
Pro Rege

Volume 34 | Number 3

Article 2

March 2006

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Recommended Citation

Carlson-Thies, Stanley (2006) "Abraham Kuyper in the White House? Why Dordt Isn't So Far From Washington, DC," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 34: No. 3, 11 - 17.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol34/iss3/2

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Abraham Kuyper in the White House?

Why Dordt Isn't So Far From Washington, DC



by Stanley Carlson-Thies

Do you ever wonder just what will become of you? Do you pray about your future, asking God to allow you to make a significant contribution to others—not only to your family and church but also to your community, your discipline, or your line of work and the broader society? And when you do dream big dreams, when you do ask God to put you in a position to advance the Kingdom

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of God; spread the Good News; erect a signpost to the Kingdom; promote justice, stewardship, and compassion—when you have big dreams and a burning desire to make a difference—do you sometimes worry that such hopes are vain?

Maybe you tell yourself to be realistic. Here you are, in Iowa, at Dordt College, and you are a Christian, a Calvinist. How can *you* anticipate making a difference in our culture? Your college isn't in the Ivy League or even the Big Ten, you live in a place the cultural elite snubs as mere "fly-over country," and not only do you cling to what they are convinced is an odd and pernicious set of religious convictions, but you are also being taught how those odd convictions should shape your entire view of the world and of life!

Can there actually be any room for you and your views in the real world of the decision-makers and culture-shapers? Certainly *you* are convinced that your Bible convictions are true and that the Calvinist world-and-life view is right and fruitful, yet you worry that perhaps what you and Dordt regard as preparation for life and service is instead confining you to the backwaters, to irrelevance in the big cultural battles and debates of our day.

I must confess that I had secret worries of this sort a dozen or so years ago when I lived in Orange City, taught at Northwestern College, and then was part of the Dordt College community for a time, working in the library and teaching. I was deeply convinced of the truth of the Reformed faith and Calvinist perspective; after all, none of that was part of my upbringing but rather something I had consciously chosen and had gone thousands of

miles out of my way to pursue because I saw greater biblical faithfulness and worldly fruitfulness in these convictions and perspectives than in the views with which I had been raised. But I could not see how the Calvinist and Kuyperian worldview would amount to much in shaping our nation, our world. Shaping the world was left to others—graduates of Harvard and Chicago, Stanford and Princeton, people from the East Coast or the West Coast, people who grew up next door to prominent leaders and spent their time in grand conferences, not in meeting with a handful of other believers for a Bible study or book discussion on how to obey God and glory in his guidance and love in areas such as farming, citizenship, raising a family, or running a business. I thought it was inspiring and exactly right for Abraham Kuyper to claim, “There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is mine!’” But isn’t the world just going along in its own ways, nevertheless?

If you are secretly worried, as I was secretly worried, that you are being shaped into worldly irrelevance by being educated at Dordt and with the reformational vision, I assure you that your worries are mistaken. Why are they mistaken? One reason, of course, is that those value judgments of the elites are false. Iowa is not mere “fly-over country.” Dordt College isn’t a backwater. Christianity isn’t the dark force that prevents cultural and intellectual progress. Calvinism isn’t the kill-joy repressive doctrine they imagine.

Another and vital reason is that we really *are* called to be faithful, not successful. Our responsibility *is* to hear God and to follow him, and we can safely leave to him the way our lives, our culture, and history are aimed and shaped toward the New Heavens and New Earth.

But a third reason for putting your worries about insignificance behind you is this: the concepts and principles in which you deeply believe are not irrelevant to our culture and world. Rather, they are having a major transformative role in our nation. Let me unfold to you one example of how the ideas inspiring Dordt are actually shaping our society and government.

This example begins with a story that appeared in a Dutch Christian newspaper in March,

2002. Translated into English, the headline says, “Abraham Kuyper in the White House.”²¹ Actually, the journalist wasn’t claiming that Abraham Kuyper has come back to life or that President George W. Bush is a reincarnation of Kuyper. Neither was he claiming that Bush is a political leader with the same broad and deep Christian political and social vision as Kuyper. No, the story was pointing to something else, something surprising in its own way.

That something else is this: inside the Bush White House, inside the Bush administration’s public policy machine and mentality, exists an idea championed by Abraham Kuyper, and that idea was represented by someone from the Kuyper-inspired Center for Public Justice. That someone was I. From February, 2001, to May, 2002, I was part of President Bush’s White House staff as a founding member of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The Kuyper idea is embodied in the Bush faith-based initiative.

After explaining the key concepts of the faith-based initiative, I will tell the surprising story of that initiative’s ending up in the White House. For groundwork, I will first review the three extremes or temptations for Christians when it comes to our action in the world, our interaction with our culture and its institutions. One temptation is simply to assimilate to the world’s patterns, keeping our spiritual life pure but allowing our outer life—our studies, our politics, our economic involvement, our care for the poor—to be guided by the world’s principles, not by God. Yet how can we confine our obedience to God in that cramped way? A second temptation is instead to try to dominate the world, to take over cultural and political institutions and make them righteous, using our power to force unbelievers to conceal their beliefs and yield to our standards. This is a temptation for conservative Christian political involvement: the hope and attempt to mobilize Christians, or the Moral Majority, to restore an imagined Christian America and chase the liberals and secularists and unbelievers out of prominence and influence. But a takeover of government, the universities, and Hollywood doesn’t seem too likely, so we can be tempted in a third way: to try to flee the world, creating our own separate subculture where we can do

things right and not be subjected to the evil ideas and behavior of people who don't believe what we believe.

I suggest that one fundamental idea of Abraham Kuyper, and Dordt College, is that we not give in to any one of those extremes or temptations. The drive for dominance is not right. Good is not all on our side and evil on the other, such that all we need do is drive others out and take over ourselves. Ultimate victory is the Lord's and is the fruit of

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faithful obedience, not the result of our power and scheming. We are, as Kuyper said, to battle with spiritual weapons—prayer, argument, persuasion, example—and not seek to suppress or kill those with whom we disagree. Then again, the strategy of dividing our lives into spiritual and worldly parts and merely going along with whatever our culture or our discipline dictates can't be right either, for it denies the full gospel and the Bible truths—that everything was created by God and exists under his care and guidance, and that what we do in our families, jobs, voting booths, and classrooms should bring glory to God and advance his kingdom. The third strategy—to flee into our subculture—is not right, either. While we often need to construct alternative institutions and develop alternative philosophies—a Dordt College

with biblically shaped academic disciplines—the goal of this strategy of alternatives is to create not a subculture safe from the world but rather a launching pad from which we can make a distinctively Christian contribution in the world.

It is this Kuyperian and Dordt-ian idea of distinctively Christian engagement with the world that forms the root of the faith-based initiative that is such a prominent activity of the Bush White House. I don't mean to suggest that the Bush administration is filled with dedicated Calvinists or even with Christians. And I don't mean to say that everything the Bush administration does, or even most of it, is an expression of Christian politics or even intends to be. I mean only that this one key initiative of the Bush administration embodies the Kuyperian idea of how the government should act. And yet what a significant initiative!

The faith-based initiative has at its heart this idea: Christian ministries and other religiously inspired groups should be able to partner with the government to serve their neighbors without first having to give up their religious inspiration and practices. Or we can look at it from the other way around: A Christian social ministry should operate in accordance with its Christian principles, not assimilate its practices to secular views. If it is faithful in this way, it should not be forced to remain in a Christian subculture but should be able to become a collaborator with the government and with other social-service organizations. The faith-based initiative seeks to create a level playing field in which all organizations that serve their neighbors—whether the organizations are Christian, or secular, or embody some other faith or perspective—have an equal opportunity to become the government's partner to provide welfare services, job training, drug-treatment help, after-school programs for latchkey kids, housing for poor families, or mentoring for prisoners who need to prepare to reenter the community.

In a land of religious liberty and so much faith-inspired charity, wasn't this partnering of faith-based organizations with the government always the standard? Actually it was not, because throughout most of the past half-century, constitutional interpretation and legal thought were dominated by the idea of an extreme separation

of church and state that prohibited the government from giving taxpayer money to organizations thought to be “sectarian” or “too religious,” even if those organizations provided just the kinds of social services the government wanted to support. Practice was always less strict than theory, yet the old rules for government discouraged the involvement of many Christian ministries and often placed those faith-based organizations that did become the government’s partners under pressure to secularize themselves.

The federal government’s secularizing rules now have been changed. In the summer of 2001, the White House published a report, called *The Uneven Playing Field*,² in which it admitted that faith-based groups, along with small organizations of every kind, often ran into barriers, or discrimination, if they applied for government money to provide services to the needy. Since then, the Bush administration has been systematically changing the rules attached to federal funds to create an equal opportunity for faith-based organizations to collaborate with the government. It has also been instructing state and local governments, which receive most of the federal money, that they, too, must provide equal opportunity when they seek private groups to provide help to the poor.

Thanks to such reforms, and despite the fact that governments are very slow to change, faith-based organizations that today approach government agencies to become service partners will probably receive a welcome rather than a brush-off. The rules now declare their right to preserve their religious mission and faith characteristics instead of pressuring them to suppress their faith basis. Organizations that never before could receive our tax dollars to serve hurting neighbors now are doing so. Christian ministries that in the past had to stay away from the government if they valued their Christian principles are now taking a second look at the opportunities.

Not everything has changed, not everything is perfect, and not everything was bad before. Yet a decisive change has taken place, a corner has been turned. A Kuyperian principle for government has been at work in the White House, and the result is a dramatic change taking place in government-funded social services in our country.

As one can imagine, such a change has not pleased everyone. Many powerful forces think the faith-based initiative is a big mistake, an unconstitutional elevation of religion, a regressive blow against an essential “wall of separation between church and state.” And some loud Christian voices have protested too. In their view, to honor God a government should not create a level playing field but instead partner with Christian ministries and leave out the secular groups. So how did the Kuyperian idea end up in the White House?

Of course, the full story is too long and complicated to tell here. It has many stages and many participants. But I do want to explain the role of one major player: the Center for Public Justice.

The Center for Public Justice is a Kuyper-inspired think tank for public policy research, citizen education, and leadership development. It was founded at a conference here at Dordt in 1977. From the start it has been headed by Dr. James Skillen, who in the late ‘70s was a Dordt College political studies professor.

In 1992 I was recruited out of my work here at Dordt College to join the Center for Public Justice in Washington, DC, to direct a project to help Christians think more biblically about welfare policy. By joining the Center, I dramatically increased its size: it jumped from two full-time staff all the way to three full-time staff! I should add that, after half-a-dozen years of temporary expansion, the Center now consists of four people. If one knows anything about Washington, DC, one knows that politics is greased by money, that big numbers are vital, and that throwing one’s weight around is the way to make things happen. And yet the Center, the tiny Center, has been at the center of the faith-based initiative. How can that be?

Our work on welfare policy showed us the need for change in the government’s rules for working with faith-based social-service organizations. As a result, we collaborated with Christian constitutional law expert Carl Esbeck, with the Christian Legal Society, with Catholic Church lawyers, and with World Vision to develop and advocate the concept of Charitable Choice and to entrench it in the reform of federal welfare policy that President Bill Clinton had promised. Charitable Choice requires equal opportunity for faith-based social-service

providers seeking government support. When the welfare bill seemed headed for success but some Democrats and Republicans appeared likely to strip Charitable Choice out, I was one of the few outsiders to work the halls of Congress advocating for Charitable Choice and organizing support for it from Christian ministries. Most Christian advocacy groups in Washington were preoccupied, instead, with other battles and thought Charitable Choice hardly worth defending.

President Clinton signed Charitable Choice into law in 1996, but that was only a paper victory. It was clear that his administration was not very enthusiastic about the innovation and was likely to ignore it. Furthermore, almost all the Washington advocacy groups that paid attention to Charitable Choice were against it. To keep Charitable Choice from becoming a legal orphan, the Center for Public Justice took three initiatives.

First, to ensure that officials and faith-based organizations would know about and understand the new legal provision, we joined with the Christian Legal Society and published a *Guide to Charitable Choice*, a booklet of easy explanations and detailed information.³ The forward was written by then-Senator John Ashcroft, the chief sponsor of the innovation. Thousands and thousands of copies of this guide have been bought, photocopied, and downloaded by government officials and by leaders of faith-based organizations.

Second, to create pressure on officials to put the legal changes into practice, we issued a report card on state governments.⁴ Foundation money funded a major research project to see what difference Charitable Choice would make to government practice. We conducted a state-by-state survey of officials and discovered that many welfare agencies were ignoring Charitable Choice. Instead of writing a *report* to end up on some dusty shelf, we created a *report card* grading the states, and then we unveiled it at a press conference in Washington, DC. Every state except twelve flunked the test. All those F grades got the attention not only of reporters but also of officials. One governor the next year confessed to a conference of faith-based organizations that his state had been violating Charitable Choice, had rightly been failed by the Center's report card, and was now adopting new

state rules.

Our third initiative was designed to help the states know how to put Charitable Choice into practice and to assist faith-based organizations to know their rights and responsibilities as state policies changed. With funding from another foundation, we developed a detailed and widely read Charitable Choice how-to implementation guide for officials.⁵ We also published a how-to booklet for ministry leaders that still circulates in printed, photocopied, and downloaded formats.⁶

All this work put me in touch with the then-governor of Texas, George W. Bush, who had his own concerns because of the way Texas officials sometimes mistreated faith-based social-service organizations. Governor Bush created his own faith-based initiative for Texas, and his officials several times invited me to Texas to help their agencies understand and apply Charitable Choice.

Out of those contacts came the invitation for me to advise Bush's campaign team on faith-based

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issues when he decided to run for President. I should point out, though, that in the presidential campaign, it was Democrat Al Gore, and not Republican George Bush, who first made a big speech supporting Charitable Choice. That is a reminder that the faith-based initiative is bigger than the Bush administration and that it is not owned by either political party.

After George Bush was elected President, I was asked to advise his transition team about how

the President could develop a national faith-based initiative, and I was then hired onto the staff of the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. I worked with Congress, I helped develop policy initiatives that later resulted in reforms to regulations and programs, and I helped establish Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in major federal departments. Most of all, I drafted—while I thought I was going to be on vacation—the White House report, *Unequal Playing Field*, which admitted the federal bias against faith-based groups and suggested a series of fundamental reforms.

It was while I worked for the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives that the Dutch paper published its headline about Kuyper in the White House. Through the work of the Center for Public Justice, Kuyper's concept of pluralism had been taken into the heart of American government.

Having helped to create and launch the Bush faith-based initiative, I then returned to the Center for Public Justice, where we created a Coalition to Preserve Religious Freedom, an association of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish organizations working to ensure that Congress and the administration continue to advance faith-based reforms. The Coalition helps to educate members and staff in Congress about the issues, and it mobilizes faith-based organizations when it is time for them to speak up to make a difference. I have testified to Congress about the faith-based initiative, regularly speak to organizations and conferences, and publish on the topic. The Center is a consultant to federal departments and to state governments about how to implement Charitable Choice and other reforms that ensure that faith-based organizations have equal opportunity to serve as partners with government without having to hide their light under a bushel.

The Center is a small organization. But the Kuyperian idea is a powerful one. And reform was needed. Christian ministries shouldn't have to fear collaboration with government. Neither can they be the government's exclusive partners, chosen merely because they are Christian. Kuyperian pluralism was the right solution: there should be equal opportunity without secularizing pressures. It is a

concept also with strong Catholic roots and is fully compatible with the principles of our Constitution. Yes, there was great opposition and much government inertia. Nevertheless, as the Center championed the idea and provided leadership to other groups, Charitable Choice and the faith-based initiative became central commitments of the Bush administration and central ideas of the reform of social services that has been underway since the early 1990s.

Did I anticipate any of this when I left north-west Iowa a dozen years ago? Did I suspect it? Was I planning a path into the White House? Did I think pluralism would overcome extreme separatism in government social services? I surely did not. The Center surely did not know, either, what things would come to pass and what avenues of service would be open to us. But we were heirs to a powerful and just idea, and it was the idea that was needed. And, although we did not know it, the Center and I had been getting prepared for leadership as we designed arguments, conducted research, built networks of allies, and sought to serve officials and faith-based organizations.

From here to our nation's capital, the distance is not as great as it might seem as you study in your classes here, as you read about national politics, as you hear about the great clashes inside the Washington Beltway about religion in our public life. Will you be making the journey from here to there? Or from here to some other important place of decision-making, to some other place of service to your neighbors? Will you be called to a vital challenge of service right here?

You cannot know. But you can and should be preparing yourself. Preparing yourself means cultivating faithful religious convictions and habits, of course. But it also means learning true and fruitful concepts and theories in your discipline and learning all the contours of a reformational worldview. And it means becoming a person of integrity, self-discipline, initiative, creativity, and courage. Dordt College is dedicated to your preparation in all of these ways. It is not a backwater, a subculture seeking mere self-preservation. Make it your launching pad into the world and into our culture's institutions and leadership positions.

I never expected to go from here to the White

House. One day, while I worked there, when I was pondering how it had come about and why, my wife wisely reminded me of a verse from the Book of Proverbs. The verse is Proverbs 22:29 and it reads,

Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will serve before kings;
he will not serve before obscure men.

Will you be called to serve before kings or a President? Or will you called to be that President? Or maybe your call will be to some other arena, some other institution and place of service. In God's providence, what you are doing here, now, is deeply connected to that future opportunity. Dordt College truly is not far from Washington, DC.

Endnotes

1. George Harinck, "Abraham Kuyper in het Witte Huis: Ideeën Nederlandse theoloog en politicus richtinggevend bij nieuwe vormgeving pluriforme samenleving in Amerika," *Reformatieisch Dagblad*, March 30, 2002, 31.
2. The White House, *Unlevel Playing Field: Barriers to Participation by Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Programs* (August 2001).
3. *A Guide to Charitable Choice: The Rules of Section 104 of the 1996 Federal Welfare Law Governing State Cooperation with Faith-Based Social-Service Providers* (Washington, DC: Center for Public Justice and Annandale, Virginia: Center for Law and Religious Freedom of the Christian Legal Society, January 1997).
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