CHRISTIANITY, CULTURE, & COMMON GRACE

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I. Reason & Revelation

This study on Christianity, culture, and common grace, will be largely an exercise in definition. Our goal is to offer some theoretical and practical assistance to Christians who are attempting to be obedient creatures and disciples of Jesus Christ in what is commonly called a post-Christian society. Our method will be to define what each of these terms means, especially in relation to the others.

Of the three terms, "common grace" is probably the least familiar. It is a narrow and technical term, whereas "Christianity" and "culture" are familiar and everyday words. You might think, therefore, that I will spend the bulk of this study discussing the *doctrine* of common grace.

But I am convinced that if what Christianity was and what culture was were properly understood, a discussion about the doctrine of common grace would be almost unnecessary. One of the reasons the doctrine of common grace has become a "lost teaching," an unfamiliar idea, is that modern Christians, especially evangelical Christians, have made some crucial mistakes in their thinking about Christianity and culture.

Let me give an example. In September of 1982, I was working as arts and humanities editor for National Public Radio. On September 14th, the level of chaos in our newsroom was above average when three prominent figures died within the course of a few hours. The first, President-elect Bashir Gemayel of Lebanon, was killed in a bomb blast. Shortly after that news was made public, we heard that Princess Grace of Monaco, known to movie fans as Grace Kelly, died from injuries suffered in a car crash in France. Then, later that afternoon, we learned that novelist John Gardner, author of *October Light* and *On Moral Fiction,* had been killed in a motorcycle crash in Pennsylvania.

This happened on a Tuesday evening. I remember that because, as an elder in my church, I had a Session meeting that night. Because two of the three deaths were on my "beat," I had to prepare sound-studded obituaries for *Morning Edition,* NPR's morning news program, and there was no way I was going to get out of the studio in time to get to a 7:30 meeting. I had to track down people who knew Grace Kelly, get them to a studio and on tape, edit the interview, and write copy.

I called the pastor of the church to apologize, explaining to him what had happened, and that I wouldn't be at the meeting. He responded with great graciousness, and eased my concern by saying, "That's alright, Ken. You're doing the work of the kingdom where you are. You're needed there."

This was a great comfort. I hung up the phone, gratified that I had a pastor who was so understanding about my erratic schedule.

But his remark haunted me. Was I really doing the work of the Kingdom of God? If someone else had produced the eulogy of Grace Kelly, would the Kingdom of God really have suffered a noticeable setback? I knew that God's kingdom was best understood as God's rule. How was the rule of God more evident or more certain because I was editing an interview with some offbeat film critic? One of my nonbelieving colleagues did the tribute to John Gardner. Was God's sovereignty diminished or hampered because I didn't do it?

Not all of these things were rushing through my head that night. But in subsequent weeks, whenever I heard reference to the Kingdom of God, I found myself paying close attention to the context and the claims. And I soon realized that many Christians were using the phrase rather carelessly. Anything worth doing was given the status of being "kingdom work."

Another experience a couple of years later produced similar misgivings. I was then editor of *Eternity* magazine, and we had published, in the November 1984 issue, a rather provocative piece about "Hill Street Blues." This was at the height of the show's popularity, and the piece we published, by novelist Harold Fickett, compared the Hill Street precinct to the Camelot of King Arthur. Specifically, Fickett looked at whether Hill Street's depiction of sex and violence was really "realistic," as so many critics and fans had praised it. In Fickett's comparison, Captain Furilo and Ms. Davenport corresponded with Arthur and Guinevere, and the precinct cops to the knights of the round table. It was a brilliant analysis examining the different notions of virtue, honor, and goodness that the two myths embodied.

Shortly after the piece was published, we received a letter from a professor of communications at a Christian college who was very upset that we had been critical of "Hill Street Blues," because it was, in his words, a "redemptive program."

In what sense could "Hill Street Blues" be considered redemptive? This professor seemed to believe that because "Hill Street" was (at least in his estimation) so successful in depicting humanity in a very perilous, dramatic setting, it was therefore redemptive.

Such language is not unusual. It is admittedly more common among theological liberals than evangelicals, but it is increasingly common among those who would by most standards be considered theologically conservative.

In a sense, this study is my response to those two remarks, because they are typical of a very dangerous tendency among modern Christians: I refer to it, with apologies to Francis Schaeffer, as allowing grace to swallow up nature. Dr. Schaeffer was very worried about the tendency of allowing nature to swallow up grace, of reducing theology to anthropology, of humanistically redefining Christian theology in such a way as to rule out the reality of a transcendent God.

Partly in reaction to that humanistic tendency, and partly because of certain gaps in Dr. Schaeffer's own work, we witness today an inflation in theological language that, instead of lowering the divine to the human, elevates the human to the divine, or, more accurately, mistakes creation for redemption.

Dr. Schaeffer was very clear that creation must be the beginning of all Christian theology. He used to insist that every believer bows twice before God: acknowledging him first as Creator, and then as Redeemer. Dr. Schaeffer's lifelong interest in the arts and humanities was a testimony to his conviction that the merely human, the merely created and unredeemed, had significance. He

was especially concerned about recognizing the dignity that the image of God conferred upon man, even in man's rebellion.

Yet many of those who consider themselves disciples of Dr. Schaeffer have lost sight of the significance of the merely human.

Permit me, still by way of introduction, to offer my own analysis of how and why we have gotten to where we are, and why it has become necessary to pause to reconsider the relationship between Christianity and culture, and why the lost doctrine of common grace is so crucial to our enterprise.

With the entrenchment of theological liberalism in the major American denominations in the teens and twenties, there arose that much-misunderstood and usually misdiagnosed movement called fundamentalism. As historian George Marsden has pointed out, caricatures of fundamentalism picture it as a Southern, rural, anti-intellectual movement: the redneck party at prayer. In fact, early fundamentalism was largely the product of Northern, urban intellectuals. For it was in the North, particularly in Northern seminaries and denominational headquarters, that so-called "modernism" was gaining ground. Southern religion in the early part of the century, like much of Southern culture in general, was still too much bound by the ties of tradition to become captive to theological novelties imported from Germany.[1]

In time, however, modernism was seen not just as a threat to orthodoxy, but as a potent enemy of tradition. Fundamentalism became a vehicle for resisting cultural and political trends that had less to do with theories of the atonement and the virgin birth than with questions of what we now call life-style. (Compare the number of times you've heard a fundamentalist evangelist on television defend the substitutionary atonement with the number of times they've talked about the family or abortion or Communism.) It was not so much the triumph of theological *modernism* as the advent of *modernity,* and all of its culturally dislocating forces, that shaped the evolution of the broadening movement called fundamentalism.

Conservative American Protestantism was not ready to confront the modern world, modern culture, in the teens and twenties of this century. Throughout the nineteenth century, American Christians behaved as if the blows to Christianity dealt by the enlightenment and the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century had never happened. When they awoke in the twentieth century, it was already too late. The pitched battle against Darwin and the theory of evolution, with its climax in the Scopes trial, was but a public display of the anachronism that Christianity had become to the modern mind.

Rather than attempting to *understand* what was happening in modern culture, conservative Christians retreated to a cultural ghetto. Certain that they possessed *eternal* truths, they took smug comfort in their ignorance of the ephemeral world beyond their church doors. Apathy about culture became a virtue. To the extent that cultural phenomena were discussed at all, they were used as object lessons about man's depravity and need for salvation.

The effort in the 1940s and 1950s to rehabilitate conservative American Protestantism, with the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals and other "evangelical" institutions, was the beginning of the end of this period of cultural isolation. "Evangelical" became the label of choice for people who shared much of the theology of fundamentalism but not its bellicosity and fractiousness. The early self-conscious efforts at a postwar evangelical movement

were led by people who wanted to recover a greater level of interaction with the culture at large. To this day, many evangelical institutions are led by people who often see their task as making their constituency less negative about the world around them. In part, this comes from a belief that a more winsome attitude will assist in evangelism, the great uniting task of evangelicalism.

In the 1960s and 70s, the pace and extent of the evangelical effort to get out of the evangelical ghetto picked up dramatically. The list of cultural taboos that once included smoking, drinking, dancing, card-playing, movie-going, and other common forms of entertainments became shorter and shorter.

This was a time when evangelicals developed a lust for respectability. Every positive mention of Billy Graham in the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine was seen as a victory for the gospel. Every Christian fullback willing to share his testimony, every Christian Miss America quoting the Bible, every Ph.D. earned at Harvard or Yale by a graduate of Wheaton or Houghton, was seen as a great step forward out of the ghetto into the real world.

But it took a lot of convincing to persuade people who had made their seclusion a mark of faith to cast a concerned and critical eye over what was going on at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or in Watts or Southeast Asia. If evangelism was the beginning and the end of evangelicalism, if the gospel was principally about saving souls, why worry about Abstract Impressionism or American Imperialism or any other secular "-ism"?

As it happened, the easiest way to make people already committed to saving souls really care about something like urban renewal or American foreign policy or even the quality of prime-time television programming was to use the language of redemption. So “Hill Street Blues” becomes a redemptive program. So American foreign policy becomes not an effort to protect national interests, but an exercise in extending “God’s shalom kingdom.”

As we noted, today it is common to hear Christians referring to any thing worth doing as being “kingdom work.” Sometimes this may be done out of a sense of guilt, that is, they feel they really ought to be spending more time studying the Scriptures or praying, but after all, their PTA meeting or their letter to the editor about the Route 288 extension or their volunteering at the public library is *kingdom* work.

I would like to present a case that the activity of Christians in the culture is not usually kingdom work in the sense it is assumed to be, nor is it redemptive in any useful sense of the word. But it is nonetheless imperative for us to be active in the culture, not because we are saved, but because we are created. Pursuing an understanding of and engagement with our culture is necessary for Christians because we must first bow to God as Creator, to thank him for the goodness that remains in his fallen creation, to live creatively, that is, in keeping with the patterns and norms he has established for creation, even as we eagerly await the advent of a new creation.

Meanwhile, life in this created sphere has meaning and value. God bestows blessings even on the unrighteous. He gives wonderful talents and abilities to those who hate the mention of his name. These blessings are what we mean by common grace: the gratuitous gifts to the just and the unjust that sustain and enrich the life shared by the wheat and the tares.

A Definition of Culture

I have just about set the stage now. I hope I have raised enough questions or caused enough uneasiness to sustain your interest. But we need to get a working definition of culture that will be at least enough to get us started.

In his 1871 *Primitive Culture*, English anthropologist E. B. Taylor wrote this definition of culture: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

In other words, culture might be defined as the social context or contexts of human experience. While culture is something of an abstraction, any evaluation of culture must always take the concrete human experience into consideration. Christians are often tempted to lose sight of the real historical setting of cultural phenomena.

I do not believe that Christian reflection on culture should or even can lead, by means of theological deduction, to a design for the perfect Christian culture. Instead, we will focus on the more imminent question of what to do about the sometimes very un-Christian culture in which we in fact live, in which God in his sovereign wisdom has seen fit to call us to live. Each of us arises every morning with, in the providence of God, a number of duties, dilemmas, opportunities, and confusion that stem from living in this culture at this time.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "Christianity does not simply replace our natural life and substitute a new one: it is rather a new organization which exploits, to its own supernatural ends, these natural materials." Substitute the word culture for natural life and it fits our purposes. Of course, Lewis recognized that some cultural activities were in direct violation of Christian principles. In the very next sentence, he noted that "No doubt, in a given situation, [Christianity] demands the surrender of some, or of all, our merely human pursuits: it is better to be saved with one eye, than, having two, to be cast into Gehenna."[2]

Lewis's warning having been stated, we have a lot of theological ground to clear before we can get to the point of drawing specific conclusions about specific cultural issues. This is in part because, as I have suggested, we understand neither Christianity nor the idea of culture very well. In fact, some of us, although virtual life-long Christians, may have a much better understanding of our culture than we do of Christianity insofar as it relates to our culture. Most of us have heard somewhere that we are to be in the world but not of the world. But precisely what that means is often difficult to decipher even in theory, let alone in practice.

Cultural Apathy

There are two extremes toward which Christians characteristically gravitate in their attempts to be in the world but not of the world.

The first is apathy, and we've already seen one historical case of collective apathy in the history of American fundamentalism. In a sermon given in 1939 at Oxford, C. S. Lewis raised the question: What are all of us doing here studying philosophy or medieval literature, while Europe is at war. "Why should we—indeed how can we—continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives and liberties of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?"[3]

Lewis went on to argue that that is precisely the question the Christian faces even during peacetime. "To a Christian," he observed, "the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell."[4]

Lewis then posed the question of the worth of Christians taking an interest in culture, particularly the academic study of culture. "Every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology."[5]

Lewis's reply was that the ideal of suspending all cultural activity for the sake of evangelism or the pursuit of holiness was impossible. "If you attempted," he argued, "to suspend your whole intellectual and aesthetic activity, you would only succeed in substituting a worse cultural life for a better." This is precisely what many religious people do, which is one of the reasons we have such bad music and ugly architecture in Christian settings. Lewis went on: "You are not, in fact, going to read nothing, either in the Church or on the [front] line: if you don't read good books you will read bad ones. If you don't go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally. If you reject aesthetic satisfactions you will fall into sensual satisfactions."[6]

Note that Lewis never, to the best of my knowledge, argued that good architecture or music or literature was redemptive: simply that it was better than bad architecture or bad music or bad literature.

Let me recall a passage from T. S. Eliot. Eliot once noted that "if we take culture seriously, we see that a people does not merely need enough to eat (though even that is more than we seem able to ensure) but a proper and particular *cuisine*: one symptom of the decline of culture in Britain is indifference to the art of preparing food."[7] As Lewis might add, if you don't see to it that you eat good food, you will eat bad food.

We cannot afford to be indifferent about culture any more than we can afford to be indifferent about the toxicity of the water we drink or the air we breathe. Even if we believe that the Church is a kind of eschatological parenthesis in the history of redemption, we are still faced with real choices about how we live on the level of our humanity.

Triumphalism & Theonomy

If some Christians are given to cultural apathy, others are tempted by triumphalism. Many Christians believe that the only way we can live lives under submission to God, the only way we can follow Paul's command to "take every thought captive for Christ" (II Cor. 10:5), is to have Christians take over society lock, stock, and barrel. It is asserted by these people that no cultural activity is neutral: either it acknowledges Christ as Lord or it is anti-Christ. Particularly, it is argued that civil laws of a state, if not based *explicitly* on Scripture, are pagan and an offense to God. This position is increasingly common among American evangelicals. Some of Pat Robertson's speeches indicated a clear sympathy with this position.

We will not take the time to rebut this position fully, except to say that it is based on a intertwined series of misunderstandings about biblical teaching on the effects of the Fall, on the nature of the covenant, and on eschatology, among other things. But we ought to take this position very seriously, since many evangelicals hold a watered down version of it.

On one side of the political spectrum, there are the reconstructionists, who are well-represented in evangelical circles. They believe that the Old Testament law is expressive of God's will for all nations at all times. Most evangelicals would not agree with them. Yet many evangelicals have quoted II Chronicles 7:14 approvingly as a prooftext for the need for a return to morality in America, for cultural reform, if you will. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin and will heal their land." But in context, this verse is directed to Israel at the time of the consecration of the Temple. It explicitly talks about "my people," as the covenant people Israel, so it would be very odd to apply this text to the U.S. or any other nation, since only Old Testament Israel and the Church can claim the title "my people." Appropriating this promise for American society is no different in principle from appropriating the laws of the Pentateuch for American legislators and jurists.

On the other side of the political spectrum are those self-styled Christian radicals, who don't quote the Law very much, but their delight is in the Prophets of Jehovah. And on the prophets do they meditate day and night. They cite Amos or Joel or Isaiah, almost always out of context, applying divine threats and promises with no apparent recognition of the context in which such prophetic communication was given.

The text that bothers me most in these contexts, partly because many people who use it are only interested in holy Scripture to the extent that they can exploit it for political purposes, is Isaiah 2:4, the text about beating swords into plowshares. This text is often used as a divine sanction for pacifism and disarmament. There may be reasons to be pacifist or to promote disarmament, but Isaiah 2:4 is not one of them. Let's read it in context:

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:
In the last days
the mountains of the Lord's temple will be
established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
Many people will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations

and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks,
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

The rest of chapter 2 and all of chapter 3 is about "the day of the Lord," the eschatological day of judgment, which is the prelude to this glorious state of peace. There is a passage in Joel that is very much a parallel to the Isaiah text, a passage that talks about the coming day of the Lord. It is a section that includes the famous lines about sons and daughters prophesying, and old men dreaming dreams, and young men seeing visions. And in that passage, the prophet speaks about what must transpire before that pacifist dream can come true. Yes, Joel too speaks of peace, and the safety of the mountain of the Lord: "Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her" (Joel 3:17). But before that can take place, the nations must be judged.

In those days and at that time,
when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,
I will gather all nations
and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.
There I will enter into judgment against them
concerning my inheritance,
my people Israel . . .

And later . . .

Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare for war!
Rouse the warriors!
Let all the fighting men draw near and attack.
Beat your plowshares into swords
and your pruning hooks into spears.
Let the weakling say,
"I am strong!"

If it is legitimate for the American Friends Service Committee or Physicians for Social Responsibility to cite Isaiah 2 for its cause, then it is legitimate for Ollie North or the Defense Department to cite Joel 3 for its cause. Both applications of the text are equally bad.

Citing Isaiah 2 to advise American foreign policy is just as problematic as citing the book of Leviticus to guide American domestic policy, as the Reconstructionists do. Both sides eliminate the context of the Scriptures in an attempt to have a Christian perspective on a cultural matter.

We will return to this fallacy in Chapter II when we discuss our Redemptive-Historical horizon. For now, let us examine the relation of reason and revelation.

If we believe that our life in the common, created order, while not redemptive, is still lived before God, and according to God's law for creation, we are still faced with the question of how we are to know what is good in the context of creation.

General & Special Revelation

Theologians have historically distinguished between two kinds of revelation: general and special revelation. Let me read a summary description of this distinction from Bruce A. Demarest's *General Revelation*. "General revelation, mediated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God's existence and character. Through the modalities of general revelation, man at large knows both that there is a God and in broad outline what He is like. . . . [In addition] Christian orthodoxy has insisted that answers to life's profoundest questions—the secret nature of God and His will for man—are provided by a supernatural revelatory disclosure to a special people. Through the modalities of God's mighty acts in history, the teaching and deeds of Jesus Christ, and the writing of the Bible, the divine salvific plan is unveiled to a particular people."[8]

General revelation provides general knowledge to people in general. In general revelation, God can be known as creator. Special revelation provides special knowledge about salvation. In special revelation alone, God can be known as redeemer.

Theologians have argued from Scripture, especially Romans 1 and 2, that man has an intuitive knowledge of God, based on his being created in God's image, as well as inferential knowledge, knowledge that is the product of reflection on experience. Based on this definition, we can say that all knowledge about anything is based on revelation. That is, all knowledge comes from God because it comes from his creation.

Paul says that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). A number of theologians, including Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, have argued that God's eternity, power, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, truth, justice, and judgment are displayed in the universe. But not his grace. For that, we must rely on his special revelation in redemptive history, in Christ, and in the apostles and prophets. In other words, general revelation has to do principally with creation, and special revelation deals uniquely with redemption, although it obviously deals with creation as well.

Some people believe that there is a battle between reason and revelation. But to pit reason and revelation against one another is to misunderstand what they are.

In an essay on Jonathan Edwards, John Gerstner wrote the following: "Revelation is a means of communication (and secondarily that which is communicated); reason is the means of apprehension of that which is communicated. Really the only means by which anything is communicated is revelation (unfolding or disclosing). The only way anything revealed is apprehended, grasped, or understood is by reason. There is no other way of communication but by revelation. There is no other way of apprehension but by

reason. Without revelation there would be no knowledge; without reason there would be no apprehension of knowledge."[9]

Gerstner's point is that there is no antithesis, no conflict between reason and revelation. Reasoning is what we do with revelation. We may do it badly, but then it is *unreasonable* reasoning, and it may be so unreasonable as to be nonsense. But there is at least an attempt at reasoning.

Some people say that we should apprehend Scripture with our hearts, not our heads. This may sound very pious and wise, but I believe it is finally nonsense. What I hope they mean to say is that we should never let our appreciation of special revelation stop in our heads. Jonathan Edwards taught that nothing can ever enter the heart which is not first in the head. "Speculative knowledge is . . . of infinite importance . . . [for] without it we can have no spiritual or practical knowledge."[10] This is in his sermon on *The Divine and Supernatural Light,* which is his famous exposition of the doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, about which Gerstner notes, "If there is a sermon that could be expected to denigrate natural reason, it would be this one." But Edwards disappoints on that score. "If there is nothing in the mind," Gerstner summarizes Edwards, "how can it be illuminated by the divine light?" The Church's commitment to evangelism is a tacit testimony to this notion. Unless people hear the truth of the gospel and receive its outward call, how can they have the conviction of sin and repentance? As Edwards put it, "It is not according to the nature of the human soul to love an object which is entirely unknown. . . . Such is the nature of man, that nothing can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding. And there can be no spiritual knowledge of that of which there is not first a rational knowledge."[11]

Insufficiency of Reason

There is no such thing as "reason alone." Reason alone is like hearing alone. If you had the capacity to hear but there were no sounds, you would perceive and hence understand *nothing.* If we all lived in sensory deprivation chambers, we would still have some inner senses, some intuitions, which are the product of created human nature, and hence, general revelation. It would be very boring, but there would not be "reason alone."

When most people talk about the inability of "reason alone" to deduce, for example, anything about salvation, what they mean is reason acting only on general revelation. And general revelation is, as we have said, limited. But it is not impotent. We can know much about human nature and about divine nature through general revelation. And since, as I've said, the most important single fact about a culture is its view of human nature, it behooves us as Christians to make every public appeal that we can to general revelation. It is, after all, available to all, though many people will, of course, suppress the truth by their wickedness. But by God's grace, many in our culture, even though they have rejected the truths of special revelation, have accepted some of the truths of general revelation. Paul, in Romans 1, says that unregenerate haters of God are nonetheless capable of knowing that many things are contrary to God's will, including envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossiping, slander, insolence, arrogance, mercilessness, and disobedience to parents (Rom. 1:21, 28ff.). If only that standard of human behavior was established in our common culture, a

standard that Paul says is known even by those that God has given over to a depraved mind, our culture would be much improved. A commitment to human decency and human dignity, expressed in some of the most irreligious of contexts, is a response to general revelation. It does not save anyone from judgment, but it does make life more tolerable for the saints and for others.

Insufficiency of Scripture

We don't hear much about the "insufficiency of Scripture." But it is an important point to keep in mind when thinking about Christianity and culture. Scripture does not present itself as the *only* source of truth about *all* matters. It does not even present itself as a source of *some* truth about everything. It presents itself as the only authoritative source of truth about some things, and they are the most important things. But the Bible does not claim to teach us the fundamentals of arithmetic, of biology, of engineering, or of music. About most of the matters of culture, the Bible has little explicit to say.

Many people insist on taking implicit statements from Scripture (or allegedly implicit statements) and deducing from them an entire theory. This is often done in the name of a high view of Scripture, but it is rather to treat Scripture as a magic book. It is a superstitious view of Scripture, not the view God has himself presented.

The belief that all the blueprints for all of life are in Scripture is in part derived from the notion that reason and general revelation are not to be trusted.

Authority of Scripture

It is obligatory for every person who is attached to the name of Christ to be subservient to Scripture to the most minute detail. Jesus was quite clear on this. Relaxing the least of the commandments puts one in last place in the Kingdom. The Scriptures are the only source of authority for the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church has no right to make pronouncements solely on the basis of the opinions of its elders and laity. It is good for them to be thinking seriously about cultural matters of all kinds, but unless there is clear biblical warrant to require the taking of a certain position, the Church as a holy institution must remain silent. In our time, many denominations have established themselves as lobbyists more than as shepherds. They issue statements on the most intricate detail of public policy, basing their convictions on their own fallible prudential judgment. As Richard Neuhaus has observed, there are now career tracks in Prophetic Utterance.

The Church has been given the mandate to speak from God, and as Protestants we affirm that the source for that speech is in Scripture. Individual believers may offer their own opinions on complex and controversial cultural matters, and those opinions should be given careful consideration by those competent to consider them. But the Church does not have that liberty.

Perhaps one reason there is virtually no respect for the Church in our culture, even among Christians, is that the Church has abused its authority so badly.

The authority of Scripture is abused in another way in our time. If some people step beyond Scripture or ignore it, others try to read things into

Scripture that are not there. They appeal to Scripture alone, but they squeeze all sorts of unusual and original things from the text itself, so that one has to question whether they are following the Word of God or their own vain imaginations.

If the doctrine of the authority of Scripture is to mean anything at all, it must mean that what Scripture teaches is authoritative, and Scripture teaches some things and not other things, certainly not all things.

II. Revelation & Redemption

As disciples of Jesus Christ, all of us desire to bring our lives in conformity with God's will as revealed in his Word. But the real existential question for us is what is often referred to as the "application" of Scripture: how do we "apply" it to our own situation.

I'd like to draw attention to the word "application" in this context. Webster's defines application in this sense as "the practical inference to be derived from a discourse, as a moral tale." Note that an application is said to be practical, and that it is an *inference derived,* not an *implication.* Now it should be obvious that many invalid inferences can be drawn from a discourse. The skill of biblical teaching and preaching consists not only in determining the clear *implications* of a text, but in discerning what proper *inferences* can be drawn from it.

For example, someone may read Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made," and infer, improperly, that the text teaches universalism. All of us know of cases where bad inferences are drawn from Scripture, and of people who have done strange things, saying they were applying a text.

How one chooses to draw inferences from Scripture will be shaped in large measure by what kind of book one believes the Bible to be. If you believe that the Bible is the only source of truth about everything, that every human endeavor, every aspect of culture, must be based on the teaching of Scripture, then you will tend to see many more inferences in a given text than the person who believes that all of life is to be judged by Scripture, but that God did not intend that every human activity proceed with only the Bible as a source for information.

Applying Scripture is difficult for every individual, often as much because we fail to understand the significance of our own situation, the context in which we are applying it, as because we fail to understand the original, objective meaning of the text. We live in complex patterns of need, of opportunity, and of sin. The inference we really ought to draw is often the most difficult to see, because of the complexity of our lives and because of the sin in our lives. This is why we need teachers and the fellowship of the saints.

But consider how much more complex an entire culture is, or even a single aspect of that culture. On one hand we have this huge, literally unimaginable thing called modern American culture, or Western culture, or, God deliver us, world culture, and on the other hand this expansive collection of narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, apocalyptic, and letters written 2,000 years ago, suffused with divine mystery and debated by the greatest and most

pious minds of the ages. Sometimes I am breathless at the temerity of people who write books claiming to be a blueprint for culture. Assuming that they have such an exhaustive understanding of both the world and the Word is a feat of self-confidence that I cannot even begin to comprehend.

Application & Obedience

Nevertheless, we *are* called to be obedient in the culture in which we live. And some of us, especially those of us who are teachers of some sort, have a particular vocation to help others understand their culture in a way that pleases God, and to involve themselves within it without compromising love for God or neighbor.

The first thing we must do, is come up with some principles for interpreting and applying the Scriptures to this huge abstraction called "culture." What sort of being *is* a culture? It's not a person. It's not even an institution, like the Church or the state or the family. It is instead a dynamic pattern, an ever-changing matrix of objects, artifacts, sounds, institutions, philosophies, fashions, enthusiasms, myths, prejudices, relationships, attitudes, tastes, rituals, habits, colors, and loves, all embodied in individual people, in groups and collectives and associations of people, many of whom do not know they are associated, in books, in buildings, in the use of time and space, in wars, in jokes, and in food.

We can't simplify things too quickly by isolating one of these things and asking how Scripture applies to *it* in isolation from everything else, for then, it's not part of that social experience that's called culture. We cannot, for example, evaluate the virtues and vices of fast food in our culture merely by looking at biblical teaching about meals. We have to take into consideration the place of the automobile and highways in our culture, our view of time and convenience, the pressures on modern families, both those relieved and those exacerbated by fast food, at the opportunity for employment created by this new service industry, and many other pieces of the cultural puzzle. We then have to ask, given all of the other forces that shape modern culture, whether eliminating McDonald's from the equation would mean that people would automatically eat more nutritious homecooked meals with the family gathered around the table, or whether they would eat more frozen TV dinners on their own schedules.

Having defined what this specific cultural thing is about which we are trying to draw inferences from Scripture, we still have some basic hermeneutical questions before us. To what extent, for example, is Israel's dietary, familial, social order normative for all social orders, and to what extent does it reflect the prudent embodiment of more general principles within a primitive nomadic culture?

We also need to ask whether general revelation suggests something about the social nature of meals and eating that Scripture does not.

A Common Interest

But the still more basic question that ought to be settled about Scripture is this: to what extent is the biblical message about the culture shared by believer and unbeliever, and to what extent is it about the life of that much narrower group

of those who are in union with Christ, whether we think of that group as the elect, the Church, the saints, or the covenant community?

I was at a conference recently with a theologian who was arguing that the entire Old Testament was about the sort of economic order God wants for all of creation. He refused to make any distinctions between God's will for the Church and God's will for the society or culture at large. That is a common position, even for people who are not universalists.

One of the reasons it is common is historical rather than hermeneutical. For over a thousand years, Western civilization was profoundly influenced by Christianity and by the Church, in good ways and bad. By the middle ages, the term Christendom had been coined to refer to most of the West. Since Christianity was the official religion of empires and nations, the membership of the visible church and the membership of the society at large were fairly congruent. Therefore, it was easy, and, in some ways, not terribly problematic, to make biblical applications that ignored the distinction between the church and the greater society. The Reformation changed that to some extent, but secularism had a much greater influence in changing it. Christendom is dead. Its corpse remains, and it is a useful thing. The good cultural influences of Christianity on the West are, in the providence of God, among the most positive cultural factors in history. But there is clearly no sense in pretending that the visible church and the society are equivalent communities, even in, and perhaps especially in, states that have established churches.

The death of God was Friedrich Nietzsche's shorthand for the historical state of affairs in which the idea of God was no longer socially, culturally compelling. The death of Christendom might have been a more accurate if less dramatic phrase. After all, Nietzsche didn't mean that there was a being called God who ceased to exist, nor that there wouldn't be some people, perhaps even a great number of people, for whom belief in God would not be compelling and comforting. What was new was that the cultural significance of God had been radically altered.

There are many movements afoot to try to recover Christendom. The horrible cultural effects of secularism and modernity have launched dozens of crusades to recapture the sense of a shared sacred canopy for public life. As modern culture becomes more and more confused, less and less coherent, and more and more barbaric, people look desperately for some single unifying principle that will restore order where there is chaos. And arguing that we should recover the ideal of being a Christian culture has great attractiveness, at least to Christians.

A Christian Culture?

Of course, there have been movements of Christians who never accepted the idea of Christendom. Most notable among them are the Anabaptists, the so-called radical reformation, still evident today in the Mennonites, the Amish, and the so-called historic peace churches. In the Anabaptist view, the culture of the saved and the culture of the damned had nothing whatsoever to do with one another. Early Anabaptists were pacifists for the same reason they refused to take any civil service job: believers have no business involving themselves with the coercive power of the state. Not only was there no such thing as a Christian

state, there could not even be a Christian statesman. For the Anabaptist, the secular culture was evil.

That is one alternative to Christendom, but not, I believe, a biblical one.

There *is* a better alternative to the views that either the culture belongs to the Church or that the culture is the enemy of the Church.

To understand that alternative, we must ask what sort of entity the Church is. The Church is, we confess, the holy community of the redeemed. But what exactly does that redemption accomplish. There is an increasingly popular notion that God's work of redemption in Jesus Christ means nothing less than the complete transformation of all human institutions, that the progress of the kingdom of God will inexorably mean that all culture will become Christian culture. Eschatological texts are cited in support of this view, texts about the end of history, both in the sense of completion and of goal. Lambs lying down with lions, justice and peace embracing, swords beat into plowshares: these are the cultural goals that ought to be realizable in human history.

Redemptive-Historical Horizons

Before we can assess that view, we have to take some time to look at the broader scope of the history of redemption. We have already discussed revelation (especially special revelation) and redemption. How are revelation and redemption related?

Special revelation is nothing less than the divine interpretation of divine redemption. As redemption unfolds in installments, so does revelation. We say that revelation is progressive, meaning that in the course of the Scriptures, more and more is gradually revealed. This is so in large measure because there is, up to a point, more and more to reveal about redemption.

Redemption and revelation have proceeded and unfolded in history with parallel contours. The objective-central acts of redemption culminate in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but in order to understand the person and work of Christ, we must know something of the calling of Israel to be in covenant with God, the giving of the Law, the disobedience of Israel, and the message of the Prophets.

Now, if Jesus is the center of *redemption,* then it should be expected that Jesus is the central reality of *revelation.* That is why many teachers of the Bible stress that we should understand the Bible in a Christ-centered way. Luther spoke of the Bible as the cradle of Christ, and that is a very apt metaphor. Affirming this is not merely an act of devotion, not merely a nod to Jesus, a religious gesture of interpreting Scripture while keeping him in mind in some sentimental and arbitrary way. It is in fact the way Scripture exists, the way it was given, and the way it must be interpreted.

But Christ-centered interpretation doesn't mean that we are always straining the text looking for Christ *symbols.* Rather, it means that, when we interpret any given passage of Scripture, we must always ask, "Where does this passage fit in the stream of redemptive history that culminates in Jesus Christ? How is the redemptive plan of God being fulfilled in the history associated with this text?"

Once we ask that, then we can look for the appropriate analogies with our own time. For we live in a phase of redemptive history that is distinct from that of most of the Bible. We live in the time following the ascension of Christ to

the right hand of the Father, following the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, following the completion of the New Testament, and awaiting the next great redemptive event: the coming of Christ in glory and in judgment.

What *we* look back to as history and forward to in anticipation, our redemptive-historical horizons, if you will, are different from that of, say, Moses, or David, or John the Baptist, or the apostles in the upper room. There are continuities and there are discontinuities between our epoch in redemptive history and theirs. Failing to consider the place in redemptive history of a particular narrative from Scripture will surely lead to allegorizing or moralizing.

What do I mean by redemptive-historical horizon? What I have in view is the events in the history of redemption that were most recent and most imminently anticipated by the original audience for some particular piece of revelation. What was the last great objective act of God's redemptive work that the audience had witnessed? What was the next promised act of God's redemption? Was the audience the patriarchs, who had a covenant promise, but not the law? Was it the Israelites wandering in the wilderness? Was it Israel in exile? Was it the apostles of Jesus Christ before his crucifixion, still confused about the meaning of the kingdom? Was it after Pentecost, but during the period in which the New Testament Scriptures were, by apostolic authority, still being produced?

And what was the state of the canon of Scripture for that audience? What Scriptures would they have known, and not known?

We often speak rather loosely about trying to discern what God is doing in our time. From the standpoint of redemptive history, that question is a bit more manageable. What God is doing now is building his Church, delaying judgment on the world until the return of Christ. That much is revealed to us. As to his secret will, we cannot know what the full significance of an earthquake or a plague or the results of an election are.

But in the revealed history of redemption in the Scriptures, there is much more information about the plan of God than we often take into consideration. When God established Israel, for example, as a holy, geopolitical community, was he setting up a model for all nations in all times? When God gave Israel instructions about waging devastating warfare on her neighbors, not just to conquer the promised land, but for the sake of plunder, as he does in Deuteronomy 20, was he revealing a model for foreign policy for Christian statesmen in coming generations? The answer lies in understanding redemptive history.

Let me take another example, to continue fleshing out the significance of taking redemptive history seriously. Consider the following passage from *Preaching and Biblical Theology,* by Edmund Clowney. Dr. Clowney is principally addressing preachers, trying to move them beyond mere moralizing to an organically Christ-centered approach to preaching. He uses the story of David and Goliath, one most of us have heard since childhood, as an example of how thin so much preaching is, particularly when the narratives of Old Testament figures are interpreted merely as illustrations of certain character traits. Clowney writes:

> David's slaying of Goliath has often been preached on in such a way as to be merely "illustrative" with a vengeance. Indeed, one hears sermons

> on this theme that might almost as well have been preached on Jack the Giant Killer. But even when perception rises above the level on which David is seen as a brave shepherd boy who was a dead shot with the sling, the improvement is often merely a stress on David's faith and God's faithfulness in granting him victory. So conceived, this incident slips into a vast store of miscellaneous victories of faith in the Old Testament.
>
> When the biblical-theological dimension is added the story is viewed in a new light. The significance of the kingship in the development of the theocracy must be appreciated, for David is the Lord's anointed. In this incident he is manifested to Israel as a divinely endowed savior of the people. Only in this perspective can David's words to Goliath in I Samuel 17:45-47 be given their proper force. [These words] then become the theological core of the whole passage. David's attack is in the name of Jehovah of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel. His victory will testify to all the earth that there is a God in Israel. David appears as the restorer of the theocracy from shame to its rightful function as a witness to God's sovereignty to save. Further, his victory is that "all this assembly may know" the futility of carnal weapons and the sovereignty in salvation of the covenant God. Here David is proclaiming as a prophet the deepest principles of the history of salvation, principles which find their fulfillment only in that theocratic King who is David's greater Son. It is impossible not to see Christ in this passage.[12]

We might add here that I Samuel 17:45-47 has been quoted as a prooftext for unilateral nuclear disarmament. If we Christian citizens really trust in God, the argument runs, we will not put our trust in the modern equivalents of javelins, swords, or spears. But unless we, the United States, are thought to be the modern equivalent of the Israel of God, and unless the Lord's annointed of our epoch in redemptive history, great David's greater son, the King of Kings, is on the front line slaying our foes, it is wrong to make such an application of the text. Of course, the modern analogue to Israel is the Church, and under the leadership of our great king, we do not in fact trust in temporal weapons. The Church does not defend itself with javelins or ICBMs, because, yes, the battle is the Lord's. But to suppose that the battle for American safety is somehow God's holy fight is to make amazing claims about the place of the United States in redemptive history. What is most ironic about this particular case is that the people using this and other texts to argue for disarmament usually are extremely critical about the "God and Country" jingoism they see in their opponents. Yet appropriation of David's claim on behalf of the United States is clearly a "God and Country" argument.

But back to Clowney. He notes that on one hand, David says that the battle is the Lord's, then he turns around and takes on Goliath himself. If the battle was the Lord's, why didn't God simply strike down Goliath immediately? Why rely on the theatrical business of the slingshot and the five smooth stones from the brook? Clowney explains:

> By the unction of the Spirit, David has insight into his own role in redemptive history. He understands the nature of Israel and the purpose of the existence of this nation. He also understands the nature of the

> covenant God, his omnipotence, and his faithfulness. Further, he understands his own position as an instrument of the Lord. His power is of the Lord who saves not with sword and spear, for the battle is his. Do we not perceive that David's possession, in a measure, of this insight was necessary to his role in redemptive history? Indeed, is not this the issue in the rejection of Saul and the establishment of the kingdom in David's hands? In David's later testing through the persecution of Saul, it is this principle in his own understanding that is repeatedly challenged by circumstances and embraced by faith. The true theocratic King must be one whose glory is the name of God, who comes not in his own name but in the name of the God who sends him.[13]

Continuity & Discontinuity

With this example one gets an idea of how keeping sight of the context in redemptive history can render not only a richer meaning to a given text, but a meaning more in keeping with the center of the Scriptures, Jesus Christ, and his meaning in redemptive history.

Remember the story of the greatest Bible Study in history: the experience of two disciples after the resurrection, who meet Jesus unawares on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). He asks them why they are so depressed, and they explain that this Jesus whom they had hoped was the one who would redeem Israel had proved to be a pathetic failure and had been dead for three days. Jesus rebukes them: "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory." And Luke tells us that Jesus started with Moses and all the prophets and explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. Jesus surely had a Christocentric view of the Old Testament. So did the author of much of the Old Testament, Moses. The book of Hebrews tells us that Moses was not looking for a temporal reward, but an eternal one. He considered the disgrace for the sake of Christ of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

Christ and his work of redemption provide the great continuity in Scripture. But, as redemption is progressive, there are discontinuities as well.

There are continuities and discontinuities between the corporate life of the covenant people of God in Israel, and the corporate life of the covenant people of God in the Church. Both are described as holy nations and royal priesthoods. Both are communities called into existence by God's grace. But there are some crucial discontinuities as well.

There are third and fourth communities that we must take into account as we sift through this question of continuity and discontinuity. The third is the community of creation, the pre-Fall human community in Eden, man as created. The fourth is the community of common grace: man as fallen but temporarily reprieved. Here I have in mind the family of Noah. Sometimes Noah is seen as a precursor of Abraham and Moses, but there are powerful biblical reasons to infer that the covenant confirmed in the rainbow was a covenant with fallen man as man, not with man as redeemed son of God.

And just as the work of Christ cannot be interpreted apart from the Old Testament reality of covenant, so that earlier redemptive chapter and our

relation to it must be understood against the backdrop of creation, and the remarkable act of judgment and the re-enactment of creation in the story of Noah.

Let's look first at creation. Much theologizing about culture properly looks at creation, since human culture is part of man's life as created. Theologians speak of Genesis 1:28 as the creation mandate: hidden in the seed of this text is the great flowering of all human culture; God blessed man, male and female, that he had created in his image, and said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Culture was intended by God to be a fulfilment of the image of God, an imitation of God. Man was called to be a worker, like the divine worker who established the model in the six days of creation. Meredith Kline observes:

> Fulfillment of man's cultural stewardship would thus begin with man functioning as princely gardener in Eden. But the goal of his kingdom commission was not some minimal, local life support system. It was rather a maximal, global mastery. The cultural mandate put all the capacity of human brain and brawn to work in a challenging and rewarding world to develop his original paradise home into a universal city.[14]

Kline writes elsewhere, "Invited to be a fellow laborer with God—that is the dignity of man the worker and the zest and glory of man's labor. Jesus, the second Adam, affirmed his own adherence to the imitation of God principle in this particular respect when he said: 'My Father works until now and I work,' (John 5:17)."[15]

Kline continues:

> God's work was creative, sustaining, governing; so too, on a creaturely level, was man's. God's original works of absolute origination found analogues in man's constructive and inventive activities, in his artistic creativity, and in his procreative functioning. . . . In man's cultivation of the earth, his nourishing and nurturing of his own young, his caring for and using, taming and domesticating the animals, in all the variety of his cultural laboring to subdue the earth, he was imitating what God did in his providential preserving and governing of the world as a place which through its fulness of provision supported man's bodily life and through its harmonies and its infinities answered to the deep call of the human spirit.[16]

Here is the origin of human culture in untainted glory and possibility. It is no wonder that those who see God's redemption as a transformation of human culture speak of it in terms of re-creation.

But the most profound aspect of the creation culture was man's imitation of God in the sabbath-rest. God the worker became God the rester on the seventh day. Genesis 2:2 describes God observing a rest on the seventh day. But Genesis 2:3 goes on with the further point that God also blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, that is, he made it a holy day, set apart. It is important to realize

that the sabbath was not something introduced by the giving of the law on Mount Sinai; it was merely reiterated there. It is clear, from Exodus 31 and other passages, that the Sabbath was not some arbitrary ritual suggested by God for Israel's sake. Rather, it was established as holy in the very order of creation. Look at Exodus 31:12-18, the climax of Moses's forty days on Mount Sinai:

> And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.' It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed."

The sabbath was as much a part of the order of creation as was creative labor. In imitating that sabbath, man was called to demonstrate with religious regularity the divine source of his creativity and energy. As Kline puts it, "For man to observe the Sabbath in obedient imitation of the paradigm of work and rest established by his Creator was an acknowledgement that he was the Creator's servant-son, a confession of God as his Father and Lord. As an ordinance observed by man the Sabbath was a . . . confessional sign of man's consecration to God."[17]

In observing the sabbath, man was culturally structuring time in accordance with a holy pattern. This was part of his cultural commission, along with the task of being an architect in space. Space and time were thus consecrated by man's culture.

For man as originally created, there was no separation between his culture and his loving worship of his Lord. Culture and religious duty were one. All cultural activity was self-consciously pursued as an act of loving obedience. Not only the internal attitude of man in these activities, but the invention of the very cultural structures themselves was bound to be a deliberate act of service to the Creator. Just as God's will and creative word called real planets and trees and birds and fish into being, so man's will and intellect would effect the establishment of real art and science and agriculture and social structures This was the sort of wholism and unity many of us long for: no shadow between culture and devotion.

But then the Fall occurred.

III. Redemption & Eschatology

If we know anything about the story of Adam and Eve, we know that the result of the Fall, of rebellion against God, was the curse. God had warned Adam and Eve that they would die if they disobeyed. But their death is postponed, ultimate judgment is delayed, and a temporal curse, common to all mankind, is uttered by God.

The curse is found in Genesis 3:14-19.

> And the Lord God said to the serpent,
> "Because you have done this,
> Cursed are you more than all cattle,
> and more than every beast of the field;
> On your belly shall you go,
> And dust shall you eat
> All the days of your life;
> And I will put enmity
> Between you and the woman,
> And between your seed and her seed;
> He shall bruise you on the head,
> And you shall bruise him on the heel"
> To the woman He said,
> "I will greatly multiply
> Your pain in childbirth,
> In pain you shall bring forth children;
> Yet your desire shall be for your husband,
> And he shall rule over you."
> Then to Adam He said, "Because you have
> listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten
> from the tree about which I commanded you,
> saying, 'You shall not eat from it';
> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> In toil you shall eat of it
> All the days of your life.
> Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
> And you shall eat the plants of the field;
> By the sweat of your face
> You shall eat bread,
> Till you return to the ground,
> Because from it you were taken;
> For you are dust,
> And to dust you shall return."

A number of commentators have noted that, in addition to the promise of Satan's ultimate foe, there are other signs of grace even in the curse. As Meredith Kline has noted, "The world order continued. The sun was not darkened, the heavens did not pass away, the earth was not consumed. Man was not totally abandoned to the power of sin and the devil; he was not cast into outer darkness. The positive benefits realized in a measure through this restraint on the effects of sin and the curse are not the eternal benefits of the holy, heavenly kingdom that come to the elect through God's saving grace in Christ, but they

are blessings—temporal blessings that all men experience in common by virtue of their remaining part of the continuing world order."[18]

But the reality of the common curse cannot be understated. As Kline notes elsewhere, "By reason of the common curse the history of mankind would be turned into a history of death. The ground man was to subdue would subdue him. . . . A shadow would be cast by the inevitability of death over all man's earthly existence, making all his labors seem like a clutching at the wind. . . .

". . . Under the common curse, humanity was to be troubled by social discord as well as by afflictions in the realm of nature. . . . In sum, the common curse would turn human experience on earth into a struggle for survival, a perpetual conflict, a vain history unto death."[19] The curse means that cultural activity would continue, but it would be profoundly different.

The most signifcant moment in the story of the Fall is the expulsion from the Garden. Even more devastating than the promise of painful childbirth, difficult farming, and even the inevitability of death itself was the removal from this place favored by the special presence of God. The Garden was the original Sanctuary, a holy place, and, as Kline notes:

> In his zeal for the sanctity of his own holy Name, God had come to cleanse his temple and he made a thorough work of it. By their apostasy the priests of the temple had turned it into an abomination. . . . Driven from his native homeland, the holy and blessed land, into a world profane and cursed, man is in exile on the face of the earth. His historical existence is a wandering east of Eden. Until the restoration of all things, the earth has taken on the character of a wilderness, lying outside the holy land of promise. It is a realm under the shadow of death. In the hour that God drove man into exile it was indicated that any future return to God's dwelling place and the tree of life must involve a passage through the flaming sword of God's judgment, with which the new guardians of his sanctuary were armed.[20]

The Ultimate Curse Delayed

Thus the fall introduces a principle of death and conflict to human culture, a principle that will not be eradicated from the earth until the cleansing judgment of God. Re-creation, the recovery of the creation experience of culture, the returning to the blessed environment of the Garden, can only take place at the time of judgment.

But the terms of the curse indicate clearly that the judgment has been delayed.

With the fall and the curse, culture no longer had the holy quality it had in the garden. Culture would serve to continue the temporal life of man. Note the story of the family of Cain. The line of Cain is identified with the line of rebellion against God, because of Cain's wicked act of fratricide. But there is an amazing amount of cultural activity in that line. In Genesis 4:17, we read that Cain built a city. In verse 20, we are told of Jabal: "he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock." In the next verse we meet Jubal: "he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe." Tubal-cain, introduced in verse 22, was the "forger of all implements of bronze and iron."

Clearly, human culture of all sorts was thriving in this evil family. In chapter 5, the line of Seth, the faithful line that produces Enoch and Noah, we read of no significant cultural achievements. The only special feature in the line of Seth was Enoch, who "walked with God, and he was not, for God took him," and Methuselah, who lived to be 969. Methuselah's son was Lamech, and Lamech's son was Noah.

At the time of Noah, we read that God had become especially grieved at the wickedness of man. There are several significant aspects of the story of Noah.

First, notice the parallels between the covenant with Noah in Genesis 8, 9, and 10, and the original ordinances of creation. In 10:1, God blesses Noah and tells him and his sons to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. In verse 2, he talks of the dominion that man will have over all the beasts.

But there are some important discontinuities in the text. First, in verse three, there seems to be a revocation of some dietary restrictions. God says that man can eat any kind of meat that he wants to. It appears there had been restrictions on what could be eaten while Noah and his family were in the special setting of the ark. In Genesis 7, when God is giving Noah instructions for gathering animals into the ark, he distinguishes between clean and unclean animals, and tells Noah to take more of the clean animals; they would be needed for sacrifices and for food. The distinction between clean and unclean would appear again during the theocracy, the holy culture of Israel. And the distinction would be revoked, dramatically, in Acts 10, when Peter has a vision of a sheet being lowered, and a voice telling him that he can eat of all animals.

So we have this pattern of dietary restrictions accompanying holy cultures, including Israel and Noah's family in the ark, and dietary restrictions lifted for common cultures, as in the period following the flood, and after the ascension of Christ. What is notable in the passage in Acts 10, is the fact that God, Peter, and Luke, the writer of Acts, clearly associate this removal of dietary restrictions with the fact that the gospel has gone forth to the Gentiles. As Peter said to the Gentile Cornelius, "God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (v. 28).

The people of God in our epoch of redemptive history are not called to a segregated culture, but called to take the gospel to all cultures. Israel's holy culture prevented Jews, as Peter told Cornelius, from associating or visiting with Gentiles. But the people of God in this new moment of redemptive history are not only allowed to visit with other peoples, they are commanded to.

Culture & Holiness

When Israel's culture was established, it was both a partial recovery of the original experience in Eden, and a typological anticipation of the final, fulfilled Kingdom of God, in which culture and worship would be one, in which there was no discontinuity between the human and the holy. But, as we know from the sad story of Eden, the way back to that holy land is a way that involves judgment. And this is precisely why Israel's law was so rigorous. An Israelite could be stoned for breaking the Sabbath, for committing adultery, for being disrespectful to parents. Meanwhile, Israel pursued an unrelenting foreign policy of conquest and devastation. This was a holy war, a war that was a temporal

manifestation, a huge, bloody audio-visual aid, if you will, that underscored the severity of God's judgment, and the demands of his holiness. God's people were to be holy for he was holy, and any violation of that holiness was to be met with banishment from the holy community either by eviction or death.

Culture and holy congregation were one in Eden, they were one in Israel (though in an imperfect way), and they will be one again in the new heaven and the new earth. But the typological life of Israel has passed, since its foreshadowing of God's final kingdom in a real, flesh-and-blood geopolitical entity is not in God's plan between the two advents of Christ, in whom all the law is fulfilled, and who will come with the final, devastating judgment at the last day, the Church must be content with being leaven within a common culture. It is not in the interest of the spreading of the gospel that God's people be a sequestered ethnic group any longer. The great message of the gospel is intended to go to the ends of the earth. To accomplish that, the people of God must be found in all cultures, eating and drinking, enjoying music and art and making tools with those who do not yet know the gospel.

The culture of Israel was intended to demonstrate the holy eschatological reality of God's rule, but human culture as such cannot do that because human beings as such do not submit to the rule of God. This is about as Calvinistic a message as you can get, and yet there are many Calvinists today who can't seem to get this point. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace,* writes: "If we had lived as God meant us to live, we would all be members of an ordered community bound together by love for each other and gratitude to God, using the earth for our benefit and delight. In fact we do not live thus. A fall has occurred. God's response to this fall of mankind was to choose from all humanity a people destined for eternal life."[21] So far, so good. "They in obedient gratitude are now to work for the renewal of human life so that it may become what God meant it to be." How the Church can "work for the renewal of human life." Our own lives are renewed, and to the extent that we are obedient, what we do in the world will have a different quality. But there are limits to what we can do for the simple reason that we're not the only ones here. But let Wolterstorff finish. "They are to struggle to establish a holy commonwealth here on earth." If by "holy commonwealth" he means the Church, that's fine. The Church is a holy nation and a royal priesthood. But the Church is a commonwealth only in a metaphoric sense. It doesn't have a representative at the U.N., it doesn't maintain an army or put people in jail or issue drivers' licenses or any other things commonwealths do. Wolterstorff continues. "Of course it is [note present tense] the mandate of all humanity to struggle toward such a community."[22] At this point Wolterstorff has lost his biblical-theological horizon. There is nothing in the covenant with Noah, which is the most significant instance in Scripture of God addressing fallen mankind *en masse,* about holiness.

It is most certainly not the mandate for all humanity to be struggling to build a holy community or commonwealth. Not even the people of God in our epoch of redemptive history are called to create a holy culture. The gospel is no longer bound to a particular culture or to a geopolitical institution.

The Kingdom of God

There is another strain of teaching that dissuades us from establishing a Christian culture. That is the New Testament teaching about the nature of the coming of the kingdom of God.

Some Christians today use the word "kingdom" like a magic adjective that sanctifies any noun it touches. We read of "kingdom ethics," "kingdom theology," "kingdom values," "kingdom justice," "kingdom love," "kingdom caring," "kingdom priorities," and "kingdom relationships." All of these terms might well be referring to some good thing. But the glib transformation of a noun into an adjective is almost always an alert that jargon has replaced thinking, and one gets the impression that "kingdom" is being used incantationally, as what New Testament scholar R. T. France calls a "hurray-word."[23] S. H. Travis has written this warning: "Indeed, the current danger in some quarters is that a few mentions of the word 'kingdom' in any theological document will be enough to guarantee that it be received with uncritical enthusiasm."[24]

Jesus' First Sermon

A good place to start a study of the meaning of the kingdom is in a New Testament passage that doesn't explicitly mention it: Luke 4.

Here we have two narratives: the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and his first public sermon in Nazareth. In is not insignificant that those two episodes in the life of Jesus are joined by Luke, under the guidance of the Spirit. Jesus' confrontation with Satan has interesting parallels with the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden. It is appropriate that his inaugural sermon about the redemption of God be preceded by his victory over Satan.

But we want to focus on that second story.

Jesus had been brought up in Nazareth. At the age of thirty, he had long been in the habit of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath. After being out of town for some time, he went to the synagogue one week and, as a visiting rabbi, was honored by being given the scroll containing the prophet Isaiah from which he could read. He read a passage late in the work, from the beginning of chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Carefully rolling up the scroll, Jesus handed it to the servant who assisted the head of the synagogue. Then he sat on a small platform, the customary place for the delivery of a sermon. Everyone in the room was waiting expectantly. Some of the people present had lived in Nazareth all of their lives, and remembered Joseph and Mary, Jesus' parents. They remembered seeing him as a young boy, playing in the streets of Nazareth.

"Today," Jesus asserted, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." This shocking claim was uttered with complete conviction and power, perplexing the entire crowd. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" some wondered aloud, and their confusion was warranted. The text from Isaiah is part of the last part of the prophecy, a section that describes the fulfilling of Israel's destiny as the greatest nation on earth. The passage continues (in 61:5f.): "Aliens will shepherd

your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. . . . You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. . . ."

Shortly after this is a section from which the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was drawn, in which God speaks of his coming to judge the wicked (63:3ff.): "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come. . . . I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground."

If the verses Jesus read sounded like good news, this continuation of the text is about the worst news one could imagine. And if the first part is fulfilled, so is the second. The year of the Lord's favor is also the great day of vengeance. And Jesus was claiming that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled, right before the ears and eyes of the simple folk of Nazareth.

Jesus didn't quite expect a warm welcome. He was ready for the rejection of his townsfolk. "I tell you the truth," he went on after the outbursts of incredulity had died down. "No prophet is accepted in his home town."

At least this statement, to all observers, was evidently true. The Nazarenes got up, drove him out of town, took him to the edge of a steep hill on the edge of town and tried to throw him off the cliff. The Nazarenes were not, one gathers, fond of subtle warnings.

Jesus escaped from the clutches of his boyhood chums and left Nazareth for Capernaum. "From that time on," Matthew's account (in 4:17) tells us, "Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'."

The Coming of the Kingdom

What Matthew doesn't spell out is that the sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth was also about the kingdom of heaven. (Note that the terms "Kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are synonymous.) That dramatic Nazarene pronouncement was about the coming of a new phase in God's rule of the earth.

Throughout the history of the Jews during the Biblical period, there were great figures whose personality and activities gave definition to the people. Abraham the patriarch, Moses the lawgiver, Joshua the leader in battle: all expressed some aspect of the relationship of the people of Israel to their God. King David was one of those figures.

It was David, miraculous slayer of giants, gentle shepherd, and singer of the praises of God, who became the first great King of the Jews, consolidating a visible kingdom for the people of God. David's role reminded the people of Israel that God was their ultimate King, as he anticipated the rule of the great King of Kings.

In holy writings after David's own time, the idea of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom was a popular one. But another idea also emerged: that of a final, apocalyptic kingdom, a kingdom that would bring in an entirely new age, not just a re-establishment of the good old days when David was around.

During the years immediately preceding Jesus' public ministry, some Jews, known to us as the zealots, regarded political action as a necessity for the introduction of this final kingdom. Chafing under Roman oppression, the zealots

proclaimed a primitive liberation theology, and awaited a political freedom fighter who would put down the ruling powers by the power of God the king.

Rabbinic writings at the time of Christ also mention the idea of kingdom, tying it to the coming Messiah, the annointed one of the Lord, who would usher in the new age.

Each of these expectations was a significant part of the thinking of people in first century Palestine. And into this setting came one of the more exotic figures in the Bible: John the Baptist. John roamed the rugged countryside, challenging people with the horror of their sin. He called the respected religious leaders of the day a brood of vipers, and commanded them to repent. He preached dramatically of the coming judgment of God: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

What was the rationale for John the Baptist's fiery sermons? The answer can be found in the summary of John's message, given in Matthew 3:2–"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near."

John was a prophet of the kingdom of God. All three gospels that record John's ministry say that he fulfilled other prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"–"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:2, cf. Matt. 3:3 and Luke 3:4).

The kingdom that John announced was the coming of God the Lord himself to be with his people. The presence of God ruling his people is a rich image in Biblical theology. God's presence was evident in the pillar of cloud and of fire when the Jews left Egypt and wandered around in the wilderness. It was manifest on Mount Sinai with smoke and thunder. It was symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant and in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Where God was present, God ruled.

The coming of the kingdom is really the dramatic coming of God himself. One New Testament scholar goes so far as to say that we would be better off abbreviating "the Kingdom of God" with the single word "God" rather than "kingdom." The important thing about the kingdom of God is that it is God's.

The Kingdom of God is exclusively by God. "There is no question of man inventing the kingdom or promoting it," writes Donald Guthrie. "It is infinitely more than an invitation to humanitarian action. However much it may stimulate human response, it is essentially the sovereign activity of God. There is nothing democratic about it. Man isn't even invited to comment on it. It is simply announced as a *fait accompli.* God has acted in history."[25]

Now is a good time to reintroduce the idea of covenant. The form of the covenant in Scripture is really borrowed from ancient treaties that conquering kings would swear with their vassals. So the idea of God's rule is implicit in the idea of covenant, and the idea of covenant flows out of the way God chooses to rule. And the evolution of the administration of that covenant is very much related to the advance of the Kingdom of God.

Now, said John the Baptist, the rule of God is coming to the earth in a new way. The rule of God is intensifying; it is becoming more demanding; it is precipitating a crisis.

Mark summarized Jesus' early preaching in almost the same terms Matthew used to summarize that of John the Baptist: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). To his Jewish audience, this was about the same as seeing someone carrying a placard reading "The end is near. Prepare to meet thy doom." This was the announcement of the end of time. Nobody had any idea that a new order of things would emerge against the old order.

But that's exactly the idea that emerged throughout Jesus' ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount, in many of his parables, in private conversation with his disciples, in all of these settings he defined the meaning of his work as ushering in the Kingdom of God.

The parables are among the most popular of Jesus' teaching, partly because they are so earthy. Almost all of the parables are glimpses of the Kingdom of God. Such as the parables of the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the pearl, the net, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the unjust steward. Some of the parables teach about the growth of the Kingdom of God from humble beginnings, some of them emphasize the point that the kingdom is so treasured that wise people will abandon everything to enjoy it. Still others contrast the fate of the righteous with the fate of the wicked when the kingdom is fully established.

The miracles of Jesus all testified to the truth of his message. In converting water to wine, calming storms, multiplying loaves and fishes, healing the sick, and raising the dead, Jesus was not working magic to gather crowds. Nor was he just showing off how powerful he was to give greater credibility to his message. In performing miracles, Jesus was demonstrating the reality of his rule, of his kingdom. He was exercising his dominion over every phase of earthly existence, showing that in fact, the kingdom had come.

But just before Jesus began his teaching, John the Baptist ended up in the dark in more ways than one. John had been imprisoned and condemned to death, and during his imprisonment he became confused about Jesus' identity. From prison (see Matt. 11:2ff.) he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" The source of John's confusion may be one of the most important issues in understanding what the Kingdom of God means today.

John the Baptist's Doubt

Imagine what John was going through. God had told him that "the ax is at the root of the tree" (Matt. 3:10), that his kingdom was at hand. He had preached that message faithfully and forcefully. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Those are the sentiments of someone who knows he's really on the right side of history, and those on the wrong side are going to suffer for it.

Now, John is languishing away in some dark prison, wondering if maybe he was mistaken. After all, if Jesus was the one with the winnowing fork, the one bringing judgment on the ungodly, what was he waiting for? "The ungodly

were the guys who put me in prison," reasons John. "Get that winnowing fork over here and liberate me!"

John knew that prophecy from Isaiah, about the bloody vengeance God was going to satisfy. He knew that freedom for the captives and destruction of the enemies of God were part of the gospel of the kingdom. And John must have been thinking of the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar, interpreted by the prophet Daniel, in which a great stone comes to shatter the wicked kingdoms of this earth: "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (Daniel 2:14).

Where were the great stones? Where was that winnowing fork? Where was the trampling of the vintage of the grapes of wrath?

Maybe he had been wrong all along. Maybe the desert sun had taken its toll and John had deluded himself all this time. Maybe his cousin Jesus, the one he had baptized so dramatically, was just humoring him, pretending to play the prophetic role John's dementia had created for him. Maybe the kingdom wasn't at hand. Maybe Jesus was just establishing some new religious club.

So John's disciples went to ask Jesus for the hard truth. Jesus instructed them (Matt. 11:4ff.) to go back and tell John that they saw the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, lepers cured, the deaf hearing, the dead raised, and the good news being preached to the poor. Nothing was said about release of the captives, but nonetheless, the kingdom *was* coming: these were certainly signs of a new order of things.

But the surprise to John is that the kingdom was not being ushered in with its full power. The judgment of God was delayed while the mercy of God was being proclaimed. When Messiah returns in judgment, the Kingdom of God will be consummated. As Geerhardus Vos has described it, there is "one kingdom coming in two successive stages."[26] The first stage, announced by Jesus, is marked by the outpouring of God's mercy on humanity. God's rule is established in the hearts of his own people. The second stage, which Christians believe will arrive with the second coming of Christ, is a stage of fulfillment and completion. Then the full authority of God's rule will be asserted. Then God will judge and punish the wicked. Then, and not until then, swords will be beaten into plowshares and lions will lie down with lambs.

The kingdom was coming in like the scattering of seed, not like the huge destructive rock. It was coming in like a bit of leaven in a great big bowl of dough, gradually working its way to every molecule. It was like a mustard seed, a tiny, insignificant, almost invisible thing at first, but when germinated, growing into a great tree. John didn't predict that the kingdom would have such modest beginnings. He expected it to enter history fully grown. That was not to be.

A Spiritual Kingdom

The kingdom Jesus came to establish was decidedly not a political kingdom. "My kingdom is not of this earth," he informed Pilate during his trial (John 18:36). He rebuked Satan when, during the temptation in the wilderness, he offered Jesus political rule over the kingdoms of this earth (Matt. 4:10). The Kingdom of God

as we now experience it is not extended by the power of the sword, but by the power of the Spirit.

The Kingdom of God refers to all aspects of God's rule over his people. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus summarizes the duty of his people: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). There is no limit in such a command.

In earthly kingdoms, if you kill the king you can capture the kingdom. But the crucifixion of Jesus was not a defeat. It was in fact the great victory for God's kingdom. The cross is not a great symbol of passive suffering in the face of evil. It is the great sacrifice of active suffering to deliver men from God's wrath. The death of Christ on the cross is the moral payment for human sin, payment which God himself required for man and God to be reconciled. Without that reconciliation, man can never truly love God. Without love, man can never really recognize God as King. So the death of Christ was a necessary prerequisite for his rule to be established.

But from the dim perspective of his prison cell, John was understandably confused. John knew of the wrath of God. He preached it every day. He knew that sin would not go unpunished. It was precisely because of that mandate of justice that he expected Jesus the King to come to inflict judgment. But the glorious and gracious surprise was that Jesus the suffering servant came to bear judgment. He will come again to do what John expected, but first, he had to cancel the effects of sin. God's people must be holy, because God is holy. His rule of them is a holy rule. Their life under his kingdom is a holy life. Sin had to be conquered for the holy rule of the kingdom to be possible.

But the crucifixion is not the end of the story. After the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension came Pentecost. Now the Holy Spirit came in power. Now the spiritual power of God's rule was given to his people. The coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the church was a great advance for the Kingdom of God.

The people of God's kingdom are called to holiness. Their lives under his rule are to be marked by righteousness; that is the sign of their citizenship, their passport. The Holy Spirit is the agent that enables such righteousness.

This World & the World to Come

From all that has been said so far, one might conclude that the kingdom's essentially spiritual identity means that it doesn't really have anything to do with the human culture. Even with all its talk about the Kingdom of God, Christianity, it would seem, remains a personal religion, a matter of private piety and devotion, and therefore irrelevant to public life.

But while Jesus did not come to establish a geo-political kingdom, what he set in motion has profound ramifications for the cultural order. While his message was not a political message, political life could never be the same after the coming of Jesus.

During his lifetime, many people, both friends and foes, tried to read their own meaning into the mission of Jesus. The Jewish sect known as the Zealots were particularly eager to understand the Messianic function as one of political revolution. Throughout the history of the Church, such interpretations have been popular. James V. Schall reminds us that "if there is any constant

temptation in the history of Christianity, from reaction to Christ's rejection of Jewish Zealotism on to current debates about the relation of Marxism to the Kingdom of God, it is the pressure to make religion a formula for refashioning the political and economic structures of the world. One of the major political-theological tasks, in any era, not excluding our own, is clearly to understand what exact form this ultimately 'heretical' idea takes within the prevailing political movements and ideas."[27]

One of the more popular revisions of the mission of Jesus today is that of the liberation theologians who re-cast Jesus as principally a political figure. They understand the kingdom of God in the most literal of senses. They assert that Jesus began the enactment on a global scale of what happened for the Jews in the Exodus: God leading his people out of political and economic repression.

But the Exodus was primarily religious, not political. God delivers his people from economic and political slavery for a doxological task and identity, to make them, through the covenant on Sinai, 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6)." Israel was not miraculously delivered out of Egypt to fulfill a mere political destiny, but for the sake of holiness. "Not the liberation from Pharoah's service," writes Edmund Clowney, "but the imposition of the Lord's covenant is the meaning of the exodus."[28]

The Sovereign King

When Jesus said to Pilate (John 18:36), "My kingdom is not of this earth," Pilate may have breathed a sigh of relief. But which is more threatening to a political ruler, an external foe with mighty but visible and vulnerable armies, or a transnational and eternal king who rules the very souls of men and women? Jesus is a king who can command the will and affections, a king who demands absolute obedience, a king who can threaten eternal punishment for breaking his laws, a king who can covertly impart unlimited power to his subjects, a king whose followers fear no earthly power, a king whose kingdom shall have no end: in the face of such a potentate, any mere political leader must shudder.

And not only does this king demand absolute *obedience* from his subjects, thereby relativizing the authority of earthly magistrates. His rule is also the source of the greatest *blessings.* Temporal "entitlements" and benefits from the welfare state are petty compared with the true entitlements of the Kingdom of God. His people are recipients of the best welfare benefit imaginable: they become the sons and daughters of the King himself. And the inheritance that they receive is life itself, what Jesus called "abundant life." No earthly ruler can compete in providing such incentives.

The great irony is that the message of the Kingdom of God has profound cultural and political consequences *precisely because it is not a cultural or political message.* It cannot be fought by cultural means. It cannot be defeated by cultural power.

The message of the kingdom is a proclamation of the rule of God over all aspects of life. God is not merely authoritarian; he is totalitarian. The demands of the rule of God are ultimate, but so are the rewards. The most significant of those rewards is summed up in one word: salvation.

The message of the Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it was that God rules. But it is a message with layers of meaning, and in most contemporary

references to the idea of kingdom, there is as little recognition of those layers as there was by John the Baptist languishing away in prison. At the top layer, God rules all things. More specifically, he rules his own people, the people he has saved from the destructive tendencies of their own rebellion and, more profoundly, from his holy judgment. There is an obvious selectivity in many of the sayings about the Kingdom of God: some people see it, some people don't. Some receive the kingdom, others are far from it. The reason for this discrimination is that, in addition to the *general* rule of God, there is a *saving* rule of God. And the route to that saving rule is faith and repentance, the human response to the divine initiative of spiritual rebirth.

God saves people from ultimate destruction by bringing them into his kingdom, conquering their rebellious natures and bringing them under his holy rule. That subjugation occurs in the spiritual act of new birth, by which a will to acknowledge his absolute reign is engendered. The visible sign of that second birth is the response of faith and repentance. Hence, when Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," he was announcing the mechanism by which the kingdom was obtained. "The kingdom means redemption," writes Herman Ridderbos, "because God maintains his royal justice towards those who put their trust in him as his people."[29]

How is the Kingdom of God related to the institution of the Church? Herman Ridderbos distinguished the two in this way:

> The *basilea* [kingdom] is the great divine work of salvation in its fulfillment and consummation in Christ; the *ekklesia* [Church] is the people elected and called by God and sharing in the bliss of the *basilea*. . . . [The Church] is the people who in this great drama have been placed on the side of God in Christ by virtue of the divine election and covenant. . . . It is a community of those who await the salvation of the *basilea.* Insofar as the *basilea* is already a present reality, the *ekklesia* is also the place where the gifts and powers of the *basilea* are granted and received. It is, further, the gathering of those who, as the instruments of the *basilea,* are called upon to make profession of Jesus as the Christ, to obey his commandments, to perform the missionary task of the preaching of the gospel throughout the world.[30]

Some critics will argue that the church has an obligation to build a more perfect culture. But the improvement of society is a byproduct rather than a goal for the church's work. The common culture is not, after all, under the authority of the church. The church has no power to enforce the social vision it holds.

Insofar as they acknowledge the rule of God in all aspects of their lives, Christians will always have an effect on their cultures. The church will not be an inert agent in society, even though it has no master plan for the perfect society. But as Christians are active in their societies, they must always remember that it is God who fulfills his kingdom, and that his kingdom is always linked to redemption. Mere social work, or some other cultural activity divorced from the proclamation of the gospel, is not kingdom work. It may be important work, done by kingdom people, out of love for their neighbors. But the work in and of itself is not the building of the kingdom.

IV. Common Grace & Culture

Let us summarize and synthesize all that we've covered so far. If, when you finish reading, you're mumbling to yourself, "Why of course that's obviously true," I will have done my duty.

Part of the burden of this study consists in persuading readers that Christians must be profoundly concerned about cultural matters, but that it is not the obligation of Christians to seek to institute some sort of distinctively Christian or biblical culture. Someone recently told me that he believed quite sincerely that if all cultures were dominated by Christians who were really consistent with the Scriptures, all cultures would be virtually identical, since Scripture provides a blueprint for all cultural activity.

At the risk of sounding uncharitable, I think that some people who believe such things are able to do so in part because they live such culturally restricted lives. The amazing range of diversity in human culture, diversity both in the sheer number of cultural activities and expressions and in the astounding variety of options within each of those activities and expressions, ought to make it obvious that, since the tower of Babel, there is no possibility before the consummation of the kingdom (and maybe not even then), of a universal culture.

As you should have guessed by now, I am in extreme disagreement, for biblical reasons, with those who believe there are biblical blueprints for everything from monetary standards to foreign policy to welfare reform to music. And there are at least two principle areas of disagreement. One concerns what sort of culture God intends to be established among human beings at this time in redemptive history, and the other concerns whether or not non-Christians have the capibility of fulfilling those divine intentions.

Often in conversation with other Christians, when I talk of appealing to general revelation as a guide to thinking about social and cultural matters, they cite the need for authority as one reason for the absolute necessity of always appealing to special revelation. Reasoning from general revelation is open to debate and disagreement, and therefore lacks full authoritativeness, they argue. Some even accuse those who try to find common ground with unbelievers in general revelation of not really being Christians at all. Someone once said of me, as a matter of fact, that I was simply a conservative who happened to be a Christian.

But of course, if we reason only from Scripture, we are just as likely, if not more likely, to elicit debate and disagreement. Most battles among Christians are over the interpretation of Scripture. Obviously, the authority is there and recognized by all, but no one agrees on what its significance is, on exactly what is being authoritatively revealed. A sheer appeal to authority never absolves us from the responsibility of reasoning properly, of drawing the right inferences from the text, and of developing sound arguments based on those inferences.

I maintain that general revelation is authoritative also, and I believe this to be the classical Christian, the biblical position. Consider the case of Sodom and

Gomorrah, which, if I read *special revelation* right, were destroyed because they ignored or misread *general revelation.*

Further, consider Paul's teaching about general revelation in Romans 1, where general revelation is said to leave men without excuse, meaning either that they are without excuse for their refusing to glorify and thank God, or for their immorality, or both. General revelation has the authority to convict men before God.

One of the great ironies in this debate is that the authoritative special revelation in Scripture commands that, in certain matters, we rely on and appeal to general revelation. Meanwhile, others appeal to the same authoritative special revelation and assert that general revelation is totally unreliable because of the effects of sin on man's reason, and that the only way to avoid sinfully autonomous thinking is to rely on the Bible alone. Both of us are appealing to the Scriptures as our final authority in all matters. It's just that one of us believes that there is a Biblical mandate for not attempting to solve all cultural and social problems with deductions from Scripture. We cannot resolve this dilemma apart from appeals to reasonable, logical arguments. We need to try to persuade each other of the validity of our own position. Both of us can say we have the authority of special revelation on our side, but one of us has drawn wrong conclusions from that revelation. Unless an angel informs us which one is right, we have no alternative but to reason about revelation. And even then, following Paul's warning to the Galatians, the angel might not be reliable; his testimony would have to be logically consistent with our conclusions from revelation.

General Revelation & Authority

It is similar with regard to appeals to general revelation. Because someone can draw wrong conclusions from it, or refuses to draw any conclusions from it, does not mean that it has no authority, or that it is always unreliable.

General revelation is authoritative because it is from God; even though its intended recipients may deny its source, it is still authoritative. In some areas of life, it is the source God has established as the appropriate court of appeal. It deals with man's existence before God in a fallen universe. It speaks of God's creation of all things, his justice, his wrath, but not of his redemption.

Within that (now fallen) order of creation, the state is an institution of God's common grace, not his special grace. In the words of John Murray:

> Civil government as such is not a redemptive ordinance. But it provides, and is intended to provide, that outward peace and order within which the ordinances of redemption may work to the accomplishment of God's saving purpose. . . .
>
> The tranquility and order established and preserved by the ordinances of government are benefits enjoyed by all. This blessing arising from divine institution we must regard therefore as a common blessing and therefore as one of the institutions of common grace.[31]

Similarly, the social and cultural spheres are best understood as being spheres of common grace. Quoting Murray again:

> Without common grace special grace would not be possible because special grace would have no material out of which to erect its structure. It is common grace that provides not only the sphere in which, but the material out of which, the building fitly framed together may grow up into a holy temple in the Lord. It is the human race preserved by God, endowed with various gifts by God, in a world upheld and enriched by God, subsisting through the means of various pursuits and fields of labour, that provides the subjects for redemptive and regenerative grace.[32]

Those "various pursuits and fields of labour" by which the world subsists make up what we call "culture." Included here are the various arts and sciences by which human society survives and (in a manner) flourishes.

Common Grace in Reformed Theology

Let's look at what a number of other Reformed theologians have said about common grace, starting with Louis Berkhof, who, in his *Systematic Theology* argues that common grace effects its work through several means: general revelation, that is "the light of God's revelation that shines in nature and lightens every man coming into the world;"[33] government (cf. Rom. 13); public opinion, which, if in conformity with God's law, "has a tremendous influence on the conduct of men;"[34] and divine punishments and rewards, providentially arranged in this life.

The fruits of common grace include the ability to perform what has been called "civic righteousness," or *justitia civilis,* "that which is right in civil or natural affairs, in distinction from that which is right in religious matters, natural good works especially in social relations, works that are outwardly and objectively in harmony with the law of God, though entirely destitute of any spiritual quality."[35]

Berkhof is consistent with the Reformed confessions, compare, for example, the Westminster Confession on "Good Works," (ch. XVI, paragraph VII):

> Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

So works that are "of good use to themselves and to others" are done by the unregenerate. These works include works in the social and cultural spheres.

Now let's look at Calvin, in a chapter from the *Institutes* appropriately entitled "Man Has Now Been Deprived of Freedom of Choice and Bound Over to Miserable Servitude," (Book II, Chapter ii).

Calvin delivers his most stinging criticism of the idea of "free will," insisting that sinful man "cannot claim for himself ever so little beyond what is

rightfully his without losing himself in vain confidence and without usurping God's honor, and thus becoming guilty of monstrous sacrilege."[36] It is Satan himself, warns Calvin, who tempts us "to seek out something of our own that reposes in ourselves rather than in God."[37]

But Calvin then goes on to insist that man's reason, "though corrupted by sin, could not be completely wiped out."[38] Just as man still has a will, but suffers its bondage "to wicked desires," so man's reason still functions, and still performs some relative good.

> When we so condemn human understanding for its perpetual blindness as to leave it no perception of any object whatever, we not only go against God's Word, but also run counter to the experience of common sense. For we see implanted in human nature some sort of desire to search out the truth to which man would not aspire if he had not already savored it. Human understanding then possesses some power of perception, since it is by nature captivated by love of truth. The lack of this endowment in brute animals proves their nature gross and irrational.[39]

Calvin goes on to argue that man's search for truth "cannot hold to the right path" and is "incapable . . . of seeking and finding truth." But then he continues:

> Yet its [the human understanding's] efforts do not always become so worthless as to have no effect, especially when it turns its attention to things below. On the contrary, it is intelligent enough to taste something of things above, although it is more careless about investigating these. Nor does it carry on this latter activity with equal skill. For when the mind is borne above the level of the present life, it is especially convinced of its own frailty. Therefore, to perceive more clearly how far the mind can proceed in any matter according to the degree of its ability, we must here set forth a distinction: that there is one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly. I call "earthly things" those which do not pertain to God or his Kingdom, to true justice, or to the blessedness of the future life; but which have their significance and relationship with regard to the present life and are, in a sense, confined within its bounds. I call "heavenly things" the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom. The first class includes government, household management, all mechanical skills, and the liberal arts. In the second are the knowledge of God and of his will, and the rule by which we conform our lives to it.
>
> Of the first class the following ought to be said: since man is by nature a social animal, he tends through natural instinct to foster and preserve society. Consequently, we observe that there exist in all men's minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order. Hence no man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws. Hence arises that unvarying consent of all

nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws. For their seeds have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men.

I do not dwell upon the dissension and conflicts that immediately spring up. Some, like thieves and robbers, desire to overturn all law and right, to break all legal restraints, to let their lust alone masquerade as law. Others think unjust what some have sanctioned as just (an even commoner fault), and contend that what some have forbidden is praiseworthy. Such persons hate laws not because they do not know them to be good and holy; but raging with headlong lust, they fight against manifest reason. What they approve of in their understanding they hate on account of their lust. Quarrels of this latter sort do not nullify the original conception of equity. For, while men dispute among themselves about individual sections of the law, they agree on the general conception of equity. In this respect the frailty of the human mind is surely proved: even when it seems to follow the way, it limps and staggers. Yet the fact remains that some seed of political order has been implanted in all men. And this is ample proof that in the arrangements of this life no man is without the life of reason.

14. Then follow the arts, both liberal and manual. The power of human acuteness also appears in learning these because all of us have a certain aptitude. But although not all the arts are suitable for everyone to learn, yet it is a certain enough indication of the common energy that hardly anyone is to be found who does not manifest talent in some art. There are at hand energy and ability not only to learn but also to devise something new in each art or to perfect or polish what one has learned from a predecessor. This prompted Plato to teach wrongly that such apprehension is nothing but recollection. Hence, with good reason we are compelled to confess that its beginning is inborn in human nature. Therefore this evidence clearly testifies to a universal apprehension of reason and understanding by nature implanted in men. Yet so universal is this good that every man ought to recognize for himself in it the peculiar grace of God. The Creator of nature himself abundantly arouses this gratitude in us when he creates imbeciles. Through them he shows the endowments that the human soul would enjoy unpervaded by his light, a light so natural to all that it is certainly a free gift of his beneficience to each! Now the discovery or systematic transmission of the arts, or the inner and more excellent knowledge of them, which is characteristic of few, is not a sufficient proof of common discernment. Yet because it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious, it is rightly counted among natural gifts.

15. Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we contemn and reproach the Spirit himself. What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline

> with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? Let us be ashamed of such ingratitude, into which not even the pagan poets fell, for they confessed that the gods had invented philosophy, laws, and all useful arts. Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2:14] calls "natural men" were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.[40]

Calvin goes on to insist that it is the Spirit of God that establishes all human competence in arts and sciences "for the common good of mankind."

> But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer punishment for our sloths.[41]

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, writing in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1909, expressed many similar thoughts. Bavinck, writing about Calvin's view of common grace, began by observing that while "Christianity has from the beginning laid claim to be the one true religion,"[42] it is clear that "the Christian religion is by no means the sole content of history."[43] Rather:

> Underneath and side by side with the Christian religion a rich stream of natural life continues to flow. What, then, is the relation of Christianity to this wealth of natural life, which, originating in creation, has, under the law there imposed upon it, developed from age to age? What is the connection between nature and grace, creation and regeneration, culture and Christianity, earthly and heavenly vocation, the man and the Christian?[44]

Bavinck begins answering this question by asserting Scripture's clear claim that "for man God is the supreme good. . . . This, however, does not hinder earthly possessions from retaining a relative value. Considered in themselves they are not sinful or unclean; so long as they do not interfere with man's pursuit of the kingdom of heaven, they are to be enjoyed with thanksgiving."[45]

While the early Church necessarily "had to assume a preponderantly negative attitude towards the culture of their time,"[46] in time the Church was

able to rise "to the higher standpoint of trying all things and holding fast to that which is good, and adopt an eclectic procedure in its valuation and assimilation of the existing culture."[47]

> It was possible for the first Christians to do this because of their firm conviction that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, who in times past has never left Himself without witness to the heathen. . . . There existed in paganism a continued revelation through nature and the reason, in heart and conscience,—an illumination of the Logos, a speech from the wisdom of God through the hidden working of grace. . . . No doubt among the heathen this wisdom has in many respects become corrupted and falsified; they retain only fragments of truth, not the one, entire, full truth. But even such fragments are profitable and good. The three sisters, logic, physics and ethics, are like unto the three wise men from the east, who came to worship in Jesus the perfect wisdom. The good philosophical thoughts and ethical precepts found scattered through the pagan world receive in Christ their unity and center. They stand for the desire which in Christ finds its satisfaction; they represent the question to which Christ gives the answer; they are the idea of which Christ furnishes the reality. The pagan world, especially in its philosophy, is a pedagogy unto Christ; Aristotle, like John the Baptist, is the forerunner of Christ. It behooves the Christians to enrich their temple with the vessels of the Egyptians and to adorn the crown of Christ, their king, with the pearls brought up from the sea of paganism.[48]

Bavinck continues with a summary of Calvin's view of the ways in which the human race

> is still a clear mirror of the operation of God, an exhibition of His manifold gifts. [I, 5, 3, 4 in the *Institutes*] In every man there is still a seed of religion, a consciousness of God, wholly ineradicable, convincing all of the heavenly grace on which their life depends, and leading even the heathen to name God the Father of mankind. [I, 3; I, 5, 3; II, 2, 18] The supernatural gifts have been lost, and the natural gifts have become corrupted, so that man by nature no longer knows who and what God seeks to be to him. Still these latter gifts have not been withdrawn entirely from man. [II, 2, 12] Reason and judgment and will, however corrupt, yet, in so far as they belong to man's nature, have not been wholly lost. The fact that men are found either wholly or in part deprived of reason, proves that the title to these gifts is not self-evident and that they are not distributed to men on the basis of merit. None the less, the grace of God imparts them to us. [II, 2, 14, 17] The reason whereby man distinguishes between truth and error, good and evil, and forms conceptions and judgments, and also the will which is inseparable from human nature as the faculty whereby man strives after what he deems good for himself,—these raise him above the animals. Consequently it is contrary to Scripture as well as to experience to attribute to man such a perpetual blindness as would render him unable to form any true conception. [II, 2, 12] On the contrary, there is light still shining in the

> darkness, men still retain a degree of love for the truth, some sparks of the truth have still been preserved. [II, 2, 12, 18] Men carry in themselves the principles of the laws which are to govern them individually and in their association with one another. They agree in regard to the fundamentals of justice and equity, and everywhere exhibit an aptness and liking for social order. [II, 2, 13] Sometimes a remarkable sagacity is given to men whereby they are not only able to learn certain things, but also to make important inventions and discoveries, and to put these to practical use in life. [II, 2, 14] Owing to all this, not only is an orderly civil society made possible among men, but arts and sciences develop, which are not to be despised. For these should be considered [gifts of the Holy Spirit]. It is true the Holy Spirit as a spirit of sanctification dwells in believers only, but as a spirit of life, of wisdom and of power He works also in those who do not believe. No Christian, therefore, should despise these gifts; on the contrary, he should honor art and science, music and philosophy and various other products of the human mind as gifts of the Spirit, and make the most of them for his own personal use. [II, 2, 15, 16] Accordingly in the moral sphere also distinctions are to be recognized between some men and others. While all are corrupt, not all are fallen to an equal depth; [II, 3, 4] there are sins of ignorance and sins of malice. [II, 2, 25][49]

Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, philosopher, and educator at the turn of the century, followed Calvin's and Bavinck's lead in his appreciation for the evidences of common grace in cultural and social life. Kuyper is best known for his articulation of the antithesis between Christian knowledge and nonchristian knowledge. But in his lecture on "Calvinism and Science," published in the 1930s, Kuyper insisted that:

> . . . the one Aristotle knew more of the cosmos than all the church-fathers taken together; that under the dominion of Islam, better cosmic science flourished than in the cathedral and monastic schools of Europe; that the recovery of the writings of Aristotle was the first incentive to renewed though rather deficient study. . . .[50]

Kuyper further develops the doctrine of common grace in a subsequent lecture, asserting that:

> . . . the unbelieving world excels in many things. Precious treasures have come down to us from the old heathen civilization. In Plato you find pages which you devour. Cicero fascinates you and bears you along by his noble tone and stirs up in you holy sentiments. And if you consider your own surroundings, that which is reported to you, and that which you derive from the studies and literary productions of professed infidels, how much more there is which attracts you, with which you sympathize and which you admire. It is not exclusively the spark of genius or the splendor of talent which excites your pleasure in the words and actions of unbelievers, but it is often their beauty of character, their zeal, their devotion, their love, their candor, their faithfulness and their sense of

> honesty. Yea, we may not pass it over in silence, not infrequently you entertain the desire that certain believers might have more of the attractiveness, and who among us has not himself been put to the blush occasionally by being confronted with what is called the "virtues of the heathen"?[51]

Kuyper argues that common grace accounts for this state of affairs, which seems to go against the grain of the doctrine of total depravity. Calvinism articulated the doctrine of common grace more clearly than it had been before.

> It was now understood that it was the "common grace" of God, which had produced in ancient Greece and Rome the treasures of philosophic light, and disclosed to us treasures of art and justice, which kindled the love for classical studies, in order to renew to us the profit of so splendid an heritage.[52]

In a later lecture on "Calvinism and Art," Kuyper makes some even more surprising statements. First, he pays homage to Calvin by asserting that "all liberal arts are gifts which God imparts promiscuously to believers and to unbelievers, yea, that, as history shows, these gifts have flourished even in a larger measure outside the holy circle."[53] Such is the case not only with art, says Kuyper, "but to all the natural utterances of human life."[54] To make his argument, Kuyper looks at the character of the nation of Israel.

> As far as holy things are concerned, Israel is chosen, and is not only blessed above all nations, but stands among all nations, isolated. In the question of Religion, Israel has not only a larger share, but Israel alone has the truth, and all the other nations, even the Greeks and the Romans, are bent beneath the yoke of falsehood. Christ is not partly of Israel and partly of the nations; He is of Israel alone. Salvation is of the Jews. But just in proportion as Israel shines forth from within the domain of Religion, so is it equally backward when you compare the development of its art, science, politics, commerce and trade to that of the surrounding nations. The building of the Temple required the coming of Hiram from a heathen country to Jerusalem; and Solomon, in whom, after all, was found the Wisdom of God, not only knows that Israel stands behind in architecture and needs help from without, but by his action he publicly shows that he, as king of the Jews, is in no way ashamed of Hiram's coming, which he realizes as a natural ordinance of God.
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> . . . if Israel was chosen for the sake of Religion, this in no way prevented a parallel election of the Greeks for the domain of philosophy and for the revelations of art, nor of the Romans for the classical development within the domain of the Law and of State.[55]

Kuyper goes so far as to assert that the aesthetic principles enunciated by the Greeks are normative, that they have have an authority that subsequent generations of artists and art lovers must acknowledge, an authority that for Kuyper could only be the product of common grace enabling fallen men to perceive general revelation properly:

> And thus Calvinism confessed that, inasmuch as the Greeks had first discovered the laws by which the growth of the art-plant is governed, they therefore remain entitled to bind every further growth and every new impulse of art to their first, their classical development, not for the sake of stopping short with Greece, or of adopting her Paganistic form without criticism. Art, like Science, cannot afford to tarry at her origin, but must ever develop herself more richly, at the same time purging herself of whatsoever had been falsely intermingled with the earlier plant. Only, the law of her growth and life, when once discovered, must remain the fundamental law of art forever; a law, not imposed upon her from without, but sprung from her own nature.[56]

Art, Kuyper is saying, has its own rules, rules which God has placed there, which men must discover, and which, if broken, produce bad art. Such rules must be evident in general revelation: in human nature and in the created order. How else could Greece have discovered such rules?

Similarly, Kuyper agrees with Calvin that in politics, philosophy, commerce, and other cultural matters, unbelievers have in theory as much ability at developing skills as do the regenerate.

The Lordship of Christ

Now of course this is not to question God's sovereignty over all of life, nor Christ's lordship over all of the earth. It is merely to acknowledge diverse mechanisms and methods that God himself has established in his rule. God rules over all, but not all exists in the same position of submission to him. For example, in Colossians 1, one of the great texts proclaiming the rule of Christ over the universe, Paul says that Christ is the "head" of the Church. To my knowledge, that language is not used anywhere to describe Christ's rule over the universe more generally, because Christ does not rule the world in the same way that he rules the Church. He is not the head of the world. He is not the vine of which the world is the branches. He is not the good shepherd of the world. The world is not the bride of Christ. There is not the intimate organic spiritual unity between the world and Christ. So the way Christ is lord of the church is not the same way he is lord of the universe.

Moreover, the distinction between that which is holy and set apart and that which is common is not the product of un-Christian dualism, but a very biblical distinction, as we saw earlier. It is a distinction made in the Old Testament by God's election of Israel, and it is reinforced in the New Testament by his election of the church. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," says Peter of the church.

We acknowledge this distinction between the holy and the common each time we partake of the Lord's Supper. Every meal I eat, I eat to the glory of God, under the Lordship of Christ. But not every meal I eat has the significance and the power to transform that the Lord's Supper has. It is a holy meal in a way last week's visit to Burger King is not.

While God is bestowing good gifts on mankind through wicked men, he is simultaneously calling out his covenant community, a redemptive community,

that acknowledges his kingship. Members of this community are also engaged in the common cultural activities. But as Meredith Kline notes, these are still common grace activities:

> The common city of man does not in any fashion or to any degree become the holy kingdom of God through the participation of the culture-sanctifying saints in its development. Viewed in terms of its products, effects, institutional context, etc., the cultural activity of God's people is common grace activity. Their city of man activity is not "kingdom (of God)" activity. Though it is an expression of the reign of God in their lives, it is not a building of the Kingdom of God as institution or realm. For the common city of man is not the holy kingdom realm, nor does it ever become the holy city of God, whether gradually or suddenly. Rather, it must be removed in judgment to make way for the heavenly city as a new creation.[57]

Cultural Norms

What difference, then, does Christian involvement make? Cultural activity is a common grace activity. But, as Reformed theologians of every generation and nationality have acknowledged, there are nonetheless divine standards for cultural behavior, evident in general revelation, that believer and unbeliever alike can recognize and obey. Believers have the advantage of special revelation that informs them of the existence and significance of general revelation. But believers have no guarantee that they will thereby be automatically better interpreters of general revelation.

So while we are eager to see our culture reflect the values of the creator, values evident if ignored in his creation, we are not trying to establish a "biblical culture." There is no such thing. There is no such thing as "biblical art." Art, as Kuyper asserts, has its own rules. The Greeks saw many of these rules, without consulting the Bible.

Nor is there any such thing as "biblical politics," though there is certainly such a thing as "unbiblical politics," politics that violates the limitations of the state as understood in special revelation. But many unbelievers, informed by conscience and relying on their observations about human nature and history (all means of common grace), have come to conclude the necessities of the same limitations. Man as man suffers when government transgresses its bounds, and man as man *knows* that he suffers.

To the extent that our culture embodies or respects natural goods, experiences which are good by their God-given nature, by virtue of what it means to be human, to that extent a Christian observer should praise it, not because it embodies "kingdom values," but because it affirms common goods for those in the kingdom and for those outside.

When Christians articulate cultural values, they should be values that nonchristians can embrace as well, not because we have some prior commitment to "pluralism," and thereby seek to be inoffensive, but because we have expressed values which are in fact common values. Some, perhaps most, of our fellows will reject those values; likewise, as Calvin points out, some people refuse to obey civic laws, and prefer thievery to industry. The answer is not to

retreat from a defense based on appeals to general revelation, and scurry behind the allegedly impervious shield of special revelation. Miscreants who ignore common sense are unlikely to pause before citations from Leviticus. The answer is to be better philosophers, better art critics, better film producers, better journalists, better social theorists. The answer is not to ignore the rules of the game to which God has commited us, the game in which both the faithful and the infidel must play, and insist on the rules of the game that only the faithful can play. The answer is to play the game we are in (by God's direction) as best we can. We may not win that game. The city of man may deteriorate into something bestial. But God never promised that it would evolve into his holy city. Yes, it is in our interests that our culture conform to the norms of creation, but it may not be God's will that it do so. There have certainly been many cultures throughout history not blessed with the leaven of believers and the measure of common grace that ours has had. But it may well be that it is in God's purposes that he is withdrawing the common grace that has restrained our culture for centuries. We cannot know.

Saying that culture is common does not mean that it is neutral. It is common in that all human beings, both the "saints" (literally, the "holy ones," holy because God's presence is with them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit) and non-saints, are called to participate in it. But there's certainly nothing neutral about general revelation. It's certainly on our side. Admittedly, the ability to discern and affirm the content of general revelation is, in a sense, a "faith-neutral" ability. That is, the fact that one has not responded in affirming faith to the gospel has nothing to do with whether or not one will respond to the revelation of God in nature and conscience.

Faith is made possible by grace. So is the ability to perceive rightly general revelation. The ability to discern the truth about creation is not dependant on one's spiritual state. God has established the universe so that faith necessarily precedes justification; but there is nothing to hint that faith must precede common sense.

God graciously enables (not allows) many aspects of life to be properly pursued by people who refuse to love him. That makes the grace of God more wonderful and mysterious to me. God carries human history forth using some vessels prepared for glory and some fit for destruction. He establishes a common human culture for all to participate in and all to enjoy. He is not niggardly with his gifts, only bestowing intelligence or wit or heroism on his own children: he gives such gifts to the children of wrath as well, certainly not because they deserve them, since no one does, or because they will always use them properly, but because he wills it.

As we have noted, the curse has implicit within it the confirmation of the institution of the family, and a promise that the earth would continue to provide produce. Even in the curse, there is grace, and it is common grace: promises which obtain for all men.

The Necessity of Common Grace

Especially because of the common curse, common grace is necessary. Laboring under the physical, spiritual, and emotional strains of a fallen world, without any shade in the scorching sun of God's wrath, man's suffering would be, well,

hellish. But human experience is not hellish. In fact, considering what he deserves, human culture is an amazing gift. But that doesn't make it the Kingdom of God.

It is vital that we not regard art or science or the humanities to be evangelism carried on by other means. The purpose of those cultural pursuits is not to get people to acknowledge Christ as Savior and Lord, but simply to maintain fallen yet rich human life on the planet. Certainly the ultimate purpose of all of creation is the glory of God, but the glory of God is served in ways that are not properly speaking redemptive. God is glorified by the condemnation of the reprobate to eternal punishment; it would be incorrect to call their reprobation, and all of the wicked acts they do in meriting eternal punishment, "redemptive."

Neither is the rain that falls on the just and unjust "redemptive." The regenerate may give thanks to God because of the rain, and the produce they gather, in addition to keeping them alive, may support the work of bringing men and women into the kingdom. It may also support works of charity or other acts of mercy.

Meanwhile, when the rain comes the unregenerate give thanks to no one but themselves. If they are diligent workers, and take advantage of the earth's bounty (which is a gift of God), we can thank common grace for their industry; left to themselves they would only be thieves. True, they will use their material gain to further their own perdition. But even in so doing, they may do (by the grace of God) some civil goods. Some of the fruits of their labor will end up on the plates of the regenerate. The taxes they pay on their income provide for parks and highways that make the work of the regenerate more pleasant and more efficient. (If they are motivated to pay their taxes, we can attribute this to common grace, which has restrained their rebellion. If the taxes are collected fairly and the state is providing for national security, we can attribute this too to God's common grace, which has given even the unregenerate politicians and voters the knowledge that the state serves to protect its people.) They may even see fit to give some of their income to the church; if they are moved to do so, it would be because of conscience serving as a means of common grace.

The life of human culture is a common task. There is nothing intrinsically holy about it, since holiness has always to do with the unique presence of God. The saints are to live "holy" lives, but the locus of their holiness is not in the *nature* of what they do (since non-saints can do many of the same things) but in the *manner* in which they do it. Giving all of one's possessions to the poor can be a holy act, necessary for eternal life (Luke 18:18ff.), or it can be a common act, making the cultural life of the poor a bit more bearable, but profiting nothing spiritually speaking (I Cor. 13:1ff.).

It is true that every act is in some sense religious. Every act is finally related to the religious roots of existence, and the particular religious state of an individual. Even when God restrains the wicked, and enables them to do externally good things, the act is not neutral. It is simultaneously an act of the rebellious nature of the sinner influenced by the common grace of God. But it is not thereby holy. God remains sovereign over the life of the unbeliever, as he remains sovereign over Hell. But the unbeliever is not thereby a "holy one" just because the Spirit has enabled him to do some civic good.

Because of God's common grace, unregenerate and rebellious people are restrained in their evil, and in the foolishness of their thinking. Because of common grace, many unregenerate people hold standards of goodness, truth, justice, morality, and beauty which accord with God's will.

But another force is also at work in culture: the effects of the "common curse." Because of the residual effects of sin, many regenerate people remain foolish and stupid. They actually hate what is good, true, just, noble, and beautiful. Therefore, the regenerate are culturally retarded much of the time.

What about a person who consults what he thinks is general revelation and comes up with an ethical system that condones abortion and euthanasia. One could do so only by misreading general revelation. General revelation is no less divine, and no less in accordance with God's law for its generality. Most cultures frown on homicide precisely because of perceptions from general revelation that it is wrong. To deny the continuity of life from conception to birth to adulthood, and to posit that fetal homicide is allowable at some arbitrary point on this continuum, is not reasoning properly from general revelation. Many non-Christians have recognized the folly of such pro-choice reasoning, not least of them Peter Singer, the animal rights activist and champion of infanticide. Singer argues that the liberal argument for abortion but against infanticide is unsound, precisely because of this logical impropriety. Now, if our colleagues know at some level (conscience?) that infanticide is wrong, we must reason, as Singer does, back to abortion and show them, on the basis of their appeal to general revelation ("my conscience tells me that infanticide is wrong"), that abortion is also wrong. What we must do is train people in the art of interpreting general revelation consistently, as well as special revelation.

By ignoring the appeal to general revelation in the public arena, Christians have virtually turned it over to the opponents of truth, to twist and distort for their purposes. Louis Berkhof says that public opinion is one of the means of common grace. God graciously leads people into civic righteousness, which is "in external conformity with the law of God," by means of public opinion, informed by "the natural light that shines in the hearts of men," and reinforced by the influence of special revelation. In this century, the church has lost the battle for public opinion on many fronts, especially among intellectuals. Recovering lost ground will require reinforcement from special revelation. But it will not succeed if we refuse to appeal to "the light of nature." One of the reasons I believe this so strongly is because I believe one of the greatest losses of recent decades is a loss of belief in human nature as a constant, objective, metaphysical reality. Philosophers, both pagan and Christian, have assumed this for centuries, as have pagan and Christian lawyers, statesmen, artists, and novelists. They believed this because they knew it in their hearts, they saw it in history, and to believe otherwise was to go against the testimony of history and public opinion, to be stigmatized. These were all forces of common grace: God restraining evil through various means.

The belief in the distinctiveness of man is essential to human life and to human culture. As a Christian, submissive to special revelation, I know the reasons for the significance of this truth. But it was no less true and no less powerful an idea for millions of non-Christians who believed it throughout history. The dignity of man is not a "party truth," something only the elect can believe. If it were, history would not have gotten so far.

It may be that God is withdrawing his common grace, allowing man to wallow in the despair of meaninglessness that accompanies the loss of belief in man. But I do not know this for sure, and I cannot assist in encouraging other human beings to deny the truth.

If there is an apparent diminishing love for God's Word within his Church, it could only be because he sovereignly allowed it. My response should not be to cease to preach, but to preach all the more earnestly, and teach and write and argue and weep and pray, working to remove all human barriers to love for God's Word knowing that the outcome is finally in his hands. The same is true with God's word in creation and conscience. I cannot take pleasure in the degradation of God's general revelation. I must preach it and teach it and praise it and argue and weep and pray for God's common grace even for those destined to eternal damnation, pray that they be given better understanding of the truths necessary for human culture to be preserved.

Belief Without Faith

When Paul instructed Timothy (I Tim. 2:1, 2) to pray for kings and those in authority, that we might live peaceful and quiet lives, in all godliness and holiness, I don't think the only way those prayers could be answered was for the kings to become converted and start reading the law and the prophets. God did, and does answer those prayers by restraining the rebellion of the kings and the other civil leaders, enabling them to see how to conduct affairs of state that made peaceful and quiet lives possible for believers and unbelievers.

Belief in God, belief in the dignity of man, in human rights, in equity in justice: all of these things are perfectly capable of being believed by unregenerate people. It is certainly not necessary for the person to respond to the gospel in saving faith to affirm those assumptions. All that is necessary is that God make them willing to believe in, say, the dignity of man. It won't get them to heaven, but it may make them better citizens. It may encourage civic righteousness, and in some contexts the encouragement of civic righteousness is a properly limited goal. Of course, you can't make them willing to believe it yourself. But the same objection applies to getting them to repent, and that doesn't keep good Calvinists from doing evangelism.

Believers concerned about their culture must be concerned to assist in God's work of common grace, in an matter analogous to that of the evangelist with regard to special grace. Because we want to strengthen the common culture, we are interested in making arguments that reinforce perceptions of general revelation.

In his book, *Death of the Soul,* philosopher William Barrett observes, "The religious question is ultimately at the center of all philosophy, even if it be by way of rejection."[58] This is a powerful observation: the question of man's relationship to God is so obviously the central question for anyone doing philosophical reflection, that is, anyone taking to the time to consider general revelation seriously. But, continues Barrett, modern philosophy has come to a perilous destination:

> That some contemporary philosophers have reached the point where they never enter into the question, where the philosopher never seems

> even to be troubled by the word "God," is itself a profound sign of the state of our culture. It took an immense amount of philosophic thinking and unthinking to prepare the human psyche for this matter-of-fact state of godlessness. Perhaps it is a harbinger of the future at which the human species—all of us—will someday arrive. But perhaps not; and certainly not yet.[59]

Our culture has arrived at this dismal state, in part, I believe, because Christians have held God's own work of common grace in low esteem, and we have not pressed home the evident implications of general revelation. By our retreat from cultural involvement, we have not been present to press home the teaching of general revelation.

We must always be wary of holding the blessing of God through common grace in disdain. To disregard the nobility and worth of the accomplishments (by God's common grace) of the unregenerate is, as we've heard Calvin warn, "to dishonor the Spirit of God," to "contemn and reproach the Spirit himself." Of course, we must condemn the rebellion of the wicked, and call them to repentance, but there is no need to ignore the occasions in which the unregenerate show themselves on the side of beauty and truth. Never, of course, is such accomplishment righteous in the eyes of God. We honor such accomplishments, even if in their hearts the doers of these deeds hate the creator, because the accomplishments themselves are a gift from, and serve to honor, the creator of all beauty and truth, who is also our Father, Lord, and King.

NOTES

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[3] Ibid., p. 43.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 44.

[6] Ibid., p. 46.

[7] Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Notes toward the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 100.

[8] Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 14.

[9] John H. Gerstner, "Jonathan Edwards and the Bible," *Tenth: An Evangelical Quarterly,* October 1979, pp. 2f.

[10] Ibid., p. 7.

[11] Ibid., p. 6.

[12] Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 82f.

[13] Ibid., p. 83.

[14] Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* volume one (Privately published, 1986), p. 55.

[15] Ibid., p. 58.

[16] Ibid., p. 58f.

[17] Ibid., p. 63.

[18] Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* volume two (Privately published, 1985), p. 14f.

[19] Kline, volume one, pp. 104f.

[20] Ibid., p. 105f.

[21] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p. 19.

[22] Ibid.

[23] R. T. France, "The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization,* edited by D. A. Carson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 30.

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[25] Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 419.

[26] Geerhardus Vos, "The Kingdom of God," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 309.

[27] James V. Schall, S.J., *Christianity and Politics* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), p. 7.

[28] Edmund P. Clowney, "The Politics of the Kingdom," MARS HILL *Monograph* 3, p. 2.

[29] Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962) p. 20.

[30] Ibid., p. 354ff.

[31] John Murray, "Common Grace," in *Collected Writings of John Murray,* volume two (Edinburgh/Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), p. 112.

[32] Ibid., p. 113.

[33] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), p. 440.

[34] Ibid., p. 441.

[35] Ibid., p. 443.

[36] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 267.

[37] Ibid., p. 267f.

[38] Ibid., p. 270.

[39] Ibid., p. 271.

[40] Ibid., p. 271ff.

[41] Ibid., p. 275.

[42] Herman Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace," *Princeton Theological Review* 7 (1909), p. 437.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., pp. 437ff.

[45] Ibid., p. 437.

[46] Ibid., p. 439.

[47] Ibid.

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[49] Ibid., pp. 454-456

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[51] Ibid., pp. 121f.

[52] Ibid., p. 125.

[53] Ibid., p. 160.

[54] Ibid., p. 161.

[55] Ibid., pp. 161f.

[56] Ibid., p. 163.

[57] Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* volume two, p. 57.

[58] William Barrett, *Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986), p. 56.

[59] Ibid.