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Neo-Calvinism for the Nations: Reviewing Part 2 & 3 of Reformed Public Theology

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Abstract

"Together, these essays demonstrate that Neo-Calvinism can offer insight beyond its Dutch roots."

Posting about the book *Reformed Public Theology* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/neo-calvinism-for-the-nations-reviewing-part-2-3-of-reformed-public-theology/>

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In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

Neo-Calvinism for the Nations: Reviewing Part 2 & 3 of *Reformed Public Theology*

Donald Roth

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I am less of an unlikely Neo-Calvinist than my colleague who began this review series. Even though I don't have a Dutch surname, I grew up in a little Dutch pocket of Southern California in the shadow of Westminster Seminary California. My mom has been a grade school secretary for over 40 years at Calvin Christian School in Escondido, and I grew up immersed in both Dutch Reformed theology and its vision for a close partnership of church, home, and school. I went to Dordt University myself before ultimately returning to teach here. That said, I share Justin's conviction that Neo-Calvinism must transcend its ethnic roots to offer the fruit of its rich theological insights to a broader world.

Reformed Public Theology offers a glimpse of what that sort of broader engagement might look like, drawing together essays from a broad range of authors representing an impressively wide array of backgrounds. The diversity of this collection serves as a powerful demonstration of what it looks like to apply Neo-Calvinist insights to "every square inch" of our common life.

The essays collected under the themes of "Public Markets" and "Public Justice" demonstrate the potential insights that Neo-Calvinism offers to Christians struggling with work/life balance in the Big Apple (Katherine Leary Alsdorf), seeking political reform in Brazil (Lucas Freire), looking for labor reform in China (Agnes Chiu), searching for an alternative to contemporary political dichotomies (Bruce Riley Ashford and Dennis Greeson), critiquing the violence of the Duterte regime in the Philippines (Romel Regalado Bagares), or advocating for the common good (Stephanie Summers).

Together, these essays demonstrate that Neo-Calvinism can offer insight beyond its Dutch roots, and they provide a testimony to the potency of a vision for Christian public engagement that takes both its ultimate and its temporal calling seriously. Since I don't have the space to engage more deeply with each essay, I will instead offer my summary of the common themes

that emerge from these essays as a snapshot of exactly what insights Neo-Calvinism has to offer in this field.

The most common theme emphasized by these authors is the concept of sphere sovereignty. Sphere sovereignty is the idea that God mediates His provision for all people through various institutions invested with a call to promote welfare in different spheres of human life. Each of these spheres is a sort of jurisdictional zone for these institutions, and the government's role is to essentially play referee, seeking to provide fertile soil for all spheres and institutions to flourish.

This concept offers a couple of important distinctions from common views of public life. First, it differs from more totalizing views of the state by emphasizing a more modest role for government. Second, this approach opens a structural door to pluralism; for example, in allowing for a range of educational institutions to pursue their calling and empowering them to largely define the goals of education, rather than having this dictated by a central government. Third, this approach keeps an emphasis on God's sovereignty over all of life, not via the divine right of kings, but in a more immanent way throughout society. This emphasis helps to limit the ambitions we might have for the political sphere, keeping the ultimacy of God's kingdom more firmly in view.

The second most common theme emphasized in these essays is the value of common grace as a motivation for public engagement. Most of these authors emphasize a particular aspect of the doctrine of common grace, namely the idea that God provides for all people through good gifts like intelligence, creativity, and insight, which He bestows on believer and unbeliever alike. The idea is that God works out His purposes through believer and unbeliever alike, and He equips all of us for a calling that we all share: seeking the common good. Alsdorf captures this well in her essay, saying, "because of common grace, the works ... of non-believers are never as bad as their wrong beliefs should make them. Likewise, because of total depravity, the works ... of believers are never as good as their right beliefs should make them." ¹

This idea does a couple of powerful things.

First, it trains us to see God's provision in everything around us. Christians often get tangled up in the value of their own works. We rightly see ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ, but we sometimes think we are the *only* means that our Savior uses to rule and provide for this world. When we make God's work about what *we* do, we are only a step away from thinking that the results are something that *we* bring about, and, in the context of the wealthy West, it can become all too easy to make things so much about us that God becomes an afterthought, what Craig Gay calls "practical atheism."

Second, this concept, matched with a robust sense of our own sin, encourages a posture of humility and openness to engagement with others. It encourages us to seek the welfare of the

city in which the Lord has placed us, because God provides for our welfare through the common provision He makes for the places where He puts us.

This opens the door to concepts like public justice, a more capacious view of vocation, and a number of themes which I don't have the space to get into, but this brief sampling hopefully illustrates the valuable tools that the Neo-Calvinist tradition has to offer to Christians engaged in seeking the common good more broadly, and I commend the work of the scholars published in this volume as a reason for the optimism I have about these tools reaching a new and wider audience.