

## All Things New: Neo-Calvinist Groundings for Social Work

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*“There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.... See, I am making all things new.” This vision from Revelation 21—perhaps the most comforting words a Christian in social work will ever hear—provides a beacon of hope in the face of despair. This article grounds this hopeful vision within Reformed Christianity, specifically within the neo-Calvinist tradition, and highlights contributions of this tradition to social work and social welfare.*

**I**N 1891, ABRAHAM KUYPER GAVE THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE FIRST Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands. The burning question on the minds of Christians across Europe was what to do about the torrent of social problems erupting in cities across the western world. Two emerging approaches battled for supremacy, each promising a golden future: capitalism and socialism. Both approaches rested upon the twin foundations of human autonomy and scientific rationality. Both approaches explicitly rejected God and the millennia-old traditions of Christianity as hopelessly outdated for the complex social problems at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this context, Abraham Kuyper emerged as a Christian David fighting a secular Goliath. Vehemently rejecting humanist diagnoses and solutions, Kuyper (2011/1891) unapologetically declared:

We as Christians must place the strongest possible emphasis on the majesty of God’s authority and on the absolute validity of his ordinances, so that, even as we condemn the rotting social structure of our day, we will never try to erect any structure except one that rests on foundations laid by God (p. 58).

Kuyper was a whirlwind in Dutch public life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pastoring rural and urban churches, founding and editing two newspapers, founding a university, founding and leading a political party, and even serving a term as prime minister (Bratt, 2013).

Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we can scarcely imagine a prominent public figure speaking on so many contemporary issues with such unabashed and explicit reference to Jesus Christ as Lord over “every square inch,” as Kuyper famously declared. Kuyper was one of the most prominent forefathers of what has become known as neo-Calvinism. To confront the pressing social problems of the day, Kuyper urged that we needed more architects and fewer physicians. That is, we need to get to the roots of the problems—“the rotting social structure”—rather than tinkering at the margins, or bandaging the wounds.

Armed with the incisive scalpel of Scripture, Kuyper provided an “architectonic critique” that sliced away the pretences and idolatry of both market-based and state-driven solutions to social problems:

Only one thing is necessary if the social question is to exist for you: you must realize the untenability of the present state of affairs, and you must account for this untenability not by incidental causes but by a fault in the very foundation of our society's organization. If you do not acknowledge this and think that social evil can be exorcised through an increase in piety, or through friendlier treatment or more generous charity, then you may believe that we face a religious question or possibly a philanthropic question, but you will not recognize the *social* question. This question does not exist for you until you exercise an architectonic critique of human society, which leads to the desire for a different arrangement of the social order (Kuyper, 2011/1891, p. 44-45).

Kuyper was many things, but he was not a social worker; yet, it isn't hard for us as Christian social workers to be stirred by his words. Who among us does not share his sense that something is wrong at the very core of our society—as wrong now as it was then? Who among us does not also question the limits of piety or charity or philanthropy to get to the roots of the social problems we face? And who among us does not also long for the day when all things will be made new, and there will be no more mourning, crying, pain, or death?

My aim in this article is to provide an introduction and an overview of neo-Calvinism as it has developed in the past one hundred or so years, and how it has shaped our capacity as the body of Christ to engage in the architectonic critiques necessary to get to the roots of the social problems that face us as Christians in social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I do not do this as a neutral observer: I grew up in, and for most of my life I have been

connected with, a small homogenous religious community made up of Dutch Protestant Calvinists, many of whom immigrated to Canada after the Second World War. Recounting war stories is a favourite activity in my family gatherings (see den Hartog & Kasaboski (2009) for an example), and one of the favourite topics was the Dutch resistance to the Nazi occupation. I swell with pride when I hear how my grandparents harboured a Jewish couple in their attic while being forced to feed German officers in their dining room, or how my father and his boyhood friends devised various schemes to thwart a German Panzer division parked in the woods near his house. But, then I heard the story of how my grandfather, before settling on Canada as the destination to resettle his family, seriously considered instead South Africa. I shudder at the thought that I could have been born there instead, because it was the same Dutch Calvinism that inspired resistance to the Nazis that was also the primary theological rationale for apartheid.

My own immersion in a specific Christian tradition has led me to dig deeper into its history, doctrines, and practices in order to better understand myself, but also to probe at its claims, contradictions and ambiguities. In doing so, I have at times been moved to pride, and at other times I have cringed in embarrassment. In this article I take inspiration from Terry Wolfer, who, in a previous Alan Keith Lucas Lecture, described the contributions of Anabaptist theology and practice for social work (Wolfer, 2011).

We are in an age when institutions and traditions have come under heavy criticism (Crouch, 2013). There is a profound level of distrust in the authority that comes embedded in institutions (Koyzis, 2014), and this distrust has worked its way into the church as well (Hunter, 2010). Increasing numbers of Christians seek to avoid denominational identification, preferring instead to a more individualistic expression. Sayings such as “*no creed but Christ*” and “*just the Bible and me*” capture this anti-institutional and individualistic mindset. In this context, First Things blogger Matthew Block’s recent observations about interpreting scripture are instructive:

Personal piety and a desire for truth are not guarantees that we always read Scripture aright. Consequently, we must rely upon our brothers and sisters in the faith to correct and rebuke us when we err, demonstrating our errors by Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). And this reliance on brothers and sisters refers not merely to those Christians who happen to be alive at the same time as us. Instead, it refers to the whole Christian Church, throughout time (Block, 2014).

As Block suggests, too many Christians are ignorant of or misunderstand the history of Christianity or their particular place in that history. In that sense, Christians are no different than many North Americans, who have a decidedly ahistoric and presentist bias. As some Christian scholars ironically point out, even though these Christians “often deny being influ-

enced by any tradition at all... In point of fact, there is a long tradition of antitraditionalism within the history of Christianity” (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004, p. 89). We are human, after all, and as humans, it is impossible for us to inhabit some generic, abstract space. We exist in a particular time and place. Our walk of faith follows others’ footsteps, whether we are aware of it or not. It is important to be aware of what traditions have shaped us, so that we are better able to see the insights and gaps in our own traditions but also in others. As a Christian and as a social worker, I cannot think of a context more suited to explore these ideas than NACSW. I have come to know NACSW as a safe place in which Christians from many traditions can gather. I have had the opportunity to learn a great deal from fellow sisters and brothers in Christ in the fifteen or so years that I have been part of this organization. I hope that this article contributes to an ongoing process in which we can learn from each other.

### **Neo-Calvinists on the Christian Family Tree**

Picture the universal church as a tree with many branches. The trunk of the tree is the early Christian church established by Jesus’ followers in the first century. As we know, the church has gone through countless divisions—many (most?) of them fractious—and our collective history is not always pretty (Marty, 1959). Nevertheless, we confess that the body of Christ finds its unity in a collective rootedness in Jesus Christ, and that it finds expression in a multitude of ethnic, cultural, doctrinal, and other kinds of diversity. Neo-Calvinism emerged from the Protestant branch of Dutch Calvinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It traces its lineage back to John Calvin, and even further back to Augustine (Wolters, 2005a). It is so-named because it represented an explicit agenda to refocus the power of the gospel to the entire world, rather than limiting God’s redemptive actions to only the personal salvation of souls (Kuyper, 1931, p. 118-9; Wolterstorff, 1983). Kuyper was one of the leading proponents of this movement and outlined the agenda of a new Calvinist project in his “Lectures on Calvinism,” a series of addresses he gave at Princeton University in 1898 (Kuyper, 1931). Neo-Calvinism had a substantial impact on Dutch society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly in providing a theological and political argument for a unique social arrangement referred to as “pillarization” (or *verzuiling* in Dutch) in which government provided space and resources for various social institutions according to the four most prominent religious and political communities in Dutch society at that time: Protestant, Catholic, socialist, and liberal (Daly, 2009; Koyzis, 2015a; Monsma & Soper, 1997).

Despite Kuyper’s lectures in Princeton in 1898, neo-Calvinism did not gain much traction in North America until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and that impact was not primarily in politics, but in philosophy. In 1970, two philosophers at Calvin College, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff,

spearheaded an academic movement that improbably revolutionized the field of philosophy (Smith, 2013). They both drew on Kuyper's claim that no one is neutral; everyone believes in something, and cannot help but bring their beliefs into whatever they do. While the secular field of philosophy claimed to be founded on the neutral solid ground of objective reason, Plantinga and Wolterstorff exposed the flaws of that argument, and posited instead that philosophers ought to come clean with their points of view, rather than pretending to be neutral (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2013).

Here they dovetailed with what we now recognize as one of the central insights of postmodernism: we're all biased; everyone tells some story that helps them make sense of the world, which we use to filter and interpret things around us. Further, the truths we once thought to be universal, objective, and neutral have turned out to be nothing more than particular stories that have all too often been used to marginalize and minimize others' experiences and participation (Middleton & Walsh, 1995; Smith, 2003). Plantinga and Wolterstorff recognized the prophetic genius of Kuyper and his Christian philosophic heirs and their insights about the worldview claims that all humans make. Thus, these two Christian philosophers were able to leverage the postmodern movement and carve out a legitimate space for Christians in philosophy.

The significance of this accomplishment radiated beyond philosophy. In fact, Time Magazine singled out Plantinga in a 1980 article, and followed that up by putting the "new Calvinism" on the cover of their 2009 issue, "Ten Ideas Changing the World." More recently, the New York Times declared that "Evangelicals find themselves in the midst of a Calvinist revival" (Oppenheimer, 2014; Joustra, 2014a). Admittedly, these mainstream media sources often mess up the nuances of the various streams of Calvinism (Robinson, 2014), and just about everything else about Christianity, for that matter. Nevertheless, neo-Calvinism has had a significant impact on North American Christianity (Bolt, 2000; Daly, 2009; Kits, 1987; Monsma, 2012).

### **The Distinctive Accent of Neo-Calvinism**

To understand the differences among branches on the Christian tree risks accentuating disagreements rather than commonalities. Another way of thinking about these differences is to think of Christians as speaking the same language, but with different accents (Plantinga, 2002, p. xv). What accent do neo-Calvinists speak with? In this section I want to outline five key themes that mark the neo-Calvinist accent as distinct. Focusing on these distinctives is not the same as claiming that each on their own is unique to neo-Calvinists, for, of course, there is much that is shared among many Christian traditions. What I will claim is that these five *taken together* represent an approach within Christianity that is unique; that is, in these five areas neo-Calvinists speak with an accent that no other Christians do. At

the same time, this is not the same thing as suggesting that this particular accent is better than other accents spoken by Christians, rather, as I've said, each tradition has its own insights and gaps.

### **God's Sovereignty**

Calvinists—neo or otherwise—usually begin by focusing on the absolute, non-negotiable and incomprehensible sovereignty of the triune God. Jesus declared before issuing the Great Commission that “all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18 NIV). Calvinists follow this truth to its logical consequence: even our salvation is ultimately God's choice, not ours. The Calvinist emphasis on divine election has generated much controversy, but the *neo*-Calvinist accent doesn't get hung up there, and neither will I (for more see Mouw's *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 2004a).

Instead, another insight flows from recognizing God's sovereignty that particularly defines the neo-Calvinist accent, and that is the one captured by Kuyper's arguably most-often quoted passage: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry out, ‘Mine!’” (Kuyper, 1880). If you want to get a sense of what this means to a neo-Calvinist social worker, ask her to give you a tour of her agency and point out to you which parts of the agency are secular and which parts are religious. You will see her squirm and frown and eventually hear her say something that echoes Kuyper, “But it's all religious!” Because God is sovereign over the entire creation, everything is God's and nothing is outside his authority and control.

### **Creation—Fall—Redemption (“Grace Restores Nature”)**

The remaining distinctive aspects of a neo-Calvinist accent all flow from this recognition of God's all-encompassing, non-negotiable sovereignty. Not only is God sovereign over His entire cosmos (this is the word favoured by neo-Calvinists to describe everything that God created, both material and spiritual), but He is also committed to it. In other words, God has a sustaining investment in nurturing and upholding everything He has made. God cares about it all, and is not about to abandon any of it. As Biblical scholar Al Wolters (2005b) says, “God did not make junk, and God does not junk what he made” (p. 49).

Contrary to the “Left Behind” notion of a faithful remnant being snatched to safety as the rest of the world is left to catastrophic destruction, neo-Calvinists point to the scriptural evidence that, “God so loved the *cosmos* that He gave his only son”—yes, “world” in this verse is best translated as “cosmos,” by which is meant the entirety of created reality, not simply the people in our world (Mouw, 2011, p. 12). How does

scripture provide evidence of God's commitment to the entire creation? Neo-Calvinists read the Bible as not simply a series of stories of God and His people that provide insights and lessons for our lives today, but rather as a lens, or a framework, or a worldview, through which one understands everything else (Greidanus, 1982; Wolters, 2005b).

That worldview framework can be captured in the phrase, "*grace restores nature*," or in the three-part structure of creation—fall—redemption (Wolters, 2005b). To say that grace restores nature is to describe how God in His love relates to the world He made. It points to how God *has* acted, is acting, and *will* act intentionally to reclaim and renew all of what He made. God is not distant from His creation, but rather demonstrates His love for all of reality by being actively engaged to restore the world to the flourishing that He intended. A creation—fall—redemption framework highlights three foundational principles that guide how we interpret everything: God created the world as a context for *shalom* (Wolterstorff, 1983), but humans rebelled against God and disrupted not only the intended *shalom* but the very creation itself, and in response, God enters the world and sets about to restore His creation to its original goodness.

### **"It's All Good"**

The central insight that the creation is good, but fell into sin through human disobedience, and is now being restored by God leads us to another insight: the world cannot be divided into sacred and secular, holy and unholy, good and evil. Christians sometimes struggle with how much we should separate ourselves from "worldly" influences so that we don't become corrupted. Since God created it good, there are no parts of his creation that are inherently evil. True, there is evil in the world, but that evil can be traced to human rebellion, not the things of creation themselves. In other words, each created thing is simultaneously good, but also tainted by sin. This makes more sense if we understand God's creation not only as all of the physical, inanimate, and non-human reality, but also humans and their societies and cultures as well. God created these too, although in society and culture, God gave humans the high calling of being His co-creators. That is one sense in which we are His image-bearers, because we image in a tiny way His creativity (Middleton, 2005).

Further, while God gives his laws for the operation and regulation of the physical world—laws of gravity, thermodynamics, the changing of the seasons, the ordering and movement of the stars, and so on—God's laws also apply to society and culture. Just as there is a structure and proper ordering for the physical world, so there is for the human and social world. Society is God's creation and operates according to God's laws, or at least it should. If you're thinking at this point that there is scant evidence of that, then you're right. The key difference between the laws of gravity, say, and the laws for the

social world, is the agency of humans. The physical world cannot choose to disobey God's laws, whereas humans can. In other words, there is a *structure* to social arrangements that recognizes these are not merely human inventions, but rather are parts of God's creation. When social arrangements conform to God's laws then we can say that they are operating the way God intended. The word *norm* can be used in this context to differentiate between God's structures for the non-human world, that is, His laws, and God's structures for the human and social world (Wolters, 2005b).

The implication of this insight is that human and social entities—marriages, families, schools, businesses, labour unions, governments, and so on—are part of God's creation and must conform to His norms. There is, in other words, a right way and a wrong way to structure a marriage, or a government, or a school; these social entities do not operate only according to the whims of humans, but rather must adhere to God's designs. When they don't, it is not because of the way God created them, but rather because of the way humans have misunderstood or misapplied—both wilfully and ignorantly—God's norms.

When we say that all of creation is good, therefore, we are saying that there is inherent good in the structures of things that God has made. However, we know full well that not all marriages or schools or governments or whatever are actually good. What we see here are God's good structures that are being distorted or corrupted away from His intentions. They are misdirected away from His norms and instead, pointed to some other direction. This distinction—between the inherent structures of things, and their direction—either towards or away from God—helps us to avoid the sacred/secular, holy/unholy dualism (Chaplin, 2011; Wolters, 2005b).

### **Salvation Isn't Just For You and Me**

Many western hemisphere Christians, embedded as we are in modern, liberal, individualism, have reduced the entire gospel message to what Jesus has done for *me* (Middleton, 2014; Peterson, 2005). However, the biblical story is not just about our own individual salvation. John 3:16 says “for God so loved *the world*—not, “for God so loved *Jim*,” or even “for God so loved *the people*.” Of course God dearly loves each one of us, but we misunderstand and limit the scope of God's love if we think of salvation as only something that He does for each of us (Peterson, 2005; Wright, 2008). Paul says in Colossians 1, “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him [that is, Christ], and *through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven*, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross” (emphasis added).

The neo-Calvinist distinction between the structure and direction of creation—that is, in the inherent goodness of all of what God made, intertwined with the sinful human misdirections that have been embedded

into everything—alerts us to what God is up to. He is not content just to save our souls; no, He has much grander ambitions than that. God has set about to restore it all! He wants to reclaim and renew *all* of what He created (Middleton, 2014). When Jesus stilled the storm, the disciples said, “Who is this, that even the clouds obey Him?” And, when Christ gave up His life on the cross, the very earth trembled and shook, and the skies went dark. Clearly, this is bigger than we think. In fact, since we see through a glass darkly, we can barely grasp the immensity of God’s plans.

Salvation, then, is the ongoing action of God to carry out His purposes in His creation to restore and renew it to the glory that He has in mind. Through God’s grace, we are restored to relationship with Him, but it goes further than this. God’s grace extends to the entire creation. Romans 8:22 describes creation as “groaning as in the pangs of childbirth,” and thankfully, God hears those groans. That means that God’s salvation restores not just humans, but human and social arrangements and artifacts as well. God wants to renew and restore marriages, families, businesses, choirs, hockey teams, movies, paintings, theatre productions, automobiles, can openers, combines, apps, websites, and on and on and on—all of it. God seeks flourishing and shalom and thriving in His creation, and to do that, He is invested in an immense project of restoration and renewal, the likes of which we can scarcely imagine (Peterson, 2005).

This should give great hope for social workers to invest in the tasks of working within the various settings—agencies, communities, neighbourhoods, businesses—that God has placed us, because these settings are not just earthly things that God will rescue us from. No, these are His creation and He will not abandon neither us nor them.

### **The True Story of the Whole World**

How is God doing this? How do we know how God is doing this? Because the Bible tells us so. At one level, the Bible is a jumbled collection of disparate historical fragments, varied literary forms, official and tedious records, breathtakingly beautiful poetry, incomplete correspondence, apocalyptic visions, and more. But step back from these seemingly incoherent pieces and what comes into focus is one broad narrative arc: God created the world, humans rebelled, and God is setting things straight. Between the seemingly trivial, sometimes bizarre, often violent and tragic particularities and that grand, simple story, one can detect the thread of a convoluted, messy plotline, a story about the world—not just the world of Bible times, but of our world, too—and how God acts through human means to carry out His purposes. Bartholomew and Goheen, in *The Drama of Scripture* (2004), suggest that the Bible is a drama that can be told in six acts: Act I: creation, Act II: fall, Act III: redemption initiated through the people of Israel, Act IV: redemption accomplished in Jesus’ death and resurrection, Act V: the spreading kingdom

of God through Christ's body, the church, and Act VI: the final establishment of the kingdom of God in the return of Christ. If the first scene of Act V is the early church spreading throughout the Roman Empire, then we could view the story of the church since then as scene two.

For Christians, the Bible is not simply a collection of inspiring stories about other people; this is *our* story. We can understand our place in the world and make sense of the events of our time and place in terms of this drama, in which we join with the "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) and are now part of God's unfolding plan to reclaim and renew His creation by using humans to accomplish His purposes. We are not just random individuals whose puny efforts in social work are simply bandaging wounds that cannot be healed, but rather, we are actors in a drama that we did not write; God is writing and directing the play, and calls us to our parts. Our task is to be faithful and obedient to the parts we play in the drama and let Him worry about the rest.

Further, we place our hope in a dramatic and controversial claim: this Biblical story is not simply, as postmodernists would have it, our particular story that we tell ourselves to make sense of our own reality. No, the power of the Biblical story is its claim that it is *everyone's* story about *everything*. This is really the way it is. This story is the true account of how things really are and what really matters. It is, therefore, a metanarrative, a story that trumps every other story and subsumes all other experiences and perspectives to its account (Goheen & Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 2008). As theologian N.T. Wright explains, "The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth." (Wright, 1992, p. 41-2).

This is not to say that everyone believes it, accepts it, or agrees with it. Not at all. This is why the Biblical story is both so powerful and so offensive. The Biblical story is powerful because it tells of the one true Lord and Saviour over all things, who alone holds the promise of complete healing and wholeness for all humanity's ills; and it is offensive because it unambiguously challenges every other pretender to His throne. No wonder it's easy to dismiss or reject this story, because to tell it and accept it is to submit to the true King and to conform one's life to His rule. And in our world, submitting and conforming to some other authority is not what we humans like to do (Koyzis, 2014). Instead, we like to make up our own stories about the world, and, not surprisingly, we tend to put ourselves in the lead role as the hero. But in the Biblical story, Jesus Christ is the hero, who, paradoxically, uses His authority by giving up His power (Crouch, 2013) and delegating us as co-heroes. When we have eyes to see the Biblical story in this way, then we are better able to understand our God, His world, and our place in it.

To summarize, the neo-Calvinism accent is a world formative Christianity (Wolterstorff, 1983, ch.1). Taking seriously God's authority as creator

of the entire cosmos, neo-Calvinists train the light of scripture onto every aspect of God's creation, searching for how God's laws are woven into every dimension of our existence. Neo-Calvinists celebrate and wonder at the goodness of all that God made, and yet lament how our human hearts, hardened toward God, have warped and poisoned it. But our lament pales in contrast to God's. As it turns out, His love and care for His creation runs deeper than we can imagine. He is so invested in what He made that He gave up His only Son in order to redeem it all. He does not do that with the snap of His finger, even though He could. Instead, He chooses to work slowly, empowering us as His co-workers to form and shape and develop His creation. Scripture reveals a grand story in which God invites us to be actors in His drama. Our hope lies in being "certain of what we cannot see," (Hebrews 11:1) which includes, in part, the end of the story: the end of all crying, mourning, tears, and pain (Rev. 21:5). Neo-Calvinism is world-reforming because we are participating in God's great work to restore His creation.

### **Neo-Calvinist Insights for Social Work and Social Welfare**

When social workers wade into the murky waters of human pain, brokenness, and conflict, we do not do so objectively. The very act of engaging with another hurting person already reveals our bias: people matter. Social workers, unique among the professions, have a heightened sense of the all-important place of values to our practice. What we believe matters; beliefs shape practice. These five distinctive elements of a neo-Calvinist vision, therefore, are not just articles of doctrine that are important only to theologians.

I would now like to highlight briefly how a neo-Calvinist worldview provides a lens through which we can come to a fuller understanding of some of the complexities of the social worlds that confront us as social workers. I will focus on two areas that are particularly relevant to our task as social workers: specifically, what it means to be human, and how to understand the complexities of our current societal contexts.

### **Humans Created in the Image of God**

A neo-Calvinist Christian worldview provides an understanding of the nature of humans and their roles and characteristics within diverse, pluralistic, and complex societies. The fundamental characteristic of humans, according to this view, is that we are created as image-bearers of God (see Genesis 1-2; Middleton & Walsh, 1995, ch. 6; Middleton, 2005). Exactly what that means has been a matter of much debate, but it includes at least that we image God's "we-ness" and his creativity. God said, "Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added). God's

plural self-identification alludes to His three-in-one personhood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity is described as *perichoresis*, Keller, 2008, p. 214).

We can infer from this that God is relational and social, and that we, as His image-bearers, are also relational and social. To be human—to image God—is to be in mutual, harmonious, inter-dependent relationships with others. The reverse is also true. When we are isolated from others or when our relationships are constrained, limited, or broken, then we are in some way less than fully human as God intended. When humans gather together and associate with one another in many types of social arrangements, we get a glimpse of the many ways in which we humans have lived out our relational character.

We are also creative beings with the capacity to envision and imagine. We mirror God by harnessing our talents, gifts, and resources to build and establish physical structures and social arrangements and to make something of ourselves and the world (Crouch, 2008). Further, our being made in God's image as creative beings also carries with it the responsibility to use our creative energy for God's purposes and for others' benefit. Neil Plantinga (1995) describes this as follows:

[W]e are to become responsible beings: people to whom God can entrust deep and worthy assignments, expecting us to make something significant of them—expecting us to make something significant of our lives. None of us simply finds himself here in the world. None of our lives is an accident. We have been called into existence, expected, awaited, equipped, and assigned. We have been called to undertake the stewardship of a good creation, to create sturdy and buoyant families that pulse with the glad give-and-take of the generations. We are expected to show hospitality to strangers and to express gratitude to friends and teachers. We have been assigned to seek justice for our neighbors and, whenever we can, to relieve them from the tyranny of their suffering (p. 197).

As image bearers of God, we carry both responsibilities and rights. We are responsible, as Plantinga argues, to both God and others. But, we have the right to basic treatment and conditions, not because we deserve them, or only because of our worth as humans, but also so that we have what we need in order to carry out those responsibilities. Responsibility cannot be exercised without adequate resources to enable us to fulfill our calling. Part of what it means to image God's creativeness is that we participate in creation and its unfolding. The capacity to participate is therefore a fundamental ingredient in our life together (Coffin, 2000; Goudzwaard, VanderVennen, & Van Heemst, 2007; Mott, 1996).

This biblical conception of the value of human persons rooted in and reflecting God's identity provides the roots and soil out of which springs social work's value in the inherent dignity of every single human being (Hodge & Wolfer, 2008). As David Sherwood (2012) has pointed out, "Many in our generation, including many social workers, are trying to hold onto values—such as the irreducible dignity and worth of the individual—while denying the only basis on which such a value can ultimately stand" (p. 89).

### **Nature of Societies**

As we have seen, a neo-Calvinist understanding of society posits that social structures were not created exclusively by humans, but rather were established by God as part of the created order. However, humans do have a unique role in developing, establishing, and refining these structures in response to God's created order, and can thus choose to do this in obedience or in rejection of God. Further, according to Wolters, these structures have characteristics and properties, similar to the laws that govern physical reality, which God built into them and that establish parameters for their functioning (Walsh, Hart, & VanderVennen, 1995; Wolters, 2005b).

### ***Differentiation & Development***

The overall purpose of social structures is to facilitate God's intent for humans in His creation, which is the abundant flourishing of human relationships in harmony—what the Hebrews in the Old Testament called *shalom* (Gornick, 2002; Wolterstorff, 1983). One of our tasks as humans is to seek understanding of and knowledge about the characteristics and properties of various social structures so that we might discern God's intent and purpose for them—and for us (MacLarkey, 1991).

To be sure, however, this is tricky business, in part because the Bible is not a social science reference book that provides simple formulas for universal application. God has given humans considerable latitude in developing social structures that are appropriate to specific times and places. It would be too simplistic to suggest that the Bible provides blueprints for particular social arrangements that are universal across the breadth of historical and cultural variation.

Nevertheless, humans are called to develop and utilize social arrangements in a way that is consistent with God's commands and in a way that either contributes to or detracts from *shalom*. That is, social reality, unlike physical reality, can stray from adherence to God's norms because social structures are established and realized through human effort, and humans, unlike rocks, water, and other inanimate matter, can be obedient or disobedient.

Further, creation is not static, but is continually changing, largely through the work of humans, who are empowered by God to work in

the world to develop it. Humans not only build physical things, but also develop social organizations, practices, and institutions. Societies evolve and change over time through human imagination and intervention; social forms and entities that exist today did not exist yesterday and may not tomorrow. Such variation is understood to be part of God's plan for His creation—albeit distorted and stunted by sin and human failing. Nevertheless, the differentiation and development of societies from agrarian rural to industrial and post-industrial are not seen as diverging from God's will, but rather as the unfolding history of God's kingdom in which humans play a primary role (Chaplin, 2011; Koyzis, 2003).

### ***Principled Pluralism***

There was a time when we could assume that we were all on the same page, but that is no longer true. Pluralism is our society's default now, which Christian sociologist James Davison Hunter (2010) describes as, "the simultaneous presence of multiple cultures and those who inhabit those cultures" (p. 200). Like it or not, not all citizens in a given nation are Christians, and even if they were, wide differences of opinion exist about how things ought to be. Further, we recognize that citizens have a right to believe what they want, and to express that belief freely. Indeed, this right is enshrined as the First Amendment in the Constitution of the United States, in Articles 2a and 2b of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But pluralism is more than the individual right to religious freedom. People do not "inhabit culture" only as individuals, but together with others. Pluralism must recognize not only individual difference but also communal difference. The neo-Calvinist conception of pluralism provides a multi-faceted understanding that helps us to sort out these matters (Koyzis, 2015b; Monsma, 2012).

There are at least three types of pluralism. The first, *directional* (also referred to as *confessional*) *pluralism* (Skillen, 1994), addresses diversity based on spiritual beliefs, religion, or confessions. This type of pluralism recognizes that individuals and groups within society may legitimately hold varying beliefs and, within the rules of law, act on these beliefs. It is this type of pluralism that makes space for differences in spirituality and religion, and provides guidance for how persons from different religious and confessional belief systems treat one another (including belief systems that are not explicitly religious).

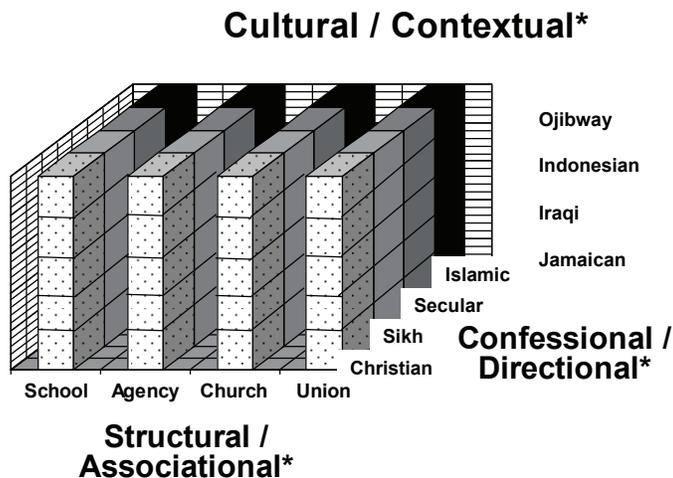
In addition to religious differences, we gather together in many other ways: we join political parties, play on soccer teams, volunteer at the public library, sit on school boards, serve Thanksgiving dinners at the downtown soup kitchen, visit art galleries and museums, enroll our children (and their animals) in 4H clubs, hold memberships in the American Automobile Association, and send donations to Bread for the World. These are just a

few examples of a second type of pluralism referred to as *structural* (or *associational*) pluralism. This type of pluralism recognizes that society consists of a wide variety of types of organizations, and that individuals are free to join and associate together according to their own voluntary choices.

The third type of plurality is labelled as *cultural* (or *contextual*). This type of plurality refers to the differences associated with ethnicity, culture, and language. While these may overlap with confessional/directional pluralism, distinguishing between these is important in that it prevents us from making erroneous assumptions that conflate beliefs and culture, for example, that all Muslims are Arab, or that all Indians are Sikhs.

As shown in Figure 1, a person could belong to particular societal structures (for example a school or a labour union) that specifically operate from within a particular confessional or directional context. Such confessional contexts could be explicitly religious (such as a Christian university, or an Islamic school, or a Jewish social service agency) but could also not be specifically religious. For example, an agency serving women and children who are victims of male violence could be explicitly situated within a secular feminist perspective; or, a labour union could be organized explicitly according to a Marxist-socialist perspective; or a child welfare agency could operate from an explicit anti-oppressive perspective.

Figure 1: Three Kinds of Pluralism



\*Note that for each of the three types, the four specific labels are only examples, and not intended to be exhaustive. For example, under structural/associational pluralism, there are many more types of societal structures that could be included such as businesses, professions, families, community theatre groups, self-help groups, bowling leagues, etc. The same is true for confessional / directional and cultural / contextual pluralisms.

Together, these three types of pluralisms capture the idea that people organize and live their lives in terms of their fundamental beliefs about the world (i.e., directional/confessional), in terms of the purpose or function of the grouping (i.e., structural/associational), and in terms of their belonging to various ethnic and cultural groups (cultural/contextual). Further, this understanding of multiple pluralities allows for the recognition of how fundamental beliefs operate in different social contexts. While we may disagree with other individuals and their choices, we recognize that in a diverse society, imposing our own particular perspectives on others is not a legitimate response when we encounter individuals who make choices different from our own, unless such choices violate established rules of law.

### ***The Role of Government and Other Social Entities***

Of particular interest is how these numerous and different social entities relate to one another and how the overlapping, multiple, and sometimes contradictory claims of these entities can be sorted out. For example, who is responsible for teaching children about sexuality, parents or schools? What role should government have in sorting out such a question? Is government to be “above” parents and schools, telling them what they may or may not do? Or, are parents, schools (and other social entities) independent of government, and thus allowed to do as they wish?

The neo-Calvinist concept of *sphere sovereignty* addresses these questions (note that there are close similarities between this neo-Calvinist concept and the Catholic concept of subsidiarity; Chaplin, 1995; Daly, 2009; Koyzis, 2003; McIlroy, 2003; Monsma, 2012). God’s work of creation includes an ordering of the social relationships and organizations of society such as families, marriages, schools, business corporations, unions, sports teams, neighborhood associations, and consumer groups. Sphere sovereignty asserts that these various social entities exist not simply at the behest of the state, but have a legitimacy and authority that ultimately comes from God.

Further, these entities possess autonomy appropriate to their social space and function. Local organizations and institutions have the right to govern their own affairs. For example, churches do not need to get government approval over their doctrines, nor do parents need government to tell them what to feed their children. In other words, these various organizations have the right to make decisions without interference from government.

At the same time, however, a neo-Calvinist understanding of government is not the same as the libertarian preference to minimize the state as an end in itself. Rather, sphere sovereignty argues that each social organization has a specific and central role that inheres to that organization as part of God’s creation plan. The term *norm*, which we already encountered, refers to this role as the ideal standard to which organizations must aspire. Whether

a specific organization identifies itself as Christian or not matters less than whether that organization conducts itself consistent with God's norms.

The norm for government—that is, its central role and fundamental purpose—is to uphold public justice, that is, to encourage other organizations under its jurisdiction to fulfill their respective obligations and to adjudicate and protect the rights of other citizens and organizations to just and fair treatment in keeping with their unique, God-created norms (Koyzis, 2003; Skillen, 1994). Thus, government has a unique, overarching—but also limited—role with respect to all the other types of social organizations. Government is not simply one among other entities, but has special responsibilities and obligations toward all of the citizens and residents within its jurisdiction, unlike many other types of organizations that can limit their memberships and their activities based on their own particular preferences (Hiemstra, 2005).

### **Neo-Calvinist Influences in Social Welfare**

Neo-Calvinist ideas have made their mark on the infrastructure of our social welfare systems in North America. In that respect, we could say that some of the girders of our social welfare system have been constructed using the “architectonic critique” that Kuyper advocated more than a century ago. In fact, he prepared the way for these girders by establishing institutions and practices in the Netherlands that have been adapted, modified, and implemented right here in the U.S. and Canada. However, some of these are not readily visible, in part because they form the frameworks of the building rather than the facades. I would like to briefly describe just a few of these, both as an example of neo-Calvinism's contributions, but more importantly, to provide some pathways and possibilities for how Christians in social work can be increasingly engaged in God's work of redemption.

Two organizing themes for these examples are religious freedom (Joustra, 2014b; Monsma, 2012) and public justice (Chaplin, 2011). Regarding religious freedom, I want to show how neo-Calvinism provides a fresh, nuanced, persuasive, and practical alternative to impasses and conflicts about religious freedom in three areas: the role of faith-based social services organizations, Christian education, and Christians in the labour movement. Regarding public justice, I will highlight some of the ways in which neo-Calvinists have been engaged in political advocacy to advance public justice in both the U.S. and Canada.

#### **Religious Freedom**

The neo-Calvinist conception of pluralism has enormous implications for what has been called our post-Christian society. At the risk of sounding alarmist (Flatt, 2014; Joustra, 2014c), I think it is safe to say that the

fundamental protection of religious freedom is being eroded in a society in which a secular viewpoint is taken as the norm (Hodge, 2009). To what discourse can we appeal to provide compelling reasons for, say, Christian colleges and universities to be accredited without giving up their lifestyle and sexuality guidelines, or for why pastors should *not* have to surrender their sermons to civic authorities, or to protect the legitimacy for Christian social work education programs within the Council on Social Work Education, or to allow employers to provide employee benefits consistent with their Christian values, or for Catholic hospitals to be protected from performing abortions, or for Christian family and children's services agencies to be free from coercion to approve same-sex foster or adoptive parents? In these and many other examples, how do we avoid the critique that we are just another "self-interest group" that clamours for "just us" rather than "justice"?

### ***Faith-based Social Services***

Many of us are familiar with the multi-faceted initiatives to increase partnerships between government and faith-based social services. Perhaps after more than a decade, we are both wary and weary of exaggerated claims of effectiveness, of cutbacks and restrictions for welfare programs, of arrogant boasting about moral benefits. However, despite these criticisms, there lies the germ of an idea that has its roots in a neo-Calvinist perspective (Daly, 2009; Glenn, 2000; Monsma, 2012).

Stanley Carlson-Thies (2006) gave a convocation address at Dordt College entitled, "Abraham Kuyper in the White House." As one of the founding staff members of the White Office for Faith-Based Initiatives, Carlson-Thies provides an insider's account of how the ideas of neo-Calvinism came to shape a substantial social policy revolution. In the dense networks of high-priced and well-placed lobbyists inside the beltway, how did the Center for Public Justice, the tiny three-person think-tank where Carlson-Thies worked, get the ear of the president? As Carlson-Thies described, "the Center is a small organization. But the Kuyperian idea [of pluralism] is a powerful one.... We were heirs to a powerful and just idea, and it was the idea that was needed [at the time]" (p. 16).

That idea is sphere sovereignty: because God created everything, including social entities, they owe their ultimate allegiance to Him. It is not government that created them or grants them the right to exist; the myriad social arrangements that make up civil society exist because of God's degree—they possess limited, but non-negotiable autonomy, or, as Kuyper puts it, they are sovereign within their own sphere.

Carlson-Thies has gone on to establish the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFA), whose mission is, "to advance public policies and public attitudes that respect the character and service of faith-based

organizations. It supports and honors the spectrum of organizations that comprise the religious pluralism of our society” (Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, nd). This neo-Calvinist idea has, in the words of former president G. W. Bush, unleashed “the armies of compassion” (Bush, 2001; see also Donaldson & Carlson-Thies, 2003, p. 58; McClain, 2008, p. 361) and freed up people of faith to extend their reach and their legitimacy.

### ***“Free” Christian Education***

In 1880 Abraham Kuyper founded the Vrije Universiteit, or what is called in English, the Free University of Amsterdam (Bratt, 2013). No, this does not mean a university with free tuition. Rather, Kuyper, pursuing the logic of sphere sovereignty, sought to protect university education from increasing encroachment from the liberal, secularizing influence of the Dutch state (as well as protect it from encroachment by the church). Free meant freedom from state control, and freedom to be openly, unapologetically rooted in a Protestant Calvinist worldview. Of course, there are thousands of examples of Christians founding their own education institutions from primary to higher education. However, what makes the neo-Calvinist approach different is not just the right to be religious and independent, but also the right to equal public support and legitimacy, including funding. As Kuyper and many of his followers have pointed out, all education is done from some worldview, and none is neutral.

The legacy of the Enlightenment is to establish liberal, public, secular, empirical education as the objective and rational default that demands allegiance for all educational pursuits, both in teaching and research. By contrast, the neo-Calvinist alternative is to recognize the sovereignty of educational institutions to define for themselves what worldview they choose to work out of, and to allow public space for a variety, rather than imposing an allegedly neutral secular worldview on them all. With this approach, a Christian university or any of its programs need not apologize for its unique Christian worldview and commitments to live out of it.

### ***Christian Labour Unions***

A final example where the neo-Calvinist ideas can be applied to defend religious freedom is in the labour movement. In his 1891 address Abraham Kuyper (2011/1891) rhetorically cried, “Socialism is in the air!” (p. 47). He was not just being alarmist, but was articulating a concern that many Christians shared. In the face of rampant problems associated with rapid capitalist industrialization, socialism was capturing the public imagination as a compelling alternative. But, as Kuyper foresaw, socialism is just as jealous a god as capitalism, and would demand submission as well. The mobilization of workers appeared to be the best way to challenge the

hegemony of the market, but it was not neutral. Instead, various unionization movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries coalesced into a one-size-fits-all approach that brooked no challengers. Certain principles were ironclad and defined as synonymous with worker justice: a so-called “closed shop” where every employee must join the same union, an adversarial posture in which employees and employers are pitted against one another, and widespread preference for a socialist rather than a capitalist economy (Grootenboer, 2005).

Here, too, however, a neo-Calvinist concept of principled pluralism led to the establishment of multiple and diverse labour unions in Western Europe, including Christian unions. Dutch postwar immigrants to Canada took those ideas and attempted to transplant them in Canada, establishing the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) in 1952. Not surprisingly, CLAC has been relentlessly attacked by the mainstream labour movement.

A key court ruling in 1963, however, demonstrates how union plurality is also a matter of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Ontario Supreme Court Justice McRuer, upon examining big labour’s argument that CLAC couldn’t be a real union because it was too religious, ruled that, “If I supported the Board’s refusal to certify the [CLAC] union on the ground that its members engage in prayer, read passages from the Bible and sing psalms and hymns at their meetings, the result would be that a union that required no standards of ethical or moral conduct and opened its meetings by reading from Karl Marx and singing the Red International might be certified but one that permits the practices here in question could not be” (Regina v. Ontario Labour Relations Board, 1963).

Despite an overall decline in unionization in North America, CLAC is now one of the fastest-growing unions in Canada, reaching nearly 60,000 members (Christian Labour Association of Canada, 2012). CLAC union representation is open to any worker regardless of their faith; the union operates by three key principles which it derives from its Christian world view: an open shop, in which employees are free to make their own choice about whether to join; a collaborative relationship between employers and employees, in which dialogue and mutual trust are emphasized; and a pursuit of broader goals beyond just compensation and profit, focusing on mutual responsibilities that both employers and employees are called to as members of a shared business community (Antonides, 1978).

### **Public Justice**

Public justice, according to the neo-Calvinist perspective, is the unique responsibility of governments (Chaplin, 2011). By public I mean those matters that have to do with our lives together as citizens and residents within a particular political jurisdiction. There are other arenas, or spheres, to follow the neo-Calvinist usage, in which justice is important, but not

all are public. For example, as a university professor, if I award all of my students the same grade regardless of their work, that would be unjust, but it is not a matter for government to resolve. Similarly, if I allow two of my sons to use my car but not the third, he may rightly protest, “that’s not fair!” but again, that is a matter of family or parental justice, not the state’s.

The neo-Calvinist concept of justice argues that since we are made in the image of God, we have both rights and responsibilities. Contrary to the obsession with entitlements and individual liberty, neo-Calvinists recognize that justice is more than individual equality, but rather, requires a more contextualized assessment of what is necessary in order for persons and groups to be able to fulfill their callings.

Motivated by the desire to see Christ’s reign over politics and our public life together, neo-Calvinists have established several advocacy organizations and think tanks to promote public justice and the common good. One of these is the Center for Public Justice in Washington, DC, which I’ve already described above. In Canada, two other organizations have also had an impact belying their size.

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), based in Canada’s capital, Ottawa, has been a respected participant in Canadian political affairs for more than half a century. CPJ has been involved in far too many issues to list here, but I will highlight two. First, CPJ was one of the first Christian organizations to advocate on behalf of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples, and CPJ was instrumental in mobilizing a coalition to block a pipeline in the Mackenzie Valley in the 1970s. Second, co-founder Gerald Vandezande, who died in 2011, had a lasting impact on Canadian political affairs. Vandezande carried the Kuyperian vision into every political party (Vandezande, 1984). When Canada’s Constitution was repatriated in 1982, he was part of a group that worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that this preamble was included, “Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law...” Vandezande received the Order of Canada for his lifelong work in pursuit of, as he often said, “justice, not just us”(Vandezande, 1999, p. 1).

Finally, Cardus is a Christian think tank with a bold vision, “...dedicated to the renewal of North American social architecture” (Cardus, n.d.; Van Pelt, 2008). Cardus seeks to do the kind of “architectonic critique” that Abraham Kuyper called for; one of the hallmarks of their approach is a refusal to become trapped in the partisan dilemmas that so often paralyze political discourse today. Just as Kuyper condemned both capitalist and socialist extremes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so Cardus stakes out thoughtful arguments and proposals that recognize the multiple entities that make up our society. Cardus draws on the neo-Calvinist insight that society is not simply a battleground staking individuals against government, but rather, a more complex array of groups, associations, allegiances, and alliances. Confounding critics on both the right and the left, Cardus pushes for

justice in labour, in business, in education, in urban planning, and much more. It is not often that you find a mutual fund manager and a labour organizer contributing to the same blogs or agreeing on much, but that is what Cardus does in pursuit of public justice.

### **Blindspots and Opportunities**

Our traditions are both glasses and blinders; our traditions have formed us in such a way that whatever we see is filtered through our worldview, but these traditions also make us prone to blindspots. The psalmist David, in his psalm of praise and wonder at God's creative works, has this line of starkly honest confession tucked away within it: "But who can discern their own errors?" (Psalm 19:12). Which fish can see the water in which it swims? It's easy to be so immersed in one's own perspective that you don't see how others might perceive things differently. Egocentrism and ethnocentrism are notoriously difficult to avoid, despite our best intentions. And neo-Calvinists are just as guilty. Let me rephrase that: *I* am just as guilty. Speaking personally now, too often we neo-Calvinists are overly confident of our own certainty about what exactly God wants for this world. Given the emphasis on God's sovereignty, it's a tad disingenuous that we neo-Calvinists have an annoying tendency to make *ourselves* sovereign, and err on the side of being pushy, arrogant, triumphalist, and downright uncivil (Mouw, 2010).

This triumphalism leads to another significant problem: when Calvinists (and maybe all Protestants) encounter difference and disagreement, our default response is to take the ball and go start our own game. In the tradition I grew up in, we celebrate Reformation Day on October 31<sup>st</sup>. As one website (in the Calvinist tradition, but which I won't name) declares, the Reformation is "perhaps the greatest move of God's Spirit since the days of the Apostles," and, aside from its triumphalist tone, when you put it that way, it certainly seems worth celebrating. But, as the psalmist David reminds us, who can discern their own errors?

I admit that I never realized the downside until a Catholic friend gently asked me, "Why do you Protestants celebrate one of the most divisive movements in the church? Maybe you should be grieving, not celebrating." And it's true; Jesus prayed that we might be one so that the world will know Him (John 17). Meanwhile, there are almost as many Reformed Calvinist denominations as there are Calvinists! If you Google "reformed denominations" you will discover an alphabet soup of disunity: CRC, RCA, URC, NRC, PCA, OPC, FRC, ORC, ARPC, EPC, EAPC, ETC, etc.!

Another blindspot in neo-Calvinism is our emphasis of head over heart and hands. In other words, neo-Calvinism is strong on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of worldview, but sometimes lacks follow-through. Neo-Calvinism is too prone to what Andy Crouch (2008) calls "the aca-

demic fallacy ... that once you have understood something—analyzed and critiqued it—you have changed it” (p. 69). Or, as Calvin College philosopher Jamie Smith (2009) puts it in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, we’re too focused on what we *think* and not on what we *love*. Smith explains,

Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who *loves* rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love (p. 33).

It’s a good thing, then, that God promises that His power is made perfect in our weaknesses (II Corinthians 12:9), because we Calvinists certainly have more than enough raw material for God to work with! And that’s the beauty of it! Grace restores nature, which means that God’s work of salvation restores us as well. Even in the midst of our weaknesses, we can be affirmed by God’s appointment of us as His ambassadors (II Corinthians 5:18) and co-workers (I Corinthians 3:9), crowned with honor and glory to rule on God’s behalf (Psalm 8). Ultimately, the neo-Calvinist accent is rooted in hope in the face of death, mourning, crying, or pain. This is not just an otherworldly, fatalistic, and passive hope. On the contrary, Jesus, who is seated on the throne, says in Revelation 21:5 “Behold, I *am* making *all things new!*” Not, “I *will* make all things new”. And not, “I am making *all new things.*” No, Jesus is doing this *here and now*.

### **Conclusion**

When Christians confess that Jesus is Lord, we are making an audacious claim: that Jesus rules over *all things*, not just our hearts or our souls. This is a public claim that encompasses everything. At its heart, then, the neo-Calvinist accent reminds us of the world changing implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when we say accent, we must remember that we are still talking about speaking a common language. Neo-Calvinism is not the only Christian voice calling for renewal; many Christians have said this same thing, and continue to do so, each with their own particular accent. In that vein, international development scholar, Center for Public Justice Senior Fellow, and Cardus contributor Robert Joustra (2014d), makes this observation:

I wonder if we don’t then also need to hear from another 19th-century voice, one whom Kuyper much revered in his own day, that of Pope Leo XIII and his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Leo’s bracing argument in that encyclical was about development too, about the deep and widening di-

visions between the rich and the poor, about the abuse of laborers, and about building sustainable systems of public justice. Only two years after Kuyper's "On Manual Labor," Leo wrote in *Rerum Novarum* that "if human society is to be healed now, in no other way can it be healed save by a return to Christian life and Christian institutions." Abraham Kuyper and Pope Leo XIII, had much in common... , but one of the most significant commonalities was their call for a *public theology* to underwrite a renewed social architecture, a robust public justice.

Sure, sometimes each of us can be too deeply immersed in our own traditions. But at our best, there is one other thing that characterizes all three of the organizations that I have mentioned—the Center for Public Justice, Citizens for Public Justice, and Cardus—and that is this: although each of them sprung from neo-Calvinist soil, none of them are exclusively neo-Calvinist. Rather, all of them have explicitly sought to broaden their reach and draw in other Christians from other traditions, recognizing that "iron sharpens iron" (Proverbs 27:17) and that all of us need to be refined by the Refiner's fire (Malachi 3:1-3).

As Jamie Smith (2006) observed, "the viability of neocalvinism hinges on its being in dialogue with other Christian traditions" (p. 40), echoing Herman Bavinck, another Dutch Calvinist and contemporary of Abraham Kuyper, who insisted that, "The Christian life is so rich that it develops its full glory not just in a single form or within the walls of one church" (as cited in Mouw, 2011, p. 78).

Seeking greater knowledge of our own traditions should ultimately be motivated not by focusing on how we're different, but about how we're similar, and how God can use us to learn from each other. For that is also part of God's grand vision: "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." (Rev. 7:9). ❖

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