

A Protestant View of the Common Good

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Abstract

Protestantism historically has adopted a number of the principles of the common good but with differences in language and emphasis. We will review recent ecumenical usage of the language of the common good and reflect on meaning and application to business and the economy. Does Protestantism have a distinctive view of the common good or has the tradition simply adopted Catholic Social Thought?

A Protestant understanding of the common good advocates a strong view of *society*, a well-articulated view of both the role and the limits of *civil government* (in both positive and negative senses), the *voluntary* principle, a recognition of divine authority over all of society and the dignity of work and the human person.

Calvin recognised that we are not simply individuals but are part of a wider society. He argued that there are positive purposes to the role of government, not just the traditional negative ('restraint of evil') reasons. Calvin refers to common peace and tranquillity. Work was endowed with moral dignity. We will review how Geneva practised the common good both economically and socially.

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) is the evangelical through whom Smithian economics most obviously travelled. There are distinctive elements of common good and both continuity and discontinuity with Calvin. For Chalmers, the paradox between the pursuit of individual self-interest and the overall achievement of the public good was explainable only by the providential design of the laws of economics. However, the impact of sin could lead to poverty, inequality and suffering. How then was the common good to be preserved? The paper will review Chalmers' understand and application of the voluntary principle.

Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) concept of 'sphere sovereignty' will be developed in relation to the common good. This theory allows for weight to be given to the particular and distinctive responsibilities of business and the market. We will review the extent to which Kuyper himself articulated such views or at least whether his theories allowed for such explanation.

The paper seeks to articulate the commonalities between historic Protestant and evangelical thought and Catholic Social Teaching both theoretically and practically.