



# Race

Ordained Servant

March 2021

# Ordained Servant Online

## A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

### CURRENT ISSUE: RACE

March 2021

#### From the Editor

There are two poles in the discussion of race which I believe only Christianity can hold together: difference and unity. But, just what is race? Is there such a thing? David VanDrunen, in his article “Reflections on Race and Racism,” says no, race is a social construct, which is a dangerous myth, and as such must be understood in order to deal with the real prejudice we call racism. VanDrunen makes an important distinction between the ground of unity in the civil community, which is “relatively shallow, a unity of peaceful co-existence,” and the ground of unity in the Christian community, which flows from the saving grace of our Redeemer. He also reminds us that the OPC has dealt with this issue in 1974 with the “Report of the Committee on the Problems of Race.”

On the same topic Alan Strange, in “Slavery and Covenanters,” reviews Joseph S. Moore, *Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution*. This book is an illuminating piece of history showing how our Reformed friends the Covenanters were on the vanguard of the abolitionist movement.

Christianity seeks its unity broadly in the *imago Dei*, narrowly in the mediatorial person and work of Jesus Christ, while respecting God-given cultural uniqueness, provided that uniqueness is not contrary to biblical orthodoxy. Differences need a solid common foundation.

Alan Strange continues his illuminating “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church” with chapter 14 on “The Regional Church and Its Presbytery.” This will prove to be a great resource for church officers when it is completed.

David VanDrunen’s review of Pierre Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason* reminded me of how important it is to read widely outside of our own Reformed circles, so that we may intelligently engage with the larger church and the secular world around us. VanDrunen’s careful, nuanced consideration is a hallmark of Reformed scholarship and ministry since the Reformation.

Richard Gamble reviews David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*. This is a perceptive review of an important book. VanDrunen’s program for reforming the way American Christians view their relationship to society and politics brings us a nice addition to this project. By reintroducing the Reformation doctrine of natural law and introducing the importance of the Noahic covenant in our understanding of that law and its place in society, VanDrunen has given Christians a framework to develop and protect a more biblical ecclesiology, calling us to see the church’s mission as one of transforming sinners saved by grace, and not the fallen culture around us.

Charles Wingard reviews a fascinating new book by William J. Edgar, *7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On*. This is not the Edgar who teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the retired president of Geneva College. As Wingard tells us, this is a book that one can give to believer or unbeliever. Weighing in at only sixty-eight pages, Edgar presents a theologically

rich array of reasons to embrace the gospel.

Recently, I have been asked to teach a workshop to the docents of the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire, where I live. Through my long association with the museum (going back to childhood), I have been writing ekphrastic poetry. The workshop was titled “All Eyes and Ears: Appreciating and Creating Ekphrastic Poetry.” Ekphrastic comes from the Greek ἐκφράζειν (*ekphrázein*) meaning to call or describe (lit. out speak) or name an inanimate object. The poetic form is defined by the Poetry Foundation as “a vivid description of . . . a work of art.” John Keats, “Ode to a Grecian Urn” is probably the best known poem of this type. The combination of two art forms is itself an exquisite art form—an amalgam of the two senses. I offer an example of a painting by the greatest artist of the Dutch Golden Age, Jacob van Ruisdale, who painted during the rise of the seventeenth century Dutch Republic during a time of the rise of Dutch Reformed theology. Ekphrastic poetry challenges and enhances the power of observation. I hope you will enjoy it.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Truth

## Reflections on Race and Racism

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by David VanDrunen

Race and racism are obviously controversial issues. Writing on the subject is a thankless task, bound to provoke accusations that an author is enthralled by some nefarious ideology and insufficiently enlightened by a better one. This essay has no agenda either to call out the church for racism or to strike the death blow against wokeness. It simply offers reflections on race and racism intended to help Reformed Christians work through these matters in humble, wise, and Christ-honoring ways. Five basic ideas guide these reflections. (A terminological note: I use “antiracist” to refer to scholars and activists who use this term to describe themselves, *not* as a general term for all people who think racism is immoral. Although antiracists differ amongst themselves on some issues, they share many core convictions addressed below.)

### 1. Race Does Not Exist, although Racism Does.

Perhaps the most important thing to say about *race*, in the typical American sense of the word,<sup>1</sup> is that it does not exist. Unlike sex, it has no biological reality, and unlike ethnicity, it has no cultural reality. The human community simply is not divided into half-a-dozen (or whatever) racial groups united by distinct genetic markers or a common culture. Let me explain this claim.

The idea that race exists did not originate in Scripture. Scripture speaks of all human beings descending from one man, and thus the only “race” it knows is the one human race. Scripture distinguishes among humans, but does so in terms of people-groups. Egyptians, Babylonians, Israelites, and dozens of others had different customs and religions, but they were not different races. The geographical theatre in which the biblical story unfolded, at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, ensured that biblical writers were familiar with people of dark skin, light skin, and many shades in between, yet they gave no hint of regarding Cushites and Galatians (Celts) as racially separate.

Contemporary genetic science comes to the same conclusion. Mapping the human genome is one of the most amazing scientific accomplishments of recent decades. By studying the genetic information of living humans and comparing it to DNA from human remains of past millennia, genetic scientists have been able to reconstruct the migration of peoples and their inter-breeding with other peoples in ways hitherto impossible. Data is still coming in and scientists will undoubtedly modify their reconstructions, but one basic

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<sup>1</sup> “Race” has been used in different senses, especially as a way to refer to ethnic-groups or other smaller people-groups. For a brief but helpful discussion of this development of terminology and some of its implications, see Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ch. 2.

conclusion is clear: the modern conception of race has no genetic basis. People around the world are related to each other in complex and often counter-intuitive ways. Who would have thought, for example, that Western Africans are more closely related genetically to Western Europeans than to Eastern Africans? Population-groups have certain genetic markers distinguishing them from other population-groups, but this does not translate into anything corresponding to the “races” of modern mythology.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, race has no cultural reality because, unlike ethnic-groups, modern races (“black,” “white,” “Asian,” etc.) do not share a common culture. Rather, they consist of a multitude of groups with often very different histories, languages, and the like.

I do not know how many contemporary Reformed Christians believe that race is a biological and cultural reality, but they would be well-advised to abandon such a spurious notion.

Race, instead, is a figment of the human imagination. One way to put it is that race is a *social construct*.<sup>3</sup> Certain people in a certain historical context developed the notion of distinct human races. Although social constructs are not necessarily bad or unhelpful, this one was pernicious. Europeans constructed race in conjunction with the colonization of the Americas and the African slave-trade, and they used it to justify the subjugation of non-Europeans and the elevation of Europeans as morally and intellectually superior.<sup>4</sup>

This explains why racism exists even though race does not. (I take “racism” as treating and judging people not according to what is true about them but according to their racial categorization.) Social constructs can be powerful. Often what we imagine to be true shapes our thoughts, feelings, and behavior more strongly than what is actually true. Christians should understand this. Scripture emphasizes that there is no God but one. Yet idolatry exists and it is seductive. Baal was a construct of the human imagination, but it inspired people to dance around altars cutting themselves and provoked Israel to forsake the living God who redeemed them from bondage. Race is something like a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are based on fabrications, yet they can powerfully re-shape the lives of those who buy into them. They scare people into moving off the grid, rejecting life-saving vaccines, or hoarding gold coins under their mattress. Likewise, race is based on lies, but the idea became very important to those who believed those lies and forced others to live as if they were true.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See generally David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Vintage, 2018); and Adam Rutherford, *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold through Our Genes* (New York: The Experiment, 2017). Antiracists also deny that race has any biological basis. E.g., see Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 53; Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018), 5, 15; Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 19, 27; and Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps there is a better term, but the basic idea is correct. Antiracists often use “social construct” terminology. E.g., see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 9; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 5, 15; Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 35, 37; Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 44; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 19, 27.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., see the account in Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, ch. 2.

<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting, then, that some antiracists (surely unwittingly) describe the power of racism with rhetoric that sounds like that of conspiracy theorists'. For example, DiAngelo speaks of racism as largely invisible to most “whites” until she and others unveil “interlocking patterns” that reveal it. And all possible evidence supports her conclusions, while seemingly nothing can falsify them. For example, if “whites” warn

## 2. The Interests of Truth and Peace Call for De-Racialization.

If race is a fabrication of the sinful imagination, there seems to be one fundamental and necessary response: Deal with the idea as the lie it is. Stop acting as though race is real. Stop treating and judging people according to what is false. As people are unlikely to escape Baal-worship until they cease to think and act as though a powerful deity named Baal exists, so people are unlikely to escape racism until they cease to think and act as though race exists.

Some of what this entails is obvious, even if easy to overlook. Most of us have become aware of racial stereotypes and made efforts to give them up, but we all need to stay alert and keep striving to put them aside. Most of us have been warned about the hurt caused by racist jokes, although many people still tell them privately now and then, thinking no one is harmed. But whether in public or private, that is acting as though a destructive lie were true. Or consider some people's habit of mentioning a person's racial categorization when it is irrelevant: the European-American, for example, who relates a funny incident at the grocery store and describes one of the people involved as an "Asian guy," although it has no bearing on the story. Perhaps she intends nothing malicious, but she perpetuates racial thought-patterns that have wrought profound harm.

Recognizing the myth of race calls for de-racialization. That is, to live by truth and at peace with all our fellow humans, we ought to (continue to) strip our minds of racial categories and treat our neighbors without respect to them.

What I just wrote is highly controversial. Its most prominent opponents, however, are not unrepentant racists but antiracists. For antiracists, the preceding paragraph promotes *color-blindness*, the idea that we should not see other people's race. They believe this is a terrible thing that impedes racial justice and reconciliation rather than promotes it.<sup>6</sup> Progress, they argue, requires seeing racial tensions and dynamics everywhere. When "whites" do not see race, it manifests their dominant place in society and their privilege over others. "Whites" need to become increasingly cognizant of their "whiteness" and hence remain aware of others' different identities.<sup>7</sup>

These antiracists have legitimate concerns. If wrongs have been done in the name of an imaginary concept, it is surely impossible to rectify wrongs and change course without mentioning that concept. To return to a previous analogy, the Old Testament prophets did not pretend as though they had never heard of Baal or ignore the seduction of idolatry. Likewise, battling racism throughout de-racialization should not mean that we simply stop talking about race and hope that this clears things up. Antiracists are also rightly concerned

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others about a neighborhood because it is "black," that demonstrates racism, but if they do not use racial language and warn about a neighborhood because it is "dangerous," that also demonstrates racism, because they speak in code. See *White Fragility*, 23, 29, 44–46. After developing this conspiracy-theory analogy, I discovered that Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay also use it; see *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 36.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 26; Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 10, 20, 54; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 7, 11, 40–42; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 152–53. It is interesting, however, that antiracists sometimes (inadvertently?) recognize the virtue of color-blindness. For example, Kendi (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 55) speaks appreciatively of when one of his grade-school principals "suddenly saw me not as the misbehaving Black boy but as a boy...." Yet on his own theory, this principal's conduct was racist.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., see DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 24–38.

about an alleged color-blindness that sees the world only through the lens of one's own cultural assumptions. Ceasing to judge people according to racial categorization should not mean making one's own culture the universal standard. Cultural diversity is generally a good thing.<sup>8</sup> Finally, antiracists correctly oppose a color-blindness that evaluates all formally identical racial statements identically. For example, an African-American who says "black is beautiful" and a European-American who says "white is beautiful" make formally identical statements. But in the context of American history, they obviously do not communicate the same thing.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns should keep us from a simplistic color-blindness, but if we are concerned about truth and peace, our goal ought to be the elimination of thinking and acting in racial terms. The best strategy for getting there is open for debate, but it is far-fetched to think that the concept of race might disappear by demanding that people see all things through the lens of race.<sup>10</sup> Racism is doomed only if we de-racialize our thoughts, words, and behavior.

### **3. We Need an Elusive Combination of Humility and Critical Thinking.**

We are dealing with "profoundly complex" issues.<sup>11</sup> It is easy to understand that race does not exist, but when an imaginary but powerful concept has taken hold of so many minds for so long and wreaked so much harm, charting a viable way forward is not simple.

We see this complexity in all sorts of ways. Prominent antiracists, seemingly allies, disagree with each other about basic matters such as what racism is and which people are racists.<sup>12</sup> We see it in controversies about the police. In some cases, the evidence of police misconduct is overwhelming. But very few of us really understand the culture of police departments or are experts on effective policing—which does not stop people from sloganeering (Defund the police! Blue lives matter!). We also see this complexity in our churches. A family of one racial categorization begins to worship and fellowship at a church consisting primarily of people of another racial categorization. Everyone is happy for a while, except that this family finds the worship persistently unfamiliar and the fellowship awkward, for a host of cultural reasons that baffle and frustrate all involved.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a rich issue to explore from Christian theological perspective. The diversity of individuals and people-groups seems to be an inevitable development of multiplying and filling the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). It reflects the great potential of humans created in God's image—potential which no single individual or group can fully embody. Of course, there is also a sense in which our experience of diversity reflects human sin and the misuse of God's gifts, as the story of Babel illustrates (Gen. 11:1–9). Nevertheless, Scripture indicates that God redeems people in the midst of their diversity and without eliminating all differences, people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). The redeemed community is profoundly united, but not because everyone is identical.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> According to Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 54: "Terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle."

<sup>11</sup> DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> I mention a few examples: For DiAngelo, "whites" are inevitably racist (*White Fragility*, 4, 87), while for Kendi no one is inevitably racist (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 10–11). For DiAngelo, only "whites" can be racist (*White Fragility*, 22), while for Kendi anyone can be racist (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 10, 128, 136, 140–44). For DiAngelo, generalizing about people based on race is proper and helpful (*White Fragility*, 11–13), while for Kendi this is improper (*How to Be an Antiracist*, 44).

In the face of such complexities, humility and open-mindedness are highly important.<sup>13</sup> Proverbs repeatedly urges readers to take counsel and listen to advice. The wise person recognizes that any opinion can seem right when first presented, until another person offers a different argument and puts things in new light (Prov. 18:17).<sup>14</sup> At a time when most people get their news only from sources they trust to tell them what they already think, the wise will ensure they get multiple sides of the story. In a culture in which most people spend most of their time with people of their own racial categorization, the wise will want to listen carefully to the stories and experiences of people of other racial categories—and to listen not to critique but to understand, appreciate, and sympathize. These things are incumbent upon all, but European-Americans should probably pay special attention. Arguments that the drug war and the criminal-justice system work to the unjust detriment of African-American communities, for example, may not resonate with typical European-American experience, but many of them are compelling and at least demand open-minded reflection.

Nevertheless, critical thinking about race controversies is also essential. I think, for example, of a number of controversial ideas promoted by influential antiracists. Some of these ideas have an element of truth, yet all of them demand close scrutiny. I cannot provide this close scrutiny here, but simply call attention to a few matters briefly.<sup>15</sup>

One notion demanding critical reflection is *systemic racism*.<sup>16</sup> Racism can be systemic, to be sure. American slavery and South African apartheid are obvious examples that institutionalized racism in the law. It is much less clear how to evaluate claims about systemic racism in America today, since racial discrimination is outlawed throughout American society. Many people continue to suffer disadvantages because of their racial categorization, but the extent to which it is due to a “system” rather than to individuals’ malice or carelessness is nearly impossible to prove. “Socialization” into racist prejudice undoubtedly also remains present in American society.<sup>17</sup> Yet claims that this socialization is so pervasive that racial bias shapes everything seem very exaggerated, underestimate

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<sup>13</sup> Much of the antiracist literature, I am afraid, does not exemplify such virtues. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* presents his vision as *the* way to be antiracist and labels dozens of dissenting opinions on various aspects of his vision as racist. (He does describe his own mistakes and learning in the past, but he gives the impression that he has now arrived.) DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* properly praises listening and learning from others, yet she repeatedly demeans and belittles the people who have participated in her seminars and disagreed with things she said.

<sup>14</sup> The “Report of the Committee on the Problems of Race,” presented to the 1974 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (available on [opc.org](http://opc.org)), is dated in some obvious and understandable ways, but it remains worthy of consideration. For example, section IV.2 reflects on the mutuality of love among those of different racial categorization, and I believe such mutual love would go a long way toward the sort of humility and open-mindedness I am encouraging here.

<sup>15</sup> Many of the ideas I have in mind are associated with *critical race theory*. For a positive presentation of critical race theory, see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*. For recent critiques of it, see (from Reformed perspective) Carl R. Trueman, “Evangelicals and Race Theory,” *First Things* 310 (Feb. 2021): 19–24, and (from secular liberal perspective) Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, ch.5.

<sup>16</sup> For some expressions of this, see e.g. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 3, 19–22, 83; and Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> DiAngelo focuses a great deal on socialization. As she puts it: Racism is “a system into which I was socialized” (*White Fragility*, 4).

differences in cultures and upbringings, and grant race a greater power than it has.<sup>18</sup> Lingering systemic racism is a legitimate topic of conversation, but there are dangers of emphasizing racism as systemic, such as blaming the system instead of individuals' and groups' immoral behavior<sup>19</sup>—whether the immoral behavior of the alleged oppressors<sup>20</sup> or the alleged oppressed.<sup>21</sup>

Another issue concerns many antiracists' embrace of *identity politics*.<sup>22</sup> This approach divides people into an ever-increasing number of identity groups, each with its own set of interests and grievances.<sup>23</sup> This naturally leads to an emphasis upon race relations as a struggle for *power*.<sup>24</sup> Identity politics is not about working together for what is good and just, but about redistributing power from oppressor groups to oppressed groups. And this is inseparable from *cultural relativism*. As one prominent antiracist puts it: "To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals."<sup>25</sup> These ideas thus have no prospect of promoting peaceful relations among people. If social life is merely a relativistic struggle for power, who can blame people for fighting back against anyone who challenges them? If you tell "oppressors" that any attempt to make an objective, reasonable argument for what is morally right is only a cynical power play, there is nothing left but perpetual war among identity groups.

Finally, it is worth thinking critically about how some influential antiracists link race with a host of other categories in which oppressors and oppressed collide.<sup>26</sup> Of special note, they claim that opposing racism requires support for the LGBTQ agendas.<sup>27</sup>

#### **4. Success in Race Issues in the Church Looks Different from Success in Our Political Communities.**

God calls Christians to live peacefully and justly in political communities alongside their non-Christian neighbors. He also calls Christians to gather in the church as a redeemed

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<sup>18</sup> See DiAngelo again on the alleged pervasiveness of racism. For example, "racial disparity" exists "in every institution across society," and racism is present in every "cross-racial friendship." See *White Fragility*, 22–23, 81.

<sup>19</sup> In confessional terms, focusing on systemic issues may distract from the responsibility to repent of "particular sins, particularly" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 15.5).

<sup>20</sup> E.g., DiAngelo believes that being racist is simply inevitable for "whites" and is not a matter of whether they are moral or immoral people. See *White Fragility*, 13–14.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Kendi frequently emphasizes that troubles within "Black" communities are *only* the result of bad political policies and *not* of the behavior of people within them. See *How to Be an Antiracist*, 8–9, 18–20, 64, 117, 153. He does not even permit discussion of other potentially contributing factors (27, 185).

<sup>22</sup> DiAngelo explicitly embraces identity politics in *White Fragility*, xiii–xiv.

<sup>23</sup> As Amy Chua puts it, "Once identity politics gains momentum, it inevitably subdivides, giving rise to ever-proliferating group identities demanding recognition." See *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 183.

<sup>24</sup> Kendi often speaks about race in terms of a struggle for power. E.g., see *How to Be an Antiracist*, 34–35, 38, 42, 130, 208. Cf. Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> This raises the complicated issue of *intersectionality*. For discussion of the importance of intersectionality for antiracism from a prominent antiracist, see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 188–200. For critical discussion of the same topic, see e.g. Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 123–32.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., see DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 15, 40; and Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 38, 193–98. To mention two other issues, some antiracists also claim that true opponents of racism must be feminist and anti-capitalist. E.g., see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 156–63, 189.

community of justified believers. Racism is a terrible thing in either community. But the answer and alternative to racism in each community looks different.

In political communities, the antidote to racism is recognition of our *common humanity*. Christians believe that all human beings are children of Adam, image-bearers of God, and beneficiaries of God's common grace under the Noahic covenant. However it is understood, our common humanity provides grounds for unity over against the divisiveness of racism and identity politics. But such political unity is relatively shallow, a unity of peaceful co-existence that will always remain fragile in a sinful world in which so many things threaten to divide us. In this context, I believe the (classical) liberalism of the U.S. constitutional order, or something like it, is the best we can do.<sup>28</sup> Such a system supports a broad array of liberties and aims at the kind of society in which people are judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."<sup>29</sup> Many antiracists (despite being designated "liberal" in contemporary American parlance) oppose such a system, due to their vision of social justice through identity politics and power redistribution.<sup>30</sup>

In our churches, however, the antidote to racism is recognition of not only our common humanity but especially our *redeemed humanity*. Christians are co-heirs with the Last Adam, re-created in the image of Christ. Their source of unity flows not from common grace but from saving grace, not from this present creation but from the new creation. These redemptive resources are far more powerful than anything political communities have at their disposal, although churches have often used these resources poorly. Consider two advantages the church's resources provide.

One concerns *identity*. Finding political unity in, for example, being an American with constitutional liberties is meaningful. But it is proving tenuous in the face of the fragmentation promoted by identity politics. The church has a much more powerful alternative to "the idea that one's position within society, as determined by group identity, dictates how one sees the world . . ."<sup>31</sup> Christians' vision of the world cannot be thus dictated, for their union with Christ through faith and baptism makes them *one*, and thus there are no Christian identity groups, either of ethnicity (Jew or Greek), class (slave or free), or sex (male or female) (Gal. 3:26–28), let alone the imaginary concept of race.

Another advantage concerns *hope*. A sort of Pelagianism pervades much antiracist literature. Evil resides in social structures and individuals learn it by socialization. Pessimism often accompanies this quasi-Pelagianism, and with good reason: if changing an individual's behavior is difficult, changing social power structures is much harder, and where there is no true sin there is also no true grace. There is a lot of Romans 7 in antiracist literature, but without the triumphant note of hope at the end: "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (7:24–25). Most

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed argument for this, see David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), especially ch.12.

<sup>29</sup> These words, of course, are from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech; see *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 219. Antiracists frequently assail such appeals to King and portray him as a much more radical critic of the American polity. E.g., see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 179; DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 41; Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 148; and Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3, 26–29.

<sup>31</sup> As described by Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 118.

antiracists want to keep trying, through therapy and/or activism,<sup>32</sup> but there is nothing like *biblical* hope, which is certain and assured—even if fully realized only in the age-to-come. Christians rightly grieve over the church’s many racist failings, but unlike the world we do not grieve without hope (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13). Christians are rightly humbled by the church’s slow and uneven progress in de-racialization, but we remain confident that God’s grace is more powerful than our sin and that our sanctified striving for Christian unity and peace is not in vain (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58).

## 5. We Need a Serious and Consistent Commitment to a Non-Political Church.

Some Christians with antiracist sympathies criticize churches that, when faced with racial issues, appeal to the church’s non-political nature. This critique is valid insofar as it addresses inconsistent application of the idea,<sup>33</sup> for many churches have indeed appealed to it to avoid committing to political positions on race while expressing plenty of political opinions on other issues. But often the critique runs deeper and charges churches with improperly focusing on evangelism and conversion at the expense of promoting political reform.<sup>34</sup> This deeper critique is unsurprising when it comes from antiracist authors: if racism is primarily systemic rather than individual, then churches cannot oppose racism without political activism.

In this final section, I urge Reformed churches to resist the call to be politically engaged and to strive to be *consistently* non-political, refusing to “intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth” (Westminster Confession of Faith 31.4).<sup>35</sup> Contemporary tensions over race makes this idea *more* important, not less.

To be sure, the church must proclaim the whole counsel of God found in Scripture, even about issues that get dragged into political controversy. And of course, Christians may engage in political affairs as one of many legitimate vocations. But politics constantly involves making difficult judgment calls—about when to compromise and settle for a partial good when the full good is unattainable, about which candidate to support when all the choices are flawed, etc. Politics constantly involves judgment calls because politics constantly involves morally ambiguous things.<sup>36</sup> Of course, political players often pretend that what is morally ambiguous is unambiguous. One political faction views itself as good and other factions as evil. Being critical of one’s own faction, or saying something positive

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<sup>32</sup> I take it, generally, that DiAngelo’s approach in *White Fragility* is one of therapy, while Kendi’s in *How to Be an Antiracist* is one of activism. At the end of his book, Kendi proposes combatting racism in the body politic as physicians combat cancer in the human body, that is, by saturating “the body politic with the chemotherapy or immunotherapy of antiracist policies” (237). This analogy makes some sense if the problem with racism does not lie in the human heart but in social structures.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., see Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., see Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 69, 135, 140–41, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Some Reformed theologians discuss this issue in terms of the “spirituality of the church” while others believe the term has been poisoned by its abuse and that we should not use it. I will not engage this debate here.

<sup>36</sup> By “morally ambiguous things,” I mean issues that involve genuine moral choices yet require us to choose between things that involve mixtures of good and evil rather than between things that are wholly good or wholly evil. Whether to defraud one’s neighbor is not morally ambiguous. Whether to speed through a residential neighborhood where children are playing to get a person having a stroke to a hospital is morally ambiguous.

about another faction, is forbidden. But no political party or agenda is unambiguously good. None is beyond critique.

Thus, when the church plays politics, it unnecessarily takes sides with some of its members over other members on “opinions” or *debatable things* (Rom. 14:1).<sup>37</sup> It makes some members’ judgment call on morally ambiguous matters the official position of the church and dismisses the judgments of others. The church thereby goes beyond its mandate to proclaim the unambiguous Scriptures and that alone.

Although I hate to bring it up, the Trump presidency provides an excellent example. To act as though it was either unambiguously good or unambiguously evil is preposterous (although many Americans do one or the other). It is one thing, then, for individual Christians to take all things into consideration and make a judgment call to vote for Trump or to decline to vote for him. But it is far different for a church to be pro-Trump or anti-Trump. If a church chooses one of these paths, it must either admit that it makes a judgment call about a morally ambiguous matter or pretend that the matter is morally unambiguous. If the former, it violates its mandate to teach only the Scriptures. If the latter, it not only deceives itself but also communicates that its members who made a different judgment call have sinned.

These comments are relevant here, in part, because racial issues were one of the flashpoints of the Trump presidency. Many Christians were willing to overlook his inflammatory rhetoric in light of his support for other issues close to their hearts. Other Christians were not willing to overlook it. These were morally ambiguous decisions. Christians should at least be able to agree on that, which means the church has no business deciding the issue for all its members. The preceding comments are also relevant because, as is well-known, Christians of different racial categorization tended to make this ambiguous decision in rather different ways. Thus, churches that take it upon themselves to decide the issue seem likely to exacerbate the racial segregation of American Christianity, not heal it.

## Conclusion

When it comes to race and racism, Reformed churches must reflect on their history soberly and work toward a better future seriously. May the Lord grant us much humility, charity, and wisdom.

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<sup>37</sup> On some *ecclesiastical* matters, this is necessary. A congregation’s members may have different opinions about what time to begin Sunday morning worship, for instance, but the church must make a decision.

# Servant Standards

## Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

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by Alan D. Strange

### Chapter XIV The Regional Church and Its Presbytery

1. A regional church consists of all the members of the local congregations and the ministers within a certain district. The general assembly may organize a regional church when there are at least four congregations, two ministers, and two ruling elders, within a region.

**Comment:** The church does not exist only locally. Particularly, congregations of the same denomination enjoying some degree of proximity form a regional church. Ideally, a regional church should consist of local congregations that are reasonably contiguous; however, necessity often demands that a regional church be more spread out, due to number restrictions. In the OPC, for example, in some areas of the country, our churches are too few and too distant from other congregations to be able to realize the regional church in its more desirable form, which is congregations having sufficient propinquity for meaningful interaction and cooperation. Such a regional church consists of all the members of the local congregations within the relevant district together with all the ministers, both the pastors and the other ministers in that area. The general assembly may organize within a particular district a new regional church with as few as four congregations (also consisting of at least two ministers and two ruling elders).

2. The presbytery is the governing body of a regional church. It consists of all the ministers and all the ruling elders of the congregations of the regional church.

**Comment:** The presbytery is the governing body of the regional church, even as the session is the governing body of a local church and the general assembly the governing body of the whole church. The presbytery, in one sense, consists of all the ministers and all the ruling elders of the congregations within a particular regional church. I say “in one sense” because only the ministers are permanent members of the presbyteries, ruling elders having their memberships in the local churches. The sense in which the presbytery can be said to consist also of ruling elders (in addition to the ministers whose membership is in the presbyteries) is when certain ruling elders are commissioned to serve in presbytery by their local sessions. Before every meeting of presbytery, for instance, each congregation, by action of its session, gets to commission one ruling elder (and an alternate) to serve together with all the ministers of that presbytery. It is in this sense, then, that ruling elders can be said to be members of the presbytery along with all the ministers of that presbytery.

3. Meetings of the presbytery shall be composed, insofar as possible, of all the ministers on the roll and one ruling elder from each congregation commissioned by the respective

sessions. Any four presbyters, among whom shall be at least two ministers and one commissioned ruling elder, being met at the time and place appointed, shall be a quorum.

**Comment:** As noted immediately above, the presbytery consists in an ongoing way of all the ministers who have membership in it, together with the ruling elders who are elected by their respective sessions to serve as commissioners in any given meeting of said presbytery. This section further clarifies the meaning of presbytery, defining the presbytery as consisting of all its ministers and one ruling elder from each of its local congregations (if possible—some churches may not have ruling elders available to serve in any given meeting of presbytery). A quorum is defined as any four members of presbytery, which must include at least two ministers and one commissioned ruling elder, met together at the appointed place.

Perhaps a note about the nomenclature “commissioned” and the use of the term “commissioners” is in order. Some other Reformed churches do not designate those who serve at higher or broader levels of the church as “commissioners.” Rather they are called “delegates.” The terms imply differing conceptions: “commissioners” are those selected to go to higher/broader judicatories and to deliberate and vote in accordance with their best understanding of the issues under consideration, especially as debate serves to clarify the issues. “Delegates” are assumed to be representatives of the bodies that sent them (commissioners are this as well, but in a different sense) and may be instructed to vote as their sending bodies require.<sup>1</sup>

To be concrete, a delegate from a consistory (the Reformed equivalent of a session) may be instructed by his sending body to vote in a particular way on an overture that might be before the classis (the Reformed equivalent of presbytery) or synod (the Reformed equivalent of general assembly). While a ruling elder commissioner to presbytery or general assembly may know the mind of his sending body, he is responsible to listen to and engage in debate about the issues as such debate takes place in the assembly in which he is commissioned to vote, voting his conscience as informed by the Word and as he stands *coram Deo*. A commissioner, while indeed a representative of his sending body, remains free to vote and act as he sees fit, in accordance with the Word of God, the constitution of the church, and what he believes to be wisdom with regards to the matter(s) under consideration.

4. The moderator shall be chosen from among its members from year to year, or for some shorter term if the presbytery so determines, and shall serve until his successor is installed.

**Comment:** The moderator of the presbytery is one of its members, elected annually, able to succeed himself in accordance with the will of the presbytery. He may serve a shorter term or for a specified purpose. A presbytery may elect someone, for example, to moderate it in the event of the presbytery acting as a trial judicatory, while retaining the already elected moderator to serve in its non-judicial meetings in that same time frame. Whoever is elected moderator serves the annual or lesser term, remaining in the chair until his elected successor is installed as moderator. This means that his service does not end with the election of a new moderator but only with the installation of a new moderator.

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Seventy-First General Assembly of the OPC* (2004), 267. This is from the *Report of the Committee to Study the View of Creation* and reflects some of the polity considerations of that committee.

Some have argued that since ministers are its continuing members and ruling elders its occasional members (serving only when commissioned by the session to vote at presbytery), ministers should ordinarily serve as moderators of the presbytery. In practice, most presbyteries elect ministers to moderate and this seems in keeping with the requirement that presbytery chose a moderator “from among its members”: only ministers have their membership in the presbytery (and are thus its permanent members), ruling elders having their membership in the local congregations. That having been said, in more recent years presbyteries have also elected ruling elders to serve as moderators.

5. The presbytery has the power to order whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare of the churches under its care, always respecting the liberties guaranteed to the individual congregations under the constitution. In the exercise of its jurisdiction the presbytery has responsibility for evangelism within the bounds of its region, especially in areas which are not within the sphere of service in any one congregation. Similarly the presbytery shall seek to foster fellowship in worship and nurture in the church as a whole within its region.

The presbytery has the power to organize and receive congregations (cf. Chapter XXIX), to unite and dissolve congregations, at the request of the people and with the advice of the sessions involved, to visit particular churches for the purpose of inquiring into their state and of taking proper measures to insure that the evils which may have arisen in them shall be redressed. Presbytery shall examine and approve or censure the records of church sessions.

Further, the presbytery has power to receive and issue all appeals, and other matters, that are brought before it from church sessions in a regular manner, subject to the provisions of the Book of Discipline; to resolve questions of doctrine or discipline seriously and reasonably proposed; to condemn erroneous opinions which injure the purity or peace of the church; to take under its care, examine, and license candidates for the holy ministry; and to ordain, install, remove, and judge ministers.

**Comment:** The government of the Presbyterian church is importantly one of graded judicatories. Thus, the first sentence of this section indicates that the power of the presbytery is not merely advisory but real and fundamental to the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian church, in fact, over against the conception of church held by some other Reformed churches, does not properly exist in any given area simply by the existence of a church or two that is Presbyterian: it exists only when those churches form a presbytery. This can be seen in the case of the American Presbyterian church. There were various Presbyterian churches in existence before 1706, but the Presbyterian church was not reckoned to exist in this country until the formation of the first presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, there is a balance struck here between the power of the presbytery and the liberties enjoyed by the individual congregations that constitute that presbytery. Even as there is a balance in office and shared power between ministers and ruling elders, so there is also such a balance when it comes to the church in its local manifestation and in its regional expression (in the presbytery). Note the language of “spiritual welfare” as a reminder, as we saw particularly in the commentary on the first four chapters of this FG, that the calling and the task of the church is a spiritual one. This also implies that the

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<sup>2</sup> Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*, 24–32.

maintenance and welfare of physical matters (such as a local congregation's land and properties) remains under the control of those at the local level.

To say that the presbytery has responsibility for evangelism within the bounds of its region is to acknowledge that the presbytery, whatever local churches may or may not be doing with respect to evangelism, has a specific calling to reach all within its boundaries with the gospel. To this end, most presbyteries have some sort of church planting and home missions committee that helps the presbytery tend to this task; many presbyteries employ a regional home missionary particularly focused on this task. The presbytery, then, should be planting mission churches in its task of gathering and discipling the saints (WCF 25). Such church planting efforts find a special focus in the areas of the presbytery with no local OPC congregation nearby that could reach out in gospel witness.

The presbytery should also seek fellowship with other sound churches of its region, especially other confessional Reformed and Presbyterian bodies with whom the OPC has fraternal relations (one thinks especially of NAPARC<sup>3</sup> churches here). This would commonly be expressed by a presbytery sending representatives (fraternal delegates) of itself to the regional meetings of other Reformed and Presbyterian churches and receiving such delegates at its meetings. Another way that ecumenicity may be expressed, e.g., is when OPC and PCA presbyteries (or OPC presbyteries and URC classes) have joint meetings and pulpit exchanges as an expression of this ecumenical unity.

The presbytery has the power to organize and receive congregations, in accordance with FG 29 (further discussed in the commentary on that chapter), as well as power to unite and dissolve congregations within its bounds. This power, however, is exercised only with the approbation of the people and in consultation with the respective sessions. It is not a unilateral power but one shared between the higher judicatory (the presbytery) and those congregations proposing to come into the presbytery or come to an end of their existence as local churches.

The presbytery exercises direct oversight of the churches in its region both by its power of visitation of those churches and its review of the minutes of the sessions under its jurisdiction. Many presbyteries, in order to carry out this mandate of the FG, have visitation committees that go to the churches on a regular schedule or in the case of evident need, either as raised by the church or observed by the presbytery. It is fitting that the session of a local congregation invite such a visitation (whether regular or in the case of particular need(s)) and welcome the visitation committee. Ordinary visits look over the whole scope of the ministry and assess the state of all the programs of the local church. Presbytery by-laws or standing rules customarily detail what should occur in such visits. Visits, initiated either by the presbytery or the session, which occur to address particular needs or emergencies, may be more narrowly focused on those crises that occasioned presbyters being called in to help in the local church.

It is not, however, the case in Presbyterianism that if the presbytery is aware of acute need and wishes to visit a particular church, the local session should seek to stop such a visit. Such sentiment bespeaks congregationalism and is unworthy of a Presbyterian church. To be sure, presbytery should ordinarily be deferential to the local church with respect to visitation, but not to the point of ignoring local situations where the presbytery is clearly needed. When manifest wrongs occur in a congregation and the local session refuses to invite or receive a visitation from presbytery, Presbyterianism suffers. Presbytery

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<sup>3</sup> North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.

interaction to help a local congregation through some of its most challenging problems or crises is one of the great blessings of Presbyterianism and should not be resisted but received as such. At the same time, presbytery must never be abusive of its congregations and sessions, but humbly assist and direct them in support of their mutual ministries.

Additionally, presbytery is the recipient of appeals coming from the local churches in its region, whether of complaints brought on appeal (BD 9) or appeals of judicial cases (BD 7). This is all detailed at the appropriate places in the BD and will be duly commented on at such points. Further, presbytery may address all matters brought before it in a regular manner (“according to the rule”) from the sessions beneath it, such as those seeking its counsel and guidance. In this respect it may also resolve questions having to do with teaching (doctrine) or life (discipline) that are seriously proposed and brought before it, either by its members or from the churches within its bounds. As a part of this power it may condemn seriously erroneous positions (ones which harm the purity or peace of the church), perhaps taking action against such after careful study by a committee appointed for that purpose.

It should be noted that sometimes matters from congregations or members thereof percolate up to presbytery in an irregular manner (perhaps not through the appeal process). This does not mean that the presbytery should ignore or simply dismiss such concerns but should address them in some fashion, especially when it may appear that those bringing disputes to presbytery by letter or other means may be unclear about the church’s proper polity procedures. At every level of governance (session, presbytery, and general assembly) those given rule and ministry in such should take care to do right by those with concerns, even if those concerns are expressed in an irregular or arguably disorderly fashion. Justice and equity demand that the church hears matters, or helps those with concerns to put them in proper form, even when those matters may be improperly presented or expressed.

Finally, perhaps the most important regular duty of the presbytery is the whole process of ordaining and installing men for the gospel ministry. The process, detailed later in the FG (chapter 21 and following), begins with the presbytery taking a prospective candidate for the gospel ministry under the care of the presbytery, often at the point of entry into seminary or shortly thereafter. The candidate proceeds down a path that includes examination for licensure, licensing, the processing of a call that has been issued, and further examination in advance of ordination and installation. The presbytery customarily employs a committee on candidates and credentials to aid in this work. The presbytery also dissolves pastoral relationships when a man retires, takes another call, or leaves the ministry. It also judicially tries and censures impenitent ministers and restores penitent ministers. Again, all of this is described in great detail later in the FG and in the BD.

6. It shall be the duty of the presbytery to keep an accurate record of its proceedings and to submit this record to the general assembly for examination at least once each year. The presbytery shall also report to the general assembly each year the licensures, ordinations, the receiving or dismissing of members, the removal of members by death, the organization, reception, union, or dissolution of congregations, or the formation of new ones, and in general, all the important changes which have taken place within its bounds in the course of the year.

**Comment:** The presbytery, as is true of the session (see comments on FG 13), is to keep an accurate record of its proceedings and of its actions (minutes) and submit the same to the general assembly for yearly review. These minutes shall include all of the matters

detailed here in this section in the manner required by the GA in its “Rule for Keeping Presbytery Minutes.”<sup>4</sup>

7. The presbytery shall meet on its own adjournment; and when any emergency shall require a meeting sooner than the time to which it stands adjourned, the moderator, or, in case of his absence, death, or inability to act, the stated clerk, shall, at the request of any two ministers and two ruling elders, the ruling elders being of different congregations, call a special meeting; the moderator or the stated clerk, as the case may be, if otherwise qualified to do so, may be one of those making the request. For this purpose a circular letter shall be sent, specifying the particular business of the intended meeting, to every minister and the clerk of every session under the jurisdiction of the presbytery, at least ten days prior to the meeting. Nothing shall be transacted at such special meeting besides the particular business for which the judicatory has been convened.

**Comment:** The first sentence means that the presbytery will determine the date, places, and times of its stated meetings, meeting thereupon, and meeting again when it determines to do so. The presbyteries in the OPC tend to hold regular (stated) meetings from two to four times annually. Special meetings of the presbytery may occur when any emergency arises requiring such before the next stated meeting. It should here be noted that “emergency” is to be taken in the classical sense of the word—an occasion that emerges necessitating attention sooner than the stated meeting would permit. Presbyteries are free to define further what may constitute such emergencies in their by-laws or standing rules.

For presbyteries that have fewer stated meetings annually (say, two or less) than others that have three or four, it seems ill-advised to be overly restrictive with what constitutes an emergency. One might argue that only two stated meetings annually are inimical to the idea of a regional church, whose presbytery would better gather oftener in the regular enjoyment of mutual service and fellowship. Further, making particular local churches wait months before calls can be processed and other matters of moment properly addressed can discourage local churches and induce the sense that presbytery is not a tool of mutual edification but an obstacle to be overcome by the local church.

Both local churches and presbyteries must strive harder to make their relationship a better one—one that works for the good of both local churches and the regional church. One solution to this is geographically closer presbyteries that meet more often. In any case, there always remains much work to be done to achieve a better and more functional Presbyterianism.

Special meetings are to be called by the moderator of presbytery, or in his inability to do so, the stated clerk upon the request of two ministers and two ruling elders (these being from different congregations). The moderator and stated clerk, if otherwise qualified to do so (two ruling elders from the same congregation, for instance, could not do so), may make up the required number and office needed to call such a special meeting. A call to a special meeting must be issued at least ten days in advance of the meeting, either in a letter by the post or electronic circulation, and must specify the business that is to be conducted at the special meeting, customarily describing it with the addition of “and matters germane,” so that what properly pertains to the special business may be done even if not specifically

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<sup>4</sup> *Standing Rules and Instruments of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 18, accessed at <https://www.opc.org/GA/StandingRules2019-2020.pdf> on 1/28/21.

detailed. No other business may be transacted at such a special meeting except that which was contained in the call to the meeting.

8. Each day's session shall be opened and closed with prayer.

**Comment:** The meetings of presbytery, because a meeting of the judicatory of the regional church, should be opened and closed with prayer.

9. Uncommissioned elders of the regional church, and presbyters in good standing in other presbyteries or in churches of like faith and practice, who may be present, may be invited to sit with the presbytery as corresponding members. Such members shall be entitled to deliberate and advise, but not to vote in any decisions of the presbytery.

**Comment:** Any given meeting of the presbytery will have not only ministers and commissioned elders in attendance but will usually also have other ruling elders of that presbytery, who have not been commissioned by a session, present. It is customary to invite (though not automatic or required) such men to sit with the presbytery as corresponding members, which means that they have the privilege of the floor and may enter into deliberations and offer advice to the presbytery but may not vote. Those who are presbyters in good standing (meaning that they are not under judicial censure) in other presbyteries within the OPC, or other churches of like faith and practice (NAPARC churches, for instance), may also be invited to be a part of the presbytery as corresponding members (all also without vote).

It should be noted that “presbyters” here tends to assume that such men are ministers, since it speaks of them as coming from other presbyteries, and only ministers properly come from “other presbyteries,” whereas ruling elders come from other churches in other presbyteries. This does mean that a ruling elder present at a meeting of a presbytery other than the one of which his church is a part may not be seated as a corresponding member of the presbytery he visits. It is to say, however, that the provision to seat visiting presbyters would thus not automatically apply to ruling elders from other presbyteries (in the same way it would to ministers), who would not necessarily be seated as corresponding members but who may be given the privilege of the floor, especially at the point needed to address the bodies in which they are guests.

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# ServantReading

## Slavery and Covenanters

A Review Article

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by Alan D. Strange

*Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution*, by Joseph S. Moore. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, xiv + 214 pages, \$36.95.

Joseph Moore, an Assistant Professor of History at Gardner-Webb University (North Carolina), argues in this book that the heirs of the Scottish Covenanters opposed two things especially as they relocated to the British colonies and the new American nation: the “godless” U.S. Constitution and the chattel slavery that it protected. This book examines both the abolitionism of the Covenanters and their opposition to the lack of any acknowledgment of God and Christ in the nation’s governing charter. The latter manifested itself over the course of many decades in an attempt to amend the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution to read

We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as Governor among the nations, in order to constitute a Christian government, to form a more perfect Union . . .” (119)

There were some variations on this proposed amendment, but the idea remained the same: Covenanters thought that the nation must formally and legally admit its obligations to God, which they believed was incumbent on all nations to which the gospel had come, and openly submit to “the crown rights of King Jesus.” This was necessary for America to be a properly Christian nation, according to Covenanter reasoning; otherwise, it was a mere rebel government, not worthy of the support of Christians, a position that in the Old and New Worlds rendered the Covenanters suspect as purveyors of treason and sedition. The process of the civil authorities in swearing fealty to God and his rule found expression in “covenanting,” the way in which the kings of the earth kissed the Son (Ps. 2).

If the federal government would but acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, Covenanters averred, the U.S. could address “manstealing,” the chief sin associated with chattel slavery, which could then be eliminated. The Covenanters, in addition to insisting on the necessity for such civil covenanting, also found the sin of manstealing to be contrary to a Christian profession (I Tim. 1:10) and excluded from communion those who refused to manumit their slaves and renounce chattel slavery. On this point the Covenanters differed with their mainstream brethren, particularly the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA). The PCUSA, though it expressed opposition to slavery,

never took the sort of uncompromising stance that the Covenanters did with respect both to opposing the U.S. Constitution and slavery.

Moore points out that the Covenanters are among the most influential religionists in this country of which scarcely anyone has heard. The attempt of the Covenanters to amend the U.S. Constitution so that it would reflect national submission to God and Christ continued for many years. The National Reform Association (NRA) was started largely by Covenanters in 1864 to promote such a “God amendment.” It caused no little furor as late as the 1980 U.S. Presidential campaign when it was realized that third-party candidate John Anderson had sought to introduce a version of the “God amendment” in Congress. When Anderson’s support of such was brought to light, the public was shocked. As odd as the “God amendment” seemed at the time, it serves as testimony to how far-reaching this lost cause of the Covenanters was.

Who are Covenanters? Perhaps the readers have seen those charts depicting the “family tree” of American Presbyterianism. The top half typically depicts the majority tradition: The Church of Scotland, Free Church of Scotland, and the other churches deriving therefrom. The OPC and the PCA, for instance, both derive from this part of Scottish Presbyterianism. The bottom half of such charts shows the Covenanter and Seceder lines. Both are the subject of Moore’s book; he lumps the two groups together, though the Covenanters are decidedly more adamant about these matters than the Seceders. The Covenanters derive from those who promoted the National Covenant of 1638 in Scotland and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. The Seceders come out of the Marrow Controversy in Scotland in the early part of the next century. The Covenanters today, at least in their Old School form, are represented by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA) and the Seceders by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC). All of these churches—OPC, PCA, RPCNA, and ARPC—are allied in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

Perhaps a brief examination of the origins of “covenanting” would be useful. Reform came to Scotland in 1560 with the Scottish Confession and the First Book of Discipline. What characterized these reforms was opposition to Episcopacy, Erastianism, and later, after its rise in the seventeenth century, Arminianism. All parties continued to embrace the idea of Christendom, as had the Roman Catholic Church, which entailed support of the notion of a religious establishment, in which the civil government supported, including monetarily, the official established church. The problem here was how to do this without promoting Erastianism, the notion that the state is over the church. This idea was core to the Caesaro-papism of the East, which permitted the Emperor to hold decisive sway in the church. In the West the Roman Catholic Church rejected the idea of the state being over the church, proclaiming instead that the church was over the state.

When Reformation came, many Protestant rulers, in seeking to turn the tables on the Romanists, adopted their own view of state over church (the Erastian position), quite egregiously in the British context, in which the king of England claimed headship over all the church in his realm. The Second Book of Discipline (1578) offered a potential solution to this problem in its doctrine of the Spiritual Independency of the Church.

Another solution to this problem would be to embrace what later became known as the Voluntary Church movement, the kind of disestablishment ethos that came to prevail in America. Scotsmen did not embrace this position, however. They wanted to find a way

to support an established church that would not be Erastian, a position that may be hard to avoid with an establishment principle that involves the state itself funding the church and calling and overseeing her synods. Enter the notion of “covenanting.” The Covenanter movement arose as a way to maintain the establishment principle and, at the same time, avoid Erastianism. The covenanting idea is that the state is bound to God’s law and the governorship of Christ and, by sworn oath, is to be in explicit submission to the divine. The question that naturally arises is that in a contract (which is what a covenant is, at least in part) between God and man, to which all men are to subscribe and swear allegiance, “who speaks for God?”

Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, and William Henderson, as leading lights among the Covenanters, would say “God, who has already spoken in His Word.” How is such to be understood and interpreted, though? The answer of the Covenanters would be through the agency of the church, particularly through the preaching of the Word. Covenanting is a sort of Protestant version of the church over the state, arguing that the Presbyterian church is established by divine right and, as the only true church in any properly Christian nation, has the right and obligation to inform the state of her duties. How specifically though? How does a book (the Bible) that was meant to govern God’s people in a particular redemptive historical moment—during the time of types and shadows—in a particular land—in a primitive agricultural society—apply, especially politically, once the gospel goes global and all these conditions radically change? Certainly, one does not see this sort of church/state relationship in the New Testament. Here are some of the problems with the whole covenanting idea. It seems an odd sort of special pleading to argue that the New Testament warrants the Presbyterian Church to instruct the state as to her specific duties and to hold her feet to the fire in assessing the state’s compliance to the church’s proclamations. Might not this approach baptize political views as if such came from Scripture?

Moore treats the rise and fall of the covenanting idea in Scotland itself in the seventeenth century. By the end of the century, the Toleration Act of 1689 and other developments permitted the Scots to maintain an established Presbyterian church without the over-lordship of the British monarch. This was mainly what Scotland desired, and the covenanting movement, earlier embraced to achieve this, was no longer mainstream and, in fact, became radicalized and persecuted as seditious (thousands perished in the “Killing Times”). The now marginalized covenanting movement (and even the Seceding movement of the 1730’s, in the aftermath of the Marrow Controversy) never amounted to much thereafter in Scotland. Perusal of a mainstream Free Church of Scotland (founded as a result of the Disruption in the Church of Scotland, 1843) book on the church, James Bannerman’s *The Church of Christ*,<sup>1</sup> makes clear that the Free Church opposed Voluntaryism and still embraced, at least in principle, establishmentarianism. The principle of “covenanting,” though, was not deemed necessary to secure such.

Some of these covenanters, due to persecution in Scotland, and other factors, moved to America. They settled in Virginia, the Carolinas, and especially Western Pennsylvania, becoming ardent patriots in the American Revolution. They were quite happy to oppose King George III (and British rule generally) and to argue the illegitimacy of the rule of a state (England, especially) that had once covenanted (as they claimed) and now had broken covenant with God.

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<sup>1</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols., (repr., 1869, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974).

The Covenanters became sorely disappointed in the failure of the new nation to recognize God in the U.S. Constitution. The Preamble failed to do so, declaring in Lockean fashion that the government derived its authority not from God but from “We the People.” Furthermore, to add insult to the injury of no acknowledgment of God, the Constitution forbade any religious test for office. It declared, in the last part of Article 6, Clause 3: “but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” This meant that an atheist, a heretic, or a follower of another religion than Christian (Jews, Muslims, etc.) might serve in any office of the Federal government. While some state constitutions retained religious tests for office and religious establishments (Massachusetts maintaining an established church until 1833), the Federal Government, both in the “no religious test” clause and in the First Amendment to the Constitution (which forbade Congress to establish any particular religion or church) explicitly prohibited such.

Accompanying this failure to acknowledge the Supreme Deity in the national charter was the provision made in it for the godless “peculiar institution” of slavery. Slaves first came to Virginia in 1619 and by the time of the country’s founding the institution seemed to be waning. The word “slavery” is never mentioned in the Constitution and the founding document did not permit the slave trade to extend further than 1808, with the apparent intention being the desired withering away of the institution in the new nation. But the newly revived cotton industry made the South more dedicated to slavery than ever. The PCUSA, before its 1837 division into Old and New Schools, adopted a statement at its GA in 1818 condemning slavery and calling for its abolition. However, this never materialized, and by the 1830s and 1840s the PCUSA, especially the Old School, came to regard abolitionist rhetoric as threatening to the bond of union in church and state.

This stands in marked contrast to the Covenanters, who insisted that Africans were in the image of God and thus should not be enslaved. The Covenanters identified with the plight of slaves, seeing themselves also as victims of the establishment. In the early national period, when most Americans were embracing and perpetuating the “George Washington myth,” Covenanters taught that Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and the other Founders were not heroes in heaven but rebels in perdition. This did not endear them or their cause to fellow Americans.

As time progressed the American narrative among many Christians ran like this: America’s origin was distinctly Christian and America was a Christian nation at its founding. The Covenanters begged to differ, given the Constitutional absence of any acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ and the embrace of slavery, with many Christians not only slaveholders but serving as its chief defenders, particularly in the PCUSA. In the South, Seceders supported the American Colonization Society (which chiefly involved the emigration of freed slaves to Liberia) and other measures more acceptable to a South that grew increasingly intolerant of any opposition to slavery. In the North, many Covenanters established and manned the Underground Railroad, spiriting slaves especially through Ohio to freedom in Canada.

They particularly opposed the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850, the Dred Scott decision of 1857, and supported John Brown and his raid on Harper’s Ferry. Covenanters viewed the Constitution as a sort of “covenant with death,” particularly in light of the three-fifths clause in which slaves were deemed three-fifths of

a person for purposes of taxation and representation. Covenanters embraced the argument, long before William Lloyd Garrison and other famous abolitionists did, that the Constitution promulgated the notion that slavery meant that not only did the labor of the slave belong to the slaveholder but also the person of the slave did. Frederick Douglass opposed this and averred that the Constitution taught that there was “no property in man.” The Covenanters were to the left of Douglass and others on this and contributed to the rise of political liberalism, not on the question of the “God amendment,” but in critique of the Constitution, slavery, and matters germane.

Moore notes that the Covenanters in the North, which is where they ultimately came primarily to reside (the South being quite hostile to them), remained staunch opponents of slavery before and of racism after the Civil War. The Seceders, largely in the South, muted their abolitionism and sought to do what they could to better the condition of slaves, taking a more moderate course (since abolitionism, at least openly, became impossible in the South in the run-up to the War). After the War, however, not only did some Seceders not oppose racism and Jim Crow but gave way to and supported it. Ultimately, then, it remained the preserve of the Covenanters, in distinction from the Seceders, to continue in staunch opposition to slavery and all its attendant evils (whether racism was a consequence or more of a cause of African slavery remains hotly disputed).

Moore’s book is a welcome contribution to the growing literature assessing historic attitudes to slavery, showing that at least some Presbyterians, namely, the Covenanters, stood firmly opposed to slavery from the beginning, though never able to convince wider Presbyterianism, and certainly not the nation, to embrace the idea of “covenanting.”

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# Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason *by Pierre Manent*

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by David VanDrunen

*Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, by Pierre Manent, trans. Ralph C. Hancock. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, xxvi + 149 pages, \$29.00.

French political philosopher Pierre Manent offers a relatively brief but intellectually dense account of our present moral and political condition. Although Manent uses the ideas of natural law and human rights to frame his study, readers may think of it generally as an attempt to explain the cultural changes that have agitated Western societies in recent generations and to point a better way forward.

In the opening chapter, Manent introduces two important concepts. He claims that modern opinion opposes *natural law* because it is an obstacle to *human rights*. Natural law promotes “the idea of freedom under law” and is grounded in “human nature” (7). This refers to *universal* human nature, to characteristics that all humans share in common. The notion of human rights is about nature too, but in the sense of a person’s *individual* nature. There are no particular characteristics of an individual nature, and thus it can be “constructed and deconstructed as we wish” (10). Manent applies these insights to recent developments concerning sex and gender. He concludes that legalization of homosexual marriage was the paramount way to express the triumph of the concept of human rights, for it declared the rejection of human nature with respect to this most fundamental social institution.

The second chapter focuses on the historical origins of this turn from natural law to human rights. Given that Manent is a politically conservative Roman Catholic, his cast of characters offers few surprises. He thinks Thomas Hobbes’s thought was very important but devotes the most space to Machiavelli, who “contributed more than any other author to the discrediting of natural law” (34). Manent also claims that Martin Luther’s “reinterpretation of the Christian religious experience” (36) made a move analogous to Machiavelli’s. Readers familiar with Luther will see that Manent understands some important elements of Luther’s theology but portrays him simplistically as an antinomian.

Chapter 3 then reflects on the reconstruction of political thought emerging from the turn to human rights. Both classical and Christian thought approached politics presupposing that the world was already ordered by law. In contrast, modern human-rights doctrine imagines political life against the background of a lawless state of nature. Individuals grant power to a sovereign state to protect them, but the morality proper to the state remains indeterminate.

What is the result for the modern state? Chapter 4 argues that we now operate with the imaginary idea of the autonomous subject, in which the people supposedly authorize the sovereign’s actions and thereby command themselves. As a result, there is no longer any true commanding or obeying in political life. Manent suggests that the 1960s marked a “point of inflection” (75). The arguments derived from the unlimited sovereignty of

individual rights became unanswerable and prevailed over all the rules and meanings of every social institution. Law could no longer aim at objective goods without allegedly violating human rights.

The fifth chapter continues to analyze the modern condition. The moderns define humanity in terms of freedom, that is, a freedom from all impediments of nature. They reject the notion of freedom under law and insist that law has meaning only as the product or expression of their freedom. The state is regarded as legitimate because the people *consent* to it and because its officials *represent* them. Again, this destroys all true commanding and obeying.

Manent seeks to recover these ideas of commanding and obeying in his final chapter. Here, he develops his thoughts about natural law in most detail. “The very notion of natural law presupposes or implies that we have the ability to judge human conduct according to criteria that are clear, stable, and largely if not universally shared” (106). But Manent does not think natural law is exhaustive. It leaves “latitude” (110) and “room to deliberate and then to choose.” It “guides action but does not determine it” (111). It does not leave humanity in a state of condemnation but helps us find “a reasonably pleasant, useful, and noble life” (112). In an appendix, Manent concludes by calling for recovery of a proper understanding of law. He points to Thomas Aquinas as the most helpful guide. Such a recovery, he says, would turn back “the disordered extension of rights” that makes “unintelligible the very bases of European moral life” (127).

Reading Manent’s work will be a thought-provoking exercise for people concerned about contemporary morality and politics and who are willing and able to wrestle with intellectually challenging material. Many American Christians think of Europe as a completely secularized, post-Christian, religiously-skeptical place, but there are still plenty of serious European thinkers who are exceptions to this generalization. Manent is one of them. Reformed office-bearers in North America may find his book useful simply as a way to expand their horizons by engaging someone with many similar concerns but who writes from a different theological and social context.

Natural law can be a complex subject, but there is much to appreciate in the way Manent treats it. He is correct, I believe, to portray natural law as an objective moral standard that precedes our own individual lives and experiences. Skepticism about such an idea is indeed a root cause of much that ails Western moral and political life. I also think Manent is appropriately modest in seeing natural law more as a general moral compass than as an exhaustive standard that leaves little room for discretion or good judgment. Nevertheless, his claim that natural law does not condemn “humanity in its ordinary or current condition” as a “mass of perdition” (111) is directly contrary to Paul’s discussion of natural revelation in Romans 1:18–32. Any Christian theory of natural law needs to account for this crucial text.

One might wish to engage Manent critically on many smaller matters, but I conclude this review by focusing on one larger issue. Manent is a learned scholar, and so I wish to say this with modesty and due respect: While I affirm much of his analysis, I also protest that things are more complicated than he often suggests. There have been some good reasons for the increasing emphasis on human rights, and they are not necessarily at odds with natural law or traditional Christian conviction. In fact, as scholars such as Brian Tierney and John Witte have shown, rich notions of human/natural rights long pre-dated the modern period and complemented Christian natural-law theory and moral theology.

Human rights is an attractive idea when confronted by rulers who claim extensive authority and use it badly, mistreating many fellow humans in the process. In the face of foolish and unjust rulers, rights-claims (grounded properly in a common human nature) can be a powerful way to defend the dignity of each and every divine image-bearer.

Manent's book, I must say, has a rather strong authoritarian bent. He rightfully critiques the loss of objective law and morality and its threat to *legitimate authority*, but his repeated characterization of political life in terms of *commanding and obeying* leaves me at something of a loss. Healthy political life undoubtedly involves some degree of commanding and obeying, but to make this so prominent in the relationship between civil officials and citizens seems one-sided and even dangerous. In my judgment, we need both a recovery of natural law as an objective moral norm to guide legitimate authority and a nuanced affirmation of natural rights as checks upon what governments can do to people. But maintaining both is difficult, even elusive, and there is hardly a Reformed consensus about how to do it. Countless sessions and consistories found themselves internally divided during the pandemic of 2020 between those whose instinct is to defer to authority figures and those whose instinct is to challenge abuse of authority (to put it very simply, I admit). It is a delicate balance, but surely both are necessary. We undoubtedly require ongoing, charitable discussion to get that balance right.

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# ServantReading

## Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World *by David VanDrunen*

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By Richard M. Gamble

*Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020, 400 pages, \$29.99, paper.

Among the books I will never get around to writing is a history of the apolitical church in America from the colonial era to the present. It would be a boring book. Americans seem to have an insatiable appetite for books that purport to show how some event “changed America forever.” Prize-winning bestsellers also need to have happy endings, and I doubt the story of the apolitical church will have a happy ending, at least not in the immediate future, although a glorious future awaits the church at the consummation of the ages, and its work in the meantime could not be weightier or more precious.

Such a book would tell about pastors who did not preach that America was God’s New Israel, or that George Washington was a new Moses or Joshua; who did not make abstinence from alcohol a test of sanctification, let alone a standard for church membership, fellowship with other believers, or qualification for church office; who did not speak of their nations in terms of altars and martyrs, apostles and prophets. It would be the history of the ordinary (but extraordinary) ministry of Word and sacrament in the midst of the upheavals of 1776, 1812, 1861–65, 1914–1918, and 1939–1945. Above all, it would be the history of pastors who maintained the distinction between church and state (not a myth concocted by the secular left), the nation and the kingdom of God, the temporal and eternal. A story of pastors who never presumed to treat secular history as prophecy, or progress as providence, or attempted to read events as if they were “God’s alphabet,” who did not feel a warm glow when politicians sanctioned a generic religion or spirituality as if getting right with America was the same as getting right with God.

The only drama in this story would be the heroic resistance of pastors and congregations who refused to mobilize their churches for domestic and international crusades for righteousness. These small stories of integrity and fidelity have rarely been the stuff of headlines in American history, and too often what makes it into the press has been what makes it into the history books. The media follows the extravagant militants, millennialists, and radical pacifists, quoting the most quotable things said by extremists, and historians are only too happy to follow their lead.

After more than thirty years of teaching and writing, it is my conviction that the apolitical church ought to be as much a part of a Christian’s historical self-understanding as any abuse of the things of God and the things of Caesar.

These thoughts came to me repeatedly as I read David VanDrunen's excellent new book. His book is not directly about any of these things. Nevertheless, it has deep significance for not only how we think about Christianity and politics "after Christendom" and in the midst of our current confusion, but also for the way we think about the relationship between church and society throughout American history and back beyond it. Bad political theology is nothing new. As a diagnostic tool, VanDrunen's book is invaluable. Much would be gained by applying his insights to history, not as some prefabricated architecture imposed on the past, but as a way to ask fresh questions about church and states, or more broadly, religion and nation, in America. Every denomination at one time or another has been set in turmoil by sincere, earnest, and misguided calls for cultural transformation. Churches that stood by what Walter Rauschenbusch impatiently dismissed as the "pure gospel" have been condemned as indifferent at best and complicit in evil at worst.

VanDrunen has produced a timely and important addition to his body of work on two-kingdoms theology and its practical application with *Politics After Christendom*. It is a welcome companion to his *Living in God's Two Kingdoms, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms, Divine Covenants and Moral Order*,<sup>1</sup> and others. It is a sane book, and his call for modesty is urgently needed.

By "Christendom," VanDrunen has in mind "the vision of Christian civilization that emerged in the very early medieval period and stretched well into the modern era, primarily in the West" (15). That vision presupposed a common Christian culture and saw a large political role for the faith even while keeping institutions and callings distinct. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay referred to church and state as "two twins" ordained by God to care for his people. From New England to the mid-Atlantic colonies, to Virginia, leaders presupposed, as had Bucer, Calvin, Luther, and the Catholic Church before them, that the magistrate was to enforce both tables of the Law. They continued to live under the assumptions of a unified Christendom in place since at least Constantine legalized Christianity, and his heirs made it the only legal religion. Christendom was challenged by Enlightenment notions of individual liberty and America's confrontation with the reality of religious pluralism. The question of how to live with neighbors not baptized into my church became a question of practical politics, and the solution was contested and anything but obvious.

VanDrunen argues that the Bible affirms that earthly government is legitimate, provisional (a temporary means to limited ends), common to believers and unbelievers, and accountable to God. He seeks to reacquaint Christians with the natural law tradition that the Reformers embraced, the doctrine of the two cities as articulated by Augustine and others, the two kingdoms of common and redemptive rule, and the biblical covenants that underlie each. VanDrunen presents his incorporation of covenants into longstanding treatments of political theology in the West as his distinct contribution to the debate. To that end, he turns to the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:21–9:17) as key to understanding God's relationship to the civil order. God made that covenant with all mankind after the Flood, charging them to be fruitful, creative, and provide for justice, particularly in the protection of life. Even when they do so unwittingly, earthly governments carry out this

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<sup>1</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), and *Two Kingdoms, Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

divine mandate, however imperfectly. These kingdoms are not holy communities, thus not redemptive. That task and honor belongs to the church alone. In a sense, VanDrunen argues for a Christian exceptionalism—the church is distinct, superior to the ambitions of earthly powers, endowed with a mission belonging only to itself, and judged not by the degree to which it transforms the world but by its fidelity in proclamation, worship, and equipping the saints in the present age as the bride awaits the Bridegroom.

At a time when the social gospel makes even greater inroads into American evangelicalism in matters of racial politics and social justice, when Pope Francis breaks down further the distinction between the church and the world in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Oct. 3, 2020), and when a bizarre mix of the prosperity gospel and Donald Trump gathers on the Mall in Washington, DC, for what Michael Horton recently denounced as “Trumpianity,” the need for a sane defense of two-kingdom theology could not be more obvious. Both the left and right in American politics have to one degree or another mobilized the church for action. Believers who resist the itch to intervene and defend the apolitical calling of the church can expect little sympathy and much misunderstanding and no thanks for their efforts. But how many believers have the biblical framework, especially a theology of the proper relationship between ancient Israel and the church, to see what is going on in these calls for relevance and know how to mount a defense?

We are in VanDrunen’s debt for doing the painstaking work of scholarship and biblical exegesis to reground the church in her high calling in the midst of “a fractured world.” We have Jesus’s promise that we will have tribulation in the world and also the promise that he has overcome the world. And he has done so and is doing so in a way that no Christian should exchange for any substitute, no matter how alluring.

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# 7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On *by* *William J. Edgar*

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By Charles Malcolm Wingard

*7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On*, by William J. Edgar. Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2020, 68 pages, \$9.00, paper.

Only a rare book fits well in the hands of both the unbeliever (exploring what Christianity is all about) and the mature believer who wants to think deeply about the demands of God's Word upon his life. William Edgar's *7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On* is one of those books.

The author identifies four fundamental questions from Genesis:

- Did God really say?
- Where are you?
- Where is the lamb?
- Am I in the place of God?

To these he adds three from the gospels:

- Where is the baby born to be King of the Jews?
- Do you want to be healed?
- Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?

The author has a gift for pinpointing core issues of concern: attitudes toward authority, yearnings to fix a broken world and our own broken lives, the delusion of the autonomous self, just how much we truly desire salvation, and where we look for it.

As Edgar explains and reflects upon these questions, the reader is forced to consider his responses—both to the voices of unbelief in our culture, as well as the rebellious thoughts that tempt us to doubt what God has said. Have we taken into account the reality of our offenses against God and his holy wrath, contrasted with the offenses of others against us and our *unholy* wrath? No matter how long one has walked with Christ, these remain pressing concerns.

Chapter 3 gives a flavor of Edgar's approach as it surveys Genesis 22 and Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb?" Our world is twisted, broken, and impervious to rehabilitation and fixing. The real problem is sin and the suppression of truth that brings

God's righteous wrath upon man. What is the solution that makes man right with God? That solution is sacrifice—and hence Isaac's question: "Where is the Lamb?"

Confronted by the world's brokenness and his own guilt, man has two choices: Do I try to fix the broken world myself—perhaps by supporting one of the grand utopian schemes that, if unchecked, inevitably lead to totalitarian oppression—or do I trust the sacrifice that God has provided in Jesus Christ? Yes, our life depends on how we answer.

Between the Genesis and Gospel questions is a six-page chapter, "The Story of Israel from Joseph to Jesus's Birth," that supplies readers with a history of Israel. No words are wasted; scripture's plot line is summarized well. Preachers will find here a model for concisely communicating a large swath of biblical history to their congregations.

This short volume is proof that a book need not be long to be theologically rich.

I write this review on New Year's Eve. Another year of my life concludes, and I prepare to enter the next—a perfect time to contemplate seven big questions upon which my life depends.

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# ServantPoetry

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G. E. Reynolds (1949—)



"View of Egmond aan Zee," Jacob van Ruisdale (c. 1848)  
The Currier Museum of Art

## A Pilgrim's View

The foreground tree battles  
To survive against the sea,  
Encroaching on the town you see  
As every pilgrim rattles,

Laboring through still water  
And rough road, seeking  
The endangered town, reeking  
Of the possibility of slaughter

Under the relentless tumult  
Of the dark North Sea rage—  
They seek a delivering sage  
By whom they might exult

In the power of the sky,  
Where heaven rises above  
The waters of the sea in love  
To those on earth who die.

That tree is our mortality;  
The steeple in the distance  
Is the sign of our resistance—  
Pointing up to make us free.