



Southwestern

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY



Theology Applied



TOWARD A BAPTIST NATURAL LAW CONCEPTION OF THE COMMON GOOD

Casey B. Hough and Andrew T. Walker*

The idea of the common good is a foundational concept in contemporary evangelical public theology. It is the centerpiece of a Christian social ethic in that historic Christianity believes the social arrangements it calls forth from general and special revelation are good for the ordering of society.

At least since the mid-twentieth century, when Carl F. H. Henry sought to awaken evangelicalism to its social obligations through the publication of his *The Uneasy of Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, a cottage industry of Christian thought has mainstreamed the idea of the Christian worldview's contribution to the social order. On the one hand, this is a most welcome development, since Christians believe that our ethics produce a net benefit for society. Rather than a sectarian ethic imposed on society, a Christian worldview helps the world be the very best version of what it was created to be.

On the other hand, the common good is an elusive concept in Christian social ethics. By our reading, when the idea of the common good arises in evangelicalism, it is more akin to an idea like “human flourishing” or “public square” exchanges than with the common good proper. In other words, while evangelicals have laudably expressed care about overcoming various injustices (sex trafficking, abortion, etc.), there is little to no coherent explanation for understanding how the interdependence of a culture's institutions cooperate toward instantiating just conditions overall.

To state it more plainly: a typical evangelical family might donate time and money to their local pregnancy resource center, but this same family likely does not think about how their *activity and purpose as a family* contributes to the common good and the justly ordered

*Casey B. Hough is assistant professor of biblical interpretation at Luther Rice College & Seminary. Andrew T. Walker is associate professor of Christian ethics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

society alongside their acts of compassion and mercy. This is because, in our view, the common good in evangelical thinking is more of an industry than it is a function of the creation mandate.

This is especially true compared to Catholic social teaching's emphasis on the common good. One wonders whether Catholicism's greater emphasis on social solidarity has not produced more considerable attention to the common good compared to the more individualistic spirit of evangelicalism. Even still, the problem of the common good lacking clear explanation is that a failure to conceive of it *as such* will hamper how evangelicals understand (1) the purpose of culture's institutions, (2) the expectations of social consensus, and (3) the realization of justice's enactment throughout society. Put differently, our assumptions about the common good color our expectations for what the just society entails.

Evangelical clamoring for justice and righteousness will be to little effect unless we understand what its energies about human flourishing are channeled *toward*. Because the common good is not given focused attention in evangelical public theology, its use aims for everything and hits nothing. This essay hopes to remedy that problem by offering a preliminary proposal for thinking about the common good from the perspective of Baptist theology through a natural law appropriation. We write under the conviction that Baptist distinctives such as (but not limited to) (1) the cultural mandate, (2) natural law, (3) religious liberty, and (4) limited government help promote the conditions for a just society.¹

I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF COMMON GOOD CONCEPTIONS

First, let us define the common good. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines it as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.”² George Duke similarly defines it as a “state of affairs in which each individual within a political community

¹ To clarify, we acknowledge that many of these themes find common cause and overlap with other Christian traditions. In framing this discussion around Baptist identity, we intend merely to demonstrate how the Baptist tradition can accommodate ideas that contribute toward the common good.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1906, available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a2.htm.

and the political community as a whole are flourishing.”³ In these definitions, the common good is both a means and an end. As a means, at the macro-level, the common good is a temporal state of affairs that provides the cooperating institutions of society a peaceable horizon to realize their respective ends. In this, the common good is a conduit that facilitates individual and social flourishing. It does so by protecting the agency rights of various institutions to live out their respective duties. The common good, as such, allows mediating institutions to cooperate toward the advancement of the just society freely. For example, the common good allows educational enterprises to work toward furthering the advancement of knowledge. Similarly, the common good ensures that family life can prosper by removing obstacles to its formation such that families can experience the bliss of family life.

As an end, the common good realizes a state of affairs where institutions are properly ordered and human flourishing is present. The common good is not coterminous with justice but facilitates the advancement and realization of justice. Yet, the common good will never be realized devoid of justice. By way of example: Where a child is in a married, two-parent household and can achieve the education necessary to their development as a person, and where the household of this child lives is headed by a working father whose entrepreneurial skills result in profit and monies to provide for their basic needs, the common good(s) of family life, education, and industry are realized. These are all distinguishable realities but not severable. In this, the common good is oriented to happiness. A child born to wealth in a single-parent home who attends an elite private school is missing a critical pillar to their development. Now think about this arrangement at the aggregate level where certain ideals and arrangements become routinized over time such that society’s norms are robbing society of more just conditions.

The common good reflects the biblical principle of humankind being (1) a community of individuals and (2) individuals in community. If either is emphasized to the neglect of the other, we have jettisoned biblical anthropology. The common good reflects the duality of human existence—human persons *as* persons are social

³ George Duke, “The Common Good,” in *Natural Law Jurisprudence* (ed. George Duke and Robert P. George; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 376.

creatures who live in context-specific communities.

1. *Augustine*. Augustine's *City of God* provides fertile ground for considering his views on the common good. Because of the antithesis set in the contrast between the City of God and the City of Man, Augustine's reflections on the common good direct our attention to the provisional and fragmented state of a fallen society. For Augustine, though the City of God and City of Man partake of equal space in society, each understands its station with different ends in mind. The City of Man seeks a tranquility that makes life hospitable. The City of God is to inhabit this same tranquil space in hopes that its peacefulness lets them live in ultimate obedience to God. The City of God hopes that forces inimical to peace can be restrained and do not divert attention away from God. According to Augustine, "The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away."⁴ The common good for Augustine is a merely temporal sphere where existence can be "well-ordered." The City of God is to participate in the traditions and customs of culture and "insofar preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced." The City of God is obedient to surrounding laws and seeks "common agreement" with the City of Man since each has a vested interest in the stability of society for its own sake but for different ends. They cannot, however, share a common religion because the diversity of beliefs about who God is means that common cause cannot be pursued in heavenly duties. There are echoes in Augustine of a normative pluralism that better confronts contemporary evangelicalism with an alien and exile status. For Augustine, as much as the City of God is to peaceably cooperate with the City of Man, the antithesis between the two means their ultimate commitments have an irreconcilable divergence. The only point of convergence between the two is their pursuit of the common good's fulfillment

⁴ Reflections in this section come from Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, Book 19, Chapter 17.

for mutual, temporal beneficence.

Augustine's reflections on the shared space that the people of God occupy in society offers a chastened expectation as to the richness of moral agreement that one is to expect in society, a theme discussed later in this paper. Augustine's common good is far more instrumentalized and modest in form than what many Christians schooled in transformationalism would countenance.

2. *Thomas Aquinas*. While Aquinas was no Baptist, the influence of his political theory on modern conceptions of the common good are important to consider, especially if one wants to understand the interaction between modern Catholic social thought⁵ and a distinctly Baptist social thought. While Aquinas did not develop an extensive doctrine of the common good regarding its particular substance, the concept still "played an important role in Aquinas's mature moral thought."⁶ On the central elements of Aquinas's account of the common good, Jean Porter writes:

Most fundamentally, the common good is understood by contrast with one's private good, or with the good of the individual. As such, *the common good* provides the rationale of political authority; the ruler acts with a view to the common good, just as each person directs her or his actions in accordance with some conception of his or her private good. By the same token, the common good provides a rationale for laws, and it serves to justify the ruler in some courses of action that would be closed to private citizens. Finally, because the good of individuals is inseparable from the common good, the political authority so constituted is appropriate in a community of free persons.⁷

For Aquinas, political authority (legislative authority) serves and promotes the common good. The legitimacy of political authority depends on its orientation to the common good. Thus, while Aquinas offers no substantive account of the common good, the procedural

⁵ Jean Porter, "The Common Good in Thomas Aquinas," in *In Search of the Common Good* (ed. Dennis P. McCann and Patrick D. Miller; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 95.

⁶ Porter, "Common Good in Thomas Aquinas," 96.

⁷ Porter, "Common Good in Thomas Aquinas," 100–01.

significance of the concept of the common good is undeniable. Civil society finds its bedrock in a political authority that “aims at the common good.”⁸ George Duke argues that for Aquinas, the common good of a political community “is a unity of order that is distinguishable from a mere aggregate of individual goods.”⁹

3. *Martin Luther*.¹⁰ Whereas Aquinas grounded his understanding of the common good in contrast to individual goods and the role of political authority, Martin Luther primarily spoke of the common good in connection to the Christian’s obligation to his neighbor. In *Freedom of the Christian*, Luther wrote, “The good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all, so that everyone should ‘put on’ his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as he himself were in the other’s place.”¹¹ In *Secular Authority*, Luther expanded upon the idea of serving the common good of others:

Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor profitable for them. Since, however, a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself but for his neighbor, therefore the whole spirit of his life impels him to do even that which he need not do, but which is profitable and necessary for his neighbor. Because the sword is a very great benefit and necessary to the whole world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil, he submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays tax, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to further the government, that it may be sustained and held in honor and fear. Although he needs none of these things for himself and it is not necessary for him to do them, yet he considers

what is for the good and profit of others, as Paul teaches

⁸ *Summa Theologica (ST)* I.96.4.

⁹ George Duke, “The Common Good,” 374.

¹⁰This section relies on Wanda Deifelt, “Seeking the Common Good: Lutheran Contributions to Global Citizenship,” for the quotes from “The Freedom of the Christian” and “Secular Authority.”

¹¹Martin Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (ed. John Dillenberger; New York: Anchor, 1962), 79.

in Ephesians 5:21.¹²

Luther's insights into the common good, however, were not limited to his treatises on Christians and their relationship to the government. In his lectures on Genesis and Romans, Luther promoted the pursuit of the common good as a Christian ideal. In summary, Luther understands the common good as the pursuits of members of a community promoting the good of all in keeping with the Christian's obligation to love God and neighbors.

4. *Abraham Kuyper*. Kuyper, the Dutch Reformed theologian who is known for his work on sphere sovereignty, rarely referred to the common good in explicit terms. Instead, Kuyper tended to emphasize the doctrine of common grace, which was fundamentally rooted in God's universal kindness to all humanity but distinct from the particular grace of God toward the elect.¹³ On the matter of common grace, Kuyper wrote, "Neither our election nor our attachment to the *community* of saints negates our common *humanity*, nor removes our participation in the life of family, homeland, or world. Therefore, we need to consider not two, but three aspects: first, our *personal* life; second, our incorporation into the *body* of Christ; and third, our existence as *human beings* (that is, our origin by *human birth*, our membership in the *human race*)."¹⁴ Thus, while it would not be fair to read the concept of common good as a category of political theology into every mention of common grace in Kuyper's works, the idea of a shared experience and obligation to other humans which promotes their good in different spheres of society is undeniably present in Kuyper. One might venture to say that Kuyper's explicit focus on common grace undergirds his implicit articulation of the common good in the different spheres.

5. *David VanDrunen*. Reformed theologian and ethicist David

¹²Martin Luther, "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (ed. John Dillenberger; New York: Anchor, 1963), 373.

¹³"Particular grace deals with the *individual*, the *person* to be saved, with the *individual* entering glory. And with this individual, as a child of God, we cannot wrap the golden chain of redemption around his soul unless that golden chain descends from personal, sovereign *election*." Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World: The Historical Section* (ed. Jordan J. Ballor, Melvin Flikkema, and Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, vol. 1, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology; Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 2.

¹⁴Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 3.

VanDrunen has advanced a concept of the common good based on his reflections on the Noahic Covenant. Far from offering a detailed blueprint for the common good, VanDrunen describes the reconstituted creational order of the Noahic Covenant as one that calls forth family formation, enterprise associations, and judicial institutions. To form families, engage in cultural formation, and to ensure the stability of justice through government authority does not require a Christianized society for the common good to be achieved. For VanDrunen, an account of the common good need not be, indeed cannot be, dependent only on society experiencing mass conversion to Christianity. Society is too beset by sin and religious diversity for there to be a rich expectation of thick moral agreement.¹⁵

Natural law as a subset of creation theology functions as the vehicle that makes social life habitable and the common good attainable. VanDrunen rightfully acknowledges that some degree of moral consensus must be present, but he calls this consensus “modest” as to the expectations for specificity. He writes that “a political community needs some shared moral vision, but this vision need not be substantively rich in order to sustain a peaceful coexistence.”¹⁶ The common good for VanDrunen exists to allow the broad diversity of society’s members to achieve its conception of the good life: “By affirming a modest vision of the common good constituted by the advancement of family life, enterprise, and justice against the violent, a political community is to maintain both a peaceful coexistence and a broad pluralism in which individuals and institutions can pursue their own richer notions of the good.”¹⁷ VanDrunen’s argument has much to offer evangelical public theology. Rescuing it from the burdensome task of “taking America back” to its Christian roots or implementing a refurbished Christendom, VanDrunen’s conception of the common good calls Christians back to a more humble engagement with society, recognizing that their unbelieving neighbor has an equal stake in the goods and services of society just as much as the Christian.

¹⁵For VanDrunen’s fullest treatment on how the Noahic Covenant offers an attractive foundation for Reformed political theology, see his *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

¹⁶VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 187.

¹⁷VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 188.

II. THE COMMON GOOD PROPER

With a brief overview of various conceptions of the common good, let us proceed with offering some preliminary insights to advance our thinking and understanding about the common good's use and realization in society. The categories listed below are not exhaustive but demonstrate how categories consistent with Baptist thought can cooperate toward the development of common good thinking in evangelical public theology.

As was mentioned in the introduction of this article, we want to explore how to realize three elements central to achieving the common good in each section below. Proper thinking about the common good will take into consideration (1) the purpose of culture's institutions, (2) the expectations of social consensus, and (3) the realization of justice.

1. *Cultural mandate*. The cultural mandate refers to the command in Gen 1:26–28 where God commissions the man and woman, our ancestral archetypes, to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (v. 28). The cultural mandate is the command to take the raw materials of the earth and to bring form and poise to the surrounding world. Debate persists as to the number of institutions that are entailed by the cultural mandate, but among them are the family, state, and the various pillars of civil society such as industry, education, leisure, and art.

a. *Cultural institutions*. The cultural mandate affirms common good institutions such as the family and the legitimacy of cultural pursuits and creative innovation, as institutions *for their own ends*. Political authority, family life, and other emanating realities that stem from civil society's development are irreducible pursuits (or goods) and incommensurable. Their pursuit is the benefit. The cultural mandate thus gives intelligibility to the institutions of culture. Rather than being sectarian and limited, the institutions of culture are universally accessible to all humans who have an equal share in contributing to their world. The common good exists to allow participating institutions to realize their intelligibility and the actualization of their own end.

b. *Social consensus*. We agree with David Van Druenen's analysis that

sinfulness results in fragmenting the ability for thick moral agreement to occur. Sin does not vitiate the cultural mandate but hampers its ability to be clearly understood and acted upon. The effects of sin ensure that humanity will turn the positive call to exercise dominion into a chaotic panoply of moral and religious pluralism. Because humanity has turned its back toward God, one should expect that a multitude of pick-and-choose moralities bombards society.

Nevertheless, like VanDrunen, we agree that an ineradicable light of nature persists in humankind that restrains the full effects of sin, thus making conditions hospitable. We believe that where society recognizes the lineaments of the Decalogue or the “law written on the heart”—even imperfectly—there will be sufficient common grace to allow the continued perpetuation of civilization through the enduring witness of the cultural mandate. A common good ethic will understand that shared, contested space exists that allows diverse viewpoints to contend with one another for the most persuasive path to human flourishing.

c. *The realization of justice.* The cultural mandate, insofar as it facilitates the cultivation of cultural institutions toward their end, ensures that just conditions are present. To revisit an earlier example: A society whose attitudes about family life make it more likely that a child receives the love and care of the parents who brought children into the world is a society whose common good facilitates justice. Likewise, a society that sees the education of its youngest citizens as a priority to their development treats the child with dignity constitutive of the common good. Of course, there will always be prudential debates about all that justice entails for the common good (e.g., is one’s access to healthcare a matter of justice?), but threats to common good occur when treating an institution originating from the cultural mandate as a mere accessory.

2. *Natural law.* Speaking of the “good” in the common good is to presuppose the existence of an underived principle of moral goodness. Without its existence, the idea of a good worth holding in common is emptied of any meaning. Natural law refers to the idea of a universal moral law accessible to human reason, even fallen human reason (Rom 1:18–21; 2:14–15).¹⁸ Its existence is confirmed or

¹⁸For more on the natural law, see Andrew T. Walker and Daniel Darling, “We Should Expect Non-Christians to Share Our Morals,” *Christianity Today*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.>

ratified by the natural sense of revulsion one encounters at observing or experiencing an injustice. A predicate to any concept of human flourishing is an intelligible understanding of human nature's end. Natural law directs our attention to those desires, attitudes, and actions that align with the design of our nature. A controversial idea in some Protestant quarters, we enthusiastically endorse natural law as an essential attribute of the common good as it offers a moral grammar to aid and guide society's thirst for moral rectitude. In our view, natural law is an essential component of Christian ethics as it helps explain how morality, justice, and the common good function as a revelation of God's design for both creation and reason. Natural law is held together not by autonomous reason, but by Jesus Christ, the Logos (John 1:3; Col 1:15–17).

a. *Cultural institutions.* For fear of oversimplification, the very presence of certain institutions presumes an essence or a way of acting that accords with the purpose of a thing. Natural law contributes to the common good of cultural institutions when those institutions' designs are upheld as normative in society.

Let us take marriage, the cornerstone of society, as an example. As a cultural institution, marriage is the conjugal union of one man and woman who unite through a comprehensive bodily union to become husband and wife. Through their respective sex difference, their sexual union can produce offspring, now making them not only spouses but a mother and father. Definitions of marriage that correspond to its authentic design uphold the common good of the family. Sadly, in the United States, with the presence of same-sex marriage, the common good has been undermined at the cultural and legal level of society by enshrining into law a false view of marriage. Such redefinition will have deleterious effects in society, not only by denying children their right to a mother or father but through the sully of marital norms that make the institution internally coherent.

b. *Social consensus.* Social consensus on basic moral norms is a requirement for the common good to be fulfilled. Natural law serves to direct society toward moral consensus at the level of basic principle, not finite specificity. Enacting laws against theft upholds the common

good by protecting property rights. The inability to reach a consensus on basic moral minimums threatens the common good. Again, to echo an earlier sentiment, the common good does not require consensus on all matters of moral significance; but only those whose tearing asunder undermines the fundamental operation of society.

c. *The realization of justice.* Natural law accords with justice in that it directs individuals to pursue actions that accord with moral righteousness and to ennoble those activities that constitute human nature's well-being. A society that refuses to prosecute murder is a society that offends the common good by refusing to bring to justice those who offend elementary principles of the natural law. Actively spurning the principles of natural law and denying justice ensures the denial of the common good. To use asymmetrical moral reasoning: a society that appeals to natural law for the sake of justice to prevent underground sex trafficking ought to be the same society that deconstructs positivist law that offends justice, such as abortion.

3. *Religious liberty.* A principle of utmost significance to Baptist identity, religious liberty is a principle of social equality that, positively, allows all persons to live out the obligations for their conscience. Negatively, religious liberty is a restraining force on the government to prevent any sort of religious establishment from occurring while removing from its jurisdiction the control or enforcement of religion among its citizens.

a. *Cultural institutions.* The very essence of humankind as the *imago Dei* means that its participation in the social sphere is of a divine warrant. All that we do as humans originate from the mind of God and his will for creation. To the degree that humankind understands the obligations of conscience (religiously shaped or not), even if issuing from different faiths, religious liberty protects the common good of the cultural mandate by allowing religion to flow freely throughout society and to ensconce itself in citizens' lives and associations without fear of harassment. Religious liberty used here might as well be a shorthand for general liberty since, in our formulation, the desire to engage in any cultural activity emanates from divine inspiration, whether acknowledged or not. Religious liberty protects the common good of obeying the cultural mandate by allowing the agency of individuals to fulfill the duties imposed on them by conscience. As the common good is ordered toward the

temporal only, it best to afford the institutions of culture their ability to pursue ultimate commitments.

b. *Social consensus*. Rejecting religious liberty as a pillar of the common good ensures society will grow more intolerant or illiberal. Religious liberty as a pillar of the common good allows communities and associations to organize themselves around deep-seated convictions, convictions that result in serving the common good and public welfare.

c. *The realization of justice*. It is fundamentally unjust and a denial of the common good to deny persons the right of their conscience. To insist upon a cultural or political orthodoxy that drafts individuals into conforming themselves to convictions not of their own grasping or voluntary assent is to invite inner fragmentation. Religious liberty fulfills the common good by rendering to each person the freedom to be true to their conscience. Anything less than this, apart from those areas where legislatures act to curtail religion for the sake of another common good, is to vitiate justice.

4. *Limited government*. Limited government serves the interests of the common good by insisting that the government does not have authority over all matters of the common good—that the common good of society has prepolitical aspects. The common good ensures that individuals, communities, and associations can reach their flourishing apart from meddlesome intervention. The government neither exclusively defines the common good nor is synonymous with its fulfillment. Instead, the rightly limited government protects the common good by allowing its constitutive parts to occur organically and protecting it from encroaching impediments.

Far from being a hackneyed concept associated with political conservatism (not that there is anything wrong with that), limited government is a profoundly theological principle. In Matt 22:15–22, Jesus squares off with Pharisees who ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. His reply, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (v. 21), was nothing short of revolutionary for his period. Because the coin bears Caesar’s image implying a limited jurisdiction, the obverse reality was that humanity bears God’s image as a comprehensive jurisdiction. The common good ensures that humankind’s responsibility before God is antecedent to any claim of the government. As Robert Reilly

writes, “The ultimate ordering of man’s soul to the transcendent is the principle impetus for limiting politics.”¹⁹

a. *Cultural institutions.* On the surface, institutions consistent with the cultural mandate require a limited government in order for their agency to develop and prosper. Nevertheless, the best way to explain the connection between limited government and the common good is (a) by pointing to a doctrine of subsidiarity wherein the institutions of civil society most local to a given issue are the best suited to resolve a given issue and (b) by demonstrating how the power of an overweening government obstructs the common good.

Government most patently obstructs the common good by veering into jurisdictions outside its mandate. Let us, for example, consider the abhorrent practice of slavery. Slavery was an evil institution aided and abetted by the government intervening in matters that offend natural law and the principle of justice by perversely incentivizing the trafficking of humans. This abuse is outside the mandate of Scripture, as Scripture’s mandate for government is “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Pet 2:13). The most justly ordered government will be one that serves the common good by adjudicating only those areas assigned to it by Scripture.

b. *Social consensus.* An overly litigious society will be the society that defaults to government procedures to settle all moral disputes. In this scheme, the government necessarily grows larger by playing an increasingly more significant role in adjudicating intricate moral matters. It is doubtless the case that a justly ordered government will be involved in adjudicating moral disputes. The question is the type and degree of moral dispute in question.

Here, deliberative bodies serve the common good by distinguishing immoral actions that are merely sins from those that verge into criminal wrongdoing. As the adage goes, all crimes are sins, but not all sins are crimes. The common good requires a consistent and fairly applied moral system, one whose moral theory can construct a case for determining what types of vices to penalize versus merely discouraging. But a government of exacting moral rectitude will channel the very worst of Inquisition-like powers. According to Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George, this form of government

¹⁹Robert Reilly, *America on Trial: A Defense of the Founding* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), 33.

can become intrusive and does more harm to the common good:

Thomas Aquinas famously taught that the law should not command every virtue or prohibit every vice. Attempts — in the name of the human good — to penalize every form or instance of immorality would actually *undermine* the human good (by, for example, giving power to governments that is too easily abused, or intruding improperly into the lives of families and other institutions of civil society, or imposing a legal burden that is too heavy for most to bear). And so, he taught, the state should limit itself to punishing the graver forms of immorality, those that do the most harm, and those against which the force of law can be effective. Thus, we see in Aquinas one “pre-liberal” limit on government power: Government should not attempt to promote the common good in ways that are likely to undermine or harm it. Indeed, sometimes restricting the liberty to do wrong — a liberty to which no one has a moral right — rather than promoting the common good can actually harm it.²⁰

Anderson and George endorse a perfectionist view of government while acknowledging that strenuous protection of a community’s moral ecology can serve to undermine the common good. We agree with this assessment and would aver that promoting the common good through heavy-handedness serves to undermine the common good in the long run by granting too much power to the government.

c. *The realization of justice.* In similar sentiment above, limited government serves the interests of the common good by allowing the institutions of civil society to prosper as each institution is meant to function for itself as such. In essence, by refusing to impose a false redefinition of marriage and family, a limited government allows the contours of the natural family to arise organically. By allowing the delivery of education by those private institutions who educate according to a set of convictions, it treats these institutions according

²⁰Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George, “The Baby and the Bathwater,” *National Affairs* 41 (Fall 2019): 176–77.

to their desires. Whether a Christian school or a Jewish school, a common good that allows institutions the ability to act according to their wishes facilitates the justice owed to private associations. Admittedly, there is nothing on the surface that suggests a larger state or more generous safety net is an intrinsic threat to justice, except as a prudential matter where state largesse has worked over time to etch itself ever more deeply into the lives of its citizens.

III. BAPTIST ACCENTS TO THE COMMON GOOD

From a theological and historical perspective, Baptists have significant resources for developing and advancing a conception of the common good. Baptists have long been distinguished for their commitment to ideals like biblical authority, regenerate church membership, and religious liberty. Such ideals work together to promote an optimal context for the development of a robust conviction and pursuit of the common good in society. Since religious liberty has already been covered in the preceding section, what follows here will be a consideration of how a commitment to biblical authority and regenerate church membership uniquely shape a Baptist conception of the common good.

1. *Biblical authority and the common good.* One cannot speak of a Baptist conception of the common good without considering how a commitment to biblical authority should shape our doctrine. In this section, we consider in brief four prominently cited passages regarding the common good: Jer 29:4–7, Rom 13:1–7, 1 Tim 2:1–7, and 1 Pet 2:13–17.²¹

Evangelicals persistently reference Jeremiah 29 as a text that calls forth “cultural engagement” or “cultural transformation.” In our estimation, these quoted terms lack specificity in evangelical use and over-promise what can be delivered as far as an evangelical program for social engagement. Using categories cited throughout this paper, we would like to reconfigure Jeremiah 29 as an illustrative example of how common good thinking better frames our participation in society over and against triumphalist claims of Christian social transformation.

Jeremiah 29:4–7 states,

²¹One could also mention Titus 3:1.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

We submit that Jeremiah 29 offers a compelling case for the common good. Notice, chiefly, that Jeremiah's call for exiled Israel is not to "engage" the culture inasmuch as it is to simply immerse oneself in the cultural practices that foster the right conditions for social ordering. The exiles are not to storm the institutions of elite culture as much as they are to recapitulate the cultural mandate in a new social context. Such is our calling as Christians, as is demonstrated by the way that New Testament authors employ the language of "exile" as a description of the believing community. The consideration of the remaining passages in this section will make this point clearer.

In Rom 13:1–7, the *locus classicus* for a Christian understanding of civil government, the apostle Paul acknowledged the God-ordained role that governing authorities carry out for the common good. As v. 4 declares, governing authorities "are God's servants for your good." To be clear, given the context of Romans 13, Paul is not suggesting that governments somehow redemptively transform people into good, God-honoring, moral people, but rather that the governing authorities must order and support a society where the common good is encouraged and rewarded while discouraging and punishing evil that disrupts society. As for how this passage contributes to the vision of common good found in this article, we submit that Scripture teaches that the common good does not require Christianity to be the majority culture in order for Christians to pursue and promote the common good in society. This passage reinforces the idea that the common good, while fundamentally rooted in the nature of God, can and should be encouraged in a society, even one in which Christianity is not the primary reference for morality.

In 1 Tim 2:1–7, as he neared the end of his ministry, Paul instructed Timothy to lead the churches of Christ to “pray for all peoples—for kings and all those in authority, that Christians may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Yet, this is not the first place that Paul stressed the need for a “quiet life” amid the broader community. In 1 Thess 4:10–12, Paul wrote, “But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” Paul expected the Christian communities that he founded to live with a peculiar disposition of peace in the broader society that provoked the interest of unbelievers without incurring the unnecessary discipline of governing authorities. Admittedly, sometimes faithful Christian living will provoke society and incite governing authorities, as seen in the example of the early church in Rome. Yet, we must also remember that part of what it means to live a faithful Christian life in society is to seek to live peaceful and calm lives for the common good. Seeking to live a faithful Christian life in a secular society and seeking the common good are not contradictory aims.

Yet, the tension remained for the Christian community to live as submissively as possible to the secular authorities in society. One could argue that in 1 Timothy 2, an appropriately peaceful and calm life in society served to advance the cause of the gospel by not bringing disrepute to the churches. It is noteworthy that Paul does not call Christians to political revolution but relatively private lives of prayer for peace and calm in society.²² For Paul, the Christian’s prayer life was partly a political act aimed at societal peace for all people, which fits perfectly within the framework presented in this article regarding a principled pursuit of the common good. While the common good should never be construed as more important than the redemptive good brought about through the gospel of Christ, there is also no biblical basis for pitting the two goods against one another. As 1 Timothy 2 teaches, the provision of peace and calm in a secular society (a common good) serves to advance the cause of

²²“Perhaps Paul has in mind the words of Jer 29:7 (LXX 36:7): ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’” George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 117.

evangelism and missions (a redemptive good).²³

Finally, 1 Pet 2:13–17 bookends our consideration of passages that speak to the pursuit of the common good in Scripture by revisiting the theme of exilic living in a pagan society. As Peter wrote to a dispersed audience, he reminded them of their sojourning identity in Christ. As those who belonged to Christ, their lives were to be both set apart from and missionally provocative to the pagans in their community. They were commanded to flee the desires of their flesh that were stoked during their time of exile in a faithless land. However, not every aspect of the faithless land was sinful. While the rulers in the land were faithless concerning Christ, they were still appointed by him for the good of society. As Peter’s audience shunned sinful living while submitting to “every human authority” in obedience to “God’s will,” these exiled Christians would “silence the ignorant talk of foolish people” who charged the churches of God with wrongdoing. Drawing upon the resources of their identity as the people of God (1 Pet 2:9–10), Peter’s audience could live faithfully for Christ while submitting to any human authority that did not require them to disobey God. Hence, as Peter closed the pericope on human authorities, he reminded his audience that there is a proper respect to be paid for all people (civility), a love to be reflected for the household of God (charity), and an honor to be shown for those in authority (citizenship). However, only God is to be feared and worshipped because he alone is the Lord of the conscience. Thus, like exiles living in the land of captivity and longing for home, we receive instruction from Scripture to submit to governing authorities and promote a peaceful and just society through prayer and responsible participation in our communities while acknowledging that our pursuit of the common good is both a vital yet ancillary means to the church’s redemptive end in the world. This is not because the common good is in itself redemptive (it is not, it is temporal) but that the common good provides a tranquility that the church can use to its advantage.

²³“When Paul says ‘this is good,’ he probably means that it is so not only ‘before God,’ but also because of all that is involved in such prayer, such as concern for all people, and (as he implies in vv. 3-5.) for their salvation, as well as concern for civil government, tranquility, quiet, and a greater opportunity to live a life of Christian piety (cf. 2 Cor 8:21). ἀπόδεκτος (1 Tim 2:3; 5:4, both with ἐνώπιον θεοῦ) means ‘acceptable’ in the sense of pleasing (see BAGD).” Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 119.

2. *Regenerate church membership and the common good.* One of the more unique contributions of Baptist theology to the conversation regarding the promotion of the common good is the doctrine of regenerate church membership. In brief, the doctrine of regenerate church membership states that only people who have been regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit should be members of the church of Jesus Christ. Consequently, Baptists believe that baptism is exclusively reserved for those who have consciously placed their trust in Christ for salvation as their Savior and Lord. Foundational to the doctrine of regenerate church membership is the acknowledgment that entrance into the church depends entirely upon the work of God.

If membership in the church of Jesus Christ depends upon a supernatural work of grace by the Holy Spirit, then it should follow that Baptists who maintain this belief will not resort to coercive means, but will rely instead upon the preaching of the gospel for the advancement of its mission in the world. In other words, a Baptist understanding of the nature of the church should temper our expectations for the extent to which governing authorities aid our work. Baptists advocate for limited government and religious liberty because we understand the formation of our religious communities and the advancement of our mission in the world to depend upon the supernatural power of God. Thus, a proper Baptist conception of the common good should also be the least likely to attempt to impose a maximalist approach to the common good, which a pluralistic society cannot sustain.

Unfortunately, in more recent days, Baptists have been influenced by the specific aspects of Enlightenment individualism and modern society, which have led to both confusions about the individual's role in the context of the believing community and a functional abandonment of regenerate church membership among some churches that allow members to either go unaccounted for or undisciplined in accordance with Scripture's expectations for church membership. The result of this unfortunate decline has been the idolizing of individualism among some who have misunderstood the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which threatens the possibility of consistently holding a conception of the common good.

If Baptists are going to work for the common good as a believing community, then each subsequent generation must be taught the

importance of our doctrinal distinctives, and how the pursuit of the common good fundamentally requires a certain degree of cooperation and agreement based on those distinctives. As a remedy to this decline, we encourage Baptists to recover a robust awareness of their confessional heritage and doctrinal distinctives, especially as such heritage and distinctives lay an invaluable foundation for building a consensus regarding the concept of the common good in present-day Baptist churches.

IV. CONCLUSION: ON THE LIMITS AND END OF THE COMMON GOOD

This essay forces us to reckon with a counterargument: How thin or “modest” can the common good be and still endure? When is the common good no longer functioning as it ought? From our point of view, it is hard to tear the totality of the common good asunder because the common good is constitutive of other common good(s). This stems from our belief that despite sin manifesting itself in all corners of human existence, an enduring common grace exists—and will ineradicably exist until the eschaton—that makes the total implosion of society impossible. No matter how many Protestants might reject the natural law, the fact that society obeys road signs and that prisons exist is a testament to the common grace that makes even the most minimal attainment of the common good achievable.

In a fallen world, society will have both simultaneous successes and failures. For example, a society such as our own that has a strong tradition of religious liberty furthers the common good. This same society, tragically, is a society whose idea of the common good leaves out the protection of the unborn. It cannot be said that our nation is a failed state but a state whose conception of the common good denies the most basic essential attribute: the protection of life. We judge the common good by the reigning moral ecologies that comprise it. Far from insinuating that a “modest” common good implies moral neutrality or moral skepticism, the common good requires a moral subtext for personal and social meaning that liberal order cannot in itself provide.

Life in a post-Genesis 3 world is a paradox. Deeply depraved and wicked, it is also inhabited by those capable of supererogatory action.

It is this tension and convergence that should call all Christians to a vigilant concern for strengthening the common good.

