

# Dominion Theology Meets the Kingdom of God

By Ruben C. Alvarado

*The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church*, by Peter Leithart (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1993), pp. Xiv, 269.

Contra Mundum, No. 12, Summer 1994

Copyright 1994 Ruben C. Alvarado

---

The “Christian Reconstruction” movement broadly conceived has been dominated by a single motif: dominion. For too long, reconstructionists say, the Church has eschewed the task set before Adam by God in Genesis 1:26-28: to subdue the earth and have dominion over all its creatures. Christians are called by God to recover this so-called “dominion mandate” and take control of every area of life—family, business, science, government, economics, art, etc.<sup>1</sup> These activities are elevated to the status of “kingdom activities”. Works of culture “build the kingdom”. This program of action, in particular via the work of Rousas John Rushdoony, was adopted from the Dutch “neo-Calvinist” movement whose founding father was Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). Neo-calvinist, because (1) it made a big deal out of being Reformed, and (2) it discarded fundamental elements of the classical Reformed heritage. Neo-Calvinists (at least since Herman Dooyeweerd's “Cosmonic Idea” school took over in the 1930s) denigrated that tradition's reliance on classical philosophy as represented by Plato, Aristotle, et al., and rejected the “pietistic” emphasis on personal subjective religious experience so characteristic of earlier strict Reformed teaching. Even more crucial: neo-Calvinists rejected the theocratic mandate of a public establishment of religion as embodied in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. In fact, in 1905 neo-Calvinists, under the leadership of Kuyper, excised the offending portion of that article.<sup>2</sup> Kuyper proposed a radical distinction between the visible and invisible church, deemphasizing the role of the former in favor of the latter. These distinctives were carried over into the Christian Reconstruction movement.

---

1 Such lists describing “every area of life” nearly always end in “etc.”

2 “[The civil magistrates'] office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry *and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship, that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed* that the Kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted.” The italicized clause was removed. This action was similar to what American Presbyterians did to the Westminster Confession in 1787.

Not that neo-Calvinists rejected the idea that Christians needed to apply the truths of Scripture to society. Far from it. While rejecting traditional theocracy, they worked to apply a new definition of the Kingdom of God to society. Classic Reformed theology had defined the Kingdom of God essentially as the Church, invisible as well as visible, not as society at large. The Kingdom certainly impacted society, and society was certainly to subordinate itself to the claims of the Kingdom, but one could never say that society was the Kingdom or embodied the Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Neo-Calvinists redefined that Kingdom as the invisible church, but not in the old sense as true believers united with God in heaven but simply as Christians active in the world. Christian private associations became the expression of this invisible church, as opposed to the traditional institutional church. The Kingdom thus became a part of human culture, the leaven, it was hoped, which would make a culture acceptable unto God. Such would fulfil the cultural mandate. Thus the cultural mandate came to be viewed as the means to establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Christian culture is the Kingdom of God.

The problem with this approach is, what is Christian culture? We live in a world in which even in the best of times a sizeable number of people are unconverted. But culture is a collective enterprise. One cannot build a culture on one's own. One needs cooperation from others. Cooperation demands a leading function, a goal, teleology. People can only cooperate if they have some final end in view. How are unbelievers to cooperate with believers in building culture?

In terms of the neo-Calvinist approach, this is done by disestablishing the church and religion, and so establishing the state above confessional differences, allowing the different confessional groupings in society to 'compete' with each other in culture-building activities. What springs up then, from Christian circles, is a variety of Christian institutions—Christian universities, Christian newspapers, Christian radio and television, Christian bookstores, Christian schools, Christian hospitals, etc.—which stand over

---

3 The classic expression of Reformed teaching in this regard is Martin Bucer's *De Regno Christi*. Chapter II of Book I is entitled: "What the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdoms of the world have in common and what they do not." In both kingdoms, one person exercises supreme authority; in addition, kings as well as Christ work to "establish and promote the means of making their citizens devout and righteous" although earthly kings cannot affect the heart but may only work on the outer man; furthermore, in both kingdoms the wicked must be tolerated "while they lie hidden among the good", although when they expose themselves and prove themselves incorrigible they should be "removed from the commonwealth"; kings of this world reward the good and punish the bad by external means, while Christ works through His Word and the Spirit; kings of the world as well as Christ engage with their subjects through external covenants and sacraments, but Christ's sacraments cleanse from sin "according to the hidden counsel of his eternal election"; again, both kings attend to the material needs of their subjects, both look to the education of their subjects in useful occupations according to the skill and function of each individual, but civil government needs the Kingdom of Christ to fulfill this goal: "only in [Christ's] Kingdom this end of civil government is achieved." Kings of the earth cannot give their wealthy subjects a spirit of sharing in material blessings, nor to their needy subjects "hearts that will accept an unavoidable dependence on the kindness of others." The kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of Christ are also subject to each other insofar as each is under the jurisdiction of the other, according to the Lord's dispensation. *De Regno Christi*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck in collaboration with Paul Larkin, in *Melancthon and Bucer*. The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1969).

against humanistic counterparts. From the state's point of view, these stand on a line: Christian institutions are of no higher value juridically than humanistic ones.

This approach is only tenable when one relegates all of culture to the private sphere. The state and culture are strictly separate. Only so can the condition of strict neutrality in public affairs be maintained. But guess what? Politics also proves to be cultural. Cultural movements do not run in isolation to political ones. In fact, politics tends to express the balance of power among society's cultural elements.

Here again the neo-Calvinist paradigm comes to the rescue. Yes, culture impacts politics—one certainly cannot maintain a wall of separation between them. What one does need to do is ensure that the balance of power in society is faithfully reflected in politics. Thus democracy, free and fair elections, will ensure that the competition among confessional groupings in the private sector, in “culture”, is extended into the public arena.

In Abraham Kuyper's day one could reckon on a Christian majority. No longer. Christians find themselves increasingly under attack in contemporary Dutch society. An equal rights amendment was recently passed guaranteeing that no one could be discriminated against in hiring, in renting an apartment, etc., especially with regard to sexual orientation. Here is a frontal attack on Christian institutions. It was to be expected.

Contemporary “conservative” Dutch Christians well-nigh passively accept such a situation. They are now so wedded to this system of “neutrality” under the leadership of the state that they cannot seem to stand up for specifically Christian values anymore. For the most part, Christian ethics in the Netherlands consists in following the left-wing socialist agenda. Most Dutch Christians applauded Bill Clinton's victory over George Bush. As I write, the attempt is being made to form a new coalition government in the Netherlands. One of the options is a coalition between Christian parties and the pro-free-market Liberal party. Again, most Dutch Christians are against such a coalition and would rather join with the left-wing Labour party.

Many of the problems experienced by Dutch neo-Calvinists are now cropping up for conservative Christians in the U.S. Reigning humanism among public institutions, especially public education, has put Christians on a war footing. The old 'Sunday school' consensus evaporated in the sixties, never to return.

In the face of this threat the neo-Calvinist model of cultural action has been adapted to the American situation especially through the influence of the Christian Reconstruction movement. This has led to a boom in two areas: voluntary Christian associationalism, especially in education and the media, and Christian political action.

Which goal is actually to be attained through political action is a matter of debate. Many follow the Kuyperian framework in seeking to maintain a religiously neutral state which

nevertheless adheres to God's law in matters secular.<sup>4</sup> Others believe that political action can actually lead to the establishment of the Kingdom. Most secular humanists attribute the latter goal to all Christian political activism, and become suitably scared out of their wits. And, truth be told, Christian political activism will always labor under the presumption that, deep down, what all these fanatics really want is to impose their fundamentalist beliefs on everyone else.

The problem with this entire approach is not so much liberal suspicion as that it accepts a fundamental presupposition of modern liberalism: that Christianity cannot be publicly established, that the nation as such cannot be Christian. Christians therefore need to work through the “democratic process”, through political action, to get as much of their agenda on the lawbooks as possible. In short, Christians need to accept the armor of Saul to do the work of David. But this begs a crucial question: is politics the vehicle for promoting fundamental principles, presuppositions? Is politics about subjecting the Truth to majority vote? Or worse: to the odious practices of party politics? Are the interests of the Kingdom to be entrusted to the GOP? Can any political party claim an exclusive ownership of the Christian inheritance?

Such problems are inherent in modern democracy, which is predicated on the belief that ultimate realities, absolute values, cannot be established as the basis for the political order. Our social contract supposedly is to agree to disagree about ultimate reality; in fact, we fight about it in the political arena. The claim is that we gain a more or less acceptable compromise faithfully reflecting the balance of power of belief-systems in a religiously free society; in fact, we institutionalize a state of war.

In summary: equating the Kingdom of God with Christian culture results in accepting a culture war with humanists, which is resolved (i.e. allowed to remain unresolved) via political action.

Just as the age of Hillary looms and the impasse seems insurmountable, along comes Peter Leithart to remind us that our problems are bound up, not so much with getting bad breaks or doing a better job of fund-raising, but with our entire approach. We view the Kingdom as culture and are then forced to accept the corollary to this viewpoint, political action in the 'neutral' public square, which never fails to disappoint, when it doesn't end up selling the Kingdom down the river. Leithart's purpose is to free us from the bondage of this deception into the spiritual liberty of a transcendent Kingdom whose supremacy is undisputed and whose dominion is hardly dependent upon what we can accomplish with the works of our hands. In short, Leithart scotches the Kingdom=culture perspective.

Not in so many words. Leithart is a member of that rare species, the true gentleman, in an age of second-rate journalistic/literary hatchetmen.<sup>5</sup> While I'm at it I may as well also

---

4 This gospel was preached by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, Chuck Colson, Herbert Titus (erstwhile dean of Pat Robertson's law school), and the latest manifestation, the Christian Coalition.

5 Lest anyone think I am insinuating criticism of Gary North: Gary is in a class by himself, a true master of the art of carving up his opponents in more fair-handed a manner than many such deserve. It takes all

heap praises on his excellent style of writing: always clear, to the point, often profound, abounding in helpful analogies and illustrations. It is not often that such literary talent is put to the service of such an urgent message. The message itself, be it said, is the most important one that can be made in our day and age. I don't want to make too much of this, but the combination of gift and message that Leithart combines does remind me of a wonderful blessing of God's dispensation, when the most brilliant, most eloquent orator in the last days of Rome was also the one called to provide the definitive content to Western Christianity: Augustine.

These last statements appear to undermine the very thesis of Leithart's book, that the Kingdom and “natural”, cultural, “this-worldly” gifts and talents are not to be put on a line. But Leithart makes clear what in essence has been the teaching of the Church ever since she crystallized her views on cultural activity (a good deal of which, by the way, through the work of Augustine, who himself ceaselessly wrestled with this conundrum): that cultural activity serves the Kingdom, without ever becoming one with the Kingdom, and thus that talents and gifts are cast at the feet of the King (Rev. 4:10) as we recognize that we are but unprofitable slaves, only doing that which was commanded us (Luke 17:10).

We need to keep in mind what the Bible tells us about the relation between culture and spirituality: more often the relationship is one of conflict than cooperation. The most successful practitioners of cultural enterprise are often those most lifted up against God. At least that's the way Paul describes it. “For you see your calling, brothers, that not many wise men according to the flesh [are called], not many mighty, not many noble. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and God has chosen the base things of the world, and things which are despised, and things which are not, in order to bring to nothing things that are; so that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Corinthians 1:26-30).

It is therefore unwise to view the Great Commission as a renewed call to subdue the earth, to build culture:

Some have suggested that the Great Commission is a republication of the original 'dominion mandate' given to Adam (Gen. 1:26-28). The two are certainly related, but I believe it is more accurate to say that the dominion mandate sets the context for the Great Commission. The Great Commission assumes that the dominion mandate is still in force. There was no need whatever for Jesus to “republish” the cultural mandate, because humanity never stopped forming cultures (p. 129).

As Klaas Schilder emphasized in his study *Christ and Culture*, the cultural mandate is the “substrate” upon which human destiny is worked out, to blessing or to curse, to heaven or

---

kinds to make a Kingdom.

to hell. The dominion called for in the Great Commission is something higher than that substrate; in fact, it acts upon that substrate. “The saints' dominion is not of an earthly character. To echo James, even demons can have a form of dominion (James 2:19). But the Scriptures teach that all who are 'in Christ' have an authority denied to all those who are outside Christ; only those who are 'in Christ' are seated on heavenly thrones. Only those in Christ have access to the real Inner Ring of power and privilege” (p. 72).

The unbeliever, for his part, is not lacking in skill; it's his heart that's bad:

Cornelius Van Til used the illustration of the buzz saw to explain the difference between the regenerate and the unregenerate. The unbeliever's problem is not that the saw blade—representing his reason, his senses, his artistic or technical skills—is dull. His blade may be razor sharp. The problem is the blade setting. It makes magnificent, finished cuts—at the wrong angle. Likewise, the unbeliever constructs magnificent philosophical systems—on fundamentally false premises. His problem is not a lack of rational or technical skill. It is his inherited sinful flesh, and his actual unbelief, rebellion, and sin. As Van Til put it, his problem is ethical, not metaphysical. Conversion does not make the blade sharper; conversion sets the blade back at the correct angle (p. 131).

Are Christians therefore to accept a condition of cultural inferiority—as Gary North puts it, be doormats for Jesus—waiting for the fulfilment of the Kingdom? Of course not. It is a red herring to propose an either/or in this case: either cultural success or spiritual growth. “For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable to all things, having promise of the present life, and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). When the gates to the Kingdom are opened to culture, it is redeemed from the curse it incurred through Adam's fall, on both an individual and a collective level. “Entrance into the the kingdom and access to the sanctuary do improve a person's cultural abilities. Those who have eaten and drunk with the King at the beginning of the week will be made more righteous by the Spirit and will also be more skillful workers throughout the week. Those who listen to the Word of the Lord, and obey it, build superior cultures. The God who designed the world instructs us in Scripture how to live in it. Those who are obedient are building cultures as God intended them to be built. After all, if your saw blade is set properly, you are apt to make better bookshelves” (p. 131).

But the key point to this is that the Kingdom is the end, culture is the means. The ministry of the Church results in redeemed cultures, but that is not the point of the exercise so much as the worship of the true God of which such is the fruit. That God is praised, honored, worshiped, obeyed, submitted to, is the point. That we are freed from “the sin that so easily besets us” (Hebrews 12:1), delivered from “the body of this death” (Romans 7:24), knowing with Paul that to live is Christ, but to die is gain (Philippians 1:21), this is the goal, this is the victory. “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:1-2). “Is acquiring earthly dominion the

chief end of man? ... The Bible answers a thundering NO! On the contrary, the Bible teaches us that Christians will accomplish God's grand design only as they live by faith in the unseen things, only if they put heavenly things first" (p. 83).

It follows from these conclusions that we can do no better in our present situation than to return to the traditional life of the institutional church as the focal point of our "Kingdom efforts". This Leithart alternately terms the "ecclesiastical", "sacramental", and "liturgical" models of the Kingdom (cf. pp. xi-xii). The emphasis here is on the life of the worshipping community. In communion with God, our lives are restored to their proper balance. We see things set right again. We come to see our place in the larger scheme of things. We come to recognize that the contemporary situation, however bleak it may appear, is not the whole story. We have something more than the mess of pottage which the Esaus around us glory in. We have life with God in Christ! As Moses beseeched God, "If your presence does not go with me, do not carry us up from here" even though He promised victory over the Canaanites (Exodus 33:1-17).

Lest someone believe that such practice is just a descent into pietistic lotus-eating, Leithart reminds us that in worship we come into God's presence and, in doing so, participate in His rule over all things. "Heaven is both the place where we meet with the triune God in intimate fellowship, and the place where we sit upon thrones ruling all things.... Heaven is the Inner Ring, a place of both intimacy and power. If we wish to conduct a biblical holy war, our first offensive is to lift up our Warrior-King on our praises" (p. 98). The Church possesses the keys to the Kingdom; it binds and looses by allowing or preventing access to the King's presence. As orthodoxy has always proclaimed, the keys to the Kingdom are the preaching of the Word and control of the administration of the sacraments: these open and close the Kingdom to the world. "God grants salvation, life, and communion with Him by the Spirit in the church.... The sanctuary is locked to the sons of Adam. If you want to get into the Holy Place, you need to see the fellows with the keys" (p. 106).

It is nothing shameful for the Church to realize that her calling is not to fill earthly seats of power. Earthly success God bestows on whom He will, and as the saints throughout history have realized, it is not always clear why He bestows it on some undeserving folks rather than on other deserving ones. True, Old Testament Israel lived in a covenant relationship with God in which the emphasis was placed on material blessings in exchange for obedience. Certainly, such a covenant relationship is not only particular to Israel but is valid for all peoples at all times. But the Church has always taught that those Old Testament blessings were not ends in themselves, but were means to teaching higher ends. They were types of the spiritual blessings which would only be fully revealed in the New Testament. It is a sign of immaturity to seek those blessings first, rather than the spiritual blessings which they typified. This, of course, was the error of the Jews.

There is another level to this discussion which is not often discussed. I speak of the dual election presented in Genesis chapter 9, one to priesthood and another to culture. These two callings are not the same. God chose both Shem and Japheth, not just Shem. He

called Shem to be His priest; He called Japheth to have dominion.<sup>6</sup> The result: the Jews brought the world the true religion, while the Greeks and Romans, the sons of Javan (Genesis 10:4-5) brought the world the foundations of true culture.<sup>7</sup> It was when Japheth decided that he would, after all, cease following after Ham and turn to “dwell in the tents of Shem” (Genesis 9:27) that culture became reconciled to the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

The reason is clear: the two need each other. Shem needs the cultural fruits of Japheth's labor just as Japheth needs the spiritual blessings of Shem's priestly calling. Such blessings to the Gentiles helped to convince wavering Jews that God's call was universal, not just to the Old Covenant chosen people. Cultural “success stories”, realizing how fleeting that success is and how little they owe it to themselves, come trembling to the priest to give glory to God for what He, in fact, has bestowed upon them, as did many Romans, acutely aware of and sensitive to the burden of empire. It is a relationship of mutual reinforcement, and when that relationship is cemented, the Kingdom is established among men.

When this dual nature of election goes unrecognized, and the culture=Kingdom approach is accepted, a destiny is assured of the kind which the Jews brought upon themselves in their rejection of Jesus, their Messiah. The Jews viewed Rome as the model, the fulfilment, of their idea of the Kingdom. How far from the truth that was! The Jews envied Rome, lusted after the position Rome had in the world, awaited a Messiah who would deliver just that. When Jesus rejected that desire, they crucified Him. In so doing they relegated themselves to the cultural backwaters, to the isolation of the ghetto, a self-imposed exile because they refuse the calling of God to Shem, and to Abraham, and to the Church: to go out into the world and bring His blessing to it, the message of reconciliation. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). If the Church isolates herself and nourishes the delusion that she can spin a culture out of herself, she will end up in a like position.

---

6 Genesis 9:26: “God shall enlarge Japheth.” Keil & Delitzsch note that the word for “enlarge” is related to the name Japheth, indicating either extension over a wide territory or placement in a free, unfettered position: “both allusions must be retained here, so that the promise to the family of Japhet embraced not only a wide extension, but also prosperity on every hand. This blessing was desired by Noah, not from Jehovah, the God of Shem, who bestows saving spiritual good upon man, but from Elohim, God as Creator and Governor of the world; for it had respect primarily to the blessings of the earth, not to spiritual blessings; although Japheth would participate in these as well, for he should come and dwell in the tents of Shem.” C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: Volume I: The Pentateuch: Three Volumes in One*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985 [reprint]), vol. 1, pp. 158-159.

7 Even this, it must be remembered, was the later fruit of the Israelite civilization which stood like a beacon among the Semitic and Hamitic nations of the Fertile Crescent (Assyria, Babylon, Egypt) and which preceded the rise of Japhethite civilization, which centered on the Mediterranean Sea (in Old Testament language, the “coastlands” or “isles”).

8 “The fulfilment’, as Delitzsch says, ‘is plain enough, for we are all Japhetites dwelling in the tents of Shem; and the language of the New Testament is the language of Javan entered into the tents of Shem.’ To this we may add, that by the Gospel preached in this language, Israel, though subdued by the imperial power of Rome, became the spiritual conqueror of the orbis terrarum Romanus, and received it into his tents.” Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary*, p. 160.

And so much of contemporary Christianity appears exactly like that. Fundamentalism combines with militant millennialism to create a cultural backwater, at the same time entranced by and repelled by the world, its culture a pale imitation of the world's, its dependence on the world becoming ever more painfully evident as it continues to lose whatever grip it had on the reins of public opinion. Its children, sensing the impotence and futility, succumb to the lure of worldly culture, and become lost to the Kingdom, usually for good.

Do we want to end up like the Jews? Do we want to be mocked and abused for the absurdity of our ever-unfulfilled millennial pretensions? Then we need only continue pursuing outright cultural dominion as if it were the calling God has placed on us. But that is not our calling at all. Our calling is to place the claims of God on peoples and nations so that they might fulfil that dominion mandate and bring the fruits thereof into the gates, into the heavenly city (Rev. 21:24-26).