

Neo-Calvinism versus Two-Kingdoms: an eschatological assessment

Recent debates about the church and society in Reformed evangelical circles are often characterised as a disagreement between Neo-Calvinist and Two-Kingdoms approaches.¹ Even when neither position is referenced explicitly, many of the issues are understood in ways which seems to align with these approaches. I find both views offer useful insights, but neither is entirely satisfactory. This article offers an assessment of both views on the basis of an eschatology informed by a biblical theological approach, and illustrates how some of the insights from that assessment can help Christians in our social engagement, particularly in the Australian context.² I do not discuss the history of the two movements in any detail, and will certainly not try to adjudicate which approach has the best claim to being faithful to the thought of John Calvin.

Neo-Calvinism

The movement begun by Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), which attempted to address the issues of modern society from the viewpoint of

¹ See D. Strange, 'Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology', *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011), 241.

² This paper was first presented at The Colloquium on Religion in the Public Square, held by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria in Melbourne in July 2010, and a later version was given to the Faculty of Christ College at a retreat in June 2015.

historic Calvinist theology, is now often called ‘neo-Calvinism’.³ Though the movement contains a range of views, the following are relatively common across the movement.

World-and-life view

Neo-Calvinism offers a ‘world-and-life’ view. Kuyper insists that Calvinism is not simply a soteriology or even an ecclesiology, but a way of viewing the world and of living in it.

Calvinism *did* not stop at a church-order, but expanded in a *life-system*, and did not exhaust its energy in a dogmatical construction, but created a *life* and *world-view*, and such a one as was, and still is, able to fit itself to the needs of every stage of human development, in every department of life. It raised our Christian religion to its highest spiritual splendour ... it proved to be the guardian angel of science; it emancipated art; it propagated a political scheme, which gave birth to constitutional government, both in Europe and America ... it put a thorough Christian stamp upon home-life and family-ties.⁴

Central to the world-and-life view is the assertion of God’s sovereignty in Christ. Kuyper’s famous claim is ‘no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’’.⁵ On this basis, the world-and-life view speaks to all areas of life and all disciplines.

Neo-Calvinism offers not simply a way of viewing the world but of engaging it and seeking to transform it. Kuyper stresses the so-called

³ See H. Plantinga, ‘History of the Reformational Movement’, <http://www.plantinga.ca/m/REFTOC.HTM#>, accessed 17 November 2017, and see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: a History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). W. D. Dennison, ‘Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots For Transformation: An Introductory Essay’, *JETS* 42, no. 2 (June 1999), 273, explains that ‘Neo-Calvinism’ was used by Kuyper’s critics but ‘accepted by him and his followers, who viewed themselves as developing classical Calvinism in the culture surrounding them’.

⁴ A. Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (New York: Revell, 1899), 213.

⁵ Quoted in James D. Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

‘cultural mandate’. In his view, Gen 1:28 is the call to develop a human culture in which humanity rules the world for God. For Christians, this means that humanity renewed in Christ is called to continue the same task. The Great Commission can be seen as subservient to the cultural mandate, in the sense that evangelism seeks to form disciples who bring the world into dominion.

Creation and eschatology

Kuyperian thought has a distinctive eschatological note, that God’s redemption is the restoration of creation. Al Wolters titles his book *Creation Regained*, and writes, ‘redemption means restoration—that is, the return to the goodness of an originally unscathed creation’. This ‘affects the *whole* of creational life’. Wolters clarifies that such restoration is not re-creation, but includes human cultural developments, which must also be redeemed.

Biblical religion is historically progressive, not reactionary. It views the whole course of history as a movement from a garden to a city, and it fundamentally affirms that movement.⁶

Kuyper even claims that the cultural potential of creation must be realised before the Parousia.⁷ That is not typical of later Neo-Calvinists, though they do stress the continuity between this age and the eschaton by focussing on the ‘realised’ aspect of New Testament eschatology and asserting the inclusion of human cultural products into God’s glory in the eschaton. Cosden explains, ‘What we have done—although it is ambivalent at best on its own—once redeemed and transformed, does find a home in the new creation.’⁸

⁶ A. M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 78.

⁷ ‘Everything that God has hidden in nature and the world must be brought to light before the end can be ushered in’. Abraham Kuyper, *Van de Voleinding*, Vol. 2 (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1929), 507, quoted in C. Pronk, ‘Neo-calvinism’, *The Free Reformed Student Journal* (Spring 1994), 6, available from <https://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2002/neo-calvinism>, accessed 17 November 2017.

⁸ D. Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 76.

This view of creation, culture and eschatology gives Neo-Calvinism its distinctively transformationist tone. It allows that humans develop the world under God as part of the cultural mandate, and that what we achieve is purified and included in the glory of the new creation.⁹

Common Grace

Common grace was a distinctive emphasis of Kuyper, which he used ‘to motivate pious, orthodox Dutch Reformed Christians to Christian social, political, and cultural activity’.¹⁰ The doctrine of common grace asserts that while God does not save all people, He does restrain the destructiveness of sin and allows all people to make a contribution of the fulfilment of the cultural mandate. This doctrine allows believers to recognise God’s goodness in creation and human culture, and to receive the gifts of creation and culture with thanksgiving.

According to Bratt, Kuyper used this doctrine to challenge the Reformed community to ‘purge themselves of their ‘pietistic dualisms’, their separation of Sunday from the workweek, of the spiritual from the physical in theological terms.’¹¹ The doctrine also implies that where God’s grace is discerned in the wider culture, Christians can and should act to reinforce and develop it, working with nonbelievers in education, politics, industry, agriculture or the arts.

Antithesis

In Kuyper’s thought, the principle of antithesis sits alongside the doctrine of common grace. He was very aware that the Christian and non-Christian operate from opposed worldviews, one based in love for God, the other in enmity to him.

Wolters illustrates this truth using a military motif: two kingdoms are in dispute both claiming the same territory and each with an army in the

⁹ See A. Wolters, ‘Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Pet. 3:10’, *WTJ* 49 (1987), 405–413, for an explication and defence of this view even in the light of a ‘hard text’ such as 2 Pet 3:10.

¹⁰ J. Bolt, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. J. Bolt, trans. J. Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 4:22.

¹¹ Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism*, 16.

field.¹² Pronk comments on Kuyper that,

By skilfully combining [the doctrine of common grace] with the doctrine of the antithesis, he was able to reassure those who were concerned to preserve the difference between church and world, while at the same time satisfying intellectuals within the Reformed camp who appreciated at least some aspects of culture.¹³

Creation order

For Kuyper, creational and cultural life should be seen as having settled spheres in which each had a distinctive and God-given way of operating.

The family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does.¹⁴

There is a tension in Neo-Calvinism over the issue of creation order that is worth noting. Dennison suggests that there are creation-order Neo-Calvinists who seek a 'distinctive Christian approach towards creation norms and societal structures' and shalom Neo-Calvinists who 'stress humans acting for shalom and justice in the present social order'.¹⁵ The first approach implies that Christians in their various callings need to discern the norms which God himself has placed in creation and to develop particular areas of creation along appropriate lines. This strand of thought was developed by Herman Dooyeweerd (1889–1977) and contemporary Neo-Calvinists such as Al Wolters. Wolters argues that from creation, we are able to discern the norms of each cultural activity.

God's ordinances also extend to the structures of society, to the world of art, to business and commerce. Human civilisation has a normative character throughout. Everywhere we discover limits and properties, standards and criteria: in every field of human affairs there are right and wrong ways of doing things... [The Bible shows] the creational nature

¹² Wolters, *Creation*, 83–84.

¹³ Pronk, 'Neo-calvinism', 4.

¹⁴ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 90.

¹⁵ Dennison, 'Dutch Neo-Calvinism', 279, 281.

of marriage and the state... The same holds for such structures as the family and the church and for such modern institutions as businesses and schools. They too are grounded in the realities of God's world order and are therefore not arbitrary in their configuration.¹⁶

The establishment of norms for distinct cultural activities is related to a claim of 'sphere sovereignty', that various areas of culture are demarcated from each other by God's intention and should not intrude upon each other.

There are in life as many spheres as there are constellations in the sky and the circumference of each has been drawn on a fixed radius from the center of a unique principle... Just as we speak of a 'moral world', a 'scientific world', a 'business world', the 'world of art', so we can more properly speak of a 'sphere' of morality, of the family, of social life, each with its own *domain*. And because each comprises its own domain, each has its own Sovereign within its bounds.¹⁷

For Kuyper, this claim was primarily aimed at attempts by the government to overstep what he saw as its boundaries as it took control of church, family or education (hence he established the *Free University*).¹⁸ Later Neo-Calvinism has far more detailed views of each distinct sphere.

Wolterstorff, a shalom Neo-Calvinist, emphasises a concern for justice and peace.

Our work will always have the two dimensions of a struggle for justice and the pursuit of increased mastery of the world so as to enrich human life... Development and liberation must go hand in hand. Ours is both a cultural mandate and a liberation mandate—the mandate to master the world for the benefit of mankind.¹⁹

¹⁶ Wolters, *Creation*, 23.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, 'Sphere Sovereignty', *Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 467.

¹⁸ G. Harinck, 'A Historian's Comment on the Use of Abraham Kuyper's Idea of Sphere Sovereignty', *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 279–280.

¹⁹ N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 72.

This approach is far less concerned about the detailed norms in each sphere.

Church

Kuyper made a distinction between the church as institute, with its offices and sacraments, and the church as organism, which is the people of God who are involved in cultural life and carry out the cultural mandate. Spykman considers Kuyper's statement the 'definitive formulation'.²⁰ Spykman uses the term Church/church, representing organism and institute (and note that the organism receives the capitalisation). According to Zwaanstra, in Kuyper's thought:

The church as institute is not all of the church, nor the real or essential church, not the church itself, but an institute established through the church and for the church in order that the Word can be effective in its midst.²¹

Similarly, Spykman comments that 'Sunday is now directed toward Monday, and worship toward service. So also the ministries of the church as institute are subservient to the 'worldly' life of the church as organism.'²²

Church and State

Neo-Calvinism is sometime viewed as allowing a very close relationship between church and state, yet Kuyper developed his theory of sphere sovereignty explicitly to limit the rule of the state over the church. He considers the development of denominations as demanding an even handed response from government: 'the duty of the government [is] to suspend its own judgment and to consider the multiform complex of all these denominations as the totality of the manifestation of the Church of Christ on earth'. At the same time, he repeats the standard Reformed claim that 'the Church has her own King'. He continues:

²⁰ G. J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 431.

²¹ H. Zwaanstra, 'Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church', *CTJ* 9, no. 2 (1974), 178.

²² Spykman, 431–433.

her position in the State is not assigned her by the permission of the Government, but *jure divino* ... It is therefore her privilege, and not that of the State, to determine her own characteristics as the true Church, and to proclaim her own confession as the confession of the truth.²³

Two-Kingdom Political Theology

In recent years a reaction to Neo-Calvinism has identified itself as the heir of a Two-Kingdom theology drawn from Augustine, Luther and Calvin. David VanDrunen has been the leading writer in this response; others include Darryl Hart and Michael Horton. This is a simpler proposal and can be summarised more briefly.²⁴

Two kingdoms

In Two-Kingdoms thought, life is divided into distinct areas. The church is the kingdom of Christ and 'various other spheres of cultural activity' constitute the civil kingdom. Both kingdoms are 'legitimate and divinely ordained', yet God relates to the two differently. To the civil kingdom he is Creator and Sustainer; to the church he is Redeemer.

These two kingdoms, and God's distinct ways of ruling them, are never to be confused, and ideas of gospel, redemption, and eternal life are associated with the spiritual rather than the civil kingdom.²⁵

²³ Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 137.

²⁴ Strange, 'Not Ashamed!', 244, prefers the term, 'Common-Kingdom'.

²⁵ D. VanDrunen, 'The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationist Calvin', *CTJ* 40 (2005), 250. Cf. D. VanDrunen, 'Bearing Sword in the State, Turning Cheek in the Church: A Reformed Two-Kingdoms Interpretation of Matthew 5:38–42', *Themelios* 34. no. 3 (2009), 332, in which he argues, 'As the creator and sustainer, through his Son as the eternal Logos, he rules over all human beings in the *civil* kingdom. This civil kingdom consists of a range of non-ecclesiastical cultural endeavors and institutions, among which the state has particular prominence. As redeemer, through his Son as the incarnate God-Man, God rules the other kingdom, sometimes referred to as the *spiritual* kingdom. This spiritual kingdom is essentially heavenly and eschatological, but has broken into history and is now expressed institutionally in the church. Both kingdoms are good, God-ordained, and regulated by divine law, and believers participate in both kingdoms during the present age'.

This distinction is not the antithesis of God's kingdom and Satan's (which is not denied), but a more foundational distinction within the account of redemption. In Two-Kingdom thought, the civil kingdom is not the site of redemption and no signs of the kingdom of Christ are to be expected in it, though it is still under God's rule. To act in the civil kingdom as if it were the site of redemption is to make a category error with potentially disastrous consequences.

Eschatology and the church

The Two-Kingdom view insists on a sharp distinction between the now and the not yet. VanDrunen is clear that the church, and the church alone, is the anticipation of the kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven came not in order to redeem all institutions and spheres of life in this present world, but to redeem sinners and to gather them into an ecclesial community, until the day when the civil institutions of this age are brought to a sudden end.²⁶

Church and worship

In Two-Kingdom approaches, the church and its worship are viewed as the focus of the kingdom of God rather than any transformation of society. Stellman writes, 'what good are Word, water, bread and wine for attaining such lofty goals as cultural transformation or wooing of the young and attractive'.²⁷ The means of grace create a church but do not change the world. Hart insists, 'the church is called to proclaim the good news that makes us ready for the world to come, not to speak prophetically 'for the renewal and reform' of this world'.²⁸

Transformation

As is apparent, Two-Kingdoms approaches stand resolutely against the idea that the church has a mission to transform culture or society. VanDrunen appeals to Calvin, arguing that 'Calvin's refusal to allow the

²⁶ VanDrunen, 'Bearing Sword', 333.

²⁷ J. Stellman, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet* (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 15.

²⁸ D. Hart, 'Two Kingdoms Come', *Touchstone* (December 2006), 41.

gospel (via Christian liberty) to be applied to civil government drops a weighty barrier in the path of all claims painting Calvin as one who applied the gospel to all areas of life.²⁹ He portrays Calvin as socially conservative, holding to the motto, 'All change is to be feared'.³⁰ This point seems to be the major point of contention against Neo-Calvinism. Thus, Reynolds protests,

The only New Testament imperatives regarding the state command Christians to subject themselves to this common grace institution, and if the state commands them to stop preaching the gospel, they must humbly submit to the punishment for disobeying. Of cultural agendas there is silence.³¹

Further, he insists,

the church is ... the pilgrim bride of the risen Lord, an embassy among the nations of the earth, awaiting its land inheritance in its resurrection glory, calling the nations to repent and believe the good news of the amazing amnesty offered by heaven. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. This not only defines the limits of church power, but the focus of her purposes as well. She is to preach the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations.³²

Church-state distinction

Two-kingdom theology supports a very clear demarcation of church and state much like that in the United States. VanDrunen is aware that in practice, Calvin's Geneva did not operate with the modern distinction

²⁹ VanDrunen, 'Two Kingdoms', 264.

³⁰ From Calvin's sermon on Deut 19:14–15. For more on this theme in Calvin, see S. E. Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 86.

³¹ G. E. Reynolds, 'What Is the Church For?', *Ordained Servant* 15 (2006), 36–37.

³² Reynolds, 'What Is the Church For?', 38. D. VanDrunen *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 349, argues that Neo-Calvinists 'placed an eschatological burden upon the cultural task that was not present in earlier Reformed thought and that further distinguishes their thought from earlier ideas of natural law and the two kingdoms'.

between church and state.³³ However, the US arrangement is often cited as the inevitable outcome of the Two-Kingdom approach.

A secular realm

Two-kingdoms approaches claim that the notion of the ‘secular’ is important for Christian living.

Working from a two kingdoms doctrine, one might posit that there is a ‘secular’ realm (in its etymological sense of concerning ‘this age’), a common space shared by all human beings despite religious differences. Yet this secular realm need not be dismissed as anti-religious or immoral, for God is creator and sustainer of the civil kingdom and governs it by the law of nature. From this perspective, attempts to engage in common, non-religiously exclusive public discourse do not betray Christian truth but are an endeavor that a rich theological account of reality suggests is a possibility and even a responsibility.³⁴

In contrast, Neo-Calvinism insists that there is no sacred-secular distinction. All of life is to be lived under Christ’s rule and God’s people are to seek to do this in all areas as an expression of the kingdom of Christ.

Natural Law

Consistent with a sharp distinction between a spiritual and civil kingdom is the claim that the civil kingdom is to be ordered by natural law rather than by the ‘gospel’. VanDrunen presents his account of Calvin’s view as a preferred alternative to Neo-Calvinism.

In the civil kingdom, where issues of salvation are not concerned, natural law plays its positive role, enabling even non-Christians to achieve various impressive accomplishments in fields such as law, science, and the liberal arts. In the spiritual kingdom of Christ, on the other hand, where issues of salvation are indeed at issue, the cultural

³³ VanDrunen, ‘The Two Kingdoms’, 261–262.

³⁴ D. VanDrunen, ‘The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and the Relationship of Church and State in the Early Reformed Tradition’, *Journal of Church & State* 49, no. 4 (2007), 762.

accomplishment enable by natural law are judged worthless for attaining eternal life.³⁵

An Eschatological Assessment

I am not going to adjudicate the debate point by point, but suggest that an eschatological perspective enables us to understand and learn from it. If we ask what expectations each approach has for the future and how those expectations impact on the present, some distinctive strengths and weaknesses emerge. Both positions assert that we look forward to the return of Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God. They differ on their view of the timing, scope and implications of that hope.

Eschatological timing: the basis of dualism

The Two-Kingdoms approach captures an important element of New Testament eschatological timing, for there are very significant ways in which redemption is not yet realised. Christians live as pilgrims, waiting for our hope. Furthermore, there is a judgment that lies between ‘the now’ and ‘the not yet’ that prevents an easy transition from this age to the next.

Properly conceived, the Two-Kingdoms approach rests on this eschatological timing. It is not that there are forever two distinct kingdoms. Rather, the kingdom of God is present now but hidden, and the social order and the civic powers are not at present the site of the anticipation of the kingdom.³⁶

³⁵ VanDrunen, ‘The Two Kingdoms’, 263. Cf. Hart, ‘Two Kingdoms Come’, 39, ‘religion and politics operate in two different spheres of human existence, the former eternal, the latter temporal, and so have two different norms, with Scripture governing the spiritual (at least for Protestants) and general revelation guiding the political’; and see D. VanDrunen, ‘Natural Law and Christians in the Public Square’, *Modern Reformation* 15, no. 2 (March/April 2006), 12–15.

³⁶ It may be that Two-Kingdoms thought at times also trades on a metaphysical dualism which assumes a basic antithesis between the heavenly and spiritual and the earthly and material. However, that dualism is not a necessary basis for the Two-Kingdoms view. See Jason Lief, ‘Is Neo-Calvinism Calvinist? A Neo-

The emphasis on ‘not-yet’ runs through the whole New Testament. Jesus’ four parables in Matthew 13 teach that his ministry is not yet complete but awaits the fullness of the kingdom, and that in the meantime appearances are at odds with the hope of the kingdom. In the parable of the four soils, the word sowed seems to fail, only one soil produces a harvest. In light of the other parables in the series, it is clear that the harvest is an eschatological one that will not be taken in before Jesus’ death. The wheat and the tares similarly tells disciples to bear with the current lack of clarity about the kingdom and wait for the final harvest. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast also speak of a now hidden kingdom.³⁷

In Paul’s writings, Christians now share in resurrection and glory (Eph 1:20–22; 2 Cor 3:7–18), yet this is hidden (Col 3:3). What we have now is ‘first fruits’ (Rom 8:23), a ‘pledge’ (Eph 1:14; 2 Cor 5:5) and a ‘seal’ (2 Cor 1:22) of an inheritance that we do not yet possess (Rom 8:24–25; Eph 1:11, 14). Creation remains in bondage to decay (Rom 8:19) and with it we long and groan (Rom 8:23). Hebrews 12:22–29 has the same now-not yet tension when it says that we ‘have’ come to heavenly Jerusalem and yet we await the shaking and removal of created things.

The eschatological teaching of the New Testament is that the kingdom is not yet brought about in the general culture, and so talk of ‘transforming’ the culture risks being overblown and triumphalist. Society changes, yet it remains the realm of ‘the world’ that stands in opposition to God. The antithesis will never be resolved before the return of Christ. There is a temporal dualism in Christian experience of redemption.

Kuyperian approaches, while not necessarily denying the eschatological tension, seem to under emphasise it. The rejection of any dualism coupled with discussions of Christian ‘transformation’ of

Calvinist Engagement of Calvin’s ‘Two Kingdoms’ Doctrine’, *Pro Rege* 37, no. 3 (March 2009), 2–7, who shows that although Calvin makes use of Platonic distinctions, his two kingdoms account rests in his eschatology.

³⁷ Even John’s gospel, which has a far stronger emphasis on the ‘already’, still preserves a sense of the future realization (John 5:28–29; 21:22).

society can obscure the temporal dualism of the New Testament. It is not that the Neo-Calvinism offers no recognition of the eschatological tension.

Bartholomew and Goheen, for instance, write of the church's mission as the meaning of the 'already-not yet' era of the kingdom. They quote David Bosch, who says that the church is 'called to erect signs to God's ultimate reign—not more, but certainly not less'.³⁸ Yet even Bartholomew and Goheen reject 'dualism', without any note that eschatological timing does produce a kind of dualism.³⁹

Christian social ethics require a carefully articulated eschatology that avoids over-realisation. Jesus' words, 'the poor you will always have with you' (Matt 26:11), is misused to deny that the church has any concern with poverty. His statement does, however, represent an eschatological realism. Poverty will not be 'made history' before Jesus' return.

The most important implication of now-not yet eschatology is that the church is a pilgrim community. In Christendom, the church often lost a lively sense of pilgrimage and imagined that it could be fully at home in this age. However, Christendom is theologically abnormal and prone to distort our self-understanding. We should not expect that the church has any guarantee of a voice in the public square, or that its voice will command attention. That does not mean that we do not raise our voice but we must not tie our identity, or our confidence in God, to our place in the public square.

³⁸ M. W. Goheen and C. G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 59–60.

³⁹ Richard J. Mouw, 'Calvin's Legacy for Public Theology', *Political Theology* 10, no. 3 (2009), 444–445, comments, 'A public theology grounded in the Christian tradition will want to proceed with the awareness that a true and lasting public life will arrive only with the eschaton. But for those who embrace a partially realised eschatology it is not unrealistic to expect signs of renewal in the present—first fruits of the end-time that can embolden us to join others in the larger human quest for a flourishing public life.' See also N. Wolterstorff, 'In Reply', *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* (Feb. 2008), 18; Lief, 'Is Neo-Calvinism Calvinist?', 7–8.

Recent debates in Australia about the role of churches in state schools are a case in point.⁴⁰ It is no surprise that there is pressure to remove the right of churches to have any presence in public schools and there is no in-principle argument which defends that right. The only valid arguments are historical, legal and political—there is a legislated right which has a long historical precedent and has been part of our cultural history, and there are enough Christian voters who care sufficiently about the issue for there to be a political pressure to retain to role of churches in schools. If such rights are removed, the mission of the church will not stop. Living as a minority without a voice is often part of the mission of the church.

We do not help the church by continuing talk of Australia as a ‘Christian’ nation as a current description.⁴¹ Such terminology can be given a range of meanings and uses, but none of them has any great value. This is a point at which it seems better to take a Two-Kingdoms view than a Neo-Calvinist one. Kuyper was enthusiastic about the place of America in God’s providence.⁴² John Bolt offers as a first proposition for an American public theology:

The future success of an American evangelical political philosophy depends on whether it is willing to affirm the providentially blessed

⁴⁰ For a survey issues of religion and politics in Australia, see G. Melleuish, ‘Religion and Politics in Australia’, *Political Theology* 11, no. 6 (2010), 909–927. G. Bouma, D. Cahill, H. Dellal and A. Zwartz, *Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia* (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011), explore a range of issues and views about religion and government in contemporary Australian society.

⁴¹ On the perception of Australia as a ‘Christian nation’, see T. Frame, *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW, 2009), 60–89; S. Sunderland, ‘Post-secular Nation; or How ‘Australian Spirituality’ Privileges a Secular, White, Judaeo-Christian Culture’, *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 2, no. 1 (November 2007), 59–62, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>; and the discussion of various points of view in Bouma, *Freedom*, 22–29.

⁴² Kuyper, *Lectures*, 24, exclaims, ‘The fundamental idea of Calvin has been transplanted from Holland and England to America, thus driving our higher development ever more Westward, until on the shores of the Pacific it now reverently awaits whatsoever God has ordained.’

reality of the American experiment in ordered liberty while successfully navigating the treacherous land mines of civil religion.⁴³

A recognition of the now-not yet nature of the kingdom will temper claims that any nation has a providential standing as a ‘Christian’ nation. Such claims impede effective engagement in the public square. It is better to recognise the ‘secular’ status of social life.

Sharing substantial convictions of faith and practice does not inevitably entail a particular Christian political order; conversely, sharing substantial political agreements does not engender a Christian communion.⁴⁴

Eschatological scope: the relativisation of dualism

The Kuyperian emphasis on God’s redemption of all of creation is equally important. The Bible points us to the great hope of the restoration of creation (Rom 8:21). As Adam was the image of God, ruling creation for God, so his fall effected all creation; and the restoration of the image in Christ is the restoration of blessing to creation.⁴⁵ Two-kingdoms approaches do not deny the full scope of redemption in the new creation, but typically they do not emphasise it or draw out the implications.

The idea that the sacred and the secular can be clearly demarcated from each other as two distinct realms denies the biblical eschatological vision. The point is seen in thinking about medical ethics. Death now

⁴³ J. Bolt, ‘Abraham Kuyper and the Search of an Evangelical Public Theology’, *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action*, eds J. Budziszewski and David L. Weeks (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 147.

⁴⁴ M. S. Horton, ‘In Praise of the Profane’, *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, eds Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzer (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 264.

⁴⁵ See H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:698–730; D. J. Moo, ‘Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology And The Environment’, *JETS* 49, no. 3 (September 2006), 449–488; C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 407–412; K. Innes, ‘Towards an Ecological Eschatology: Continuity and Discontinuity’, *EQ* 81, no. 2 (2009), 126–144.

reigns and humans are destined for sickness, pain and death and we bury the Christian dead in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

How do we treat human bodies in the face of inevitable death and resurrection hope? We could take a view of resignation: people get sick and die and there is not much to be done about it. However, if God considers bodies worth making and remaking, then Christians value them. Without imagining we stop death and pain, we care for the sick and dying.

The same view should inform our view of the social order and the culture. God considers it worthy of remaking—so it is worth our investment. As there is no area of life that is beyond the scope of God’s redemption, there is no realm in which there is not a proper *Christian* concern. Carl Henry reflects this when he states:

to truncate the Christian mission simply to the changing of social structures profoundly misunderstands the biblical view of human nature and divine redemption. Yet we also truncate the gospel if we limit or circumvent the expectation that divine deliverance will extend ‘far as the curse is found’.⁴⁶

If now-not yet eschatology warns us not to profound social transformation, new creation eschatology calls us to engage the culture, to witness, to challenge, to serve and to bless. When we engage the culture, we may indeed see things change, so we bless those around us. Such change will not be wholesale change, but it can be real blessing.

In an application of Two-Kingdom theology, the Presbyterian Church in the southern United States in the nineteenth century insisted that, as a ‘spiritual’ institution, it had nothing to say about the ‘social question’ of slavery.⁴⁷ If God’s intention for people is life in renewed

⁴⁶ C. H. Henry, ‘American Evangelicals in a Turning Time’, *Theologians in Transition*, ed. J. M. Wall (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 48–49.

⁴⁷ J. L. Alvis, *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946–1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1994), 46–48. D. VanDrunen, *Natural Law*, 212–275, gives a detailed study of the development of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and argues that it was not merely a convenient device for keeping the church silent on the question of slavery. He shows the doctrine as developed in the American church had genuine theological grounding. The genuine theological roots of the doctrine in the Reformed Tradition does not,

community, then the treatment of people in our society cannot be irrelevant to our Christian concern. In our society, the abortion of unborn children, the sex-slave trade, the state of Australian indigenous people and the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers are all rightly in the our purview.⁴⁸ Biblical eschatology will not allow us to limit our concern to the so-called ‘spiritual’ over against the physical and social.

Two-kingdom advocates often argue that social issues are not part of Christian *mission* or not part of the *church’s* mission. That is, either they are not part of God’s mission though they may be proper matters of concern, or they are not the business of the church but may be the calling of individual Christians addressed by other Christian organisations. These responses seem to trade on the dualism which Neo-Calvinism rightly rejects. Since God’s redemption will be ‘comprehensive’, then the concern of Christian mission is comprehensive.⁴⁹ The eschatological perspective I am commending has much in common with that advocated by de Young and Gilbert.⁵⁰ However I differ from them on this point—new creation eschatology implies a comprehensiveness in the church’s concern that their exposition does not reflect. Further, if concern for all dimensions of life is a Christian concern grounded in God’s work, then it must also be a church concern, since Christian identity is ecclesial. This does not deny that the mission of the church finds its centre and drive from the preaching of the gospel, nor does it mean that churches claims to have authority, or even expertise, in the complexities of the various areas of contemporary society.

The church has to take seriously the innumerable biblical injunctions to care for the poor and the weak. New creation eschatology demands

however, justify the use of the doctrine to silence the church on the question of slavery.

⁴⁸ Not that Neo-Calvinism is free from its dark secrets. Mouw, ‘Calvin’s Legacy’, 442, notes, ‘The architects and enforcers of the deep injustices of South African apartheid not only professed a Calvinist theology, they often made their case for the segregationist civil order by appealing directly to tenets associated with Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism’.

⁴⁹ Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 54ff.

⁵⁰ K. DeYoung and G. Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

that. It also underwrites the continued significance of the cultural mandate. While we are not going to bring the kingdom through our cultural efforts, just as we will not bring resurrection by medical care, there is real value in teaching classes, building bridges, keeping accounts, weeding gardens, making art and fixing motors.

The relativisation of dualism has implications for Christian speech in the public square. The public square has a certain 'secularity', in that it is a shared space in which citizens with widely differing convictions participate. However, because the public square is part of God's world that he will redeem through Christ, then Christians speak a distinctively Christian message. The Two-Kingdom view that Christians can operate from a natural law stripped of Christian distinctives is not sustainable. The Neo-Calvinists are right when they insist that Christians will need to speak a distinctively Christian word. The theological basis for a distinctive Christian discourse lies in the unity of creation and God's work of redemption. The created order, which is the foundation of natural law, is mediated by the Son who will unite all reality (John 1:1–4; Eph 1:10). Creation finds its proper end in the rule of Christ, and so can only be properly understood in and through him.⁵¹ This means that the gospel of Christ, the declaration that he is Saviour and Lord, is required for a true and full understanding of the world. Thus, it must inform Christian speech in the public square. Christian engagement in the public square is required to be distinctively Christian and cannot be framed in a purely secular mode of argument.⁵²

Actual engagement of Christians in the public square constantly illustrates the truth that we must speak a distinctive Christian message. Attempts to argue against same-sex marriage from a generalised natural law shows the problem. An appeal to an instinctive preference for heterosexuality trades on cultural impulses or prejudices that for most people are ungrounded. In a public debate, such views soon require defence, and such a defence requires a distinctive Christian view. Even a

⁵¹ See O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Leicester: Apollos, 1994).

⁵² See Strange, 'Not Ashamed!', 249–260, for a far more detailed presentation of the case against the normativity of natural law in public discourse.

sophisticated natural law approach may be turned in favour of same-sex marriage.⁵³

Alternatively, Christians might argue from consequences, that homosexual partnerships are, on average, less stable or not relationships in which children can flourish. Still, the consequentialist argument is very difficult to sustain.⁵⁴ Further, consequentialism is not a proper basis of Christian ethics. In order to have a genuine witness in the public square, Christians have to speak about marriage in a way that is evidently grounded in the gospel. There may be a place for supplementary *ad hoc* arguments within such a presentation, but the evangelical basis should be clear.

Church as the eschatological community: a social agenda

The Two-Kingdoms approach asserts that the church has no social agenda. Proponents point to the absence of any explicit agenda in the New Testament. However, things are not quite as straightforward as that. Neo-Calvinism tends to give a priority to the church scattered over the church gathered and its accompanying institutions. Neither of these properly captures the place of the church in God's mission. A biblical eschatology suggests that a biblical social ethic is bound in with the life of the church.⁵⁵

Wright argues, persuasively, that Israel's social arrangement is meant to be 'paradigmatic' for the church and then for the world.

The social relevance of Israel is to be seen as 'paradigmatic' ... we do not think in terms of literal imitation of Israel ... on the other hand, the social system of Israel cannot be dismissed as relevant only within the confines

⁵³ J. Porter, 'The Natural Law and Innovative Forms of Marriage: A Reconsideration', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2010), 79–97.

⁵⁴ T. J. Biblarz and J. Stacey, 'How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (February 2010), 3–22.

⁵⁵ In contrast, Reynolds, 'What Is the Church For?', 38, claims that only the New Testament can inform our view of the role of the church in the world, 'because Israel was a geo-political entity unique in the history of redemption. It was a nation ruled by Yahweh...it had a typological purpose picturing the eschatological glory to be ushered in by Judgment Day.'

of historical Israel... If Israel was meant to be a light to the nations, then that light must be allowed to illuminate.⁵⁶

According to Wright, Israel was meant to reflect a pattern established in creation. The Promised Land is the new Eden and Israel is the new Adam. Israel, in turn, finds its fulfilment in the church and finally in the consummation of the new creation. Wright argues that these relationships provide a framework which ensures that we treat Old Testament social laws in their widest context and think about how they relate to creation, new creation and the church. Because the fulfilment of all these patterns is eschatological, their application now will be partial and limited, so Wright thinks of a 'paradigm', not a literal immediate application.

Wright's approach is substantiated in the book of Acts, which shows the church as the community for which the social laws of the OT are paradigmatic. The laws are not enacted, or re-enacted, in detail. Rather, the church is presented as being the type of community that the social legislation of the OT aimed to make Israel. Hays summarises this emphasis of Acts as follows:

The purpose of God's outpouring of the Spirit is to establish a covenant community in which justice is both proclaimed and practised... The book of Acts gives no evidence of the apostles seeking to reform political structures outside the church, either through protest or by seizing power. Instead, Luke tells the story of the formation of a new human community—the church—in which goods are shared and wrongs are put right.⁵⁷

Joel Green considers that Luke's presentation of Jesus' teaching is meant to create a community that lives as Israel should have done. He argues that the call to give without expecting return (Luke 11:39–41; 18:18–23; 20:46–47) implies a demand to 'treat one another as kin',

⁵⁶ C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 43–44.

⁵⁷ R. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 133–135.

which ‘strikes at the root of one of the most prevalent models of friendship in the ancient world, the patron-client relationship’.⁵⁸

Likewise, Jesus seeks to establish an egalitarian community (hence ‘Jesus’ radical openness in table fellowship’) that is not marked by status-seeking (Luke 9:46–48; 14:21, 23; 20:45–47; 22:24–27). Acts makes it abundantly clear that salvation involves joining a people (Luke 1:17, 68–69; 19:37; Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35) that is to be a community of brotherly and sisterly care and equity. The church upsets social convention (Acts 4:24–30; 5:29; 19:23–41): ‘it turns the world upside down not through armed revolution but through the formation of the church as a counterculture, an alternative witness-bearing community’.⁵⁹

The social vision of the Old Testament laws does not come to an end with the coming of Christ. Israel is paradigmatic as well as typological. An eschatological ecclesiology provides a bridge between Neo-Calvinist and Two-Kingdoms approaches. It affirms that the church lives in the now-not yet tension, and that as the community living in the hope for the new creation it engages in all of life in that light. This view of church is the key guide to our participation in the culture and the public square.

An Eschatological Community: Our Witness

Wright’s point is that the church is not so much called to change its society as it is called to stand as a witness to the coming kingdom and a paradigm of what the world will one day be. His view has a proper eschatological realism. It does not claim too much for the ‘now’ of the kingdom, yet it does expect real change ‘now’. He looks for that change not in the whole of society, but in the church.⁶⁰ The church is to be a genuine counter-culture, seeking to engage, witness to, challenge and bless the culture.⁶¹

⁵⁸ J. Green *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 114.

⁵⁹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 128.

⁶⁰ Cf. S. Hauwerwas, ‘Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses’, *The Hauwerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 111–115.

⁶¹ For a similar perspective, though developed from a close analysis of the concept of culture, see R. McIlhenny, ‘Third-Way Reformed Approach to

Neo-Calvinism, when it views the organic church as the ‘real’ church, risks under-emphasising the church as God’s gathered and worshipping community. In that account, the institutions of the church, including worship, serve the mission of the church in the world. This misunderstands the biblical dynamic. God gathers his people in anticipation of the eschaton. The church gathered is not primarily to serve mission, but as anticipation of the eschaton. Corporate life certainly empowers daily Christian living, yet when we orient our thinking about church along more eschatological lines, we cannot think of the gathered church as merely instrumental.

The gathering of God’s people by the gospel and their life together as a worshipping community is the essence of the church. It is in the church gathered as community in which we most fully bear witness to the kingdom. To take one example from Acts, the appointment of the seven in Acts 6, an obviously institutional action, was intended to meet the need of fair distribution of food among the widows, while the apostles maintained their focus on the word of God. In God’s new community, the Grecian widows must be cared for.

Two-kingdoms approaches give a very full emphasis to the worshipping church. The spiritual kingdom of Christ is found in the people of God hearing his word, praising him, relying on him in prayer and receiving the seals of his grace in the sacraments. This approach underestimates the significance of the community life which must exist because of worship. We anticipate the kingdom in our worship and in our wider life as a church. As we live with each other, serve one another, and care for the poor and weak among us, we bear a powerful witness to the kingdom. The church is an exemplar of the new creation community that God will bring into being. As such, it should engage the culture—in a dynamic which both challenges that culture and blesses it.

The place of the church is then the key to thinking about how we live in the culture. The question for every cultural and social issue is not, ‘How do we change the world?’, or, ‘What issues can we win on?’, but, ‘How do we do this in the church?’ For instance, the Christian concern

with marriage is not just about same-sex marriage, but a whole ethic of marriage and sexuality. Christians are counter-cultural in our view of sex and marriage, and we should celebrate that. We need to live our difference boldly: helping to support and grow good strong marriages, caring for the people hurt by confusion about sex and marriage. We have to help singles live a life of content chastity in a world desperate for romance and sex. Our counter-cultural speech and action as a church is not incidental to witness in the public square—it is the basis of our witness and our engagement with culture. The same point could be made about issues such as life and death, wealth and poverty, creation care, or immigration.

This understanding of the church and its role is neither Two-Kingdoms nor Neo-Calvinist. It shares element of both approaches and is critical of elements of both approaches. It is based on an understanding of the church that is sensitive to New Testament eschatology. It suggests that the church should view itself as God's new community living on pilgrimage and bearing witness to the hope that the Creator will 'bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ' (Eph 1:10).

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