

VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PUBLIC CALLING OF REFORMATIONAL
THOUGHT

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In 2001 the leading American newsweekly, *Time* magazine, ran a series featuring the people who (according to the magazine's researchers) were considered to be the most influential in their fields of leadership. The religious thinker who was given the title "America's Best Theologian" was Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches ethics at Duke University.

There is an element of irony in the fact that one of the leading arbiters of cultural popularity would choose to honor Hauerwas in this manner. While Hauerwas is officially a Methodist, he identifies closely with the Anabaptist tradition of ethical thought, often citing the late Mennonite theological ethicist John Howard Yoder as the primary influence on the development of his ethical thought. The Anabaptists, as we all know, make much of the need to form communities of radical disciples of Jesus who stand over against the dominant cultural patterns, and Hauerwas, like his mentor Yoder, is not shy about calling for this over-against-ness.

Indeed, Hauerwas has even taken his counter-cultural convictions to the point of questioning whether Christians can legitimately use terms like "justice" and "peace" in addressing issues of public policy. The assumption that Christians can assume a common core of meaning that we share with non-Christians when we employ such language, Hauerwas insists, is fundamentally misguided. These terms can have no meaning, he argues, "apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth" — it is only the biblical witness to Jesus' ministry that "gives content to our faith."¹ And this content must be embodied in communities of "resident aliens" who have committed themselves to the *Way of Jesus*. In a much-quoted phrase, Hauerwas insists that "the church does not *have* a social ethic, it *is* a social ethic". The primary Christian ethical task is for believers to "*be* a particular kind of people" so that both "we and the world [can] hear the [Christian] story truthfully."² Hauerwas' convictions are both provocative and profoundly theological, but I'm not sure if qualifying them as distinctly 'American' (let alone America's best) doesn't in some important sense undercut the very project he sees himself undertaking.

I want to further suggest that the basic themes addressed by Hauerwas have relevance for every one of the topics that are on the agenda for our discussions here: Christian ethical thought in our post-Enlightenment context, ethics for the professions, public philosophy, the question of the primacy of rules versus virtues, and so on. In that sense, what we might think of as "Hauerwasianism" is

¹ S. Hauerwas and W. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville 1989: Abingdon Press, 23.

² S. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame 1983: University of Notre Dame Press, 100; emphases mine.

not a peculiarly North American phenomenon; it poses challenges for contemporary ethical theory as such in our present global context.

1 *Unpacking the Hauerwasian mystique*

In my conversations with students at Fuller Seminary in recent years, I have been surprised how many of them have been strongly influenced by Stanley Hauerwas's views. This has been especially true of students who did their undergraduate studies at evangelical colleges. Typically, such students have been introduced to the Hauerwasian perspective by evangelical professors who see it as a healthy alternative to prevailing cultural attitudes within the evangelical community. And certainly many of the cultural attitudes within the evangelical community are in need of some healthy alternatives.

There are indeed many ways in which Stanley Hauerwas and his disciples have had a positive influence on North American Christianity, within mainline Protestant denominations as well. In these settings, Hauerwas has reinforced a growing disillusionment with a culture-accommodating liberal theology. One convert to the Hauerwasian perspective — a pastor in a mainline denomination — reported that his standard liberal theological education had trained him to preach in a manner that he describes this way: “You hear what the psychologist says, what the historian says, what *The New York Times* editorial writer says, and then the sermon concludes with, ‘And perhaps Jesus said it best...’” But now, the pastor preaches a very different message, one that stands over against the “accumulated wisdom of humankind.” Instead of “perhaps Jesus said it best” he now proclaims, “You have heard it said ... but Jesus says to you ...”³

It is encouraging to see the ways that the Hauerwasian emphases often serve as a healthy corrective for liberal Protestantism. And there is also something to be said in favor of moving from a classical evangelical pietist kind of cultural over-against-ness to the more nuanced Hauerwasian variety. However, from a Reformational perspective, I sense that there is something missing in an ethical perspective that gets its basic inspiration from a spirit of cultural over-against-ness.

Before spelling out what I see to be the defects of the Hauerwasian perspective, however, it is important to distance ourselves from the centuries-old Reformed-versus-Anabaptist debates. The battle lines drawn by those debates no longer represent the most important distinctions between these two believing communities. And the issues that we face have taken on some very different textures in our present-day moral climate.

I observed earlier that there is some irony to be found in the fact that a leading popular secular magazine in the United States would designate an Anabaptist theologian as the nation's most influential religious thinker. The sense of irony is reduced, however, when we look at those features of his thought that

³ M. B. Copenhaver, A. B. Robinson and W. H. Willimon, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church*, Grand Rapids 1999: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 9-11.

— for all of Hauerwas’s claims of cultural over-against-ness — have some significant commonalities with present-day secular thought.

A prominent theme among those who have announced the failure of “the Enlightenment project” is the absence of an ethical “meta-narrative,” with a corresponding insistence that we must simply learn to live with a plurality of self-contained ethical narratives or “discourses.” Hauerwas’s approach comports in significant ways with this picture. It’s not that Hauerwas thinks that the Christian narrative is merely one story among many. Hauerwas (who is notorious for his crude language) has been heard to comment that the Christian ethic is superior to all others because “we have the best damn story!” Nonetheless, he does see the *Way of Jesus* as a closed system in the sense that it is accessible only by participation in shared Christian practices — making the search for a common public discourse very difficult. And this has profound implications for our agenda at this conference. How do we provide the kinds of moral counsel to the Christian community that will equip believers to pursue Kingdom goals in business, medicine, the technology industry, the media? How do we strengthen the shared practices that are necessary for a healthy civil society? To the degree that these matters have to do with public discipleship, with the need for guidance for Christians who in their daily callings work alongside persons of other faiths and non-faiths, it is not clear what the Hauerwasian perspective has to offer — or even *wants* to offer — beyond a few generalities.

We must be clear about the fact, of course, that Hauerwas would not take it as a criticism to be told that his perspective provides little by way of guidance for action in the larger culture. A broad and active cultural engagement is not a mandate in his scheme of things. That sort of activism is closely linked in his mind with a misguided emphasis on *making the right moral decisions*. This “decisionist” ethic presupposes, as James McClendon puts it, that there is a “Christian responsibility to *organize the world*,” and thus sees a central function of Christian ethics as helping us to fulfill that responsibility by providing guidance for the decision-making process.⁴ It is precisely this felt need to organize the larger world — the need to make good things happen — that the *Way of Jesus* frees us from. Not that Hauerwas is against making decisions as such; he simply wants it understood that “decisions do not have the same status they assume in ethics that ignore the significance of the virtues.”⁵

Gilbert Meilaender offers a nice formulation of how the recent Christian virtue ethicists view the patterns of Christian morality. According to Meilaender, the salient issue is:

Not whether we should frame one innocent man to save five — but on the virtue of justice, with its steady, habitual determination to make space in life for the needs and claims of others. Not whether to lie to the secret police — but on that steady regard for others which uses language truthfully and thereby makes a common life possible. Not whether abortion is permissible in an extreme case — but on the ancient question Socrates raised, whether it is better to suffer wrong than to do it. An ethic of virtue turns away not only from an overemphasis on borderline cases but also from the concept of duty as the central moral concept.

⁴ J.W. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Nashville 1986: Abingdon Press, 52.

⁵ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 123.

Being not doing takes center stage; for what we ought to do may depend on the sort of person we are. What duties we perceive may depend upon what virtues shape our vision of the world.”⁶

Needless to say, there is little in Meilaender’s summary here of an ethical emphasis on virtue that a Reformational ethicist will find objectionable. To be sure, we ourselves, have often advocated a “doing” approach to the Christian life. It is not insignificant, for example, that when John Kraay and Anthony Tol co-edited a festschrift for H. Evan Runner in the late 1970s, they gave their volume the title, *Hearing and Doing*.⁷ But, for all of our focus on doing, we have always also insisted that our active lives of obedience to divine directives must be characterized by a coherence that can only be found by understanding our obligations in the context of a “world-and-life-view”. — This is, in turn, the embodiment of a way of life that nurtures in us (to use Meilaender’s unpacking of the notion of a virtue) a “steady, habitual determination” to *be* certain kinds of persons.

For all of that, however, the exclusive virtue emphasis in ethics is still at odds with Reformational thought in some important respects. While an emphasis on virtue and moral “being” can be, and should be, intentionally integrated into a variety of theological-ethical systems — Meilaender works within a self-consciously Lutheran perspective — there are reasons why a Christian virtue ethic seems to gravitate rather quickly in the direction of Anabaptist thought.

The link can be seen in a recent study, by the Jesuit philosopher John J. Conley, of the virtue theories developed by French women thinkers in the last half of the 17th century. Whatever their particular ecclesial-confessional affiliation, Conley asserts, these women typically rejected the notion of a moral knowledge that was available to all human beings. As Conley puts it, they tended to emphasize the radical “specificity of Christian ethics.” Rejecting “the vain virtues” that are attractive to “a corrupt human nature,” they insisted “that Christian ethics cannot be understood as an expansion or a deepening of a generic moral project” but that it “must begin in Christ’s act of redemption.”⁸

These phrases could just as easily have been employed by Hauerwas and his Mennonite mentor John Howard Yoder, each of whom refuses to accept any definition of properly-formed cultural reality that is not grounded directly in the redemptive ministry of Jesus. The *Way of Jesus*, they contend, is the exclusive normative reference point for the moral life. Hauerwas and Yoder insist that Kingdom of Jesus Christ embodies economic, political and social norms that are so antithetical to the patterns of collective life in the larger human culture that Christians are required, in effect, to create an alternative “public.” One can see how such an over-against view of public responsibility leads directly to their Anabaptist call for the formation of a Kingdom community living in separation from the practices of the larger human community.

⁶ G. C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, Notre Dame 1984: University of Notre Dame Press, 5.

⁷ J. Kraay and Anthony Tol (ed.), *Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner*, Toronto 1979: Wedge Publishing Foundation.

⁸ J. J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, Ithaca 2002: Cornell University Press, 164-165.

The insistence on the *Way of Jesus* as the sole reference point for shaping the moral life is grounded in some basic assumptions about moral epistemology. This became very clear to me in an extensive dialogue that I engaged in during the 1970s with John Howard Yoder. This dialogue took place in both public debates as well as in various publications. Some of our debates focused on the sorts of practical issues that one would expect a Calvinist and a Mennonite to disagree about, such as whether consistent non-violence is a Christian obligation and whether a Christian can legitimately serve as an agent of government. But each of us realized that these issues could never really be settled apart from addressing a more fundamental issue. This issue Yoder once described succinctly in one of our public exchanges: On questions of culture, he observed, “Mouw wants to say, ‘Fallen, but *created*,’ and I want to say, ‘Created, but *fallen*.’”

2. *The limits of over-against-ness*

Perhaps I can underscore the importance of these issues with a brief personal testimony. My lengthy interactions with Yoder went beyond a mere curiosity about the exact nature of the differences between two historic confessional communities. The tensions at stake in the Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue reside deep in my own soul as well. Cultural over-against-ness was the dominant pattern of my upbringing. My grandparents, who immigrated to North America from the Netherlands in the 1880s, had brought with them two pietistic strands of Calvinism: one of the Afscheiding variety and the other rooted in the “experiential” (*bevindelijk*) patterns of the Veluwe. They and their offspring found it rather easy to meld these patterns of spirituality with the revivalism that they discovered in their new American environs. The result was a spiritual atmosphere that emphasized a very personal relationship with God that was coupled with a fear of the influence of “worldliness.” This was the cultural milieu in which my faith was formed.

My own perspective changed significantly, however, as a graduate student in the 1960s. I became convinced that the civil rights movement and the debate over the legitimacy of the Vietnam war were important matters for active Christian concern. Pursuing this agenda I began to develop a deep sense of alienation from the evangelical community. It was during this time, however, that I came upon Abraham Kuyper’s 1898 Stone Lectures. In reading his case for a robust Calvinism I realized that I had found a perspective that remained profoundly evangelical while providing an alternative to the Dutch Calvinism that had shaped my own family traditions as well as to the broader patterns of American evangelicalism with which I had become disillusioned during the Vietnam war. In declaring Christ’s kingly rule over all spheres of created reality, Kuyper was calling for a kind of active involvement in public life that had no place in the versions of Christian teaching that had nurtured me. Yet Kuyper also provided me with a sense of continuity with the pietistic orthodoxy whose essentials I did not want to abandon. In short, he allowed me to avoid

the false choice between a privatized evangelicalism and liberal Social Gospel theology.

In our insistence on the radical effects of the fall on our noetic and ethical capacities, we Calvinists, like the Anabaptists, have wanted to avoid some of the more optimistic views of fallen human nature as set forth by Catholics and others. These other perspectives typically downplay the depth of human depravity by positing a kind of automatic universal upgrade of those dimensions of human nature that have been corrupted by sin. To put it much too simply, the goal of prevenient grace *is* the upgrade; it is to raise the deeply wounded human capacities to a level where some measure of freedom to choose or reject obedience to God is made possible. Common grace, on the other hand, is typically set forth by Calvinists as a divine strategy for bringing the cultural designs of God to completion. Common grace operates mysteriously in the life of, say, a Chinese government official or an unbelieving artist to harness their created talents to prepare the creation for the full coming of the Kingdom. In this sense, the operations of common grace — unlike those of prevenient grace — always have a goal-directed *ad hoc* character.

In 1989 John Howard Yoder and I co-authored an essay, published in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*,⁹ in which we argued that the differences between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions have typically been depicted in too stark a fashion. Indeed, we argued, the disagreements between Calvinist and Mennonite perspectives on ethical issues ought not to be treated as being of the same order as the differences between either community and, say, Lutheranism or Roman Catholicism. In this case, we insisted, our differences are best viewed as taking place *within* a specific theological tradition. They are an ongoing family argument.

In forging my agreement with Yoder, I took some inspiration from the writings of the Christian Reformed pastor-theologian Leonard Verduin, who devoted a lifetime of study to Anabaptist life and thought.¹⁰ Verduin defended his own affinities to the Anabaptist perspective by insisting that the healthiest strand of Dutch Calvinism was represented by the protest on the part of the 1834 *Afscheiding* movement against the state-controlled Reformed churches of the day. The *Afgescheidenen*, Verduin argued, were in fundamental agreement with the Anabaptists in rejecting “Constantinian” Christianity and calling for the formation of a church that would stand over against the present order of things.¹¹

What Verduin does not attend to, however, is the fact that this kind of pietist Calvinism, when it takes the shape of careful theological formulation, often steps back from endorsing the highly particularistic moral epistemology of a full-fledged Anabaptism. This is certainly the case in the thinking of Klaas

⁹ R. J. Mouw and J. H. Yoder, ‘Evangelical ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue’, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 17 (1989), 121-137.

¹⁰ See, for example, his *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, Grand Rapids 1964: William B. Eerdmans Publishing and *Anatomy of a Hybrid: A Study of Church-State Relations*, Grand Rapids 1976: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

¹¹ L. Verduin, *Honor Your Mother: Christian Reformed Roots in the 1834 Separation*, Grand Rapids 1988: CRC Publications.

Schilder who most closely approximates the Hauerwasian position. His determinedly antitheticalist Reformed thinking can be seen as he sets forth his case in his little book *Christ and Culture*. Unlike Hauerwas, of course, Schilder had a strong notion of a broad creation-based cultural mandate, which leads him to condemn the kind of “abstinence” from cultural involvement that “originates in resentment, laziness, diffidence, slackness, or narrow-mindedness.” But he does recommend a “heroic” abstaining from the Kuyperian brand of “cultural transformation.” And in advocating that believers concentrate almost exclusively on cultural formation *within* the Christian *koinonia*, he comes close to an Anabaptist position.

It is significant, though, that Schilder cannot bring himself to go in a consistent Anabaptist direction. He does allow that while God is presently calling us primarily to sustain a separated *koinonia*, there is also a Christian obligation to attend to the preservation of “a *sumousia*, a being-together, among all men.”¹² Christians cannot simply ignore the life of the larger human community, Schilder says, because in the midst of human rebellion we still can discern the “residues” of what was originally “given in the paradisaal world.”¹³

Schilder steps back from a thoroughgoing Anabaptist type separatism because of his recognition of God’s continuing purposes for his creation as such. And Schilder concedes grudgingly, what many of us will want to celebrate: that all people, redeemed and unredeemed alike, live within the lawful structures of God’s creation — a creation that is heading for renewal rather than a final destruction. This means that we have a mandate to promote the common good, as stated so clearly by Jeremiah to the newly exiled people of God as they struggled to understand how they were to maintain their identity and mission during the time of their exile in Babylon: “Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.” (Jer. 29: 7)

Anabaptist thinkers like Yoder and Hauerwas reject the appeal to a creation order, arguing that our sinfulness has so altered our moral situation that we no longer have epistemic access to any sort of original divine ordinances. Our only option is to create communities that follow the *Way of Jesus* as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount and as displayed in his own radical willingness to take up the Cross. As has always been the case in Anabaptist thought, the *imitatio Christi* motif looms large in the Yoder-Hauerwas perspective. Because of our radical sinfulness, we need revealed guidance for our efforts to live the moral life. And that guidance is available to us in the form of a clear moral exemplar, Jesus of Nazareth. To be his disciple is to cultivate — by immersing ourselves in the practices of Christian community — the virtues that he displayed in his earthly ministry.

Not that Yoder and Hauerwas would approve of the kind “What Would Jesus Do?” approach to Christian living that often emerges in popular Christian culture. They see no open-ended “Be like Jesus” mandate in the Scriptures. It will

¹² K. Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, G. van Rongen and W. Helder (trans.), Winnipeg 1977: Premier Printing Ltd., 55.

¹³ Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, 59

not do to ask, “What would Jesus do?” when we are confronted, for example, with 5000 hungry people at a religious gathering where no one bothered to prepare a lunch for the crowd, or when we are standing on a beach and we see some friends in a boat out in the lake, and we wonder how we can go out to meet them when we can’t swim that far and we have no boat of our own.

Yoder makes it very clear that it is necessary to operate with a specific focus in pursuing the *imitatio Christi*. “Only at one point,” he writes “only on one subject — but then consistently and universally — is Jesus our example: in his cross.”¹⁴ This too is problematic, however. We cannot “consistently and universally” imitate the work of the cross. This is made abundantly clear by Oscar Cullmann who begins his wonderful essay on the Greek version of the biblical conception of the afterlife by drawing a stark contrast between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus.¹⁵ After a calm philosophical discussion with his friends, Socrates takes the hemlock in a seemingly cheerful anticipation of the separation of his soul from his body. Jesus, on the other hand, sweats drops of blood in Gethsemane as he pleads with the Father to allow the cup of suffering to pass from him. And then on the cross he cries out in agony over his abandonment by God. Cullmann rightly explains this contrast by spelling out the important differences between the Platonistic and the Christian understandings of sin and death.

We all know saintly Christian friends who have faced their deaths more in the spirit of Socrates than of Jesus. And this is appropriate. We do not have to — indeed we *ought* not to — imitate Jesus’ approach to dying. His suffering is in significant ways inimitable, because he bore the wrath of our cursed existence precisely in order that we do not have to suffer under that wrath.

This is not to say that an *imitatio Christi* based ethic cannot be given a coherent formulation. Indeed, Herman Bavinck saw it as an important theme for a Calvinist ethic. “The true imitation of Christ occurs,” he observed, when “we do the same will of God which Christ explicated and at the cost of His glory and life” — an effort we must make, said Bavinck, “even when it demands of us the most severe self-denial and a bearing of the heaviest cross.”¹⁶ But, of course, Bavinck sees us as properly imitating Jesus when we submit to the same standards of righteousness to which the Son of God submitted in his life of perfectly fulfilling the demands of the divine Law.

3. *Divine ordinances and mediating structures*

It is interesting to observe that the present-day Anabaptist virtue ethicists sometimes express their own concerns about the adequacy of their highly particu-

¹⁴ J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Grand Rapids 1972: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 97.

¹⁵ O. Cullmann, ‘Immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead: the witness of the New Testament’, reprinted in *Immortality*, Terence Penelhum (ed.), Belmont, California 1973: Wadsworth, 60-63.

¹⁶ H. Bavinck, ‘Wat zou Jezus doen?’, *De Bazuin*, 48 (1900), no. 8, translated and quoted in J. Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today*, Jordan Station 1984: Paideia Press, 143.

laristic ethical approach. Hauerwas has been receiving some criticism lately from ethicists who have been influenced by his writings, but who worry that he has begun to concede too much to the possibility of a common language. Robert W. Brimlow highlights some places in Hauerwas's writings where he seems to allow for some sort of "translation" of particularistic Christian language into terms that make sense to non-Christians. These concessions, argues Brimlow, blunt the force of Hauerwas's emphasis on radical discipleship.¹⁷ Brimlow calls Hauerwas to return to an uncompromising insistence that Christians "are called to the margins; we are called to be weak and separate and to view ourselves as such. We therefore must turn our back on all that is incompatible with the Gospel."¹⁸

And Yoder himself acknowledged on occasion the need for a larger moral perspective than the *imitatio Christi* provides, one that would of necessity draw upon broader resources. We cannot hope to gain "a specific biblical ethical content for modern questions," he wrote at one point, without also making use of "broader generalizations, a longer hermeneutic path, and insights from other sources."¹⁹

For Reformational thought, the longer path leads into the creation as such, where with the necessary aid of biblical spectacles we can discern, in Schilder's words, the "residues" of what was originally "given in the paradisaal world." The earth — including its cultural "filling" — is still the Lord's. No matter how perverse the processes and products of cultural formation have become, human beings still work within the structures of the good creation. For this reason Reformational ethics will want to insist — to be sure, with a proper sense of caution — that Christian morality is in an important sense, to use Father Conley's apt wording, "an expansion or a deepening of a generic moral project."²⁰ This is certainly what Kuyper had in mind when he boldly (and a bit too triumphantly) proclaimed that the incarnation was not a project in moral innovation:

Can we imagine that at one time God willed to rule things in a certain moral order, but that now, in Christ, He wills to rule it otherwise? As though He were not the Eternal, the Unchangeable, Who, from the very hour of creation, even unto all eternity, had willed, wills, and shall will and maintain, one and the same firm moral world-order! Verily Christ has swept away the dust with which man's sinful limitations had covered up this world-order, and has made it glitter again in its original brilliancy ... [T]he world-order remains just what it was from the beginning. It lays full claim, not only to the believer (as though less were required from the unbeliever), but to every human being and to all human relationships."²¹

¹⁷ R. W. Brimlow, 'Solomon's porch: the church as sectarian ghetto', in Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (ed.), *The Church as Counterculture*, Albany, N.Y. 2000: State University of New York Press, 115.

¹⁸ Brimlow, 'Solomon's porch', 123.

¹⁹ J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 192.

²⁰ Conley, *Suspicion of Virtue*, 164.

²¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Grand Rapids 1931: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 71-72.

This means that those of us in the Reformational tradition will take on ethical assignments that are not attractive to the Hauerwasians. The present discussions of the challenges of “civil society” are a good case in point. The Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, for example, has been bemoaning recently in his writings the decline of participation in “voluntary societies” in North American culture. He sees this inauspicious trend as a sign of the deterioration of those social bonds wherein individuals have traditionally developed the qualities of public character that are the preconditions for a healthy participation in civil society.²²

Putnam is echoing the concerns that have long been expressed by, among others, the sociologist Peter Berger, who has complained that scholars concerned about normative issues of societal life have tended to give too much attention to the relationship of individuals specifically to the political order. In doing so, Berger argued, they failed to recognize the important role of what he called “mediating structures.” If we are too avoid the twin evils of individualism on the one hand and statism on the other, he insisted, we must pay attention to the ways in which we can strengthen a whole variety of associational patterns — neighborhood organizations, youth clubs, service groups, churches, and families themselves — that can provide a buffer zone between the state and the individual.²³

These concerns have global significance. The need for developing a strong civil society is crucial these days in various developing nations, as well as in those countries that are recovering from many decades of totalitarian rule. The issues at stake have long been on the agenda of Reformational thought. Kuyper’s “sphere sovereignty” formulations, along with the modal-diversity refinement later elaborated upon by Dooyeweerd and others, make it clear that the so-called mediating structures are necessary for proper human functioning. Such mediating structures are not merely curbs to the power of government, but more importantly they display the patterns of God’s complex structuring of the creation — a complexity in which the ethical must be seen from the perspective of a more comprehensive world-and-life view.

4. *Paying attention to separatist voices*

The United States has witnessed some major corporate scandals in the past few years, ones that have impacted the global markets as well. In at least two of these cases the scandals have been attributed to the sins of executive leaders, both of whom were known to be active evangelical Christians. The former pastor of one of those leaders confided to me recently that the leader seemed to have a vibrant personal faith. His problem, the pastor said, was that “he simply segmented his life into separate compartments.”

²² R. Putnam, ‘Bowling alone’, *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995) no.1, 65-78; for the book version see R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* New York 2000: Simon and Schuster.

²³ P. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics and Religion*, New York 1977: Basic Books, 140.

We cannot discuss the ethical challenges of our present culture without addressing this segmentation. And while the “sphere sovereignty” framework has much of importance to say on this subject, there are deeper issues that must also be addressed, ones having to do with personal integrity and character. And these in turn have to do with the important role of an integrating community of spiritual and moral formation.

This, I suggest, is an area where we need to learn much from the traditions I have singled out for specific criticism — the closely aligned traditions of Anabaptists and Calvinist pietists — whose defects have more to do with their limitations than with any fundamental flaws. Having confessed earlier that the tensions between a commitment to public discipleship and the separatist impulses of the antitheticalists still reside in my deep places, I want once again acknowledge those tensions by concluding with a plea that we listen to the separatist voices even as we explore our broader agenda.

In 1936 the Mennonites from around the world gathered in the Netherlands to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the conversion of Menno Simons. For their celebration they chose to meet in the Veluwe, in my ancestral town of Elspeet. I don’t know why they picked that particular venue for this gathering, but I take it as a hint from the Lord that there is something to be said for the consensus that I forged with John Howard Yoder about a common family relationship. And I believe there is also a word from the Lord in this for all of us. At the core of the ethical life — and at the center of our ethical theories and practices — there must be converted hearts that by redeeming grace are led to walk the way of the Cross.

In the bold proclamation I quoted earlier from Abraham Kuyper he gives expression to what was for him a common theme — the triumphant rule of the ascended Christ over all things. But when he came to his dying breath, Kuyper pointed to a somewhat different reality. George Puchinger tells us that a crucifix hung on the wall above Kuyper's bed, and that as he lay dying, no longer capable of speech, with his children gathered around him, Kuyper pointed to the image of the Savior on the cross. In that silent gesture Kuyper was symbolizing — and perhaps even consciously affirming — the important conviction that the Mennonite visitors to Elspeet in 1936 shared with the local Calvinist pietists: that our service to God, including our ethical service, must be seen by us as taking place, as a community of Jesus-followers, “under the Cross.”