

Living In God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity *and* Culture

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Chapter 1: Christianity, Culture, and the Two Kingdoms

In perhaps the most famous book ever written on the topic of Christianity and culture, H. Richard Niebuhr stated: "It is helpful to remember that the question of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one; that Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial, and that the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries."¹ You have begun reading another in a long line of books that deal with this perplexing and perennial topic. I have written such a volume for two primary reasons.

First, the issue of Christianity and culture is one of immense importance and relevance. If you are a serious Christian, you probably think about the Christianity and culture question on a regular basis, whether you realize it or not. Every time you reflect upon what your faith has to do with your job, your schoolwork, your political views, the books you read, or the movies you see, you confront the problem of Christianity and culture. When you consider what responsibilities your church might have with respect to contemporary political controversies or economic development, you again come face-to-face with the Christianity and culture issue. It is no accident that so many of the greatest minds in the history of the Christian church have wrestled with this problem and that so many books have been written about it. Just think how much time, energy, and passion topics like religion and modern science or faith and politics generate in the Christian community. Even so, this subject is about much more than simply these overtly "cultural" topics. Developing a coherent view of Christianity and culture demands wrestling with some of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith. A faithful biblical theology of Christianity and culture depends upon a proper view of creation, providence, the image of God, sin, the work of Christ, salvation, the church, and eschatology. Therefore I write this book to address not a narrow issue but one that confronts us with the fundamentals of Christian faith and life. This project thus has a very personal dimension for me—it has been an exercise in expressing and defending many things that are most precious to me as a believer in Christ.

Second, I write this book out of a growing conviction that contemporary conversations about Christianity and culture are on the wrong track and that the perspective presented in these pages, largely overlooked today, offers a biblical corrective that can help to get discussion back on the right track. Though a multitude of voices are contributing to the contemporary conversations, many of them have a great deal in common. Some of the themes frequently emphasized in contemporary conversations are right on target and very important for a sound view of Christianity and culture. Other themes, I fear, present a distorted view of Christian cultural engagement and its relationship to the church and to the hope of the new heaven and new earth.

Let me mention a few things that the contemporary voices get right. First, many contemporary voices emphasize that God is the Creator of all things, including material and physical things. God is king of all areas of life, and human beings are accountable to him in everything they do. Many contemporary voices also helpfully remind us that it is good for Christians to be involved in a variety of cultural pursuits. Christians should not withdraw from the broader culture but should take up cultural tasks with joy and express their Christian faith through them. Every lawful occupation is honorable. These voices also remind us that the effects of sin penetrate all aspects of life. Christians must therefore be vigilant in their cultural pursuits, perceiving and rejecting the sinful patterns in cultural life and striving after obedience to God's will in everything. Finally, many contemporary voices stress that the true Christian hope is not for a disembodied life as a soul in heaven but for the resurrection and new heaven and new earth. All of these affirmations are true and helpful.

Unfortunately, other themes popular in the contemporary conversations are problematic. For example, many contemporary voices assert that God is redeeming all legitimate cultural activities and institutions and that

Christians are therefore called to transform them accordingly and to build the kingdom of God through this work. 2 Some advocates of this position claim that redemption is God's work of restoration, empowering all living creatures through empowering human beings to pick up again the task of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and to develop human culture as they were originally called to do. This redemptive transformation of present human culture begins a process that will culminate in the new creation—the new heaven and new earth. According to this vision of Christian cultural engagement, our cultural products will adorn the eternal city.

Many talented authors present such ideas as an exciting and inspiring vision, but are they biblically sound? I believe that they are not true to Scripture, and therefore I offer a biblical alternative in this book. I refer to this alternative as a “two-kingdoms” doctrine. Though many writers in recent years have ignored, mischaracterized, or slandered the idea of “two kingdoms,” it has a venerable place in the annals of Christian theology. It stands in the line of Christian thinking famously articulated by Augustine in *The City of God*, developed in the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations, and brought to greater maturity in the post-Reformation Reformed tradition. 3 Many writers today seem to associate a two-kingdoms doctrine with unwarranted dualisms, secularism, moral neutrality in social life, or even the denial of Christ's universal kingship. Perhaps some versions of the two-kingdoms doctrine have fit such stereotypes. My task in this book is not to defend everything that has ever gone by the name “two kingdoms,” but to expound a two-kingdoms approach that is thoroughly grounded in the story of Scripture and biblical doctrine. It embraces the heritage of Augustine and the Reformation and seeks to develop and strengthen it further. I will strive to present it in an accessible and useful form to the church in the early twenty-first century.

This two-kingdoms doctrine strongly affirms that God has made all things, that sin corrupts all aspects of life, that Christians should be active in human culture, that all lawful cultural vocations are honorable, that all people are accountable to God in every activity, and that Christians should seek to live out the implications of their faith in their daily vocations. A Christian, however, does not have to adopt a redemptive vision of culture in order to affirm these important truths. A biblical two-kingdoms doctrine provides another compelling way to do so. According to this doctrine, God is not redeeming the cultural activities and institutions of this world, but is preserving them through the covenant he made with all living creatures through Noah in Genesis 8:20–9:17. God himself rules this “common kingdom,” and thus it is not, as some writers describe it, the “kingdom of man.” This kingdom is in no sense a realm of moral neutrality or autonomy. God makes its institutions and activities honorable, though only for temporary and provisional purposes. Simultaneously, God is redeeming a people for himself, by virtue of the covenant made with Abraham and brought to glorious fulfillment in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has completed Adam's original task once and for all. These redeemed people are citizens of the “redemptive kingdom,” whom God is gathering now in the church and will welcome into the new heaven and new earth at Christ's glorious return. Until that day, Christians live as members of both kingdoms, discharging their proper duties in each. They rejoice to be citizens of heaven through membership in the church, but also recognize that for the time being they are living in Babylon, striving for justice and excellence in their cultural labors, out of love for Christ and their neighbor, as sojourners and exiles in a land that is not their lasting home. 4

In order to introduce and explain this two-kingdoms vision more clearly, I now briefly describe some of the prominent voices in contemporary conversations about Christianity and culture. All of these voices, in various ways, defend a redemptive model of Christian cultural engagement. After I describe their views, I will turn readers' attention back to the two-kingdoms alternative and summarize the biblical defense of the two-kingdoms doctrine that will unfold in the chapters to come.

Contemporary Voices: The Redemptive Transformation of Culture

In the contemporary conversations about Christianity and culture, there is perhaps no voice more eloquent than what is sometimes referred to as “neo-Calvinism.” This school of thought traces back most immediately to the work of Dutch philosopher and jurist Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), and it also claims to be heir of the Dutch

theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and of the Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564).⁵ “Neo-Calvinism” has been influential not only in many Reformed and evangelical churches but has provided inspiration for many Christian schools and colleges in recent generations. My own early education, in both church and school, was significantly shaped by this line of thought. A number of friends, pastors, and theologians that I respect embrace its views. It gets many things correct and presents an attractive vision for Christianity and culture in many respects. It helpfully combats forms of Christianity that are indifferent to mundane cultural activity or see the faith as only relevant on Sundays. In the end, however, it misreads some important biblical themes and offers a distorted theology of Christian cultural engagement.

One fascinating thing about the current scene is that many other prominent Christian voices sound so similar to neo-Calvinism. When neo-Calvinists speak about Platonic and dualistic tendencies in the contemporary church, the redemptive transformation of culture, and the connection of cultural work to the kingdom of God and the new creation, they have a lot of company. I could cite many examples, but I focus on two that have gained considerable attention in the Christian world in recent years: the New Perspective on Paul (as exemplified by N. T. Wright) and the emerging (or emergent) church (as exemplified by Brian McLaren). Though advocates of neo-Calvinism, the New Perspective on Paul, and the emerging church certainly do not hold identical views on all issues, they show mutual respect for each other’s work⁶ and, most significantly, they share a common vision that the redemptive transformation of culture is central to the Christian life.

Contemporary Neo-Calvinism

Neo-Calvinism is a diverse movement in certain respects, but its proponents are united by many common themes. Two contemporary advocates of the neo-Calvinist vision have summarized “neo-Calvinism” in three points: first, grace restores nature through redemption in Christ; second, God is sovereign and orders all of reality; and third, the original cultural mandate of Genesis 1 has ongoing relevance.⁷ This is a concise and accurate summary, but it may be helpful to unpack the tenets of neo-Calvinism at a little more length. To do so, I refer especially to two books that present a neo-Calvinist perspective: Albert Wolters’s *Creation Regained* and Cornelius Plantinga’s *Engaging God’s World*.⁸ These writers do not necessarily agree with each other on every specific issue, but their general vision of Christianity and culture is the same. Their books are accessible and winsomely written, and they have been influential in many Christian schools and colleges.

Perhaps the most important thing to know initially about neo-Calvinism is that it presents the story of Scripture as the story of creation, fall, and redemption. Recognizing this pattern forms the heart of a Christian worldview, according to neo-Calvinism. What this means is that “all has been created good, including the full range of human cultures that emerge when humans act according to God’s design. But all has been corrupted by evil, including not only culture but also the natural world. So all—the whole cosmos— must be redeemed by Jesus Christ the Lord.”⁹ Wolters and Plantinga share a general conviction that God created this world and that the whole world was his kingdom and thus was good and blessed. God gave the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:26–28) to the human race, which meant that human beings were to use their abilities to care for the world and to develop human culture, thereby releasing the vast potential latent in creation. Their goal in this labor was eternal and eschatological: the new earth. As Plantinga puts it, “we may think of the holy city as the garden of Eden plus the fullness of the centuries.”¹⁰

The fall into sin threatened to destroy this entire project. The fall produced the corruption of every human faculty, all human action, and the created order itself. God, however, not only preserved the world from immediate collapse but also undertook a plan of salvation to ensure that his original purposes for this world are fulfilled. For neo-Calvinism the salvation or redemption brought by Christ is essentially restoration or re-creation. God does not start over new, but accomplishes his original plan. According to Wolters, our first parents “botched” their original mandate, but God has now given us a “second chance” and has “reinstated” us as his managers on earth.¹¹ This does not mean that God, through Christ, simply puts us back into the garden of Eden to pick up where Adam left

off before he fell. God originally gave Adam the long-term task of unlocking the potentialities of creation through human culture, and despite his sin the human race subsequently has been engaging in that task, though in corrupted form. Redemption in Christ restores and renews human beings in this ongoing task, purging them of their sinful perversion of culture and redirecting them in ways that are obedient to God and beneficial to one another and the whole of creation. 12

As all of creation and human culture was God's kingdom before the fall, so now the renewal and redemption of all creation in Christ constitute the renewal and redemption of that kingdom. All cultural labor is kingdom work. 13 All cultural labor aims to advance the full realization of that kingdom in the new creation. Our ordinary activity in this world is "kingdom service," which produces "the building materials for that new earth."14 As Plantinga writes, "What we do now in the name of Christ—striving for healing, for justice, for intellectual light in darkness, striving simply to produce something helpful for sustaining the lives of other human beings—shall be preserved across into the next life."15

In light of this grand vision, neo-Calvinism often warns against various "dualistic" views that compromise the holistic character of God's kingdom in this world. Wolters, for example, is very critical of so-called "two-realms" theories that he sees as a perennial danger for Christianity. 16 Wolters rejects any division of life into a "sacred" realm on the one hand, in which people do "kingdom" work, and a "secular" or "profane" realm on the other hand. He fears that Christians holding such a view will depreciate the latter realm or look upon it as inherently inferior. He claims that this view falls prey to a "deep-seated Gnostic tendency." It "restricts the scope of Christ's lordship." Wolters and other neo-Calvinist writers use terms such as "secular" and "profane" to denote things that are inherently evil or at least compromised for the Christian. 17 By rejecting dualistic views, furthermore, neo-Calvinist writers aim to steer Christians away from "vertical" views of salvation that involve "escape" from this world into "heaven," which is the view of Plato rather than Scripture. 18

N. T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul

Though neo-Calvinism has been influential in many Reformed and evangelical circles in recent generations, it is far from being the only voice in current discussions about Christianity and culture. As noted, however, many of today's significant voices in the broader Christian world emphasize themes that resemble neo-Calvinist teaching, such as the importance of redemptive cultural transformation and the problem of Platonic and dualistic tendencies in the church. Though there are many theologians and movements that I could mention, I will focus briefly upon two that may be familiar to many readers: the New Perspective on Paul (as represented by N. T. Wright) and the emerging church (as represented by Brian McLaren). As I describe these two, readers should recognize many of the neo-Calvinist themes identified in the previous section.

First I consider the so-called New Perspective on Paul. In the past few decades, this new perspective has sparked discussions about the character of Judaism in Paul's day, Paul's view of Jew-Gentile relations in the early church, his understanding of justification, and his attitude toward the Old Testament law. Proponents of the New Perspective have challenged traditional Protestant readings of Paul that focus upon the universal sinfulness of humanity and God's saving answer to human sin through Christ's atonement, justification, and sanctification. Many recent books address these subjects. 19 Of interest here is what the New Perspective might have to say about Christianity and culture. There is no single set of beliefs that constitute the official New Perspective view on such things. What may be useful is to focus upon the most well-known theologian associated with the New Perspective, Anglican bishop N. T. Wright. One of his recent books, *Surprised by Hope*, has much to say about Christianity and culture issues. It is remarkable to see how similar his concerns are to those of neo-Calvinist writers such as Wolters and Plantinga.

It is no coincidence that Wright both finds the traditional Reformation view of justification inadequate and also embraces the redemptive transformation of human culture. Before we consider *Surprised by Hope*, let me briefly

state a bold claim that I will defend in subsequent chapters. Those who hold a traditional Protestant view of justification consistently should not find a redemptive transformationist perspective attractive. As some of the Reformers grasped, a two-kingdoms doctrine is a proper companion to a Protestant doctrine of justification. 20

Wright is clear about the major theme of *Surprised by Hope*. He sets out to defend the physical resurrection and the physical new heaven and new earth as the great Christian eschatological hope, over against popular misconceptions of Christian hope as “going to heaven” after death, and aims to prove that this hope provides motivation for Christians to transform the present world in anticipation of what is to come. 21 In order to establish and develop this claim, Wright spends considerable time critiquing what he believes is the predominant perspective of the Western church in recent centuries. This perspective emphasizes individual salvation, which consists of our immortal souls being rescued from the present evil world and entering into heaven, a nonmaterial realm that will survive when the present world is completely destroyed at the end of history. 22 According to Wright, such a perspective sounds much more like Plato or Gnosticism than like biblical Christianity. 23 In contrast to this perspective, Wright highlights the resurrection of the dead, which establishes a deep continuity between this present world and the eternal state (though he acknowledges that there is discontinuity too). 24

One significant thing is that believing in the resurrection gives Christians a compelling reason to seek justice and peace in the present world. In contrast, believing in salvation as “going to heaven” to escape this world tends to cause disinterest or indifference to social and cultural affairs. 25

In order to defend these claims, Wright identifies three grand themes in Scripture: the goodness of God’s creation, the evil in this world due to human rebellion, and God’s redemption of the world, which consists in God’s “liberating” and “remaking” of creation in order to accomplish his original plans for it. 26 Wright’s view of the kingdom of God reflects this view of redemption. For Wright, the kingdom has to do not with a future immaterial heaven, but with the present earth as it will be fully renewed in the new creation. 27 Though the coming of the kingdom is ultimately God’s work, God enlists the efforts of human beings in bringing the kingdom to final fulfillment. Social transformation in the present is an anticipation of the resurrection and cosmic renewal on the last day. 28 Human beings are “part of the means” by which God brings ultimate salvation, and they are “rescuing stewards over creation.” This is the “inner dynamic” of the kingdom of God. 29 At several points Wright refers readers to 1 Corinthians 15:58, with its promise that our work in the Lord is not in vain. From this verse he claims that what we do now is “building for God’s kingdom” and “will last into God’s future.” 30 Though Wright confesses that he has no idea what this will actually look like, he assures Christians: “You are . . . accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world.” 31 In light of all this, one of Wright’s chief concerns is to reshape his readers’ conception of the mission of the church. The church’s mission, he says, should consist not only in evangelism but also in working for justice, peace, and beauty in this present world. 32 Wright’s chief concerns, therefore, closely resemble those of contemporary neo-Calvinism. Over against perceived Platonic tendencies in modern Christianity that despise physical things and devalue cultural activity, both Wright and neo-Calvinists present a creation-fall-redemption perspective that emphasizes the centrality of Christian cultural work as a means of building the kingdom of God and anticipating the new creation.

The Emerging Church

Another contemporary voice that has gained popularity in recent years is that of the “emergent” or “emerging” church. 33 Those involved in the emerging church movement like to emphasize that they are involved in a “conversation” about a new kind of Christianity. They say that this conversation is still ongoing, and so it is hard to predict what exactly this new kind of Christianity will turn out to be. Proponents are critical of traditional forms of Christianity (particularly Reformed and evangelical varieties, from which many of them have come), and have special dislike for rigid doctrine. They are also critical of recent megachurch types of Christianity, in search of something more fresh and authentic. Though it is often unclear what emergent Christianity stands for positively, one thing certainly stands out: its emphasis upon the redemptive transformation of culture as being at the heart of

Christian faith. A recent book by leading emergent spokesman Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, provides a good case in point. ... He calls for Christians to develop an effective “framing story” (something like a worldview), and the framing story that he defines has nothing to do with Christ’s atonement or the forgiveness of sins but everything to do with social “transformation.”³⁶ His framing story affirms that Jesus came to “retrain and restore humanity to its original vocation and potential. This renewed humanity can return to its role as caretakers of creation and one another so the planet and all it contains can be restored to the healthy and fruitful harmony that God desires.”³⁷ Thus Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God not in terms of escaping from this world but “in terms of God’s dream coming true for this earth, of God’s justice and peace replacing earth’s injustice and disharmony.”³⁸ Not unexpectedly, McLaren sees the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 as providing “hope within history,” which means that this vision “seeks to inspire our imaginations with hope about what our world can actually become.” It shows “a new way of living that is possible within this universe, a new societal system that is coming as surely as God is just and faithful.”³⁹ The gospel of the kingdom of God, therefore, is about our work of transforming the world toward peace and justice, and the New Jerusalem is the result of this process.

The Two-Kingdoms Alternative

A person can learn some very important things about Christianity and the Christian’s cultural responsibilities by reading neo-Calvinist, New Perspective, and emerging authors. The physical created world is God’s good creation, sin is a horrible and distorting thing, God has not given up on his original goal for creation, cultural vocations are honorable and beneficial, Christians should think critically about sin’s effects upon cultural life, and the resurrection and the new heaven and new earth are the great Christian hope. The problem is, I believe, that these authors quite confidently give the impression that their visions of cultural transformation, the kingdom of God, and the new creation are the only way to affirm these things. They suggest that the only people who would oppose their vision are those who are indifferent to the broader culture, reject the resurrection, and hope only to escape to heaven where they will float around as happy spirits. This is a terribly distorted and misleading suggestion. Great Christian leaders such as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin—to name but a few—respected earthly vocations and affirmed the resurrection of the dead. But they also made very clear that the Christian’s cultural activities have to be carefully distinguished from the coming of the kingdom and the hope of the new creation. Such distinctions, they believed, were crucial to Christian faith and life. 40

This book, in developing a contemporary and biblically-based two-kingdoms doctrine, follows this Augustinian and Reformation trajectory. Though I present an approach to Christianity and culture that is different from the transformationist visions exemplified by neo-Calvinism, Wright, and McLaren, readers should expect to find a defense of classic Christian doctrines such as creation, the fall, and the resurrection within these pages. Likewise, readers should not expect to find any hostility or indifference toward the broader world of human culture. I confess to loving many cultural activities. I am a proficient pianist and organist, read novels and *The Wall Street Journal* nearly every day, love college football, am an attorney (though currently on inactive status, so please don’t call for legal advice), and play golf to a low handicap (you certainly may call if you are a member of a nice club and wish to invite me for a round). What readers can expect to find in this book is a positive view of cultural activity—though a positive view that is also reserved. It is reserved because it seeks to follow Scripture’s teaching that the affairs of human culture are temporary, provisional, and bound to pass away. The kingdom of God proclaimed by the Lord Jesus Christ is not built through politics, commerce, music, or sports. Redemption does not consist in restoring people to fulfill Adam’s original task, but consists in the Lord Jesus Christ himself fulfilling Adam’s original task once and for all, on our behalf. Thus redemption is not “creation regained” but “re-creation gained.” What readers can expect to find in this book most of all, therefore, is a high view of the Lord Jesus Christ, his perfect redeeming work, and his eternal kingdom—a kingdom advancing now through the ministry and life of the church and one day to be revealed in consummate glory apart from any work of our own human culture. VanDrunen, David (2010-10-

06). Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture (pp. 24-26). Crossway. Kindle Edition.