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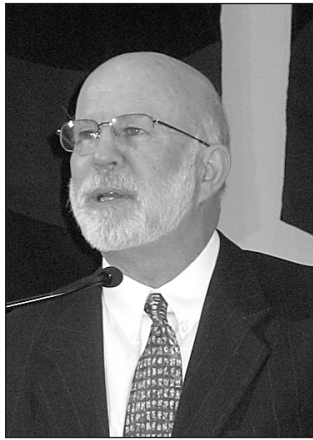
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Semper Reformanda in All of Life



by James W. Skillen

Kuyperian Calvinism Today

The continuing florescence of a distinctive type of Reformational Calvinism that began with Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper in The

Netherlands in the middle of the nineteenth century is remarkable for many reasons. One of them is the attention still being given in some circles to the development of Christian organizations in the cultural, economic, and political arenas as a response both to God's common grace toward all and to Christ's call to discipleship in antithesis to patterns of life that lead to destruction. Seen in this light, *Semper reformanda* requires more than talk; contending for right doctrine is insufficient; preaching and catechesis are not the goal of Christian discipleship; the nurturing of a Reformational worldview is only one ingredient of Christian discipleship. Christianity is a way of life and not only a way of worship and doing theology. Therefore, keeping in mind last year's 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth as well as the 100-plus years of Christian organizational efforts spawned by Kuyper, I want to say something about political life, particularly in the United States, that urgently requires our attention and engagement today.¹

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Calvin's contribution to the biblical reformation of life is as important for us today as it was for Kuyper in his day. With other Reformers, Calvin insisted on the priesthood of all believers, whose relation to God is mediated by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit directly and not indirectly by a priestly class. Hearing and obeying the word of God through careful study of the Bible was his ambition for the whole body of Christ because the Bible illuminates the path along which Christians are to walk in serving God in all they do. With that view of the Bible and of life, it should be no surprise that schools and universities were established wherever Calvinism took root. Menna Prestwich highlights the international network that Calvinists developed through their educational institutions.² Some of the world's most influential colleges and universities, including those in Geneva, Leiden, Basel, and Debrecen, as well as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, began as Reformed institutions. And their influence was significant not only in the church and theology but also in social, scientific, economic, and political life.³

To underline the importance, for Calvinists, of education and preparation for life in society is not to suggest an incipient secularizing tendency that generated the modernist faith in self-salvation and world-change through human ingenuity and the progress of science. Calvin and Kuyper, following Augustine, had their hearts fixed on serving God in Christ and had no doubts about the inability of sinners to save themselves and the world. Only through God's grace in Christ is redemption and the renewal of life possible. Nevertheless, the sinners who are being redeemed are human beings whom God originally made good and righteous—the very image of God—as part of the Creator's marvelous handiwork. "I retain the principle," wrote Calvin, "that the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures."⁴ Therefore, the whole of creation, with all the talents and responsibilities that belong to human beings, must be kept in view when Calvin talks about God's sovereignty, redemption in Christ, and the ongoing reformation of life.

Having said this much, however, we need to acknowledge that by and large, churches in the Reformed tradition have occupied themselves primarily with doctrinal and ecclesiastical matters and

not with the reformation of all arenas of life. To be sure, many Calvinists have played important roles in science, business, the arts, government, law, and education, prepared in part by their Christian education. But ongoing, organized Christian efforts in those fields have been rare. It is difficult to find many schools and universities in the world today that are still vitally and distinguishably Reformed; it is even

To be sure, many Calvinists have played important roles in science, business, the arts, government, law, and education, prepared in part by their Christian education. But ongoing, organized Christian efforts in those fields have been rare.

more difficult to find business, labor, and political organizations that bear the mark and manifest the inspiration of *semper reformanda*. Kuyper's efforts along this line are what made him so unusual in the history of Calvinism.

But wasn't Kuyper off track, some ask, in trying to build Christian organizations in the secular spheres of society? Didn't that show the zeal of an imperially minded triumphalist rather than the humility of a true Christian? Isn't it a sign of sectarian self-righteousness for Christians to separate themselves in that way? In response to those questions, I want to contend for the urgent importance of Christians organizing for reformational action in every sphere of life in a biblically humble, loving, and engaging manner that is neither triumphalist nor sectarian. For if such organizational

efforts are not made in a diligent, persistent, cost-counting, unpretentious, self-critical way, the trend will continue to be for Christians to accommodate themselves to whatever is culturally dominant at the time. Failure to organize in appropriate ways will leave us immature and unable to eat the solid food (Heb. 5.14) we need to be able to distinguish between what is just and unjust, right and wrong, good and evil in the common institutions and practices of contemporary life. If Christians are to be leaven in the loaf, salt that retains its strength, and witnesses to the truth of God's judgment and redemption of the creation in Christ, then we need to work in concert, "spur[ring] one another on to love and good deeds, all the more as we see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10.24-25).

Consider, for example, one of the important matters of government that have undergone radical change since Calvin's time, namely the political establishment or enforcement of true religion. Few Calvinists believe any longer that medieval and earlier modern modes of enforcement should be reinstated. Church and state should be separated to a much greater degree than Calvin wanted, we say today. Yet by and large, Calvinists and others have come to this position not through any well-developed Christian arguments and political efforts but by acquiescing in the Enlightenment's program to secularize public life and privatize religion in keeping with faith in the supremacy of public reason and the dismissal of superstition and sectarian religions. Kuyper did better than that, but his efforts—through an organized Christian political party and public newspaper—to advance equitable public pluralism have not been carried forward to any significant degree outside of Holland.

The position Kuyper reached on this matter led him to conclude that Calvin had been mistaken about the legitimacy of state enforcement of one true faith. *Semper reformanda* requires bowing before the sovereignty of God, he argued, rather than holding on to a past practice built on the conviction that the state had to back up church discipline in order to make sure God's sovereignty was recognized. With the ongoing differentiation of society and the break-up of Christendom, Kuyper became convinced that government's authority and responsibility should be more limited in order to allow all kinds of human responsibilities to develop in direct response to the sovereignty of God. "The duty

of the government to extirpate every form of false religion and idolatry," Kuyper said at Princeton in 1898, "was not a find of Calvinism, but dates from Constantine the Great, and was the reaction against the horrible persecutions which his pagan predecessors on the imperial throne had inflicted upon the sect of the Nazarene."⁵ After Constantine, that system continued to be defended by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, who fought with one another and oppressed the Anabaptists. "I not only deplore [the stake at which Servetus was burned in Geneva]," Kuyper said, "but I unconditionally disapprove of it; yet not as if it were the expression of a special characteristic of Calvinism, but on the contrary as the fatal after-effect of a system, grey with age, which Calvinism found in existence, under which it had grown up, and from which it had not yet been able entirely to liberate itself."⁶ Self-critical insight into a matter as weighty as this, together with efforts, on a Christian basis, to change the law and public opinion, required organized political and journalistic efforts. These were not actions of self-righteous triumphalism but humble efforts to respond in obedience to God's call to do justice to all.

Kuyper went on from there to insist that limiting government for the sake of religious freedom of all citizens in public as well as in private life is only one important reforming step to take. What about government's relation to families, schooling, business, social welfare, and foreign policy? Regardless of how one may judge the successes and failures of Christian reformational politics in the Netherlands over the past century and a half, one must recognize that for more than 100 years, Protestants and Catholics there have organized themselves in significant political ways to draw on the best of their distinctive resources in order to contribute to the work of government in dealing with precisely these issues. One of the reasons there is more than liberalism and socialism in Europe is those organized efforts. In addition, Kuyper's work to organize a free Christian university, Christian labor and business organizations, and Christian public media arose from the same motivation. Nothing like that, with the exception of a few Christian schools, colleges, and publications, developed in the United States or in most other countries influenced by Calvinism. And without such efforts, our political attitudes, ideas, policy preferences, voting habits, and most

employments remain dependent on the organizational efforts of those who may stand on different foundations. Generally speaking, Reformed as well as other American Christians have accepted the confinement of Christian life and thought to ecclesiastical practices, personal piety, a variety of non-profit service organizations, and informal fellowship with other Christians. Consequently, our political and economic lives have taken their direction from habits, ideas, and forces that are partially or wholly incompatible with a Christian way of life

The Puritan aim was to gain release from the deformities of Christendom (European Egypt) and to settle like a monastic community at the outer edges of that corrupted civilization in a new promised land.

but that we are unable to evaluate and critique in a significant, biblically grounded way.

Let me try to illustrate this point in our contemporary context by probing the influence of the American civil religion on our thinking and behavior.

Calvinism and American Civil Religion

The American founding was, as we know, deeply influenced by Puritan Calvinist thought. This is not to suggest that all early Americans were Puritans or that the Puritans' vision of themselves as a "new Israel" was inherent in Calvin's thought. Moreover, the idea of America as a new Israel was not the only one that shaped the nation's self-understanding at its founding. In fact, when most of us think and talk about American politics and government, our attention is focused on the republic's structure with its constitutionally limited gov-

ernment, separation of powers, Bill of Rights, and so forth. However, the country's identity did not come solely from its constitutional republicanism. More important for American self-understanding, I would argue, was the idea of the new nation as "exceptional"—an idea derived from the Puritan mission to New England as a covenant people of God.

The Puritan aim was to gain release from the deformities of Christendom (European Egypt) and to settle like a monastic community at the outer edges of that corrupted civilization in a new promised land. Their venture was obviously inspired by biblical stories, beginning with God delivering Israel from Egypt and establishing them in a new land as the chosen people—the exceptional nation. Calvin had studied Hebrew with Jewish rabbis and dug deep into the Old Testament to understand Israel as the prototype of the body of Christ. But much of Reformed thinking about Israel grew attached to the newly emerging states that harbored them or that they helped to found. Calvinist reformer John Knox, almost a century before the Puritans embarked on their mission, sought "to turn the Scots into God's chosen people, and Scotland into the New Jerusalem."⁷ Thus, the idea of a modern nation as a "new Israel," "new Jerusalem," or "new Zion" was not original with the American Puritans. Nonetheless, the Puritan settlement in *New England* helped to generate the most influential of all the Calvinist new-Israel programs.

But in what sense was the Puritan experiment compatible with anything in the Bible? After all, the earliest Christian communities did not take shape as territorial polities, as replacements for Israel in the old promised land. Jesus and the apostles nowhere suggested such an idea. The early church was an eschatologically oriented community of faith spreading throughout many cities and kingdoms of the world and looking ahead to the return of Christ, whose kingdom would encompass the whole world. Nor was it the case that the Puritans were overly optimistic about what human government could achieve in this age. They were not utopian idealists but Augustinian Calvinists, who emphasized human depravity and the dangers of power and idolatry. Nevertheless, ambiguities remain. Did the Puritans see their New England *church* as a branch of the single worldwide Christian community spread throughout the world? Or did they see their

territorial polity as a replica of Israel, and themselves as starting the covenanting process over again so that they would become the fount of the renewed church/city everywhere?

The ambiguities of the Puritan settlement that lie behind these questions were never resolved. In the original Puritan commonwealth, voters were male church members, thus assuring a bond between the institutionally differentiated church and the state. But when a growing number of men in subsequent generations did not make profession of faith (in church) and thus failed to maintain their civic voting rights, concern about the colony's future became as urgent as the concern about the health of the church. One influential proposal to resolve the problem was put forward by Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729). His interpretation helps to explain how the United States as a whole would later take on the identity of a new Israel in covenant with God. Stoddard, according to Mark Noll, believed that "a national covenant existed whenever any people subscribed in the aggregate to the Christian religion... [He assumed] that New England was a Christian nation, or in his terms, 'the Commonwealth of Israel.'"⁸ Not every citizen or voter, in other words, had to be a Christian for the commonwealth as a whole to be considered God's chosen people. By this means, the inspiration behind the Puritan attempt to found a Christian commonwealth worked its way into the American experiment as a whole, like leaven in a lump of dough. Not long after the American founding, church membership would be limited to churches while citizenship in the American "Christian" commonwealth would be open to everyone without regard to church affiliation, though not without regard to various obligations to the commonwealth conceived of as God's chosen nation.

According to Noll, "During the War for Independence, a vibrant Christian republicanism and Real Whig political analysis persuaded other colonists to think that the new nation in its entirety might be specially elect of God like a new ancient Israel."⁹ With the war effort, "the cause of America" became for many Americans "the cause of Christ" and vice versa. Furthermore, the "belief that the United States was a land chosen and protected by God for special, and perhaps even millennial, purposes may not have been as widely spread during the War for Independence as is sometimes suggested.

But it did flourish in the decades after the war."¹⁰ And that sense of national identity kept on growing. James Block, among others, makes this point in developing his thesis: that America invented itself as "a nation of agents." By the time of the Civil War, says Block, civil religion reached a high level of articulation. "If prewar religious activists burned with 'the gospel ideal of a righteous nation,'" then, says Block, the fashioning of a "new society as a single moral enterprise in the Civil War made that view a widespread conviction.... [T]he war became the ultimate test of the nation's religious destiny, of God's blessing upon the land as a whole"¹¹:

This transcendent shaping of the world, utilizing America as God's first full Kingdom, made the nation rather than any congregation or community the locus of the agency

*The "self-understanding of America as the Redeemer Nation" has persisted in part because the American civil religion incorporated elements from both the Enlightenment and Christianity. The synthesis that has persisted conveys "a strong sense of God's providence, His blessing on the land, and of the Nation's consequent responsibility to serve as a light unto other nations."*¹³

vision. The nation's goals were to be regarded as sacred goals, its successes sacred accomplishments: "Men in all walks of life believed that the sovereign Holy Spirit was endowing the nation with resources sufficient to convert and civilize the globe, to purge human society of all its evils, and to usher in Christ's reign on earth." *The nation's governance and direction would henceforth replace the fate of the churches as the strategic center of the mission* (emphasis added).¹²

Clearly, the *United States* was a state in the modern sense of that term. But just as clearly, the *American nation* was a new kind of religious community—a civil-religious community—similar to the Roman Republic and the Greek city states that had been civic-religious polities. After the First Amendment was adopted with the Constitution, and after all the states eventually disestablished their churches, the US was certainly not characterized by an enforced or privileged ecclesiastical faith. The states and their federal government were constitutionally restricted, and citizens were free to associate independently in different ecclesiastical institutions. But there can be no doubt that a certain kind of civil religion characterized the republic and membership in it. As the supporting context of the churches, America itself served as the more encompassing "chosen people" whom God had called to fulfill a unique role in the world.

It may seem surprising, writes Wilfred McClay, that the Puritan-indebted American civil religion did not dissipate within a few decades of the founding. The "self-understanding of America as the Redeemer Nation" has persisted in part because the American civil religion incorporated elements from both the Enlightenment and Christianity. The synthesis that has persisted conveys "a strong sense of God's providence, His blessing on the land, and of the Nation's consequent responsibility to serve as a light unto other nations."¹³ There are certainly many American Christians, such as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, cited by McClay, who reject and criticize civil religion, but they, too, can be full American citizens like everyone else. America can still be God's chosen nation even if not all Americans share the dominant civil-religious faith, just as the Puritan colony after a few generations could still be thought of as a Christian commonwealth even if not all its citizens were

members of the Congregational church.

A crucial question that McClay raises is whether the use of Christian symbols, like the cross, in America's civil religion subordinates "the Christian story to the American one," and thus traduces its Christian meaning?¹⁴ Although he recognizes that some Christians and people of other faiths may feel disgust about the civil religion, McClay doubts that such critics can "offer a serious and persuasive vision of what things could be like in this country, or any country, without it... Indeed, there may be more to be feared from the continued weakness of America's civil religion than from its resurgent strength [after 9/11]."¹⁵ "In a pluralistic society," says McClay, "religious believers and nonbelievers alike need ways to live together, and to do so, they need a *second language of piety*, one that extends their other commitments without undermining them" [emphasis added].¹⁶

It seems to me that McClay's conclusion is highly questionable and that Reformed Christians should have critically evaluated and rejected the American civil religion right from the start. McClay's idea of the need for a "second language of piety" was challenged long ago by Augustine and before him by the New Testament writers and the prophets of Israel. The fact that early Christians refused to share in emperor worship did not make them bad citizens, Augustine argued, in responding to charges to the contrary. Jesus allowed that his followers should pay taxes to Caesar, but they were to do so only in dedicating their lives entirely to the one true God, using only one language of piety. And Paul could urge Roman Christians to recognize the God-ordained authority of governing officials and to seek to live at peace with all their neighbors while refusing to be part of any community of faith other than the one that followed the way of Jesus Christ. The political community does not have to be a community of religious faith in order for people to work together as fellow citizens for the common good. In fact, from a Christian point of view, a state should function only as a community of citizens, as a differentiated civic bond built of shared political memories and, most importantly, of a shared confidence that its constitution and government are upholding public justice.¹⁷ Patriotism can be as legitimate as love of one's family, love of one's college, or love of one's business, but none of those loves should become the

encompassing bond of life, requiring a second language of piety to supplement privatized communities of “sectarian” faith.

Two Exodus Stories

There is another difficulty with McClay’s summary presentation of our American civil religion. It is that there are actually two different Exodus stories struggling for control of that religion. The competing stories help to explain what’s at stake in many of the current conflicts and “culture wars” in American politics. Let me explain.

The first Exodus story is the one contained in what we’ve just said about American new-Isralitism. Courageous Puritans, in covenant with God, took their exodus from oppression in Britain (Egypt), crossed the Red Sea of the Atlantic, and entered a new promised land where they built a city on a hill to serve as light to the nations. Freedom for this new Israel meant that there had to be a constitutional prohibition against any future Pharaoh and a means of strong defense against any potential foreign adversary who might try to snuff out the flame of liberty—America’s light to the nations. A strong central government would be anathema just as a king would be unthinkable. The chief executive for the nation’s minimal federal government (only grudgingly established) should be little more than an executive director, responsible to carry out the decisions of Congress, which the Founders tethered carefully to the states. The Constitution granted the federal government responsibility only to regulate interstate commerce and to defend the states from foreign attacks. The states were the original, legitimate polities—political communities—with a full range of powers, except for defense. The federal government was set up to serve the states, not to be the head of a national polity. What was central was individual liberty and national liberty; government must be kept on a short leash because it could threaten the nation’s freedom to fulfill its divine calling.

Quite in contrast to that story, the second Exodus story that shaped and still shapes American life was authored by its slaves—mostly in song. Most of us did not, and still do not, sing those songs. For the slaves and their descendents, the original promise of America, in the providence of God, was that all humans are created equal and should be protected equally under the law. The Pharaoh

who thwarted the achievement of that promise was none other than the American slaveholders and the Constitution, which was supported by the majority of Americans. The slaves’ oppressors were the very ones who thought of themselves as God’s chosen people, liberated from slavery in Pharaoh’s European Egypt. For the American slaves, the exodus had to take place within the Egypt of America in order to open the way to the true and full liberation of the nation as promised by the Declaration of Independence. And the instrument God used to accomplish that exodus from slavery was a strong central government. It took a hundred years after the end of slavery before the federal government and Supreme Court were able to establish equal civil rights for everyone in the *national* polity, not only in a few of the states. This story built on ancient appeals to the “rights of Englishmen” eventually inspired other quests for rights and equality, such as the one for voting rights for non-Christians, for those who owned no property, and for women.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate John McCain came very close to representing, or being carried along by, the first American Exodus story. He was an icon of the Puritan errand into the wilderness that kept expanding until the western expanse of America’s promised land had been settled. As a military hero he epitomized the defense of American freedom by those willing to give up their lives in warfare. He promised to stand tall against real and perceived enemies by maintaining America’s military strength. He expressed undying love for the nation if not for government in Washington. He promised to continue the Reagan-Bush quest for a smaller federal government and lower taxes while being willing, when necessary, to engage in deficit spending for the sake of national security and market freedom.

Candidate Barack Obama came close to representing, or being carried along by, the second American Exodus story. He symbolized the great American promise of equal civil rights for all, secured by the exodus from real slavery and by the civil rights movement. Freedom for Obama begins at home and is won and maintained by the federal as well as state governments. Government should not be disrespected or held in suspicion; it bears responsibility to achieve equal opportunity and justice for all in a strong national community. Justice and prosperity will be achieved for everyone, not

by means of trickle-down economics and government deferring to the market and the states to deliver public goods. With respect to foreign policy, American freedom among the nations of the world depends as much on upholding principles of the rule of law and building sound international institutions as it does on the exertion of military force.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate John McCain came very close to representing, or being carried along by, the first American Exodus story. . . . Candidate Barack Obama came close to representing, or being carried along by, the second American Exodus story.

McCain gave voice to the love of freedom but cast aspersions on government; Obama gave voice to the love of American ideals that must be realized in part through government actions to assure equal treatment for all Americans. For McCain and many of his followers, the military is an extension of the American nation rather than part of an overgrown federal government that should be cut back in size. For Obama, the military is one department of a government that should give as much attention to diplomacy as it does to military preparedness in order for the U.S. to play a constructive role in the world. Some supporters of McCain, carried along by the first American Exodus story, wondered if Obama is really an American. His life story doesn't seem to fit the American story they treasure. Some Obama supporters feared the impact of racism from those who do not seem able to reconcile themselves

to the multiracial, multicultural, national polity that America has become.

The first American Exodus story runs off the tracks, in my estimation, when the myth of American exceptionalism leads the president and Congress to take aggressive, unilateral actions that neither enhance U.S. security nor gain respect for it abroad. Moreover, when that story pits love of the nation against government, the latter is weakened to the point where it can no longer act deliberately, decisively, and with forethought but is reduced to merely reacting to emergencies, such as the financial crisis. That, in turn, leads to further suspicion of government by citizens who on one side think government should leave the markets alone and on the other side see no comparable government action to save the national polity's crumbling infrastructure, growing trade deficit, expanding distance between rich and poor, and troubling crises in health care, Social Security, and the environment.

The second American Exodus story runs off the tracks when popular appeals to the federal government and the courts turn politics and litigation into little more than competition among ever more narrowly defined identity groups, each seeking public backing for their "right" to receive benefits or privileges. The cry of slaves for freedom and the long struggle for civil rights by African Americans were reactions to the wholesale exclusion of an entire group of citizens from almost every aspect of American life simply because they were black and had been purchased for slavery, not for equal participation in the nation defined by the first American Exodus story. But the subsequent misuse of civil-rights appeals by "groups" trying to gain benefits and privileges far beyond the scope of civil-rights claims makes governing increasingly difficult, fueling identity politics and interest-group brokering that frustrate the building of a national polity for the common good.

It seems to me that a great deal of the political conflict in the U.S. today arises from these competing exodus stories. The debates may be over government's size, the legitimacy of taxes, or the appropriateness of a national health insurance program, environmental protection, welfare benefits, or financial reform. And most of the contenders may not even be conscious of the civil-religious roots of their beliefs about the nation and about government. But if you probe beneath the surface, I believe you'll

find the deepest sources of the conflicts in the stories just recounted. Keeping all of this in mind, we see that McClay's comments are revealing even if he overlooks the conflict between the two American Exodus stories. Contrary to McClay, I believe that a modern, differentiated state does not need, and should not depend on, a civil religion. Christians, more importantly, should be able to see and feel that the national new-Israelite myth conflicts with biblical Christianity. It represents a false religion. McClay is correct that the U.S. is a civil-religious polity to the core, and that it is impossible to fathom America's self-understanding and its foreign and defense policies without taking into account its civil-religious character. But that is precisely what should arouse awareness of the antithesis between Christian faith and American civil-religious faith. The New Testament does not support the idea that after the coming of Christ a political entity may legitimately claim to be God's new Israel, modeled after God's chosen people Israel. The people of God in Christ through all times and in all places are God's only new Israel. That is the "people," the "nation," that should be discovering its unity in every area of life, including the civic life of its members who are citizens in many countries under a diverse array of governments. Nevertheless, I would estimate that in the United States the analogy between ancient Israel and new-Israelite America has been more influential among Christians than the analogy between ancient Israel and the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. Many Americans, both confessing Christians and those who harbor no faith in God, hold the belief that America is the world's "exceptional nation," the nation commissioned to lead history to its proper democratic, peaceful, and prosperous destiny. All the dangers of overzealous hubris and self-aggrandizing foreign policies are inherent in that form of nationalism.

A Closing Admonition

In recalling the work of John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper, we who are citizens in countries influenced by Calvinism should be reexamining our ideas of national identity in relation to God. Reformed Christians should emphasize government's responsibility to do justice in humility before God. We have much for which to give thanks in the United States and other countries influenced by Calvinism. Many aspects of constitutional gov-

ernment, the codification of civil rights, and the protection of many non-government responsibilities are a constructive part of that heritage, and we should not be hesitant to applaud and celebrate it. My critical assessment of the American civil religion does not spring from anti-Americanism. It springs from the *semper-reformanda* calling to submit all of life, including our political lives, to the only true Sovereign, Jesus Christ. There is simply no Reformed justification for governments to act out of nationalistic, messianic motivations or for Christians to support or join in such actions.

We need to do quite the opposite today and work for governments that will act cooperatively, insofar as possible, to uphold laws of distributive and retributive justice for the good of the public commons—both the domestic commons of individual countries and the international commons shared by all nations.¹⁸ What does this mean? What is required to work out just policies? Those questions, I would submit, are precisely the ones that cannot be satisfactorily answered apart from long-term, organized Christian political efforts conducted in dialogue, debate, confrontation, and cooperation with fellow citizens of other faiths. That, it seems to me, is one of the unavoidable challenges that *semper reformanda* in a Kuyperian mode presents to us.

Endnotes

1. This essay builds on an earlier one of mine: "Reformed ...and Always Reforming?" in Sandra F. Joireman, ed., *Church, State, and Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53-72.
2. Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism: 1541-1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). "Calvinism was an international religion seeking not to adapt itself to society but to cast society into a new mould," writes Prestwich (7). It "was marked by a sense of international solidarity" (5). In this regard, see also John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), particularly Part 3, 237-350.
3. For more on the relation of Calvin and Calvinism to the modern world, see Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), particularly 164-94; William R. Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin's Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge:

- The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), particularly 31-92; Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998); James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998); Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961, 1931); and W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971). Graham's book draws on and helps to represent the classic study of Calvin's social and economic influence by Andre Bieler, *La pensee economique et sociale de Calvin* (Geneva: Georg, 1959).
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., *The Library of Christian Classics, XX* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Bk. 1, Chap. 15, 188. "We must now speak of the creation of man," writes Calvin, "not only because among all God's works here is the noblest and most remarkable example of his justice, wisdom, and goodness; but because, as we said at the beginning, we cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge of ourselves is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were first created and what our condition became after the fall of Adam." *Institutes*, Bk. 1, Chap. 15, 183.
 5. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 100.
 6. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 100.
 7. Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 15.
 8. Noll, *America's God*, 41.
 9. Noll, *America's God*, 32-33.
 10. Noll, *America's God*, 206.
 11. James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents*, 449.
 12. Block, *Nation of Agents*, 449.
 13. Wilfred M. McClay, "The Soul of a Nation," *The Public Interest*, no. 155 (Spring 2004): 13.
 14. McClay, "Soul of a Nation," 17.
 15. McClay, "Soul of a Nation," 18.
 16. McClay, "Soul of a Nation," 19.
 17. For an extended argument (based on Christian rather than civil-religious faith) for a constitutional polity, organized citizenship, protection of non-government organizations and institutions, and religious pluralism, see James W. Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) and Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).
 18. I develop more of this argument in James W. Skillen, "The Common Good as Political Norm," in Dennis P. McCann and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *In Search of the Common Good* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 256-78; and Skillen, *With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).