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The Two Kingdoms Perspective and Theological Method: Why I Still Disagree with David Van Drunen

by Jason Lief

In the March 2012 edition of *Pro Rege*, David Van Drunen wrote an essay in which he responded to criticism of his work advocating for a return to a two kingdoms theological perspective.[1] In his essay he argues that a two kingdoms perspective and a return to natural law provide a significant paradigm for the Christian engagement of cultural issues. His arguments are biblically grounded in dialogue with the Reformed tradition, demonstrating that any criticism from the Neo-Calvinist camp that relies solely upon Kuyperian jargon misses the point. For his part, Van Drunen takes seriously the language of Luther and Calvin regarding the temporal and spiritual realms of human existence, prompting adherents of the Neo-Calvinist perspective to carefully re-examine the way in which the issues of cultural engagement and transformation have been articulated. Ultimately, he argues that the two kingdoms paradigm is a more biblically and theologically orthodox paradigm for cultural engagement than the transformational paradigm of Neo-Calvinism. While Neo-Calvinists are free to disagree, we must at least provide solid arguments explaining why we disagree.

A good place to begin is to admit that Van Drunen is right—Calvin, explicitly, and Kuyper, implicitly, use "two kingdoms" language. A literal reading of the *Institutes* shows that Calvin separated the experience of the Christian community into two realms. Within the temporal realm he emphasized the role of reason, the importance of vocation, and

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the possibility of a common cultural life between Christians and non-Christians, making it somewhat strange to speak of specifically Christian forms of commerce, farming, or plumbing.

Within a Kuyperian perspective, the belief in "common grace" maintains that even though humanity has fallen into sin, and sin has corrupted every aspect of our human nature, by God's grace certain aspects of our humanity are preserved so that humans are not as evil as we could be. This measure of grace props up our human nature, enabling non-Christians to seek, with Christians, common "good"; that capacity becomes the basis for a common cultural experience. While the Kuyperian understanding of the "antithesis" takes seriously the impact of sin upon human culture, "common grace" raises significant questions about the existence of specifically Christian forms of culture. To be fair to Van Drunen, he is clearly not calling into question the Lordship of Christ over cultural existence, nor does his perspective necessarily undercut support for Christian education. He is, however, challenging the Neo-Calvinist articulation of the way in which God governs the various spheres of creaturely life, and the relationship of this mode of governing to the work of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Ironically, I'm not sure Van Drunen goes far enough in his critique of the Neo-Calvinist rejection of the "secular" realm. An important consequence of the Reformation has been the demythologization of the natural world, what Bonhoeffer referred to as "the world come of age."[2] In one of his letters written from prison he writes, "We must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. We must live a 'secular' life, and thereby share in God's sufferings. We may live a 'secular' life (as one who has been freed from false religious obligations and inhibitions).... It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life."[3] To speak of the "secular" in this way means that the world is no longer deified or imbued with magical powers; instead, the world is set free to be what is was created to be.[4] It is this move that gave religious support to the scientific and political movements already in process during the time of the Reformation. Too often, the critique of the enlightenment and modernity by those in the Neo-Calvinist perspective overshadows the positive contribution of Christianity, and the Reformation in particular, to the process of secularization that makes a common cultural participation possible. To speak of the "secular" in this way does not necessarily undercut the Kuyperian understanding of "antithesis," but it does call for a clarification of what "antithesis" means. What exactly is the difference between science from a Christian perspective and other forms of science? More importantly, how does a Neo-Calvinist perspective bring together a healthy understanding of the secular that does not fall into a type of dualism, but that, like Bonhoeffer, recognizes the process of secularization (as opposed to secularism) as an outworking of Christianity?

Van Drunen also draws some important connections between Kuyperian thought and natural law.[5] While Kuyperians tend to avoid natural-law language, a Kuyperian vision of higher education is grounded in a belief that it is the task of the Christian community to uncover, unfold, and unleash the potentialities of God's good creation. An essential part of this endeavor is to discern the normative ways, or "modes" of being, within the various creational spheres. Van Drunen argues that the categories of natural law, grounded in the two kingdoms perspective, is a better way for Christians to talk about creational normativity, going so far as to claim that the nuanced language of the Kuyperian perspective is really a modified form of "natural law." He bases this view upon the observation that while the Neo-Calvinist perspective speaks of laws and modes in a manner that takes relationality and historicity seriously, there remains a strong emphasis upon "creational norms" grounded in an act of creation "in the beginning." This grounding becomes the foundation for the "development" of cultural spheres in response to the "creational" or "cultural" mandate as humanity participates in the cultivation of the various cultural spheres, unleashing the potentiality of creation. It's fair to say that many Kuyperians would agree with Van Drunen when he writes, "In his creation and providence God formed the world in a certain way, thereby establishing the truths of mathematics, agriculture, and anatomy....The result of good farming is a

good crop, whether by a believer or unbeliever."[6]

My point has been to demonstrate that if we read Van Drunen's arguments carefully, we find that he makes a strong argument. His work represents an attempt to construct a theological perspective grounded in the two kingdoms paradigm that provides a way for the Christian community to frame the engagement of cultural issues. He provides a critique of the transformational elements within the Kuyperian tradition, believing them to be at best inadequate and at worst unorthodox, because he believes the two realms of the kingdom of God—the cultural (temporal) and the redemptive (spiritual)—are held in proper tension within a two kingdoms paradigm. For Van Drunen there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, and one Kingdom, consisting of two realms governed by God in two different ways that allow for a common participation in the broader culture. This perspective guarantees that these two realms are not confused—salvation does not come through the engagement of the temporal realm, though most discourses that emphasize cultural transformation inevitably lead to the conflation of justification and sanctification. Overall, Van Drunen makes a strong argument that brings together insights from the Reformed tradition and Scripture, offering a Reformed perspective of cultural engagement that provides an alternative to the Kuyperian emphasis upon cultural transformation.

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The weaknesses of Van Drunen's arguments are found in the presuppositions that undergird his biblical interpretation and his engagement of the Reformed tradition. Van Drunen provides a literalistic interpretation of the creation accounts that emphasizes a factual and scientific (meaning metaphysical) reading of the text. This interpretation includes a belief in a pre-fall "covenant of works," which becomes the epistemological and moral foundation for discerning the objective "truth" that can be known from creation. This "covenant" of works, interpreted through the lens of the Noahic Covenant, also provides the moral and epistemological basis for the human ability to discern what is socially and culturally "good." This interpretation allows Van Drunen to make claims about the common "objective standards of excellence" for the Christian and non-Christian participation in vocation and the possibility of a consensus about what is "good" agriculture or "good" medicine.[7] To be fair, the Neo-Calvinist perspective arrives at a similar perspective with "common grace"—the belief that God upholds creation after the fall and does not allow the full ramification of sin to run its course. In both cases, the "truth" of creation and human culture can be commonly discerned through reason as it connects with a static, metaphysical, act of creation "in the beginning."

It is important to recognize that Van Drunen's biblical arguments are informed by his interpretive choices, as the creation accounts of Genesis are taken to be factual, quasi-scientific accounts that provide the foundation for moral, objective truth. This interpretation does not leave space for a canonical, inter-textual reading of Genesis that opens the creation accounts to a "salvific-redemptive" reading in connection with the Exodus event. A consequence of Van Drunen's interpretive choice is that it allows him to differentiate between the Noahic and the Abrahamic covenants.

Yet, an alternative reading of the creation accounts suggests that both the Abrahamic covenant and the Noahic covenant are grounded in the act of creation with the "promise" of land and progeny given to the man and woman in Genesis 1. Such an inter-textual reading demonstrates the correlation between the chaotic darkness "in the beginning," the darkness of the ninth plague, and the darkness of the crucifixion. Just as the Genesis accounts tell us of a creation that bursts forth from the darkness and chaotic water, so too the Exodus narrative tells of the creation of Israel as they are brought out of darkness, out of death, through the chaotic water, and into the "garden" that is the "promised land." The Christological connections are obvious,

as Good Friday and Holy Saturday culminate with the day of resurrection, which early Christian theologians referred to as the eighth day of creation. In this context the creation accounts are not merely scientific—factual—accounts of a creation "in the beginning" but are also a poetic and theological testimony to the salvific work of God that points ahead to the Exodus event and the creation of Israel, culminating in the work of Christ.

An eschatological interpretation of the creation accounts connects the act of creation with the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, the full meaning of the creation accounts points into the future to the fulfillment of creation anchored in the future of God and God's kingdom, which is symbolized by the promise of a new Creation, revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is how the creation texts should be interpreted—upholding the primacy of God's grace and "promise" to make all things new.

A second point of disagreement is the way in which Van Drunen's use of natural law imposes a form of metaphysical, or ontological, moral truth upon the social and cultural world. The problem with most articulations of natural law is that they become the basis for asserting a specific way of being in the world. It becomes the means by which particular cultural manifestations are declared to be universal and normative. Whether it is gender roles, political institutions, or social institutions and organizations, etc., the tendency of natural law is to point to some essentialized, metaphysical truth and posit it as non-historical. Even the Kuyperian perspective, which emphasizes the development of creation and the unfolding of the potentialities of creation, can fall into this trap, as the potentiality of creation is grounded in some static creation "in the beginning." All of these considerations lead to these questions: What are the creational norms for each creational sphere? What constitutes a "family?" Who decides what is normative with regard to gender roles or sexuality? Ultimately, the problem with a doctrine of creation that is not eschatologically connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that it becomes the basis for reification and idolatry—concretizing and essentializing that which is historical and contingent. Ultimately, this question has to be asked: What's at stake? What moral principles, what cultural forms, what way of life are all at stake in this dialogue? All of these questions point to the presuppositions and interpretive choices we make as we come to Scripture to construct our theological and philosophical arguments.

Similar choices are made regarding the way we interpret the Christian tradition. I appreciate the way Van Drunen prompts the broader Reformed community to revisit the wisdom and insight of the reformers. The thought of Luther and Calvin represents an important paradigm shift—one that moved away from strong metaphysical categories and hierarchal ordering of society to a more "this worldly," egalitarian theology. The way in which Van Drunen interprets this tradition, however, is problematic. Once again, Van Drunen takes a literalistic approach to Calvin and Luther that diminishes the depth of their ideas. Clearly, their language and categories were grounded in a specific historical context—one that no longer exists and one that we should not try to recreate. Instead, a reader should pay attention to the rhetorical and metaphorical power of Calvin's language by tapping into the hermeneutical and rhetorical nature of his work. This perspective recognizes that "reality" is constituted through that act of interpretation, and that the task of theology is to enter into a dialogue with Scripture, with the tradition, and with one another.

An excellent example of a contemporary theologian who takes this approach to Calvin's work is Serene Jones, who has constructed a feminist theological paradigm that brings both Scripture and Calvin's theology into conversation with other disciplines and the significant issues pertaining to the contemporary experience of women. Jones makes constant reference to the liberating elements of Calvin's thought, emphasizing how his theological method focused upon rhetorically affecting the heart.[8] She interprets and applies Calvin's insight on accommodation, justification, sanctification, and even his reference to the "church as mother."[9] While this is not the place to debate the merits of Jones' theological method, I refer to her work as an example of the depth and insight available to the Christian community in the thought of John Calvin.

So where does this leave us? I have attempted

to demonstrate the value and importance of David Van Drunen's articulation of the two kingdoms perspective. If taken seriously, his perspective provides an important dialogue partner for the Neo-Calvinist perspective, as it continues to develop ways of speaking about the Christian engagement of culture. However, while I respect Van Drunen's work and the arguments he makes, I cannot, in the end, agree with him. As I have tried to demonstrate, my disagreement is grounded in the presuppositions we bring to the conversation—the lens through which we interpret Scripture and the manner in which we appropriate the Reformed tradition and the thought of John Calvin specifically. I in no way pretend to think that this short essay will persuade Van Drunen or anyone else to change their mind about the two kingdoms perspective. What I have tried to demonstrate is that, while we share a common heritage and tradition, our theological methods have different starting points with different concerns and driving issues. For my part, I sincerely hope this dialogue will continue in a manner that acknowledges and engages the arguments so that we can learn from each other, challenge each other, and, in the spirit of Luther, one day sit down to drink beer together.

A second point of disagreement is the way in which Van Drunen's use of natural law imposes a form of metaphysical, or ontological, moral truth upon the social and cultural world.

Endnotes

1. David Van Drunen, "The Two Kingdoms and Reformed Christianity: Why Recovering an Old Paradigm is Historically Sound, Biblically Grounded, and Practically Useful" *Pro Rege* 40, no. 3 (March 2012), 31-38.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Geffrey B. Kelly, and F. Burton Nelson, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 506-07.
3. Ibid., 509.
4. For a discussion of the relationship between Christianity and secularization see, Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, Italian Academy Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
5. See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), especially chapter 9, which engages the Kuyperian tradition.
6. David Van Drunen, "The Two Kingdoms and Reformed Christianity," p. 37-38.
7. *Ibid*.
8. See Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, 1st ed., Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
9. See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, *Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).