





Reformed Church Political Engagement in the United States

A Case Study of How PCA Churches Can Engage Politics

Jared Isaac Fitz

August 17, 2026

MIRT (TU Utrecht)

- *Image of handshake, a church in NYC, and Abraham Kuyper in the public domain*
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REFORMED CHURCH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES: A CASE STUDY OF HOW PCA CHURCHES CAN ENGAGE POLITICS

Jared Isaac Fitz

Student number: 93998

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First supervisor: Dr. Jos Colijn (TU Utrecht)

Second supervisor: Prof. Dr. Matthew Kaemingk (Fuller Theological Seminary; TU Utrecht)

Dedication

For my sister Emma

"May the Lord fulfill all your petitions" – Psalm 20:5*b*

"Dove a dot"

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"Churches today are dividing over politics because people are finding themselves far more passionate and moved by political and social issues than they are by the truths of our faith, and especially the centrality of the gospel of Christ."– Timothy Keller (2022)

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List of Abbreviations

ABH	*A Better Hope*
AC	*After Christendom*
ATE	*Approaching the End*
BCN	Baseline Cultural Narrative
BCO	The Presbyterian Church in America Book of Church Order
CET	*Christian Existence Today*
CN	Christian Nationalism
COC	*A Community of Character*
CONG. REC.	*Congressional Record*
DT	*Disrupting Time*
ESV	English Standard Version
GKN	Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland
HC	*Hannah's Child*
IGC	*In Good Company*
NHK	Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church)
PCA	The Presbyterian Church in America
PK	*The Peaceable Kingdom*
RABB	*Remembering: A Biography of Books*
RPC	Redeemer Presbyterian Church
STT	*Sanctify Them in the Truth*
TGC	The Gospel Coalition
T4G	Together for the Gospel
US	United States
VU	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WGO	*With the Grain of the Universe*
WOT	*The Work of Theology*
WWW	*Working with Words*

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Chapter 1 – Introduction & Overview

1.1 Church Political Engagement in the American Context

In July 1954, United States (US) Senator Lyndon Johnson introduced a law that prevented non-profits and other tax-exempt organizations from influencing legislative policy.[1] Johnson's reasoning was: "If non-profits were going to be insulated from paying most kinds of taxes, they should also be prohibited from engaging in political activity."[2] The new tax policy intended to preclude nonprofits from interfering "in *any* political campaign on behalf of *any* candidate for *any* public office."[3] This meant that churches (as tax-exempt non-profits) could not take public positions on political candidates.[4] The amendment allowed pastors to speak as individuals on political issues, offer political advice, and address political topics; however, if churches (as institutions) wanted to retain tax-exempt status, they could not engage in the legislative process—specifically, they could not endorse political candidates. Later in 1954, Congress adopted what is known as the Johnson Amendment, enshrining into law a regulatory tax code for non-profits that endorse political candidates.[5] In the decades since the legislation's approval, the Johnson Amendment has become a cultural marker for how churches engage political issues.[6]

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[1] Mark Goldfeder and Michelle K. Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment," *U. Mem L. Rev.* 48 (2017): 209–55.

[2] Ryan P. Burge, *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 173.

[3] My emphasis. "100 CONG. REC. 9604 (Statement of Sen. Johnson).," July 2, 1954. In 2019 at the National Day of Prayer service Donald Trump claimed, "One of the things I'm most proud of is the Johnson Amendment. You can now speak your mind—and speak it freely…We got rid of the Johnson Amendment." Trump signed laws in 2017 making it easier for churches to participate in politics, but despite Trump's claims, the Johnson Amendment remains intact. Eugene Scott, "At a National Day of Prayer Speech, Trump Falsely Claims There Was Little Religious Freedom before His Election," *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/02/national-day-prayer-speech-trump-falsely-claims-there-was-little-religious-freedom-before-his-election/.

[4] Churches were granted tax-exempt status in 1913. Tax-exempt status applies but is not limited to 501(c)(3) organizations. Goldfeder and Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment," 210. For an European perspective of taxation and funding see: Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2006), 122–24.

[5] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 204.

[6] The Johnson Amendment was not intended to limit religious speech; its intent was to prevent non-profits from interfering in political elections. Churches must comply with federal law to benefit from tax codes. However, some cultural narratives view the Amendment as church censorship; groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom argue that pastors should be able to say what they want and churches should be able to endorse any political candidates they choose. The Alliance Defending Freedom sponsor and promote "Pulpit Freedom Sunday," an event held on the Sunday after April 15 (Tax Day), where pastors are encouraged to explicitly take stances on political positions. Goldfeder and Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment," 236–37. Others argue for a moderate view, saying the bill is intended for charitable organizations and the government can rightfully revoke tax-

While the Johnson Amendment is a relatively new piece of legislation that addresses explicit political directives, historically, the church, as a visible institution, has engaged politically using several visions; one need only think of Augustine's *City of God* (426 CE) or the *Barmen Declaration* (1934). However, in the US, "rendering unto Caesar" and honoring Christ are complicated by pluralism and secularization.[7] Pluralism refers to the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities, and secularization refers to political arrangements that uphold certain "constitutive values" (viz., human dignity, basic human rights, and popular sovereignty).[8] Pluralism shapes the church's self-conception, while secularization alters its public perception. In the contemporary American context, pluralization and secularization have led to two distinct responses when relating church life to politics: (1) integrationism and (2) separationism.[9]

According to integrationists, the public sphere is no place for moderation. Religion is "an 'all or none' proposition—conservative evangelical religion or none at all."[10] Ryan Burge says that those who argue for church-state integration "believe that the laws of the country should reflect the theological precepts laid out in their interpretation of the Bible" and are increasingly comfortable with religion intersecting with politics.[11] For the integrationist, the *national consciousness* should embrace the religious (viz., Christian) story, and the nation's laws should

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exempt status from churches promoting political candidates. Goldfeder and Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment," 249. Both arguments make fundamental assumptions religious institutions (primarily the church) can and do offer something valuable to public life in words, deeds, and influence. Since 2004 the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has issued voting guidelines for/against the Johnson Amendment. To be fair, a cursory look at these guidelines shows the subjectivity of the government criteria. It is unclear what constitutes endorsement. Goldfeder and Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment," 251, 255. This lack of clarity has led to several high-profile cases challenging the constitutionality of the bill. For example: Walker v. Texas Division, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Inc. (2009), Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce (2010), Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010), NFIB v. Sebelius (2012).

[7] See Steven Green's excellent study. Steven K. Green, *Separating Church and State: A History*, Religion and American Public Life (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[8] This is a form of "political pluralism." The term and list of "constitutive values" is taken from McDougall's article. Derek McDougall, "From 'Secular' to 'Post-Secular' and 'Pluralist': Some Christian Approaches," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13, no. 3 (2019): 325.

[9] This is my terminology. For a similar discussion on these two groups see Hart's monograph. He places Francis Schaeffer in the integrationist group and J.G. Machen in the separationist group. D. G. Hart, *Protestants and Patriots: Presbyterians in the Age of Revolution* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2026), Preface and Introduction.

[10] Ryan P. Burge, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2026), 6.

[11] Burge, *The Vanishing Church*, 7. It is often noted that "European politics eschews…religiously tinged rhetoric." Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* (Ashgate Publishing, 2008; repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 11.

reflect Scriptural narratives; therefore, laws like the Johnson Amendment should be removed because they limit the church's influence in the public sphere.[12]

Separationists take the opposite view; they believe organized religion (i.e., Christianity) has historically caused *injustice* and see church-state separation as an essential part of democracy.[13] In this view, religious conviction is a matter of personal belief between the self and God. As such, religious individuals need to suspend their religious convictions when executing public policy. Religion, especially Christianity, needs to stay out of politics so no "religious sect" can wrongfully influence the population.[14] In this view, the Johnson Amendment protects against the abuse of power and the integrity of American democracy.[15] For both the integrationist and the separationist, the Johnson Amendment regulates the church's explicit political directives.

While the Johnson Amendment remains contentious, it does not necessarily diminish the church's ability to politically engage.[16] Today, as a pluralistic and secular society, the US still "allows for the continuing role of religion" in culture and politics.[17] The US emerged from a

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[12] Gasper Martinez notes, "[religion] has been constantly and relevantly present in American life and politics."; Gasper Martinez, "The Distinction of Public Theology from Political and Liberation Theologies," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, ed. Christoph Hübenthal and Christiane Alpers, T&T Clark Handbooks (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 91. A simple example of church-state integration is Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address; Lincoln quotes Scripture five times. Stout calls Lincoln's Second Inaugural "perhaps the highest ethical achievement of any political speaker in U.S. history." Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, New Forum Books, ed. Robert P. George (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 69–70. It is also important to clarify that integrationists often want to *integrate church with state* and keep the state out of the church.

[13] My emphasis. Green, *Separating Church and State*, 187. In the more extreme form, they co-mingle post-Christendom with post-Christianity, becoming a type of militant atheism.

[14] This idea is not limited to Separationists. Isolationists in the form of Christian Nationalism prefer Christian leaders in power, and want to keep other religions out of public office. Kanishka Singh, "Mamdani's NYC Primary Win Sparks Surge in Anti-Muslim Posts, Advocates Say," United States, *Reuters*, June 27, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/mamdanis-nyc-primary-win-sparks-surge-anti-muslim-posts-advocates-say-2025-06-27/.

[15] In a 1971 court case, Warren Burger noted, "total separation [between church and state] is not possible in an absolute sense. Some relationship between government and religious organization is inevitable." Green, *Separating Church and State*, 7. Other contemporary thinkers argue the same way, noting that it is impossible to isolate the private self from the public self. Richard Rorty says that religion, as a private matter, does not have a unique relationship to the public sphere—all citizens (religious or non-religious) bring private presuppositions to bear on public life. Universal reason is not possible without personal context; therefore, it is impossible to avoid inserting a private "religion at home" into "political questions in public." See *After Christendom* for Hauerwas's discussion of Rorty on religious freedom. Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003): 141, 148, ATLA0001334947; Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom*, First Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 74–77.

[16] Goldfeder and Terry, "To Repeal or Not Repeal: The Johnson Amendment"; Benjamin M. Leff, "Fixing the Johnson Amendment Without Totally Destroying It," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Public Affairs* 6, no. 1 (November 2020): 115–76.

[17] McDougall, "From 'Secular' to 'Post-Secular' and 'Pluralist,'" 326.

broadly Judeo-Christian framework in which the church held cultural hegemony.[18] The demise of American Christendom (which has become increasingly prevalent), and the subsequent rise of secularization and pluralization may open new and imaginative ways for the church to engage politically. As Sally Wagenmaker, a tax attorney working with non-profits, says, "The question for the church is: Is it part of what you feel God has called you to do, for such a time as this?...To push the envelope?"[19] Broadly speaking, the spirit of this study echoes Wagenmaker's sentiment: how can the church faithfully engage politics in a pluralistic and secular society without pushing the envelope?

1.2 Topic of Study

Rather than formally examining the Johnson Amendment, this study plays a small role in reimagining church political engagement. The topic of this study is: *how the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) can faithfully engage politics in a pluralistic/secular society*.[20] This study does four things: (1) It uses Redeemer Presbyterian Church (RPC) as an illustrative case study for political engagement, showing how political engagement is a multifaceted and disputed topic in the PCA. (2) It then describes and analyzes the ecclesiology of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940) for the purpose of resourcing their perspective on political engagement. (3) The ecclesiologies of Kuyper and Hauerwas are then placed in an intercultural dialogue against the backdrop of RPC to reveal ecclesial tensions. (4) Finally, it investigates how their ecclesiologies might inform a church like RPC and other PCA churches in their engagement with politics.

The purpose of this study is two-fold: first, it attempts to help PCA churches *faithfully engage* politics by (a) *describing* and *analyzing* RPC as a case study of political engagement, and by (b) *examining* the ecclesiology of Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas with regard to the question of political engagement of churches.[21] Second, it attempts to provide *building blocks* for developing a theological *benchmark* for political engagement by using (a) an *intercultural*

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[18] Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2006), 3;

[19] Eekhoff Sarah Zylstra, "Politics: Double-Daring the IRS," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL), 2011.

[20] Most contemporary Western scholars view the demise of Christendom as a net positive. See Robert C. Crouse, *Two Kingdoms & Two Cities: Mapping Theological Traditions of Church, Culture, and Civil Order* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), The introduction to the book deals extensively with this topic.

[21] Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer," Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2026, https://www.redeemer.com/.

dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas and (b) giving an *evaluation* of an RPC case study on political engagement.

This study uses Kuyper and Hauerwas as conversation partners for several reasons. For now, reasons will be listed without much comment. First, both are arguably the most *significant* political/public theologians of their respective eras and write extensively on the church-state dynamic.[22] Second, they both *engage* this dynamic living in a post-Christendom era. Third, they discuss church-state engagement from *different ecclesial perspectives and instincts,* providing opportunities for richer conversation (Reformed and Methodist/Anabaptist, respectively). Fourth, they discuss their ecclesial perspectives in *different cultures, settings, and times*, enabling fruitful intercultural exchange. Lastly, both believe *that ecclesiology is central,* not only to their theological project but also to the *formation of God's people* ("worldview" for Kuyper and a "social ethic" for Hauerwas).

1.2.1 Explicit & Implicit Directives

It is also worth noting the distinction between the "explicit" and "implicit" functions of the church. The church's "explicit" function is when the community makes a public statement or commentary on a social issue.[23] In contrast, the church's "implicit" function focuses on individual ethical formation, shaping individual habits, and the structure of the church itself for the purpose of individual faithful political witness. The "implicit" function is primarily interested in political *formation for engagement,* while the "explicit" function is when the church's corporate voice *engages politically*.[24]

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[22] Kuyper is usually categorized as a public theologian and Hauerwas is categorized as a political theologian.

[23] Frederike Van Oorschot, "'Making Public Theology Operational': Public Theology and the Church," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13, no. 2 (2019): 208, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341572.

[24] As human beings, our political sensibility is shaped by liturgies. The people of God are not empty vessels, but are embodied creatures, who repeat practices, liturgies, and participate individually and corporately in the church. Liturgies such as hearing the Word preached, communing with God in prayer, and receiving the sacraments, shape our loves, produce Christian judgment, and help form the political imagination. Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Information For the Sake of Our Neighbor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 12. Smith makes a strong case for voluntarism in trilogy of works. While I am generally sympathetic to his anthropology (and project more broadly), I think intellectualism (and the Reformed tradition) is equally suited for ethical formation (Rom 12:2, Phil. 1:9-10). His "love takes practice" approach to spiritual formation is somewhat writ and formulaic. Take a brief example from Scripture: King Solomon, his wives came with false beliefs and false practices. "Was his heart's desire shaped by these practices? Or were the practices a conscious choice stemming from his wayward heart?" Mike Emlet argues there seems to be a tight *connection* between practice and the heart. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies

Political engagement is not limited to explicit or implicit directives. In the Reformed tradition, political engagement involves the slow process of sanctifying grace, which includes hearing the Word proclaimed, mortifying sin, and being vivified by the Spirit. Michael Wear notes, "We can count on the Holy Spirit as our helper, just as we can for our 'personal' spiritual formation. We can expect to see God working through and in us as we act in public."[25] In other words, salvation is holistic, shaping the entire person; it not only restores our relationship with God but also reconciles our relationship with public life, enabling the church to engage politics explicitly and implicitly.

1.3 Problem Statement & Relevance of Study

Integrationism and separationism create a tension in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PCA is a confessional denomination but relatively flexible in its deliberations on political engagement; therefore, political topics are often treated as contextual or being "faithful to Scripture." A theological benchmark that aids public engagement or ecclesial restraint remains unclear and inconsistently applied. To state the problem succinctly: the PCA's corporate voice (explicit function) on when to engage or not engage politically is insufficiently clarified, leaving unresolved tensions between ecclesial public witness and ecclesial restraint (viz., integrationism and separationism). As a result, the PCA frequently debates which political topics *require* corporate public engagement and which ones require individual responsibility (e.g., abortion, homosexuality, climate change, Christian Nationalism, or questions surrounding just war).[26] In this sense, churches in the PCA disagree on how to engage public life.

As a heuristic device, a brief typology of PCA approaches to political engagement illustrates the relevance of the problem above. This study assumes three prominent approaches to political engagement in the PCA: (1) Theonomic approaches, (2) Neo-Calvinistic approaches, and (3) Two-Kingdoms approaches.[27] The first two approaches are *public engagement* models

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(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Michael Emlet, "Practice Makes Perfect? Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge, Desire, and Habit," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27, no. 1 (2013): 41.

[25] Michael Wear, "Foreword," in *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Information For the Sake of Our Neighbor*, by Kaitlyn Schiess (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 3.

[26] Which issues in scripture are sufficiently clear for the church to corporately speak on? Both integrationists and separations make different theological moves to justify their position, then select biblical texts accordingly.

[27] See Keller's white paper on confessional subscription in the PCA, where he discusses Greg Bahnson, Meredith Kline, and Abraham Kuyper having a home in the PCA. Timothy Keller, "How Then Shall We Live Together?: Subscription and the Future of the PCA," White Paper, June 2001, 3. Theonomic approaches are

(redeeming creation); they fundamentally view the church as possessing a political voice, having a corporate responsibility for political concerns (e.g., "Scripture talks about this topic explicitly" or "Scripture does not speak about this topic"). In these views, the church influences politics in different ways and to different degrees. Theonomic approaches argue that grace *reorders* and *restructures* nature, and depending on the theonomist (e.g., Reconstructivism), the church can persuade/force the state to adopt biblical proscriptions or absorb the civil sphere completely.[28] On the other hand, neo-Calvinism believes that grace *restores* nature, following a narrative structure, creation-fall-redemption. In this narrative structure, the church is always speaking politically in the "theo-drama" of God redeeming all things.[29] As such, the people of God should not confuse church authority with civil authority.

The Two-Kingdoms approach is a *private engagement* model and remains *cautious* when the church engages politically. Instead, the church's primary role is the spiritual kingdom (as opposed to the earthly kingdom). It argues that politics proper does not belong in the church because it risks conflating ecclesial power with civil power, which ultimately compromises the church's witness (§2.2.1, "spirituality of the church"). In this sense, they argue for a form of church-state separation, in which the church should speak politically only with a "prophetic voice" (in extraordinary circumstances).[30] While these views do not exhaust the approaches within the denomination, they generally have the greatest influence in the PCA.[31]

1.4 Research Question & Sub Questions

This study cannot address every question posed by the problem above. This study attempts to contribute to the conversation by seeking to answer the following main research question:

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generally "anti-liberal," neo-Calvinistic approaches are sympathetic to "political liberalism," and Two-Kingdoms approaches appeal to "natural law."

[28] American Reconstructionists argue that the Mosaic ceremonial law is an obligation for modern Christians. For the most authoritative and interesting distillation of this project see R.J. Rushdoony's writings.

[29] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, First edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

[30] The criteria for determining such "extenuating circumstances" are almost always contextual, cultural, or are inconsistently defined. Who or what decides the "extenuating circumstances"?

[31] The Two Kingdoms approach has a particular influence in the age of Donald Trump, who many view as too abrasive and combative. Scholars like David VanDrunen, Michael Horton, and D.G. Hart represent this school of thought. See: David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, ed. Jr. Editor Witte John, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010); Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*, First edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); D. G. Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R Dee, Inc, 2006).

What theological account of Christian engagement in public life emerges from a case study of political engagement at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, set against the background of the ecclesiologies of Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas?

To narrow this research question, specific questions shape this study. Each sub-question corresponds to a chapter in the study.

> **Sub-question 1**: "How does Redeemer Presbyterian church engage politics?" (Chapter 2)
>
> **Sub-question 2:** "What theological doctrines shape Abraham Kuyper's account of the church's institutional authority against the background of engaging politics?" (Chapter 3)
>
> **Sub-question 3**: "What theological doctrines shape Stanley Hauerwas's account of the church's institutional authority against the background of engaging politics?" (Chapter 4)
>
> **Sub-question 4:** "What theological tensions can be discerned from an intercultural dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas for evaluating how the church might engage politics?" (Chapter 5)
>
> **Sub-question 5:** "What theological account of the *church's participation in politics* emerges from a reflection on Kuyper and Hauerwas regarding RPC's political engagement?" (Chapter 6)

1.5 Method of Investigation

Political theology typically considers how individuals *qua* individuals (i.e., as individuals) relate to the state, while public theology considers the "fabric of society that flourishes within (and often beyond) the state."[32] This study takes a slightly different approach. It focuses on the *public function of the church* as a public theology and, as such, is an exercise in ecclesiology expressed as a public theology. This is primarily demonstrated by an illustrative case study of political

[32] Clifford Anderson, "Volume Introduction," in *Pro Rege: Living under Christ's Kingship: The Exalted Nature of Christ's Kingship*, vol. 1, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al., trans. Albert Gootjes, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), xxv. See also J. Brian Benestad et al., *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

engagement at RPC. From this ecclesiological foundation, it aims to describe and analyze the church's engagement model through the ecclesiologies of Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas. RPC provides a focused test case for balancing integrationism and separationism. Furthermore, by placing Kuyper and Hauerwas in direct intercultural dialogue, this study aims to uncover tensions and contribute to the development of a theological benchmark for PCA churches as they engage politics.

The methodology of this study is descriptive, comparative, and analytical. It uses neo-Calvinism as an interpretive lens and theological retrieval as a methodology.[33] Neo-Calvinism provides the ecclesial and theological framework for this study.[34] In particular, the Kuyperian understanding of sphere sovereignty, antithesis, and common grace function as its primary starting points. Abraham Kuyper noted that "Not one segment of our intellectual world can be hermetically sealed off from the others, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not call out: 'Mine!'"[35] Following early neo-Calvinists, this study seeks, "a fully orbed vision and application of theology" to the area of church political engagement and aims to be charitable and understanding, especially toward other Christian traditions.[36] In this way, this study is self-consciously Reformed but open to conversation. Including Hauerwas as a comparative dialogue partner allows the study to remain true to the sphere sovereignty and common grace sensibilities of neo-Calvinism.

While neo-Calvinism is a form of theological retrieval, this study differentiates neo-Calvinism from theological retrieval as a methodology. As a methodology, theological retrieval affirms that Christian tradition itself is a divine institution, not on par with Scripture, but serves as a guardrail

[33] Both are defined in more detail below (§1.5.1). This study uses "Theological Retrieval" and "Theological Ressourcement" as synonyms. Allen and Swain see "retrieval" and "ressourcement" as "mode[s] of theological inquiry…in retrieving resources from the Christian tradition." The term "retrieval" was first used by Paul Ricoeur as an alternative to the "hermeneutics of suspicion." The term "ressourcement" was used by the Nouvelle Théologie as a signal to move beyond Neo-Scholasticism and return to the patristic sources. In an experiential sense, this study is an exercise in dialectical methodology, hoping that truth emerges when two methodologies are brought together in dialogue. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, with J. Todd Billings (Grand Rapids. MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 8.

[34] This study uses "neo-Calvinism" and "Kuyperianism" interchangeably.

[35] Abraham Kuyper, "Address at the Dedication of the Free University, Delivered on 20 October, 1880 in the Chancel of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam," in *On Charity & Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga, Jordan J. Ballor, and Melvin Flikkema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2022), 115.

[36] Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 40.

to ensure the church does not slip into hermeneutical obscurity.[37] As John Webster says, creeds and prayer "help us focus; they help us fix mind and heart and will and imagination on the particular reality of the gospel."[38] Theological retrieval in the tradition of Reformed Catholicity (viz., Allen and Swain) works as a preventative measure against parochial readings of history and positively operates as a tool to understand political engagement in concert with church history and the "Great tradition."[39] Theological retrieval allows this study to draw on voices from the past and the present, something both Hauerwas and Kuyper were willing to do. There is also a historical tone to this study, as RPC, Kuyper, and Hauerwas are read critically against the Reformed Catholic tradition.

Theological retrieval is "an attempt to recover the riches of patristic theology for the sake of *engaging* the modern world more effectively."[40] Retrieving sources from the Christian tradition resists a single unified expression—from the Nouvelle Théologie,[41] Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics,[42] to Thomas Oden's "Paleo-Orthodoxy"[43]—all these movements attempt to offer a "new theology" by directly appropriating the church fathers and church tradition. Not all retrieval movements are created equal; some should probably be avoided.[44] Allen and Swain warn against the danger of practicing retrieval as a "theological bricolage"—appropriating church tradition as a handyman rather than intentional Protestant Reformed reflection.[45]

To avoid a hybrid theology, this study has formulated criteria and standards for evaluating what constitutes theological retrieval: (1) Scripture-based, (2) Christ-centered, (3) Harmonized with

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[37] Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 22.

[38] John Webster, *Christ Our Salvation: Expositions and Proclamations*, ed. Daniel J. Bush (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 15.

[39] Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 40–45.

[40] My emphasis. Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 8. Buschart and Eilers note that theological retrieval "begins in the middle" between God's reconciling activity and the church's sanctified reasoning. W. David Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 11-12.

[41] Examples include Teilhard de Chardin, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac. For an example see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: Eerdmans; T&T Clark, 1998).

[42] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

[43] Oden's three Systematic volumes are a testament to his model. I used his model earlier when defining the church. See Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology, Vol. I* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992).

[44] See the Emerging Church movement. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); Jim Belcher and Richard J. Mouw, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

[45] Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 15.

tradition, (4) Interpreting with charity, (5) Application-focused, and (6) Doxologically oriented. Retrieving sources for the betterment of the church has a longstanding tradition—one need only think of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) using Augustine or Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) using John Calvin. This study views theological retrieval as an acute Reformed methodology, in which we embrace the past while retaining an awareness of the present cultural moment.[46]

1.5.1 Analytical Definitions

1.5.1.1 Neo-Calvinism

Historically, neo-Calvinism refers to the 19th-century Dutch Reformed movement that developed and reworked the theology of John Calvin in response to modernity.[47] Influenced by Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) and Herman Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803-1875), Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck largely developed neo-Calvinism as a worldview and theological system.[48] They wanted to correct theological liberalism by being confessionally orthodox and culturally aware. The 20th century saw a range of theological voices sympathize with this approach—from Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff to Cornelius Van Til and Francis Schaeffer to Herman Dooyeweerd and Hendrik Vollenhoven—each modified neo-Calvinism to suit their own theological-cultural situation.

In the popular imagination, neo-Calvinism is often associated with cultural "transformationalism"—the idea that the church's mission is to reshape society through theology incrementally. While not entirely inaccurate, this understanding is historically anachronistic. Neo-Calvinism, as conceived by Kuyper and Bavinck, was a thoughtful reflection of how Christianity is lived in modernity (*Neo*), paired with the revival of Reformed confessional sensibility (*Calvinism*).[49] Sutanto and Brock state, "what historic neo-Calvinism offers foremost today is both its material dogmatic reflections and a model for adapting and updating orthodox confessional dogmatic reasoning for each generation and in each culture."[50] As stated previously,

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[46] Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 16.

[47] Neo-Calvinism was not limited to the Netherlands, but its geographic center was the Lowlands.

[48] Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry Van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018); Roel Kuiper, *The Antirevolutionary: Life and Works of Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025).

[49] Joel Beeke notes that the first usage of the term is ascribed to Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam professor A. Anema. Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 309, footnote 30.

[50] Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, 3.

neo-Calvinism is a method of Reformed retrieval—returning to the sources to faithfully and contextually engage the present. Cory Brock describes this phenomenon as "orthodox *yet* modern."[51] Referring to Bavinck, he argues that "Reformed orthodox identity does not preclude the adoption of a particular modern philosophical grammar."[52] This study defines neo-Calvinism in the historical sense of the term and uses it as a "theological sensibility" in research and evaluating sources.

1.5.1.2 Reformed

The word Reformed risks the dangerous reductionism of equating it with a specific set of doctrine. Instead of framing "Reformed" as a doctrinal construct, George Stroup helpfully identifies five markers of commonality in the Reformed traditions: (1) polity and church structure, (2) essential tenets, (3) themes and emphases, (4) habits, and (5) cultural-linguistic patterns. Using Stroup's framework, this study defines Reformed in the following five ways.[53] In terms of *polity*, this study refers to churches aligning with the theology and practice of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) as Reformed.[54] Regarding *tenets*, Reformed refers to churches that align with the Continental and Presbyterian streams of the confessional tradition (viz., Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Confession of Faith) and are properly considered Reformed.[55]

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[51] Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

[52] Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern*, 19.

[53] This is not to exclude other Reformed traditions from the Reformed tradition (e.g. Dutch Reformed, Barthian, Reformed Baptist, etc.) or to make a statement about who can claim the title "Reformed." Reformed traditions influence one another, often creating ambiguity in the history of thought and perspectives. Here Stroup's framework is helpful to contextualize "Reformed" to different contexts and perspectives.

[54] I recognize that this is a narrow definition, but for the purpose of evaluating Redeemer Presbyterian Church, which is in the PCA, and helping PCA church members engage public life, it is best to keep the definition narrow.

[55] First, in the PCA, only teaching and ruling elders are required to affirm the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). The PCA subscribes to the American revision version (1788). This is important, because the original WCF (1646) states that the civil magistrate is to suppress blasphemy, heresy, ensure unity, and call synods. The American revision (much in line with the "spirituality of the church") has these provisions removed. Elders in the PCA can take exceptions to the Confession. Second, the Three Forms of Unity consists of: (1) Belgic Confession; (2) the Canons of Dort; and (3) the Heidelberg Catechism. Without getting into debates on English Puritanism, pietism, and its divergence from liturgical practices, this study sees the continental Reformed tradition and the Anglo-Saxon presbyterian tradition as two expressions of the magisterial Reformation and can both rightfully be called "Reformed." While I do not want to downplay their differences in approach a good case can be made that the Puritan movement in England influenced the inner-life and piety of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Further Reformation). George W. Stroup, "Reformed Identity in an Ecumenical World," in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Jr. Alston and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

Regarding *themes*, Reformed refers to churches that are Scripture-based, gospel-centered, and tradition-bound. In reference to *habits*, Reformed entails preaching God's Word as a means of grace, a high view of the sacraments, intellectual seriousness, and a family-centered church life. Lastly, Reformed is a cultural-linguistic *pattern* that means the church maintains a "gospel grammar" in the church and in public life. In summary, this study uses the term "Reformed" to refer to churches (viz., the PCA) that are Scripture-based, gospel-centered, maintain a high view of the sacraments, and use "gospel grammar" in the church and public life.

1.5.1.3 The Church

Having defined Reformed in a narrow way, this study defines the church (*ekklēsia*) in two principal ways. First, "the church" refers to the sociological expression of *belonging* to the visible Reformed church. In this sense, the church is the local, ecclesiastical body composed of the *communicant members* of the PCA. The visible church is a concrete and embodied reality in the present time, most fully expressed in the public worship of the gathered people of God, who assemble to receive the means of grace and partake in the sacraments. This is not to falsely equivocate the PCA with the universal church, the one true Church, or worse, "the only true church." Like all church denominations, the PCA is prone to good and bad, consistency and inconsistency, virtue and sin. The church, in the local and visible sense, serves as a sociological marker of common worship and community among a specific American Reformed denomination and tradition.

Second, this study also refers to "the church" as the universal expression of God's divinely given institution to humanity on earth. The Augsburg Confession gives a classic definition: "[the church is] the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments rightly administered."[56] Where the church is, there Christ is; where Christians are, there is the church.[57] Accordingly, this study harmonizes the Roman Catholic and Reformed notion of the church, not confining the Head of the church to a human individual (Roman Catholic), nor emphasizing individual conversion (Reformed); rather, the church is one, holy, catholic,

[56] Charles P. Krauth, *The Augsburg Confession, Together with the General Creeds; and an Introduction, Notes, and Analytical Index* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Book Store, 1868), preprint VII.

[57] Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology, Vol. III* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), 280.

apostolic body of believers, a universal community of individuals baptized into a social organism, united through the Spirit, with Christ as the head.[58]

1.5.1.4 Public Life

The idea of a "public life" assumes that there is such a thing as a "public" in distinction from a "private."[59] This distinction is sometimes called a "modern Western invention" or "one of the great dichotomies" of Western civilization.[60] One can think of Jürgen Habermas, who forcefully argued that the public/private distinction was a modern bourgeois social construction, where public life was based on the "*two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple*."[61] While Habermas is partially correct, the modern formulation of the public/private is not entirely new, nor is it the fault of the bourgeoisie (as Habermas would have it)—the distinction goes back to early Western civilization.[62]

Historically, the American tradition defines "public" in the tradition of John Locke (as mediated through Thomas Jefferson and James Madison).[63] "Public," under this view, is never isolated from the private, religious, or otherwise. Instead of treating private life as a subset of public life,

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[58] Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology, Vol. III*, 279. In this sense Oden agrees with Kuyper's anti-institutional definition of the church. The church according to Kuyper is a group of "*regenerated and confessing individuals*, who, in accordance with the Scriptural command, and under the influence of the sociological element of all religion, have formed a society, and are endeavouring to live together in subordination to Christ as their king. This, alone, is the church on earth,—not the building,—not the institution,—not a spiritual order." The irony does not evade me that Kuyper speaks against the Roman Catholic conception of worldview. However, his definition of the church fits with Oden's and is ecumenically applicable. Emphasis original. Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), 76.

[59] Aristotle Papanikolaou, "A Public Orthodox Theology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Public Theology*, ed. Christoph Hübenthal and Christiane Alpers, T&T Clark Handbooks (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 164.

[60] Norberto Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship: The Nature and Limits of State Power*, trans. Peter Kennealy (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 1.

[61] Italics original. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 56.

[62] Most contemporary Western scholars agree that the public/private distinction dates to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who differentiated between a political and a household community. Aristotle makes this distinction in his book *Rhetoric*, where he distinguishes between "two kinds of laws"—"particular" and "common." Common law applies to the entire community; particular law applies to the household. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 1.13 1373 b.1-9.

[63] In the 20th century, John Rawls modified the Enlightenment tradition, stating, "What is necessary is that political parties be autonomous with respect to private demands, that is, demands not expressed in the public forum and argued for openly by reference to a conception of the public good. For Rawls, religion is not private, but the public space should be a "naked public square"—a place where people essentially pretend to be ignorant of religious conviction; therefore, confining religion to the private sphere. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Rev. ed (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 198.

this study reverses the relationship. Public life is treated as a subset of private life, where public life is a type of "private life" that varies across historical periods. For example, the public life of 1890s Amsterdam was very different from that of 1990s Durham, North Carolina. Private lives in those respective periods were shaped by private narratives of family and culture, which, in turn, defined the public life of those decades. This is not to deny the role of the larger community in shaping private life; the point is to note that "private life" is not "individualistic life," but rather life lived in a small community, sheltered from larger public spaces (e.g., visible church, visible politics).[64] The stories shaped in private life, small church gatherings, and private family functions shape public spaces, which in turn shape public life. In summary, *public life is the larger civic community, which depends on and is shaped by the moral, cultural, and religious formation of smaller private lives.*[65]

1.5.2 Other Definitions

1.5.2.1 Public Theology

While this study is primarily an ecclesiastical exercise in *public theology* (§1.3), public theology should be defined and distinguished from *political theology* and *practical politics*.[66] Political theology refers to "the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social, and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world."[67] The task of political theology varies, but it primarily seeks to *relate religious belief to political belief by reflecting critically on the political*.[68] Therefore, political theology is primarily a post-Christendom project that critiques Christendom's original aspiration and recognizes the need for ecumenism in retrieving tradition for a constructive solution to modern problems.[69] On the other hand, practical politics refers to specific political *actions and commitments* of individuals and communities. Examples might be promoting gay

[64] This is also not to say that public life is merely an aggregation of private life or that public life is merely the consensus of private communities.

[65] I am not attempting to defend the sovereignty of the individual. Granted, this gives ground to a liberal perspective.

[66] Martin Marty is credited with coining the term "public theology" in 1974. Martin Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russel E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 139–57.

[67] Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, "Introduction," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1.

[68] Scott and Cavanaugh, "Introduction," 2.

[69] Crouse, *Two Kingdoms & Two Cities*, xv.

rights, arguing for pro-life policies, or lobbying for Israel. Practical politics are moral actions with political consequences, grounded in cultural and personal worldviews (*weltanschauungen*).

Public theology presupposes a distinction between the public and the private (§1.5.1.4) and has historically operated in Christendom and post-Christendom contexts.[70] Unlike political theology, public theology sees a closer correlation between theology itself and other sciences. As such, this study uses Elaine Graham's definition. She says the following:

> [Public theology is] an academic discipline and *ecclesial* discourse [that] *seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective* on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture, and media. Traditionally, public theology sees itself as *rooted in religious traditions*, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions.[71]

As an ecclesial discourse rooted in the Reformed tradition, this study is a public theology, not a political theology or a manual for practical politics.

1.5.2.2 Postliberalism

Stanley Hauerwas is often associated with postliberal theology; however, he often resists rigid theological categorization. Postliberalism refers to a Protestant theological movement with three essential traits: (1) doing theology from an ecclesial perspective; (2) placing strong emphasis on story and narrative; and (3) paying close attention to the grammar of the Christian life.[72] In 1984, George Lindbeck's book *The Nature of Doctrine* placed the Yale professor at the center of a loose movement that included other theologians such as Hans Frei and David Kelsey.[73] Lindbeck coined the term to describe his "cultural-linguistic" approach to theology and the Christian tradition, in which the acquisition of theological understanding is always connected with a specific theological culture.[74] Hauerwas took from Lindbeck and Frei the idea that Christianity is

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[70] Political theology does not presuppose this distinction. One can do political theology without presupposing the public/private distinction.

[71] My emphasis. Elaine Graham quoted in Matthew J. Kaemingk, "Introduction: Toward a Reformed Public Theology," in *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World*, ed. Matthew J. Kaemingk (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 9.

[72] Christopher Ben Simpson, *Modern Christian Theology* (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 360.

[73] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

[74] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*; Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 23. Lindbeck argued that "religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought." He rejected the Enlightenment retreat to "objectivity" and sought to avoid postmodern obfuscation of truth while asserting that theology was a communal phenomenon shaped by a culture's experience of Christ. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology*

not merely a belief or feeling, "but a story—a narrative about God's covenant with Israel, about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and about a church whose members, in turn, seek to form their stories to God's story."[75] The church participates in this story.

In this sense, postliberalism is a pre-Christendom, a clarion call for the American church and the Western church more generally to return to the theological culture of Christ, his disciples, and the early church (see Appendix A).[76] Samuel Wells notes that postliberalism is "primarily a statement about *revelation*," in which the theologian's primary task is to "describe the *way faith works*" and how it continues to work.[77] Postliberalism is neither theologically liberal nor conservative in the strict sense, but rather a *mediating theology* that seeks to avoid what it perceives as the errors of rationalism and fideism arising from Christendom. This study reads Stanley Hauerwas as a postliberal theologian and defines postliberalism as *a theological mode that interprets Christian doctrine (specifically the way faith works) through an ecclesial, cultural-linguistic, and narrative framework.*

1.6 Overview of Secondary Scholarship

It is impossible to include all the secondary literature written about Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas. Not only were both influential in their fields of study, but both were notable professors at laudable institutions.[78] This places both at the center of secondary scholarship mills, especially 19th-century Calvinism and postliberal theology. This overview covers the historical reception of Kuyper (through Warfield and Schilder) and Hauerwas (through Gustafson and O'Donovan) and briefly covers their contemporary reception.

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in a Postliberal Age, 33. Lindbeck is credited with coining the term postliberalism, but H. Richard Niebuhr first used the term "post-liberal theology." David B. Hunsicker, *The Making of Stanley Hauerwas: Bridging Barth and Postliberalism*, with Stanley Hauerwas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 7.

[75] Frei was Hauerwas's teacher at Yale. While not taught by Lindbeck directly, his influence still looms large. Herman J. Paul, "Stanley Hauerwas: Against Secularization in the Church," sec. 2, *Zeitschrift Für Dialektische Theologie* 29, no. 59 (2013): 15.

[76] Postliberalism is a broad and diffuse field. It includes Anglo-Catholics (John Milbank), Eastern Orthodox (Rod Dreher), and political scientists (Adrian Pabst, Patrick Deneen). See chart in Appendix A for a brief explanation.

[77] My emphasis. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 53-54.

[78] Abraham Kuyper taught at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Stanley Hauerwas taught at Notre Dame and Duke Divinity School.

1.6.1 Scholarship on Kuyper's Public Theology

Early theologians read Kuyper in continuity with the contemporary Reformed tradition to combat theological liberalism. In a personal note to Kuyper, Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield remarked, "I have always delighted in your theological writings…I rejoice, I feel myself in full accord with the great march of your thought, and I never consult your books without deriving from them both instruction and inspiration."[79] Warfield's admiration for Kuyper was longstanding; he invited him to deliver the Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1896. While his personal letter may be unreliable to reveal his theological assessment of Kuyper, in his encyclopedia article titled "Calvinism," Warfield argued that Calvinism was a form of religious consciousness, offering the best prospect for the future of Christianity.[80] This article was consistent with a Kuyperian understanding of Calvinism as a "life-system." While Warfield differed in theological sensibility—inspiration/authority (Warfield) versus common grace/antithesis (Kuyper), Warfield read Kuyper in continuity with his Princeton colleagues and the contemporary Reformed tradition, ultimately seeing Kuyper as a friend in the battle against theological liberalism.

In the 1930s, Dutch theologian Klaas Schilder became a strident critic of Kuyper. Schilder thought Kuyper was too triumphalistic in his approach to culture, especially in his doctrine of common grace.[81] Schilder remarks:

> In Kuyper's *Common Grace*, we already see the danger latent in this erroneous approach to history. One of the things he writes is that there would have been next to no development had there been no common grace… We counter that the situation sketched by Kuyper does not exist. The development of the world has always been part and parcel of God's very counsel.

Schilder argued that Kuyper's notion of common grace fails to adequately sketch the eschatological image of the church at "war" with the forces of darkness. Instead of an *extension*

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[79] KA, letter 7053, from Warfield to Kuyper, 15 April 1905. Quoted in Peter S. Heslam, "Architects of Evangelical Intellectual Thought: Abraham Kuyper and Benjamin Warfield," *Themelios* 24, no. 2 (1999): 13.

[80] Personal letters are often addressing a specific context. See an example in George Harinck's paper on the Stone Lectures where Warfield makes a note on the lectures that contradicts the historical narrative. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Calvin and Calvinism* (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2008), 5:359 ff.; George Harinck, "Lost in Translation: The First Text of the Stone Lectures," in *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, ed. Jessica R. Joustra and Robert J. Joustra (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 173.

[81] It seems that Hauerwas would be sympathetic with this assessment of Kuyper. For Hauerwas, Christians cannot employ "neutral" public language and assume that non-believers understand them. Richard J. Mouw, "Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian," *Calvin Theological Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI) 38 (2003): 283.

of common grace, Schilder sees a cultural darkening, a *loosening* of common grace as Christ's return draws near; therefore, the church should be cautious and not uncritically accept forms of non-Christian thinking.[82] While Schilder called Christians to remain faithful within present society, he distanced himself from Kuyper's disposition to recognize grace in the "common" and note the "existential divide between regenerate Christians and the unregenerate."[83]

Academic interest in Abraham Kuyper has experienced a renaissance in the last twenty years. Reprints of Kuyper's works are being published, and Reformed academics from various backgrounds are writing monographs on Kuyper. Kuyper's best-known work, *Lectures on Calvinism*, is widely regarded as a summation of his public theology and worldview. His public theology is no longer confined to Europe and the US; it is now penetrating the global South, including Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa. In this sense, Kuyper's theology of engaging the political sphere is part of a global tradition with diverse voices.

1.6.2 Scholarship on Hauerwas's Political Theology

Following the publication of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hauerwas's theology came under criticism from his former dissertation supervisor, James Gustafson.[84] Following H. Richard Niebuhr, Gustafson argues that Hauerwas fails to distinguish between the descriptive (*is*) and the normative (*ought*) elements in his theological ethics, ultimately weighing the scales in favor of the gospel narratives (*ought*), while ignoring the descriptive (*isness*) of the doctrine of creation. This leaves Hauerwas's theological ethics based on fidelity to gospel narratives—a tautology of sorts, and according to Gustafson, "[Hauerwas's] fidelity to the narratives becomes virtually self-justifying…both theology and ethics become incorrigible by anything outside of the community itself."[85] Gustafson essentially accuses Hauerwas of "sectarian withdrawal" from culture—focusing "too much on the distinction between faith as subjective assent to positively given truths on the one hand, and rational activity, which is open to questions of the adequacy of the

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[82] Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, with Jochem Douma and Richard J. Mouw (Lucerna: CRTS Publications, 2016).

[83] Dennis Greeson, "Beginning at the End of All Things: Abraham Kuyper's and Klaas Schilder's Eschatological Visions of Culture," *Themelios* 46, no. 2 (2021): 367.

[84] David Hunsicker notes that early in his years at Yale and Norte Dame, Hauerwas saw himself as walking in Gustafson's footsteps. James M. Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University," Proceedings of the Fortieth Annual Convention, Catholic Theological Society of America, San Francisco, CA, June 5, 1985; Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 39; Stanley Hauerwas, *Remembering: A Biography of Books* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026), 68.

[85] Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation," 88.

truths assented to on the other."[86] Gustafson posits that when we use the right tools, we can discern a single way of moral guidance that can better American life.[87] On the other hand, Hauerwas believes that Gustafson's project is "Constantinian," an ethics for America rather than for the church.[88] For Hauerwas, the true subject of Christian ethics is not theology, not America, but the church.[89]

In his book *The Desire of the Nations*, Oliver O'Donovan claims that Hauerwas is "simply wrong" for stating that "Christians [during Christendom] were attempting to further the kingdom through the power of this world."[90] Unlike Gustafson, O'Donovan does not accuse Hauerwas of "sectarian withdrawal," but argues that he is much too harsh on Christendom: "[Hauerwas's] Christianity is marked by a kind of return to the catacombs…[where] Hauerwas does not talk about martyrdom in the way the master-builders did."[91] According to O'Donovan, Hauerwas's version of postliberal theology lacks sufficient hope in the resurrection. In Hauerwas's attempt to construct a uniquely Christian ethic, he tends to underemphasize the constructive strands of Christian theology within Christendom while giving insufficient attention to the resurrection as the ground of Christian hope.[92] According to O'Donovan, the resurrection offers a different power in which Christ reigns differently over the church than over the world (viz., politics).[93] Therefore, Christendom is not necessarily detrimental for mankind; it can be mutually beneficial for the church and politics if the program is rightly centered on resurrection hope.

The reception of Hauerwas in contemporary theology ranges from appreciative to critical.[94] Those who are positive tend to focus on his prophetic voice in a liberal secular culture, while

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[86] Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation," 92.

[87] Harry J. Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Baylor University Press, 2012), 41.

[88] This analysis comes from Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Yoder's neo-Barthian and Christological ethic gradually persuaded Hauerwas away from Gustafson's Niebuhr ethic.

[89] Hunsicker, *The Making of Stanley Hauerwas, 40*.

[90] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 216.

[91] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations*, 216.

[92] O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations*, 216–17.

[93] Adekoya points out that Hauerwas and O'Donovan overlap in their ecclesial-turn against the "Dominant Tradition," which "preserves an alternative political vision with its own metaphysical commitments." In this sense, Enoch Adekoya, "The Church as Political Society in the Political Theologies of Stanley Hauerwas and Oliver O'Donovan" (Ph.D diss., University of Manchester, 2024), 63–65.

[94] For positive assessments see Smith and Hunsicker. For mixed assessment see Hill. For critical interaction see Vidu and Healy. Adonis Vidu, *Postliberal Theological Method: A Critical Study*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005); Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, ed. Conor Cunningham, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King:*

those who are critical often accuse him of being *sectarian* or *conceding* too much to culture.[95] From an American evangelical perspective, Hauerwas is a complex Christian thinker because he often stands at the intersection of theological conservatism and theological progressivism. Most scholars believe his most significant contribution is in the discipline of Christian ethics.[96] Hauerwas's academic career has focused on Christian ethics and political theology, specifically a Christian approach to peace and non-resistance. He has prompted American theologians to reflect on how culture shapes the Christian.[97] Hauerwas says, "The reason Christian convictions have lost their power for many Christians and non-Christians alike is that many Christians, and in particular most Christian theologians, have failed to challenge the cultural accommodation of the church to the world."[98] Hauerwas is generally seen as perceptive in untangling politics from theology and connecting ethical issues with philosophical resources. At times, his approach is viewed as too combative, causing some to distance themselves from his "distinctly Christian approach."

1.7 Statement of the Argument

This study offers *building blocks* for developing a *theological benchmark* by which PCA church members may approach public life in the American context. This is based on RPC as an illustrative case study and an intercultural dialogue between Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas. Chapter 2 discusses the problem in the PCA through the RPC case study. It outlines political engagement, explains the rise of the New Calvinism movement in the early 2000s, examines Timothy Keller's public theology, and considers the contemporary materials the church uses for political engagement.[99] Chapter 3 examines Abraham Kuyper's historical and

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Reforming Public Theology, vol. 3, Cultural Liturgies (Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017); Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*; Daniel Lee Hill, *Gathered on the Road to Zion: Toward a Free Church Ecclesio-Anthropology*, with Marc Cortez (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021).

[95] See Mouw's article for a helpful overview. Mouw, "Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian," 283.

[96] Hauerwas in his own words states that he wants to primarily be remembered as a theologian not an ethicist. See Hauerwas, *RABB*.

[97] Ironically, he writes on American culture and ethical issues, but he is more appreciated in European theology than in American theology.

[98] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 218.

[99] It is important to note that "New Calvinism" is different than "neo-Calvinism." New Calvinism is a recent phenomenon from American evangelical circles. Those associated with the movement are debated. Some names might include Timothy Keller, R.C. Sproul, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, and Kevin DeYoung. In 2009, New Calvinism was considered by TIME magazine to be one of the ideas changing the world. David Van Biema, "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now: The New Calvinism," *Time*, March 12, 2009, https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html.

theological context, focusing on his ecclesiology in relation to political engagement. Chapter 4 considers Stanley Hauerwas's historical and theological context, focusing on his ecclesiology as an ethical community. Chapter 5 engages in an intercultural dialogue with Kuyper and Hauerwas. Chapter 6 reconsiders the RPC illustrative case study, considering the Kuyper and Hauerwas dialogue. Chapter 7 presents research findings and offers potential building blocks for political engagement. The next chapter turns to an illustrative case study to highlight the problem of political engagement in the PCA.

Chapter 2 – Illustrative Case Study: Redeemer Presbyterian Church

2.1 Introduction

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is not known as a politically activist church; in fact, they are known for promoting political pluralism, something that "amounts to advocating a soft-spoken form of political moderation."[100] McMillan notes, "Redeemer does not forefront political action narrowly conceived, instead they stress serving others and working with affiliates to pursue social justice, care for the poor and needy, and serve the community."[101] RPC attempts to avoid political characterization and skirt political issues, helping "[the church] avoid being written off *in toto* as a bunch of no-nothing evangelical fundamentalists."[102]

If RPC is known for political moderation, why examine it as an illustrative test case in political engagement? The PCA increasingly faces questions of how the denomination should maintain faithful public witness amid a pluralistic/secular society. Redeemer serves as a good test case for several reasons: First, RPC illustrates how a contemporary PCA church navigates the tension between maintaining a distinct "churchly" identity while remaining culturally engaged. Second, RPC regularly grapples with contemporary culture (pluralism and secularism) in an urban, secular environment (NYC). Third, RPC attempts to avoid the traps of integrationism and separationism previously mentioned (§1.1). Fourth, RPC commonly engages the three approaches to politics in the PCA (Theonomy, neo-Calvinism, and Two-Kingdoms). Lastly, RPC is a large and culturally influential PCA church; as such, a case study on Redeemer could have a broader impact beyond the PCA.

This chapter builds on Ryan Burge's empirical research and William McMillian's PhD. dissertation, *Cosmopolitan Calvinists: Global Religion in A Secular Age*. This illustrative case study focuses on the public theology of Timothy Keller and how RPC, *vis-à-vis* the church, publicly articulates political engagement.[103] The primary question asked is: "How does Redeemer Presbyterian church engage politics?"

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[100] William McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists: Global Religion in A Secular Age" (Ph.D diss., Yale University, 2018), 40.
[101] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 51.
[102] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 183.
[103] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists."

2.2 Brief History of Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is a family of six churches located in Manhattan, New York City, with an average weekly attendance of approximately 5,500 people.[104] Founded in 1989 as a living-room Bible study by Timothy and Kathy Keller on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Redeemer has engaged New Yorkers for over 35 years by combining a strong grace narrative with a nuanced understanding of church-culture dynamics.[105] When Timothy Keller started RPC, he wanted to "re-create L'Abri as a local church for a strikingly secular city."[106] As a result, RPC church grew quickly. By Christmas 1989, the Upper East Side meetings had 250 attendees.[107] In the 1990s, RPC expanded its footprint in New York City, planting churches and launching public ministries like the *Center for Faith and Work.*[108] By 1996, the church had 3,000 in weekly attendance, and it launched a branch campus on the West Side of Central Park.[109] This growth was partially due to the church elders sensing *tensions* between opposing positions in the American church. RPC positioned itself between the liberal mainline churches (which tended to over-assimilate cultural narratives) and evangelical churches (which tended to avoid cultural narratives).[110] RPC also resisted the trend of attracting outsiders through "glued-on" business methods (e.g., the church growth movement).[111] One of the founding elders of RPC, Glen Klienkenect, commented that "New York [churches] needed a new wine skin."[112] "New wine

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[104] The six churches include: (1) Downtown; (2) West Side; (3) East Side; (4) Lincoln Square; (5) Brooklyn; and (6) East Harlem. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer."

[105] Rudolph Tucker Bartholomew, "Reviving Orthodoxy: A Study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City" (Ph.D diss., University of Georgia, 2000), 3; McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 10.

[106] Collin Hansen, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 90.

[107] Hansen, *Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*, 200.

[108] Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "History," Redeemer East Side, 2026, https://www.redeemeres.com/history.

[109] Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer History," Redeemer Church and Ministries, accessed May 13, 2026, https://www.redeemer.com/learn/about_us/redeemer_history.

[110] In this sense, the church was crafted after the ministries of John Stott and James Montgomery Boice who found ways to serve the needs of their congregations (orthopraxy), while maintaining a strong view of Scripture and tradition (orthodoxy); "In a way, both Stott and Boice were forging the kind of church that ministers of Manhattan in the late 19th century should have created." Timothy Keller, *Our Place in the Story: Part 2*, Redeemer Report [Newsletter] (2014). McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 92.

[111] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 14.

[112] Bartholomew, "Reviving Orthodoxy," 62. RPC expanded the scope of their ministry by keeping the wine and discarding the old skin. Keller conducted ministerial evaluation not through success or faithfulness but through fruitfulness. Klienkenect's description of "new wine skin" seems to fit this description. I am sympathetic with Keller's argument for measuring ministry by fruitfulness; however, unlike faithfulness, fruitfulness lacks an objective standard. While not completely impervious to cultural constructivism, we can define faithfulness according to Scripture. How are we to measure the prophet Jeremiah's ministry? Was Jeremiah's ministry fruitful?

skin" included doctrinal fidelity (orthodoxy), prioritizing ministry (orthopraxy), and casting a theological vision for "a particular time and place" (contextuality).[113] This included a multi-site church model; by 2003-4, attendance averaged 4,200 people and three congregations in New York City.[114] Today, through *Redeemer City to City*, the church has a global reach. The church claims to have trained 218,875 leaders and helped plant/re-plant/revitalize 2,807 churches in over 50 global cities.[115]

2.3 Ecclesial and Historical Context

2.3.1 The Presbyterian Church in America

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is part of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a confessional church denomination with approximately 400,000 members in the US.[116] As of 2025, the PCA is the largest conservative Reformed denomination in the English-speaking world.[117] The PCA was born out of the theological conflicts within the Southern Presbyterian Church.[118] During the 1950s, theological conservatives noticed seminary professors and clergy questioning inerrancy, the authority of Scripture, the loosening of Confessional subscription, and the allowance of women's ordination.[119] This drift toward theological liberalism ultimately led to social and political liberalism, resulting in the abandonment of the "spirituality of the church," a doctrine which states that "the church's only concern [is] with spiritual (as opposed to temporal or civil) things, and thus that the church [is] generally prohibited from expressing views about civil affairs."[120] The 1960s proved to be a tumultuous decade for the denomination; the Civil

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How are we to quantify fruitfulness apart from measurable statistics (which Keller wants to avoid)? Keller, *Center Church*, 11.

[113] Keller, *Center Church*, 14–16.

[114] Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer History."

[115] Redeemer City to City, "2025 Annual Report," CT Annual Report, 2025, https://ctcannualreport.com/.

[116] Presbyterian Church in America, "Statistical Report 2025," 2025, https://presbyteryportal.pcanet.org/Report/StatsReport.

[117] Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), ix; Presbyterian Church in America, "Statistical Report 2025."

[118] Strangely, McMillan's excellent dissertation misses this historical detail and claims that the PCA was formally associated with The Presbyterian Church (USA), the Northern branch of the Mainline denomination. This is untrue, the PCA split from the Southern Presbyterian Church or what is called the PCUS. McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 46.

[119] Brent F. Nelson and Beverly A. Gaddy, "Presbyterian Church in America," in *Pulpit and Politics; Clergy in American Politics at the Advent of the Millennium*, ed. Corwin E. Smidt (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 142.

[120] Nelson and Gaddy, "Presbyterian Church in America," 142; VanDrunen, *Natural Law and Two Kingdoms*, 247.

Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the Sexual Revolution, and the social gospel divided Southern Presbyterian parishioners. The theological conservatives split and formed a new denomination in 1973 (renaming itself the Presbyterian Church in America in 1974).

2.3.2 The "Spirituality of the Church"

For many PCA pastors, the doctrine of the "spirituality of the church" remains an important yet complicated topic.[121] It is shrouded in controversy since Presbyterians used the doctrine to excuse and ignore the plight of African Americans and biblically sanction chattel slavery.[122] Yet PCA elders remain hesitant to throw out the doctrine, recognizing that faithful preaching in real communities often involves tension with cultural ambiguity. Alan Strange notes, "what is moral or ethical, and thus properly spiritual, cannot always readily be separated from what is 'purely political.'"[123] While there is no way to completely disentangle the church from culture, many PCA pastors cautiously use the doctrine as a way of distinguishing the gospel from social/political issues.

On what basis do elders determine that a social/political issue falls within the church's spirituality? This question is beyond the scope of this study. But for the PCA, drawing lines between the spiritual and civil is "an exceedingly complicated and difficult subject."[124] In a 2001 survey of 464 PCA teaching elders, nearly all approved of preaching on moral issues, sixty

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[121] Historians now view the doctrine "as a means for white Presbyterian leaders to protect their social position and influence in American culture." Sean Michael Lucas, "Francis Grimké And The Spirituality Of The Church: A Case Study," *Westminster Theological Journal* 85, nos. 1 & 2 (2023): 169. Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge and J. Gresham Machen affirmed the doctrine. Richard E. Burnett, *Machen's Hope: The Transformation of a Modernist in the New Princeton* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 275; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 974. Contemporary Two-Kingdom proponents are sympathetic to the doctrine. VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, viz., chapter 6.

[122] Nelson and Gaddy, "Presbyterian Church in America," 143. The Spirituality of the Church is oft cited in discussions about Southern slavery. Presbyterian pastor James Henley Thornwell defended slavery (as the status quo) by appealing to the doctrine. Thornwell argued in 1850, "Where the Scriptures are silent, she [the church] must be silent, too." James Henley Thornwell, "The Rights and Duties of Masters," in *Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967*, ed. DeWitte Holland (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 221. His Northern counterpart, Charles Hodge held a more nuanced view of the doctrine, but historians like Mark Noll believe he did not go far enough. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Jemar Tisby, who argues that the doctrine was/is "inconsistently applied" and ultimately protects white supremacy and racism. Tisby's critique is interesting, but may push too far. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, with Lecrae Moore (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), Chapter 5.

[123] Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*, Reformed Academic Dissertations, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 414.

[124] Charles Hodge quoted in: Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*, 33.

percent approved of preaching on political issues, and only six percent approved of endorsing political candidates from the pulpit.[125] According to the survey, PCA teaching elders see a distinction between preaching gospel imperatives (e.g., proscriptions and prescriptions) and preaching about social/political issues. Preaching about social/political issues makes pastors wary of slipping into "theological liberalism" or subtly proclaiming a "social gospel." Many pastors also want to avoid letting the news cycle dictate the sermon, chasing stories in culture rather than looking at the text first.[126]

The phrase "spirituality of the church" is not mentioned in the PCA *Book of Church Order* (BCO). Chapter 3 of the BCO discusses the nature and extent of church power—it says, "The *sole functions* of the Church, as a kingdom and government distinct from the civil commonwealth, are to proclaim, to administer, and to enforce the law of Christ revealed in the Scriptures."[127] The function of the church (as opposed to the civil magistrate) is focused on the law of Christ. In the next section, the BCO explicitly states that "The *power* of the Church is exclusively spiritual...The Church has no right to construct or modify a government for the State."[128] Preliminary Principle 8 echoes this sentiment: "ecclesiastical discipline must be purely *moral or spiritual* in its object."[129] According to the BCO, the function and power of the church reside exclusively in the spiritual; however, the BCO leaves social/political issues to the conscience of the church session and the church community. This ultimately shapes the theological context of RPC.

2.3.3 New Calvinism in Early 21st Century Evangelicalism

Decades after neo-Calvinism established itself through the "Christian worldview" writings of Francis Schaeffer and Carl Henry, New Calvinism emerged in the early 2000s as a loosely

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[125] Nelson and Gaddy, "Presbyterian Church in America," 148, footnote 29. The PCA overwhelmingly affirms 2 ½ offices (ruling elder and teaching elder, and deacons). Deacons focus on "mercy ministry" and elders handle teaching and church governance. This study uses "teaching elder" and "pastor" interchangeably. In a recent analysis Ryan Burge says the median PCA church has 117 members. Ryan P. Burge, "A Deep Dive into the Presbyterian Church in America," *Graphs About Religion*, July 31, 2025, https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/a-deep-dive-into-the-presbyterian.

[126] Jason Cook, Mika Edmonson, and Kevin DeYoung, hosts, *Edmondson, DeYoung, Cook on Whether Politics Belongs in the Pulpit* (The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 7:53, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/edmondson-deyoung-cook-on-whether-politics-belongs-in-the-pulpit/.

[127] My emphasis. Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Office of the Stated Clerk, 2025), 3–3.

[128] My emphasis. Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, 3–4.

[129] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, Preliminary principle 8.

defined, influential, grassroots theological movement.[130] In 2009, Time Magazine dubbed it one of "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now."[131] Heuristically speaking, neo-Calvinism *emphasizes* the sovereignty of God over *all creation*, while New Calvinism *emphasizes* the sovereignty of God in *salvation*.[132] New Calvinism "arose as a response to the inadequate teaching of churches caught up in the *tenets* of church growth. People came to a *saving* knowledge of Christ, but soon found themselves starving, longing to be fed by and from the Word of God."[133] Often dubbed by American journalists as "the Young, Restless, and Reformed," many Millennials were unimpressed by "church growth" strategies, tired of Christian pietism, and wary of the "emerging church."[134] They hungered for "[a] God-centered, transcendence-focused understanding of who God is and what God wants us to do and what God has given us in Jesus Christ."[135] Calvinism was a breath of fresh air, offering a big God, a renewed idea of *sola scriptura*, and a formal liturgical structure. Parachurch organizations like Together for the Gospel (T4G) and The Gospel Coalition (TGC) hosted large conferences featuring keynote speakers and panel discussions, which drew large audiences.[136]

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[130] I date the height of the movement from roughly 2003 to 2014. The second edition of John Piper's book *Desiring God* was re-published in 2003 and the collapse of Mars Hill Church in Seatle (WA) occurred in 2014. Mars Hill in 2013-14 had roughly 14,000 weekly attendees across fifteen campuses in five states (i.e., Washington, California, Oregon, Arizona, and New Mexico). John Piper, *Desiring God* (Multnomah Publishers, 2003). Two brief qualifiers: First, this movement did not metastasize overnight. It was a thirty-year process in American evangelicalism. See for instance the success of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology in the 1970s. James Montgomery Boice, "Is the Reformed Faith Being Rediscovered?," *Christianity Today*, March 28, 1975, https://www.christianitytoday.com/1975/03/is-reformed-faith-being-rediscovered/. Tim Challies offers a "visual history" of the movement: Tim Challies, "New Calvinism Timeline," 2014, https://s3.amazonaws.com/Challies_VisualTheology/new-calvinism-timeline.html.; Brad Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence: A Field-Theoretic Analysis of Religious Strength (and Weakness) in Advanced Modernity" (Ph.D diss., Notre Dame University, 2016), 76.

[131] Biema, "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now: The New Calvinism."

[132] These ideas are not mutually exclusive, however New Calvinism seems to *emphasize* Calvinistic soteriology (e.g. TULIP). Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 59.

[133] My emphasis. Tim Challies, "A Call for Discernment," in *New Calvinism: New Reformation or Theological Fad?*, ed. Josh Buice (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2017), 91–92.

[134] In brief summary: "Christian pietism" refers to an evangelical sensibility, much like D.L. Moody and other 19th century evangelists, who argued that the goal for Christians was not to improve culture, but was merely to convert people in it. D. L. Moody *Notes from My Bible: From Genesis to Revelation* (Chicago; New York; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, 1895).

[135] Quoting an interview with Timothy George in: Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 21.

[136] The last T4G conference was in April 2022. TGC still holds conferences as of 2026. Speakers at T4G and TGC have included: Voddie Baucham, Jr., D.A. Carson, Matt Chandler, Mark Dever, Kevin DeYoung, Mark Driscoll, Collin Hansen, Tim Keller, C.J. Mahaney, James MacDonald, Al Mohler, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul (amongst others). Names gathered in this section come from Vermurlen's research. While this list is predominantly white, Vermurlen states that the movement "has a further reach than just among white Americans." Jackie Hill Perry, Chad Jones, Anthony Bradley, Anthony (Tony) Carter, and the Reformed African American Network

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, RPC in Manhattan became an intellectual incubator for New Calvinism. Keller's preaching and posture toward public life compelled young Millennials to develop theological convictions while maintaining cultural charity. Keller resisted political withdrawal and cultural assimilation, arguing instead that "Jesus forbids us to withhold help from our neighbors…[which] inevitably require[s] that we *participate* in political processes."[137] Keller's participatory model spread internationally with the founding of TGC. Founded in 2007 with D.A. Carson, TGC functioned as a "broadly Reformed" yet focused network that provided pastors and leaders with Reformed conferences and resources for their ministry. The stated *intention* of TGC was to "restore the center of historic, confessional Christianity in the Reformed heritage."[138] However, *functionally*, TGC served as the "organizational mastermind" of New Calvinism.[139]

However, as a church, Redeemer was always more closely tied to the ministry context of New York City.[140] When interviewed about New Calvinism specifically, Keller remarked,

> I don't feel like I identify much with it…But I love that group. I love the guys that are the figures of the New Calvinism. A lot of them are very dear friends of mine, and I really am so grateful for their ministries. I'm totally grateful for their ministries [sic]. I wish they were Presbyterian.[141]

Another staff member remarked that Redeemer staff and leadership were committed to Presbyterian distinctives (e.g., infant baptism and ecclesial structure).[142] While New Calvinists were influenced by RPC, the continuity in theological vision was in *emphasis* (viz., a high view of salvation) rather than in *kind*.[143] RPC is ultimately a confessional church, requiring elders to

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founded by Jemar Tisby and Phillip Holmes shows that New Calvinism has impact well beyond the white evangelical world. Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence." 99.

[137] Timothy Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't," Opinion, *The New York Times* (New York, NY), September 29, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html. Many leaders in New Calvinism try to position themselves as "*apolitical and nonpartisan, especially in light of the negative associations many Americans, and especially Millennials, have with the political ambitions of the Christian Right*. Emphasis original. Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 248.

[138] Quoting D.A. Carson. The Gospel Coalition, *What Is the History and Future of The Gospel Coalition?*, 2014, 10:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYQCtHyuLAI.

[139] Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 88.

[140] Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 75.

[141] Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 75, footnote 33.

[142] Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 75.

[143] As a denomination, the PCA does not fully embrace the New Calvinism. The PCA may benefit from the Reformed resurgence; the denomination has grown 3-5% year over year for the past 15 years, bucking the trend of nearly every major denomination in the United States, adding 50,000 people from 2011 to 2025. Burge, "A Deep Dive into the PCA"; Ryan P. Burge, "What 12 Denominations Tell Us About American Christianity," Graphs About Religion, December 18, 2025, https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/what-12-denominations-tell-us-about.

subscribe to confessional standards, take vows to uphold doctrinal commitments, and inform the presbytery if any changes occur in their theology. New Calvinism offered a "big God" under "big tent" evangelicalism, which included Reformed Baptists, Southern Baptists, and Dutch Reformed. While Keller was always receptive and welcoming of divergent perspectives, RPC remained PCA in its commitments.[144] While neither RPC nor Keller publicly identified with the New Calvinist movement, their public ministry and nuanced understanding of Christ and culture helped spur the Reformed resurgence and shaped subsequent New Calvinist approaches to public life.[145]

2.4 Timothy Keller's Public Theology

In the first decade of RPC, Tim Keller articulated Redeemer's public theology, defining the church's direction, scope, and model for engaging unbelief.[146] While Keller retired from pastoral ministry in 2017, his public theology continues to shape RPC's philosophy of ministry.[147] Admittedly, some of this reading of Keller is speculative, given that Keller rarely, if ever, talked about politics from the pulpit. However, he articulated a public theology in his writings that provides the scaffolding to understand how RPC engages politics.

2.4.1 Keller's Assessment of American Protestantism

As a practitioner of the gospel, Keller mapped the American ecclesial landscape along a continuum (Figure 2.1). He believed mainline churches limited the gospel to a horizontal dimension (e.g., love of neighbor, justice, world peace, etc.), stressing "social justice and reject[ing] overt calls to convert others."[148] The mainline tended to downplay God's authority.[149] At the same time, evangelical churches limited the gospel to the vertical dimension (e.g., loving Christ, justification, renewal by the Spirit, etc.), stressing the "importance of personal

[144] This is a debated point internally in the PCA. See Chapter 5 for further discussion.

[145] It is important to note that the intention of New Calvinism was never political or activist but sought to bring evangelicals back to the Word of God. Tim Challies identifies six potential weaknesses in the New Calvinism movement: (1) trendiness, (2) celebrityism, (3) pride, (4) boundaries, (5) homogeneity, and (6) cold theology. Challies, "A Call for Discernment," 99–103. See also: Flynn Cratty, "The New Calvinism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, First edition, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 647.

[146] Bartholomew's dissertation is one of the earliest dissertations about RPC and Tim Keller. He analyzed 42 sermons for his study. Bartholomew, "Reviving Orthodoxy," 93–94.

[147] Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer."

[148] Keller, *Center Church*, 326.

[149] Capitulated to a form of "imminent frame" spirituality. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1st Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

morality…[and] calling people to conversion through evangelism and preaching of the gospel."[150] Evangelical churches tended to downplay justice in the world.[151]

This dichotomy was an oversimplification, but Keller found it useful for illustrating *why* and *how* the church cannot separate word from deed—each segment of the church contains an element of truth but ultimately fails to embrace the whole gospel. According to Keller, "Neither the Mainline nor the conservative Protestant churches—nor the secular political establishment—are currently capable of moving forward into a truly pluralistic society."[152] For Keller, the American church can only be fruitful if it embraces an "incisive public apologetic" which *engages* Western secularity as another culture and shows how secular worldviews fail to consistently sustain their cultural and moral ideals.[153]

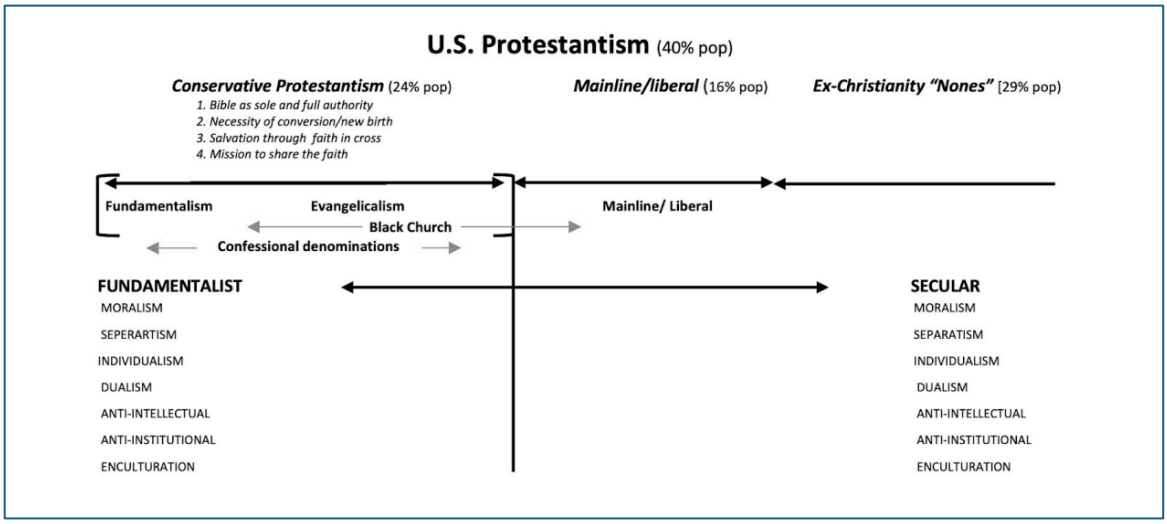


Figure 2.1. Keller's visual spectrum of American Protestantism[154]

[150] Timothy Keller, *Answering Lesslie Newbigin*, 2017, Lecture PTS, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0LG26k6ngs. Keller, *Center Church*, 326.

[151] Capitulated to a form of "moralistic-therapeutic-deism." Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[152] Keller argues that the future of the American church will be multi-ethnic and evangelical, requiring a transformed life through Spirit-wrought conversion. According to Keller, conservative Protestantism and Catholicism have better resources for an "incisive public apologetic" because they take the supernatural seriously. He says, "Evangelical faith is better adapted to modern culture [than mainline faith] because it is indeed a chosen religion one that requires conversion. Yet it pushes back on the individualism of culture too. When we freely choose to follow Christ, we also choose to give up living according to our own wisdom—bowing instead to his glad and wise authority." Timothy Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," *Gospel In Life*, 2022, 15.

[153] Keller, *Answering Lesslie Newbigin*; Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

[154] Notice that Keller uses the Bebbington quadrilateral to describe conservative Protestantism. At some point in the American context, evangelism and fundamentalism were placed into the same category. In the 1960s

Keller's apologetic involves individual Christians participating in public life as an expression of neighborly love.[155] By participating in public life, Christians can make significant political changes. Keller says, "To work for better public schools, or for a justice system not weighted against the poor, or to end racial segregation requires political engagement. Christians have done these things in the past and should continue to do so."[156] At the same time, Christians should not identify the church with a political party; doing so risks the integrity of the church.[157] As such, Keller argues that many Christians are tempted to be *a*political or assimilate and fully adopt one political party.[158] According to Keller, both political parties (Democrats and Republicans) contain elements of truth and have the opportunity to be transformed by the gospel:

> When [America's main values] are held together in close connection to each other, and defined by biblical themes, and seen as natural outgrowths of a world created by God—then they are each transformed. Because the Bible not only combines but transforms, you can't say the biblical position is some kind of single point on any of the political spectrums.[159]

For Keller, political positions are not biblical imperatives but ones of practical wisdom.[160] Therefore, churches that take political positions on "hot button" issues tend to bind the conscience of the believer; at the same time, churches can and should speak to "concrete situations" (§2.5). As individuals, we should be involved in the political process—"Jesus forbids us to withhold help from our neighbors."[161]

2.4.2 Keller's Model for Engaging Culture

Seeing the tension in the American church and politics, Keller wanted to create a "new" model for navigating culture —one that faithfully engaged yet remained orthodox (articulating the gospel in terms of horizontal and vertical dimensions)—staying true to the evangelicalism

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and 70s, there were clear distinctions between three groups, fundamentalists, evangelicals, and the mainline. However the line between evangelical and fundamentalist seems to blur after the 1970s, into a broader "conservative Protestantism". Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," 29; David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 2–3.

[155] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[156] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[157] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[158] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[159] Timothy Keller, "A Political Case Study: Four Americas, Ideologies & Idolatries (Part 1 of a 2-Part Series)," *Gospel in Life*, Spring 2026, https://gospelinlife.com/article/a-political-case-study-four-americas-ideologies-idolatries-part-1-of-a-2-part-series/.

[160] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[161] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

articulated by Ockenga, Henry, and Schaeffer. Keller remarked, "We must find ways to *preach* the ancient message of the gospel in ways that both defy the illusions of the age yet resonate with the good aspirations and hopes of our neighbors."[162] RPC faced the "secular undercurrents of skepticism and religious critique" in American culture, especially among New Yorkers.[163] Four years after planting RPC, Keller wrote:

> *The preaching had to be intelligent, bordering on the intellectual, but showing familiarity with urban life issues*. Manhattanites are all experts in their fields, and they will only go to someone else they perceive as knowing far more than they about a subject. The preacher had to anticipate questions and objections to the evangelical message that would be raised by Jewish persons, socialists, Wall Street brokers, aspiring actors, gay rights activists, politically correct graduate students…We decided to always present the classic Christian message in close connection with the issues we identified as "burning and relevant" to the average Manhattanite. Being Reformed in our doctrinal conviction and preaching was something we emphasized rather than diluted.[164]

From the beginning, Keller recognized two things: (1) RPC needed faithful preaching and (2) RPC needed careful attention to the cultural context. His most mature view on this topic is found in *Center Church*, where he discusses *how* the church can fruitfully engage culture.[165]

In *Center Church*, he outlines four models that the American church has taken toward culture: the Transformationalist model, the Relevance model, the Counter-Culturalist model, and the Two Kingdoms model (see Figure 1.2).[166] Keller argues that "Each of the four models has biblical support, and each effectively responds to a key problem the church faces in relating to culture."[167] According to Keller, no one likes to be put into a category and have their politics pigeonholed by others. But the fundamental point Keller is trying to make is that "Believers cannot withdraw from the modern world but must *engage* every aspect, from art to business to politics to family to education, with a distinct worldview built on historic orthodox doctrine."[168]

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[162] Keller, *Our Place in the Story: Part 2*.

[163] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 7.

[164] Timothy Keller, "An Evangelical Ministry in a Secular City," in *Center City Churches: The New Urban Frontier*, ed. Lyle E. Schaller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993).

[165] Keller, *Center Church*.

[166] Keller admired theologians who did not fit neatly into theological categories or ministry models. This is speculation, but this may explain why he was so interested in finding biblical tensions between views. Keller, *Center Church*, 194, 219, footnote 6.

[167] Keller, *Center Church*, 195, 225.

[168] My emphasis. Hansen, *Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*, 69.

His constructive solution to the four models is for churches to "inhabit [one] model that fits [their] convictions" and, at the same time, "seek the center" and learn from other models.[169]

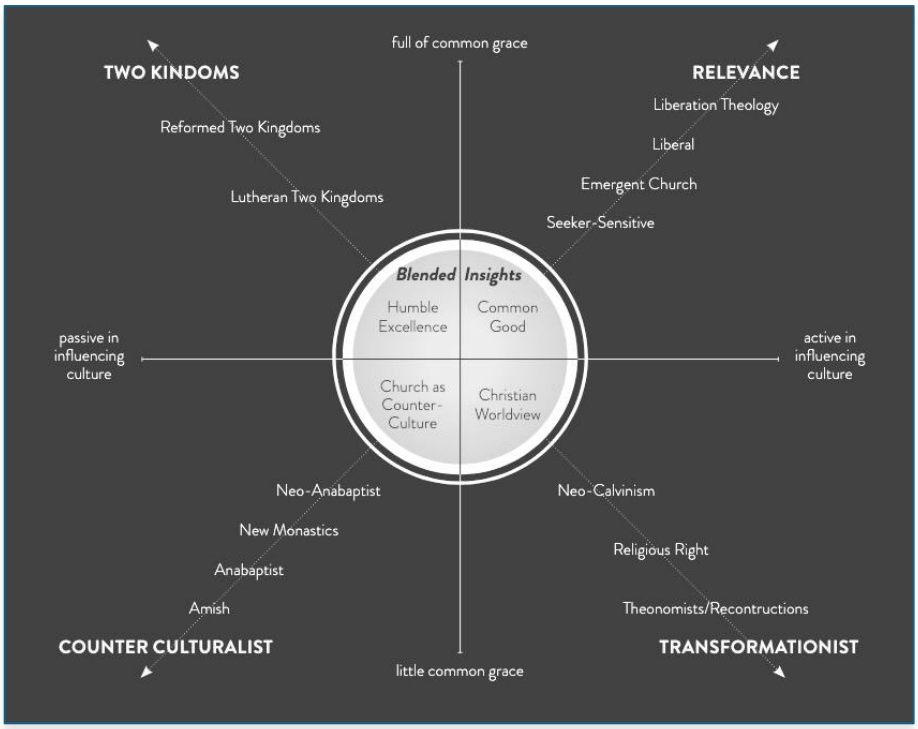


Figure 2.2. Keller's visual diagram of four models of "Christ and Culture."[170]

By "seeking the center," Keller endeavors to avoid RPC becoming too politically active or too politically inactive. Seeking the center is not so much a decommitment as avoiding unwise political activity. For example, churches that are too politically active often fail to distinguish between the *rights* and *responsibilities* of Christians and those of the church. This is usually a mainline problem.[171] An historical example would be Reinhold Niebuhr, who blurred the rights and responsibilities of the church and those of the individual—the lines between the church as institution and the church as organism were insufficiently clarified (to use Kuyper's terminology).[172] Michael Allen notes, "We must ask *how* churches exercise authority over

[169] Keller, *Center Church*, 242.

[170] The four models are mapped onto two axes. Keller explains: "the vertical axis represents the nature of our cultural world…the horizontal axis represents the spectrum of views on our attitude toward cultural change." Explaining the chart politically: those on the left side are less politically active and those on the right side are more politically active. Those on the top are more politically cooperative and those on the bottom are less politically cooperative. Graph taken from: Keller, *Center Church*, 232.

[171] Keller, *Center Church*, 243.

[172] R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology*, Doing Theology (T&T Clark, 2010), 175.

particular Christians and *what* tasks churches are called to pursue corporately."[173] On the other hand, churches that are too politically inactive make the mistake of the "spirituality of the church," usually a conservative evangelical problem. Southern Presbyterians like Stuart Robinson, James Henley Thornwell, and Robert Lewis Dabney argued that the church should only address "spiritual" problems and not address social and political matters, condoning the evils of chattel slavery in the process. There were even churches during the Civil Rights movement that appealed to the doctrine.[174]

Keller thought the "spirituality of the church" improperly avoided social ills, while the mainline unnecessarily lobbied political action plans.[175] For Keller, the "spirituality of the church" is a cautionary example of how doctrinal fidelity excuses lack of political engagement—a form of "social quietism."[176] Keller's negative critique set him apart from other PCA pastors who condemned Thornwell and Dabney but emphasized: "that the institutional church has a specific divinely appointed task beyond which it ought not to go."[177] While Keller agreed in principle, in practice he insisted that the gospel transcended politics and "advocated political pluralism from [RPC's] earliest days."[178]

2.4.3 Keller's Model for Challenging Secular Worldviews

For Keller, *preaching* served as a divinely appointed means by which the church exposed and challenged secular worldviews.[179] This does not mean the church should preach politics or endorse political candidates from the pulpit. According to Keller, the *act* of preaching is

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[173] Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 175. Allen uses the WCF 31.4 as evidence for separating communal and individual rights/responsibilities. WCF 31.4 says, "Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate." Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (William S. Young, 1851).

[174] Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 175.

[175] For more on this see: Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 174.

[176] Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System?"

[177] David Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 279.

[178] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 94.

[179] A "baseline cultural narrative" (BCN) was Keller's preferred term for worldview, which he used in his preaching to describe the five primary narratives of secularism: rationality, history, morality, society, and identity. J. Walter H. Nilsson, "Engaging Baseline Cultural Narratives Through Active Contextualization: An Analysis of the Preaching of Timothy Keller" (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022), 2.

ultimately spiritual, demonstrating the greatness of Christ.[180] However, as a *method*, preaching should contextualize to public and political situations. Preachers should enter the culture, challenge the culture, and appeal to the culture.[181] Entering the culture means becoming conversant with its political questions, hopes, and beliefs. Preaching does not simply endorse or confirm what the listener is thinking; instead, it challenges them, revealing the inner contradictions of their heart. By subverting the hearers' belief in their own worldview, preaching calls people to repent of their idolatry and to believe in Christ.[182]

According to Keller, churches need to adapt to a post-Christendom world. Both the mainline and evangelical churches make the mistake of assuming America lives in a Christendom culture—a culture that gives people the mental furniture of Christian belief and religious consciousness. While endorsing political perspectives, providing political application, or offering voting advice might have been "normal" in Christendom churches and preaching, it is no longer an effective tool for reaching the unevangelized. Churches should preach on "concrete situations" (e.g., 9/11, racial reconciliation, and the economy) and preaching should always "connect the gospel to every square inch of common grace in God's creation."[183] But for Keller, discussing politics proper from the pulpit risks limiting the gospel to one sphere.[184]

2.5 Contemporary Context

Following in the footsteps of Keller, "the topic of politics is only incidentally, if ever, approached from the pulpit at Redeemer…politics proper are avoided so that the church can focus on proclaiming what it understands to be the core teachings of Christianity…if politics are

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[180] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 15.

[181] Keller is speaking more broadly of churches/Christians in this context. Keller, *Center Church*, 117.

[182] Keller, *Center Church*, Chapter 10. Steve Pearson is critical of Keller on this point. He sees Keller's perspective of worldview as binary, thus oversimplifying idolatry and individualism, "portraying [idolatry] as something we can abandon as easily as we might discard a bad habit." This leaves the hearer believing that they can simply take off their individualism, but Pearson says, "individualism is beyond the power of the individual." One wonders if Keller's theology of "subversive fulfillment" might address Pearson's concern. Steve Pearson, *Colin Gunton, Tim Keller, and the Trinitarian Challenge to Individualism: Towards Reframing Faith and Work Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025), Chapter 5. Keller develops Hendrik Kraemer's idea of "subversive fulfillment" in the lecture he gives at Princeton Theological Seminary. See: Keller, *Answering Lesslie Newbigin*.

[183] Hansen also notes the importance of Ligonier Valley Study Center (Sproul's ministry) in Keller's public ministry. However, Hansen seems to sympathize with the neo-Calvinist influence (viz., Kuyperian understanding of common grace). Hansen, *Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*, 72.

[184] In this sense, he encouraged preachers to end sermons by stressing gospel indicatives rather than moral imperatives. Keller, *Preaching*, 90.

ever discussed, it's in very general terms."[185] At RPC, political speech is reframed as ecclesial witness. For example, for the 2024 Presidential election, RPC (Downtown) created an election resource page for church members, offering prayers, handouts, and voting principles.[186] Pastor of the Downtown campus, Pete Nichols, noted:

> we need to be acutely aware of the terrible irony that it *undermines our witness* to gloss over (or even justify) the moral failings of politicians who advance, in some areas, a Judeo-Christian ethical position. Humility, gentleness, self-control, honesty, and charity are to be praised in leaders with whom we disagree.[187]

Instead of viewing politicians as Cyrus figures, "we must seek to lead the people in our congregations toward voting as an expression of their allegiance to the heavenly city (love for God and neighbor) and their turn from the early city (love for self and the world)."[188] Politics is important and necessary, but it is not supremely important—the church remains in exile. RPC (Downtown) provided five voting principles: "(1) Neither party adequately/fully represents the biblical view; (2) Vote for the 'city of God' not the 'city of man'; (3) Vote according to the hierarchy of God's values; (4) Vote aware of the character of the candidates; (5) Vote aware of the difference between morality and policy."[189] We can see that Keller's winsomeness in this approach. Each principle "seeks the center" by looking to the heavenly Jerusalem.[190] Public witness should not jeopardize the church's location in culture. Keller summarized this perspective when he said, "I think it's our job as individual congregations to care for the poor, to *produce people* who speak civilly, to just serve our neighborhoods and serve people, and be careful about speaking *ex cathedra* about these great political positions or issues."[191] This approach is not unwarranted, especially in a culture that gives Christianity a fair hearing; however, American culture has shifted since the 1990s. As culture has lost its sense of transcendence, so has it lost a sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Is the church's approach to political engagement to choose between constantly winning converts and

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[185] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists: Global Religion in A Secular Age," 182-183.

[186] Redeemer Downtown, "Navigating the Political Season," 2024, https://redeemerdt.com/politics.

[187] Pete Nichols, "Don't Let Nietzsche Be Your Political Teacher," Navigating the Political Season, The Gospel Coalition, July 11, 2024, https://redeemerdt.com/politics.

[188] Pete Nichols, "Rome Is Not Our Home: Live Counterculturally During Election Season," Navigating the Political Season, The Gospel Coalition, April 19, 2024, https://redeemerdt.com/politics.

[189] Pete Nichols, "Five Principles for Voting," Navigating the Political Season, Redeemer Downtown, 2024, https://redeemerdt.com/politics.

[190] While RPC makes engaging the public square clear for the individual, it remains ambiguous how the church (as a community) should speak politically in "extraordinary circumstances".

[191] Keller quoted in: McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 185.

transforming the city? Or is there a way to seek the center between winsomeness (Keller), relevance (Church-growth movement), and influence (Evangelicalism, Theological Liberalism)?

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a brief case study of RPC's view of political engagement. In RPC's view, politics flows from cultural narratives, so it deliberately downplays explicit political engagement by seeking to subvert unbelieving worldviews through *contextual preaching*. In this sense, RPC recognizes that politics is important and encourages individual Christians to participate in politics, but instead of preparing church members for public life through explicit political statements, it primarily prepares them through the church liturgy: preaching, teaching, discipleship, prayer, and sacraments. According to RPC, politics requires practical wisdom and discernment; no political party or system fits neatly into the Bible's narrative. The next chapter discusses Abraham Kuyper's ecclesiology for political engagement against the backdrop of his political and cultural context.

Chapter 3 – Abraham Kuyper

3.1 Introduction

Abraham Kuyper was born in 1837 in Maassluis, located in the province of South Holland, the Netherlands.[192] His formative years were marked by shifting economic conditions, changing cultural assumptions, and spiritual upheaval. He was one of the first Reformed theologians to engage post-Christendom culture; he tirelessly reconsidered how the church could operate amid "multiplicity," striving to maintain Calvinistic unity while recognizing the importance of pluralism.[193] He did this by leading an extremely productive life: founding the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1879, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) in 1880, and the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) in 1892. He was also a husband, father of eight, pastor, politician, newspaper editor, university professor, and the prime minister of the Netherlands (1901-05). In the shadow of the French Revolution, the state dominated society, and the church's sphere of influence was shrinking in Europe.[194] The church needed to relate to politics differently. This chapter discusses and analyzes Abraham Kuyper's ecclesiology. His ecclesiology is discussed in relation to his historical context and corporate political engagement. The primary question addressed is: what theological doctrine(s) shape Abraham Kuyper's account of the church's institutional authority against the background of engaging politics?"

3.2 Kuyper's Historical Context

3.2.1 Economic Context

As with any theologian, Kuyper's ecclesial and political choices were shaped by his immediate cultural context. One cannot appreciate Kuyper's ecclesiology without discussing his cultural

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[192] James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 3.

[193] VanDrunen argues that Kuyper was in fact a proponent of "natural law" and a "two kingdoms theology" but his context in the Netherlands "did not conduce to his purposes." Therefore, Kuyper appealed to other paradigms in the Reformed tradition to make his case to the culture, and his "very use of such categories [such as divine ordinances and common grace] bore very significant resemblances to earlier Reformed use of the natural law and two kingdoms categories." VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, 277-78. John Halsey Wood Jr., "Unity and Engagement in the Modern World: Abraham Kuyper's Calvinist Renewal," in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, First edition, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 509.

[194] John Halsey Wood Jr., *Going Dutch in the Modern Age: Abraham Kuyper's Struggle for a Free Church in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41.

milieu.[195] While the Netherlands was slow to industrialize, the Dutch economy boomed around 1860—factories, railroads, and manufacturing saw considerable expansion. This produced a working class, and from 1850 to 1890, the population grew from 3 to 4.5 million.[196] Living conditions were poor, but people could think beyond mere survival and maintain social lives. Between 1870 and 1890, the economy stagnated while emigration accelerated. The economic situation proved fertile ground for Social Democracy; the Dutch government introduced "social laws" to stabilize the economy and make living more affordable.[197] Meanwhile, the old political divisions (the urban patriciate and supporters of the House of Orange) dissolved, and the democratization and pluralization of Dutch culture allowed the church to contribute politically and socially.[198]

3.2.2 The Modernist Crisis

As the Dutch economy underwent a significant transformation, some took this as evidence that the church no longer served a necessary public function. Revolutionary modernism was making a stamp on the Dutch church.[199] Some within the NHK regarded the church as an "outdated" institution. They argued that the cultural and social progress embodied by the liberal state was sufficient to address society's ills—the state assumed the primary responsibility for public welfare and social care, rendering the church increasingly obsolete.[200] Modernists like Allard

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[195] Ad L. Th. de Bruijne, "'Colony of Heaven': Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 445.

[196] Rudy B. Andeweg, Galen A. Irwin, and Tom Louwerse, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, Fifth edition (London, UK: Red Globe Press, 2020), 65. George Harinck and Lodewijk Winkeler, "The Nineteenth Century," in *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 487.

[197] When the first national census was given in 1879, 54.5 percent of the population identified with the Dutch Reformed Church; 35.9 percent identified with the Roman Catholic Church; and 3.5 identified with the *Gereformeerden*. Andeweg, Irwin, and Louwerse, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, 63. Harinck and Winkeler, s.v. "The Nineteenth Century," 490.

[198] Marxist commentators argue that economic groups contributing after the dissolution of political divisions is no accident. Andeweg, Irwin, and Louwerse, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, 65. Harinck and Winkeler, s.v. "The Nineteenth Century," 491.

[199] John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 396.

[200] Allard Pierson and modernists at the time argued that *the church was becoming obsolete*, not religion generally (contra. the "secularization thesis"). The "secularization thesis" argues that religion more broadly is becoming obsolete. This idea was popularized by American sociologist Peter Berger in the 1960s. He argued that secular states, governments, and culture undermine revealed religion, the subsequent decay of established religion follows. Berger later tempered his claims considering the empirical data. Berger's counterpart in Britain, David Martin argued that secularization failed to deteriorate religion. For example: "As churches gave up their links with the old structures of power, they emerged as social actors, taking up various causes and even being listened to." Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Anchor

Pierson, C. Busken-Huet, and F.W.B. Bell questioned the church's legitimacy, believing the church needed to be "abandoned once for all."[201] In 1864, consistent with his convictions, Allard Pierson left his church post and advocated a "noble humanism".[202] This strategy attempted to secularize all aspects of society: "[it] successively tried, first to secularize the spirit of the home, then to make the church look irrelevant, and finally to ban the Bible from the school."[203] The modernist crisis left young Kuyper "rethinking" the church's role in modern culture.

The 1860s proved to be a formative decade for Kuyper; he pastored a church in the village of Beesd from 1863-67, earned a doctorate from the University of Leiden (1867), took a pastoral position in Utrecht (1867), and ended the decade as a pastor in Amsterdam (1870).[204] Kuyper's assessment of modernism in the 1860s placed him at the center of an "emerging orthodoxy."[205] In 1865, he issued his first major response to modernism in the NHK. In his first anti-modernist sermon titled "Humanism and Christendom," Kuyper claimed, "[For modernists] to say the church's role is played out is to assert that every person has been reborn, recreated."[206] Here, Kuyper refers to the future reality of the church—the modernist holds an "over-realized eschatology" which, in this context, encourages the dissolution of the church.[207]

Kuyper's initial assessment of the modernist crisis bore traces of German Idealism, which called for "dissolving the church as a *separate institution* in the modern state."[208] This evidently shaded

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Books, 1990); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 24; James K.A. Smith defines the thesis in the following way: "as cultures experience modernization and technological advancement, the (divisive) forces of religious belief and participation wither in the face of modernity's disenchant of the world." James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 21.

[201] Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 46.

[202] Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 45.

[203] Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, Melvin Flikkema, and Harry Van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 193.

[204] Kuyper was installed as a pastor in Beesd on Sunday August 9, 1863, as pastor in Utrecht on Sunday November 10, 1867, and in Amsterdam on Sunday August 7, 1870. Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 1st Edition, Abraham Kuyper Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 35,46,56.

[205] Wood, "Unity and Engagement in the Modern World: Abraham Kuyper's Calvinist Renewal," 509. Harinck and Winkeler, s.v. "The Nineteenth Century," 491

[206] Quoting Kuyper's speech "Humanisme en Christendom" given in Utrecht, taken from: Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 46.

[207] Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 46.

[208] Ad L. Th. de Bruijne, "Volume Introduction," in *On the Church*, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), xxxiv; Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 46–47. It remains questionable if Kuyper successfully purged himself of Idealism. One of the proponents of German Idealism was Kuyper's professor at Leiden, J.H. Scholten, "[Scholten] was deeply persuaded…that the traditional Reformed Confessions, especially the Articles of Dordt, need reinterpretation in terms of modern personalist thinking." Cornelius Van Til, *New Synthesis Theology of the Netherlands* (Nutley, NJ:

Kuyper's historical research on the Polish Reformer Johannes à Lasco (1499-1560).[209] In Kuyper's award-winning dissertation, he favored à Lasco's *organic* ecclesiology over John Calvin's *institutional* (mechanical) ecclesiology. For Kuyper, Calvin had a "gloomy theology," one that inflicted a "disease" on the Netherlands; in contrast, à Lasco "better exemplified the Dutch spirit [and tradition]."[210] While Kuyper eventually came to a more traditional Reformed understanding of the church (e.g., Calvin), his understanding of German Idealism and historical research on à Lasco did two things: (1) convinced him that modernism, as exemplified in the NHK, was historically erroneous, and (2) laid the groundwork for deploying the idea of the church as organism.[211] As Bratt notes, after attempting to publish a book on à Lasco, "Kuyper decided not to write church history but to shape it."[212]

3.2.3 The Conservative Crisis

Modernism was not the only problem in the church; when Kuyper left Utrecht in 1870, he was frustrated by the conservative (Ethical-Irenical) group, which tended to rest "too much in

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The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), 21. In addition, Bavinck criticized Kuyper for arguing that man pre-fall could have knowledge of God without revelation. Bavinck argues that our knowledge is not historically contingent (idealism), but dependent on the objective revelation of God. Bavinck notes: "Kuyper says that man, in and of himself—apart from sin—is able to obtain knowledge of God entirely from within himself. In principle, this is rationalism and mysticism. See original quote in: Rolf Hendrik Bremmer: *Herman Bavinck Als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 41; Dmytro Bintsarovskyi, *Hidden and Revealed: The Doctrine of God in the Reformed and Eastern Orthodox Traditions* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 68.

[209] John Halsey Wood Jr., "Introduction," in *On the Church*, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016). Johannes à Lasco was a Polish Reformed scholar who ministered in several countries (Netherlands, Switzerland, England). He organized three congregations in London while he was in exile from Poland, they consisted of Dutch, German, French and Italian emigrants. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The History of Creeds* (Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1878), 1:583. According to Bavinck, "[à Lasco's] London church order included (1) professors or prophets who conducted prophecy once a week; (2) pastors, chosen by the congregations, though the final decision was made by the consistory; (3) elders, chosen by cooptation; and (4) deacons." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, vol. 1, ed. John Bolt et al. (Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 278.

[210] Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), 3; See also: Abraham Kuyper, "Commentatio," in *On the Church*, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), 9.

[211] Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 44–45; Schilder later accused Kuyper of grounding his idea of "organism" in German Idealism rather than Scripture. Klaas Schilder, "Dr. Kuyper on Calvinism," in *The Klaas Schilder Reader: The Essential Theological Writings*, ed. George Harinck, Marinus De Jong, and Richard Mouw (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 159–77; For a discussion on this point see: Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, 253ff.

[212] Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 45.

institutional inertia and…neglected institutional reforms."[213] The conservatives in Utrecht required firm doctrinal definitions, rigidly adhered to tradition, and sought to preserve the church through cultural uniformity—conflating church and state.[214] The group acted as a "reasonable response" to modernism—as one biographer puts it, "they did not want to stir up any hornet's nest."[215] Kuyper believed this was naïve and nearsighted, obscuring the good of the church in culture and failing to properly distinguish church from state.[216] For Kuyper, both modernism and conservatism were problematic; however, by the late 1870s, Kuyper lost respect for the conservatives.[217] In Kuyper's view, the conservatives "were not willing to take radical action, especially if it might compromise the integrity of the Dutch Reformed Church."[218] The conservatives, as a mediating theology, held out hope for a future Protestant Dutch Republic and sought state-funded Christian education. In contrast, Kuyper desired a "free church" that would exercise public influence while remaining separate from the civil authority, and believed that education was a function of conscience, free from government control.[219] For Kuyper, modernism was more problematic on paper, but at least it was more consistent in its ecclesial positions.

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[213] Wood, "Introduction," xix; The term "conservative" unfortunately suffers from the baggage of modern political and theological tropes. It is importance to note that "conservative" is working in a specific historical context, in relation to the issues of that time. Koyzis argues that the left-right spectrum originates during the period of the French Revolution, and states that it should be abandoned primarily because "[the terms] are *relative to the issues of the day* and therefore cannot be said to have a universally accepted meaning." Wood, "Introduction," xix; Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 19–22; Vanden notes that Kuyper's dissatisfaction with conservatives began a few years earlier in Beesd. Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 1st Edition, Abraham Kuyper Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 43.

[214] The city of Utrecht was the heart of "God and country conservativism" in the Netherlands. This was mostly (but not entirely) a political conservativism—looking back to the "Golden Dutch" age of Christendom and attempting to recapture the nostalgia of that time. Theological conservativism is distinct from political conservatism. Sometimes political conservatives in an attempt to foster a politically conservative vision encouraged conservativism of all kinds (including the adoption theological conservatism). Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 122.

[215] Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 51.

[216] While Kuyper did not believe in a Christian culture or state (where special grace completes common grace), he does affirm in several places that Western culture influenced by the Christian faith was (in his opinion) a superior culture. See Kuyper's first lecture at Princeton for an example. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*. Kuyper was not alone in this view, others at the time such as Emil Brunner argued in his Gifford Lectures that there was a link between Christianity and social improvement. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation: Foundations & Specific Problems* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke and Co., 2009).

[217] Kuyper was a strident critic of theological liberalism, especially as he developed theologically (e.g., higher criticism).

[218] Wood, "Introduction," xxi.

[219] Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 116–17; Wood, "Unity and Engagement in the Modern World: Abraham Kuyper's Calvinist Renewal," 513.

3.2.4 A Free Church

Eventually, Kuyper and his group, the *Doleantie* (a name taken from the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age), fractured with the Ethical-Irenic group and joined the *Afscheiding* (a group of theological conservatives that left the NHK in 1834), forming the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) in 1892.[220] Kuyper's solution to the mores of modernism and conservatism was a "free church," a church that advocated a Calvinist subculture within a pluralist culture.[221] A free church avoided two things: First, it avoided the Roman Catholic and NHK instinct to marry the church with the state, which neglected the organic nature of the church. Second, it avoided the church's tendency to ignore the multiplicity of life (viz., the spheres of education and politics).[222] Avoiding these two errors held the church in tension "between the restriction of the church to its own sphere and its comprehensive influence."[223] According to John Bolt, Kuyper's Antirevolutionary break from the NHK was neither liberal nor radically separatist, but he did embrace political liberalism as "the art of separation."[224] In this sense, Kyper valued the separation of powers, especially the distinction between church and state, and public and private education. Kuyper's ecclesiology provides the theological foundation for his account of political engagement (see Chapter 5).

3.3 Kuyper's Ecclesiology

Kuyper was confident in his ability to restructure Dutch church efforts toward culture and politics.[225] In this sense, three domains were essential for the Dutch church: family, church, and

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[220] The *Afscheding* (secession) formed a new ecclesiastical body in 1834 and was free of state control. Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 103.

[221] Abraham Kuyper, "Rooted and Grounded," in *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016); Cratty, "The New Calvinism," 513.

[222] These two points come from Wood's monograph. Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 122.

[223] Van Oorschot, "'Making Public Theology Operational,'" 217.

[224] Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 343. At times Bolt reads Kuyper in the tradition of classical liberalism (viz., John Locke and John Stuart Mill). Bolt is partially correct (i.e., when liberalism is defined as "freedom of religion"). But Kuyper rejected the liberal theory of "social contract" which maintains that "some persons can have rational religious beliefs and rationally engage in religious practices, but they maintain that citizens are committed to setting religion aside when it comes to politics." Kevin Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith: Beyond Separation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 22; Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World: The Historical Section*, vol. 1, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, Melvin Flikkema, and Stephen J. Grabill (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2015), 93.

[225] Eglinton notes that Kuyper is a deductive thinker, often confident that he can make big changes. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 181.

education.[226] These spheres served as a holistic strategy to "plant and grow" people into good citizens, train them in righteousness and truth, and engender a comprehensive Calvinistic worldview.[227] This was needed to counter modernism, which offered its own "world-and life-view" (*weltanschauung*) as a "polemic against Christianity."[228] According to Kuyper, modernism is built "from the data of the natural man" and proceeds to *construct* mankind from that data.[229] If people were going to engage productively, they needed a holistic way of interpreting reality. Kuyper's ecclesiology proved critical to this project.

Kuyper's "cultural project" emerged from his doctrine of the church, which sought to avoid both modernism and naïve conservatism by exhibiting Christ on earth and reflecting the kingdom of God without overrealizing it. According to Kuyper, this was "true conservatism;" it exerted itself "not for the shell but for the pearl within the shell…[the free church] looks at *what is*, not as *it now exhibits itself*, but as it will one day in eternity unfold its true glory."[230] Therefore, as the free church, the people of God simultaneously hate the world as it exists now (in sin) but also love the world (through special and common grace). Kuyper's vision for the free church is helpfully explained in terms of two well-known contours of his thought: sphere sovereignty and common grace.[231]

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[226] Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ's Kingship: The Kingship of Christ in Its Operation*, vol. 2, ed. John Kok et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2017).

[227] This is not to the negation of cultivating personal piety. Kuyper was also influenced by pietist movements of the time. Following the Dutch tradition.

[228] Abraham Kuyper, "Modernism: A Fata Morgana in the Christian Domain," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 89. Kuyper's idea of worldview is also derived from Scottish Presbyterian theologian James Orr. David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 17, footnote 46. Kuyper's assessment of the Western "immanent frame" was reflected in Bavinck's observation that modernist theologians elevate morality "as the *triumph of the human mind* over nature." My emphasis. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, vol. 1, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 261.

[229] Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 4; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 171.

[230] My emphasis. Abraham Kuyper, "Conservatism and Orthodoxy: False and True Preservation," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 80.

[231] This is not to exclude other relevant contours of his thought which include immanence and transcendence, and the antithesis. On the antithesis, Kuyper comes close to suggesting that there are two "Sciences," one based on palingenesis and the other based on the unbelieving worldview. See Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898).

3.3.1 Sphere Sovereignty

Kuyper's best-known distillation of sphere sovereignty appears in his 1880 inaugural address at the VU. In his speech, he defines *sovereignty* as follows: "authority that has the right, the duty, and the power to break and avenge all resistance to its will."[232] For Kuyper, having authority means that *absolute* sovereignty cannot reside in any creature but must reside in God's majesty.[233] He explains this using the grand narrative of Scripture (creation-fall-redemption-recreation) and notes that God's sovereignty is not based on redemption but on God's creation. God, as the sovereign creator, is interested in all things. The church shares God's comprehensive vision by having a "world-facing" orientation, as Michael Wagenman comments, "the human activity of faith is not an extra superfluous activity, unrelated to the rest or the whole of life…the church has a unique place within the *structured potentials of Creation*."[234] God's absolute sovereignty is placed in the "hands of one man"—Jesus Christ (John 18:37; Matthew 28:18; Romans 14:11).[235] In Christ, God's sovereignty is absolute; however, the kingdom of God is not fully harmonious until the new creation. The kingdom of God, through the absolute sovereignty of Christ, will break through in the new creation, at which time Christ will be "*ta panta en pasi*, that is 'all in all.'"[236]

Until the new creation, humanity lives in the shadow of Adam's sin. Christ's absolute sovereignty (in and through special and common grace) challenges the absolute sovereignty of *sinful* humans. According to Kuyper, until the kingdom of God is consummated, the world is delineated into separate spheres.[237] This makes human life "neither *simple* nor *uniform,* but

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[232] Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 466.

[233] Kuyper develops this idea from John Calvin. Kuyper's framework presupposes the creator-creature distinction, where all authority is derivative and ectypal. Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, 272.

[234] My emphasis. Michael R. Wagenman, "Ecclesiology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, ed. Nathanial Gray Sutanto and Cory C. Brock, T&T Clark Handbooks (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2024), 143.

[235] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 466.

[236] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 466.

[237] This is perhaps the most contentious point in Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty—is Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty susceptible to a *felix culpa* ("happy fall")? Kaltwasser notes that he "locates the ground of common grace *not* in God incarnate but in the Eternal Son behind the decision to become a human being in Jesus Christ." Cambria Janae Kaltwasser, "Assessing the Christological Foundation of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace," in *Revelation and Common Grace*, vol. 2, ed. Josh Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2011). Of course baking "common grace" into ontological trinity shows God's providential right, duty, and power, God's sovereignty over all things. If Kuyper was to be more specific, he might say the Logos *Inarnandus* ("the Word to be incarnate"). Kuyper in the same inaugural address states, "If you believe in Him as Deviser and Creator, as Founder and Director of all things, your soul must also proclaim the *Triune God as the only absolute Sovereign*

constitutes an infinitely *complex organism,*" in which human individuals exist in groups, and in such groups the *whole* becomes manifest.[238] For Kuyper, the precise number of spheres is not important; what matters is how God and humans operate in each sphere.[239] According to Kuyper, God operates distinctly in each sphere (e.g., politics, church, education, etc.), each sphere has its own law (1 Corinthians 15:23), and each sphere interacts with the other, which creates a "multifaceted multiformity of human life."[240] In this sense, Kuyper sees sphere sovereignty as not only *universal* (Christ reigns over all spheres), but *particular* (each sphere has their own "sphere sovereignty").

In his speech at the VU, Kuyper conceptualizes the state as "the *sphere of spheres*, which encircles the whole extent of human life."[241] The state has a vertical bond with God, which exists independently of the church. This does not make the state the kingdom of God, but it does make the civil authority responsible for executing justice, protecting the individual (Proverbs 29:4), and "defining" the relationship between the visible spheres.[242] It should allow for "the free movement of life in and for every sphere," remembering that their authority is derivative.[243] In this sense, sphere sovereignty "entails that each…social sphere has the liberty to operate independently of the state in accordance with its own God-given norms, and in deference to the liberty interests of other social spheres and of all individuals."[244] For Kuyper, supreme authority does not reside in the civil sphere but in Christ. Until the full unity of the new creation, the church (among other spheres) needs to respect the state, and the civil sphere needs to preserve the church's rights.[245]

3.3.1.1 Church as Organism and Institute

According to Kuyper, the church as a distinct sphere can be understood in one of four ways: (1) its existence in God's counsel (eternity past); (2) its life hidden in Christ (heavenly present); (3)

[my emphasis]." Kuyper emphasizes the incarnated Christ to explain the current state of the world, not to neglect his *a priori* assumption that the Triune God is indeed sovereign pre-fall. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 466, 469ff.

[238] My emphasis. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 467.

[239] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 467.

[240] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 467.

[241] Italics original. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 472; Kuyper, *Pro Rege Vol. 2*, 2:105–6.

[242] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 468.

[243] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 468.

[244] John Witte Jr., "The Biography and Biology of Liberty: Abraham Kuyper and the American Experiment," *Koers - Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 64, no. 2/3 (1999): 177.

[245] Kuyper, "Commentatio," 34.

its realization among human beings on earth (earthly present); and (4) its existence in the future glory (eternity future).[246] When Kuyper speaks about the sphere of the church, he often refers to the third sense of the term: the *church's earthly present reality* among human beings.[247] In this sense, he follows Calvin in affirming the visible/invisible distinction, but offers a unique perspective by using the terms *organism* and *institute* to describe his approach.[248] De Bruijne notes that Kuyper's concept of organism and institute are two approaches to the same church. While these concepts are distinct, they cannot be hermetically sealed from one another.[249]

Working from Ephesians 3:17,[250] Kuyper argues that the church as an institute is "grounded" (θεμελιόω), a physical structure whose parts and pieces are established by human hands.[251] The church, from this perspective, is an organized society that includes, but is not limited to, the organizing structures of a physical/visible church, pastors, elders, deacons, laity, creeds,

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[246] This list is taken from Kuyper's article. Abraham Kuyper, "Tract on the Reformation of the Churches," in *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), 88.

[247] Kuyper refers often to the third sense of the church: "People who speak of the church will be confused and will confuse others if they fail to ask in every discussion which of these four relationships of the church is meant…We must speak *only and exclusively* [my emphasis] about the church of Christ as it manifests itself on earth. Kuyper, "Tract on the Reformation of the Churches," 90. "Your church is then a colony of heaven *living on the earth* [my emphasis]." Abraham Kuyper, "State and Church," in *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), 323.

[248] Ad. De Bruijne, "Not Without the Church as Institute: The Relevance of Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology for Christian Public and Theological Responsibilities in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Kuyper Center Review: Church and Academy*, vol. 5, ed. Gordon Graham, The Kuyper Center Review (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 105–23. Not everyone agrees with how De Bruijne reads Kuyper's institute/organism distinction. De Bruijne argues that Kuyper's downplaying of the institutional church is often overextended. Alvarado argues that De Bruijne selectively uses and reads Schilder's sustained attack on Kuyper's model and thus overreacts to Schilder's valid criticism. Ruben Alvarado, "The Kuyper Option: Kuyper's Concept of the Church in the Context of Strategic Christian Action," in *For Law and For Liberty: Essays on The Trans-Atlantic Legacy of Protestant Political Thought*, Revised edition, ed. Bradford Littlejohn (Landrum, SC: The Davenant Trust, 2018), 148–50.

[249] In this sense, Kuyper's approach is similar to "inter-ecclesial pluriformity"—co-existing models and appearances of church institutional life that work together to engage cultural institutions. See Slavich's journal article. Daniel T. Slavich, "A Credible Witness: A Pluriform Church in a Pluralist Culture," *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 19, no. 2 (2022): 327–44. In Kuyper's corpus, it is often unclear which sense of the church (organic or institute) Kuyper has in mind. Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 462; Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 428.

[250] The Greek text of Ephesians 3:17 reads: "κατοικῆσαι τὸν Χριστὸν διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν, ἐν ἀγάπῃ ἐρριζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι." Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle, *Nestle-Aland: Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28. revidierte Auflage, ed. Barbara Aland et al. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Ephesians 3:17.

[251] Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 187. It is not entirely clear if the church as institute is "in process" or what exactly that would entail. One thinks of John Henry Newsman's argument on the development of doctrine in the tradition (church). John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (James Toovey, 1845).

confessions, ordinances, church orders, sacraments, disciplines, and diaconal acts.[252] The task of the church as institute is the gathering of public worship, preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and enforcing church discipline.[253] Kuyper says:

> the *Church on earth* consists only of those who have been *incorporated into Christ*, who bow before Him, live in His Word, and adhere to His ordinances; and for this reason the *church on earth* has to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise discipline, and in everything to stand before the face of God.[254]

Kuyper goes beyond the institutional category and contends that the church on earth is also an organism, as De Bruijne says, "the church as institute…forms the context of the organism."[255] An organism is something "rooted" (ῥιζόομαι), often referring to the *process of organic growth,* a sphere whose parts and pieces are produced on their own, subject to change over time in accordance with context and multiplicity.[256] To view the church as an organism is to view it in relation to other cultural spheres.[257] This not only includes the church's mission to the world but, more importantly, spheres of "common grace," including but not limited to: engaging in politics, creating organizations, and participating in the arts. The church's visible unity is fractured by those who abuse the institutional (structural) power of the church, insisting on total uniformity and rigidity, resulting in either false unity or pluriformity. However, the church's organic nature calls it to be "a city on a hill," radiating "beams of faith's light into the realm of common grace."[258] "The organic *nature* of the church fits with how God has created the church"—fitting God's original intention to participate in all spheres of life.[259] Therefore, Christians who are part of the church as institution, are called to participate in the church as organism, creating, redeeming, and transforming all spheres of life.

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[252] Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 427; Wagenman, "Ecclesiology," 143.

[253] Kuyper does not work in traditional Reformed categories on this front. Louis Berkhof points out that Kuyper only recognizes two *real marks* of the church (proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments). "[Kuyper] has no objection, however, to regard the faithful exercise of discipline as one of the marks of the church." L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 577.

[254] My emphasis. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 76.

[255] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 463.

[256] Kuyper, "Common Grace," 187.

[257] Wagenman, "Ecclesiology," 143.

[258] Craig G. Bartholomew, "Volume Introduction," in *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World: The Doctrinal Section*, vol. 2, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, J. Daryl Charles, and Melvin Flikkema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2019), 305; Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 429.

[259] Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 174.

This distinction partially reflects Kuyper's Dutch context. As an institute, the NHK underemphasized the importance of the church in culture. Michael Wagenman notes that the development of this distinction was "primarily to avoid the church withdrawing from society, retreating from public engagement with the challenges of the day, and to orient the church toward holistic world-engagement."[260] At the same time, the conservatives (Ethical-Irenics) overemphasized cultural transformation and sought to expand the church's influence in the public sphere. A free church appreciates the reciprocity of the organic/institute nature of the church. Problems arise when the church elevates, neglects, or misapplies either its nature (organism) or essence (institute). Instead, the church should "[stand] on the assertion that what is good in the secular world is truly good" not because it *is* secular, but because "In him [all spheres] live and move have [their] being."[261]

3.3.2 Common Grace

In Kuyper's view, God gives special grace to the church and common grace to the world. True to its name, common grace is both universal (common) and undeserved (grace).[262] Historically, the doctrine of common grace has served three functions: (1) to develop human gifts in various spheres, (2) to restrain sin, and (3) to enable unbelievers to perform good acts.[263] In Kuyper's context, Brock and Sutanto define the doctrine as: "[God's] loving patience in preserving both humanity and the creaturely cosmos despite human rebellion and its polluting corruption for the sake of redemption."[264]

According to Kuyper, special grace "abolishes sin and completely undoes its consequences," while common grace is "extended to all of human life."[265] The church lives under special and common grace, but common grace precedes special grace in logical sequence.[266] This does not mean that common grace simply works as a bridge for the visible church to "enter into" the

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[260] Wagenman, "Ecclesiology," 143.

[261] Kaltwasser, "Assessing the Christological Foundation of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace," 200. Acts 17:28a (ESV).

[262]The doctrine of common grace goes back to at least Calvin. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), II, ii, 15; III, xiv, 2.

[263] Klaas Schilder's reticence to accept common grace persuaded him to coin the term "cultural mandate" (or "cultural endeavor") which described the general call issued to all humanity pre-fall. For Schilder, the term *grace* should not be used for unbelievers after the fall.

[264] Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, 214.

[265] Kuyper, "Common Grace," 167.

[266] Kuyper, "Common Grace," 168.

heavenly realm; rather, common grace is a summons for the church to engage the world in the "already-not-yet" kingdom. Kuyper remarks, "The ages must continue not solely for the sake of the elect, nor solely for God to disclose means to us in our struggle against suffering, but in the *interest of developing the world itself to its consummation*."[267] Development includes individual and communal creative activity across all spheres of life (e.g., education, art, technology).

While the church "develops" the world, Kuyper also expresses a distinction between church and state through common grace: "There is church life, but our civil life has an altogether different nature."[268] The civil sphere contains only common grace, while the church (organism and institute) contains special grace. This does not delegitimize the civil sphere; it receives God's (common) grace. In this sense, common grace does *not* merely attenuate the effects of human sin but creates the *same foundation* for both the civil and the church sphere. The church always has a *point of contact* with the civil sphere. In other words, common grace sustains both spheres in their distinct callings.

Kuyper based his conception of common grace on scriptural evidence, but he also had practical reasons for affirming common grace. [269] Common grace seeks to remedy the problem of church withdrawal and triumphalism in the following ways: First, common grace *unites* the church and the state under one banner called "grace"—God has bestowed the same (common) grace on the world as he has on the church.[270] Second, common grace is a good, given indiscriminately and universally; the church does not need to withdraw or triumph over the civil sphere—instead, God is graciously working in all human activity. Third, common grace is the origin of the earthly homeland, which enables individual Christians to engage fully in the civil sphere in light of their heavenly citizenship.

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[267] Kuyper, "Common Grace," 176.

[268] Kuyper, *Pro Rege Vol. 2*, 2:301.

[269] For a good overview of the biblical argument see Beeke and Smalley's volume. Beeke says, "The irony of defending the doctrine of common grace is that common grace generally flourishes only when the church focuses its pursuit on saving grace." Beeke's statement shows that neo-Puritanism and neo-Calvinism stand to benefit from ongoing dialogue. Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 3:85–90.

[270] It is important to note that not everyone agreed with Kuyper's conception of common grace. For instance, Hoekema and Schilder thought it misread the creation narrative in Genesis 1-3. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Klaas Schilder, "Culture and Common Grace (1933)," in *The Klaas Schilder Reader: The Essential Theological Writings*, ed. George Harinck, Marinus De Jong, and Richard Mouw (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 150–57; Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*.

3.4 Conclusion

Attempting to avoid the pitfalls of the NHK and the Ethical-Irenics (conservatives), Kuyper approached the church as an institution and an organism, believing that these distinctions preserved the integrity of the institutional church (though it struggled with pluriformity and uniformity) while enabling Christian engagement in culture. Sphere sovereignty and common grace do not merely address Kuyper's conception of the church as an organism but assume Kuyper's entire commitment to the church in its earthly present form. Sphere sovereignty preserves the independence of each sphere while common grace provides a shared point of contact between the church and the civil sphere.

Kuyper's ecclesiology is not without its limitations. Sphere sovereignty does not clarify the boundaries of the church's involvement in public life. Is there any realm, topic, or discipline that the Christian cannot redeem? Are some realms worth avoiding to preserve the faithfulness and holiness of the church? In the same respect, Kuyper is somewhat unclear in his distinction between corporate responsibility and individual Christian accountability. What specific role can or does the visible church play in redeeming the civil sphere? Common grace might suggest a solution, but all too often, Kuyper's vision of the doctrine is selectively invoked to justify the interpreter's positions, making political involvement selective at best and triumphant at worst.[271] While Kuyper's ecclesiology proved helpful in the Dutch context, the applicability of his vision for church-state engagement warrants reconsideration in the American context. The next chapter describes and analyzes Stanley Hauerwas's ecclesiology. Hauerwas's approach might provide a counterbalance to Kuyper's ecclesial vision.

[271] One need only think of R.J. Rushdoony in the American context. Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law & Liberty* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2009); Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977).

Chapter 4 – Stanley Hauerwas

4.1 Introduction

As a Methodist in the neo-Anabaptist tradition, Stanley Hauerwas offers an alternative, and some would say non-Reformational understanding of church engagement with the civil sphere.[272] Hauerwas aptly writes in his 2010 memoir, *Hannah's Child*, the first task of the church is *not* making the world more just ("changing it" or "evangelizing it"), but making the world the world—"we cannot understand the 'what' of Christianity without knowing the 'how' to be Christian."[273] Born to a working-class family in Texas in 1940, he was raised by his mother as "one of God's dedicated."[274] His father trained him as a bricklayer, which "left an indelible mark" on his life, ministry, and career.[275] His blue-collar background often shades the practicality of his style, approach, and method. This chapter describes and analyzes Hauerwas's ecclesiology in the context of his historical setting and political theology. While Kuyper and Hauerwas are separated by time and cultural context, both theologians argued that Constantine was fundamentally mistaken to marry the church to society. As Kuyper and Hauerwas see it, the church is responsible for seeking the welfare of earthly neighbors, but not overrealizing the kingdom of God on earth. This chapter addresses the following questions: What theological problem(s) is Hauerwas trying to solve? What is Hauerwas's alternative ecclesiology? Most importantly: "What theological doctrines shape Stanley Hauerwas's account of the church's institutional authority against the background of engaging politics?"

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[272] This chapter on Hauerwas draws on both sympathetic and critical voices. To offer a charitable reading, this chapter draws more from sympathetic interpreters of Hauerwas. For instance: Samuel Wells. Hauerwas and Wells co-edited and wrote several articles together. See: Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd Edition, Blackwell Companions to Religion (West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

[273] The word "just" here is loaded with Hauerwasian baggage. I use the phrase "changing it" to describe Hauerwas's distaste for the social gospel, and "evangelizing it" to describe his incredulity toward evangelicalism. Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), ix; For some good comments on Hauerwas's concept of justice, see: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 96–98.

[274] Hauerwas, *HC*, ix.

[275] In the over forty-five books he has written, most mention brick laying. Hauerwas, *HC*, 3, 36.

4.2 Hauerwas's Historical Context

4.2.1 Christendom and Constantinianism

To properly engage Hauerwas's ecclesiology, one must understand Christendom and his (often combative) posture toward those who seek to work within its framework. As Hauerwas himself says, "One cannot understand what I am about if one continues to presuppose the dominant philosophical and theological intellectual habits of the past hundred years."[276] Christendom often refers to an *era* (roughly between 306 CE and 1789), when the institutional church was unified with civil power.[277] More fundamentally, it refers to the *idea* of a Christian civilization, a political arrangement, and a sacral culture.[278] Hugh McLeod defines the term as "a social order in which, regardless of individual belief, Christian language, rites, moral teachings, and personnel were part of the taken-for-granted environment."[279] In today's context, the term is often used pejoratively, not as a descriptor but as an *assessment* of the church's (past and present) majority, privilege, control, power, maintenance, and colonial instincts.[280]

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[276] Stanley Hauerwas, "Why the '"Sectarian Temptation"' Is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson (1988)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 91.The following historical narrative is a critical engagement with Hauerwas's accounting of the historical sources. This study has referenced the term "Christendom" before (§1.5.2.1, §2.4.3). A fuller discussion of the term is warranted to introduce the reader to Hauerwas's context and ecclesiology.

[277] The dates in the text refer to Constantine's crowning as emperor (306) and the French Revolution (1789). Taylor's book *A Secular Age* chronicles the transformation of religious belief to secularity. As Taylor argues, the idea that unbelief *becomes an option* among others occurred gradually over the course of 500 years, from 1500 C.E. to 2000. In Taylor's paradigm, the dates of Christendom become flexible. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

[278] I do not use the term "the West" in reference to Christendom. Varouxakis argues that, "The deliberate substitution of 'the West' for 'Europe' [and Christendom] was…made for the first time explicitly and thoroughly (too thoroughly, in exasperating detail) in the voluminous writings of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857)." Georgios Varouxakis, *The West: The History of an Idea* (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2025), 8–9.

[279] Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 265.

[280] Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom*, 3. Some scholars differentiate between Centered Christendom and Decentered Christendom. Centered Christendom focused on a geographical center (e.g., Rome) to the exclusion of the secular, other faiths, or dissenting beliefs. Decentered Christendom imagined a community "where government is constituted apart from the church." According to John Heathershaw, the Reformation was a movement from Centered Christendom to Decentered Christendom. A political consequence of this model was a shift in *tolerating religious perspectives*. Engaging politics became a discipline because one could properly distinguish between the state and the church. John Heathershaw, *Security after Christendom: Global Politics and Political Theology for Apocalyptic Times* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), Chapter 1; McDougall, "From 'Secular' to 'Post-Secular' and 'Pluralist,'" 322.

For Hauerwas, the *idea* of Christendom means that for most of church history, "Christians could not [properly] distinguish between their *beliefs* and their *behavior*."[281] The historical turning point was Constantine's conversion and subsequent rule of the Roman Empire. Hauerwas and Wells explain that "Prior to Constantine, it took courage to be a Christian. After Constantine, it took courage to be a pagan. Before Constantine, no one doubted that Christians were different. After Constantine, it became increasingly unclear what difference being a Christian made."[282] Hauerwas calls this influence on the church "Constantinianism," a term borrowed from John Howard Yoder, describing "the manner in which Christianity changes as it *transitions* from a persecuted minority [in the early church] to an established majority in the Roman Empire."[283] In Constantinianism, the agenda of the church becomes confused with the power of the empire. More than that, Constantinianism denotes an ecclesiological and an eschatological *heresy* by erasing "the distinction between the church the and the world" and erasing "the distinction between the current age and the kingdom of God."[284] According to Hauerwas, both Christendom and Constantinianism are problematic not only because they conflate the terrestrial church with the celestial church, but because they suffocate the prophetic (pointing people to God and suffering) and priestly (formation of disciples) *identity* of the church.[285]

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[281] My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press / T&T Clark, 1998), 20.

[282] Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, "How the Church Managed Before There Was Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd Edition, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, Blackwell Companions to Religion (West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 42–43.

[283] Sometimes Hauerwas uses the terms "Christendom" and "Constantinianism" interchangeably. In this study the terms are mean slightly different things. Christendom refers to the time or age where the church held cultural persuasion. Constantinianism refers to the merging of political power with the Christian church. Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 22. John Howard Yoder, professor at Notre Dame, helped redefine Hauerwas's ecclesiology. After Yoder died in 1997, it came to light that he had sexually abused women for years. In Hauerwas most recent book he comments: "[Yoder] is a reality that must be borne, but how to bear that reality without being insensitive to the women he harmed is a challenge for which there is no easy response. Some think I have not appropriately expressed my sorrow for the women involved. I am sorry that seems to be the case, but I do not know what more I can do. I can say I am deeply sorry, which I am, but what good would that do? All I know to do is to do what Cora Diamond says we must do, that is, 'bear reality.'" Hauerwas, *RABB*, Chapter 6. Using the same line of reasoning, Hauerwas opines in an earlier work: "The fact that he submitted to his church's discipline process regarding sexual misconduct was but a testimony to his commitment to nonviolence as the community's form of behavior." Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 135–36.

[284] Craig A. Carter, "Beyond Theocracy and Individualism: The Significance of John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology for Evangelicalism," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 179.

[285] Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, "The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd Edition, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, Blackwell Companions to Religion (West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 21–22.

4.2.2 Approaches to Christendom Preceding Hauerwas

4.2.2.1 The Social Gospel (19th Century)

To provide historical context for Hauerwas's constructive ecclesiology, this section examines how Hauerwas interprets the views of two theologians on church-state engagement. Hauerwas regularly engages two prominent theological voices from the early 20th century: Walter Rauchenbusch (1861-1918) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). The US saw tremendous economic growth in the late 19th century.[286] Industrial development was driven by a strong work ethic that propelled the American economy into the 20th century.[287] While industrialization increased salaries, many people still lived paycheck to paycheck.[288] As the century progressed, economic inequality became a problem, and some were "on the verge of [physical] starvation."[289] The Industrial Revolution promised transformed lives, but transformation often felt distant; lived reality was shaped by societal breakdown.[290]

Responses to the crisis varied considerably, but Walter Rauschenbusch is perhaps the most remembered religious voice from the era. An influential pastor and professor at Rochester Theological Seminary, Rauschenbusch believed the crisis could be addressed through the social gospel. As articulated by Rauschenbusch, the social gospel attempted to "Christianize" the nation and the individual by promoting a Jesus ethic through social change.[291] The church was called to

[286] Time does not permit me to comment on the many economic aspects of chattel slavery in this era. In 1815, near the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, of the 8.4 million people in the US, approximately 1.4 million were held as slaves. Daniel Howe notes "by the early years of the nineteenth century, scarcely anyone outside the Deep South states of South Carolina and Georgia tried to *justify* [my emphasis] slavery in sailing to other parts of the empire." Slave labor had a large economic impact on the southern economy. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), location 71. For two different perspectives on slavery's impact on the economy see: Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

[287] German sociologist Max Weber described this phenomenon as the *"Protestantische Ethik"* (Protestant work ethic), arguing that the Protestant/Puritan idea of vocational discipline influenced the Industrial Revolution. Max Weber, *Die Protestantische Ethik, Und Der Geist Des Kapitalismus* (Berlin, 1904; Reprint, Hofenberg, 2016).

[288] Daniel K. Williams, *The Politics of the Cross: A Christian Alternative to Partisanship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 208.

[289] Williams, *The Politics of the Cross: A Christian Alternative to Partisanship*, 208.

[290] In historical retrospective, Niebuhr challenged Rauschenbusch's semi-Marxist thesis that "The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective," in *Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social, and Political Thought in a Technological Age*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1968), 34.

[291] Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 229; Harry J. Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 322.

social transformation by following Jesus' moral example, embodied in his "law of love."[292] Weaving together biblical themes, Rauschenbusch formulated a "Christian sociology" that provided a social-historical hermeneutic, allowing the church to "see the power of God's kingdom being actualized through the democratization of the economic system."[293] For Rauschenbusch, the inequality wrought by the Industrial Revolution was a temporary interruption in the church's efforts to realize the kingdom of God in American history. The purpose of the church was merely for the earthly kingdom of God, or as Samuel Wells summarizes, the American project proved to be "the testing-ground for the possibilities of the *human project*…The Church's true and long-neglected purpose…was the *transformation of human community into the kingdom*."[294] Rauschenbusch's paradigm left little distinction between the *church as a moral community* and the *United States as a civil society*; unfortunately, this allowed Christendom to preserve its influence over the church.[295]

4.2.2.2 Theological Liberalism (20th Century)

While Rauschenbusch's theology held out hope for the kingdom to arrive through socio-centric goals and moral progress, the following century failed to realize his optimism. In the 20th century, between 225.5 and 237.5 million people died due to war, conflict, genocide, enslavement, and other structural violence.[296] While the global church grew numerically, it was

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[292] Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom of God*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 181.

[293] Max L. Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections From the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed. Scott R. Paeth, E. Harold Jr. Breitenberg, and Hak Joon Lee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 23. In this sense, "the kingdom of God is always but coming." Quoting Rauschenbusch in: Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 320.

[294] Rauschenbusch says, "[the kingdom is the] purpose for which the Church exists." Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1917), 143. My emphasis. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 3.

[295] John Bolt challenges the idea of locating a distinctive "American character." Hauerwas and Wells accuse Rauschenbusch of linking Christian morality with an American spirit or soul; however, considering the influence of Royce on Rauschenbusch, it remains unclear if Rauschenbusch's thought can adequately be correlated to a uniquely American character. According to Bolt quoting Max Lerner, "America is a highly polarized field of meaning…the study of American civilization becomes thus the study of the polar pattern itself, not a search for some single key that will unlock causation." Stated in a way in which Hauerwas might be sympathetic, "America is a nation always in the process of further definition…an ongoing frontier." Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 231.

[296] Milton Leitenberg, "Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century," *Cornell University Peace Studies Program Occasional Paper*, no. #29 (2006): 14. The historian Erik Hobsbawm previous estimated that between 1914 (WWI) and 1991 (the dissolution of the USSR) 187 million were "killed or allowed to die *by human decision*." As a Marxist historian his coining of the phrase "by human decision" is an important term for determining the number. He gets this number from Zbigniew Brzezinski's book *Out of Control*.

not unaffected by these atrocities, often suffering physical, legal, and social persecution, occurring in places as far ranging as China, Rwanda, and Yemen.[297]

The brutality of the century required a response from the church, especially in the wake of the First World War and the Great Depression. Theological liberalism, reframed as Christian ethics, quickly shaped ecclesial discourse. Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor at Union Theological Seminary, emerged as one of the most significant voices in Christian ethics.[298] Niebuhr viewed Rauschenbusch's social gospel as naïve utopianism, susceptible to the illusions of his generation. More importantly, Niebuhr thought Rauschenbusch ignored the reality of human nature and focused too much on social programs.[299] Niebuhr offered a different starting point, "Christian realism," which assumed that people are self-interested; expecting otherwise ignores the reality of human nature.[300] Niebuhr argued that human nature is fundamentally self-indulgent and self-assertive, driven by the pursuit of pleasure and power.

According to Niebuhr, the cross represents sacrificial love—working "to sustain moral action in an inherently unjust world."[301] The solution to human sin is not *social renovation* by reforming culture to Christ's "law of love" (contra. Rauschenbusch), but rather in the power of God's

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[297] This persecution has occurred primarily (though not exclusively) in what scholars call the global south. These geographic regions (Asia, Latin America, and Africa) have seen an explosion in Christianity since the beginning of the 20th century. For instance, in 1910, the global south made up 18% of Christians worldwide, in 2010 these regions consisted of 67% of the global Christian population. In contrast, in 1910, approximately 80% of Christians lived in Europe and North America; in 2010 it was 37.3%. Todd M. Johnson, "The 100-Year Shift of Christianity to the South," *Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*, October 9, 2019, https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/the-100-year-shift-of-christianity-to-the-south/. See also Royal's monograph. Robert Royal, *The Martyrs of the New Millennium: The Global Persecution of Christians in the Twenty-First Century* (Sophia Institute Press, 2025); For an excellent contemporary account of the Chinese church relationship with the state see: Wang Yi, *Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement*, ed. Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2022).

[298] This is not to negate significant voices like Karl Barth who helped write the Barmen Declaration. Barth's concerns were not as much ethical or ecclesial as they were Christological. See Barth's reflections on the Declaration in his Church Dogmatics. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, Second Edition, vol. 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), II.1-6. When Hauerwas refers to liberal theology he means "theologians who think the knowledges produced by modernity render traditional theological claims problematic. They then seek to find a way to redescribe how theological claims work in a manner that can make theology congruent with modernity." Hauerwas, *ABH*, 64, footnote 21.

[299] Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective." According to Hauerwas, "Niebuhr's account of Rauschenbusch fails to appreciate Rauschenbusch's quite sophisticated understanding of the complexities of social reform." Hauerwas, *WGO*, 93, footnote 18.

[300] Concerning the works of Niebur, Christian realism often refers to "political realism."

[301] Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Catwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 59.

image, the church should "accommodate" or *"translate" the gospel to American culture*.[302] For Niebuhr, then, anthropology becomes the governing principle to uncouple moral philosophy from the church, rendering it "acceptable to secular reason."[303]

If Rauschenbusch *divided the church from the kingdom*, giving priority to the earthly kingdom, Niebuhr *integrated the church with the kingdom*, allowing the church's ethical framework to conform to it. As a result, both church-state engagement philosophies bear a family resemblance—as Hauerwas notes:

> For Niebuhr and the social gospelers *the subject of Christian ethics was America*…This perhaps explains the oft-made observation that Niebuhr paid almost no attention to the social significance of the church, for finally, in spite of all the trenchant criticism he directed at America, *America was his church*.[304]

This stark criticism from Hauerwas entails that both approaches fail to adequately distinguish between the church and the civil sphere, often confusing or inflating the civil sphere with the prophetic (pointing people to God and suffering) and priestly (formation of disciples) functions of the church. In Hauerwas's estimation, the church required a different solution to address the crisis of Christendom.

4.3 Hauerwas's Ecclesiology

According to Hauerwas, both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr (among others) failed to adequately account for how Christendom animated their ecclesiology, and, as a result, they tacitly embraced the world's narrative for the church, distorting the character and purpose of God's people.[305]

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[302] Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 33.

[303] In Niebur's paradigm, "Christ is…above history, but in being so holds out the promise of liberation from the *problem of human historical limitation* [my emphasis]." Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack, eds., *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 305. As noted previously, this historical account critically engages Hauerwas's interpretation of the sources. David True argues that "Hauerwas has failed to understand Niebur's ecclesiology," and as such argues that Niebur sees tension between the church and the world, not opposition (contra. Hauerwas). David True, "Ecclesiology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robin W. Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 307.

[304] My emphasis. Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," 60, footnote 23.

[305] Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 11. A few remarks: First, it is important to note that Hauerwas is not always critical toward Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr. While he frequently writes on both figures, he recognizes their significance and importance in the development of Christianity in the American context. Second, Hauerwas is influenced by Yoder's ecclesiology. As previously stated however, the two thinkers should not be interpreted together. Craig Carter observes four differences between Yoder and Hauerwas: "First, Yoder engages the text of Scripture to a much greater degree than Hauerwas. Second, Yoder takes history much more seriously than Hauerwas does in his theology. Third, Yoder does not share Hauerwas's interest in character; his doctrine of the imitation of Jesus is sharply focused on the cross. Fourth, it is questionable as to whether or not Hauerwas shares Yoder's

According to Hauerwas, they exemplify the problematic tendencies in Constantinianism: the overrealization and underrealization of God's perfect rule in Christ. In Christendom, the church expected the new creation to be ushered in by "activist" eschatology (Rauschenbusch), conformed itself to the world by making the gospel more attractive (Niebuhr), or retreated from the public square (pietism). The common disposition of these views is that the *church ought to be actively involved in God's kingdom work* either by transformation, conforming, obedience, or preaching the gospel.

Niebuhr's brother, Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr summarized these views in a five-part typology addressing what he called the "enduring problem" of how Christ historically relates to culture.[306] Niebuhr's influential typology was a "variation on the problem of how to relate the eternal to the temporal."[307] Hauerwas argues that his typology fails to appreciate the church's *temporal and contextual* dimensions; the church always plays a constructive role in shaping our perspective on eschatology.[308] As such, Constantinianism has proven to be a hard habit to break—theological categories, church narratives, and ethical responsibilities are often infused with Christendom's presuppositions.[309] Hauerwas's project is an attempt to break from this tradition and "redescribe reality…[to] American society, in Christian terms"—or as Hauerwas himself puts it, "teaching people how to talk."[310] For Hauerwas, the crucial question is not whether, "Christianity [can] be made amenable to the world, but [can] the world be made

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Biblical Realism." Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 25.

[306] H. Richard Niebuhr's five types are: (1) Christ against Culture, (2) Christ of Culture, (3) Christ and Culture in Paradox, (4) Christ above Culture, and (5) Christ the Transformer of Culture. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Reprint Edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1975). See Long's book for an assessment of Niebuhr's five types. D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2010), 61–71. Hauerwas note that H. Richard Niebuhr was one of his earliest influences. He read Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* in high school and reflected on its importance in university. Hauerwas, *HC*, 9, 14.

[307] Long, *Theology and Culture*, 69.

[308] Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 199–200; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), See esp. 173-174.

[309] Hauerwas, *AC*, 18–19.

[310] Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas*, Revised Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 189; Hauerwas, *WWW*, 87.

amenable to what Christians believe?"[311] In this sense, Hauerwas's purpose is to get "Christians to think and speak in *the original language* of Christianity."[312]

Hauerwas's ecclesiology resists strict categorization—partially because of his broad reading patterns and constellation of influences (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Barth, Wittgenstein, Yoder, MacIntyre, Milbank), and partially because he seeks to construct a "doctrine" of the church without the presuppositions of Christendom and its church-state arrangement(s).[313] This has led to a fair share of criticism.[314] However, Hauerwas has shown that "returning" to an ecclesiology detached from Christendom's ecclesiologies (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Reformational, Scholastic, etc.) is no minor undertaking.[315]

Hauerwas's constructive solution to Christendom is the "peacemaking church," a body of disciples spanning the globe that has "the capacity to resist the disciplines of the body associated with the modern nation state"—a church that *is* a social ethic rather than *has* a social ethic.[316] The body polity of the church is framed within a "five-act theo-drama" where act one is creation, act two is Israel, act three is Jesus, act four is the church, and act five is the eschaton.[317] The "peacemaking church" is in tension with the third and fifth acts, and is the lifeblood of all

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[311] Hauerwas, *HC*, 59; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 24.

[312] Russell P. Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference: Stanley Hauerwas and Public Theology," *Modern Theology* 36, no. 3 (July 2020): 450. In another context Hauerwas describes his project as helping "Christians disengage from the Constantinian habits that have so led them to confuse America with God's salvation. America's civil religion is not a cure for individualism but its cause." Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 55–56.

[313] For instance, following Yoder, Hauerwas rejects H. Richard Niebur's five "descriptive" categories of Christ and culture saying, "the very way Niebuhr describes the alleged 'Enduring Problem' between Christ and culture presupposes Niebuhr's understanding of Christ as the embodiment of radical monotheistic faith that relativizes all cultural achievements." Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 194–95. See also: H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Reprint Edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1975).

[314] Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation."

[315] Craig Carter agues in his monograph that John Howard Yoder is in line with the church tradition. However, he also notes that Hauerwas's ecclesiology cannot be read *ad mentem* Yoder. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*. Chapter 5 will provide an intercultural dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas. For now, I will note that a flattened reading of Hauerwas suggests that the only reliable sources for the church are pre-Constantinian (i.e., Augustine) and post-*Barmen Declaration* (i.e., Barth). This of course begs the question, not only where was the church, but *how* did the church faithfully function for the intermittent years?

[316] Hauerwas, *IGC*, 26.

[317] This list is taken from Wells. Wells working from N.T. Wright's narrative model of scripture with slight modification. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 53; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992).

theological *discourse* and *practice*—or as Hauerwas argues, "peacemaking among Christians…is the *very form of the church* insofar as the church is the form of the one who 'is our peace.'"[318]

As such, Hauerwas avoids activist, pietist, and "Christ and Culture" Christianities and adopts an ecclesiocentric framework, which focuses less on the kingdom of God broadly conceived and more on how *the church* "can provide the *interpretative categories* [e.g., Christian language] to help Christians better understand the positive and negative aspects of their societies and guide their subsequent selective participation."[319] In this sense, he is neither for "cultural transformation" nor for "church withdrawal," but for faithful selective engagement. This section looks at Hauerwas's ecclesiology, drawing on two principal dimensions of his thought: (1) the church's identity as a social ethic, and (2) the church's identity as a distinct polity.[320]

4.3.1 The Church as a Social Ethic

Hauerwas's famous (or infamous) dictum, "The church does not *have* a social ethic but *is* a social ethic," has sparked extensive debate.[321] This is partially due to his conviction "that it is unwise to isolate doctrines from the narratives that make doctrines make sense in the first place."[322] Therefore, he insists on fusing the *identity* of the church (is) with its *activity* (having),

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[318] Stanley Hauerwas, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 342. My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, "Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 95.

[319] For Barth scholar Bruce McCormack, Hauerwas is part of a group of disaffected theological liberals who want to develop a "new orthodoxy" primarily in the form of ecclesiology, and "desire to find in Barth a guarantor of their own interests and concerns so far as possible and to fault him where he falls short." Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 230. Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation,'" 102.

[320] Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, 33. This study does not have time to address all the contours of Hauerwas's ecclesiology. A brief selection of topics could include virtue, peacemaking, eschatology, kingdom, among others. Hauerwas's mentor at Notre Dame, John Howard Yoder preferred to use "functions" of the church instead of the traditional "marks." Following Visser't Hooft's categories, Yoder embraced three key functions: witness (*martyria*), service (*diakonia*), and communion or fellowship (*koinonia*). One can see how these functions overlap with Hauerwas's emphasis. Carter, "Beyond Theocracy and Individualism," 180.

[321] Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 101. The title of this book is meant as an echo to Karl Barth's Theological Existence Today which was written in 1933, one year before the Barmen Declaration. Hauerwas has called for "something like the Barmen Declaration" in Donald Trump's handling of the Covid 19 pandemic. Pinches notes that Hauerwas much like Barth found liberal theology inadequate to combat nationalism. Charles R. Pinches, "Why Church Matters: The Political Theology of Stanley Hauerwas," *The Political Science Reviewer* 46, no. 1 (2022): 322, footnote 2. For debate concerning Hauerwas see: Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation"; Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation'"; Hunter, *To Change the World*; Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*.

[322] Hauerwas, *WOT*, 32. Near the end of the Gifford Lectures, Hauerwas attempts to explain and address his ecclesial reasoning by asking himself a set of elaborate questions. Two relevant questions are quoted in full: "Does the truth of Christian convictions depend on the faithfulness of the church, and if so, how do we determine what

or as he says, "For the church *to be*, rather than *to have*, a social ethic means that [the church] must be a community where the truth is lived and spoken."[323] For Hauerwas, this language serves a few functions: First, it deconstructs the competing ecclesial traditions shaped by Christendom (Rauschenbusch/Niebuhr). Second, it attempts to reverse the influence of the deontological and utilitarian ethical schools in the American church.[324] Third, it decouples American *political activity* (e.g., voting republican or democrat) from Christian *identity*. Finally and most importantly, it articulates that the church is a distinct community from the world, and unlike past models: the church *does not build* God's kingdom by merely "*having* a peaceable or just social ethic," but *the church itself* "[is] the *foretaste of the kingdom*" by participating in *God's story*, and thus works as the primary expression of *God's narrative in the world* between the resurrection of Jesus and the future eschaton.[325] This section focuses on this last category.

4.3.1.1. Social Ethics as Story

When Hauerwas uses the phrase "social ethics," he has in mind a "community where *truth is lived* and *spoken*," a foretaste of God's kingdom. Social ethics is not a set of principles like social justice, behaviorism, or the church taking action "outside its walls." Rather, social ethics is participating in a *story*—"the story of God's calling of Israel and of the life of Jesus."[326] This community is known as "the church."[327] The church is where people *embody the story* of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, and Christ.[328] In the church, the stories of Israel and Jesus are "*told, enacted,* and *heard*."[329] In the intermediate act, the fourth stage in God's "theo-drama," the

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would constitute faithfulness? Am I [Hauerwas] suggesting that the ability of the church to be or not to be nonviolent is constitutive for understanding what it might mean to claim that Christian convictions are true?" Hauerwas responds to these questions with a resounding: "Yes! On every count, the answer is 'Yes.'" Social ethics is properly constituted when the church embodies a faithful witness to Jesus's story. Hauerwas, *WGO*, 231. Pragmatist philosopher Jeffery Stout is not convinced of Hauerwas's reasoning and suggests he still uses circular reasoning in his appeal to Yoder's ecclesiology, an objection Hauerwas attempted to address in the lectures. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Chapter 6, see esp. 149.

[323] Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 102.

[324] The ethics primarily found in Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham.

[325] My emphasis. Hauerwas also notes that the Church *is* a distinct witness, vocation, ethic, and worship. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 97.

[326] Hauerwas, *CET*, 101.

[327] It has been called other names in church history. For instance: "People of God," "Body of Christ," and "The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit."

[328] Hauerwas, *WGO*, 192; Hauerwas, *WWW*, 118.

[329] Hauerwas, *PK*, 146.

church is the space where the truth of this story grows and flourishes, serving as a witness to God's kingdom.[330]

Jesus Christ is the final proclamation of God's kingdom, and in his humanity, he declared it as a present and future reality. His message could only be understood when he *participated* in the story and embodied the kingdom's standards.[331] The church continues Jesus's story by telling it, passing it on, and embodying his presence in the world. This primarily occurs (but is not limited to) the church's language and practice. As Hauerwas says, "the new politics is a politics of speech—as so also of act. But it begins in the speech of the church."[332] As such, Jesus and the church share a *single story*—"the church is the community that is at once the *storyteller* as well as a *character in the story* that is required by Christian affirmation of God's redemption of the world through the people of Israel and the cross and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth."[333] It is important to clarify that the visible church is not commensurate with Christ; however, Jesus's participation and his perpetual obedience are continually manifested in and through the church's witness. As such, "the church, the kingdom, and the life of Jesus are invariably linked together."[334] Therefore, the church is not in the business of building God's kingdom in the world because it lacks morality, will, or desire; rather, it is not its nature to do so—the church is the embodiment of God's kingdom by participating in the story of Jesus in the world.

Furthermore, witnessing to God's kingdom means the church is a new creation, a new community that exists in a unique *time,* a body that is "capable of rest [and] of worship, in a world bent on its own destruction."[335] In this narrative, the church is the *image of Christ*, constituted by word and sacrament, and enacted through baptism and the eucharist; the former emphasizes "our citizenship [that] is transferred from one dominion to another," the latter is an

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[330] According to Hauerwas, this was *the* mistake of Rauschenbusch—he made the kingdom of God the center of his theology, rather than the church. Hauerwas, *ABH*, 94.

[331] My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 74; The original publication of The Peaceable Kingdom in 1983 is on the heels of MacIntyre's After Virtue. We can see MacIntyre's influence on Hauerwas's understanding of community laden truth. *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom*, First Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991).

[332] Hill, *Gathered on the Road to Zion*, Chapter 4, section 2; Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, & Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 46.

[333] My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language (1986)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 161.

[334] Hauerwas, *PK*, 75; Hill, *Gathered on the Road to Zion*, Chapter 4, Section 2.

[335] Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language," 145–46.

"eschatological meal of God's continuing presence that makes possible a peaceable people."[336] The liturgy of word, sacrament, and deed "helps us locate our lives, [and] our stories, in God's story."[337] As such, "the first social ethical task of the church is [not to make the 'world' better, transform it, or make it more just, but] *to be the church*."[338]

4.3.1.2. The Prophetic Character of the Church

Embodying God's kingdom by participating in Jesus's story is a good starting point, but for Hauerwas, it is not sufficient for an integrated ecclesiology. As the church embodies this story, it takes on a *prophetic role* in the world, and, as a prophetic community, the church functions as a training center where people "learn to recognize Christ" and are molded to reflect God's character.[339] Said a different way: the church as the embodiment of Christ is the place where *virtue* is built in community. While the world shares the same story as the church, it lacks the community in which social ethics can develop to recognize it; as a result, it manufactures untrue stories and, with them, false speech, arguments, and social ethics. In contrast, sanctification occurs within the church, enabling the community to see the world in Christ's truth.[340] For Hauerwas, "virtues are necessary for remembering and telling the story of a crucified savior."[341] As such, the church is called to exercise the "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and love while exhorting "other virtues" like patience and peacemaking, which are necessary in a seemingly "out of control world."[342] As Pinches summarizes, "the church bears crucial descriptions, stories, and practices that are vital for seeing truthfully, and so acting rightly," and as we embrace community, "The church enables us to be better people than we could have been if left to our own devices."[343]

For Hauerwas, then, the church inhabits the present reality of the kingdom without overrealizing it, anticipates the future without retreat, and, most importantly, lives as *a colony of resident*

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[336] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics (1983)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 383.

[337] Hauerwas, *PK*, 107–8; Hauerwas, *STT*, 254.

[338] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 10.

[339] Hauerwas, *PK*, 143; Hauerwas, *CET*, 161; Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Baylor University Press, 2012), 625.

[340] Hauerwas, *STT*, 12.

[341] Hauerwas, "The Servant Community," 378.

[342] Hauerwas, "The Servant Community," 380.

[343] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 318; Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 81.

aliens in a foreign land who primarily bear witness to God's reign. Therefore, the church is in a missionary situation, where the aim is not autonomy, certainty, but faithfulness—to be a people formed in the likeness of God.[344] Projects to accommodate the church to the unbeliever only conflate the true church (church administration, worship, pastoral care, preaching) with a false church (bigger congregations, self-esteem, materialism, making Christ interesting). As Hauerwas notes:

> The kingdom is not simply some cipher that we can fill in with our ideas about what a good society ought to look like…rather the [church is the] proclamation of the *coming kingdom of God, its presence and its future coming* is a claim about how God rules and the establishment of that rule through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.[345]

God's kingdom is *already here* in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Jesus himself proclaimed that the kingdom of God is a present and future reality.[346] On the other hand, Hauerwas insists that the church cannot establish, hasten, or impede the kingdom. Its role is not a "debased form of prophetic hope" which promotes "otherworldliness" (monasticism, ritualism, sacramentalism); instead, the church is the embodiment and witness to the kingdom.[347] Therefore, as Hauerwas sees it, the issue for the church is not engaging politics to usher in the kingdom but *being a faithful church by witnessing to God's kingdom*.

4.3.2 The Church as a Distinct Polity

4.3.2.1 The Church as a Narrative Community

Hauerwas's ecclesiology takes further shape when he clarifies that the church is not only a social ethic but also a *distinct polity* in relationship to the world. The church has its own *history, experience, and narrative*. Hauerwas argues that:

> God has entrusted his presence to a *historic and contingent community* which can never rest on its past success, but must be *renewed* generation after generation. That is why the story is not merely told but *embodied in a people's habits* that form and are formed in worship, governance, and morality.[348]

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[344] Hauerwas, *CET*, 103; Hauerwas, *IGC*, 53.
[345] Hauerwas, *PK*, 126.
[346] Hauerwas, *PK*, 115.
[347] Hauerwas, *ABH*, 82.
[348] My emphasis. Hauerwas, *PK*, 143.

Therefore, social ethics, truth claims, and stories are always qualified by the *context* of an *embodied* people. To say it differently: there is no "view from nowhere"—humans cannot get a "birds-eye view" of truth. God entrusts his presence to the church throughout history. To separate the church from its embodied experience requires the church to be separated from Scripture—a *Christian vision of the world* only "arises and is sustained [when] a community forms around the memory and worship of Jesus."[349]

Hauerwas uses the concept of "narrative" to incorporate the church into the larger church tradition, introducing the idea of a "continuing conversation" that shifts the focus from holy scripture to holy people.[350] As Wells points out, "Hauerwas opposes any efforts to set up a theory of revelation or knowledge or religion that attempt to bypass the *community of faith*."[351] So while Hauerwas maintains that scripture is authoritative within the church, he criticizes *sola scriptura* on the grounds that the doctrine rests on individualism, which undergirds the projects of Protestant liberalism, fundamentalism, and higher criticism.[352] Therefore, he often stresses the communal aspect of revelation: the church, as a community, retells the story of Jesus to each generation of Christians and learns to witness to the kingdom of God.[353] As Joseph Mangina summarizes, "Scripture functions as the norm that tells us who the God of Jesus Christ is—the God who both judges and forgives our sin—but *the norm does actual work* only when it is employed as a script by the Christian community."[354]

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[349] Pinches notes that there is "a kind of 'historicism'" in Hauerwas's claim. Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 303–4. Hauerwas notes that even the word "church" is an image of God's narration. Hauerwas, *PK*, 142.

[350] Samuel Wells, "Stanley Hauerwas' Theological Ethics in Eschatological Perspective," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 4 (November 2000): 434. Hunsicker points out the difference here between Barth and Hauerwas—"For Barth, the Scriptures refer the reader to God; for Hauerwas…the Scripture points the reader to God's people." Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 196. On this point John Webster calls Hauerwas's theology overtly "ecclesiocentric," and argues that his doctrine of salvation looks more like the liberal theologian Albert Ritschl than Karl Barth. Hunsicker sympathizes with this point but concludes, "it is possible to articulate Hauerwas's ecclesiocentrism as a postliberal ecclesiocentrism instead of a return to Protestant liberalism" (see page 202 in Hunsicker). John Webster, "Ecclesiocentrism," *First Things*, October 1, 2014, https://firstthings.com/ecclesiocentrism/.

[351] Wells, "Stanley Hauerwas' Theological Ethics in Eschatological Perspective," 434.

[352] For instance, Hauerwas says, when the distinction persists between text and interpretation, "*sola scriptura* becomes the seedbed of fundamentalism, as well as biblical criticism. It assumes that the text of the Scripture makes sense separate from a Church that gives it sense." Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 27.

[353] Hauerwas, *ATE*, 45.

[354] Joseph Mangina, "Bearing the Marks of Jesus: The Church in the Economy of Salvation in Barth and Hauerwas," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (Edinburgh, Scotland) 52, no. 3 (1999): 297.

Of course, a challenge immediately arises here: How can the church, as an interpretive community, construct the meaning of scripture while, at the same time, scripture shapes the Christian community?[355] Hauerwas navigates this tension by arguing for "conversation" across the centuries: scripture reshapes the church's interpretation, but the church's historical interpretation always participates in forming beliefs.[356] The church cannot trade Christian descriptions developed over the long history of Christian tradition for modern language such as "freedom of the individual" or "social justice."[357] Pinches captures Hauerwas's concern when he says that changing Christian language and practice for the contemporary risks losing "what we need to say truthfully who we are and who God is."[358] Christianity is a culture-shaping religion; it simultaneously shapes a new culture and speaks to us in our own history, context, and culture.[359] In other words: salvation does not constitute a "new beginning" where the believer is raptured from their historical context; rather, salvation is a "beginning in the middle" of a *story*—a story that invites the person to join an ongoing conversation within an interpretive community—as Hauerwas says, the church is "*sharing in the work of a new people* whom God has created in Israel and Jesus."[360] For Hauerwas, this is not strictly intellectual or academic, but demands holiness, which ultimately requires that the church take an offensive, not a defensive, posture toward the world.[361]

Since the church cannot be separated from its historical location over time, Hauerwas argues that there is no "invisible church" or "mystically existing universal church."[362] The church is "not

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[355] Vidu, *Postliberal Theological Method*, 34.

[356] Hauerwas, *STT*, 231. Hauerwas is attempting to modify Barth's understanding of witness. In his Gifford Lectures, Hauerwas states: "Christian orthodoxy cannot be Christian truth without living Christians. In the absence of living Christians, orthodoxy cannot help but give birth to and be opposed by mystical, liberal, existential Christianity without Christ." Hauerwas, *WGO*, 200. According to Vidu, Hauerwas "problematises the distinction between texts and their interpretation…from this correct observation it cannot easily be inferred that the content which the community supplies cannot be challenged in view of later interactions with the text." Vidu, *Postliberal Theological Method*, 35.

[357] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 318.

[358] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 318.

[359] Robert L. Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 2; Hauerwas, *WOT*, 185.

[360] My emphasis. Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 52.

[361] Christ-like holiness is "one of the essential marks that makes the church the church." Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 51; Hauerwas, *ATE*, 100. Hauerwas notes that pietism and holiness are connected historically, but insists that the concepts can be distinguished and are often antithetical. Pietism tends to focus on individual sanctification and discipleship, while holiness takes into consideration the character of the church. Hauerwas, *STT*, 84, footnote 3.

[362] Hauerwas, "The Servant Community," 382–83.

some ideal of community but a *particular people* [in particular times] who, like Israel, must find the way to sustain their existence generation after generation."[363] For Hauerwas, to speak of the church is to speak of it in a *concrete location and time*, the way local people participate in the continuing story of Jesus Christ in the world.

4.3.2.2 Making the World "the World"

Since the church is a social ethic (identity) and a distinct polity, its "first social task…is to help the world know *it is the world*."[364] Many interpret this statement as fideistic, separationist, and a call for the church to retreat from the world. But these criticisms misplace Hauerwas's concern. He strongly opposes the boosting of spiritualizing pietism. For Hauerwas, the world "is where the truth is not spoken."[365] He is not making an ontological distinction but is indicating the difference between the church's story, participation, and virtue, and that of the world (e.g., politics). The world shares the same story as the church, but it fails to participate in the story. The world assumes that human beings rule history and write their own stories. As such, it views itself as a force for good capable of determining right from wrong. This is accentuated in modern, secular cultures, especially in liberal societies that co-opt the language of justice, freedom, and love to fit their narrative. However, for Hauerwas, the world cannot adjudicate morality because it fails to participate in the community of saints. To assess matters correctly requires an intimate connection to the resurrection of Christ, as Hauerwas says, "the church knows that the life of faithfulness is not easily acquired but involves those skills that can be learned only through apprenticeship to a master."[366] Christendom and with it modernity threaten to "set the agenda" for the church, often by subverting the church's language.[367] Instead of speaking truth and following the principles laid out by Christ, the church is tempted to "use God" and set its own agenda, mimicking the principles of the world. As Hauerwas wryly comments: "It is unclear whether Texas politicians first started looking like Southern Baptist pastors or

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[363] My emphasis. Hauerwas, "The Servant Community," 383.
[364] My emphasis. Hauerwas, *PK*, 126; Hauerwas, *CET*, 102.
[365] Hauerwas, *CET*, 103.
[366] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 27; Quote from: Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 103.
[367] Treweek Danielle, *The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 204.

Southern Baptist pastors started looking like politicians."[368] This confusion of church and state, or Constantinianism, makes the church at home in the world to the point where "witness is no longer required."[369] Making the world "the world" requires the church to be the church, not to give in to worldliness, but to be a witness to the nations.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has briefly sketched Hauerwas's ecclesiology, noting that the church is a social ethic and a distinct polity. Hauerwas seamlessly weaves paradox and irony into his doctrine of the church, arguing that the church's identity (is) and activity (having) are two manifestations of the same phenomenon.[370] He opposes engaging the world on its own terms by using its language or accepting its framework. Instead, the church is a witness to God's kingdom by being its own social ethic, telling the story, and embodying Christ. The church is a distinct polity, a community of faith among a particular people that not only participates in a conversation across the Christian centuries but also practices peace among themselves, showing that they have been redeemed by the one who makes peace. As such, the church is called to make the world "the world." The next chapter reconsiders the RPC case study using an intercultural dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas. It analyzes their ecclesiology, examines their continuities and tensions, and considers how their doctrine of the church might aid a church like RPC.

[368] Hauerwas, *CET*, 38.
[369] Hauerwas, *WGO*, 221.
[370] See Hauerwas's chapter on "How to Be Theologically Ironic." Hauerwas, *WOT*, Chapter 8.

Chapter 5 – Kuyper & Hauerwas: An Intercultural Dialogue

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a comparative intercultural dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas, in order to provide *building blocks* for developing a theological *benchmark* for church members to engage in politics. The primary question asked is: "What theological tensions can be discerned from an intercultural dialogue between Kuyper and Hauerwas for evaluating how the church might engage politics?"

This chapter unfolds in two parts: First, it discusses the cultural and political context of Kuyper and Hauerwas by tracing post-Christendom and the political liberal tradition. Second, it explores tensions in Kuyper and Hauerwas's ecclesiology by examining the foundations, structures, and rules of ecclesial-political engagement. The relevance of Kuyper and Hauerwas for the context of RPC will be considered in Chapter 6.

5.1.1 Methodological Considerations

Before sketching these tensions, it is important to note that Kuyper, Hauerwas, and RPC represent three distinct historical locations, theological grammars, and cultural pressures. Their historical communities shaped how they did theology and ministry. Charles Taylor refers to this broader phenomenon as the "social imaginary"— the way "in which [people] imagine their social existence, how [people] fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations."[371] Taylor's point is that socio-historical conditions are tacitly accepted as normative for life and behavior. Therefore, ecclesiology cannot be abstracted from its social-historical context and applied to the present without careful evaluation. This can make intercultural dialogue challenging, but not impossible. Dialogue must be deliberate and intentional because it is "a mutual *encounter* of commitments," or socially and historically embedded commitments.[372] Learning through dialogue demands hermeneutical humility.[373] To

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[371] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.

[372] Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology: Intercultural Hermeneutics*, vol. 1, ed. Scott W. Sunquist, Amos Yong, and Karl E. Translator Franke John R. Editors, Böhmer, Missiological Engagements (IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016), 159.

[373] Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 10.

put it another way, this intercultural dialogue examines the "social imaginary" of Kuyper and Hauerwas, with the aim of applying their ecclesiologies to RPC's context.

Given the strength of socially embedded commitments, a few words of caution are in order. First, the following dialogue does not purport to examine 19th-century Dutch or 21st-century American culture in an exhaustive (or "holistic") way—to do so is practically impossible. "Social life is not a 'social text'" to be examined under a microscope; culture is something that is multidirectional, open, and subject to change.[374] Second, the interpreter's own culture or tradition inevitably shades how the data is interpreted. The explicit (or implicit) projecting of one's culture and tradition onto others only ends in a "self-created image" or a new set of problems.[375] Projection is a constant temptation—even more so when the author shares a culture with one of the subjects (viz., Hauerwas).[376] The goal in dialogue is not to rid oneself of cultural habitus, but to set aside personal dispositions, be critical, and open to new data. Third, while Euro-American influence does not dismiss the truthfulness of its ecclesiology, scholars like Peter van der Veer lament that the "comparative perspective seems to be the almost universal comparison of any existing society with an *ideal-typical and totally self-sufficient* Euro-American modernity."[377] The challenge in comparing Kuyper with Hauerwas for the purpose of RPC is to resist the assumption that Euro-American perspectives are normative for the church and political engagement (e.g., treating Kuyper's ecclesiology as normative for RPC's context).[378]

Moving forward, to avoid these traps, a few safeguards have been put in place: First, the dialogue first describes all three contexts, Kuyper, Hauerwas, and RPC, allowing them to speak according to their cultural and political concerns. It describes the cultural and political context, then offers a constructive comparative dialogue. Second, the dialogue avoids treating one

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[374] Peter van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 26.

[375] Drawing this concept from Ming Xie. Rather than focusing on the historical, sociopolitical, or cultural approach to comparison, Xie's monograph is primarily concerned with the "epistemological conditions of comparison," which for Xie means "an approach that emphasizes both a concept's claim to truth and a concept's cognitive status or function within a discursive system of critical concepts [within a culture]." While I am skeptical about his nominalist approach to knowledge, his monograph is helpful for comparison. Ming Xie, *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry* (New York, NY: Continuum Press, 2011), 2, 9.

[376] This refers to myself (the author).

[377] My emphasis. Veer, *Value of Comparison*, 28.

[378] This would not only ignore minority voices but begs the question, what exactly is modernity and what expressions should count as strictly modern? Van der Veer points out that contemporary sociology and political science is a macro-oriented field, "geared to constructing universally applicable models." Veer, *Value of Comparison*, 29.

ecclesiology (Kuyper, Hauerwas, or RPC) as theologically normative for the church. Lastly, each context is read critically in relation to the others.

5.2 Cultural and Political Context

While Kuyper and Hauerwas both inhabited a post-Christendom context, they occupied distinct "social imaginaries." To better understand their context, we need to examine their cultural landscapes separately.

5.2.1 Post-Christendom

5.2.1.1 Post-Christendom in Kuyper's Context

Kuyper recognized the burgeoning significance of post-Christendom. The Netherlands was becoming a post-Christendom society, a culture where "*Christian faith loses coherence* [and influence] within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story."[379] The secularizing trend accelerated after the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic occupation.[380] Recognizing the decline of Christian faith in the Netherlands, Kuyper forcefully asserted that the Calvinistic worldview could develop "in accordance with the *needs of modern consciousness.*"[381] He sought to apply this worldview to every sphere of life, aiming to be both modern and biblical while maintaining political balance.

Some conservatives in the NHK believed the church could bring about the *parousia* by actively engaging political institutions. They wanted to claim the Netherlands as a Christian nation (§3.2.3). However, De Bruijne remarks that the conservatives did little "justice to the distinct character of the heavenly fatherland and forgot, in fact, that the church is a colony of heaven that only sojourns on earth."[382] Kuyper's doctrine of sphere sovereignty limited the state's authority to intervene directly in specific spheres, making his political posture closer to Catholic social thought at the time. The Catholics accepted modernity by invoking "the principle of

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[379] My emphasis. Joshua T. Searle and Steve Chalke, *Theology After Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), Introduction.

[380] Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 230; George Harinck, "Neo-Calvinism and Democracy: An Overview from the Mid-Nineteenth Century Till the Second World War," in *Calvinism and Democracy*, ed. John Bowlin, The Kuyper Center Review 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

[381] My emphasis. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 267.

[382] De Bruijne argues that Kuyper's position is closer to the anabaptist position than the moderate reformed position of his day. Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 453.

subsidiarity"—a principle that says the government can intervene only when other spheres fail to fulfill their responsibilities.[383] Kuyper avoided overestimating the church's role in society by emphasizing how the free church could influence politics through God's common grace.

Kuyper was interested in the "diverse applications" that a free church could offer the public sphere, believing that Calvinism was not about country *qua* country but about the collective parts that make up society.[384] For Kuyper, this meant that a free church was a distinct community that shared public responsibility with the rest of the world. Van Oorschot remarks, "This dual character cause[d] a tension between the restriction of the church to its own sphere and its comprehensive influence."[385] This was evident in Kuyper's thought when he posited an "ideal situation" in which a "harmonious relationship" could develop between a free church and the state under the right conditions—a form of soft theocracy in which the nation commits itself to the kingdom of God.[386] However, Kuyper made clear that these conditions were no longer possible in the Dutch context.[387]

In places like the US, the prospects for such a development looked more promising. The US had a long-standing tradition of church-state separation and freedom of religion. In fact, in Kuyper's conception, "Under the wings of Calvinist America, Dutch Calvinism would once more flourish."[388] Kuyper remarked:

> If in every Christian country the relationship of church and state could become what it is now in America, virtually no desire would remain unfulfilled, and the churches would have full control in their attempts to influence the life of the state for a blessing of the people. *From this we may readily conclude that in regard to the state, the picture of the church presented to us in the New Testament has almost been realized*.[389]

For Kuyper, the US was "a religious Calvinistic nation," destined to become the greatest nation the world had ever seen.[390] While Kuyper regarded the US as the future of the visible church's

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[383] However, Rome itself was divided over how the Church should engage politics, as reflected in Leo XIII's Neo-Thomism and Pius X's association with Catholic integralism. Harinck and Winkeler, s.v. "The Nineteenth Century," 506–7.

[384] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 454.

[385] Van Oorschot, "'Making Public Theology Operational,'" 217.

[386] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 454–55.

[387] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 455.

[388] Bruijne, "Volume Introduction," xxxi.

[389] My emphasis. Kuyper, "State and Church," 418.

[390] See Appendix C in Bolt's book (Abraham Kuyper's Grand Rapids Address). Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 469, 472.

political influence, the Dutch context presented a far less optimistic reality. In the Netherlands, he strongly encouraged individual Christians to engage in politics, but, as a corporate, organic institution, the church should only influence politics indirectly.[391] For Kuyper, this affirmation became "a *true way of believing*" in a secular society—a normative principle for how Christians could maintain integrity in a secular post-Christendom culture.[392]

5.2.1.2 Post-Christendom in Hauerwas's Context

In Hauerwas's American context, post-Christendom came to represent the decline of Christian influence in US political institutions. Here, Stephen Webb called Hauerwas "an American version of Barth's thundering voice."[393] According to Hauerwas, the church is no longer part of culture, but part of counterculture; it should think of itself less as an institution and more as a movement. However, the church is often shaped by the consumption of culture and its own life, unable to imagine an alternative narrative.[394] In his book *After Christendom*, Hauerwas attempted to script a narrative that would provide an account of "the power and truthfulness of Christian convictions" in a post-Christendom world.[395] According to Hauerwas, a post-Christendom America can no longer assume that other cultures, civilizations, and political actors share the same ethics, virtues, or standards as the church.[396] In the past, American church leaders like Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr thought they were providing an "objective picture" of what is, when in fact, they were offering tools to understand reality through the distorted paradigm of Christendom.[397] Post-Christendom gives the church clarity about its role in society (and in God's story). It shows that the moral life is not "the pursuit of virtue while maintaining a sort of realpolitik," but that "true worship founds true politics."[398] The figurative glasses are taken off, and the church can more clearly see its part in God's story.

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[391] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 454. Van Oorschot, "'Making Public Theology Operational,'" 217.
[392] Searle and Chalke, *Theology After Christendom*, Conclusion.
[393] Stephen H. Webb, "The Very American Stanley Hauerwas," *First Things*, June 1, 2002, 15.
[394] Hauerwas, *STT*, 211.
[395] Hauerwas, *AC*, 15.
[396] Hauerwas, *ATE*, 121.
[397] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1922), prop 1.1; Hans Sluga, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Third edition, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[398] Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 23.

5.2.2 Political Liberalism

Political liberalism is a rich, complex, and multifaceted tradition.[399] Here, the term "liberalism" refers to a political *tradition* (not simply its philosophical ideas), summarized in the Enlightenment by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, and continued in the 20th century through Hayek, Rawls, and others.[400]

5.2.2.1 Political Liberalism in Kuyper's Context

Kuyper was intimately familiar with the liberal tradition; in fact, liberal institutions were established in the Netherlands as early as the 16th century. During that time, political conflicts centered on the urban patriciate and supporters of the House of Orange (the lower classes).[401] But by Kuyper's time, the older divisions had given way to broader ideological and political discussions shaped by social class, religious beliefs, and liberal concerns. The liberal party in the Netherlands sought to modernize Dutch culture, and by 1848, a constitution was created that made the Dutch Parliamentarian government the most liberal in Europe.[402] At that time, "three 'confessional' visions were contending for public recognition: Calvinism, Catholicism, and secular humanism."[403]

Kuyper's political vision emerged in part as a reaction to the other two streams: Catholicism and secular humanism.[404] The latter was embodied in the French Revolution. The idea of "revolution" loomed large in the European imagination as an optimistic political ideal grounded

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[399] I will simply refer to the term as liberalism. In the contemporary American context, the term "liberalism" (and liberal) is increasingly associated with aggressive secularization. This is not what I mean. However, today, many Americans of faith "regard liberalism" popularly understood "as a *threat* [my emphasis] to their most sacred forms of life." Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith*, 2. Vallier points out that, unfortunately, "liberals can no longer claim to stand above the fray. Instead, liberal claims to neutrality are widely regarded as a smoke screen by which liberals use political power to impose their views on others."

[400] Kristen Deede Johnson points out that, "According to many recent liberal theorists, liberalism does not have to be associated with the Enlightenment, or with any comprehensive philosophy of life." This is mostly due to the lack of heterogeneity in within current society. Johnson herself suggests that a particular date for the origins of liberalism is untenable, but the most likely emergence began in the Enlightenment with John Locke. Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12.

[401] Andeweg, Irwin, and Louwerse, *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, 109.

[402] T. Jarred Jung, "Costly Kuyperianism: Neo-Calvinist Public Theology in a Context of Persecution with a Focus on Pastor Wang Yi" (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 108.

[403] Jonathan Chaplin, "Kuyper and Politics," in *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, ed. Jessica R. Joustra and Robert J. Joustra (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 64.

[404] Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 131.

in human reason. For Kuyper, this wrongly placed the divine origins of government in the hands of human-centered philosophies, which constructed anthropology on the basis of popular sovereignty.[405] When Europeans (among others) embraced this philosophy, complete skepticism took hold, and a different conception of humanity, evil, salvation, and the eschaton emerged.[406] The French Revolution emphasized uniformity and theories such as the social contract, which assumed the goodness of human nature by arguing that political authority was not natural but "granted to rulers via the free consent of those subject to them."[407] So while liberalism claimed objectivity and neutrality, it implicitly promoted normative principles for the good political life. Kuyper saw in the French Revolution not only a false worldview but also a Trojan horse that promised *freedom* while restricting the church's independence.

Once again, while Kuyper unwaveringly rejected the liberalism of the French Revolution, he willingly embraced the *freedom* espoused by the American Revolution. Tuininga notes that Kuyper offered "ruthless criticism of the liberal tradition and laissez-faire capitalism [but]…waxed eloquently about the virtues of the United States and its glorious future."[408] According to Kuyper, the French Revolution was rooted in "unbelief," while its American counterpart presupposed Christian "belief."[409] In Kuyper's conception, American freedom was the result of a Calvinistic project grounded in God's providence.[410] Kuyper remarks, "The United States really has Calvinism to thank for this entirely unique state of affairs…[in the United States] both government and church are *entirely free* in their own realms…This is Calvinism's

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[405] George Harinck, "Neo-Calvinism and the Netherlands," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, ed. Nathanial Gray Sutanto and Cory C. Brock, T&T Clark Handbooks (London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2024), 327; Kuiper, *The Antirevolutionary: Life and Works of Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876)*, 182. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 4; Clifford B. Andersom, "Liberalism Versus Democracy? Abraham Kuyper and Carl Schmitt as Critics of Liberalism," in *Calvinism and Democracy*, ed. John Bowlin, The Kuyper Center Review 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 58; Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 171.

[406] Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution*. Kuiper, *The Antirevolutionary: Life and Works of Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876)*, 104. Quoting Bruce Riley Ashford in: Harinck, "Neo-Calvinism and the Netherlands," 327.

[407] VanDrunen, *Natural Law and Two Kingdoms*, Chapter 7. See Kuyper's Stone Lectures for his thoughts on human nature. He makes several glaringly disparaging (and racist) remarks about foreign nations and peoples. Unfortunately, his views on those topics were quite standard at the time. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*.

[408] Matthew J. Tuininga, "Abraham Kuyper and the Social Order: Principles of Christian Liberalism," in *On Charity & Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga, Jordan J. Ballor, and Melvin Flikkema, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2022), xxix.

[409] Belief specifically in the providence of God. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 13; Matt Sleat, *Post-Liberalism* (Cambridge, UK; Hoboken, NJ: Polity, 2026), 28.

[410] Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 265.

ideal, where it can operate *freely*."[411] A simple explanation is that Kuyper rejected *philosophical* liberalism (the worldview of the French Revolution) but firmly believed in liberal *institutions* (those set forth by the US Constitution) because they could be grounded in sphere sovereignty and preserved through common grace.[412]

Kuyper regularly struggled with how the church could counter *the toxicity of modernity*—desiring freedom from an oppressive government was one thing (the American Revolution), but eradicating "religion from politics as spheres of mutual influence was, for Kuyper, unthinkable" (the French Revolution).[413] He accepted liberalism as an "endeavor to organize our social world to reduce conflict between groups with diverse interests," the state had authority to care for common grace realms, and the church had freedom to spiritually care for its people.[414] Kuyper summarized this idea in his inaugural address at the VU:

> The sovereignty of the State, as the power that protects the individual and defines the mutual relationships among the visible spheres, rises high above them by its *right to command and compel*. But within these spheres…another authority rules, an authority that descends directly from God apart from the State. This authority the State does not confer but acknowledges.[415]

While Kuyper's conception of the free church was influenced by his politics, it was ultimately grounded in his ecclesiology. A free church was a divine institution that the state needed to treat as a voluntary association.[416] In this sense, Kuyper was both modern and anti-modern. He accepted the *institutional* aspect of liberalism but worked from within the Reformed tradition, which forced him to challenge the presuppositions of *philosophical* liberalism.[417]

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[411] My emphasis. Kuyper, *On the Church*, 431.

[412] Some argue that Kuyper's impulse to idealize the US context is best explained by his Romantic temperament Romanticism's influence on Kuyper is matter of debate. See: Jung, "Costly Kuyperianism: Neo-Calvinist Public Theology in a Context of Persecution with a Focus on Pastor Wang Yi," 97.

[413] Bruce Riley Ashford, "Kuyper and the Future," in *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, ed. Jessica R. Joustra and Robert J. Joustra (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 133. Abraham Kuyper, *On Islam*, ed. James D. Bratt et al. (Bellingham, WA: Acton Institute; Lexham Press, 2017), 411.

[414] Vallier does not reference Kuyper but merely stresses the main idea of liberalism. Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), 270.

[415] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 468.

[416] John Halsey Wood Jr., "Introduction-Abraham Kuyper and the Challenge of the Church," in *Rooted & Grounded: The Church as Organism and Institution*, ed. Jordon J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

[417] Hans Burger, *Jesus Christ, Hermeneutics, and Scripture: From Epistemology to Soteriology* (New York, NY: Cascade Books, 2024), 2.7.1.

5.2.2.2 Political Liberalism in Hauerwas's Context

After nearly a century overshadowed by utilitarianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, liberalism experienced a revival after the Second World War. A new political consciousness emerged, marked by renewed interest in global perspectives that emphasized toleration, freedom, and rights.[418] Discussing Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, R.R. Reno describes this realignment as shifting from a closed to an open posture:

> The imperative [in the West] is bracingly simple: *Never again*. Never again shall we allow totalitarian governments to emerge. Never again shall societies reach a fever pitch of ideological fanaticism. Never again shall the furnaces of Auschwitz consume their victims. This imperative—never again—places stringent demands upon us. It requires Western civilization to attain self-critical maturity with courage and determination…We must banish the strong gods of the closed society and create a truly open one.[419]

This is the liberal vision embodied by the United Nations, a political organization that aims to eradicate war, establish international law, uphold justice, promote universal human rights, and implement a "global vision of world peace," thereby creating an open society.[420] However, these liberal universals and goods are difficult to sustain in a world marked by cruelty, injustice, and sin. Luke Bretherton suggests that an open society can only be achieved by "doing politics."[421] However, does doing politics require the liberal tradition or another approach?[422]

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[418] Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith*, 13.

[419] Emphasis original. R. R. Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2019), 3. Peter Berger points out that liberalism's internal critique is its functional illiberalism. He notes: "The Dutch, more precisely, are known for their advanced positions on a whole range of issues, including homosexuality, euthanasia, and the use of soft drugs. It follows that only those ready to accept such policies can be admitted to their ranks. The 'others,' who hold more traditional views, *are much less welcome* [my emphasis], to the point—if necessary—of exclusion. *The irony lies in the following: to what extent is it possible to protect the values associated with liberalism by being illiberal?* [My emphasis] Taken too far, surely, such policies are likely to undermine the very cause that they seek to promote." Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*, 104. Berger can be interpreted as taking the logic of Karl Popper's "toleration paradox" aimed at totalitarian beliefs and applying it to political liberalism itself. See Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: New One-Volume Edition*, with E. H. Gombrich and Alan Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 581.

[420] Brian G. Mattson, "Bavinck's 'Revelation and the Future': A Centennial Retrospective," in *Revelation and Common Grace*, Vol. 2, ed. John Bowlin, The Kuyper Center Review (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 149.

[421] Rewording and summarizing Bretherton's list. I am not trying to oversimplify Bretherton's view of sin other political liberals. It would be false (much less ignorant) to argue that Bretherton believes politics can solve the problem of sin. Liberalism has a horizontal focus, attempting to make conversation more "doable" among fallen creatures. Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 304.

[422] Kevin Vallier's definition of a liberalism is the art of convincing "people to agree to disagree rather than to come to blows." Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith*, 2. However, if freedom is defined in the strict sense—

According to Hauerwas, "doing politics" does not require liberalism; in fact, he calls liberalism ahistorical, pernicious, and manipulative, asserting that, "[liberalism] tempts us to believe that *freedom* and *rationality* are independent of narrative—that is, we are free to the extent that we have no story…it prevents us from understanding how deeply we are captured by its account of existence."[423] The liberal tradition is an individualistic narrative which views freedom as a *status* rather than a *task*, and "the more entrenched this social order becomes…the more morality looks like law; and eventually virtues and holiness are no longer determined by the community."[424] The "freedom as status" posture tempts American Christians to believe that democracy is neutral or friendly toward the church, when in reality "the ideology of democracy believes that…truth is discerned and caried by the majority."[425] Liberal democracies primarily view morality as individualistic pursuits, where "each person is born free, independent and equal in their status as bearers of natural rights" rather than as communal creatures who take part in broader narratives.[426] Individualism allows the state to determine morality for the church, which dictates ethics from the bottom up. Thus "accounts of morality sponsored by democracy want to deny the necessity of a master."[427] According to Hauerwas, liberalism provides an answer to doing politics, but they provide the *wrong narrative*.[428] On the other hand, the church, as an alternative political community, is trained in the context of community "to notice when the language of the state is not their own."[429] A closed society is not the answer to liberalism. Christians should not withdraw from political concerns.

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freedom from any restraint—then all four limit the individual's freedom. Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*

[423] He uses all three words in the same sentence. See Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation,'" 102. My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, "Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses (1981)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 114. James K.A. Smith echoes this sentiment in Awaiting the King. He says, "Liberalism prides itself on its politics of penultimacy…liberalism likes to brag about its ultimate agnosticism and parade itself as the procedural system that only asks us to work together on the penultimate." Smith believes penultimacy and ultimacy is a false dichotomy. He continues, "political and social allegiances trump religious allegiances all the time…the ultimate/penultimate distinction is not the happy division of labor we imagine, mostly because the political is not content to remain the penultimate." Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, 3:22.

[424] Stanley Hauerwas, "Christianity: It's Not a Religion: It's an Adventure (1991)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Catwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 528.

[425] Hauerwas, *AC*, 70. Hauerwas, "Christianity: It's Not a Religion," 527.

[426] Sleat, *Post-Liberalism*, 16.

[427] Hauerwas, *AC*, 102.

[428] Emphasis original. Sleat, *Post-Liberalism*, 22.

[429] Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation,'" 102.

While a great deal of hope is still placed in liberalism and the potential for human freedom, toleration, and rights, Hauerwas's reaction shows that liberalism is no longer accepted as a neutral settlement but as a contested moral tradition.[430] Kevin Vallier, a defender of liberalism, notes that "Liberalism originally sold itself to the West as a political program that could *resolve religious conflicts*. But over time, liberalism has *created a conflict* of its own—between its adherents and citizens of faith."[431] Hauerwas calls the church to embrace an alternative narrative where God is the main actor. The church cannot tell that story without becoming part of the tale."[432] As participants in God's story, the church is a counternarrative to liberalism and the present social narrative.

5.2.3 Context to Dialogue

The church, as an institution and as a political body, cannot be separated from its historical context. Therefore, Kuyper and Hauerwas can affirm with one voice that political engagement is "concerned with *embodying the truth of God* by living in accordance with the vision inspired by the world-changing events of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection."[433] Having examined the cultural and political context, the next section brings Kuyper and Hauerwas into dialogue by asking three questions: (1) Who/what authorizes political engagement? (2) How does political engagement happen? (3) When should political engagement occur?

5.3 Kuyper and Hauerwas in Dialogue

5.3.1 The Foundation of Engagement: Sphere Sovereignty and Community

For Kuyper, political engagement is a strategy to "maintain a Calvinist *unity and engagement* with an increasingly disintegrated Western world."[434] For Hauerwas, political engagement seeks to help "Christians *disengage* from Constantinian habits that have so led them to confuse America with God's salvation."[435] Both visions argue that the church is *called to engage* politics.

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[430] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 129.
[431] My emphasis. Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith*, 4.
[432] Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language," 53–54.
[433] Searle and Chalke, *Theology After Christendom*, Conclusion.
[434] Wood, "Unity and Engagement in the Modern World: Abraham Kuyper's Calvinist Renewal," 509; Hauerwas.
[435] *CET*, 55–56.

But who or what authorizes political engagement? Kuyper grounds political engagement in sphere sovereignty, while Hauerwas grounds it in the church community.

For Hauerwas, political engagement assumes the church is a distinct community from the world, and by distinguishing itself from the world, the church can more faithfully engage the other. Too often, the American church makes the mistake of conflating itself with the state, rendering political engagement impossible.[436] The world and the church share the same story, but the world cannot actively participate in the story because it fails to join the church community—as Hauerwas says, "'the world' is a character in God's story…[but] without the church there is no world to have a story."[437] The church is the primary site of Christian formation, where extended training occurs and humans "discover and name those practices and narratives that hold us captive;" it is where people are formed and shaped to rightly inhabit and engage culture.[438]

Therefore, according to Hauerwas, community is the foundation of political engagement—it is not optional but strikes at the very heart of what it means to be Christian. The community makes us disciples of the resurrected Christ, an active participant in God's story. Political engagement is not a clarion call for social justice or political activism, but an appeal to engage the *church community itself*. If the church does not learn "how to be Christian" within the church, it cannot faithfully engage the world. In this sense, one cannot separate the church's *identity as a story* from its *activity;* they always go together. The church is an alternative political community that is an active participant in God's story. Hauerwas insists this is not to isolate the church from the world, but to make possible the church's witness to the kingdom of God.

Kuyper can empathize with Hauerwas's basic concern: conflating church with the state is a contagion on the church. This problem is not unique to contemporary America. Kuyper was closely acquainted with those in the NHK who would gladly see the Netherlands return to softer

[436] Hauerwas states in the Afterword that, "Constantinianism suggests the privileging of the church by the state." The word "privilege" is doing much of the heavy lifting here. Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 177.

[437] Hauerwas, *STT*, 205.

[438] Hauerwas, *STT*, 175.In the same context, Hauerwas says somewhat cryptically, "if we are confident Christian speakers, we may well discover that *there are other languages and grammars we can use* [my emphasis]." He continues, "Christian speech has been and will continue to be forged from encounters that have resulted in Christian appropriation of other ways of speaking that *help us be faithful to the gospel* [my emphasis]." On the one hand, this sounds very Kuyperian. But how is he determining the guidelines and criteria for what constitutes acceptable grammars and language? Hauerwas, *WWW*, 92.

forms of Christendom (§5.2.1).[439] But unlike Hauerwas, Kuyper was unwilling to dismiss the divine endowment of government wholesale. Hauerwas argues that *all* government institutions are a result of the post-lapsarian estate, arguing that *violence* establishes nation-states, specifically having their origins in Babel.[440] Kuyper takes a slightly different approach, saying, "Government did not originate with the evil one…[but] has its origin in God and thus must be maintained."[441] This means that political life is part of the natural order, under God's sovereignty; government itself is not the result of sin or a "worldly" ordinance, but a creational good. It is only *after the fall* that the political sphere takes on a distinct character.[442] As Kuyper says, "Had sin not come to disrupt the unity of the human race, there would have been no need for a [human] government."[443] Adam's sin divides the world into nation-states, but Christ's kingship unites humans, exposing creation to more of God's character through his special and common grace. According to Kuyper, sin "posed a threat to the intended diversity of life and the unfolding of creation, because it implied an unnatural uniformity."[444] As a result, "God divided the world into a multitude of nations and separate political entities. He created an artificial multiplicity to avoid this harmful uniformity."[445] Therefore, political institutions represent an

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[439] James Eglinton, "To Transcend and to Transform: The Neo-Calvinist Relationship of Church and Cultural Transformation," in *The Kuyper Center Review: Calvinism and Culture*, The Kuyper Center Review (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 3:167–84. While it is true that conflating church and state was a problem in the past, nationalism took a different form in 19th century Europe. According to John Halsey Wood, nationalism in the century is best defined as a "state church," or when political and national units were aligned. Unlike contemporary American culture which does not clearly distinguish between culture and state, Dutch culture distinguished between the nation (its people, language, history, and religion) and the state (the republic or kingdom). According to Wood, in the early 19th century, "membership in the church and membership in society were virtually indistinguishable." John Halsey Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age: Abraham Kuyper's Struggle for a Free Church in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8–9; Ad L. Th. de Bruijne, "'Colony of Heaven': Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 44, 5–90.

[440] Hauerwas notes that this does not dismiss the importance of Christian engagement with politics. It merely shows the difference between the church and the state. He is not entirely wrong for pointing this out. There is hardly a political boarder in history that has not been drawn by blood. Hauerwas, *CET*, 15.

[441] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World: The Practical Section*, vol. 3, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, J. Daryl Charles, and Melvin Flikkema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 33.

[442] De Bruijne notes, "Separate nations and states with their own governments did not fit into that picture and became necessary only because of the Fall." Ad L. Th. de Bruijne, "Not Without the Church as Institute: The Relevance of Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology for Christian Public and Theological Responsibilities in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Kuyper Center Review: Church and Academy*, vol. 5, ed. Gordon Graham, The Kuyper Center Review (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 107.

[443] Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ's Kingship: The Kingship of Christ in Its Operation*, vol. 3, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, 2019), 212.

[444] Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 107.

[445] Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 107.

expression of "artificial multiplicity" by which common grace preserves and cultivates the goods embedded in the original creation. Sphere sovereignty allows the church to preserve the good of the original creation and to freely submit to the government while maintaining the distinction of spheres.

Hauerwas does not see government as a pre-fall institution. Instead, he refers to government as "worldly," often describing it pejoratively or at least skeptically. Hauerwas argues:

> the world consists of those, including ourselves, who have chosen not to make the story of God their story. The world in us refuses to affirm that this is God's world and that, as loving Lord, God's care for creation is greater than our illusion of control. The world is those aspects of our individual and social lives in which we live *untruthfully*.[446]

Here, we see that government is a post-fall reality in which life is lived "untruthfully." On the other hand, Kuyper is hesitant to speak of "world" in exclusively negative terms. According to Kuyper, "we should pay careful attention to the threefold distinction in the use of the term."[447] Kuyper asserts that the term has positive, neutral, and negative senses in scripture. The positive sense refers to creation ("the world and its fullness are mine"), the neutral refers to all humans ("all the world should be registered"), and the negative refers to the corruption of sin ("My kingdom is not of this world").[448]

Hauerwas does not necessarily deny these uses, but he often uses the term rhetorically, namely in reference to cultures of untruth ("a different politic").[449] Perhaps this is Hauerwas's tendency to "shock first and qualify later."[450] But for Hauerwas, redeeming or transforming the government should not be the church's primary concern. The "world" does not need to be transformed in the ontological sense. He comments, "My problem is not that such strategies [to redeem] are wrong; rather, my problem is that this way of conceiving the relation of the church to American society makes the church less than the church."[451] The church, as a redeemed people, should welcome

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[446] Hauerwas, "The Servant Community," 376.

[447] Kuyper, *Pro Rege, Vol. 3*, 3:209.

[448] Quoting Psalm 50:12, Luke 2:1, and John 18:36. Quoted from the ESV.

[449] Hauerwas, *PK*, 101. Take another example from Hauerwas's memoir, where he discusses how his theological project is an extension of Barth's argument, "For Barth, the task is not to make the gospel explicable in terms set by the world, but rather to show that the world can be rightly known only if Jesus has been raised from the dead. In other words, to privilege Jesus' cross and resurrection is to make a claim about reality that invites and requires Christians to see the world differently than others." Hauerwas, *HC*, 263.

[450] Stout notes that Hauerwas often uses hyperbole to gain the reader's attention and then qualify what he means. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 149.

[451] Hauerwas, *ABH*, 33.

the world to take part in God's community rather than changing the world's narrative. In fact, according to Hauerwas, the church cannot survive if it attempts to "redeem" secular spheres to make America work better. It's the liberal impulse that desires to transform spheres and "make America work." This ultimately compromises the integrity of the church.[452] The church only survives when the church is the church.

But is Kuyper's conception of political engagement as such a socially liberal practice? If the church participates in making the world (viz., America) work better, will that eat away at the church? As previously discussed (§5.2.2), Hauerwas believes that individualism infects liberal institutions, which offer an "inadequate vision of human destiny…[creating] self-centeredness, loneliness, superficiality, and harried consumerism."[453] For Hauerwas, this fosters a society that rejects God's narrative. Therefore, in Hauerwas's conception, the liberal narrative and the church's narrative appear antithetical.[454] But Kuyper sees this as a false dichotomy. A commitment to liberal political policies, including liberal narratives such as the separation of church and state, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion, does not entail a rejection of church narratives.[455] For Kuyper, God's sovereignty permeates all spheres of culture, "extending over all things visible and invisible, over the spiritual and the material," freeing the church to affirm the good in the world and, at the same time, "transform" its negative aspects.[456] This includes liberal narratives. As Bruce Riley Ashford says, sphere sovereignty implies that there is "no sphere, no matter how corrupted or misdirected, [that] is too far gone."[457] The church can only "transform" the negative aspects because God has placed all authority in Christ's hands. As a result, the good in the world is indeed good, and Christians can and should affirm the good, profit from, and use the good gifts of non-Christians for the benefit of the political sphere and the church. Kuyper is not only willing to see the good but also argues that Christians must see the

[452] Hauerwas, *ABH*, 33.
[453] Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 50.
[454] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 152.
[455] I use policy and narrative as synonyms, because Hauerwas himself does not differentiate between liberal policy (action) and liberal narrative (being). He does the same for the church.
[456] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 466.
[457] Bruce Riley Ashford, "A Theological Sickness unto Death: Philip Rieff's Prophetic Analysis of Our Secular Age," *Themelios* 43, no. 1 (2018): 41.

good in liberal institutions.[458] Liberal narratives in liberal institutions, such as freedom of religion, can function as common grace goods.

Hauerwas does not distinguish between social and institutional liberalism. For Hauerwas, these ideas appear inseparable. However, according to Vallier, "many pieces of institutional liberalism predate social liberalism by centuries—in some cases, by millennia."[459] Therefore, it is challenging to blame modern individualism on liberalism simpliciter. Individualism fails to account for East Asian democracies, which largely reject social liberalism and remain community-centered.[460]

Kuyper emphasizes liberal institutions because he believes their freedom is grounded in sphere sovereignty. Johnathan Chaplain remarks, "Kuyper asks us to start not with 'my rights' and 'my interests' but with what binds me to my fellow human beings in all kinds of shared social and institutional settings."[461] Thus, he sees Anabaptism as an overrealized eschatology, which "[does not recognize] in the present dispensation, what was promised to us only in the future by our Lord Jesus cannot be established now."[462] According to Kuyper, Anabaptists believe that "the true disciple of Christ stands outside the world and over against it. He must *tolerate the world but must not devote himself to it*."[463] Hauerwas would certainly see this as a mischaracterization of his position, as he does not argue for complete involvement or withdrawal from the political sphere.[464] The integrity of the church is grounded in the church as an *alternative* community (viz., knowledge and language), not a sectarian ecclesiology.

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[458] Here Kuyper would likely note the antithesis. There is a point where Christinas must reject cultural narratives. For instance, "expressive liberalism," the idea that "individuals can choose their own identities and goals and pursue them without obstacles" is something that Kuyper would almost certainly object. For comments on expressive individualism see: Craig Calhoun, Parameshwar Dilip Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 12. See also Hauerwas's comments on students "making up their own minds" in After Christendom. Hauerwas, *AC*, 72.

[459] Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World*, 268.

[460] Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World*, 268.

[461] Chaplin, "Kuyper and Politics," 54.

[462] Kuyper, *Common Grace: Vol 3*, 3:31. De Bruijne notes that Kuyper was more sympathetic to the Anabaptist cause than he was with the moderate cause—"With the Anabaptists he shares the conviction that the citizenship of the heavenly fatherland is decisive. He even exclaims that 'so very much in their position is attractive!'" He continues, "Kuyper seriously considers whether modern secularization might already indicate the commencement of that future. He states that his own days experience the 'release of the demons' and therefore are a 'hard time.' In that case, already in his own days, *he would have adopted a more Anabaptist strategy* [my emphasis]." This last statement is a bit overstated. Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 108, 111.

[463] My emphasis. Bartholomew, "Volume Introduction," 76.

[464] Though he would identify as a Methodist. Hauerwas, *CET*, 11.

While sphere sovereignty serves as a helpful doctrine for the Calvinistic worldview, its basis for political engagement assumes that the church and the political sphere can communicate with one another (e.g., through points of contact). This is not inherently a problem, but for Hauerwas, the point of contact is not naturally assumed. Kuyper's formulation of sphere sovereignty presupposes that the church and the world "can dialogue," however, Hauerwas sees the church as an *alternative* community, not a community *alongside* the world. To use a sports analogy: Kuyper contends that the church and the world share the same field and play the same game (viz., sphere sovereignty), but differ on rules, strategies, and tactics (viz., worldview). For Hauerwas, the church and the world are on the same field (they share the same story), but they are *playing different games* precisely because they follow different rules, strategies, and tactics—the church is an *alternative* community.[465] Kuyper believes that, by God's grace, the church can make faithful efforts to restore spheres to their God-given, inherent structure—while recognizing that humans will do so imperfectly due to sin. However, for Hauerwas, this view places the church *alongside* the world, rather than as an *alternative* community, and pressures the church to find creation's original goodness in the political sphere rather than in the church. Opderbeck and Reid summarize, "[Sphere sovereignty] tends to make the church just one more social institution, no more or less significant than any other. In doing so, it loses a vision of the kingdom of God as the all-encompassing end of humanity."[466] Thus, for Hauerwas, effective political engagement begins within the *alternative* community.

For Hauerwas, "it is imperative that the church distinguish itself from America."[467] In other words, one cannot rightly speak of church identity without also speaking of her activity. Speaking soberly at a conference in Northern Ireland, Hauerwas notes, "America is…the embodiment of an alleged universal culture—that is, Americans believe that given the opportunity to think about it, anyone would want to be like us."[468] In Hauerwas's opinion, the US (as a nation-state) works as a functional intermediary between God and the church; the trajectory of the church is measured and determined by the nation's relationship to God.[469] Therefore, the relationship between the church and the state always complicates the church's

[465] Once again, this is Hauerwas's refusal to distinguish between the identity and activity of the church.
[466] David W. Opderbeck and David Reid, *Faithful Exchange: The Economy as It's Meant to Be* (New York, NY: Fortress Press, 2025), 233.
[467] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 300.
[468] Hauerwas, *ABH*, 139.
[469] Hauerwas, *ABH*, 10.

identity and function. In Hauerwas's assessment, Christendom bundled the two together into a form of Caesaropapism, thereby ignoring the church's unique identity and function. While Hauerwas may appreciate Kuyper's emphasis on the church and transforming each sphere, it is more likely that Hauerwas finds Kuyper's ecclesiology shaped by a time when people believed the church would continue its cultural hegemony under the banner of Christendom.

5.3.2 The Structure of Engagement: Organism and Story

How does political engagement happen? Political engagement usually contains an underlying structure—an ordering of how a conversation between two parties can proceed. This topic has been briefly discussed above (§5.3.1) regarding sphere sovereignty and community. However, for Kuyper, the structure of political engagement is a living organism. As mentioned previously (§3.3.1.1), Kuyper sees the church as an institution (a temporary physical structure) and an organism, a new humanity "which conquers all areas of created life for the kingdom of Christ."[470] Kuyper preferred to use the term organism in reference to the church, but as De Bruijne notes, "one should keep organism and institute together when interpreting Kuyper's ecclesiology."[471] This inseparability makes it challenging to distinguish personal Christian responsibility from ecclesial witness. If the church fulfills its responsibilities in all spheres of life, how can it, as "the organic aspect of the institute," act responsibly in the political sphere?[472] Here, once again, Kuyper argues that the political sphere is unique because it originally existed in the pre-fall order. The fall sets in motion God's artificial multiplicity, and God now grants the state a specific authority through common grace. Kuyper describes the authority, rights, and duties of the state as follows:

1. Whenever different spheres clash, the state must compel mutual regard for the boundary lines of each.
2. The state must defend individuals and the weak ones in each sphere against the abuse of power of the rest.
3. The state must coerce all together to bear personal and financial burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the state.[473]

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[470] Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 111.
[471] Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 112.
[472] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 463.
[473] These three points are taken from Foster's article. He is taking these points from Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*. James J. S. Foster, "Neither Ignore nor Modify nor Disrupt: The Kuyperian Model of Deliberation as Applied to Same-Sex Marriage," in *Politics, Religion, and Sphere Sovereignty*, vol. 1, ed. Gordon Graham, The Kuyper Center Review (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 107. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 124.

Considering these three points, it makes sense that Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary party rejected the "God-less state of the liberals…the theocratic state of Roman Catholics and inconsistent Protestants."[474] However, Kuyper's alternative, the US as a *positive political model* leaves him open to a postliberal critique. According to Kuyper, the US bases "the state directly on the natural knowledge of God and accordingly have government proceed *actively* as a servant of God in the sphere of the natural knowledge of God, but *passively* in the sphere of the revealed knowledge of God."[475] But for Hauerwas, this begs the question—the American political sphere, in its current form (but especially in its historical form), is infused with Constantinian influence, reinforcing the idea that the primary religious duty of the church to the state "was and is to provide support and justification for the state that guarantees freedom of religion."[476] Eggemeier summarizes Hauerwas's thoughts: "Constantinianism *silences any form of Christian opposition* to the secular political order by enlisting Christians in the project of *sustaining liberal democracy*."[477] In Hauerwas's view, Christians contribute to society precisely when they resist adopting the norms of the political sphere and preserve their distinctiveness within the church community by participating in the unique story.[478] To state it in stronger terms: Hauerwas may view Kuyper's conception of the church as simultaneously Constantinian and detached—by enlisting Christians to harvest the good from the secular political order and by pairing institute with organism, he undermines the uniqueness of the church and, in turn, preserves the Constantinian order.

However, this tension can be viewed from a different perspective. Kuyper's attempt to *integrate organism with institute* resembles Hauerwas's conviction that the church's *identity and activity are inseparable*. To be part of the church institution begets action in the world; the marks of the church are not static but point beyond themselves toward God and Christian engagement. While

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[474] Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 61.

[475] Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 61. Liberalism here refers to liberalism as a worldview—"the political and social system embodied in the French Revolution." Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 2.

[476] Hauerwas, *AC*, 70.

[477] My emphasis. Matthew T. Eggemeier, *Against Empire: Ekklesial Resistance and the Politics of Radical Democracy*, Theopolitical Visions, v. 25 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 204.

[478] Eggemeier, *Against Empire*, 204.

De Bruijne is correct to note that "the interpretation of Kuyper's ecclesiology should not depend on its contingent nineteenth-century applications" (e.g., abuse does not neglect use).[479]

For Hauerwas, true political engagement is structured by the story of God's kingdom, in which Christ's resurrection is the central event. The church practices resurrection through *casuistry*, including baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, and preaching. Casuistry means "testing your actions against the convictions that make those actions intelligible."[480] In other words, the church can only understand God's story when it comes face to face with church liturgy. If the church adopts foreign tactics, language, or liturgy, it compromises the structure of political engagement. Therefore, it seems wishful thinking (modern ecumenism) and possibly anachronistic to suggest that a *strong parallel* exists between Kuyper's concept of "institute acting as organism" and Hauerwas's "community acting as story."[481] If camaraderie exists, it primarily exists as a shared alliance against Constantinianism and what the "church is not"—rather than a common ecclesial vision.[482]

5.3.3. The Rule(s) of Engagement: A Free Church and A Distinct Politic

When should political engagement occur? The advent of post-Christendom presented a unique challenge for the church: moving from a majority to a minority is culturally disorienting. The loss of Christendom is usually lamented by church members and celebrated by Christian (and non-Christian) academics. Johnathan Chaplain exhorts his readers to take the following approach:

> [Some in post-Christendom] need to come to terms with their loss of inherited privilege and begin to reckon with, and make the best of, their new status as one minority among many…[while others] need to eschew post-Christendom breast-beating and learn to speak unapologetically with a Christian voice in the public sphere, resisting the newly assertive secularist campaign to privatize religious faith.[483]

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[479] De Bruijne notes that, "Kuyper deliberately developed [his model] for the Dutch context of his day…[and] let room for diverse applications in various contexts (page 109). Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 113.

[480] Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 161.

[481] This is my phrasing. Unless, of course, we deconstruct Kuyper's intention and say his program is malleable, we can pick apart his ecclesiology and choose what we like from the system—but at that point, when does Kuyper's ecclesiology simply become a Reformed ecclesiology?

[482] Alvarado, "The Kuyper Option: Kuyper's Concept of the Church in the Context of Strategic Christian Action."

[483] J. P. Chaplain, "Ethics," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 304.

Avoiding these extremes has proven difficult. Returning to church sources (*ad fontes*) often looks like nostalgia, while always reforming (*semper reformanda*) frequently resembles soft forms of secularization. Both Kuyper and Hauerwas saw the dangers of Christendom and the constant temptation to overreact with nostalgia or further secularism. They both affirmed that political engagement is not optional; the church always engages politics. The question is, how does the church choose to engage politics? Kuyper answers as a "free church," and Hauerwas answers as a "distinct politic."

The free church is perhaps the most important element for political engagement in Kuyper's oeuvre. It is the material manifestation of Kuyper's vision of sphere sovereignty, common grace, and the church as an organic institution. Ernst Troelstch defined the free church system as:

> the destruction of the mediaeval and early Protestant idea of a social order welded together by one uniform State Church…This meant that the question of Church membership now became a matter of *individual choice*, and that, at least outwardly, the form of Church-order becomes that of a *voluntary association*, even though theologically the community which thus *comes into being* may still continue to be considered as *an objective, ecclesiastical institution*.[484]

In other words, the state does not legitimize the church but simply grants it freedom in the public sphere, thereby preserving the church as a voluntary association (e.g., pluriformity).[485] A free church resists theopolitical grandeur and cultural withdrawal; it is *free* to develop the political sphere, which stands outside the realm of particular grace, but is also *bound* to it by common grace.[486] Using Troeltsch's definition as a paradigm, John Halsey Wood's monograph on Kuyper's ecclesiology describes the free church as both a divinely given institution and a voluntary association.[487] As Richard Mouw notes, Kuyper "saw in Calvinism's evolving support for the idea of *religious freedom*—the advocacy of the rights of diverse churches to pursue their

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[484] My emphasis. Wood quoting Ernst Troeltsch in: Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 28–29. Adair-Toteff points out that Troeltsch often "points to modern Protestantism with its emphasis on 'personal conviction' ('*persönliche Überzeugung'*) and 'individual intuition' ('*individuelle Anschauung'*) and notes that the older importance of dogma has faded." On several occasions Troeltsch notes the importance of Calvinism as a social philosophy. Christopher Adair-Toteff, *Ernst Troeltsch and the Spirit of Modern Culture: A Social-Political Investigation*, Troeltsch-Studien. Neue Folge 6 (Berlin, Germany; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2021), 54.

[485] Gordon Graham, "Kuyper, Neo-Calvinism, and Contemporary Political Philosophy," in *Politics, Religion, and Sphere Sovereignty*, ed. Gordon Graham, The Kuyper Center Review 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 54. Abraham Kuyper, *On Charity & Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga, Jordan J. Ballor, and Melvin Flikkema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2022), 183.

[486] Kuyper takes seriously the prospect that countries and nations depend on the divine favor of God and are thus obligated to show him respect. Kuyper, "State and Church," 413.

[487] Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age*, 29. Wood notes that the voluntary approach exposed Kuyper to a potential conflict with the practice of infant baptism.

various patterns of life and worship—an implicit endorsement of the idea of *ecclesiastical pluriformity*."[488] Therefore, preserving freedom of speech, the press, and assembly was an essential duty of the state, an idea that the churches should vigorously defend.[489] The church as a visible institution was meant to be free from ecclesiastical hierarchy, attachment to money, but most importantly, free from state influence. He affirmed this idea so strongly that at times he sounds like a "revolutionary" himself. Kuyper remarks, "Whenever the government impinges in society on our *spiritual freedom* and wants to force us to do or refrain from doing something that derives from our sovereignty in our own sphere and whose care God has entrusted to us as a duty, *we will resist tooth and nail*."[490] While the Netherlands had historically emphasized political freedom, it was inconsistent in applying spiritual freedom because, according to Kuyper, "Hugo Grotius and his followers put it in shackles."[491]

As an ecclesiology, the free church is an institution with an organic expression that can organize itself outside the church institution (viz., para-church organizations and schools) and shape the political sphere in light of the gospel. At the same time, Kuyper opposed institutional "church-sponsored" social and political action.[492] However, as Bolt notes, "The concrete expression of this life of *Christian discipleship* is manifested through the rich *voluntary* associational life of a nation's citizens."[493] On this point, Kuyper and Hauerwas diverge. For Hauerwas, the church today is *free*, but exists as resident aliens, in a society of unbelief.[494] The church is the only true political society, "because only in the church are we directed to worship the one true God. Only through the church do we have the resources necessary for our desires to be rightly ordered, for the virtues to be rightly formed."[495] Hauerwas also uses the concept of the "free church," but he uses it in reference to the authority of Scripture within the context of community.[496] As a distinct

[488] My emphasis. Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 17.
[489] Abraham Kuyper, *On Charity & Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga, Jordan J. Ballor, and Melvin Flikkema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2022), 156.
[490] My emphasis. Kuyper, *Pro Rege, Vol. 3*, 3:124.
[491] Kuyper, *On the Church*, 432; Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 260.
[492] Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 428.
[493] Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 429.
[494] Hauerwas and Willimon, *RA*, 33.
[495] Hauerwas, *AC*, 40.
[496] Hauerwas, *COC*, 54; Hunsicker, *Making of Stanley Hauerwas*, 180.

political institution, the effectiveness of the church is not based on its ability to change the world, create parachurch organizations, or a voluntary associational life, but on its fidelity to the gospel.

While Kuyper and Hauerwas diverge on the "rules" for political engagement, the contrast between the free church and a distinct politics should not be overstated. It is not necessarily the case that Kuyper views the political sphere more positively while Hauerwas views it more negatively. Rather, Kuyper *passively accepts* the possibility that the church's influence in politics will rise and fall (depending on the context), while Hauerwas *actively celebrates and promotes* the decline of that influence.[497] De Bruijne notes that, "[Kuyper] would express sympathy for [Hauerwas's] repeated warnings against Constantinianism and against a church that conceives of itself as only private in character or that accepts being relegated to one of the societal spheres."[498] This shows that Kuyper was willing to stand up for the truth regardless of theological or political persuasion.

On the other hand, Kuyper believed that Calvinism was not only a worldview but also the best worldview to explain reality, and, as is often the case, "If you think your religion is true, it should, *of course,* shape political order."[499] Hauerwas likewise affirms the value of truth, arguing that "we cannot know truth until we have been transformed by the story."[500] However, he is *less confident* that he can confidently call himself a Christian who follows the truth:

> For by claiming to be a Christian, I am declaring my allegiance to those people, past, present, and future, who continue to struggle to live faithful to the God we find revealed in Israel and Jesus Christ. That, however, is also the primary reason

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[497] In a provocatively titled book, Michael Clary essentially calls Hauerwas's view (though not by name) "Loser Theology." According to Clary, Loser Theology is, "a half-Christ who always bears the cross, never wears the crown, and calls us to follow his example by losing." As of this writing, Clary's book is yet to be released in full; I have only read the first chapter. D. Michael Clary, *Loser Theology: Why the Weak Will Not Inherit The Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2026), 9. From my reading his project, it looks similar to other American Christian Nationalist endeavors. Clary and other historic Reconstructionists (i.e., R.J. Rushdoony, Gary North) fall prey to what Neuhaus called the "theocratic temptation." Neuhaus noted that that this seems especially prominent in Calvinism—he says there is "a deeply American dimension of optimism in theonomy…Victorious living, positive thinking, possibility thinking, dominion theology—all are entrenched in the can-do tradition of what used to be called *muscular Christianity* [my emphasis]. It is the perduring power of what Luther called 'the theology of glory,' as opposed to 'the theology of the cross.' Daring to do the seemingly impossible, such as conquering the world for the reconstruction of humanity, may seem like awesome *hubris* [emphasis original], unless of course, you have the sure word of God that you are commanded and enabled to do it." Richard John Neuhaus, "Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation," *First Things*, May 1, 1990, https://firstthings.com/why-wait-for-the-kingdomthe-theonomist-temptation/.

[498] Bruijne, "Colony of Heaven," 478.

[499] Emphasis original. Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World*, 1.

[500] Hauerwas, *COC*, 102.

> I find myself hesitant to declare myself 'Christian,' for I have increasingly learned how difficult it is to be faithful to such a God.[501]

Whether Kuyper himself exhibits hubris or courage, or whether Hauerwas's restraint shows humility or cowardness, is beside the point. The more important question is: in what *manner* does the *church, vis-à-vis the truth,* engage in politics?

It was never the responsibility of the free church to authoritatively shape Dutch culture—Kuyper adamantly rejected the idea that the church was responsible for forming the public sphere, as such methods frequently failed to distinguish between the earthly and the heavenly homeland.[502] Instead, Kuyper grounded the authority of the public sphere in sphere sovereignty. Hauerwas, on the other hand, demands that the American church reconsider how it inhabits the world, not as victors but as witnesses to the kingdom who bear the cross. For Kuyper, truth is found in God; for Hauerwas, truth is found in the church.

Hauerwas develops this account of truth as an American thinker, in an American context, with "American concerns."[503] Ultimately, his ecclesiology attempts to alert American Christians to the compromises of Christendom and Constantinianism. Hauerwas says:

> If there is to be a genuine Christian critique of Christian America, I am convinced that [the] habit of thought, which Yoder calls Constantinianism, must be given up. Otherwise, we Christians remain caught in the same habits of thought and behavior that implicitly or explicitly assume that insofar as America is a democracy she is Christian. As a result Christians lose exactly the skills necessary to see how deeply they have been compromised by the assumption that their task is to rule, if not the government, at least the ethos of America.[504]

Stephen Webb suggests that "the key to the reception of his work is his *anti-Americanism*."[505] While Webb's claim is slightly overstated, at times it is hard to tell whether Hauerwas is opposed

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[501] Hauerwas, *CET*, 39.

[502] Bruijne, "Not Without the Church," 108; Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*. Kuyper also points to the opposite, the state does not have a genuine faith as to authoritatively shape culture, if it did, "the state would have as its aim *God's glory* [emphasis original] and nothing of such a purpose can be discerned in that strict sense. Then *it would have to be conformed to God's law in all its parts* [my emphasis], and it appears that the state can barely fulfill, even inadequately, a few parts of it. Therefore, we must abandon entirely this confessional notion, which misunderstands Christianity as a moral instrument of a higher order." Bartholomew, "Volume Introduction," 757.

[503] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 299.

[504] Hauerwas, *CET*, 182–83.

[505] Webb, "The Very American Stanley Hauerwas"; Stephen H. Webb, "Eschatology and Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 508. Hauerwas's student William Cavenaugh was a staunch critic of Webb and vice versa. For a sample see their pair of essays published in 2011: William T. Cavanaugh, "Out to Lunch: A Response to Stephen Webb's 'Against the

to Christian America or an American form of Christianity. If the latter, what kind of Christian cultural contextualization is appropriate?[506] Human language is always contextual. Even the truth of scripture is contextual.[507] Regardless, Hauerwas positively calls the American church to faithfully "bear the cross" of Christ, neither "domesticating it" (theological liberalism) nor "using it" (theocracy). The church, as a distinct political entity, is always engaged in politics. It is impossible to separate the being from the action of the church. This concept of the church challenges not only modern Christians but also counterbalances Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty, common grace, and the church as an organism, which calls the church to "apply the cross" to all spheres of life.

5.4 Conclusion

The ecclesiologies of Kuyper and Hauerwas offer unique perspectives on political engagement.[508] The primary difference between them lies in how they theologically formulated their response to their cultural context. Kuyper believed post-Christendom and liberalism demanded that the church be active in cultivating a Calvinistic worldview in every sphere of life. Hauerwas believed it is only when the church understands that it is the church that real change takes place. In this sense, both attempted to avoid what they saw as false conceptions of the church, neither "using the cross" nor "domesticating it."[509] The former attempts to identify the church with God's saving presence in the world, thus creating a "trickle-down" ecclesiology—the latter is the temptation to relocate God's spiritual communion in the individual Christian

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Gourmands,'" The Other Journal, August 2011, https://theotherjournal.com/2011/08/out-to-lunch-a-response-to-stephen-webbs-against-the-gourmands/; Stephen H. Webb, "Against the Gourmands: In Praise of Fast Food as a Form of Fasting," The Other Journal, August 2011, https://theotherjournal.com/2011/08/against-the-gourmands-in-praise-of-fast-food-as-a-form-of-fasting/.

[506] I am attempting to invite the idea that theology may look different in certain contexts. If the American context is wrong because it is "American" then how can Americans "do theology" as it were. This is obviously not Hauerwas's point, because he himself "does theology," but at times Hauerwas sounds like he wants to "do theology" without presuppositions. For example: "The notion that Christian speech can or must be translated if it is to be acceptable to modern people too often embodies simplistic views regarding the nature of language." Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2001), 3.

[507] I do not mean to imply that scripture is only human words. Scripture is God's Word, divinely inspired.

[508] Mouw uses this term to describe Kuyper's theology of sphere sovereignty. The phrase is now used to caricature or malign Tim Keller's view of "Christ and Culture." Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*, 40; Clary, *Loser Theology*, 1–2.

[509] See Eglinton's article for an explanation of how Kuyper differentiated himself from the Groninger group and the Leiden school. Eglinton notes, "The Groninger school represented a move to bind the Dutch Reformed Church *(Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk)* strictly to Dutch culture and society by making all Dutch persons members in an established national church." Eglinton, "To Transcend and to Transform," 167.

existence, compromising the character of the visible church.[510] When read in tension, their ecclesiologies echo Keller's philosophy of ministry in *Center Church,* where the church is not a "holy sphere" that fundamentally divides regenerate from unregenerate man, but provides the scaffolding, tools, and worldview for faithful political engagement.[511] In this sense, the church is essential for faithful political engagement. The next chapter will reconsider the illustrative case study discussed in Chapter 2.

[510] Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, ed. R. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 516.

[511] Keller, *Center Church*.

Chapter 6 – Redeemer Case Study Reconsidered

6.1 Introduction

This chapter revisits the Redeemer Presbyterian Church (RPC) case study discussed in Chapter 2 by examining baseline cultural narratives (BCNs) in the context of RPC and conducting an intercultural evaluation in light of the Kuyper/Hauerwas dialogue. This chapter answers the following question: "What theological account of the *church's participation in politics* emerges from a reflection on Kuyper and Hauerwas regarding RPC's political engagement?"

6.2 Baseline Cultural Narratives

Redeemer Presbyterian Church serves as an independent third context from Kuyper and Hauerwas; we might say a different form of post-Christendom. Some forms of post-Christendom emphasize duty, others individualism; Keller believed American post-Christendom elevated five BCNs: rationality, history, society, morality, and identity.[512] The following list summarizes Keller's understanding of these narratives:

1. **Rationality / Technology Narrative** – The natural world is the only reality. Objective human reason can solve the problems of the world and society.
2. **History Narrative** – History is progressing, and humans are getting better. Ideas from the past no longer belong to the present.
3. **Society / Freedom Narrative** – The goal of society is to set people free and live as they choose (as long as they do not harm others).
4. **Morality / Justice Narrative** – Morality and justice should be determined by human actions. Human choice is most important when it comes to justice and morality.
5. **Identity Narrative** – Personal identity is found on the "inside" (dreams, desires, and self-worth), not on external factors.[513]

According to Keller, each BCN emphasizes the individual over the community, personal autonomy over obedience, and anthropology over transcendence. Collectively, they can be

[512] Nilsson, "Engaging Baseline Cultural Narratives," 3.

[513] This list is my summary of Keller's chapter on "Preaching to the (Late) Modern Mind.".Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), chap. 5.

summarized as *chastened modernism,* a fusion of modern expectations and postmodern dissolution, where the highest form of good becomes the collective pursuit of liberation by autonomous individuals. According to Keller, these BCNs are not "self-evident," but shape the cultural assumptions about reality.[514] Consequently, one of the church's central tasks is to subvert the cultural expectations about reality and cultivate the plausibility of the gospel by revealing "inconsistencies in the cultural beliefs and assumptions about reality."[515] Keller explicitly engaged BCNs in his sermons to encourage responsible forms of political engagement. However, RPC and Keller believe that tensions between Christianity and secular BCNs are ultimately resolved through the church community, where dialogue and gentle confrontation invite hearers to embrace the true narrative of *the gospel*.[516]

6.2.1 New York City Context

Keller formulated BCNs against the backdrop of Manhattan, a sprawling metropolitan area with a distinct cosmopolitan character (§2.2) and an "amplified secular environment."[517] But, contrary to popular belief, secularism has not left New Yorkers "disenchanted" with religion; rather, they are "enchanted" by secular stories.[518] Politics, culture, and economics have historically shaped the city's BCNs.[519] In this sense, New Yorkers can neither fully embrace positive human expectations nor deny the human capacity for moral growth and change. They feel the urge to honor both modern and postmodern instincts.[520] Sharon Zukin argues that New Yorkers have become consumers, more interested in the "quality of things [and experience]."[521] McMillan remarks, "With a population over 1.6 million, the highest urban density in the US…the city is always in flux, with new people moving in and others moving out."[522] This not only makes it difficult to quantify religion, relationships, and the social dimensions of the city, but also makes

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[514] Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, 116.
[515] Keller, *Center Church*, 125.
[516] Bartholomew, "Reviving Orthodoxy," 174.
[517] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 32, 7.
[518] Jon Butler, *God in Gotham* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020), 25.
[519] Zukin, *Naked City*, 1.
[520] Chastened modernism is promoted through so-called "global culture industries." The world is a global village in terms of media, entertainment, and other "cultural industries." These cultural industries shape the consciousness of the people particular ways. Michael L. Budde, "Collecting Praise: Global Culture Industries," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd Edition, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, Blackwell Companions to Religion (West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 125.
[521] Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.
[522] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 112.

it challenging for RPC to overcome barriers to entry into the city's economic, social, or cultural spheres. The religious field is often "characterized by a great deal of heteronomy," carving out evangelism as a niche method for reaching people.[523]

In the 1990s and 2000s, RPC learned about the economic, social, and cultural issues plaguing the city. This appealed to well-educated individuals from finance, media, technology, entertainment, the arts, publishing, and academia. [524] Keller appropriated insights from secular voices to amplify the gospel; he sought "secular, non-believing, intelligent, or well-known cultural voices to make or illumine his key points (or to function as rhetorical foils)"—from Freud to Foucault, from Woody Allen to T.S. Eliot.[525] This helped create a plausibility structure for religious discourse that could potentially reach a skeptical city for the gospel.

6.2.2 Intercultural Application

Before applying a foreign ecclesiology to RPC, it is necessary to ask whether their models meaningfully address the baseline cultural narratives that shape RPC's context. According to Timothy Keller, BCNs are stories "people tell about themselves to make sense out of their shared existence."[526] According to De Bruijne, the American church can stand to profit from Kuyper's ecclesiology:

> [Kuyper's model] offers a powerful alternative to the two dominant positions of forced separation of church and state on the one side, keeping religion outside the public sphere, and on the other a social or civil role of religion in connection with the interests of the nation but at the price of bigger or smaller adjustments to societal trends.

In this sense, Kuyper sits between integrationist and separationist positions (§1.1). Sensing the divide in the American church and the PCA, RPC has partially embodied Kuyper's ecclesiology through Redeemer City to City, equipping church leaders, and shaping the church through preaching. When measured by global impact, the statistics show that Kuyper's model, as mediated by Keller, has yielded results in the contemporary context.[527]

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[523] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 117.

[524] Zukin says the term "authenticity" often refers to a timeless ideal, but "our mental images of authenticity do reflect change, for each generation has an experience of the city in its own time that shapes what its members think about houses, stores, and people that 'belong' on a block, in a neighborhood, and in the city as a whole." Zukin, *Naked City*, 29.

[525] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 22.

[526] Keller, *Center Church*, 90.

[527] Redeemer City to City, "2025 Annual Report."

On the other hand, viewing Kuyper's ecclesiology through the lens of results might not be the best way to assess its effectiveness today. Kuyper's ecclesiology often treats contexts in which the church is a minority as exceptional.[528] In this sense, his ecclesiology *reflects* a "spirit of Christendom"—a tacit belief that the church is in the majority. While not advocating for Christendom outright, his conceptions of sphere sovereignty and common grace are "Calvinistic principles" intended to "overwhelm Modernism."[529] This raises an important question: how can the visible church faithfully use these principles in the political realm without collapsing the church into the state? In other words, how can the visible church responsibly transform politics? Kuyper does not answer these questions clearly. Instead, he assumes (through sphere sovereignty) that as societies develop, multiple spheres unfold that are directly answerable to God's authority.[530] But this "natural" development suggests that civil realms remain interested in "honoring God" or, at the very least, preserving the transcendent. In today's context, this form of integrationism would be seen as "Christian Nationalism" unless strongly qualified. So, while Kuyper lived in a post-Christendom society, he retained an ecclesial framework that softly embraced a "spirit of Christendom" (e.g., a majority church and cultural influence). This context colors many of his conclusions about the church.

Kuyper's positive ecclesial vision never materialized in the Dutch or American context, and his idea of church-state relations proved more difficult than simply adopting a Calvinistic worldview. Commenting on 19th-century European culture, Bartley notes, "Christendom may have passed, but its ecclesiastical and social vestiges remain[ed]."[531] Today, the belief that the Reformed worldview will sweep Manhattan (much less the US) seems idealistic, or at best naïve. The church in Manhattan operates under very different conditions. Manhattan is slowly becoming less familiar with the Christian tradition, Christian language is socially marginalized, and the church is in a minority position.[532] One need only think of the recent mayoral election, in

[528] Jung, "Costly Kuyperianism: Neo-Calvinist Public Theology in a Context of Persecution with a Focus on Pastor Wang Yi," 130.

[529] Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, 12.

[530] Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 208.

[531] Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom*, 111.

[532] While I do not agree with everything Aaron Renn writes, I think he is correct that the Obergefell decision (2015) shifted US culture in a secular direction. Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024).

which New York voters elected a 34-year-old Muslim socialist, Zohran Mamdani.[533] This is not to conflate church and state, but simply to note that the state's consciousness is socially conditioned by the people who run it.

Unlike Kuyper's ecclesiology, Hauerwas does not assume a majority position for the church. In fact, he embraces a minority position. Instead of transforming BCNs through sphere sovereignty, Hauerwas's vision offers a *counternarrative* to BCNs.[534] The church itself is the counternarrative; it does not redeem the civic realm. Instead, in its action, it sustains "develop[s], and pass[es] on the skills and virtues that equip them to know how to speak and act" the truth of the crucified and resurrected Lord in a secular culture.[535] The community itself is where political impulses are formed and shaped, providing a framework to avoid the extremes of American politics.[536] Christian speech works as "an alternative to conservative and progressive discourse alike to shake up and re-align the conversation."[537] This faithfully avoids the confusion between God's kingdom and political-culture wars, and recognizes that politics is primarily practiced in the church through peace and virtue. However, astute critics of Hauerwas note that he sometimes draws the distinction between the world and the church too broadly; perhaps the church is in a historical moment in which it "needs to borrow language from the world in order to be faithful to the story of Christ."[538] At the same time, it is important to note that Hauerwas does not pit personal holiness against civic concern but rather treats the church as the most important (or essential) narrative for Christian political engagement. As Tim Keller says, "there are times of crisis when the church must speak directly to overtly political issues—and of course whoever wants that to happen will always argue that the crisis time is now!"[539]

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[533] Madeline Halpert, "'Mandate for Change': Zohran Mamdani Wins New York City Mayoral Election," November 5, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceq01l8reqlo.

[534] The counternarrative is actually

[535] Pinches, "Why Church Matters," 321.

[536] Hansen, *Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*.

[537] Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference," 457.

[538] Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference," 458.

[539] Timothy Keller, "A Political Case Study: Four Americas, Ideologies & Idolatries (Part 2 of a 2-Part Series)," *Gospel in Life*, Summer 2026, https://gospelinlife.com/article/a-political-case-study-four-americas-ideologies-idolatries-part-2/.

6.3 Redeemer Presbyterian Church

6.3.1 Intercultural Evaluation

In *Center Church*, Keller acknowledges the competing ecclesiological instincts of Kuyper and Hauerwas. On one hand, "the greatest problem for the church today is our inability to connect with non-believers in a way that they understand."[540] On the other hand, "the heart of the problem is our communal 'thinness,' the lack of distinctiveness in our own Christian communities."[541] Keller attempts to hold these two in tension. He remarks:

> [W]hen people ask me for a model I'd say, well Redeemer is supposed to be combining those factors, seeker, small group, *the Hauerwas community stuff*, the community, social justice, *Kuyperian worldview stuff*. I want them all. *I want it combined*…I felt that there's *theological coherence* that these were not just a piece, it wasn't a Frankenstein monster, where I was just piecing this stuff together because I…wanted a sort of post-modern pastiche, I really do not, I really see that there is…a theologically coherent base [that justifies combining things that others separate].[542]

However, Presbyterians such as D.G. Hart, are critical of this approach, suggesting that he compromises Presbyterian polity by engaging in ecumenical collaboration.[543] Hart strongly asserts that Keller regards "Presbyterian polity and connectionalism as *accessories* to a more basic ministry [of evangelism]."[544] In practice, Keller and RPC are much more interested in reaching Manhattanites with the gospel than "arguing" over Presbyterian polity. According to RPC, "gatekeeping" orthodoxy is uninteresting when the soul of NYC is fundamentally

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[540] Keller, *Center Church*, 225.

[541] Keller, *Center Church*, 225.

[542] My emphasis. Timothy Keller, interview with Michael Lindsay, May 12, 2005. See McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 177.

[543] Hart's concern is not without warrant. One pastor in Keller's presbytery says, "I only saw Keller at Presbytery twice in eight years. I rarely missed presbytery. During that time, I was stated clerk of presbytery for about two years. Keller's schedule was so full leading RPC and other speaking/teaching engagements that his practice very rarely included engagement with presbytery matters." (Erik Swanson, email correspondence with author, June 27, 2026.).

[544] In Keller's conception, he sought to honor the historic marks of the church (apostolic/holy/one/catholic), drawing "a doctrinal boundary line that seeks to honor both mandates as much as possible." For Keller, the PCA needs to decide what essential truths are worth dividing over. My emphasis. D. G. Hart, "Looking for Communion in All the Wrong Places: Tim Keller and Presbyterian Ecclesiology," in *Engaging with Keller: Thinking Through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical*, ed. Iain D. Campbell and William M. Schweitzer (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2013); Timothy Keller, "What Is the PCA?: The Original PCA 'Contract,'" August 1999, https://calebcangelosi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/keller-tim-the-original-pca-contract-august-1999.pdf.

broken.[545] The church is better off devoting its efforts to teaching *master narratives*, where people learn "how to apply the Christian story to themselves in terms of their consciousness and identity."[546] In this sense, RPC calls its congregation to enter a post-Christendom society and seek long-lasting, "authentic" relationships empowered by the gospel.[547]

Theologically, RPC resembles Kuyper's vision by emphasizing common grace work in every sphere. Practically speaking, it exhibits the ecclesial instincts of Hauerwas by emphasizing Christian community, advocating ecumenism, and extending hospitality to denominations within the broader Christian tradition.[548] Keller himself believed that a *new movement* in the American church (and perhaps an alternative tactic) was necessary in the contemporary era.[549] He noted that four political BCNs are currently driving schisms in the American church: (1) Free America (center-right)—embodied in individual liberty and the free market, (2) Smart America (center-left)—embodied in science, technology, and credentialed expertise, (3) Real America (far-right)—embodied in traditional culture and the original settlers, and (4) Just America (far-left)—embodied in political structures to eliminate injustice, redistribute power, and promote activism.[550] Rather than church liturgy (or casuistry) shaping church members, these BCN's become the lens through which the church engages politics. For instance, when pastors and elders encourage political engagement, explain moral dilemmas, or offer political guidance, church members simply select their preferred BCN to interpret the data. This is a form of political eisegesis on the text and culture. In other words, the church does not form politics; politics forms the church. Keller remarked that the church tradition that responds to this political inversion "with truth, tears, and grace will be the one more reflective of the Savior and more likely to be effective in winning non-believers and sanctifying believers. The side that behaves the most graciously will flourish the most in the aftermath."[551] The church should continue to

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[545] This is not to suggest that Keller did not care about orthodoxy or confessional standards. Keller makes clear in several places his alignment with Westminster Standards. Keller, "What Is the PCA?"

[546] McMillan, "Cosmopolitan Calvinists," 33.

[547] Keller, "What Is the PCA?," 6; Zukin, *Naked City*, 220.

[548] Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," 58.

[549] Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," 58.

[550] Packer does not explicitly name the PCA, but these four narratives summarize how many in the denomination feel about political engagement. See Appendix B. George Packer, *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Keller, "A Political Case Study (Part 1)."

[551] Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," 63. However, critics of Keller believe that he still has unpurged Cartesianism which presupposes the primary of the individual, narrowing his theology of political engagement. See Pearson, *Colin Gunton, Tim Keller, and the Trinitarian Challenge to Individualism*, Chapter 6.

engage worldly politics but needs to adopt a posture of a *movement* rather than an institution, "a community united by a common vision," with an "emphasis on sacrifice rather than benefits."[552]

6.4 Conclusion

Hauerwas's willingness to draw a clear boundary between the church and political influence and view the church as a distinct movement makes his vision more compelling for a church like RPC. The church has a *unique identity, calling, and purpose* from that of the nation. The American church has difficulty distinguishing Christianity from Christendom. Accepting the church's uniqueness tends to be a problem for the integrationist. Even Abraham Kuyper held out hope that an American experiment might metastasize into something special for the kingdom of God. But political engagement requires something beyond Americanism or the political-culture wars. The American church must learn to *embrace* (not merely acknowledge) its place in God's story and *reject* the BCNs of the culture.[553] In this sense, Hauerwas is clearer than Kuyper. Hauerwas is not calling churches like RPC to withdraw or to be politically passive; instead, he is inviting the church to *participate* politically in the story of God's kingdom first, then to engage constructively in a culture that is politically destructive. For Hauerwas, the churches like RPC not only live according to a different political narrative but are themselves a different political narrative. The next chapter concludes this study by offering a theological account for political engagement, presenting research findings, and offering potential building blocks for political engagement.

[552] Keller, "The Decline and Renewal of the American Church," 55.

[553] This is an allusion to Hauerwas's Gifford Lectures where he discusses John Paul II, Vatican II, and the process of globalization. Hauerwas, *WGO*, 225.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This study presented an illustrative case study to explore church political engagement in the PCA against the background of Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas. Despite the long tradition of the separation of church and state, church and politics are regularly intertwined in American culture. G.K. Chesterton once remarked that the United States is "a nation with the soul of a church."[554] Historically, the American church has seen little distinction between its own narratives and the nation's narrative. Therefore, the church is often shaped by BCNs that adopt false narratives with overrealized eschatologies. While separating religion (viz., personal witness) and politics is largely impossible, faithful political engagement affirms the good in politics without placing hope in temporary powers. At the same time, the church is called to bear the cross, embrace God's story, and act as a counternarrative to the world. The hope of the PCA is not in the American story but is in God's story. This final chapter concludes this study by:

1. Answering the main research question: "What theological account of *Christian engagement in politics* emerges from a case study of political engagement at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, set against the background of the ecclesiologies of Abraham Kuyper and Stanley Hauerwas?"
2. Presenting the findings of this study's research.
3. Proposing a theological account of political engagement and offering potential building blocks for political engagement.

7.1.1 Restatement of the Argument

Briefly sketching the argument developed above, Chapter 2 used RPC as a case study to illustrate how tensions concerning political engagement manifest in a contemporary, widely influential PCA church. As a visible institutional church, RPC intentionally downplays explicit political engagement while encouraging individual Christians to participate in public life. RPC seeks to shape individual political engagement through church life. Chapters 3 and 4 described and analyzed the ecclesiologies of Kuyper and Hauerwas. For Kuyper, sphere sovereignty preserves

[554] Chesterton quoted in: Robert Postic, "Religion and Party Politics: Evangelicals, the Republican Party, and Christian Nationalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Politics and Religion in Contemporary America*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (London, UK: Routledge, 2024), 361.

the church's identity, common grace provides a shared point of contact, and the church as an organic institution enables it to engage politics faithfully. For Hauerwas, the church is a unique social ethic, a distinct polity from the world, a call to bear the cross of Christ. In this sense, the church is simultaneously *being* and *action*. While Kuyper and Hauerwas diverge in significant ways, Chapter 5 brought their perspectives into an intercultural dialogue, described their cultural and political contexts, and noted their continuities and discontinuities. Together, they seek to preserve the idea that the church is a *unique community* that bears witness to the kingdom of God and calls Christians to be politically engaged—in Kuyper's case, actively; in Hauerwas's, passively.

7.2 Research Findings

7.2.1 A Theological Account for Church Political Engagement

As a polity of heaven on earth, neither Kuyper's nor Hauerwas's ecclesiology offers a prescriptive model for engaging politics in the intermediary period. The church should recognize that it is always conditioned by its spatio-temporal location. Therefore, in response to the primary research question, this study established that the ecclesiologies of Kuyper and Hauerwas point toward the need for the American church to *recover* an *ecclesially grounded* account of political engagement. For Kuyper, this means preserving the integrity of the church through sphere sovereignty and having a strong conception of common grace. For Hauerwas, this entails a firm antithesis between the church's narrative and the world.[555]

While their approaches differ significantly (§6.2.1), both resist integrationism, separationism, lingering forms of Christendom, and secular baseline cultural narratives that allow alternative communities and worldviews to *determine* the church's political engagement. Non-Christian spheres, languages, and communities should not dictate the church's political impulse. Instead, both Kuyper and Hauerwas suggest that a benchmark for faithful political engagement depends on preserving the *integrity* and *distinctiveness* of the church. Distinctiveness here does not mean a "holy separate sphere" or "other worldly," but for Kuyper, it means a centrifugal vision, rooted in sphere sovereignty and common grace, directing Christians outward into differentiated spheres. For Hauerwas, it means a centripetal vision, rooted in the church's community,

[555] Adekoya, "The Church as a Political Society," 232.

narrative, and language, emphasizing the formation and unity of a distinct people.[556] These impulses are neither identical nor irreconcilable; rather, they are mutually corrective. In practical terms, it means the church, as a visible, organic institution, needs to be cautiously optimistic when engaging in American politics.[557] God changes the world, and he will restore it, but he will not do so according to the church's political expectations.

As such, the integrity and distinctiveness of the church require both an *ascent* (Hauerwas) and a *descent* (Kuyper) from the cross.[558] This means that the visible church bears a cruciform witness before the world (Hauerwas), while individual Christians seek the renewal of every sphere of life (Kuyper). When the church overemphasizes the former, it risks quietism, and when it overemphasizes the latter, it risks triumphalism. The church, as a unique and distinct community, is *always tied to the cross*. Whenever we lose sight of the cross, we know that political engagement has gone too far. This requires a return to an era that embraces "pre-Constantinian ecclesio-political arrangements."[559] The church as "the polity of heaven on earth" still "awaits the consummation of its politicality when it will reign with Christ in the restored new creation."[560] In the American situation, the inclination of the church is to grasp influence and power.

7.2.2 Potential Building Blocks for Engaging Politics

Rather than offering criteria, guidelines, or principles, this section notes some potential building blocks to help PCA churches engage politically in the American context. The dialogue suggests four constructive implications: First, we can affirm that *faithful political engagement begins in the church community*. The church is where God's people receive linguistic training and learn "how to *be* and *speak* Christian."[561] From within the church community, God's people are equipped to participate in the civic sphere in accordance with the convictions of "sphere sovereignty" and "common grace." This training is not to transform the political realm, but to nurture and care for it. As such, Christians are not isolated individuals but are part of God's story; more particularly, they join Jesus and Israel in a specific story, grounded in tradition and

[556] I get the idea of centrifugal and centripetal from Johnson. Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference," 460.
[557] Hauerwas, *CET*, 96.
[558] Adekoya, "The Church as a Political Society," 233.
[559] Adekoya, "The Church as a Political Society," 237.
[560] Adekoya, "The Church as a Political Society," 233.
[561] This is my summary of Hauerwas.

Christian grammar, that belongs to a specific moment in history. To put it another way, the church equips Christians to engage politics rightly through community, liturgy, and tradition.

Second, the recovery of "true political engagement" through the church has at least one significant practical implication: *Taking political power is not an option for the church*. As alluded to above, the American church is often tempted to "use the cross" for its own purposes.[562] The temptation to "make America the church" easily saturates ecclesial discussions. When this happens, the American church confirms that it is "the great experiment in Protestant social thought," a story of modernity.[563] On the other hand, "bearing the cross" suggests that the church already has a story—the story of the cross—the church's story is *strange, different, and distinct*. In this story, the church is a peculiar people; it stops identifying America with the church and begins identifying itself as the church. This is neither liberal nor postliberal, but a *pro*scription to stop embracing the world's language and behavior, and a *pre*scription to start identifying with the church's unique place in the world. A worldly political transformation can numb the senses, wrap the wounds, and offer momentary relief, but it can never raise Christ from the dead and offer lasting peace. The political victory of the church is already won through Christ's death and resurrection.

Third, *the church has a unique political voice in the secular context*. The church is part of the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, and Jesus. As part of this grand narrative, the church participates in God's story by becoming intimately familiar with God's narrative. God's narrative is ignored when the church focuses on specific moral problems (e.g., political/moral dilemmas like gay marriage or abortion). Often, these moral problems have political consequences that divide the church along separationist and integrationist lines. Keller suggests that such forms of engagement are important but are ultimately "shallow"; the church is better spent concentrating on the "comprehensive view of a good society."[564] Therefore, political engagement recognizes that the church offers an *alternative narrative* that embodies Christ on

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[562] Unfortunately, this has already proved true in trends to "take back" politics in the Reformed world—the slogan "Christ is King" has become a dog whistle signaling pernicious forms of Christian Nationalism. Peter Smith, "'Christ Is King' Becomes a Loaded Phrase in US Political Debates, Especially on the Right," AP News, March 5, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/christ-king-us-politics-conservative-antisemitism-af8d8d252a08baf75c1e83cd5445a8a6.

[563] My emphasis. Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 16.

[564] Keller, "A Political Case Study (Part 2)."

the cross. The church is committed to "witness" to Christ on the cross, first in the church community, then to the world. The church cannot change worldly politics, but it can witness to Christ on the cross.

Fourth, because the church develops a political conscience through Christian grammar, *it can faithfully affirm the good in politics*. The church "need[s] to become familiar with contemporary vernaculars."[565] There are similarities between Christian and non-Christian discourse. Craig Bartholomew remarks: "If God never gives up on his creation, how can we?"[566] Becoming familiar with the contemporary requires common grace; this provides a theological basis for Christian participation in non-Christian political institutions. The world is not completely depraved, nor is the church hopeless. The cross and resurrection are the story of hope, as Hauerwas says, "Christians believe that our lives are constituted by the hope we have learned through Christ's cross and resurrection."[567] Christians believe life is an adventure that "is *sustained only through hope,*" knowing that one day Christ will come again.[568] Until that day, the church uses discernment and does not insist on a complete antithesis with the world. It recognizes that Christ's death and resurrection bring hope to all spheres of life—as Kuyper says, "Scripture does not lock Christ up within the sphere of grace or within the world of humanity; it places all creation—the visible and the invisible, both on the earth and beneath the earth—in direct dependence on Christ."[569] Therefore, the church is called to see truth, goodness, and beauty in the political sphere, as Kuyper says, "the focus of the church is the *entire truth*, *living in* [*Christ*]."[570] Even Hauerwas recognizes the need to locate similarities between the church and the world.[571]

In summary, the four potential building blocks are as follows:

1. Faithful political engagement begins in the church community.

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[565] Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference," 460.
[566] Bartholomew, "Volume Introduction," xxxv.
[567] Hauerwas, *STT*, 157.
[568] My emphasis. Hauerwas, *COC*, 13.The church cannot join Christ in physical/material resurrection life until the consummation. The church joins Christ in spiritual renewal and resurrection, but until the consummation, we join him in crucifying the flesh.
[569] Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ's Kingship: The Exalted Nature of Christ's Kingship*, vol. 1, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al., trans. Albert Gootjes, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2016), 212.
[570] Kuyper, "Tract on the Reformation of the Churches," 190.
[571] Johnson, "Doing Justice to Difference," 459.

2. Taking political power is not an option for the church.
3. The church has a unique political voice in the secular context.
4. The church can faithfully affirm the good in politics.

7.3 Conclusion

Political engagement begins not by recovering political influence, but by recovering the church's distinct and unique identity. The story of the cross and the victory of resurrection continues in the church. This does not occur through political hegemony, posturing, or transformation, but through faithful engagement in light of Christ's victory. Rather than treating Kuyper and Hauerwas as competing paradigms, this study argued that they function as mutually corrective ecclesiologies. Both suggest that political engagement occurs when the church embraces its distinctiveness: for Kuyper, that means sphere sovereignty and common grace; for Hauerwas, a distinct political community. When we read these ecclesiologies against the backdrop of RPC, it shows that churches that disentangle themselves from the American narrative can still engage politically in a post-Christendom culture. RPC has politically engaged Manhattan for years and remains committed to the gospel message. Political engagement is an ascent and a descent from the cross—the church is the unique "polity of heaven" on earth that bears witness to the kingdom of God.

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Appendix A –Postliberalism and Engaging Politics

Since the 1980s, a growing body of postliberal literature has emerged. These are not necessarily schools of thought but more loosely connected movements that attempt to "rethink" how the church engages the public domain apart from the liberal tradition. These movements are very different; some are more academic and theological; others are more political and populist. They usually critique liberalism as a philosophy (although critiques of liberal polity and culture also exist). The common thread among all movements is: (1) a "deconstructive" posture toward the liberal tradition, usually affirming that "individualism" is *the* destructive force, (2) an instinct to retrieve premodern understandings of church-state relationships, and (3) a rejection of neutrality and universals as adopted (and understood) by the liberal tradition (Locke, Rosseau, Kant, Rawls, et al.). According to Cécile Laborde, "critics of liberalism are not explicit enough about the normative basis of their own critique—if pushed, it usually turns out to be some version of liberal equality, freedom, or pluralism."[572] The following chart serves as a heuristic, guiding the reader through different approaches to political engagement. It is not meant to be exhaustive, nor does it account for important overlap and differences in figures across the historical movements.[573]

Historical Postliberal Movement	**Analytical Category**	**Problem in Culture / Politics (or Church)**	**Solution for the Church / State**	**Important Figures**
Radical Orthodoxy	Metaphysical	Secular / Liberal ontology	Retrieval of premodern metaphysics	John Milbank, Graham Ward, Adrian Pabst, Catherine Pickstock
Yale Postliberalism	Narrative / Analytical	Liberal hermeneutics	Doctrine as a cultural-linguistic grammar	George Lindbeck, Hans Frei
Ecclesial Postliberalism	Ecclesial-Ethical	Christendom	The Church as an alternative polis	Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder
Reformed Postliberalism	Liturgical-Reformed	Disenchantment / Political liberalism	Liturgical ecclesiology and sacred order	Peter Leithart, James R. Wood

[572] Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 18.

[573] For example, Patrick Deneen and Adrian Veremule are both Roman Catholic, but Vermeule is closely associated with Integralism. This is not an exhaustive list of postliberal forms. Some thinkers attempt to avoid both liberalism and post-liberalism. These include thinkers such as: Oliver O'Donavan, Nicholas Woltersdorf, and James Davidson Hunter.

Catholic Political Postliberalism	Catholic Political	Political liberalism	Common-good constitutionalism	Patrick Deneen, Adrian Vermeule
Protestant Political Postliberalism	Protestant Political	Secularism	Christian nationhood	Douglas Wilson, Stephen Wolfe

Figure A.1. Forms of Postliberalism

Using Keller's diagram of four models of "Christ and Culture" (Figure 2.2.), the following figure places the postliberal movements on a quadrilateral of cultural/political engagement. This is my own interpretation of the data and, once again, works as a heuristic.

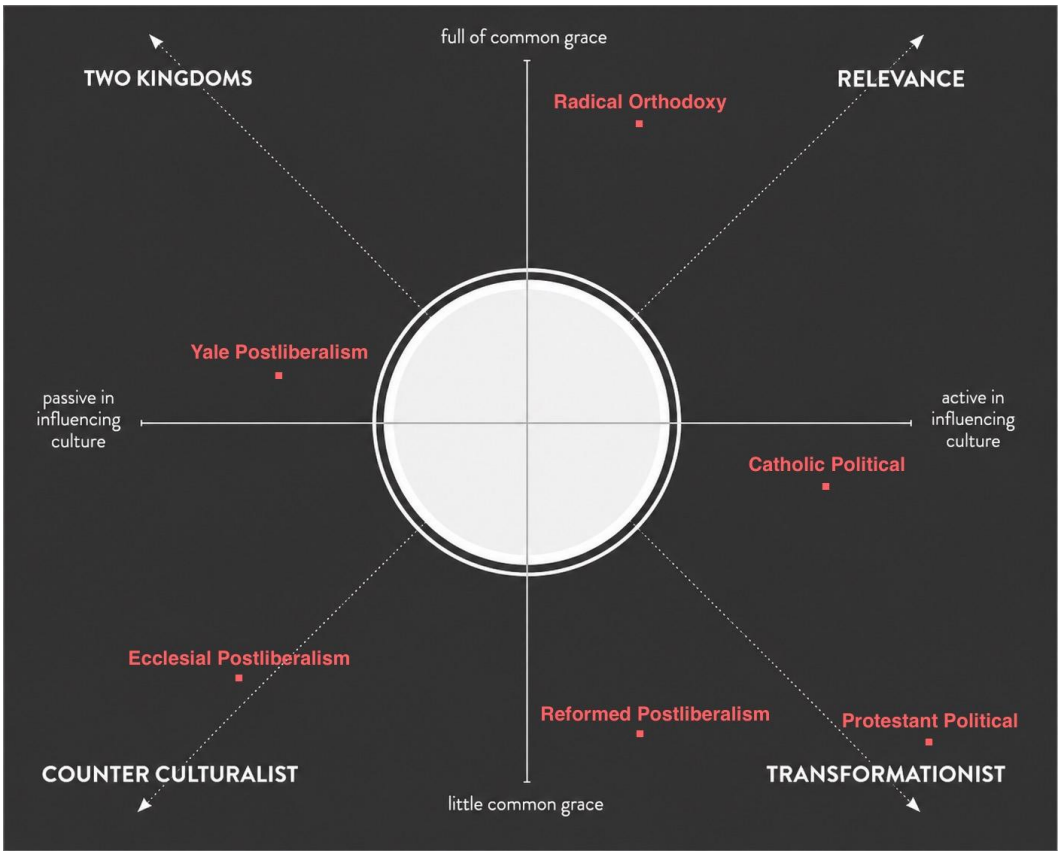


Figure A.2. Postliberalism Diagram of "Christ and Culture"

Appendix B – Baseline Cultural Narratives in American Politics

Timothy Keller used the term "baseline cultural narrative" to describe and diagnose worldviews and cultural stories that were partially true but ultimately ran counter to the story of the cross, resurrection, and the gospel. Kevin DeYoung, a PCA pastor, also describes four "teams" in Reformed evangelicalism: Contrite, Compassionate, Careful, and Courageous. DeYoung's "teams" roughly match George Packer's "Four Americas." DeYoung's four teams are:

1. **Contrite Christianity** – "[the church has] been blind to injustice, prejudice, racism, sexism, and abuse. What the world needs is to see a church owning its sins and working, in brokenness, to make up for them and overcome them."
2. **Compassionate Christianity** – "Many people are hurting and grieving in our midst and in the world. Now is the time to listen and learn. Now is the time to weep with those who weep. What the world needs is a church that demonstrates the love of Christ."
3. **Careful Christianity** – "look at the moral confusion and intellectual carelessness that marks our time…[and say] Let's pay attention to our language and our definitions. What the world needs is a church that will draw upon the best of its theological tradition and lead the way in understanding the challenges of our day."
4. **Courageous Christianity** – "Look at the church's compromise with (if not outright capitulation to) the spirit of the age. Now is the time for a trumpet blast, not for backing down. What the world needs is a church that will admonish the wayward, warn against danger, and stand as a bulwark for truth, no matter how unpopular."[574]

DeYoung makes clear that Reformed Christians rarely fit into one category. Each view grasps a partial picture of God's narrative and therefore contains only part of the truth. American politics has four basic BCNs. The following chart is a composite of the work of Keller, Packer, and DeYoung.[575]

[574] Kevin DeYoung, "Why Reformed Evangelicalism Has Splintered: Four Approaches to Race, Politics, and Gender," *The Gospel Coalition*, March 9, 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/why-reformed-evangelicalism-has-splintered-four-approaches-to-race-politics-and-gender/.

[575] DeYoung, "Why Reformed Evangelicalism Has Splintered"; Packer, *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal*; Keller, "A Political Case Study (Part 1)."

Engagement Model	Political Posture	Packer	DeYoung
Integrationist / Separationist	Center-Right	Free America	Careful
Separationist	Center-Left	Smart America	Compassionate
Integrationist	Far-Right	Real America	Courageous
Separationist	Far-Left	Just America	Contrite

Figure B.1. Baseline Cultural Narratives in American Politics

Appendix C – Futures for Engaging Politics in the PCA

Over the past decade, the PCA has experienced a renewed interest in political and public theology.[576] Political conversations center on a few topics: (1) eschatology, (2) the church's role in American political history, and (3) critiques of liberalism. Christian Nationalism (CN) and its history in the Reformed tradition play an important role in shaping these discussions.[577] Those who sympathize with forms of CN tend to argue something like: If (Reformed) Christianity is true, why not try to make *all institutions* Christian? Alternative versions of this argument look like: If (Reformed) Christianity is true, why not have *Christian leaders* who institute "Christian" laws/rules for the common good?[578] Take, for instance, James Baird, who argues that "Scripture demands a set of essentials" for how civil leaders are to increase godliness in the populace.[579] Christianity becomes a mechanism to facilitate the "common good" through politics. Though many (not necessarily Barid) fail to clarify what they mean by "common" or "good."[580] Historically, the term "common good" is used by theonomists and theological liberals alike (see Figure 2.2); but postliberals like Baird dismiss the liberal sense and appeal instead to "common sense," divine-command theory, or Scriptural evidence.[581]

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[576] Take for example the partial report on Christian Nation from the PCA presented at the General Assembly (2026). While the report was not officially accepted the denomination's position, the report itself notes, "gratitude to God for a growing renewal of interest in Christian political theology." Presbyterian Church in America, *Partial Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Christian Nationalism* (2026), 2705, lines 11-12. See article about the Reformed Public Theology Conference, sponsored by the PCA's Ministry to State and The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Ben Whisenant, "Insights From The Presbyterian and Reformed Public Theology Conference," *byFaith*, June 6, 2024, https://byfaithonline.com/insights-from-the-presbyterian-and-reformed-public-theology-conference/.

[577] It was stated previously that CN is notoriously difficult to define. I define CN as socio-political expression of a theological hermeneutic (dispensational or Reformed), which in the American context takes the form of millenarianism—the belief that America as a geo-political nation (along with its heritage and culture) is unique, special, and critical to the advent of the new age. As such Christians should seek power in the government to "make culture, society, and institutions Christian" and usher in the new age.

[578] For an excellent critique and assessment of Roman Catholic Integralism see Kevin Vallier's volume *All the Kingdoms of the World*. While Integralism is distinct from Christian Nationalism (though related in my estimation), Vallier's assessment may offer a helpful rejoinder to nationalist arguments. He chronicles the ascendency of Adrian Vermeule and other postliberal thought. He states, "In my view, Vermeule is building a new anti-liberal elite designed to steer the New Right. By running a movement, the new elite can assail liberal order." Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World*, 17.

[579] James Baird, *King of Kings: A Reformed Guide to Christian Government* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Ministries, 2025), 15.

[580] Barid does not identify as a CN. From my reading of him, he has CN sympathies.

[581] In the cotemporary era, "common good" is usually interpreted through John Rawls, who restricted the idea to the realm of justice. Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference*, 35.

While none of these approaches are inherently wrong, it seems that "common-sense" and scriptural approaches are invoked to reclaim *strong narratives* in the public sphere while simultaneously dismissing "weak" ones. The presupposition is that *American culture* and the church (though they are rarely distinguished) are being "assailed" by other religiously infused counter movements that threaten social, cultural, and political reform (e.g., Secularism, Pluralism, Islam). Strong narratives preserve American culture, life, and order, and with it (in the mind of Reformed CN sympathizers) the church. This can be "theologically justified" using the Reformed tradition (§1.2.1).[582] However, this seems to pose a false dilemma—American society either caves to secular/pluralism (false narratives) or it must be governed by Christians (or Christian law). I do not see a need for such a stark contrast. When the church confuses its unique identity with America, mission drift often follows.

The divide in Christian Nationalism discussions is not so much about retrieval and what we should retrieve, but about how the church should approach culture. Therefore, the more important question is: Is this form of political engagement faithful to the church's uniqueness (purpose, witness, etc.) when compared to the culture? According to Hauerwas (and, to a lesser degree, Kuyper), church history is full of examples not only of how to "live the faith" but also of how "not to live the faith." Retrieving the Reformed tradition is helpful, indeed necessary, but doing so with confident humility. The Reformed tradition is not always a *prescription* for how the church *should* engage politics in today's context.[583] When the church interprets political engagement through the lens of Kuyper and Hauerwas, one wonders if CN is the best approach in the American context. Discussions concerning CN show no signs of abating. The PCA is currently writing a report to be presented at the General Assembly in 2027. This will almost certainly divide churches, no matter how the report is worded. Unfortunately, the denomination risks fracture unless some clarity is reached.

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[582] The 1646 version of the WCF usually enough to sustain an argument. See also: Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); David W. Hall, *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights, and Civil Liberties* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009); Spencer W. McBride, *Pulpit and Nation: Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America*, Jeffersonian America, ed. Jan Ellen Lewis, Peter S. Onuf, and Andrew O'Shaughnessy (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Crouse, *Two Kingdoms & Two Cities*.

[583] I am not advocating for a new form of theological liberalism here. I simply stating that the Christian tradition is normed by scripture. We can also say that the community in the present age helps the church discern truth from error. Hauerwas, *COC*.

How can the PCA remain distinctly and recognizably the church while affirming the good in politics? Perhaps it is better to contemplate a Roman Catholic *approach* to political engagement, inspired by the Second Vatican Council.[584] Instead of dismissing political liberalism (Hauerwas) or transforming politics (Kuyper), Vatican II adopted a declaration on religious freedom called *Dignitatis Humanae*.[585] *Dignitatis Humanae* reflects the concerns of Kuyper and Hauerwas—the Council attempted to honor church tradition, remain orthodox (Hauerwas), and embrace parts of modernity (Kuyper); Chad Pecknold notes that the Council "wanted to show that it could find *positive elements in modernity* and so instead of merely condemning the errors of the modern liberal order, it *sought a dialogue with what was good in it.*" The document highlighted the importance of *ecclesial unity* in response to an increasingly global world, positively recognizing the good in the world and affirming that Christendom no longer exercises a stranglehold over the church.[586] Hauerwas's impulse often dismisses the good in secular politics, while Kuyper sometimes overrealizes the good in the same realm. Finding a medium between the two may be helpful. I am not endorsing *Dignitatis Humanae* but merely suggesting that the PCA may need a "Vatican II moment," where the posture of the church affirms the goodness of common grace, while reasserting the uniqueness of the church in Christ—no government, tradition, or confession can replace Christ as sovereign over the church (and the world).[587]

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[584] Hauerwas, *WOT*, 53. Hauerwas provocatively states, "I think of myself as being on the Catholic side of the Reformation." From Hauerwas's perspective, the anabaptists movement had more in common with the "Roman Catholic" understanding of Scripture and church tradition than the Magisterial Reformation.

[585] Chad Pecknold, "Catholic Teaching on Politics and the State," in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, First Edition, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 471. Kevin Vallier notes that the document "discarded the Church's self-understanding as a polity and embraced a degree of *religious liberty* [my emphasis]." Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World*, 10.

[586] It should be noted that the Council's document does raise concerns about the church's unique identity in a secular culture. I am not endorsing everything in *Dignitatis Humanae* or arguing for its ability to deal with modernity; rather, I am suggesting that an approach to public life might work for the American church. Hauerwas discusses the *Dignitatis Humanae* directly and accuses it of "high humanism" and "modernist presumptions." Some of this is true, the anthropology of Vatican II from a Reformed perspective is too positive and does not take into account the noetic effects of sin. Hauerwas, *ABH*, 109.

[587] I am not attempting to assert a form of "principled pluralism" but more of a form of "pragmatic pluralism," one that says there is little difference in the institutional church (across cultures), however what distinction there is in the organic sense should be celebrated as good and important. William James was the chief exponent of pragmatic pluralism. He acknowledged, "that there was very little difference between people, 'but what difference there is,' he said, 'was very important.'" From Hauerwas's perspective, such a proposal would likely be regarded as unpurged liberalism. Eugene Taylor, "Introduction: Section One-The Spiritual Roots of James's Varieties of Religious Experience," in *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Centenary Edition, by William James (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), xxix. God's narrative is certainly better than the BCNs offered by the world; however, it is also important to remember that particular grace does not transport RPC to a different realm—it remains embodied, with a physical, concrete existence.