

# Abraham Kuyper and Faithfulness in a Changing World

Ligonier Ministries – Renewing Your Mind  
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*G. Christians who are really gripped by the gospel, are gripped by a love of God that wants to advance the truth and goodness in society, and tries to encourage those with power to see what is good, and true, and helpful.*

**Intro:** If you read the headlines or watch the news with any regularity, you're probably perplexed, if not downright angry about what's going on in our culture today. The pace of moral decline in this country and around the world is breathtaking. Ligonier teaching fellow, W. Robert Godfrey, has taken a particular interest in this cultural shift. He sat down recently with our President and C.E.O., Chris Larson, to talk about how we should think and live as Christians of conviction during these trying times. As a noted church historian, Dr. Godfrey looks back, to help us look forward. – Lee Webb.

L: Its a pleasure to be able to sit down with you, Dr. Godfrey. Thank you for being with us today, and thank you for coming alongside of Ligonier Ministries these past few years – of course, not just as a teaching fellow but also as our Board Chair. I depend upon you often for counsel and guidance, and I know that the ministry has been greatly helped by your continued service and being able to see the ministry continue to grow and expand, even some years now after Dr. Sproul went to be with the Lord.

G: Well, it's been a great pleasure for me to first work with Dr. Sproul, with the Board, and the teaching ministry, and then, after the Lord took him home, to be able to help in a small way, and to encourage the vision that R.C. set so thoughtfully and profoundly. And I'm thrilled to be able to see how faithfully Ligonier has continued that ministry.

L: Well, we're thankful you're thankful for *your* faithful ministry as well, for many years as President at Westminster Seminary, California, there in Escondido. But what some of our listeners may not know is that you also have been a Sunday School Teacher in your local congregation there in Escondido. And I believe you've been teaching now for, is it forty years?

G: Forty years, yes. Those people are *remarkably* patient. (laughter)

L: Well, we were intrigued as you began a series several months ago, and it began with this question of, *What is going on?* – and I can almost hear R.C. saying, *What's wrong with you people??* – as you tried to help that congregation to orient to the bewildering pace of change that we are seeing in our society. Of course, we're not talking about these United States. We're talking about ideologies that are impacting nations *around* the world. But yet, as a historian, you did have some keen observations about how we got here. But I was also intrigued – and we'll get into this a little later in our conversation about your own reflection on the Dutch theologian and former Prime Minister, Abraham Kuyper – and so, I'll be interested to kind of pick your thoughts *there*. I want to start with the Lord's Prayer.

Dr. Sproul would make the observation about, the first acknowledgement of God's holiness – that the Lord's name would be hallowed, and that His kingdom would come, and that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. And Dr. Sproul would make the point that the Lord's will is that His name would be regarded as *holy*; and that the Lord's will is that that would be manifested in reality, here on earth, of course, as it is in heaven. Many times, as Christians, we feel like we are surrounded by the unbelieving forces in this world; and we believe that that is in the physical realm, as well as the invisible realm. But that's a rather subversive prayer, isn't it, that Christians are encouraged to make? That the Lord's name would be regarded as holy here on earth, even as it is in heaven. How are we to think about that kind of prayer, and the subversive nature of it?

G: It's really interesting, when we think carefully about Jesus and His words, how he's *always* subversive – how He comes to us with such a different attitude from the world's attitude. If people, by and large, talk about God or think about God, they are probably taking His name in vain, not keeping His name *holy*. And it is remarkable that Jesus begins this simple, yet *subversive* prayer, instructing us what prayer is all about, telling us to keep God's name holy – to pray that we would be *empowered* to keep God's name holy.

And R.C. saw that so profoundly, that the holiness of God was perhaps *the* issue that always has to be confronted, that always has to be considered by us. *Is* God different? That's perhaps the issue of holiness. *Is* God separate? *Is* He *distinct*? And one of our great tendencies is just to make Him like us – just a bigger *us*. And the uniqueness of God, and therefore the unique *honor* that He's owed, the unique *service* that He's owed, is really contained in that first petition of the Lord's prayer, hallowed by Thy name. And then when we really *think* about what the name of God entails, how it refers to His very being, and all His work, *then* we are ready to say, Thy Kingdom come, after we've acknowledged who He is, and how He's the Creator. And therefore He's the designer and the definer of our lives.

And you know, one of the great issues we face in our time, are completely bogus notions of freedom – freedom as liberation from the way we were created. And to pray that God's kingdom would come, is that He might be acknowledged as He really *is*, and that more and more His will might be honored and followed in the world. And of course, the claim of our time is that the will of God is oppressive and needs to be thrown off, instead of acknowledging that the will of God is liberating and fulfilling for us as *creatures*. So, yeah, there's a great deal packed into the Lord's prayer.

L: Early in the days of the Ligonier Valley Study Center, Dr. Sproul was visited by an English minister. And after that English minister had been in the States for some time, he remarked that he thinks that Americans have an allergy to God's sovereignty. They don't understand sovereignty, of course, because we've not had a monarch here in these United States. And when you start reading in the Psalms, particularly Psalm 2, and then you look even at Revelation 19, you really have a picture there of the *kingship*, and the sovereign who is reigning and ruling over all the universe – how do we begin to speak of the *Lord*, who is *unique*, is *different* than us, with people who really have no concept of a *king* or *sovereignty*?

G: Well, everyone I think, does have a certain notion of sovereignty. The American problem is perhaps *not* that we don't understand sovereignty; it's that we *want* to be sovereign. So

that, we approach sovereignty as something that we individually establish, and the perverse notion of freedom that we have now is that, I as an individual want to have complete sovereignty over my own life – to freely decide whatever I want to be or do – with as little interference from anyone else as possible. And that radical *individualism* is what stands against some other cultures where *communalism* is more important, where great value is placed on being *part* of a community, *participating* in a community, *valuing* a community, and *conforming* yourself to some extent, to that community.

Now, there can be plenty of problems there as well. If we conform to the world instead of having our minds renewed, we can run into problems in that direction. But every culture has its own sinful character, its own fallen state. And I think the problem of individualism is a particularly huge one in America, and that English visitor sensed that. It's important for us to see that, to see ourselves as others see us.

L: Do you read Psalm 2 as a warning to the kings and rulers of this world?

G: Absolutely! Because one of the great themes of the Psalter, is that God and His people have *enemies* in this world, that are *opposed* to them. Psalm 83 is a great psalm, almost an elaboration on elements of Psalm 2. But it is literally the kings of the earth taking counsel together against the Lord and His anointed; and saying to one another, *Let's wipe out God's people from the face of the earth*. That's what Psalm 83 is dedicated to. And the rebellion of this world is not just individual sinners, but it's also communities and institutions that oppose the Lord and oppose His will.

And what we Christians have to be clear about in our own minds – and the Psalter, but the whole Bible helps with this – is that right now Christ is king of this world. There *are* eschatologies that seem to miss the proper emphasis on that, and look forward to the kingship of Christ only when it's visibly displayed at the end of history. But we as Christians believe, I think the Bible clearly teaches, that *Christ is king now*. And although we don't always see His purposes, or the *reasons* for His purposes, He is sovereign *now*. He is accomplishing His purpose *now*. And of course, His greatest single purpose now is to gather His elect; and He's accomplishing that. It's a glorious thing to see, that despite all the opposition, people are still coming to faith in Christ and being saved, and the church of Christ is being built.

L: Is the church part of manifesting the *reality* of Christ's reign and rule?

G: Oh, I think the church is at the very center of manifesting that in our day. And that's why local congregations are so crucial – that local congregations be strong, and be faithful, and be grounded in ;the word, that they be growing in the truth. But also that they may be manifesting the life of *love* that Christ calls us to. So that, in a world where so many people are just asserting *themselves*, the church is a community where people are *helping others*. And that will shine as a light, I think, in this stark world.

L: R.C. told a story of many years ago, I can't remember which city he was in, but he ended up sharing a cab with the apologist, Francis Schaeffer. And R.C. just had a few minutes in the cab ride there with Dr. Schaeffer, and asked him, "Dr. Schaeffer, what's your greatest

concern for the church?” And R.C. said, he didn’t waste a minute, he said, “*Statism.*”<sup>1</sup> What is behind Schaeffer’s concern for *statism* and the church?

G: Well, it’s interesting. Francis Schaeffer was a *very* insightful apologist, and particularly sensitive to history and to culture, and to art and philosophy, and did a lot of good – and probably isn’t as remembered as much as he should be in our day – but Schaeffer, a product of American fundamentalism, came to be very much influenced by the renewal of Calvinism in the Netherlands. You mentioned Abraham Kuyper<sup>2</sup> earlier, and some of Kuyper’s descendants had a huge influence on the development of Francis Schaeffer’s thought, particularly Hans Rookmaaker, the art historian in the Netherlands.

It was Kuyper, already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who observed that there are two problems coming. One, what we were just talking about, *individualism* – an excessive focus on the individual. But on the other hand, Kuyper saw the problem of an excessive power being vested in the state. You go back and look at the development of western history, and in the Middle Ages you can say one of the great issues was the competition between church and state, as to which institution would be dominant. And we might almost say in the *modern* world, the competition tends to be between the *individual* and the state, as to which would be dominant. And in sensing that, talking about that, Kuyper was almost prophetic, because he lived *before* the days of the rise of communism and fascism,<sup>3</sup> and yet communism and fascism both became huge manifestations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – of statism gone amuck, exceedingly dangerous and corrupt.

Now both communism and fascism insisted that they were expressing the *popular* will. And so communist states all became “people’s” states. But of course it wasn’t true. These were states run by the party, an apparatus of power that was willing to use violence to assert itself. And I think on the American scene, and that’s probably what Schaeffer was particularly responding to, we have seen, really, since the first world war, an ever-expanding power and involvement of the state, in the United States, in the lives of people.

One of the characteristics of America historically, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, had been limited government, and a *balanced* government. So the Executive power was checked severely by Congress and the courts, and by the power of the states, as opposed to the *federal* government. And all of that has been, in subtle and sometimes *not* subtle ways, *shifting* in the 20<sup>th</sup> and on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; where the state is taking onto itself - and is *expected* by a lot of people to take onto itself – more and more power and involvement in the lives of people.

L: I want to come back to Abraham Kuyper in just a moment, and some of the specifics of what he tried to promote there in the Netherlands, back at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But as a church historian, Dr. Godfrey, maybe you could just chart for us where the church has been over these past two millennia, and what happened from the days of the Apostles and

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<sup>1</sup> *Statism*: any political system in which the central government plays a major role.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920); Prime Minister of the Netherlands 1901-1905.

<sup>3</sup> Not really. James Buchanan warned of the socialists in 1846, that their three goals were the destruction of the family, the church, and capitalism. The Communist Manifesto was written in 1848 to codify those goals.

the early church, through the Medieval period, the Reformation, of course – which we love to talk about here at Ligonier – but even up to today, and even this word that gets tossed around, this idea of *Christendom*; and I've heard that used in various *different* ways. So maybe you could talk about that and define that for us.

G: So this is gonna be two minutes to talk about two millennia. So here's the *fast* overview, *broad* strokes. The first few centuries of the church were a time where the church was illegal, where the church was persecuted, where the church had no illusions of having worldly power. But the very success of the church, obviously by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, led the church to become *avored* by the Roman empire, and emperors to be converted. And by the latter part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, to have Christianity made the official religion of the Empire. And then gradually, increasingly, civil authority was being used to suppress religious opposition to Christianity.

So the church became *established*; the church became *legal*; the church became legally and culturally *dominant*. And that's really what we mean by *Christendom* – that Christianity has become the defining religion of the state and of the culture.

L: Do you mark that around Constantine?

G: Well, probably the key figure – I mean, Constantine *begins* that process by making the church *legal*, and becoming a Christian himself – but it's really *later* in that century, with Theodosius, known to history as Theodosius the Great, that Christianity is *established* as the legal religion of the Roman Empire. And increasingly, then, *opposing* other religions and *suppressing* other religions. So Christendom is a description of Christianity come into cultural dominance and legal dominance. So that, the power of the state is now exercised in *defense* of Christianity, and in opposition to any religion that would *oppose* Christianity.

And that kind of reaches its high point in the Middle Ages. We sometimes talk about the Inquisition, the Roman Catholic Inquisition. That was a combination of state and church power being used *coercively*, and ultimately with violence, to protect Christianity, promote Christianity, and to oppress anything that would oppose it. And that cultural *dominance*, in I think a somewhat ironic way, begins to break up in the west, with the coming of the Reformation – because the Reformation breaks the notion that there will be one single church, dominating all of culture.

Now there are several churches in competition with one another. Those *distinct* churches remain united to civic power for a while; but the domination of a *single* church is broken by the Reformation. And that gives space, then, to critics of Christianity itself, to begin to emerge in the late 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. So that Christendom, the whole *idea* that Christianity should be culturally and religiously dominant, begins to come under more and more *attack* in the west. And that will grow in opposition; but the very opposition begins to recognize – I would argue, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century – that Christianity is *dominant*; not as dominant as it once was, not having the *power* it once had, but *still* with a sense that Christianity is regarded as a *good* thing, generally, and certainly as the dominant thing. And its critics have to be careful of the character of the criticism.

You mentioned my Sunday School class earlier, it was the sense that something had suddenly shifted *dramatically* in Christian experience in America, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...

L: So, just a few years ago.

G: Just a few years ago. I think this is why Christians felt so disoriented. I think we have the Pandemic; *that's* disorienting. We have the state's response to the Pandemic – I think *that's* been controversial. So there are a lot of immediate causes for Christians to have felt disoriented. But I felt, as a church historian, there were much bigger issues at play here than the immediate matter of the Pandemic and economic and political controversy: that we were seeing a much more *profound* cultural shift, where all of a sudden, attitudes about the role of Christianity, and the positive guidance that Christianity could offer us, was being challenged. And I suggested to the class that I taught, that we could perhaps *mark* that with a 2015 Supreme Court decision on homosexual marriage – not the *decision*, but the *reaction* to the decision. The reaction to the decision was, very widely, a sort of *shrugging*. OK, you know....

L: Almost like a fatalism?

G: Yeah. Now you *contrast* that with the fact that in 2012, when President Barack Obama ran for reelection, he ran in *opposition* to gay marriage. That was still regarded as a necessity for a politician, because opposition to gay marriage was a *Christian* position. Christianity had, for hundreds of years, described what marriage was in the west.

L: Even *cited* Christian conviction as part of his articulation of that position.

G: Exactly. And yet, when just three years later, the Supreme Court overturns that, *lots* of people clearly react by saying, “Well, I *publicly* said I was opposed to gay marriage, but actually I find this court decision liberating.” And the fact that so *much* of America just shrugged at that decision, showed that the Christian consensus on sexuality, on marriage, but much more broadly on things generally, had really dissolved. And all of a sudden, if you *criticized* that Supreme Court decision, you were homophobic; you were bigoted; you were intolerant. You were not just defending historic Christian values, you were a *bad* person, undermining the kind of freedom that we're all committed to as Americans.

L: You would be on the wrong side of history.

G: You would be on the wrong side of history; *exactly*. I just came across a quotation from Edmund Spencer's *Fairy Queen*, a famous poem that no one reads, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And in that poem Spencer wrote, “Great enemy is wicked time.” That's a very interesting statement to *think* about. “Great enemy is wicked time.” And of course I think what Spencer was primarily thinking about is that we're all going to die. And therefore our enemy is time; and we have to try to circumvent it as much as we're able. But as *Christians*, I think a great friend is *blessed* time. God's going to accomplish His purpose in history. And it's not true that history is bending against us. Christ is King, and history will accomplish *His* purpose, and we should have a settled confidence about that, no matter how much difficulty we face in the present.

L: Thank you for that explanation about Christendom, and the past couple of millennia of church history. It almost sounds like you are juxtaposing Christianity and Christendom – that Christendom wasn't a healthy development.

G: We live in a fallen world, and *all* developments have failings and limitations. There were great things that came out of Christendom. We can think of the arts, for example. Many great thinkers came out of that period. But the fundamental notion that the *coercive* power of the state should be used to promote Christianity, was a *bad* thing, I think. I think it was bad for the state, and it was bad for the church. The church should not be about *power*, particularly not about the use of *violent* power to get its ways.

The church is always strongest when it is in the mode of *persuasion*, and when it recognizes that only hearts that have been genuinely affected by the *truth*, will embrace the truth in a positive and strong way. And so, Christendom in that fundamental sense, I think brought a notion of coercion into Christianity that was bad for the church and for the truth itself.

L: We're starting to see some news stories now, after the Roe v. Wade decision in the summer of 2022,<sup>4</sup> overruling that Roe decision that was wrongly decided – *egregiously* decided, as the majority opinion stated – and seeing some arguments that the outlawing of abortion is tantamount to establishing religion. Do you agree with that criticism?

G: No, I don't. But I think it's a very illuminating criticism because, what Kuyper saw already, and what I think *we* ought to see, is that the opposition to Christendom *and* to Christianity, is an opposition that has defined itself in terms of the notion that the state ought to be a neutral, secular institution, that religion should be utterly separated from the state and its actions and its purposes.

And so, what we're seeing in reaction to this recent court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, are some people saying, "Well, the court could *only* have done that on the basis of some religious conviction that members of the court had." And that since the Constitution prohibits the establishment of religion, this kind of court decision should be *not* allowed, because it is in effect the establishment of a religious point of view.

And I think what Kuyper saw so profoundly in *his* work and in the work of those who came after him, was that *all human thought is religious*. None of it is neutral; none of it is genuinely secular. And [he saw] that the proponents of a political strategy that sees the state as secular and neutral, are those who want to change the basic character and presence of religion among us, and say, "Religion is purely private." And the *free exercise of religion* is the freedom to *think* whatever you want to think, but *not* the freedom to *do* whatever you want to do – not the freedom to have a *public* voice for Christianity – not the freedom to say, "Christianity has influenced me to embrace certain political objectives."

It's more than a little disingenuous for the people who supported Roe v. Wade, to wring their hands and say, "How has this happened, that it's overturned?" It was overturned by fifty years of hard political work, to elect Presidents who would appoint conservative justices

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<sup>4</sup> The court said that constitutionally, the legal authority to regulate abortion belongs to the states, not to the federal government. It did not "outlaw abortion" as critics of the decision claimed.

to the Supreme Court. And for fifty years people on the left in this matter, cheered whenever there was an activist court. And now, suddenly, that they've lost a case, they *hate* activism on the Court. And the hypocrisy that surrounds this whole debate in America is just shocking, I think, really.

Somehow the “extreme right wing” has taken over the Court [they say], and we have to utterly change the Court to protect democracy. No, it was the use of democratic procedures that changed the Court in the way in which it got changed. And those who supported *Roe v. Wade* sat around for fifty years assuming they were safe in having won that decision, and took no political action, either to get *their* way with the Court, or to enact laws.<sup>5</sup> The Supreme Court hasn't said that Congress can't enact laws on abortion. But the left never did that. But now that left is trying to maintain their dominance by saying there ought not to be a public religious reflection on these matters.

One of the interesting features of this, when I think about Abraham Kuyper's thought, is that Kuyper thought that his allies in the Netherlands had various points politically, namely the Roman Catholic political party. The Roman Catholic political party was not the best ally ultimately, Kuyper said, because they're not sufficiently God-centered. And that's a very interesting critique, which I'm sure would annoy Roman Catholics no end. But what he meant by that is, historically, Roman Catholic thought has revolved around a distinction between *nature*, and *grace*. And nature is the realm of human experience, not so very affected by sin, where we can cooperate with one another; and then on top of that, God has added His redeeming grace. Kuyper rejected that distinction between nature, and grace.

He said, no, all of life has to be lived out of God's creating purpose, God's preserving purpose, God's *gracious* purpose for this world. And there is no “common sphere” where we cooperate on the basis of *nature*. We as Christians have been renewed by the Spirit of God, we've been regenerated — we are *different*; and we *think* differently; and therefore we develop a public political voice on the basis of that regenerating work of God in our hearts. And we have to *insist* that we have a right to make a political claim on the world in which we live, on the basis of our convictions, on the basis of our regenerated hearts.

Kuyper would have said, we don't want to impose that in any *violent* way on anybody; we don't want to *coerce* anybody. But the political process is a process in which the body politic votes and makes decisions; and we as Christians have a right to labor to [make] our voices heard, and to have *our* understanding of what is just and right for the state, to be enacted in law.

L: So Abraham Kuyper had his own political party, and I know that that was a different political system than even we have here in these United States. But is that the route that we Christians should go? We should form our own political party?

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<sup>5</sup> Actually, the left continued their push to dominate corporate boardrooms, universities, teacher's colleges, mass media, public schools, even Christian seminaries. They worked hard to elect liberal Democrats to state and federal offices, to ensure the appointment of liberal activist judges at every level of the judiciary. President Trump had an unusual opportunity to appoint three Supreme Court justices to stem the tide. However, he appointed three *Roman Catholics* to the bench, as recommended by the Federalist Society. Now six of the nine justices are Roman Catholic. Yet America was founded on the Protestant principle of *covenantalism*, in opposition to Roman Catholic *centralism*.



G: Abraham Kuyper inherited a political party in the Netherlands, that had the name, “The Anti-Revolutionary Party.” And that party had been *developed* – it was a very small party when Kuyper came on the scene – that [party] saw the great threat to the West as the French Revolution. The French Revolution was rightly seen as anti-Christian. So the Anti-Revolutionary Party was a Christian party opposing the principles of the French Revolution.

Kuyper transformed that party into a mass party in the Netherlands. But in the Parliamentary system of the Netherlands, he was able to make that party very influential, even though in his own lifetime I don’t think the party ever got more than 13% of the vote. But by coalitions in the Parliament, with other small parties, he was actually able at one point to reach a majority, and become Prime Minister in the Netherlands.

Some of our listeners may be in countries with Parliamentary democracies, and maybe they should evaluate whether a Christian political party would make sense there. Kuyper was always clear that you had to develop a Christian public voice in light of the unique historical development of your own country. So Kuyper would not say to Americans, for example, “We need to change our Constitution to a Parliamentary system.” He would say, “No, you’ve gotta think through how, in light of the congressional system you have, how you’re going to operate.”

Now, our congressional system is really based on a Constitution that by and large *forces* America to have two political parties, instead of many political parties. And the oft-attacked Electoral College is part of what ensures that we’ll have two political parties instead of many. So Christians can’t just form in the United States a political party. But maybe what we could form, maybe what we should think about, is a political Christian *lobby* that could lobby *both* of the political parties to say, “Are you interested in our *voice*? Are you interested in the *goals* that we seek to achieve?”

So, we look back on the anti-abortion movement of the last fifty years, and that, in a sense, was a political lobby that was formed. It had a very specific goal: it wanted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. And while many in that movement were Christians, evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics, they were willing to ally with anyone who shared that goal. So there were some orthodox Jews that shared that goal; there were some secularists that shared that goal. We were willing to cooperate with everybody to accomplish that purpose.

And I think Kuyper would say that’s the right way to go to articulate the Christian vision and goals. And then to cooperate with those who are willing to share our goals, even if they don’t necessarily share our reasoning for reaching those goals.

L: Recently in *Table Talk Magazine* we published an article, and I was reading that article, and it was talking about the reformer that is often overlooked there in Switzerland, Pierre Veret.<sup>6</sup> And he had a wonderful quote there talking about Christians being good citizens. He said, “There is no doubt that rulers are, beyond compare, much better served by believers who know the Gospel, than by any other men.”

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Veret (1511-1571), influenced by the French reformer, William Farel.

G: Hmm. Well, Pierre Veret was one of the great talented reformers in Switzerland, contemporary of John Calvin, friend of John Calvin's. Yeah, I think that quotation is very apt, because Christians who are really gripped by the gospel, are gripped by a love of God that wants to advance the truth and goodness in society, and tries to encourage those with power, to see what is good, and true, and helpful. And I think that needs to guide us as Christians. There is a place for righteous anger, but most of the time we in the gospel and the cause of Christ, are better served when we try to be persuasive out of love, and try to be supportive and helpful, rather than to be angry and antagonistic. And so it's a balancing act that we're called to. But Christ calls us to be lights in this world, and that light shines most brightly, I think, where we're most loving.

L: That, then seems to lead us right back into the conversation of the separation between church and state, this debate and discussion that's happening, really, in increased measure, as you alluded to earlier today. And so, *what if* Christians were to gain the majority, and to be able to assert a biblically-informed legal system. Would that be bad?

G: It would certainly not be bad if Christians were self-conscious about *who* they are, and *what* they wanted, and what *goals* they were after, *politically*. I think as Christians, just as an *internal* conversation, we would all agree that political legislation is never going to outlaw sin. And so, the Christian goal in politics is not to end all sin. The Christian goal in politics has to be to figure out what the state *ought* to do. What are the legitimate interests of the state? And then to try to shape those interests and actions of the state, according to Christian principles.

And here I think was one of the great ideas of Abraham Kuyper, an idea that he expressed as "sphere sovereignty." He said part of the problem with the development of thought in general, and political thought in particular in the West, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was that it tended to promote the tyranny of one part of society over the other parts of society. And Abraham Kuyper saw rightly that the threat of tyranny in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was particularly the threat of the *state* to dominate everything. And Kuyper said, we will never understand God's intention for human beings, for human development, for the way in which God created reality, until we see that He intended various spheres or institutions of society to have their *own* sovereignty, under *God's* sovereignty.

And so, what he wanted to say was, God created the family. And He created the family as a marriage of a man and a woman, to produce children, to fill the earth. And that family has responsibility to be faithful directly to God. And it is *not* the job of the church, or the state, or the individual, to create the family. *God* has created the family. And the family is responsible for the fulfillment of its calling as family, to God and God alone. God created the church. And the church is responsible to God alone for fulfilling its calling.

And that's why Kuyper thought the idea of a *state church* was such a bad idea. Because the state, he said, has no competence to determine what is true religion. And therefore, even if it establishes the "true church," it's going to use its power to undermine the *character* of the church. And so the church is responsible only to *God* for its faithfulness. And then, after the fall, God established the state to restrain sin, to promote justice. And the state has a responsibility under *God*, to promote justice. It doesn't have the responsibility to perfect the

family; it doesn't have the responsibility to perfect the church. It has the responsibility to promote *justice*.

Christians, in articulating a public political philosophy, have to think more carefully than we've often done in the past, about *what is justice* as the responsibility of the state, and where are its *limits*? And so, Christians may well not always agree with one another on these matters. The Anti-Revolutionary Party in Kuyper's day had a group break away to form *another* Christian political party because they didn't agree with everything that Kuyper was trying to articulate.

So, this is *not* an easy process. This is not a situation in which it will be automatically clear what the Christian position is going to be on a variety of issues. But if we can think more clearly about how God has called us as Christians, to be part of the state, both to restrain the state from being tyrannical in areas where it shouldn't be involved, and in articulating where the state needs to pursue justice, we can begin to make some progress, I think.

L: This reminds me of a little excerpt from a lecture that Dr. Sproul gave some years ago, where he talks about the church calling the state to be the state. Let's listen to that clip now.

*Sproul*: When the church protests abortion-on-demand, what the church is doing is not asking the state to do the church's work for the church. No one is saying to the state, "Look state, you have to preach the gospel. Look state, you have to administer the sacraments," or any of *that* business. The church is *not* calling the state to be the church. The church is calling the state to be the state. Because, according to the word of God, the principle justification for the *existence* of *any* state in this world, its primary vocation, its primary task, its justification for being, under God, is to protect, to maintain, to nurture *life*.

And when the state is derelict in that responsibility, not only *may* the church exercise prophetic criticism, beloved, but the church *must* exercise prophetic criticism, and call the state to be the state. But you see, in *our* country, separation of church and state does not mean what it meant to Jefferson, or to the founding fathers who said that there are two spheres, two institutions with distinctive job descriptions. The state has its task to perform, the church has its task to perform, the church is not given the sword, the church is not given the right to maintain a standing army, the church does not have the right to exact taxes from the citizens, and so on. Those responsibilities and rights adhere to the *state*. There's a division of labor. The church has its job to do; the state has its job to do. But the founders of this country recognized that *both* the church *and* the state were under *God*. And that the state is accountable to God for how it rules.

I spoke at the inauguration of the governor of Florida a few years ago. And I said in that address, "What is happening here this day in Tallahassee, is not unlike an ordination service in the church, because *you*, governor-elect, are now being set apart by sacred vow, to a function of *ministry* – not a ministry of the *church*, but a ministry of the state. God calls state officials *ministers*, whom *He* ordains, and *He* appoints, whom *He* raises up, and whom *He* holds accountable for their work.

G: Well, I think with his usual passion, R.C. has stated things exactly right. And I think Abraham Kuyper would say *Amen* to all of that. And I think that's so important, as Christians understand what their calling is, to expect of the state. Abortion is the great

example, because what Christians have said is, our opposition to abortion is *not* born out of a desire to harm women, or restrict women. It's born out of a *belief* that the unborn child is a living soul created in the image of God, and therefore must be *protected* by the state, as precisely the weakest members of society.

Psalms 82, which talks about the responsibility of the civil government *generally* – it's talking about princes all over the world – says their responsibility is to *rescue* the weak and the needy.<sup>7</sup> The powerful and the rich usually don't need a lot of protection from the state. It's uniquely the poor and the needy that need to be protected from oppression and injustice. And that's how Christians by and large have seen the abortion debate. It is the weakest members of society that need protecting. So it is entirely right that individual Christians, but also churches as institutions, should call the state to justice where it *fails* in justice.

But R.C. is exactly right. The church doesn't expect the state to preach the gospel. It doesn't expect the state to have any competence, *as* the state, to *know* the gospel. But we do demand a *voice*, a voice in trying to shape the political process of our time. And again, in the perversity of our time, the Constitution's being turned upside down. And the Constitution was written to protect the churches from the interference of the state; not to protect the state from the interference of the churches. There was no real risk that the churches were about to take over the Congress. It was to indeed ensure that the Congress would not seek to establish any one denomination as *the* church for the United States. But the great purpose of that was to protect the churches from state interference. And that continues to be a great need in our time.

L: Ligonier Ministries has been focused on equipping God's people to *think* biblically, so that they would be growing in their faith, and that they would be active members of a local church. We really exist to come alongside of the local church, to lift up the local church, and so our focus, really, is to encourage *the church*, and to serve the church with discipleship resources. But as we close today, how would you encourage a Christian to *think* about these different spheres of engagement, and the prioritization that they should give to political matters, to local church matters, to family matters, and how they can glorify God in all their different spheres in which they are called to operate?

G: Well, I love the way you put that question, "How should we encourage Christians to *think*." One of the problems with a lot of American Christians is that I don't think they've been doing a lot of *critical* thinking; they've not been doing a lot of *careful* thinking. Part of the fruit of Christendom perhaps has been just the assumption that things will go on as they've been – that Christianity will always be sort of regarded as a *good* thing. And suddenly we find ourselves in a world where so many Christian values are *not* regarded as good things. And what are we to *think* about that? What do we need?

Well, we need to have our minds renewed. That's why I'm so enthusiastic about Ligonier. Ligonier is developing resources to help Christians *think*; and to help them think about what

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<sup>7</sup> Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and needy. <sup>4</sup> Deliver the poor and needy; Free *them* from the hand of the wicked. (Psa 82:3-4 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

the Bible says – what *theological* truth is. But beyond that, what are the implications for God’s truth in *every* sphere of life? How do we want to live as Christians in a family? How do we want, as Christians, to live in a church? How do we want, as Christians, to live in a state? How do we want, as Christians, to live in the university? All of these are new areas for many Christians, that need to be explored as suddenly we move from being part of a favored and praised movement, namely *Christianity*, to being part of a movement, namely *Christianity*, that is criticized and, in some circles, seen as dangerous and negative.

So we have to think much more clearly about a number of these issues than we’ve ever thought before. But through the whole history of the church, what we can see is that if the church does not remain strong and faithful as an institution, and particularly in its congregations, the *whole* of Christian thinking is going to be harmed and weakened.

And so, *all* Christians need to be devoted to the local church. *All* Christians need to be pursuing involvement in the *life* of the local church, in the life of a *true* church that’s committed to the gospel as it’s revealed in the Scriptures. I think when you look back on the Kuyperian movement in the Netherlands, while it flourished for decades, it did go into decline. And a very important part of that decline was the decline of orthodoxy in the churches, a decline of clear commitment to the authority of Scripture in the churches.

And so, we must keep our *churches* strong if we are to keep the Christian movement in all of its manifestations strong. The church remains the central institution of God’s work in the world.