brown argues that this perspective is found throughout the Old Testament: The way the cosmos is structured provides a moral ontology that says something about the way in which the social contours of society, including its moral contours, should be shaped.[16] There are numerous texts in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline corpus, which support this relationship between the moral instructions to believers and the order of creation.[17]

Creation Involves Historical Development

The second major implication of the doctrine of creation which I want to highlight is the *purposefulness* of creation. Another way of saying this is that God created the world for historical development. It is a world of purposes, and these purposes are to be unfolded in history. Fretheim notes that creation is a "living, moving, dynamic reality," indicating that development and change are central to creation.[18] It would be a mistake to see the account of the creation in Gen. 1 as describing a world of perfection and completion. Rather, it is a world awaiting those activities which bring its potential to fruition and which open up its possibilities. Gunton, among others, notes that the creation should be understood as directed toward an end, or *telos*. Creation is not

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[15]Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," 103-10.

[16]Brown, *Ethos of the Cosmos*, 10-12. This understanding of God's moral law in the torah for his people as expressing his law according to nature (and therefore, as being a law for the Gentiles) is presented in Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 87-111.

[17]Bockmuehl argues that in the New Testament writings this provides the basis for ethical instructions for Gentiles as they strive to live in obedience to God in the midst of pagan societies (*Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*), 119-48.

[18]Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation," 358.

created in perfection, but is destined for perfection. It should be understood as "something projected, as an act of God, into the future." God's complete intentions for creation will be realized only as creation is developed into the future.[19]

This purposeful development of creation toward its eschatological perfection is ultimately accomplished by God. But he achieves this through those creatures whom he has made in his image and to whom he has given the mandate to effect this purpose. While the Father is the origin or source of creation, and the Son is the agent of creation, the Spirit is the perfecting agent of creation.[20] Having created the world, God continues to preserve and govern it via his providential activity, so that it achieves his ultimate purposes.[21] The Holy Spirit directs the perfecting of the creation, by enabling it to become what it was created to be. He does this through the historical process of human cultural development.[22] Human agents achieve this development as they engage in the creation mandate as image-bearers of God. Gen. 1:26-28 indicates that to be an image-bearer of God means to exercise this mandate on the earth.[23] Humans are to carry out this calling by respecting the integrity of the ordering that God has given the creatures,

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[19]Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 90. See also Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, The Didsbury Lectures, 1990 (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster / Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 45.

[20]See Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 19; Colin E. Gunton distinguishes the work of the persons in creation by drawing upon the following characterization of the trinity by Basil of Caesarea: the Father is the "original cause of all things;" the Son is the "creative cause;" and the Spirit is the "perfecting cause" (*Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* [London/New York: T & T Clark, 2003], 30).

[21]Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 10.

[22]Ibid., 86; see also Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 37-39.

[23]Albert M. Wolters, *The Foundational Command: "Subdue the Earth"* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1973), 3-4. J. Richard Middleton notes that, when humans act in the world with this understanding and in obedience to this calling, then they are in harmony with the Spirit's activity of developing creation to fulfill God's purposes for creation ("The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24 [Fall 1994], 12, 24). For a good recent discussion of the *imago dei*, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: the* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), especially chapter 2, "The *Imago Dei* in the Symbolic World of Genesis 1," 43-90.

so that human development of creatures moves them toward the goal of perfection that God has established for them.[24]

Since the fate of creation depends upon the fate of humans, the extent to which humans move toward their *telos* is related to their use of the other aspects of creation to develop them toward their *telos*. O'Donovan rightly notes that when humans accept the order within which God has placed them, their rule liberates the other creatures to be in themselves, for others and for God.[25] When humans fail to move toward their proper *telos*, the rest of creation is negatively affected. This unique role of humans reflects our distinct role as the crown of creation, having the unique status and calling that God grants us as His image-bearers.

This unique calling granted to humans provides the framework for understanding Christian ethics. Ethics is concerned with our carrying out the creation mandate in accordance with God's creational order so that we, and the rest of creation, are developing toward the goal of divinely-ordained perfection.[26] Ethics guides our relationship to God, our relationship to fellow humans, and our relationship to the non-human creation so that we are directed toward our true *telos* as humans.[27] Scripture tells us that ethics is primarily about love – love in temporal relations – which encompasses our love of God, of neighbour, and of non-human creation. Since only humans as image-bearers of God are capable of love, only they are subject to the norms of ethics.

[24]Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 229.

[25]O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 36-37.

[26]Ibid., 17; Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 12.

[27]Of course, the development of creation involves more than that progression guided by the norms and virtues of ethics. Creational development also involves principles that govern human thought, language, social relations and institutions, artistic expressions, etc. So, we should not allow the principles of ethics be the standards for all aspects of human creational activity.

Sin and the Creation Order

The effects of sin on the creation order can truly be described as "the primal catastrophe of cosmic proportions."[28] Sin has disrupted the relationship between humans and God, and, by necessary consequence, it disrupts the whole of creation. In their rebellion against God, men and women also rebel against the moral order that he has established for creation. This obviously has little bearing upon those aspects of creational life affected by the laws of natural science, since they are not dependent upon human apprehension and acceptance. But sin does affect human understanding and volition in relation to the creation order in two significant ways. First, men and women no longer have a clear apprehension of that order. Second, they reject (explicitly or implicitly) the authority of the creation order in those aspects peculiar to human life.[29] Both consequences are invariably connected with the sinful disposition to create idols in place of the true God. When people give ultimate allegiance to an idol, their view of the ethical order that they embrace will result in human flourishing according to the ideals of that idol.[30] This affects both human relations and their understanding of the goals and priorities necessary for the proper ethical development of creation. So, the chain of events becomes: idolatry results in defective perceptions of the creation order, which results in disordered human relations, which results in distorted patterns of development in many areas of human cultural activities.[31] Instead of using creatures and other people for the purposes that God intended, sinful humans misuse, abuse, and oppress them.

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[28]Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 172.

[29]See O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 16-19.

[30]For example, the idol of material affluence makes material prosperity the norm of human well-being. The inevitable result it that the ethical good is evaluated according to what promotes this norm.

[31]Noted by Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 45.

Yet, in spite of the distortions of sin, the creational order remains in effect for human life. Even sinful and idolatrous distortions of the creational order occur in response to that order, and therefore, they continue to bear witness to it. The multiplicity of phenomena across the range of fallen human activity always involves an intertwining of creation order and sin. But it is imperative that in all such activities, and especially in ethical matters, we make a distinction between the two. This distinction is vital for Christians, not only for ethical discernment of our culture, but also in making an impact upon that culture.

A helpful way of recognizing this distinction is by differentiating between *structure* and *direction*.[32] Structure refers to the enduring order of creation, which God maintains over against the destructive effects of sin. Structure is anchored in God's faithfulness to his creation; it is the means whereby he providentially upholds the nature of his creation and the diversity of creatures that constitutes it. Direction has to do with the capacity, unique to humans, to determine whether or not they will live in accord with the creation order. In a fallen world, two possible ways exist for us to live in God's world. We can orientate our lives to an idol (and there are many to chose from), which results in the distortions and corruptions that flow from such idolatry; or we can orientate our lives to the true God, which results in the liberating and restoring effects of renewal in Christ.

This distinction is vital for Christian involvement in public life. Without it, the result may be that Christians are tempted to withdraw from the public realm because of sin and idolatry, and to confine their activities to the church. While the members of the institutional church are not without sin, at least they are united in their goal of serving

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[32]A good explanation is found in Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 47-50.

and obeying God. Such withdrawal limits the church's impact to being a model of devotion to God for the rest of society, or to issuing prophetic moral statements about various moral issues. The other problem is that Christians may be tempted to pursue social and cultural renewal by sweeping aside all existing social and cultural practices and institutions, and rebuilding everything from proper foundations, shaped in obedience to God. The goal would be to build a "Christian society," with proper foundations shaped by scripture and Christian tradition.

This structure/direction distinction enables Christians to be engaged with social and cultural issues so as to affirm the creational good, reject the sinful distortion, and direct practices and institutions in service of God's kingdom according to creational law. This does not mean that Christians always get it right or that non-Christians always get it wrong. Believers may gain ethical insight from non-Christians, although such insight invariably bears some marks of idolatrous distortion. But, by being directed to the glory of God, guided by the insight of God's Word, and led by the Holy Spirit, believers can renew practices and institutions to promote God's goals of *shalom* and peace in society.

Redemption and the Redeemer

1. *The Nature of Redemption*

If sin is the primal catastrophe of cosmic proportions for creation, then redemption must be understood biblically as the work of restoration that encompasses the whole of the cosmos. Scripture speaks of redemption as "the renewal of all things" (Matt. 19:28), the event whereby God will "restore everything" (Acts 3:21). God has acted in and through Christ to "reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:20). Wolters rightly observes that redemption means the restoration of the original good creation.

Redemption does not bring anything new; "it is a matter of bringing new life and vitality to what was there all along."[33] Grace restores nature; it does not add anything new as a *donum superadditum*, a gift added on top of creation, which overrules the order of creation. Redemption is the divine reaffirmation of the created order, which humans are able to acknowledge, and submit to, because of the regenerating work of Christ in their hearts.[34] Since humans are the source of the world's problems, it is only by their redirection in Christ that the rest of the creation will be set free to attain its perfection.[35]

Redemption does not merely return creation to some perfect original state as it was in the Garden of Eden. We noted previously that God's creation is dynamic, purposive, directed toward a *telos*. Redemption removes creation from the distorted *telos* to which sin and idolatry have been, and restores it to its proper order, and proper *telos*. Redemption does not result in a new *telos* for creation, which bears no connection with the creation order. Rather, it returns creation to its original purpose, that destiny that it had from the beginning.[36] Gunton says its well: "Redemption or salvation is that divine action which returns the creation to its proper direction, its orientation to its eschatological destiny, which is to be perfected in due course of time by God's enabling it to be that which it was created to be."[37]

A corollary of this is that redemption should not lead Christians to wipe out all cultural developments that sinful humans have achieved, and start the process all over again from the beginning. Redemption restores cultural achievements at their current

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[33]Ibid., 58-59. N. T. Wright observes that at the time of Christ's earthly ministry Israel expected that her vindication by her God and king would involve the "restoration of creation" (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 194).

[34]O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 19-20.

[35]Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 64.

[36]O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 55.

[37]Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 56. See also Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 94.

stage of development. Wolters notes that Christians must choose "*restoration* rather than *repristination*."[38] The historical developments that have occurred have attained some measure of true progress in line with their creational order. But mixed with this proper development is some measure of sinful distortion. Thus, redemption affirms those positive developments which are in line with God's purposes, and strives to discern the sinful distortions so that the latter can be rejected and proper redirection can occur. This never happens overnight, but is effected as the restorative power of the gospel is brought to bear in a progressive manner.

2. *The Centrality of the Redeemer*

An obvious criticism of an ethic that is grounded in creation is that it does not give due significance to the centrality of Christ for Christian ethics. A full response to this charge would require a separate article that gives an extensive exposition of the place of Christ in a creational ethic. For the purposes of this present presentation, I will summarize the key points in such a response.

By way of introduction, two points should be made. First, scripture attests to Christ's comprehensive significance for all of creation, redemption, and history. Paul states in Col. 1:15-20 that in Christ all things hold together, indicating his unique position of supremacy over and coherence for all of creation. He is "the beginning and the first-born [$\pi\rho\omega\tau\acute{o}\tau\sigma\kappa\varsigma$] from among the dead so that in everything he might have the supremacy" (1:18). Here, the emphasis shifts to Christ's supremacy in his redemptive work of creating the new community of the people of God.[39] He is also the

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[38]Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 63.

[39]A good discussion of Col. 1:15-20, and of the two different senses of "firstborn" [$\pi\rho\omega\tau\acute{o}\tau\sigma\kappa\varsigma$] in Col. 1:15 and 1:18 is found in C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, gen. ed. C.F.D. Moule (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 58-71.

first-born who leads both the church and creation to the goal toward which all things are directed.[40] All this suggests Christ's wide-ranging significance for Christian ethics.

The second reason for a broader view of Christ's significance is that ethics that is distinctively Christian should arise out of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel tells of God's restoration of all of creation, and of the whole of our created life in Christ. It is too restrictive to limit the relevance of Christ's work to the subjective facets of our moral lives. Thus, we need to understand the impact of Christ on the whole scope of Christian ethics.[41]

Christ has a central role in the divine works of creation and providence. I have already noted previously that creation is the act of a triune God, involving cooperation between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[42] Numerous biblical passages indicate the mediatorial role of the Son in creation: he is the one through [*dia*] whom all things were made (Cf. John 1:3; 1Cor. 8:6). In Col. 1:15-17 Paul highlights Christ's supremacy over creation by designating him as the firstborn over all creation, the one by [*en*, *dia*] whom all things were made, the one who is before all things and in whom all things hold together. Together with other references to Christ as the origin of all things (cf. Rev. 1:17, 21:6), the New Testament clearly indicates his cosmological significance as mediator of creation.[43]

In addition, scripture describes the mediatorial place of the Son in the work of Providence. Col. 1:17 states that "in him all things hold together." He sustains the

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[40]A good exposition of the centrality of Christ for both creation and redemption in Col. 1:15-20 is found in O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 32-33.

[41]Noted in ibid., 11-13.

[42]Herman Bavinck describes this cooperation in this way: the Father is the personal first cause of creation, the Son is the personal agent of creation, and the Spirit is the personal immanent cause by which things live and move and have their being (*In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999], 42).

creation once it has been made, by unifying it under his lordship.[44] He is the foundation

of creation; the world is created for him as the Head and heir of all things.[45] The world

and all creatures in it are gathered under his lordship so that they again return to the

Father from whom they originate. The Son's mediatorial role in creation encompasses

the creational morality. As the one by whom all things were made, he establishes the

ethic to which all humans are subject. And as the providential ruler and unifying head

of creation, he is the one who sustains the enduring authority of the creational morality.

As previously noted, creation exists for historical development. With the

progress of history, Christ sends the Holy Spirit to direct his people to embody ethical

norms in various contexts. This is the aspect of ethics known as contextualization. The

people of God must understand the contexts within which they find themselves so that

they apply creational norms faithfully in these contexts.[46] Another essential feature of

the providential rule of Christ through the activity of the Spirit is to direct all of creation

toward the end, or *telos*, where it will find its true fulfillment. Christ directs humans in

the pursuit of the proper ends of things by helping them to properly understand

creation itself. The reason for this is that the specific ends of things arise, not from

redemption, but from the purposes inherent in creation itself. Insofar as humans are

acting in accord with God's good purposes for the development and completion of

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[43]Ibid., 42-43.

[44]See Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 21.

[45]Rev. 3:14 designates Christ as "the ruler of God's creation." Eph. 1:10 refers to all things in heaven and on earth being brought together under his headship.

[46]Some factors that give rise to different social contexts are: the historical level of development (or social differentiation), the level of economic, scientific, and technological development, variation in values and virtues in different cultures, and, in a sinful world, the existence of different patterns & practices of sin in various cultures. I discuss these factors and their significance for ethics, in my article, Guenther H. Haas, "Kuyper's Legacy for Christian Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (November 1998),

creation, their actions are morally good and right. And the fact that these purposes are grounded in creation is what gives Christian ethics its eschatological orientation, what Gunton calls its essential relationship to an "eschatology of completion."[47]

Sin has corrupted the whole of creation, thereby affecting the whole of human nature and all human activities. Only divine redemption, accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ, can overcome the devastating effects of sin and can effect the restoration of people to God, and of creation to its creational goodness and goal.[48] I briefly note here the various facets of Christ's redemptive work that are significant for ethics.

The incarnation of the Son in the person of Jesus Christ is the divine affirmation of the continuing goodness of the creation. In that sense, the incarnation can be considered as the foundation of Christian ethics.[49] Since the first Adam failed in his calling to implement the rule of God over all creation (with negative consequences for all his descendants), God sends His Son to be the second Adam to redirect creation to its original destiny by re-establishing and perfecting the divine rule over creation.[50] Those who are united to Christ by the grace of God participate in this new status that Christ achieved in his work as the incarnate mediator.[51]

346-49.

[47]Gunton makes this point in *Triune Creator*, 12.

[48]N. T. Wright observes that the first task of Christ is to redeem the old, Adamic humanity; "the second task ... is the gift of life which follows from Christ's exaltation" (*The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 38).

[49]Noted by O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 143, and Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 91.

[50]Gunton avers that in Christ we see humans as they were meant to be, namely, the rulers of the created order (*Triune Creator*, 184, 202).

[51]A good presentation of our participation in Christ is found in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX & XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.12.1-6.

Christ's redemptive work confirms the continuity between the creation order and the redemptive order which his own lordship establishes. This needs to be emphasized over against the dichotomy that many Christian ethicists make between a creational ethic grounded in the natural order and a kingdom (or redemptive) ethic grounded in the redemptive work of Christ.[52] The redemption of Christ restores creation so that it may attain its fulfilment.[53] And the fulfilment of creation can only occur if redemption restores the value of the creation order. These two features of Christ's redemption should not be separated, as, I believe, occurs in the dichotomy between creational ethics and kingdom ethics. In Christ there is a continuity between restoration and fulfilment. In restoring people to a relationship with God, Christ reintegrates them into his creational order so that they are freed to be the people that God intended them to be. That freedom consists in their pursuit of the creational purposes that God has for them to find the fullness of life.[54]

Because of their fall into sin humans have corrupted their natures as image-bearers of God, and their implementation of the task of the cultural mandate. While they retain the structural capacity to be lords of creation, they are no longer obedient to God in this calling. Thus, the central feature of Christ's work of salvation is to restore us to the image of God, the perfect expression of which is found in Christ (Col. 1:15). This

[52]This dichotomy is noted by Robin Parry in "Evangelicalism and Ethics" in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects,* ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 173-74. Examples of evangelicals who accept this dichotomy between creational and kingdom (or redemptive) ethics are: Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 84-88; and Miroslav Volf, "Eschatology, Creation, and Social Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (April 1995), 134-38; Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 198; William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 147-52.

[53]This is noted by Bartholomew in "Time for War," 109.

means that redemption can be understood as being conformed to the image of Christ, which consists of true knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24).[55]

The ascension of Christ is the re-assertion of the rule of God over the whole world.[56] Paul states in Eph. 1:22 and 1Cor. 15:24-28, with a clear reference in each passage to Psalm 8, that God has placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, so that he can bring all things in subjection to God the Father. Wolters observes: "Christ's work is a restoration to our original task, and his lordship is a re-affirmation of the original mandate."[57] As the representative man Christ fulfills the call to image God by bringing the creation to its divinely appointed fulfilment in submission to God.[58] It is because he has already fulfilled this role that the church as the body of redeemed humanity can again embrace this calling, actively implementing the finished work of Christ by the power of the Spirit. We receive Christ's royal status and dignity as God's gift to us in Christ, and we are called to represent Christ's kingdom in the manner in which we subdue and rule over the earth.[59]

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[54]See Fretheim, "Reclamation of Creation," 359.

[55]Calvin observes that "Christ is the most perfect image of God; if we are conformed to it, we are so restored that with true piety, righteousness, purity and intelligence we bear God's image" (*Institutes*, 1.15.4). See also J. Richard Middleton, "The Liberating Image?" 23.

[56]Noted by Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 146; Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 61-62; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ*, trans. Cornelius Lambregtse, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 223-24.

[57]Wolters, "Foundation Command," 10.

[58]Nicholas John Ansell makes this point in " The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge," *Christian Scholar's Review* 31 (Fall 2001), 39.

[59]See Middleton, "Liberating Image," 24; Ansell, "Call of Wisdom," 54-55.

It is important to note here that it is by the cross that Christ has won the victory to the place of lordship over creation.[60] This means that our implementation of his victory before his return occurs by walking in the way of the cross. Our stance toward development of human life and the rest of creation is one of suffering love, whereby we use our ruling power to liberate and empower fellow humans, and to liberate non-human creation from the destructive effects of sin.[61]

The resurrection of Christ is a confirmation of the victory that he won over sin and death on the cross. The resurrection is also the revelation of the new reality – the new creation – that this victory inaugurates.[62] The resurrection, thus, establishes the representative status of Christ, as the one in whom the fate of creation is bound up.[63] He is the "first-born from among the dead" (Col. 1:18), revealing in his bodily resurrection that the promised transformation of the cosmos – a transformation that opens up a new way of life before God – has already begun.[64]

Christ's resurrection has particular significance for the life of the community of faith defined by its union with Christ. In Rom. 6:1-10 Paul describes this as a union of believers with Christ in his death and resurrection. Dying with Christ means a radical break with sin, and rising with Christ means a participation in a new way of life by the power of his resurrection.[65] Andreas Schuele rightly comments that our connection with Christ as risen Lord "requires us to relate what we are destined to become, as well as

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[60]For an exposition of the victory of Christ in his crucifixion over sin, death and the powers of evil, and our participation in that victory, see Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 329-336.

[61]Noted by Middleton, "Liberating Image," 23-24; Ansell, "Call of Wisdom," 55.

[62]See Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 193-96.

[63]Noted by Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 23; Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 64.

[64]See Hans Schwarz, *Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 224.

[65]A good exposition of the significance of the union with Christ described in Rom. 6:1-10 for Christian ethics is found in Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 203-209.

what we are at any present moment and what we have been in the past, to the fullness of Christ's own life."[66] The resurrection confirms not only the victory of the cross for our redemption, but also our sanctification into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:29), and our ultimate glorification into fullness of the glory of Christ.[67]

While the resurrection of Christ points us to the ultimate goal of God's redemptive purposes, it does not lead us to a way of life that transcends the creation order. O'Donovan has argued persuasively that the resurrection of Christ is God's vindication of his creation, and of our created life in the world. As the act that ushers in God's kingdom, the resurrection recovers the moral order of creation, and reaffirms this order as the evangelical morality by which the church is to live. Thus, the ethics of Christ's kingdom is the ethics of creation. Evangelical ethics – the morality of the new creation in Christ – is the retrieval of the created moral order.[68]

The final aspect of the significance of Jesus Christ for Christian ethics is Christ as our moral guide. Here there are three significant features of Christ's moral authority that bear upon our understanding and implementation of Christian ethics. First, Christ sends the Spirit to us to form his life in us (Gal. 2:20) and guide us in our participation in the new creation (2Cor. 5:17). There is a significant change in our activity as moral agents before God.[69] The Spirit enables us to participate in Christ's authority within the creation order. Instead of having to receive specific instruction from God on the implementation of his ethical norms, as occurred before the coming of Christ, we are

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[66]Andreas Schuele, "Transformed into the Image of Christ: Identity, Personality, and Resurrection," in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, eds. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 223.

[67]See ibid., 223-25.

[68]O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 15-20; O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 181-84.

[69] In Gal. 4 Paul characterizes our new status before God as sons and daughters, no longer slaves, because of the dual gifts of the Son and the Spirit.

now granted the freedom and responsibility to do so ourselves. We are called to analyse a situation and determine what is appropriate obedience to God's law in that context('contextualization'). The Spirit of Christ works in us "the mind of Christ" (1Cor.2:16) so that we manifest the kingdom of Christ in our lives of obedience.[70]

The second feature of Christ as our moral guide is that he is our moral teacher. This is usually associated with Christ's fulfillment of the office of prophet. He reveals to his people the will of God for their lives in his teaching while on earth. After his ascension he teaches the church via the scriptures as he sends the Spirit to produce the books of the New Testament (inspiration) and to guide the church in embodying this teaching throughout history (illumination). This is not a new ethic, over against the Old Testament teachings, but a fulfillment of the law and prophets (cf. Matt. 7:12; 22:40). In fact, a number of biblical scholars make a connection between Christ as our moral teacher and the theme of wisdom in the Old Testament.[71] Both are rooted in the moral order of creation. As O'Donovan notes, "True knowledge of the moral order is knowledge 'in Christ'."[72]

A final aspect of Christ as our moral guide is his life as an example of moral obedience to the Father. In his life on earth Jesus embodies what life in the kingdom of God involves.[73] He calls his disciples to imitate him through self-denial and bearing the cross (Matt. 16:24-25). The writers of the New Testament epistles also call us to imitate

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[70]For good discussions of this see Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 35; and O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 24-25.

[71]Bartholomew, "Time for War," 92; Wright, *Walking in the Ways*, 121; see also Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," [SBL presidential address, D 8 1984] *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (March 1985): 6-7.

[72]O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 85; see also Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 26.

[73]This features include: his Abba-relation with the Father (John 17:1-3), being filled with the Spirit (Acts 10:38), love (John 15:9ff), joy (John 15:11), peace (John 14:27), obedience (John 17:4), compassion for the poor and marginalized (Matt. 15:32; Luke 4:18), etc.

Christ (Eph. 5:1-2; 1Cor. 11:1). Of course, there are unique features to the life of Christ

due to his distinctive calling as the Redeemer of the World. But our participation in

Christ also involves our modelling our lives after some features of his own life.[74] Here,

Scripture functions as our guide as it directs us in the way of obedience.

Key Tenets for Kuyperian Public Ethics

Having presented the biblical and theological foundations for a creational moral

order, I now want to focus on the distinctive features of the Kuyperian tradition that

bear upon Christian involvement in public life, and especially the mandate to bring

Christian ethics to bear upon moral and public policy issues in the broader society.

These three derive, in some measure from the neo-Calvinist insight of the foundational

nature of the creation order and God's faithfulness in sustaining that order. But they

also indicate a commitment to the seriousness of both the disruptive effects of sin, and

the transforming power of redemption in Jesus Christ to effect positive change through

disciples of Christ. These features are the antithesis, common grace, and sphere

sovereignty.

1. *Antithesis*

The antithesis refers to the root spiritual division that permeates all of society

and, thus, all human activity. Herman Dooyeweerd describes this as "the unrelenting

battle between two spiritual principles that cut through…all mankind."[75] This is the

conflict to which scripture witnesses in various ways throughout the canon. In the

account of the fall in Gen. 3, God speaks of the enmity between the seed of the serpent

and the seed of the woman. In Deuteronomy God lays out before the Israelites the

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[74]For a good discussion of Christ as our moral example, see O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 146-151.
[75]Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*, trans John
Kraay, eds. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), 5.

option of a way of life of blessings and life, or of way of life of curses and death (Deut. 30:15ff; cf. Deut. 28). The gospel of John records Jesus' teachings on the opposition between kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light (John 3:19-21). It is essentially the conflict between a religious orientation to the one true God, and an orientation to an idol.[76] The orientation shapes not merely the worldview and behaviour of individuals, but, more importantly, the culture, science and social structures of a civilization.

The antithesis should not be understood to refer to a neat division between Christians and non-Christians. The antithesis also runs through the church, and through the lives of all believers as they participate in a larger culture (in the West) shaped by the sinful and idolatrous spirit of the Enlightenment. And yet, we can speak of a division between the church and the world because, over against our culture, the church is rooted in the one true God through Jesus Christ, and Christians are committed to embodying this faithfully in all spheres of life.

The clear implication of the antithesis for social involvement is that Christians must engage in discussions of moral and justice issues in the public domain guided by their deepest religious commitment. Modern western society puts pressure on religious believers of all types to abandon those moral arguments shaped by their religious commitments, and to participate in these discussions with language and arguments that are secular and neutral.[77] But Kuyperians clearly understand that to give in to this demand is already to have lost the battle at the deepest spiritual level. To embrace

[76]Dooyeweerd identifies the root Christian religious orientation as "creation, fall and redemption through Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit" (Ibid., 28). Any other ultimate commitment is idolatrous.

[77]Examples of these are: Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 288-92; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 136-39, 399-407; and Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy in Philosophy," in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially pp. 259ff.

neutral or secular arguments leads one to be absorbed into the dominant cultural framework, such that the terms of discussion and the acceptable resolutions are shaped by that framework.[78]

How then shall Christians engage in public moral and justice issues? Kuyperians have put forth various proposals for involvement in the issues of public life without bracketing one's deepest commitments. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore these proposals in detail.[79] Generally, the proposals urge the recognition of a pluralism of spiritual commitments in society that permits people to believe, to live out their beliefs, and to argue for their distinctive positions in matters of public morality and justice. In the realm of public justice, persuasion and change must occur peacefully, through constitutional procedures, via public arguments and lobbying, and the decisions of properly elected officials.

At the same time, Christians have to use language and concepts that communicate to those outside the Christian confessional community. Otherwise, as Richard Mouw observes, we will never persuade those who do not share our Christian convictions. Drawing upon the thought of the Catholic ethicist, Bryan Hehir, Mouw notes that, while Christians must speak the language that the state understands, they should also address in the wider civil community those foundational issues that undergird specific public moral debates and policy issues.[80]

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[78]Stanley Hauerwas notes this in his perceptive comment concerning the modern ideology of pluralism: "pluralism is the peace treaty left over from past wars that now benefits the victors of those wars" ("Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," *First Things* 53 [May 1995)], 47).

[79]For example, see: James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civil Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and David Y. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 182-214.

[80]Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 84-85.

2. *Common Grace*

Although the effects of sin are comprehensive and devastating for all creation and humanity, God does not turn his back on this fallen world. Instead of treating humans with the condemnation that they deserve, he reaches out to them in grace. This is evident in the special, saving grace of redemption in Jesus Christ, whereby he reconciles people to himself. But there is also his general, or common, grace whereby he shows favour to those outside of the family of God.

This divine favour of common grace is evident, first of all, in the general goodness of God that he continues to show to all humanity: sunshine and rain on the righteous and unrighteous (Matt. 5:45), the provisions for life and the joys of life (Acts 14:17), and the opportunities for social and cultural development (Acts 17:26-28). God sustains the image of God in humans and pours out gifts in the arts and sciences so that there might be cultural and social development for the common good.[81]

There another aspect of God's common grace, which has two sides to it, both of which are related to the creation order, and both of which are important for Christian activity in the public sphere. First there is the activity of God in curbing the effects of sin. Had sin runs its full course, life on earth would have "turned into a hell;"[82] all things on earth would have become "desolate and destroyed."[83] But God has made a covenant with creation not to destroy the earth and not to cut off all life (Gen. 8:21-22;

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[81]Calvin (*Institutes*, 2.2.12-16) describes the "natural gifts" in the arts and sciences that the Spirit gives to humans to enable harmonious social life and further cultural development. Kuyper ("Common Grace," 178-81) and Dooyeweerd (*Roots*, 37-38) both affirm God's maintaining the image of God in humans to allow continuing dominion over and development of creation for the improvement of human life. Kuyper calls this the "exterior" work of common grace (181).

[82]Kuyper, "Common Grace," 169.

[83]Bavinck, "Common Grace," 61.

9:1-17) so that human life and cultural development may continue.[84] He preserves the world and human life by upholding the ordinances of creation, including the moral order. Through the moral law, God impresses upon humans the fact that certain human actions warrant moral censure, whether through social disapproval or legal punishment as criminal activity.

The other side of this work of common grace is the sense in all humans of, what Calvin calls, "impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order."[85] Because the law of God is written on all hearts (Rom. 2:14-15), they have a sense of goodness, justice, equity, and honesty in human social relations.[86] This involves more than merely the human commitment to the existence of external social justice in the public realm, so that there may be some measure of harmony and fairness in social relations and interactions. It involves an internal sense of morality and justice. Kuyper argues for an "interior" work of common grace, which includes a high regard for family life, natural love, mutual loyalty, integrity, and "the improvement of the public conscience."[87] Even in the face of the corrupting effects of sin, God's common grace is operative through the creational moral order to create some measure of genuine personal and social sensitivity and commitment to those principles of morality and justice that are necessary for human social life.

This dual activity of God's common grace via his maintenance of the moral order is the basis for Christian involvement in public life. Because God continues to bring his norms and principles to bear on all humanity, Christians can appeal to that which is constitutive of the very nature of human moral and social life. It is not a matter of our

[84]Noted by Bavinck (ibid., 40).
[85]Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.
[86]Calvin discusses this in his *Commentary on Romans*, 2:14-15.

imposing a partisan religious viewpoint on the rest of society, disregarding the pluralistic nature of most modern western societies. It is a matter of promoting the one order of human life which all men and women have a sense of. The common grace in the creation order gives us hope of attaining a measure of agreement. Jonathan Chaplin says it well: "the very structures of created order, revealing themselves within the inclinations and hopes of human beings everywhere, are continually sustained by God and so, to some degree, are potentially recognizable by all, whatever their confessional perspective."[88]

Of course, this doctrine of common grace stands in tension with the previous theme of the antithesis. But it simply highlights the importance of discerning (what Wolters calls) structure and direction. In every domain or issue of life Christians must discern the creational goodness evident there, and the spiritual direction that is shaping it, whether it be in an idolatrous direction or in conformity to the kingdom of God. The important truth of common grace is that, no matter how much a human institution, practice, or product has been shaped by an idolatrous spirit, traces of creational goodness and truth still remain.[89]

3. *Sphere Sovereignty*

The concept of sphere sovereignty was first articulated in its general form by Abraham Kuyper, and developed and refined by his disciples.[90] On this view human

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[87]Kuyper, "Common Grace," 181.

[88]Jonathan Chaplin, "Defining 'Public Justice' in a Pluralistic Society: Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Insight," *Pro Rege* 32 (March 2004), 9a.

[89]See Dooyeweerd, *Roots*, 37-39.

[90]Kuyper articulated his understanding of sphere sovereignty in his address given at the inauguration of the Free University of Amsterdam on Oct. 20, 1880. The full text of his message can be found in "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 463-90.

society is made up of a diversity of institutions, each "deserving recognition on its own terms," and each containing "its own unique domain of rights, duties, and authorities – its own 'sphere of justice'."[91] Each one of the plurality of institutions of human society – family, church, state, school, business, labour union, art cooperative, voluntary association, and other social organizations – is granted its distinctive shape and sphere of sovereignty by God. No institution has sovereignty over other institutions so that it grants them the right to exist and function.[92] Again, this is grounded in the creation order, in the nature of the very structure of creational social life.[93]

This understanding assumes social differentiation between the various institutions, something that has not always been the case in western societies, and is not the case today in many societies around the world. The neo-Calvinistic insight is that undifferentiated societies – where church, state, business, education, etc. are intertwined – are societies that have not yet developed according to God's intended purposes for human life. The proper unfolding of human society should result in this social differentiation, where each institution functions with a specific focus and responsibility. This diversity allows people and communities to flourish according to the pluriform ways of engaging in the various modes of cultural and social activities. It also prevents power from being concentrated in any one institutional centre because it distributes power and authority over many such centres.[94]

What then is the role of the state? Kuyperians insist that its role is to maintain public justice. This means that the state must recognize the pluralistic nature of society,

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[91]Chaplin, "Defining 'Public Justice'," 3a.
[92]Noted by Koyzis, *Political Illusions*, 230.
[93]Peter S. Heslam observes that this is the basis for Kuyper's view of sphere sovereignty (*Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 155).
[94]Noted by Chaplin, "Defining 'Public Justice'," 4a.

and the many different legitimate spheres of authority and responsibilities. It should establish a public space where individuals and institutions might develop according to their respective callings before God, and where they might interact with each other in ways that respect each others' integrity, and not violate their respective rights. The state also ensures this by maintaining the boundaries between the various spheres of society, and by adjudicating conflicts that occur between the various spheres.[95] The state only becomes involved in the workings of an institution where the institution, usually through those in positions of authority, abuses this authority by exercising it beyond its legitimate bounds, encroaching upon the personal integrity of individuals or their rights to function in other institutions.[96]

The Kuyperian theme of sphere sovereignty has several implications for Christians' involvement in public life. First, this means that the church should not attempt to influence public life by working to make the institutional church the dominant institution in society, or by intertwining the authority of the church with that of the state, according to the historical model of Christendom. This would be a rejection of the historical development of social differentiation, which is a positive – creational – development in human social life.

Second, it is not the calling of the institutional church to engage in issues of public policy and morality. Kuyper made a distinction between the church as institution

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[95]An obvious question here is: Who ensures that the state acts properly according to its divinely-prescribed role? Koyzis suggest two responses to this question: First, the state is controlled by establishing a political system within which state power is distributed over various branches of government, exemplified in the system of checks and balances written into the American Constitution. Second, the very activity of people in seeking and doing justice in the diversity of social institutions acts as a constraint on the temptation of the state to overstep its bounds (Koyzis, *Political Illusions*, 262-63).

[96]Examples of this are: parents who physically abuse their children, schools that practice religious discrimination, and businesses that prohibit employee involvement in political parties.

and the church as organism.[97] The church as institution is restricted to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, worship and prayer, the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, and church discipline.[98] The church as organism refers to all members of the body of Christ who are involved in the diversity of callings and institutions throughout society. It is the church in this second sense which is called to engage the whole range of issues and practices in social and cultural life. It is Christians in politics, in business, in education, in medicine, in the arts, in labour associations, and so on, who are called to bring the lordship of Christ to bear upon those spheres and/or institutions through the articulation of their perspective and the faithful practice of their calling. Kuyper and his disciples have also been committed to social and cultural influence through the formation of distinctively Christian organizations of believers who are active in the various spheres of society and culture.[99]

Thirdly, since sphere sovereignty recognizes the plurality of social institutions, Christian impact upon the larger society should consist in Christians' participation in the diversity of institutions and associations according to their callings. They should resist the liberal tendency to view the state or government as the primary agent for shaping human social life in modern society. This liberal stance inevitably increases the power of the state by allowing it to encroach on more and more spheres of human activity. Chaplin notes: "Recognizing this plurality [of social institutions] distributes power and authority across many centres of society and so helps prevent illicit and oppressive concentrations of power in any one centre."[100]

[97]Kuyper, "Common Grace," 194-95.
[98]Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Foundation Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 66-67.
[99]Noted by Heslam, *Creating*, 134.
[100]Chaplin, "Defining 'Public Justice'," 4a.

The positive side of this is recognizing that Christian influence upon the larger society occurs from a diversity of social and institutional engagements. As Christians live out their callings faithfully within their institutional callings, as they are able to be a leavening influence upon those social institutions made up of believers and non-believers, and as they form distinctive Christian associations to promote their distinctive viewpoints, they may, by the gracious working of the Spirit of God, have a impact upon the larger community.

Conclusion

Of course, such social engagement by Christians must always be done with humility, for discernment and implementation of moral principles is a *human* activity, and therefore subject to human fallibility and sin, even among Christians. But with the proper servant perspective – that we are involved in such activity for the service of our neighbours and for the glory of God – we are called to engage public life on the basis of God's ongoing commitment to sustain this world, and to accomplish his purposes in and through the faithful activity of his people. His promise is to send the Spirit to be at work, not only among his people, but also in the world to accomplish his purposes. So, we participate in public life open to the amazing work of the God through earthen vessels. Who knows what the Spirit of God may do!

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