

Make Your Own History

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[Note: Except for the first, the footnotes are original, though a few have been edited.]

The key to a revival of Christian social and political life today must be a revived understanding of God's ordinances – God's normative will for all of life, including politics. We are grateful that H. Evan Runner helped to introduce many of us to a tradition of Christian thought and life which has led to a revival of concern for God's ordinances for all of life.

... It is to Groen van Prinsterer's credit, early in the nineteenth century, that he was one of the first modern Protestants to begin to reflect with deep seriousness on the meaning of human history-shaping power in this world. He saw that Christians were mistaken in thinking of themselves primarily as members of a church that rides through history.

... Christians ought to see themselves as people called by God to make history according to his will, Groen believed.² Only with such an attitude would Christianity truly live. As Groen gained insight into this simple truth, he began to recognize that different, competing spirits were at work in the shaping of history. And the spirit of the French Revolution was at odds with the Spirit of Christ in all areas of life.³ The Christian battle could not be

¹James W. Skillen. "Politics, Pluralism, and the Ordinances of God." In H. Vander Goot (ed.), *Life Is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner*. St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1981. Pp. 195-206. Selected excerpts.

²Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer. *Ongeloof and Revolutie: Een Reeks Historische Voorlezingen; Opnieuw Bewerkt door Prof. Dr. H. Smitskamp*. Franeker: T. Wever, 1951. Note: For English translations of some of Groen van Prinsterer's work turn to < www.reformationalpublishingproject.com/paideia >.

³Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer. *Unbelief and Revolution: A Series of Lectures in History*. Transl. and ed. Harry Van Dyke in collaboration with Donald Morton. Amsterdam: The Groen Van Prinsterer Fund, 1975. Pp. 17-18.

carried on simply by preserving an orthodox church in the world, but would have to be carried on in politics and education, in journalism and science.

Recognizing that God by his Spirit was calling Christians out of their somewhat passive journey through “secular” history, Groen urged his fellow Christians to reread the Scriptures in order to understand the responsibility that the people of God have to shape the history of this world to the glory of God.⁴

With this issue of human responsibility for shaping history, we confront one of the most important challenges of modernity. It is one thing for people to try to adjust themselves to a seemingly unchanging order of nature; it is something else for them to contribute to the continuing creative changes in human life.

... The revival of Calvinism, expressed in the life work of Groen van Prinsterer and then in that of Abraham Kuyper, was a fundamental challenge to that basic liberal and revolutionary outlook of modernity.⁵ True human freedom and responsibility in history, they asserted, is possible only through submission to God’s ordinances.⁶ Human beings cannot escape the “heteronomous” character of creaturely life. The true law of life comes from outside the human will; it comes from another – from the will of God. That is what “heteronomy” means. The heteronomous character of God’s will stands in direct opposition to all claims of human autonomy.

The key to human responsibility in history, then, as Kuyper saw it, is not for human creatures to try to hold on forever to seemingly unchanging patterns of social life; nor should they launch out into the future with the conviction

These lectures are a translation of Lectures VIII and IX from the book in footnote 2.

⁴Groen did not entirely free himself from the older attitude which accepted past historical patterns and institutions as a revelation of the will of God. For a criticism of the “historicism” and “organicism” in Groen, see the excellent article by Herman Dooyeweerd, “Het Historisch Element in Groen’s Staatsleer,” in H. Smitskamp et al., *Groen’s Ongeloof en Revolutie: Een Bundel Studien* (Wageningen, 1949), pp. 118- 37.

⁵Regularly Kuyper criticized the spirit and consequences of liberalism and the Revolution. See Dirk Jellema, “Abraham Kuyper’s Attack on Liberalism,” *Review of Politics*, 19 (1957), 472-85.

⁶This language is everywhere in Kuyper’s writings, but see especially the section, “Ordinantien Gods,” in his *Ons Program* (Amsterdam, 1879), pp. 116-29. Also see Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, 1961), pp. 70-71.

that they are free to create social and political life in any autonomous way they choose. Rather, human beings must give shape to an ever unfolding creation by seeking to respond obediently to God's ordinances for different areas of life. ...

... But Calvinism itself would have to be continually reforming. Reformed Christianity was not a pure and clean package that could simply be protected and handed down through an otherwise corrupt and changing history. ...

... On the one hand, Kuyper, along with many Catholics and other Protestants, was a vigorous opponent of secularization, if by "secularization" we understand the outworking of the spirit of liberalism which claims that human beings have no master in history, no ordinances from God to bind them, and that they are autonomous in their freedom to shape politics, art, science, education, and all of culture. But unlike most Catholics and many Protestants of his day, Kuyper was a strong promoter of the secularization process if by "secularization" we mean the freeing of different life spheres from ecclesiastical control.⁷ Kuyper believed that politics, art, science, education, and other areas of life should be free to unfold in obedience to God's ordinances. Each sphere of life had to be free of direct control by any other so that each could learn obedience to God's special ordinances for each area of life. Artists must be free to obey God's norms for art; they must not be locked up into obedience to what ecclesiastical officials believe to be good art. Teachers and scholars must be free to respond obediently to God's ordinances of truth for the entire creation; they must not be under orders to teach and publish only what ecclesiastical office bearers approve as scientific truth.⁸

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⁷Kuyper, pp. 46-54, 59-66.

⁸Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring* (Amsterdam, 1880). On this subject of "sphere sovereignty" and also on some other important themes, see the two articles on Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy by Jacob Klapwijk in *The Reformed Journal* (February, 1980, pp. 12-15, and March, 1980, pp. 20-24).

... We must shape history in accord with those ordinances and not merely ride through history proclaiming that they exist. ... Sphere sovereignty means nothing more sophisticated yet nothing less important than the fact that God is the only sovereign of this world and that all of his ordinances must be obeyed.⁹ Individuals are not sovereign; the state is not sovereign; the church is not sovereign. God alone is sovereign.

...

The individualistic and collectivistic humanists blaspheme God by shouting autonomy and turning their backs on the reality of God's creation. Christians violate God's commandments when they confess with pious voice that God is sovereign, but then cast their votes, buy their homes, sell their stocks, or run their schools and colleges by considering only the demands of the American way of life, or asking only about the requirements of a healthy profit margin, or looking only to the habits and expectations of tradition. ... There is no common secular tradition to which we can pledge our troth as Christians and still hope to have truly principled pluralism. ... The people of God cannot simply ride through a history that is being shaped by these [secular] spirits and traditions. And they certainly must not continue to accommodate themselves to these tension-filled systems and expect that God's ordinances will still shine through in their deeds to brighten a dark world. Christians have only one healthy option, and that is to take God's Word so seriously that they refuse to live by any other ordinances or by any other hope than the ordinances of creation and the hope of the Gospel. ... There is more at stake than a somewhat reduced confidence in "progress" on the part of western man. His whole life perspective has undergone a shock. The unfulfilled promises of progress have brought about an emptiness, a vacuum, with respect to the meaning of life and society. Many among us even experience the demise of the idea of progress as a kind of divine betrayal. The very thing in which we had placed all our trust is turning against us to devour us. And what does one have left when one's gods betray him? If this observation is correct, then we find ourselves at a very critical juncture in the development of western

⁹On the different meanings of sphere sovereignty, see Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, pp. 40-60.

civilization. No society or civilization can continue to exist without having found an answer to the question of meaning. The emptiness created by the death of the god of progress must be filled with something else. But what will that be?¹⁰

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Goudzwaard admits the tentative and uncertain character of his proposals about the responsibility of modern economic enterprises and the relationship of government to the economy. But the question is not whether we must become disciples of Kuyper and his followers. The question is: Will we take up the historical struggle of our day in the spirit of Biblical revival? Will we become self-critical about our illegitimate accommodations to the spirits and traditions of our time? Will we quit trying to ride through history and begin trying to shape history in obedience to divine ordinances? This is our only calling – to serve God and neighbors according to the Creator's ordinances fulfilled in Christ. This is also the only way that we can contribute to a healthy unfolding of a just society - one that will be respectful of the true plurality of God-given associations, institutions, and social relationships.

10 B. Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress*, pp. 248-49.