

Capstone Abstract

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By all human accounts, the Christian faith is a paradox, and its believers are breathing, walking and talking contradictions. It is “Christ-followers,” above all other adherents to organized religion, who are seemingly lost in the quandary of a confused identity. The inquisitive person who, but for a moment, chooses to observe the Christians’ way of life may presume that those followers of the “Way” are indeed a peculiar breed. They are, on one hand, characterized by a distinctive gospel, a unique lingo and, on certain days of the week, an exclusive assembly. Then again, their message is a public one, their aim is shared communication in the familiar tongue, and “Welcome Visitors” embellishes the doors of their weekly assembly halls on occasion. The Christians are simultaneously world rejecting and world affirming. This world is not their home, since they are “just passing through.” Along the way, however, they put great effort and care into the building of earthly tents. The watchful unbeliever perceives that while Christians are “not *of* the world,” they are most decisively *in* it.¹

I Corinthians 5:9-13 records in rather interesting form the words of the apostle Paul regarding the Christian’s status as those *in* the world, but not *of* it. The apostle warns the Corinthians not to associate with a fellow church member who is engaged in sexually immoral behavior. In order that the person might ultimately repent of his sin and receive restoration the entire congregation must accept God’s judgment by “purging the evil person” from their fellowship. However, Paul makes sure to clarify this command not to associate with sexually immoral people. He reminds the church that this instruction is “not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, *since then you would need to go out of the world.*” Paul’s readers understood that in their fallen context they could never separate themselves entirely from immoral people, whether those in the workplace, the academy, or in the area of the arts and entertainment. Neither could they cut themselves off from the pagan ideologies and worldviews surrounding them. God had *sent them into* the world, and until His great eschatological harvest, the wheat and tares would grow together.² For the present time, God’s children continue to “live next door to the unbeliever,” rubbing elbows in the public arena of diverse worldviews and the cultural institutions that emerge from them.³

More than ever, faithful Christians are searching for a balanced answer to the persistent question – How do I live *as a Christian* in the public square? A brief scan of church history reveals a vast slew of paradigms that Christians have adopted in an attempt to relate Christ and culture, the Bible and public life. Some have taken a hands-off approach, regarding Christ and culture as two competing authorities. Still others fully absorb the cultural forms of their day, offering little or no critical evaluation of them. Popular among broadly evangelical circles is the formulation of an alternative “Christian culture,” suggesting that to live as a follower of Christ in the public sphere is to “take back” legitimate cultural forms from their worldly derivation and bring them into the safe confines of a Christian subculture.

¹ John 15:19

² Matthew 13:30

³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: I Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 169

Sadly, many Christians have grown completely dispirited in the pursuit of living *distinctly as Christians*, while remaining *fully engaged in the world* because “there are many who control ‘the commanding heights of culture’ (the phrase is from Karl Marx) who view anything Christian as second-rate, sectarian, and an instance of special pleading.”⁴ Richard Neuhaus properly diagnoses this Christian anemia regarding public living: “Too many Christians have internalized that view promoted by the cultured despisers of Christianity. They have resigned themselves to life in the Christian subculture, and are pitifully pleased when they receive a morsel of praise falling from the table of those on the commanding heights. Other Christians are pitifully pleased when they are given a place at the table ‘on good behavior’ – meaning that they promise not to be too Christian.”⁵

Various pastors and elders of confessional Reformed churches are currently propagating a distinctive paradigm regarding the relationship between Christ and culture, the Bible and public life, and the Christian and vocation. Dubbed the “Two Kingdoms Perspective” (TKP), this development in social thought embodies “the Lutheran consensus”⁶ and allegedly represents the perspective of Reformed theologians stretching back to Augustine. The two kingdoms doctrine asserts that God rules “all human institutions and activities,” but in two very distinct ways.⁷ According to the proponents of the two kingdoms doctrine, God rules His church as redeemer through Jesus Christ. Thus, the church is God’s “spiritual kingdom.” He also rules the state and all other social institutions outside of the church. However, He rules this “civil kingdom” only as creator and preserver, and not as redeemer. The TKP significantly emphasizes the importance of natural law – the belief that God has written his moral law on the heart of every individual, so that all people have “knowledge of their basic moral obligations [and] a universally accessible standard for the development of civil law.” This natural law constitutes the moral criterion for life both for the Christian and for the unbeliever in the civil kingdom.⁸ Practically speaking, the TKP purports that Christians are citizens of two diverse God-ordained kingdoms, such that the believer submits to the redemptive code of Scripture in the ecclesiastical or spiritual kingdom, while fulfilling his temporal and mundane cultural endeavors in a strictly “common” way without appealing to Scripture in his participation in the civil kingdom.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. I aim to dialogue with the two kingdoms perspective, examine some of its strong points, and identify a few of its significant pitfalls, concluding finally that this perspective fails to provide Christians with a biblical or helpful paradigm for living as Christians in the world. Conversely, I hope to provide a useful pattern for relating Christ and culture that properly interprets the thrust of Redemptive history as the entire canon of Scripture describes it. God’s Word does not allow the Christian to live a compartmentalized life or entertain a dual ethic. Rather it commands God’s people to view all of life under the comprehensive lordship of Jesus Christ, a perspective that affirms the integral relationship between faith and cultural living in every sphere of the realm of Christ’s kingdom.

⁴ T.M Moore and Neuhaus, Richard John, *Culture Matters*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 8

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Michael Horton, *God of Promise*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 123

⁷ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1

⁸ *Ibid*, 2

Five important principles should guide our thinking as we seek to ascertain a balanced perception of the relationship between Christ and culture, the Bible and public life. First, our perspective should rest upon the solid bedrock of a robust biblical theology, which our Reformed confessional documents reflect in the framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. Secondly, our outlook must be Christ-centered, affirming the cosmic significance of Christ's sovereignty over all creation. In the third place, an eschatological focus that faithfully balances life in the "already and not yet" is vital. Upholding the integral relationship between worldview and world-activity, in the fourth place, is necessary to preserve Christian spirituality and maintain that dual citizenship does not entail a dual ethic for the Christian life. Finally, our perspective will affirm that real (albeit partial) transformation can occur where Christians engage in cultural affairs *distinctly as followers of Christ*.