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*Christianity Today, October, 2012*

THIS IS OUR CITY

## What's So Great About 'The Common Good'?

Why Christians need to revive the historically rich phrase.

**Andy Crouch** / posted October 12, 2012



Image: Mark Peterman

I'm not sure when I started hearing more about "the common good" from fellow Christians. But I'm pretty sure *Christianity Today* had something to do with it. This magazine spent 2005 exploring pastor Tim Keller's proposal that Christians be "a counterculture for the common good." Now we're in the midst of This Is Our City: two years' worth of articles, documentary films,

and events for leaders in cities around North America. Our team has realized that what we're really looking for are what we are calling "common-good decisions"—times when Christians make choices, some small and relatively easy (say, volunteering in a neighborhood school), others major and costly (say, moving into a tough school district), to seek the good of their neighborhoods.

The phrase also comes up in the perennial but newly vigorous conversation about the role Christians should play in American culture. Gordon College president Michael Lindsay titled his 2011 inaugural address "Faithful Leadership for the Common Good." Gabe Lyons, who convenes diverse church and civic leaders every year at the Q conference, describes its mission as "ideas for the common good." (Full disclosure: Lindsay and Lyons are friends, and their organizations have been the recipients of my family's financial support and have paid me for speaking engagements.) The phrase appears three times in the National Association of Evangelicals' (NAE) 2001 "call to civic responsibility" titled "For the Health of the Nation," which CT editor in chief David Neff helped draft. After longtime vice president Richard Cizik left the NAE, he founded a new group called the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good.

But a slogan isn't the same thing as a vision. And the more I've thought about and vigorously promoted the phrase "the common good," the less I'm sure we know what we mean by it.

## The Common What?

All by itself, "the common good" is as vague as fine-sounding phrases tend to be. And being fine-sounding and vague, it easily becomes political pabulum to promote whatever policies the speaker wants to advance. Not surprisingly, it arises at times when politicians want to justify imposing costs on some part of society, as when Hillary Rodham Clinton told a group of donors in 2004, "We're going to take things away from you on behalf of the common good." To some ears, "the common good" echoes communism's demands that all lesser goods yield to the construction of a people's paradise. At the least, when we hear that some sacrifice will serve "the common good," it's reasonable to ask, "Sez who?"

It's also reasonable to ask how far Christians can pursue a common good alongside people who believe in very different goods from us, or who question whether we can call anything "good" at all. It's not just Christians who wonder about this: Secular thinkers have pushed back against the phrase on the grounds that no pluralistic society has the right to dictate a vision of the good for all its members. That was fine for European societies in the Dark Ages, they imply. But in the diverse and doubting 21st century, we have to settle for something thinner, something we can all agree on without stepping on one another's metaphysical toes—allowing everyone "the pursuit of happiness" and calling it a day.

Christians, meanwhile, have reason to question visions of a world made right that omit the judgment, mercy, and grace of God. "The common good" has an awfully this-worldly ring to it. To believe we humans can achieve good on our own, even working together, without the radical intervention of God, is ultimately to deny the doctrines of Creation, Cross, Resurrection, and Second Coming, just for starters. To exchange the dramatic biblical vision of history for "the common good" might seem like trading our birthright for a bowl of lukewarm oatmeal.

So, with all these weaknesses, why should Christians embrace the phrase?

Because it was these very follies that prompted Christians to recover the language of "the common good" in the first place.

## An Old Idea

To understand the revival of "the common good," we need to understand the man who did more than anyone else to restore it to Christian currency. Vincenzo Gioacchino Raffaele Luigi Pecci became Pope Leo XIII at a time when the papacy was descending. For a thousand years, the pope had been both a spiritual leader and a temporal ruler, commanding the allegiance of kings and directing affairs of state. But in 1870, Italian armies conquered the "Papal States," regions once ruled by the Church, leaving the pope to govern only a tiny enclave of Rome. If the pope was not a ruler among rulers, what was he? That was the question Leo confronted when he began his 25-year papacy in 1878.

"[Leo] saw himself as a teacher ... who sought a dialogue with the emerging secular powers of Europe,"

Bradley Lewis, associate professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of America, told me.

"Engaging with the culture was a key theme of Leo's pontificate. He wrote 85 encyclicals on all kinds of topics." (John Paul II wrote 14 of these authoritative letters during a papacy of comparable length.)

In Leo's circumstances, we recognize a parallel to the circumstances of North American Protestants over the past century—once dominant in cultural institutions but increasingly sidelined from direct control. But rather than retreating from defining the Christian voice in a secular world, Leo and his advisers rose to the challenge, above all by returning to the reasoned philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's work, informed by Aristotle and conversant with insurgent Islam, was the high-water mark of Catholic thought. And it was from Aquinas that Leo borrowed the language of the common good for his most influential encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*.

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invested nearly messianic hope in a new government that would collectivize property and give power to the proletariat. A hundred years after the Russian Revolution, the flaws of the socialist vision (and the communism that followed it) are clear, but in Leo's time, the socialists seemed to have history on their side.

*Rerum novarum* simply means "of new things," and the new things Leo had in mind were quite literally revolutionary: the rise of socialism and other workers' movements that addressed the inequities of the new industrial world. Beyond seeking just wages, socialists scorned church and family and

*Rerum Novarum* was a bold response to both the plight of workers and the scorched-earth progressivism of the socialists. Leo agreed that workers deserved a fair wage—indeed, he was one of the first thinkers to posit that wages should be sufficient to allow hard-working people to provide for their families. But he insisted that the socialist dream of a property-free world, liberated from traditional virtues and relationships, would be disastrous. In particular, Leo argued that private property was not just a matter of private interest; when individuals tended to their own land and possessions faithfully, they made a crucial contribution to "the common good."

*Rerum Novarum* launched the movement called Catholic social thought. Successive popes and other Christian thinkers picked up on Leo's themes, defining the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." Two ideas are particularly significant in this definition. The common good is measured by *fulfillment* or flourishing—by human beings becoming all they are meant to be. And the common good is about persons, both groups and individuals—not just about "humanity" but about humans, and not just about individuals but about *persons* in relationship with one another in small groups.

While *Rerum Novarum* did not prevent the rise of communism in Eastern Europe, it did help Christians

resist its totalizing worldview even through decades of repression. One of those Christians, a Polish priest named Karol Wojtyła, occupied Leo's chair and played a pivotal role in the demise of the system whose baleful consequences Leo had foreseen.

## Small is Good

The common good can help us avoid two modern temptations—one on the left and one on the right. "Leftists tend to be concerned about 'humanity' as a collective," Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith told me via e-mail. "If some heads have to roll to improve humanity's lot, so be it. A commitment to the common good opposes that entirely. Each and every person has dignity—the good society is one which allows the thriving of all persons, especially the weak and vulnerable."

And yet, Smith pointed out, "the common good" challenges the libertarian stream of conservatism as well: "Individualists only want to see each individual live as they please, as long as they don't obstruct the ability of other individuals to do the same. They don't think anything is 'common,' except whatever minimal infrastructures are needed to create equal opportunity."

Focusing on the common good has another positive effect, Smith noted: It can both draw Christians into engagement with the wider society and prevent that engagement from becoming "all about politics." Essential to the common good, all the way back through Aquinas to Aristotle, has been the insight that the best forms of human flourishing happen in collectives that are smaller than, and whose origins are earlier than, the nation-state. Family above all, but also congregations, guilds, and clubs—these "private associations," with all their particular loyalties, paradoxically turn out to be essential to public flourishing. If we commit ourselves to the common good, we must become more public in our thinking and choices, and at the same time not too public. The common good is sustained most deeply where people know each other's names and faces—especially when it comes to the care of the vulnerable, who need more than policies to flourish.

Seeking the common good in its deepest sense means continually insisting that persons are of infinite worth—worth more than any system, any institution, or any cause. Societies are graded on a curve, with the fate of the most vulnerable given the most weight, because the fate of the most vulnerable tells us whether a society truly values persons as ends or just as means to an end.

And the common good continually reminds us that persons flourish in the small societies that best recognize them as persons—in family and the face-to-face associations of healthy workplaces, schools, teams, and of course churches. Though it is a big phrase, "the common good" reminds us that the right scale for human flourishing is small and specific, and that the larger institutions of culture make their greatest contribution to flourishing when they resist absorbing all smaller allegiances.

## The Ultimate Good

For a while, the Q conference used the tagline, "Ideas that create a better world." But Gabe Lyons became dissatisfied with it. "I saw an ad for 'furniture that creates a better world.' I wanted something with much more Christian grounding, something that would give us a definition of what the 'better world' is." For Lyons, "the common good" in its Christian definition is especially valuable for insisting on the dignity of every person. Lyons distinguishes the common good—"the most good for all people"—from narrower ideas like "the public interest," which he paraphrases as "the most good for the most people." The common good, Lyons says, is not another word for utilitarianism—doing whatever would make the greatest number of people happiest, even if some people have to suffer. Instead, it is a bulwark against utilitarian calculations that might conclude, for example, that "a better world would be one without disabled people."

But Lyons also thinks "the common good" helps Christians better articulate their commitment to a pluralistic society. There was a time when Christians might have focused on "caring for those who believe like we believe," says the Liberty University alumnus. "But the common good requires us to care for all people—loving our neighbor no matter what they believe."

Seeking the common good, then, requires taking the phrase as seriously as its rich history demands. And this richer version of the common good could have beneficial effects.

First, the common good can give us common ground with our neighbors. We may not agree with them—indeed, Christians don't always agree with one another—about what exactly human flourishing looks like. But the common good is a conversation starter rather than a conversation ender. It can move us away from pitched battles over particular issues and help us reveal the fundamental questions that often lie unexplored behind them. In a time when many conversations between people with different convictions seem to end before they begin, we simply need more conversation starters.

But equally important, the common good allows us to stake out our Christian convictions about what is good for humans—and to dare our neighbors to clarify their own convictions. "In the simplest sense," Bradley Lewis said, "the common good is God. It is God who satisfies what people need, individually and communally." Adopting the language of the common good means owning this bedrock Christian belief and proclaiming it to our neighbors. If we are not offering our neighbors the ultimate common good—the knowledge and love of God—we are not taking the idea of the common good seriously.

Perhaps best of all, the common good is a matter of choices, not just ideas. And those choices are often local, not grand social schemes. My decisions about where to live and what to eat and buy, as well as what to grow and create, whom to befriend and where to volunteer, whom to employ and how much to pay, aren't just about my private fulfillment. They will also either contribute to others' flourishing or undermine it.

Indeed, all things that are truly good are common goods, meant to be shared and enjoyed together. And

if the return of "the common good" reminds us of that truth and that hope, and shapes the way we live among our neighbors, it will have done a world of good.

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