

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 44 | Number 1

Article 1

---

September 2015

## Why We Need Institutions in Order to Be Faithful, and What Institutions Need So That They Can Be Faithful

Stanley Carlson-Thies

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Sociology of Culture Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Carlson-Thies, Stanley (2015) "Why We Need Institutions in Order to Be Faithful, and What Institutions Need So That They Can Be Faithful," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 44: No. 1, 1 - 10.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol44/iss1/1](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol44/iss1/1)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

**Editor's Note:** The following paper was transcribed from a presentation, including slides, by Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies for the Dordt College First Monday Series, April 7, 2014.

# Why We Need Institutions in Order to Be Faithful, and What Institutions Need So That They Can Be Faithful

---



by Stanley Carlson-Thies

Let's begin by considering several brand logos that are familiar to many in the church community: Hobby Lobby, Wheaton College, and World Vision. These logos represent just a few of the many distinctive community-serving organizations that we all depend on—and it isn't just you and me, or people of faith in general, who count on these and many other faith-based and conviction-driven organizations. Let me mention just three amazing examples of faith-based service:

---

Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies is Senior Director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance at the Center for Public Justice, Washington DC.

**Unexpected Beauty:** Village of Hope is the residential program for homeless people and families operated by the Orange County Rescue Mission just south of Los Angeles. The Village and Mission serve thousands of families and individuals who need spiritual guidance, meals, a safe place to sleep, medical care, addiction services. These people are homeless but not worthless, of course, and to honor them as people made in the image of God, as we all are, the chapel at the Village of Hope features specially commissioned stained glass windows—because beauty should be a part of everyone's surroundings.

**The “halo effect”:** Do the services provided by such parachurch ministries and by congregations really make a difference in their communities? University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan, a self-professed agnostic Jew, has documented the social value. One of his examples is First Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Professor Cnaan and his research team estimate that it puts positive value into its neighborhood of more than \$6 million annually—through its school and by preventing suicides, helping people find jobs, preventing family breakups, helping ex-prisoners become productive members of the community, and more. Isn't that an amazing impact?

**From waiting to homes:** The Wait No More initiatives of Focus on the Family encourage and equip churches to adopt children out of foster care. Kids often end up stuck in foster care, shuttled from home to home and sometimes aging out of the system without ever reuniting with their original family or being adopted by a new family. Many of these foster kids are hard to place. But when Focus on the Family began to connect the foster care system in Colorado with Colorado churches, a real miracle happened. In less than two years, this initiative cut the number of kids in foster care in Colorado in half—a startling success that amazed government officials.

These and many other faith-based organizations are expressions of biblical faith and the love of Jesus: I call them the hands and feet of the church, providing a range of loving services far beyond the capabilities of you or me individually and far beyond the capacity of most local congregations, which have their own vital roles to play in worship and discipleship.

So here we have hundreds of thousands of faith-inspired organizations, both nonprofits and businesses, whose work is vital in our communities, vital for the wellbeing of countless millions of individuals and families. And yet, because these are organizations shaped by faith, their freedom to be themselves and sometimes their very existence is at growing risk today. What they do differently—often in direct obedience to Jesus—is increasingly labeled by many in our society to be just bigotry, sectarianism, hatred.

Because some of their practices are out-of-step with our increasingly secularized, even anti-Christian society, many powerful groups and political leaders not only condemn their distinctive ways but seek to use the law to force them to conform or to force them out of operation. So that's the focus of my comments this morning: why, if we are to be faithful, we need organizations, Jesus-inspired organizations; and then what these organizations need, the freedom they need to be distinctive, if they are to flourish in our era. Thank you for being here this morning. My thanks to Dordt College and to the First Monday team for inviting me to

talk with you. Most of all, thank you for your own lives of faith.

As I talk with you about this vital topic of organizations and organizational faithfulness and freedom, I will be drawing on some of the key ideas of Abraham Kuyper. Although Kuyper's era was a century and more ago and his main area of action was the Netherlands, in very important ways he is a co-founder of Dordt College, and, if you know his life and thought and work at all, you will know immediately that some of his key ideas are central to my topic today: organizations, organizational faithfulness, and the appropriate freedom of organizations in the context of government rules.

Let me start with this Kuyper quote: "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>1</sup> That ringing declaration comes from Kuyper's great speech on Sphere Sovereignty—that vitally important principle of how government, church, and other organizations should be related to each other, to persons, and to God. We'll come back to the principle of sphere sovereignty. I note here that Kuyper gave this speech to inaugurate one of the many important organizations that he helped to create, the Free University of Amsterdam, a Reformed, or Calvinist, university, a university that through much of its history has offered a distinctively Christian alternative to the secular universities operated by the Dutch government. As Kuyper reminds us, there is not one square inch of life outside of Jesus' care and command: not your personal life, not your church worship, not your labors in the Dordt College library, not your work as an employee or a leader in a business.

And yet, while Jesus claims Kingship over every square inch of life, Kuyper also reminds us that Jesus does not call us to theocracy, to use the government to force our fellow citizens to bow their heads and knees to King Jesus. Rather, we seek to win others to Jesus' cause and his ways through prayer, persuasion, argument, and example. So we confess that Jesus is Lord of all, and we seek to be obedient to him in all we do. And we pray that through our words and our visible witness of actions, those around us will come to see that Jesus' way brings peace and justice and joy. And one of the most important ways that we witness to

the watching world is through Christian organizations: those that evangelize and those that serve in Jesus' name.

But, of course, for these organizations to be faithful witnesses—to shine the light and love of Jesus in what they say and do—they need freedom, religious freedom, the freedom to be faithful to

---

*To be faithful as Christians, we need to create and maintain organizations—not just churches but also other kinds of organizations: faith-based organizations, companies of conviction, a variety of nonprofits and businesses as well as clubs and other groups.*

---

King Jesus even though our culture follows other kings, other guides. And it is just this freedom to be different that is being sharply challenged in our day. So the religious freedom that religious organizations need is a main topic for me this morning.

But we have a few issues to discuss before we get to that important topic of institutional religious freedom. Here's the path of my talk this morning:

1. To be faithful as Christians, we need organizations.
2. Those organizations need to mirror or embody Christian convictions and values.
3. To be able to mirror Christian convictions, organizations need the freedom to be different from what our culture values—we need more institutional religious freedom, going against the current trend to restrict religious freedom.

Here's my first point: To be faithful as Christians, we need to create and maintain organizations—not just churches but also other kinds of organizations: faith-based organizations, companies of conviction, a variety of nonprofits and businesses as well

as clubs and other groups. That's a pretty simple point. To get things done, sometimes you just need yourself, or yourself and a few friends, but to get big things done, especially when time or distance or significant numbers are involved, you need an organization, a structure, a way to combine the efforts of many people and many skills. You need something more substantial than a flash mob or a voluntary committee, more than a temporary collaboration of convenience.

Here is just one example. Compassion International is the eventual outcome of the convicted heart of American pastor Everett Swanson, who in the early 1950s several times visited war-torn South Korea. He saw the devastated countryside, the terrible poverty, and most cruel, the many Korean children turned into orphans by the war. A missionary challenged him: "You see what's needed. Now, what do you intend to do about it?"<sup>2</sup> What he did was to ask churches back in the United States to open their hearts to Korean orphans. Out of his vision and their generosity, Pastor Swanson created Compassion International, a parachurch organization. Today, it provides spiritual and material support to more than a million children in 26 countries. As you can imagine, you cannot be a blessing to more than a million children in 26 countries, and you cannot sustain and grow a ministry like this over 60 years, without a strong and flourishing and expert organization!

We all know this, don't we? We can do many things on our own; we can do many other things if we gather friends together to join us; but for many great deeds, the adequate response to great needs and great opportunities, we need strong and sometimes even large organizations.

We know that, and yet as Americans we do have a bent towards individualism. Moreover, many of you in this audience, the millennial generation, have seen plenty of mistakes made by organizations and have developed a very critical view about them. You may see their value, yet their rules can conflict with your own goals. An organization may be pretty good at providing some service, but it might not serve you the way you desire.

So there is a tension between individuals and organizations, and in our time, there is very great sympathy for what individuals want and decreasing

sympathy for the desire of organizations to express a distinctive way of operating and serving. I'll note this tension between individuals and organizations now and then as we go along. For now, I just want to remind us of what we know: we count on organizations so that big things can get accomplished.

Now let's consider Filippo Brunelleschi's Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, Italy. Do you recognize that building? It is famous in art history and architectural history. It is, Peter Murray says, "the first truly Renaissance work," the first building after the Middle Ages that truly embodied the architectural principles of classical Rome and Greece—and it is an orphanage, a place to take care of abandoned children. This beautiful orphanage is an expression of the Bible's commandment that we are to look after the helpless—including the fatherless, the orphans. And such care has been a mark of the church for 2000 years. In Florence, Italy, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the impulse to be faithful to God and compassionate to orphans led to the creation of an organization that could bring together all the resources needed to give spiritual and material care to the many orphans of that city at that time—and to a beautiful building to house the organization and the orphans.

As I've just remarked, in our own time, the same impulse to obey God and to care for orphans led to the creation of Compassion International—and to many other organizations, often large organizations, created to show the love of Jesus to orphans. So, to be obedient to God's call of service or teaching, we often need to create organizations—even very large ones. We often can't just do it individually.

Now my second point: To be faithful to Jesus, we need not only organizations but organizations that mirror or embody the values and the heart of Jesus—and not the convictions or values of some other god or some other guide. This is also a simple point, isn't it? If, prompted by your love of God and neighbor, you are compelled to start or to join some organization to accomplish some act of service, well then, you have to be sure that the organization performs that service in a way that honors God and not in some other way. The truth is: organizations are not just a way to get things done; any particu-

lar organization is a way to get something done in some particular way, and not in another way.

Isn't that why, in the 1950s, a band of men and women, pastors and teachers and business people, joined together to build Dordt College where before there had been only fields? Not because there were no other colleges around but because there was no distinctively Reformed college around—no college grounded on the Reformed faith and a vision of all of life redeemed. Remember Kuyper's declaration: "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'" So as you look at some square inch—some area of service, some new line of business—isn't this what we should ask? Not only "Is this an instance where some new organization is needed?" but "Is this where an organization compatible with a biblical worldview is needed? And often, "Is this where an explicitly Christian organization is needed?"

But let me immediately remind you of something else Kuyper said: the appropriate organization is not always a Christian organization. You know, Abraham Kuyper created, or helped to create, many Christian organizations, not just the Free University. But he argued that sometimes a specifically Christian organization was not the right thing.

The question came up in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands when unions were beginning to be formed to protect worker rights. Calvinist workers had to decide: should they form their own union or should they join with other workers—with Catholics and with the secular workers, the socialists and liberals? Kuyper actually discouraged the formation of a Protestant union. The point of a union is to create a counterweight to the power of the employer so that all elements of the factory, every part of the work community, has a chance to be heard so that justice is done to all. But if workers are fragmented into multiple unions, then they can easily be ignored by the factory owners. Better to join together, Kuyper said: that's how to achieve the legitimate aim of a union.

As it turns out, socialist and Marxist voices came to shape the general union, along with liberals who had no sympathy for religion. And very quickly Christian workers discovered that the

general unions were unfriendly places for workers who were believers and who sought a harmonious work community and not a victory at the expense of owners. Then a Christian union was a necessary thing to create. But the goal was an organization faithful to Kingdom values, not necessarily a separate Christian union.

To summarize: to get things done, we often need organizations; to get things done in a Kingdom way, we may need to start or join a distinctively Christian organization. And in our day when so many of our fellow citizens want to follow some leader other than King Jesus, Christian organizations are even more important than in the past.

Now my third big point and a very big question of our day is this: Will the law allow that organization to be Christian, to follow Kingdom values, or will the law require the organization to change its practices to mirror the values of the secular majority in our nation?

Let me begin this discussion by talking about the common good. You'll recall that not many years ago, evangelical leaders often talked about preserving or restoring a Christian America or a Moral Majority. That talk was always troubling: for all the wonderful qualities of our nation, it has always had plenty of big flaws, which we shouldn't ignore. Besides, talk of Christian America has led some to think that non-Christians therefore are not entirely welcome, not entirely legitimate citizens.

I sympathize with everyone who, over the past few years, has brought to the foreground not the idea of restoring a Christian America but instead a deep concern for how Christians can contribute to the common good. Our country surely is religiously and morally very diverse. Christians are just part of it. But here we are, living together with people of other faiths, other convictions. We must get along together in mutual respect, and even though we have many different convictions, we can and should all contribute to the common good and not seek just to serve our own kind, our fellow believers. That's actually a great Jesus theme, isn't it—to love God and also to love your neighbor, whoever your neighbor is?

And yet, in focusing on the common good, we should never forget that, as Christian believers, we often have something distinctive and vital to

offer to others—a Bible-informed understanding of what is good, what is most helpful to people in need, what kinds of relationships can really thrive, how best to raise children, how to accurately interpret history, what all of the dimensions are that go into personhood and that should be taken into account in therapy, and so on.

Other faith communities also have distinctive visions. That is why there is a Dordt College and not just a University of Iowa or a Briar Cliff University. And that is why there are all those other kinds of faith-based service organizations—Compassion International, Catholic Charities, World Vision, Bethany Christian Services, and almost countless others. They want to operate consistent with their founding religious convictions and to make their contribution to society in a way that reflects the wisdom of those founding religious convictions. Each seeks to make a distinctive—an *uncommon*—contribution to the common good.

But, as you know, that desire is being challenged more and more in our day. Lawmakers and activists, instead of saying, “They do things differently and sometimes even better,” are increasingly say-

---

*To be faithful to Jesus, we need not only organizations but organizations that mirror or embody the values and the heart of Jesus—and not the convictions or values of some other god or some other guide.*

---

ing, “Those ways are wrong and hateful and should be stopped.” Rather than preserving the freedom for those faith-based organizations to be different, lawmakers are saying, “We need rules that require them to be the same as secular organizations, to do things the way the majority in our society values and not the way they say their religious principles require.”

What is happening? We can simplify a complex development into three trends: First, we no longer have even a thin Christian consensus but

instead great religious and moral diversity. If there is some public consensus, it is a secular consensus that on some important matters values things the Bible says are not good. Second, our governments increasingly are insisting that private organizations must be regulated, and they must be regulated so that they follow those secular values. As a result, non-Christian values increasingly are being turned into laws and regulations that government requires private organizations to follow. And third, rather than honoring the religious freedom of faith-based organizations to depart from those secular laws and regulations, governments increasingly claim that religious freedom is a narrow freedom that protects churches but not parachurch organizations, that protects worship but not service of our neighbors—a freedom that protects your thinking but not your doing if your doing involves the public and not just your family or your church. This is the conflict of the health insurance contraceptive mandate: Which organizations have religious freedom?

To refer to Abraham Kuyper again, we can say that we are losing our commitment to sphere sovereignty. Sphere sovereignty is a reminder that government does not create society and its many organizations. Rather, families, art institutes, colleges, hospitals, adoption agencies, businesses, and media companies all have their own God-created areas of service, and they often express a religiously-based way of carrying out those different kinds of service. While the government must protect individual rights and must act so that these different organizations, these different spheres, can co-exist harmoniously, it is not the legitimate duty of government to lord it over those distinct organizations, trying to change what they do and how they do it. The government should respect their sovereignty, not override it.

Well, as you may know, or might guess, the major disputes about how much freedom organizations shaped by faith should be allowed to have revolve around three important topics: religion; reproductive issues—abortion and contraception; and gay or LGBT rights—same-sex marriage and sexual-orientation discrimination.

To some activists, government officials, and judges, it is just wrong and should be illegal for a Christian student club to insist that its leaders be

faithful to the Bible in both belief and personal conduct. That's supposedly just religious discrimination and anti-gay bigotry, and so the clubs are often told, "stick to your policy and you lose your place among the approved student groups on campus."

To some activists, government officials, and judges, it is just wrong, and it should be illegal, for a religious organization, especially if it receives any form of government assistance, to hire only people who confess the same beliefs as the organization and agree to follow the organization's code of personal conduct. To these critics, there's no good reason for such a policy; it is merely a way to keep out people the organization must despise.

To some activists, government officials, and judges, it is just wrong, and it should be illegal, for a faith-based hospital not to perform elective abortions. It doesn't matter that a hospital or clinic or doctor around the corner does perform abortions: they say it violates the rights of a woman seeking an abortion if the Catholic hospital in front of her will not perform abortions. They say that such a bigoted hospital should lose Medicaid and Medicare funds and perhaps should not be allowed to operate at all.

To some activists, government officials, and judges, it is just wrong, and it should be illegal, for an adoption agency to have the idea that every child deserves, if possible, a believing father and mother married to each other for life, instead of placing the child with a cohabiting couple or a single person or a gay couple or a same-sex married couple. It does not matter that other adoption agencies are eager to help the single person, the cohabiting couple, the same-sex married couple. They believe that every agency should be forced to operate as if all these types of households are equally valuable, or else they should close their doors.

And so, after 2,000 years during which one of the key marks of the church's faithfulness was its care for orphans, in our own day in the United States and in other countries, many faith-based adoption agencies have been told by government either to abandon their beliefs and practices about families and biblical sexual relationships or else abandon their adoption services. And in our country and other countries, a growing number of faith-based adoption agencies have had to close their doors. Catholic adoption agencies in Washington,

DC, San Francisco, Massachusetts, and Illinois, and an evangelical foster-care agency in Illinois, have had to stop providing services they believed they should offer.

Now, this pressure on religious organizations to change their practices is not, at least not always, intended to be anti-Christian; it is meant, instead, to be pro-justice, or pro-equality, or pro-human rights. But here's the problem. Our society just does not have a consensus on justice, equality, and human rights. We differ, sometimes deeply, about the value of religion, about what a flourishing mar-

---

*Will the law allow that organization to be Christian, to follow Kingdom values, or will the law require the organization to change its practices to mirror the values of the secular majority in our nation?*

---

riage looks like, about the best interests of children, about abortion and euthanasia, about how best to help the poor and addicts, about the role of religion in medical care, and about many other things. And so, to respect one another, to respect conscience, to honor our Constitution's guarantee of the free exercise of religion, there ought to be robust protections for persons and organizations that do not share our society's current secular consensus. There should be religious freedom, not only for individuals but for organizations that are shaped by faith.

Our laws, rather than pressing for more and more uniformity, must preserve space for diversity. This is my third point this morning. We need institutional religious freedom; we need *more* institutional religious freedom—right in our day.

There must continue to be legal room for Dordt College, Compassion International, Catholic Charities, Hobby Lobby, Jewish Social Services, and nearly countless other organizations shaped by faith to make their uncommon contributions to the common good. And this freedom is increas-

ingly important as our society's consensus becomes less and less friendly to Christianity and more and more secular.

In our religiously diverse society, in our morally plural society, Christians need the freedom to be countercultural—freedom for individuals to be countercultural in our personal practices and freedom for organizations to be countercultural in their operations and services. And people and organizations of other faiths need the same freedoms. In our religiously and morally diverse society, we need more religious freedom, not less—and that freedom has to extend to faith-based organizations that serve the public and not be limited to individuals, worship, and church.

As the logo for my institution—Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance—says, religious organizations should be “free to flourish” even when they are “shaped by faith.” Our laws should respect our religious and moral diversity and not try to suppress views that are currently unpopular. Let me stress: Institutional freedom doesn't suppress individual rights, as many critics now say. Just think, we have diverse organizations because we have diverse views—and because of those diverse convictions, some employees want to work in a religious environment even if others don't, and some customers want to be served in a faith-shaped way, even if others don't. And other employees and customers prefer a secular organization. Respect for each other requires respect for diverse organizations—even when we disagree with some of the views that guide some of the organizations.

Now, let me affirm—not every view is right and God-pleasing. Of course not. So we do wish and pray that our fellow citizens, our neighbors, will come to acknowledge Jesus as King. But religious freedom is not a barrier to our witness but is instead the means to have a clear witness in our morally and religiously diverse society.

Remember the prayer we are supposed to pray for governmental leaders. Here it is, in I Timothy 2, written to Christians living when the Roman Empire was pagan, anti-Christian:

*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may*



*live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.—I Timothy 2:1-4*

I'm not a New Testament scholar, but isn't that a startling prayer for political leaders? It is not a prayer that they will become Christians and then rule by the Bible, forcing everyone to follow King Jesus. No, it is a prayer for religious freedom: praying that we can live holy and godly lives in peace. And if we can do that, what might be the outcome? We'll please God and he may bless our society with a harvest of new believers, people who, out of conviction, desire to follow King Jesus in all that they do.

But we face a problem, don't we? We need religious freedom so that we may live holy and godly lives—personally and through our organizations—even when many in our society have other gods and other goals. But why should our society preserve religious freedom when so many powerful people are sure that religion is not good and that religious organizations may do more harm than good? Well, there is a witness of deeds that can be persuasive even when arguments fall on deaf ears and hard hearts:

*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires...live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.—I Peter 2:11-12*

This is a passage that I think should give us hope. Here we are, you and I, more and more foreigners and exiles in our own country, followers of a different King than most of our fellow citizens want to follow. Increasingly, our fellow citizens regard many of our views and values to be wrong, harmful, hateful, cramped, bigoted. And yet these verses suggest it is possible for our fellow citizens—even if they think our convictions are wrong and crazy—to see that the works of service we do are genuinely good deeds, and even to glorify God in some way and at some time because of those good works, works they didn't expect to be good because they think religion is wrong and hateful. Isn't that striking and hopeful? Acts of service—the things we do personally and the

things that faith-based service organizations do—can be a testimony to the goodness of God, even when people don't want to hear the Gospel.

Such good deeds, when they are connected to biblical convictions, may yet speak to a disbelieving culture, a culture that needs to become convinced again that religion is not necessarily bad but can produce real good, and therefore that religious freedom is a good thing, that it is the way to make possible in society these admirable good deeds.

Let me end with one last image and with a reminder about the early years of Christianity. Have you been to the Roman Forum, that large area of ruins in Rome dating back 2000 and more years? I stood in the Roman Forum eight years ago and was pondering questions of cultural decline and cultural renewal. The main features in this picture are the triumphal arch in the foreground and the church up higher in the background.

The triumphal arch celebrates great victories in war by Emperor Septimius Severus and his sons in the years 195 and 197 AD. At one time, you will have to imagine, it was a glorious arch, standing among other gleaming monuments and buildings—sacred buildings such as many temples to the Roman and Greek gods, and also secular buildings such as triumphal arches, the Senate building, and the Rostrum, the platform where speeches were made to the gathered crowds. This was the heart of Rome, the heart of the civilized world. This was the glory of the civilized world, the concentration of power and monumental art and temples to all the gods of the pagan Romans. At one time this arch was sparkling, not eroded, and it was surrounded by gleaming white marble and gold and brightly colored statues. The arch and the other monuments and buildings celebrated the might of Rome, the glories of the Empire, the wonders of Roman culture, art, engineering, military force. Recall the powerful images in the movie *Gladiator*.

Now, imagine yourself as one of the small band of Christians, a small minority in the ancient Roman Empire in the year 200 or so. Here you are, looking at this arch and the other monuments and temples and saying, "Nevertheless, despite all the glory of these structures and all the power that these structures represent, Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not Emperor Septimius Severus despite his glorious

victories. There is only one true God, and it is not the Roman emperor.”

I am sure it was very easy to be a cultural pessimist and a personal defeatist, standing in the Roman Forum, gazing at this arch and seeing the gleaming temples and the glorious monuments. And yet, the glory of pagan Rome was extinguished. The empire fell. The monuments fell into ruin. More than that, pagan Roman civilization and pagan Roman might was transcended and replaced. And it was transcended and replaced by a civilization deeply shaped by Christianity.

That transition and replacement of pagan Rome by Christianity is symbolized and exemplified by the church you see standing taller than the arch—standing on higher ground because it was built centuries after the triumphal arch. This is the church of St. Luke the Evangelist and St. Martina, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-century martyr. The original church on this spot was built in the early medieval era, and the church was then rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Baroque style that we see now. Over the years, sometimes right on top of pagan Rome, a new civilization was built.

Pagan Rome and pagan Roman civilization were transcended by the Christian church and Western civilization. The God and the perspectives and commitments of that small band of Christians had overcome the glory and the practices and the beliefs that were exemplified and magnified by the monuments and temples and secular buildings of the Roman Forum. Pagan Roman civilization had been displaced by and transformed into Western civilization with its Christian inspiration.

Let me be clear. I don't mean to suggest that Western civilization has ever been a faithful expression of Christian convictions. There was always too much injustice and unbelief and violence and mediocrity to say it was truly and wholly Christian. Yet there was, and is, much that is good in our civilization, so much that is better than pagan civilization. Universities, modern science, legal systems, and our sense of justice, compassion for the needy, democracy and human rights, respect for women, care for children—these and many other undoubted goods are the fruit of the Christian civilization that replaced pagan Roman civilization. We should be grateful for these good practices and institutions and attitudes, and honor them. This was a tremen-

dously positive—and God-honoring—change in culture

How was pagan Rome overcome, transcended, by a Christian civilization? That, of course, is a long and complicated story, and historians do not agree on it. To start reflecting on it, I highly recommend the book by Rodney Stark called *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>3</sup>

How was pagan Rome overcome by a new civilization inspired by many Christian values? Stark says it was not because Constantine, a century after the building of that triumphal arch, seized power under Christian symbols, banned paganism, and made Christianity the official religion. That story is not true. Constantine did not ban paganism and did not make Christianity the official religion. That was done by a later emperor.

What then is the true story about why Christianity grew and paganism was displaced? That story has various parts, but beyond the invisible movement of the Spirit that was leading people to convert, there was a visible factor, the visible good works of Christians—exactly what the apostle Peter wrote about in those verses we just saw.

Rodney Stark writes about a wide range of good works—of things Christians did differently than pagans did, because Christians believed in Christ and not pagan gods. He talks about compassionate care for the poor, that Christians neither aborted babies nor put newborns out to die because a family didn't want them, that women's status and rights

---

*Sphere sovereignty is a reminder that government does not create society and its many organizations.*

---

were lifted up, that Christians bridged the gap between rich and poor and between different ethnicities in their communities of the faithful. And there were other differences. Let me remind you about one good work that the pagans, no matter what they thought about Christ and Christians, just could not ignore.

Roman cities, civilized and yet crowded and

dirty, were subject to periodic plagues. The epidemics could claim a large proportion of the population. There was no medicine, no understanding of how the plague was spread nor how to contain it. When the plague arrived, the pagan priests and the pagan leaders of society fled as far as they could go, leaving the sick and poor and powerless to fend for themselves.

Christians, the Christian church, acted differently. They had no medicine, either, and no greater understanding of public health than the pagans did. But they had love for their neighbors and for each other. So they stayed when the plague came. The church, the community of the faithful, took care of the sick and dying. Just by providing food and water and care to the sick, the church strengthened many of those who had become infected, kept them strong enough so that their own bodies could fight off death. Because of care like this, the death rate was cut by as much as two-thirds.

Then, after a plague or two had swept through a city, a disproportionate number of those who remained living would be Christians helped by other Christians and pagans helped by their Christian neighbors. Those pagans who had been helped, well, they had seen visible good deeds. And many of them converted. As Andy Crouch says, through these epidemics the church grew, “not just because it proclaimed hope in the face of horror but because of the cultural effects of a new approach to the sick and dying, [because of] a willingness to care for the sick even at risk of death.”<sup>24</sup> Here were visible good works, good works with Christian roots.

Just as the apostle Peter said, these Christians lived such good lives among the pagans that, although pagans were sure that Christians were wrong, the pagans could see the Christians’ good deeds and they were prompted to glorify God. Paganism was displaced by Christianity because Christians were faithful—they neither assimilated to pagan culture nor fled from it. Instead, they served their neighbors with the good deeds that Jesus inspired and shaped. They contributed to the common good in an *uncommon* way.

Now, when I think back to this church and triumphal arch, and when I remember Rodney Stark’s history of the social impact of early Christianity, and when I think of those verses in I Peter 2, then

I say, we do not know what will happen in the years ahead, but we should not become pessimists because we see strong negative trends and growing distrust of religion and a growing desire to restrict religious freedom. No, it is possible for our fellow citizens to admire good deeds inspired by faith and then to change their minds about religious freedom and about religion.

But that is only possible if those good deeds are visibly connected to faith and cannot be interpreted as being just humanitarian good deeds. So a winsome case for religious freedom, I believe, is built by showing our society good deeds that they admire, and clearly connecting those good deeds to the faith that produces them. Not only do faithful faith-based organizations do good, but they also communicate the value of religion and religious freedom, even to those convinced that these are evils that should be suppressed.

Friends, brothers and sisters: we live in a challenging time. This is a time for courage and commitment and compassion. Many in our society have decided that Jesus is not good news but bad news. But our calling is not to hide our heads, nor to hide our light. Rather, now is the time to demonstrate the good news of Jesus in visible acts that are clearly rooted in our faith. And now is the time to pray: not for a lost Christian America but for religious freedom so that we can live godly lives and be faithful and winsome witnesses to the King of Kings. Thank you.

### Endnotes

1. James Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Eerdmans Publishing and Paternoster Press, 1998), 488.
2. Peter Greer and Chris Horst, with Anna Haggard, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Bethany House, 2014), 25.
3. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperSan-Francisco, 1997).
4. Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (IVP Books, 2008), 157.