
Pro Rege

Volume 51 | Number 1

Article 3

September 2022

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Recommended Citation

Herman, Anna (2022) "Love Your Neighbor: The Church's Response to Individualism's Impact on Interpersonal Engagement," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 51: No. 1, 19 - 25.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol51/iss1/3

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Love Your Neighbor:

The Church's Response to Individualism's Impact on Interpersonal Engagement

by Anna Herman

Variations of the same, monotonous drama play themselves out in neighborhoods and households around the country: Thankful to be home after his long, traffic-laden commute from work, a man pulls into his garage and switches off the current episode of his latest true crime podcast. He shuts the garage door and enters his home, thankful to be done with the outside world for the day. At the same time, the woman next door extensively circulates her political opinion on the internet via social media, launching criticisms of various political figures and governmental policies. However, if you were to ask her, she would inform you that she has never actually engaged in a meaningful, face-to-face conversation with those who disagree with her ideology. Similarly, a young couple at the end of the street maintain a busy schedule and have no time to volunteer at the local shelter. Nevertheless, they believe their donation should cover their lack of social involvement. These scenes are repeated with little deviation up and down the subdivision, each neighbor never taking an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the person living next door. While commonplace and singularly unremarkable, each of these scenarios displays the growing indi-

vidualism and lack of interpersonal engagement that has permeated society within the current culture.

The lack of social connectedness within society has not gone unnoticed. In 2004, sociological research discovered that over 25% of Americans felt that they do not have anyone in whom to confide.¹ As a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of social disconnectedness have further increased, with some experts referring to the virus and its social-isolating effects as the “double pandemic.”² Multiple sectors of research have demonstrated that social connectedness has vital implications for an individual’s overall health: increasing longevity, raising self-esteem, promoting better emotion-regulation skills, and decreasing rates of anxiety and depression.³ As such, interpersonal social engagement is important not only for societal health but also for health at an individual level.

While the problem of social isolation and lack of interpersonal engagement may seem like a contemporary concern, the truth is that this issue has been the subject of commentary for many years. Working as a 19th-century theologian, politician, prime minister, and university president, Abraham Kuyper understood the importance of engaging within society. He made use of his various occupations to become a spokesperson against the individualism that had begun to creep into society. Born in 1837, Kuyper would eventually study theology at the University of Leiden, while also showing an ar-

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dent interest in literature, law, and politics. In 1863 he received his doctorate, married Johanna Schaay, and became pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Beesd, where he remained a minister until 1874.⁴ Kuyper became increasingly involved in politics and eventually established the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1878. Two years later he founded the Free University in Amsterdam, which served to provide more Calvinistic theological studies. In 1901 Kuyper became Prime Minister of the Netherlands and served in that capacity until 1905. During his time as a politician, Kuyper oversaw the Boer Wars in South Africa abroad and promoted the creation of private educational structures at home. After his defeat in the 1905 election, he continued to work within the field of politics until his death, on November 8, 1920.⁵ Because of his deep-seated theological and political background, Kuyper stood opposed to the hyper-individualism that had slowly crept into society because he viewed it as a form of “religion” which contradicted Christianity.

The individualism Kuyper recognized in society resulted from the ideals of the French Revolution. Kuyper shared the sentiments of Edmund Burke, a late-18th-century political conservative, who saw the French Revolution as promoting an individualist notion of liberty that was “solitary, unconnected, individual, and selfish”⁶ and based upon unrestrained enjoyment of life, liberty, and property. During his life as a politician and president of the Free University, Kuyper articulated concerns about the growing hyper-individualism that the French Revolution promoted and that had begun to spread across the world. Kuyper saw a clear contrast between Christianity and the “religion” of the French Revolution. He noted that “the Christian religion seeks personal human dignity in the social relationships of an organically integrated society... [while] the French Revolution disturbed that organic tissue, broke those social bonds, and left nothing but the monotonous, self-seeking individual asserting his own self-sufficiency.”⁷ Kuyper believed, in the words of Da Costa, that “society is ‘not a heap of souls on a piece of ground’ but a God-willed community, a living, human organism.”⁸ Kuyper argued that this view contrasted with the “individualism of the French Revolution,” which was “born from its denial of human com-

munity.”⁹ Kuyper opposed individualism as being contradictory to the gospel and instead called for Christ-centered lives, which promote connection among the different spheres of society and result in gospel witness and an exaltation of Christ.

Kuyper was not the only 19th-century intellectual to notice the increasing threat of individualism to society. Another opponent of individualism, Alexis de Tocqueville, French diplomat and political philosopher, visited the United States in the early 19th century. This visit eventually led to the publication of his book *Democracy in America*, in 1835. In this book, he examined the strengths of the United States and its new system of government. Closely connected to the French Revolution because of his nationality, Tocqueville, like Kuyper, expressed concern regarding the increase in individualism. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville admired the sense of community and civic engagement, which he discovered in his travels in the United States. He wrote, “there is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united in society”¹⁰; and “nothing ...is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America.”¹¹ According to Tocqueville, a society could only flourish and prosper if it placed an emphasis on engagement with others and rejected the pressures of individualism.

Unfortunately, the individualism growing during the lives of Kuyper and Tocqueville has not decreased or disappeared, but rather it has increased. People have slowly disengaged from social clubs and organizations and replaced them with activities that do not involve interacting with society. This becomes problematic as Tocqueville wrote, “if men are to remain civilized...the art of associating together must grow and improve.”¹² In other words, when people stop engaging in society, the economy, democracy, and neighborhoods do not function as they ought. However, when people do engage in society and forgo individualism, they have better health, can solve problems more easily, communicate more efficiently, allow business transactions to function more smoothly, improve education, and become more empathetic towards the feelings of others. All these things reveal the need for people to engage with each other so that

society can flourish, which will in turn increase individual happiness and health. However, people have jumped to finding individual happiness without first engaging in society, a leap which weakens both society and the happiness and health of the individual.

Robert Putnam, a leading humanist and social scientist, as well as the Malkin Research Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, wrote about his fear concerning this new, individualistic culture, in his book *Bowling Alone*. This book explained how,

When looking at the church's unity and engagement with society, Kuyper thought it important to view the church as a two-part entity: an institution and an organism.

in the mid-1900s, people actively engaged in society by joining different clubs and organizations that promoted relationships and comradery, but that eventually these clubs began to dwindle until they disappeared entirely. Putnam advocated for the concept of social capital, which is defined as the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹³ In other words, social capital encompasses the concept of being involved in societal organizations in which both parties must give something up to better each other. People used to engage in these types of activities, one such example being bowling leagues. They would get to know certain people and form relationships that went beyond the typical work interactions. Eventually, these types of activities became more individualistic; and, as the title of Putnam’s book references, people began “bowling alone.”

Examining political and religious participation as well as volunteering and workplace connections, Robert Putnam carefully examined the declining trends and provided some possible reasons for these negative slopes. When examining political participation, Putnam discovered that the more a person’s actions relied on another’s actions, the “greater the drop-off in [their] participation.”¹⁴ For example, fewer people attended public hearing meetings, served as an officer or other representative on a committee, or assisted a political party.

However, the statistics about writing to a senator or publishing an opinion piece for a newspaper or journal did not show much change over the years. The latter activities do not rely on other individuals to participate and can be accomplished on the living room couch. The former activities, however, involve leaving the house, having intellectual conversations with others, and forming relationships to further a cause. Those are the reasons why political engagement and other social interactions are becoming less frequent.

In their commentaries on society and individualism, all three men (Kuyper, Tocqueville, and Putnam) referenced the importance of the church as an impetus for social engagement. In his writings, Tocqueville pointed primarily to the church as the means of engagement within American society. He called religion the “principal ally” of interacting within society. However, the individualistic culture had seeped into the church and caused many churches to become more consumeristic and less focused on fellowship. As Tocqueville viewed the church as the greatest proponent of social interaction, this change within the church should be troubling for many. Similarly, in his chapter concerning religious participation, Putnam explained how more Christians are disregarding church membership and have become individualistic, neglecting a shared faith. Consequently, churches have had less of an impact on the communities around them. Putnam summarized it as such:

Faith-based organizations serve civic life both directly, by providing social support to their members and social services to the wider community, and indirectly, by nurturing civic skills, inculcating moral values, encouraging altruism, and fostering civic recruitment among church people...In short, as the twenty-first century opens, Americans are going to church less often than we did three or four decades ago, and the churches we go to are less engaged with the wider com-

munity. Trends in religious life reinforce rather than counterbalance the ominous plunge in social connectedness in the secular community.¹⁵

This decline in church attendance and engagement with the wider community does not present a new problem to the church. During his life, Kuyper addressed concerns about the lack of unity within the church and the desire of some to forgo the church as a structural institution. When the unity of the church weakens and people stop attending their church, the church loses its power to be effective and connect with its community. When writing about Christians' focus on denominational differences, Kuyper asserted, "Where the church should have entered every corner of the world's life, blessed it, and governed it, the church was instead constantly pervaded by the spirit of the world that weakened it from within."¹⁶ Additionally, Kuyper stated that this lack of unity damages the manifestation of Christ's glory. He pointed to Christ's high priestly prayer in John 17 as a reminder of the type of unity which should permeate the church.

When looking at the church's unity and engagement with society, Kuyper thought it important to view the church as a two-part entity: an institution and an organism. To be a unified body and successfully magnify Christ, the church should be understood in these two parts. The church as an institution can be defined as the local gathering of believers, while the organism encompasses the people of God in its entirety and their day-to-day activities. Kuyper argued the necessity of both parts because "Christianity does not bring to life just an individual but binds many together."¹⁷ In other words, Christians need the oversight, accountability, and community of a local church body and cannot be merely content with being a Christian loosely related to other Christians. Richard Mouw, writing about Kuyper, stated that the institutional church "occupies a specific sphere, an area of cultural activity that exists alongside other spheres,"¹⁸ meaning that if the church fails to act as an institution, it cannot have an impact upon the society around it.

Kuyper strongly believed the primary concern of the church as an institution should be the spiritual strengthening of its members. Only when the church has faithfully prioritized teaching the

Scriptures and spiritual growth can it look outside its walls to edify society. Kuyper called the church to a three-fold plan of ministry: philanthropy, evangelism, and mission. Philanthropy involves the process of the church caring for anyone in its community who needs assistance. However, the church should not just provide for someone's physical need but should also offer spiritual nourishment, which falls into the category of evangelism. Lastly, the church should also be concerned with those outside their local community, which Kuyper would include in his last category of missions.¹⁹

Kuyper expounded on these three categories in his address given at the First Christian Social Congress, an address that can be read in *The Problem of Poverty*. In this speech, Kuyper spoke of the church influencing society in three ways: the ministry of the Word, the ministry of charity, and the equality of brotherhood. The ministries of the Word and charity encompass the sharing of both the Scripture and material goods to those in need. When Kuyper spoke about the equality of brotherhood, he meant the communion which should be shared among all believers. Though characterizing the categories slightly differently, in both lectures Kuyper addressed the church's fundamental call to engage in society. The main focus of Kuyper's speech was the social problem resulting from the economic gap between the wealthy and poor of society; here, he was primarily speaking out against those who were promoting a communistic approach to this social problem. He began his lecture by describing the "undeniable" relationship between the church and the social problem. Kuyper emphasized this point when he quoted Johann Fichte to argue that "Christianity can also exert a wonderful organizing power on society"²⁰ through which the blessings of the gospel can be displayed throughout the world. The principles for which Kuyper advocated still apply in the church's engagement with the outside world.

In this speech, Kuyper readdressed how the French Revolution "set every man against every other," or promoted individualism within the church.²¹ He continued later in his address to mention that the French Revolution dismantled all types of social organizations, including the church and its role in society. Because of individualism,

the church began to lose focus on its eternal purpose and stopped caring for those in need. Kuyper believed the Christian religion should bring “loving compassion into the world,” which had been missing from the current society. At the heart of the social issue, according to Kuyper, the Christian should pursue human dignity in creating relationships in society. As an example of how to live in such a way, Kuyper pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ and his ministry on earth. Kuyper mentioned that Christ lived out what he preached, and

community by engaging with strangers. Kuyper pointed to both Hebrews 13:2 (“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”) and 1 Peter 4:9 (“Show hospitality to one another without grumbling”) as a reminder of our calling, not just to interact with society but, as Christians, to interact with those outside our family circles. The “duty of hospitality demands a kind of social interaction that is much more varied”²⁵ than that between family members and close acquaintances.

Just as Kuyper warned families about whom they welcome into their houses, he also cautioned churches not to let their interaction within society ruin their distinctive nature.

Kuyper called Christians to behave likewise. He stated that Christ did not strive after earthly wealth but instead chose to be born in a stable and later in his life had “nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). According to Kuyper, compassion drove the ministry of Jesus and is the trait that is “imprinted on every page of the gospel,” where Christ engages with those who are suffering. Kuyper called his hearers to behave similarly towards all people, regardless of wealth and position in life. He asserted that a Christian cannot maintain “two different faiths—one for you and one for the poor”—but must recognize every individual as a brother, part of one’s own flesh and blood.²²

Unfortunately, the tendency of Kuyper’s culture, and ours still today, is to function mainly within family circles and therefore to fail to interact with the outside world. Kuyper believed in sphere sovereignty regarding the immediate family, but he still maintained that it is unhealthy to isolate as a family unit. He stated, “God did not create the family so that the human race might be split into numerous little compartments and all interaction between them might be cut off.”²³ This type of association does not promote social engagement, but rather acts as another form of unhealthy individualism. According to Kuyper, the “interaction between different families must serve to stimulate the cohesion of our human life,”²⁴ meaning each family has a responsibility to society to strengthen

Many people seek these hospitable relationships between family and the outside world through means such as bars or social clubs. While Putnam would promote these sorts of interactions as forms of social capital, Kuyper only supported them to the extent that they act as relationships that can lead to the sharing of the gospel. Kuyper condemned these types of relationships as a way of showing hospitality because they do not promote the family, but instead provide a means of escape for those feeling “trapped” within their close family circle, unwilling to show hospitality to anyone who needs it. On the other hand, some Christians in Kuyper’s time followed the command of hospitality so passionately that they began to neglect their own family or welcomed those who had a negative spiritual impact upon the lives of their children. Therefore, when discussing this relationship between families and society, Kuyper offered a warning concerning the spiritual health of children. When dealing with younger children, Kuyper urged parents to choose the friends of their children because the children would not have enough wisdom to select their own friends. Once the children matured, parents should trust their children’s discretion to choose their own group of godly friends. He encouraged parents to get to know the friends of their children in order that they might know “the spirit that is at work in them.”²⁶ Kuyper did offer the caveat that no person can truly know the heart of another, but neverthe-

less, the main principle remains the same: if parents are not mindful of those with whom they interact and do not take precautions to protect their children, they shirk their responsibility to promote the spiritual well-being of their children.

To maintain a healthy interaction with the outside world and stay out of the pitfall of either completely disassociating oneself from society or becoming so welcoming that one can “poison [the] heart or family,”²⁷ one must allow Christ to become the center of all relationships. Kuyper stressed the significance of making the bond with Christ the most important relationship when he stated, “While the love that binds us to our King may weaken our family bond, our bond to Christ may never be weakened by our love for our family.”²⁸ His basis for this statement comes from Matthew 10:35, in which Christ states, “For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.” Christians may show hospitality to all, but they need to be conscious of whom they make close friends and acquaintances, as those people have the greatest opportunity of corrupting a household. The people who have the closest intimacy should only be those who “join us in our faithful service to our King.”²⁹

Just as Kuyper warned families about whom they welcome into their houses, he also cautioned churches not to let their interaction within society ruin their distinctive nature. While he encouraged social interaction, Kuyper placed a greater emphasis on becoming a more Christ-centered church. He claimed that the church is “a phenomenon sui generis,”³⁰ or a kind of its own. Whenever the church loses its distinctive nature in society, it also fails to have an ongoing impact within society. It begins to welcome individualism and to encourage its members to look out for their own benefit, rather than the prosperity of the Kingdom of God. When speaking about losing the distinctive nature of the church and no longer focusing on Christ, Kuyper wrote, “even if it has the best of intentions, every attempt to restore a fallen church that is not directed to the restoration of Christ’s kingship above all else can end only in failure and deliver no result.”³¹ Like the admonition he delivered to families, Kuyper admonished the church to place its relationship with Christ above all other interac-

tions in which it engages. If the church neglects to preserve Christ as the center of its foundation, it will fail to have an impact on the society around it and will rather become the individualistic church that Putnam earlier described.

With the increasing threat of individualism on societal health, Tocqueville, Putnam, and Kuyper all addressed their concerns regarding this topic. However, as a Christian, Kuyper took a different perspective on this issue than either Tocqueville or Putnam. While each praised the church and recognized the importance of the church’s engagement within society, only Kuyper had a true love for the church and a deep desire for it to exalt the name of Christ. Kuyper desired the church to be a proponent of the dignity of all human life, just as the ministry of Christ portrayed. In his writings, Kuyper also called individual families to practice hospitality and engage with strangers and formulate relationships that will foster positive interpersonal social engagement. However, Kuyper realized that the church can only have this effect on society when it first has unity within its own body. If the church preoccupies itself with issues Kuyper viewed as trivial, then it cannot enrich society through its interaction with the world. For Kuyper, the ultimate goal of the church and for each Christian should center around the glory of God and becoming more Christ-like as it bears testimony to His salvation and grace.

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