GOOD NEIGHBORS: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO CULTURE AND PUBLIC ISSUES

by

THOMAS M. HARR, JR.

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Accepted:

_____________________________
Dr. James Anderson, Thesis Advisor

_____________________________
Dr. Andrew Peterson, RTS Global President
In an increasingly secularized Western society that is more frequently antagonistic to Christianity, many concerned evangelical Christians are unsure about the most effective strategic role for the local church in politics and the debate of public issues. On the one hand, some continue to maintain that a frontal assault through political pressure, community petitions, and legislative action is the best approach. On the other hand, either due to weariness or from a more theologically separatist view, others are content to retreat into whatever still-Christian enclave they can find. However, neither approach is a sufficiently Biblical or practical approach to engaging today’s Western cultural landscape. While there has been a great deal of writing on this topic, the specific goal of this paper is to provide a succinct Biblical, theological and practical resource to help local church leaders and members consider these challenges. The analysis includes an examination of key Biblical teaching on the relationship between the church and human culture, a review of theological approaches to that relationship (particularly the development of the Two Kingdoms view in the western and Reformed tradition), and the strategic application of the Biblical and historical evidence to our current situation. The result is an argument that recognizes the significant limitations of the political process, but instead advocates for the local church’s robust engagement of contemporary culture through personal evangelism and intentional application of a Christian worldview to institutions that shape and influence cultural trends.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

The problem of how the people of God are to relate to a world where God’s priorities are not shared is not a new one. Noah was mocked by his neighbors while he built the ark. Abraham’s obedience to leave his family’s historical lands must have seemed strange to his neighbors. Moses confronted the most powerful political leader of his time. National Israel constantly struggled with the issue of cultural compromise with the nations around them. The Christian Church was established in the midst of the pagan Roman Empire.

Since the time of the Biblical writings, the church has struggled with the same questions: What is its proper role in relating to a culture that holds different values and how should it participate in the debate of public issues? The establishment of a politically Christian Europe (beginning with Constantine and continuing into modern times with vestiges of national churches) hasn’t proven particularly successful in the final analysis in promoting lasting receptivity for a biblical worldview. And the American church, both a reaction to the European experience and a product of its own formation, has seen its cultural influence wane as well.

With the increasingly rapid secularization of North American culture and failed attempts to reverse social trends through high-profile political mobilization, concerned evangelical Christians are unsure about the most effective strategic role for the local church. On the one hand, some continue to maintain that a frontal assault through political pressure, community petitions, and legislative action is the best approach. On the other hand, either due to weariness or from a more theologically separatist view, others are content to retreat into whatever still-Christian enclave they can find.
However, neither of these is a sufficiently biblical or practical approach to engaging today’s Western cultural landscape. While there has been extensive writing on this topic in recent years, the specific goal of this paper is to provide a succinct biblical, theological and practical resource to help local church leaders and members consider these challenges. We will begin by examining the insufficiency of the most common approaches to this question, and proposing an alternative solution—the local church’s robust engagement of contemporary culture in a way that seeks individual and societal transformation from the inside out.

We will then evaluate the solution in light of key Biblical teaching on the relationship between the church and human culture, a review summarizing theological approaches to that relationship (particularly the development of the Two Kingdoms view in the western and Reformed tradition), and the strategic application of the biblical and historical evidence to our current situation.

To begin, let us look a little bit more closely as to why we need to examine this topic.

Anecdotal Observations

The question of how Christians relate to the culture and public issues is of particular interest to me for two reasons, personal and pastoral.

Personal

I arrived in Newark, Delaware on the University of Delaware campus in fall of 1992 as the country was in the middle of a closely contested three-way presidential campaign. Though interested as a high school student in the workings of civil government, I had never really been a very political person—at least in the sense of taking the time to think through
and articulate my own personal views on political or cultural issues. But an election year on a college campus changed that.

I was a business major but was required to take a freshman “colloquium” course and I chose one taught by Political Science professor Joseph Pica called *Choosing the President*. In the class, we examined the history of presidential elections and systematically evaluated the different views of the candidates and the parties they represented. Only a few weeks later, I was invited to travel with a group of friends to see then President George H.W. Bush speak at a campaign rally in Dover. Standing yards from the President of the United States in the presence of hundreds of people fighting for a common (at least it seemed) cause was intoxicating. In the years that followed, I became actively involved in the College Republicans, serving as Vice-Chairman for two consecutive years. It was a pretty heady time for conservative Republicans. While the 1992 election did not go their way, the loss galvanized the religious conservative base of the party in opposition to Bill Clinton and in large part led to the massive political victory of 1994 when the Republicans took majority control of both houses of Congress for the first time in about 40 years.

But something else was happening during this time. In the spring of my junior year, I became a Christian and I began to make a few interesting observations. First, my conversion did not seem to cause much of a ripple with my politically conservative friends. A few were Christians already. Others thought they understood Christianity fairly well (at least from a political perspective) and respected those with a declared religious faith. So while I was now branded as more officially belonging to a particular “wing” of the party, I did not feel initially like an outsider.

Second, the priorities of many of my other (non-political) Christian friends were perplexing to me. While my primary application of Christian faith, at least initially, was to
continue doing what I was doing in campus and local politics, I met many others for whom it was not. In many cases these people held similar political positions as I did, but they seemed to be much more concerned with sharing the gospel with people than they were in my recruiting efforts for a campaign event. They were not obvious about their political feelings (for which I inwardly thought them timid) even as they were quite obvious about their allegiance to Jesus.

Third, as I tried my first attempts at telling others about Jesus in my life, I began to notice why many of my Christian friends avoided talking about their political views in their relationships with non-Christian friends on campus—because it distracted from what they wanted primarily to communicate to people, namely Jesus. I found that when I attempted to talk in depth with people about my conversion to Christianity, those that knew and differed from my political views would automatically classify me as “one of those Christians” and the conversation would stall. It was often still polite but it was no longer particularly productive.

Pastoral

In April of 2013, legislation was introduced in the Delaware House of Representatives to legalize marriages for people of the same gender—so-called same-sex marriage. With the support of Governor Jack Markell, the bill passed the House later that month and the State Senate in early May. Within an hour of the Senate vote, Governor Markell signed the legislation into law.

Among leaders in the evangelical churches of Delaware, the substance of the issue was not debated. Marriage, these churches agree, is intended according to Biblical teaching
to be a sign that points people to the relationship between God and his people—a sign he defined in its institution as consisting of one man and one woman.\(^1\)

However, the debate did elicit a number of different views about the church’s role in the debate. At my church, several members advocated the circulation, following a worship service, of a petition speaking in favor of a traditional view of marriage. Several others expressed disappointment that the church didn’t participate in the publication of an open letter from evangelical pastors speaking against the legislation in the local newspaper. Still others wondered out loud, from the opposite perspective, whether same-sex marriage was just simply an issue of personal preference—a cultural trend whose time had come and which the church should just accept in favor of the greater cause of loving people in the name of Jesus.

In the end, the public debate was short because the bill quickly became law and things like petitions and editorials became a moot point. However, it left people in our churches asking—what is the right role for the church in debates of this kind? Should we have done anything differently? And can we provide any greater clarity for our congregation about the appropriate role for Christians in the public debate?

**Real Problems**

There is no indication that the personal and pastoral tensions I have described will lessen in the near future. In fact, they will likely only increase. While a detailed sociological analysis would have to include many different trends, here are three examples of the increasing tension that illustrate why churches will have to think clearly about their strategic relation to culture and public issues in coming years.

\(^1\) See Gen. 2:24 (NIV).
Same-Sex Marriage

First, the recent debate about so-called ‘same-sex marriage’ has illustrated for many churches how significantly far apart the Christian worldview is from the mainstream American approach to sexuality and ethics.

This is not a comfortable reality to face and, for many evangelical Christians, has been a bit of a surprise. It was only 1996 when the U.S. Congress overwhelmingly passed, and President Bill Clinton signed, the federal Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage according to federal law as existing only between a man and woman. In the next ten years, a surge of conservative political activism around the country led states to pass their own versions of the similar bans on same-sex marriage. By the beginning of 2007, about half of the U.S. states had altered their constitutions to specifically ban gay marriage and fifteen more had state laws doing the same. In only one, Massachusetts, was same-sex marriage legal.

However, only five years later, same-sex marriage is legal in thirteen states with significant legal efforts underway in many others. And former NY Times statistician (now with ESPN), Nate Silver has predicted that by the end of the decade 44 of the 50 states will have popular support for a same-sex marriage ballot initiative. Writing in his blog before the most recent Supreme Court decision to overturn portions of the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act, Silver concludes that, statistically:

> [O]ne no longer needs to make optimistic assumptions to conclude that same-sex marriage supporters will probably soon constitute a national majority. Instead, it’s the steadiness of the trend that makes same-sex marriage virtually unique among all major public policy issues, and which might give its supporters more confidence that

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the numbers will continue to break their way regardless of what the Supreme Court decides.

Rise of the Young “Nones”

Second, the changing views of marriage and sexuality are supported by the increasingly rapid secularization of North American culture, particularly among young people.

The Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project noted in the fall of 2012 that in its surveys, about one-fifth of adults in the U.S. are religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentages ever in their polling. 4 Using historical data cited in the Pew study, the number for all religiously unaffiliated adults remained below 10% from the 1970s into the early 1990s when it began to rise noticeably, hitting about 15% before reaching its current level at just under 20%. 5

A major factor in the trend is generational replacement. According to the Pew study, one-third of adults under 30 years old have no religious affiliation compared to only about 5% of those in the shrinking World War II-era generation. In other words, absent a significant change, the overall average for the religiously unaffiliated will continue to rise simply with the march of time as the average is reweighted toward more recent generations.

Granted, the majority of Americans still say they believe in God and the numbers of those who say they attend church every week have been steady. However, the outlook is


4 The Pew Research Center uses “religiously unaffiliated” to refer to Americans who indicate in surveys that they are atheists, agnostics or have no particular religion.

obviously troubling for those who hold views on public issues driven by traditional religious affiliation. On the two most controversial socio-political issues of our day, abortion and same-sex marriage, the split between affiliated and unaffiliated is obvious. According to the Pew Study, almost three-quarters of the unaffiliated favor legalized same-sex marriage and believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases—compared to less than half of the religiously affiliated on the same two questions.

The New National Enemy Number One

Third, for much of the twentieth century, the undisputed enemy of western democracy was communism. Based on the philosophical foundation of Marxism, communist states from Russia and the Eastern Block to China, North Korea and Cuba were united in their opposition to organized religion in general. And many of the mainstream sociologists of the twentieth century following in the footsteps of Karl Marx and others predicted that religious belief (particularly as a basis for human government and influence on public policy) would steadily diminish by the end of the century.

While the trends we’ve cited above may indicate that this may increasingly be the case in the West, globally-speaking, this prediction could not have been more wrong. In Asia, Africa and South America, religion’s place in public debate is increasingly prominent. And within this, one can find much about which the Christian church can be hopeful. But in the mind of the average Western European and American, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 solidified the change in public enemy number one. It used to be communism. Now it is religious extremism. The global enemies in movies, spy novels and television programing are no longer atheists as they were from the 1950s into the 1980s. Instead, the global enemies are now the ones who pray and believe in sacred texts.

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While there is, of course, a long list of significant differences between Islamic terrorists and the mainstream American evangelical Christian, the shift on the cultural subconscious has long-term significance. One can sit down with someone and review with them how Christianity differs from other faiths. Or one can make a convincing argument that violence in the name of Christianity comes not from too much religious adherence to Biblical teaching, but too little. But the point is that the effort to explain these distinctions was not nearly as necessary fifty years ago. Today it is absolutely necessary.

**Literature Review**

Of course, the issue of how the church is to relate to public issues is not unique to this age and I am not the first to be exploring the topic. The goal in this paper is to summarize both the urgency of the question and the most biblically strategic answer in a form that can be of use to church members and church leaders. As a result, my brief review of the literature on the topic includes a short list of books I would recommend to that audience seeking a deeper analysis of the issues raised here. Below, I list each of them along with a brief summary and an explanation for their inclusion.

**City of God (Augustine) & Two Cities, Two Loves (Boice)**

Saint Augustine wrote City of God over a period of about fifteen years, completing the original work in 426 A.D. It was written in the midst of the fall of the Roman Empire, defending the Christian church from the charge that it was to blame for Rome’s decline. He does so by arguing that Roman paganism instead bears primary responsibility for the empire’s ruin, but he does so by placing the issue in the midst of a cosmic struggle between two rival cities—an earthly city and a heavenly city—striving toward two different goals in
inevitable conflict. While likely a little long and tedious for the average contemporary church reader, the work is nonetheless foundational for examining how citizens of the heavenly city are to conduct themselves while living in the earthly city.

In 1996, James Montgomery Boice, provided a capable summary of Augustine’s argument and a contemporary application to late twentieth-century America in his *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture*. Boice’s conclusion was that the common calls for more political activism, heard from the evangelical right in the twenty years or so prior to his writing, largely miss the point. He argues that American Christians are called to live as the Christian of Augustine’s day—recognizing their role as a renewing force in the pagan City of Man. However, perhaps as importantly for today’s reader, is the unique voice someone like Boice can have in this debate. For years, James Boice was at the forefront of contending for the authority of scripture, even helping to found the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Yet, his orthodox theology was immensely practical as the pastor of an historic church in the midst of a secular, liberal neighborhood in Center City Philadelphia.\(^7\) In other words, while Boice’s biblical scholarship and exegesis are extremely helpful, the northeastern urban community which was his home and mission field lend a degree of credibility to his practical arguments which exceeds that of those whose primary ministry has been in largely culturally conservative communities.

Christ & Culture (Niebuhr) and Christ & Culture Revisited (Carson)

Most modern writers addressing the subject of how Christianity relates to culture make reference to H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ & Culture*. The book was first published in

1951 and is based on a series of lectures Niebuhr delivered at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1949. In the work, Niebuhr presents five typical Christian answers for how Christ relates to the surrounding culture with the goal of “contributing to the mutual understanding of variant and often conflicting Christian groups.” These categories, though not without problems, provide a very helpful starting point for commonly held approaches. And part of the reason they have proven helpful to so many is that the Christian reader can, in each instance, almost always imagine a person or group they know who fits a category fairly well. While we will not examine the work in this paper, it’s nonetheless very helpful in following the contemporary discussion on the topic.

D.A. Carson’s *Christ & Culture Revisited* is included here because he consciously acknowledges at the beginning the influence of Niebuhr’s categories on the modern English-speaking discussion of Christianity’s intersection with culture. However, Carson’s work is not a retelling or repackaging of Niebuhr. While Niebuhr is understandably frequently referenced, Carson argues that his categories are limited because they seem to imply mutual exclusivity. Instead, Carson believes the situational application is more complex and that a robust study of Scripture (something he sees as lacking in Niebuhr) reveals a more comprehensive understanding of the relation of Christ and culture. He also attempts to look at the issue in a more global way than some other contemporary writers on the subject—going beyond twenty-first century America to examine how the Biblical principles work out in different countries and in different times.

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A Public Faith (Drew)

Charles Drew wrote his short book *A Public Faith: Bringing Personal Faith to Public Issues* in 1999 to show Christians in his congregation how they can engage the culture on political issues without the polarizing tendencies of the Religious Right. Drew summarizes by saying: "I write for Christians committed to the authority of Scripture who feel a political and social obligation to this world but are gun-shy about simply reacting to what's going on." The book is relatively brief (just over 100 pages) and was based on a series of sermons given to his own congregation at the time—Three Village Church in Setauket, NY. As a result, it is incredibly accessible to someone personally familiar with the tensions of how the church interacts with public issues and seeking a starting template for considering how to resolve them. The book’s Appendix B includes the text of the brochure used at Three Village Church summarizing principles and practice for Christian citizenship.

Politics According to the Bible (Grudem)

The subtitle to Wayne Grudem’s *Politics According to the Bible* is “A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scriptures.” At 601 pages (before the indices) the textbook-like volume meets the “comprehensive” goal fairly well. He starts with a very helpful analysis of five wrong views of Christians and Government, working to distance himself from extremes that would argue that Christian involvement in political issues is either to be completely avoided or holds the answer alone to the problems in America. His solution, spelled out in Chapter 2, is what he calls “Significant Christian Influence” on Government, in which he argues that while political power is not alone the answer, it is a legitimate goal for responsible Christians to pursue. While Grudem’s strategy

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is not squarely in line with the conclusions of this paper, his approach represents a carefully argued case for greater political involvement for churches and Christians. However, even without agreeing with every aspect of his strategic approach, the book is a very useful resource because it so thoroughly attempts to examine all the main public issues of our time through a biblical worldview.

To Change the World (Hunter)

James Davison Hunter’s *To Change the World* was published in 2010 and brings into the discussion a detailed sociological and historical analysis of how Christians relate to culture and applies it to the admittedly complex contemporary political and social climate. Hunter’s central thesis is that the tactics used by Christians to change the culture have largely been misguided and ineffective, falling either into the assumption that political activism can achieve lasting change or believing the myth that cultural change is purely a “bottom up” phenomenon. It is on this last point that Hunter is most helpful to the discussion here. As a sociologist, he makes a compelling case that societal change is often initiated and driven by a minority acting through cultural institutions—though not the political ones often employed by both the Christian right and left.

Yet, Hunter’s book is not an idealistic advocacy of how Christians can transform the culture. Hunter’s theology of “faithful presence” calls for the active incarnation of Christians into all the spheres of life where culture is forged. He acknowledges the challenge of doing this within the “dialectic of affirmation and antithesis.”10 This means that Christians engage in the hard work, within every field of life, of affirming simultaneously the goodness and beauty of everything God created and the totality of the fall. Then, they work to offer

constructive alternatives that point people and institutions to a better way. In the end, Hunter realistically acknowledges that the primary task of the church and Christians is to glorify God in the midst of a fallen culture trusting that He will act according to his promise to set it right in the end.
CHAPTER 2
RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM

In considering how the Christian church should respond to these trends, I will first consider some main categories of responses that I don’t believe are either practically or biblically appropriate. In each case, I will try to summarize the view, give examples of where we have witnessed people trying to employ the view, and note the main reasons why we should seek an alternative. Then, I will summarize that alternative approach and why it is more appropriate than the others.

Inappropriate approaches to responding to the question of how Christians are to relate to public and political issues fall into two main categories—the extremes which I will call the separatists and the crusaders. The separatists are those who see no or little place for the Christian church or Christians in the public debate. The crusaders are those who believe that active political engagement to enact laws and elect like-minded representatives is the way to change society. With the categories of “separatists” and “crusaders,” each has a left-wing and a right-wing expression. As a result, we will examine four possible approaches, consisting of two under each of the two main categories.

The Separatists

The separatist believes that there is a very bright, thick line that separates personal religious belief and the application of that belief to broader cultural and political issues. In other words, Christians are free to believe what they want, but they have no right or hope to influence public policy. As a result, the separatist views Christians entering the debate as either morally wrong or completely pointless. We will examine the differences in a minute,
but the result is the same—the Christian church is either not allowed or unwilling to have its view of reality influence the cultural issues of our time.

From the Left—Secularism

Secularism is the only one of the four positions articulated here where one need not claim to be a Christian to hold it. The secular separatist argues that Christians have no right to participate in public debate because their views are, by definition, personal and not shared by others.

R.R. Reno, the editor of First Things, summarizes:

In America, ‘religion’ largely means Christianity and today our secular culture views orthodox Christian churches as troublesome, retrograde, and reactionary forces. They’re seen as anti-science, anti-gay, and anti-women—which is to say anti-progress as the Left defines progress. Not surprisingly, then, the Left believes society will be best served if Christians are limited in their influence on public life.¹

Reno goes on to point out that the basis for this assumption is that religious beliefs (particularly Christian ones) are too narrow to form the basis for public policy. Instead, everyone should submit themselves to finding a common ground on the basis of rational thought and public reason. He cites recent court opinions that increasingly are citing “rationality” and “reason” as the only right basis for determining the validity of law. For example, in 2010, in the opinion overturning California’s public referendum banning same-sex marriage, Federal Judge Vaughn Walker said that it is not rational to think that men can only marry women. “The evidence shows conclusively,” he wrote, “that Proposition 8 enacts, without reason, a private moral view that same-sex couples are inferior to opposite-

Continuing he says that that supporters of the referendum were in many cases motivated by religious conviction which should not be allowed to influence public law.²

To the secular separatist, religion is a private matter—perhaps sentimentally important to the practitioner but not to be shared with others because it cannot be empirically proven. However, there is much of reality that cannot be empirically proven and this view assumes that rationality is a more solid standard than it actually is. As a result, using collective reason as the basis for public debate essentially relegates the standards for deciding complex moral questions to a public opinion poll. In other words, seeking the basis for cultural debate in public reason sounds noble but it is an ambiguous and shifting standard. There is nothing to which someone can ultimately appeal if the standard for argument is simply those issues around which you can build a so-called rational public consensus.

Further, the secularist rarely understands that his view of reality is, as much as Christianity, a religious worldview. In a talk given to ministry leaders at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on the topic of cultural renewal, pastor Tim Keller references Lesslie Newbigin’s 1989 book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. According to Keller, Newbigin observes that, in fact, everyone brings a worldview to bear on the issues of the society in which they live—a worldview that cannot be empirically proven without reference to its first principle.³ For the Christian, the first principle is the Bible. For the secular separatist, it is reason. But both are “religious worldviews” that cannot be proven unless you accept the premise of their first principle.

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Of all the alternative views, secular separatism is the one which is the most openly hostile to Christianity of essentially any form. The others we will discuss all claim the title of “Christian”—each arguing that everyone else has abandoned the right to claim they truly follow the teaching of Jesus.

From the Right—Bunkerism

At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, so-called Christian separatism reaches the same practical conclusion as secular separatism. Christians, according to this view, should separate themselves from the broader culture because society is largely unredeemable. The only thing left to do for the “true” Christian is to retreat into his own culture, cut off contact with the outside world, lament the church’s continued disintegration and wait for Jesus to return at the end of the age. I refer to this as “bunker-ism.”

An article published by a group referring to itself as the eXile provides a good summary of the underlying premise of bunkerism:

We must proceed from this starting point—that Christians have become a minority in our own country. If we can no longer hope to save the country, we must at least try to save ourselves from the evil. If this means becoming independent and self-sufficient and depriving the remainder of the country of our assistance and support, so be it. Let the "federal government" rely for its support on the immoral majority of its own making. But we know it will not, and cannot. Like any evil thing, it needs the good to survive. So let us keep ourselves separate, and kill it.4

The group calls for Christians to disconnect from all cultural media and establish its own alternative society. It even lists suggested counties in various states that might be most hospitable to “eXile” communities.5


Admittedly, groups like this are at the extreme and (for good reason) know themselves to be a minority. Yet, the underlying sentiment can be found in many who have become frustrated with the state of American culture and with the seeming inability of Christians to effect any real lasting change.

Paul Weyrich’s 1999 letter to supporters calling for an exit from political engagement caused a firestorm in Conservative Christian circles. Weyrich was a co-founder of the Moral Majority with Jerry Falwell in the late 1970s and the founder of the conservative policy research and advocacy organization, The Heritage Foundation. At one time he had advocated what we will term in a minute a “crusader” approach. However, growing frustration with the continued slide of cultural morals and the inability for Christians to exercise lasting political influence, led him to change his mind. He wrote:

I believe that we probably have lost the culture war. . . . Therefore, what seems to me a legitimate strategy for us to follow is to look at ways to separate ourselves from the institutions that have been captured by the ideology of Political Correctness, or by other enemies of our traditional culture.\(^6\)

This is indicative of a understandable frustration with the seeming inability of the conservative Christian community’s political activism of the 1980s and 1990s to make any significant difference. However, even if political activism has failed, that does not imply that a wholesale withdraw of Christians from cultural institutions (even political ones) is the appropriate response. As Don Eberly pointed out in a 2000 article in Modern Reformation, “This lurching about erratically, which must be amusing for the watching world, only points to the profound theological impoverishment of Evangelicalism in our era.”\(^7\) Eberly was


saying that Christians should not abandon the hard work of discerning how to live authentically Christian lives in all areas of life to impact society simply because simple solutions seem lacking.

**The Crusaders**

While separatists have both a right and a left-wing expression, the same is true of the crusaders. A crusader is someone who believes that Christians not only have an obligation to be present in the social and political debate but to be active leaders in it—that political activism and change in a society’s laws are the primary means to cultural transformation.

**From the Left—Liberation Theology and the Social Gospel**

In the early 20th century, it wasn’t the conservative Christians who took the lead in political activism. Instead, it was largely the liberals who promoted an agenda of activism and the conservatives (fundamentalists) who were content to sit back and disengage from public debate.

This activism from the left took the form of Liberation Theology in its academic form and the Social Gospel movement in its mainline application. Liberation theology grew out of the Roman Catholic Church’s response to the unjust treatment of the poor and socially marginalized in South America.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian Roman Catholic priest and theologian identified as one of the earliest to articulate this school of theological thought, defines Liberation Theology as:

[A] theological reflection based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in this oppressed and exploited sub-continent of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of shared experience in the effort
to abolish the present unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human.  

This approach to reinterpreting the central message of Christianity from spiritual salvation to material liberation formed the basis for many applications to other issues in mid-20th century America—including Black Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology and even the church-based advocacy for homosexuality. According to liberation theologians, Christian salvation is primarily concerned with the equality and justice of all people in this life. The historic Christian doctrine of sin, where humanity is called to account for its rebellion when confronted with the holiness and the justice of God, is rejected. Instead, the enemy and the cause of human suffering is cultural, economic and political oppression. Jesus is still central but his deliverance is social and political. Those rescued by him are not sinners but victims. Personal conversion is replaced by rescue from societal oppression.

This fundamental redefinition of both sin’s consequences and heaven’s rewards doesn’t square with the Bible’s message of a Savior who suffered to provide an eternal salvation, liberating sinners enslaved by their own rebellion. As a result, while a renewed concern for the poor and oppressed should find a sympathetic reaction from every Christian, the average conservative evangelical in the middle part of the 20th century avoided activism on public issues for fear of sliding into the theological liberalism they rightly wished to avoid.


From the Right—Cultural War and the Religious Right

While seeds were being sown earlier, Evangelical Christianity’s large-scale avoidance of cultural activism ended in the 1970s. The 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision to legalize abortion woke many evangelicals for the first time in generations, to the consequences of a cultural slide away from a biblically-based worldview. The election of Jimmy Carter as a self-proclaimed “born again” president in 1976 encouraged many evangelical Christians but his hiring of Sarah Weddington, the lawyer who argued in favor of abortion before the Supreme Court, angered most pro-life Christians. Four years later, encouraged by Jerry Falwell and the newly-formed Moral Majority, evangelicals voted in large numbers for Ronald Reagan, solidifying a coalition for Christian activism in public issues that, while having waned some, continues more than 30 years later.

Central to this movement is not only the view that a cultural war rages in America, but that the primary battleground for the war (or at least one worthy of significant church resources) is the legal and political structure of America.

James Hunter cites a NY Times article that referenced West County Assembly of God, a 600-member Evangelical congregation in Missouri, during the 2004 election to describe what the ideal church looks like to many who hold this view.

The church’s pastor, John A. Wilson, gives sermons that extol the importance of opposing abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage, and he publically says he supported President Bush’s decision to go to war in Iraq. To promote involvement in social issues, the church has a dozen-member ‘moral action team’ that holds open meetings for parishioners each month. They inform church members about socially conservative electoral issues. They register them to vote at stands outside the sanctuary on designated ‘voter registration’ Sundays. During elections, the ‘moral action team’ even drives church members to the polls.10

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At times the rhetoric from those who hold this view can appear combative and seem to presume a former Christian utopia that needs to be reinstated. For example, when D. James Kennedy said, “Our job is to reclaim America for Christ, whatever the cost. . .” well-meaning Americans may have been concerned about the seemingly militant tone. Despite the war-like imagery, however, most Christians advocating an active political approach do so with charitable intentions, simply desiring Christians to rise up and participate as active citizens. They do not believe, in general, that public policy advocacy should replace evangelism. (As Wayne Grudem points out, that’s a “straw man” assertion that would be denied by almost anyone in the mainstream of the conservative political movement.) However, they do largely believe that active public policy advocacy is a vehicle of gospel proclamation in its own right. Noted conservative activist Beverly LaHaye summarizes by saying:

The challenge stands before us. The question each of us must answer is this: Will I accept this challenge? . . . Christians can change our country. . . . You and I have tremendous opportunity to influence public policy in order to open the doors for the truth of the gospel to be communicated to all areas of society. . . .”

Of the four ‘inappropriate’ responses I have outlined here, this is the one which deserves the most sympathy. The secular separatist denies the philosophical validity of a faith-based worldview. The religious separatist may claim Christian principles, but denies Biblical responsibility of Christians to live gospel-influenced lives in all spheres of life. And

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11 Hunter, 127.

12 Wayne Grudem, Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 53. (Grudem’s most convincing evidence is citing the example of D. James Kennedy who was simultaneously an unflinching supporter of personal evangelism and conservative political activism.)

13 Hunter, 119.
the liberation crusader, while affirming the need for cultural engagement, completely misunderstands the true essence of the gospel, dangerously reducing what Jesus provides to mere temporal emancipation. So of the four, the Christian crusader is the only view that would affirm both an orthodox view of truth revealed in the Bible and the desire to see that truth impact positively the broader culture.

However, while we might be more sympathetic to this last approach relative to the others, the Christian crusader in the end shares a fatal flaw with the Liberation crusader—a belief that significant change can result by changing the outward structures of culture through legislation and political activism. If the fundamental problem with the world is not the unjust structure of society but the rebellious hearts of its members, then it is not surprising that Christian crusaders have not achieved any long-standing success.

Cal Thomas, conservative Christian political commentator and former spokesman for Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, wrote in 1999:

Two decades after conservative Christians charged into the political arena, bringing new voters and millions of dollars with them in hopes of transforming the culture through political power, it must be acknowledged that we have failed. We failed not because we were wrong about our critique of culture, or because we lacked conviction, or because there were not enough of us, or because too many were lethargic and uncommitted. We failed because we were unable to redirect a nation from the top down. Real change must come from the bottom up or, better yet, from the inside out.¹⁴

Another Way

If Christians truly seek to influence the world with transformative power, the Bible provides good news. When Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 28 to go into the world and

¹⁴ Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can’t Save America (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 27.
make disciples he promised not only to accompany them but he commanded them on the basis of his full authority in heaven and earth. When Paul explained to the church in Rome why he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ without shame, he said it was “because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . .” (Rom. 1:16). Similarly explaining to the church in Corinth his mission to preach the gospel, he admitted that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

Proclaiming this power of God as the only solution that leads to real cultural transformation is the primary mission of the church (and therefore of Christians). More specifically, what is needed at this cultural moment in American history is not fundamentally different than at any moment in any nation of the world. Christians cannot withdraw as separatists and withhold from the world its only true hope of change; not so long as we remain in the “day of salvation” before Christ returns.¹⁵ Neither can they in good conscience settle for crusader strategies that, at best, are empirically ineffective and, at worst, strategically hinder our ability to gain a hearing for the gospel from those who don’t believe as we do.

As a result, a strategic alternative is needed that promotes the engagement of contemporary culture and that uses the gospel to provide individual and societal transformation from the inside out. This can be accomplished by rightly understanding and promoting the centrality of both 1) intentional evangelism that leads to individual salvation and 2) integrated faith that leads to community renewal, in that order.

¹⁵ See 2 Cor. 6:2.
Intentional Evangelism

First, pursuing cultural transformation means that our primary goal as individual Christians and as a corporate church, is to proclaim the gospel so that individuals who turn to follow Jesus might be saved from the consequences of their sin. Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, “I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

We will argue below that individual salvation alone is not sufficient for cultural transformation. However, true cultural transformation cannot originate anywhere else. That is because the radical source of the disorder we encounter in our culture is a personal, heart problem of sinful rebellion against God. Therefore, true transformative change won’t begin with the outward structures, they will begin with a change to the original heart condition which created them.

This means that Christians, above all others, have something meaningful to offer the contemporary conversation about culture—because only Christianity diagnoses correctly and prescribes appropriately. The disease is our individual rebellion against God. The cure is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we will argue, the strategic opportunity presenting itself in 21st century America is evangelism based on a faithful, loving and clear verbal witness (of individuals to individuals) to the transformative power of the gospel. And when people’s lives are transformed by a Savior who then calls them to a new allegiance, discussions between people regarding social and political views now have a common authority to which they can appeal.

For example, there is a young woman in my church who was raised Roman Catholic and went to a small liberal college in New England where a relatively large percentage of her
friends were declared homosexuals. A few years ago, after not having been meaningfully connected to any type of church for years, she was questioning the role of God in her life. So a friend pointed her to our church. Through our website she connected with one of our Community Groups and started attending our seven-week “introduction to Christianity” course we call Faith Explored. As she learned more about Jesus and began to believe his claims that He was Lord of the universe, she began to trust him as the Lord of her life. And because of that, she’s now able to wrestle through her previously assumed views on various cultural issues, including homosexuality, from a totally different starting point.

In this case, as in similar others, there can still be honest struggle. However, the consideration of biblical positions on issues that may run counter to the popular culture is significantly easier when one’s starting point is a sovereign Savior who cares so much about sin that he was willing to die to assume its consequences. The consistent message this young lady heard when she came to our church was the need for everyone to submit their lives to the authority of Jesus. It is both the most critical (and eternal) issue faced by every human being and the only starting point that provides true common ground on controversial issues. Evangelism that proclaims Jesus as Lord must be the first priority. And as individual lives are changed one-by-one, the cornerstone for gospel transformation is laid.

Integrated Faith

However, it is only a cornerstone. As James Davidson Hunter articulates in his book To Change the World, it’s sociologically simplistic and historically revisionist to believe that cultures only change from the bottom up through populist, grass-roots movements of ‘converted’ individuals.\(^\text{16}\) In other words, while loving evangelism that results in real

\(^{16}\) Hunter, see particularly Essay 1, chapters 3 and 5.
individual change undoubtedly has a positive impact on the broader culture (which Hunter would acknowledge\textsuperscript{17}), it must be accompanied by something further. Those who have submitted themselves to the ultimate authority of Jesus must take that message not just to other individuals but into the world’s culture-shaping institutions. In reality, the failure of the Religious Right as a cultural movement is not its call for Christian men and women to be involved in shaping culture and views on public issues. Indeed, they should be. The failure has been in the assumption that the institution where culture is shaped is primarily political and governmental.

Instead, the right strategy for gospel transformation includes a second stage for Christians where they integrate their personal faith into their vocation and every aspect of their lives.

For example, there is a member of the church where I serve who told me that for some time, he had two separate Facebook accounts—one for his Christian friends and one for his professional contacts and colleagues. The logic is tempting for anyone: “Why burden your ‘church friends’ with comments, links and information about your professional life? And why risk offending your ‘work friends’ with all that personal religious stuff?”

However, what he discovered was that this self-enforced ‘Facebook dualism’ was both wearisome and counter-productive to his desire to live authentically as a Christian and meaningfully contribute to the good of the company he served. So he merged the two Facebook accounts into one.

In a figurative sense, Christians need to merge their lives as well. They need to combine their personal faith with their public face. However, doing this well is hard work because it requires us to think critically about how everything we do is shaped by our

\textsuperscript{17} Hunter, 18.
Christianity and how we can use the depth of theological resources in the gospel to transform the way we approach our work. As Tim Keller observes:

Most fields of work today are dominated by very different worldviews than that of Christianity. However, when most Christians enter a vocational field today, they either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout off Bible verses at people to get their faith across. We simply do not know how to think out the implications of the Christian view of reality for the shape of everything we do in our professions. We do not know how to persuade them of the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone’s work. We do not know how to attract people to Christianity by persuasively showing the resources of Christ for resolving baseline cultural problems and for fulfilling baseline cultural hopes.¹⁸

In other words, Christians need to become skilled in not just quoting the Bible about what is wrong with culture, but applying the vast “resources of Christ” to address problems. From racism to poverty to crime to sexual brokenness and relational conflict, the Bible informs our response. That does not mean that the Bible is a textbook for answers to specific 21st century problems of economics, foreign relations, and sociology. But it does mean that a Christian view of the world—created for good, horribly disfigured by sin, and restored by a gracious God—simultaneously provides Christians with both the most realistic assessment of how bad the problems are and the most authentic hope that anything can really be done about it.

To effect this change, it means that Christians intentionally work and serve in institutions in which culture is truly forged—business, non-profit community service, education, entertainment and the arts. It also means that we must be willing to live and minister in communities where these institutions are located. It means we join civic associations and coach soccer teams. It means we surround ourselves with other Christians

willing to help us with the hard, ongoing work of what it means to be an authentic Christian artist, banker, journalist, fashion designer, public school teacher, etc.

The reason why I distinguish “integrated faith that leads to community renewal” from “intentional evangelism that leads to individual salvation” is because community renewal is a legitimately Biblical goal, as we’ll demonstrate. It’s not separate from evangelism but neither is it simply ‘bait’ to ‘catch another one for Jesus.’

The Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment

There’s absolutely nothing innovative in this approach. The primary mission of Christians and the church in this age is most clearly summarized in Jesus’ Great Commission to “make disciples . . . teaching them to obey all that I have commanded.” (Matt. 28:19-20).

And what is Jesus’ summary of God’s commands? During his earthly ministry, He told one of the teachers of the law that it all boils down to these two commandments: First, “‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’” The second is this: ‘love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:30-31).

Love God and love your neighbor. When we can intentionally and creatively show people how the gospel uniquely enables us to do both, then cultural transformation is possible. The focus on evangelism that leads to individual salvation is to focus our efforts on the broken relationship with God and therefore show people how to love God. However, too often, Christians stop here.

In general, the average American probably does not doubt whether the average evangelical Christian loves God. But it is in the “loving your neighbor” category where there is a serious credibility gap. The focus on integrated faith that leads to true community renewal will demonstrate to Christians and the watching world that loving our neighbor is not
just something Christians want to do but actually do far better than anyone else. That will break stereotypes of Christianity and provide the only true hope of cultural transformation.
CHAPTER 3
BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

In chapters one and two of this paper, we identified the problem faced by the 21st century American church in how it engages with culture and public issues, reviewed the common ways churches and Christians typically respond, and proposed an alternative that focuses on personal evangelism and inside-out community renewal. In chapters three to six, we now turn our attention to evaluating this proposed solution from a Biblical, theological, historical and strategic point of view.

While the Bible is not primarily intended to be a step-by-step strategic playbook for 21st century American cultural transformation, it is nonetheless the archetypal example of how to enter into a broken world and redeem it. That is, after all, the purpose of the gospel. It diagnoses the problem with the world and effectually prescribes the cure. And so, in a real sense, God is the ultimate culture changer and the Bible is the ultimate story of cultural change. Therefore, any strategy must be rooted firmly in what the Bible has to say about how the people of God are to relate with the culture of a fallen world. While not exhaustive, the following represents a quick overview of some of the key texts that are important for the foundation of any proposed solution.

**Culture and Its Purpose—Genesis 1-2**

With the creation of the very first human beings in the Garden of Eden comes the immediate question of what they are to do. Created in the image of God, they are primarily
designed to be ‘image-bearers’ and worshipers of their Creator. ¹ Yet, God at the very beginning gives them specific roles to play in relation to the world in which he places them.

The first is seen in Genesis 1:28: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” This is the dominion mandate. God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth as vice-regents. However, this is not something that will come immediately and without effort. In order to accomplish their role of subduing, they will need to increase in number and fill the earth.

The second role God assigned Adam and Eve is recorded in Genesis 2:15: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and take care of it.” This is the cultural mandate and, in a sense, can be understood as a further clarification of what it means to exercise rule over the earth. The words for ‘work’ and ‘take care of’ are significant. Abad, the word translated as ‘work,’ means that Adam was to be in charge of caring for the garden, cultivating its raw materials and fulfilling his role of image-bearer in part through the act of creating something of beauty and usefulness out of his own effort. Shamar, the word translated ‘keep,’ means to guard and protect. While humanity had not yet sinned against God, there is a sense in which God wants Adam to understand the potential for improper use of God’s creation.

Thus, we have the origin for a modern definition of ‘culture.’ The linguistic root of the term is the Latin word cultura. It conveys the idea of preparing soil in a field for seeding. According to David Wells, the original Western uses of the term were close to this Latin meaning. A “cultured” person was someone whose mind was properly prepared (“cultivated”) to sprout good values and proper behavior. Narrowly, this was accomplished

¹ See Gen. 1:26-27.
by exposure to the best in art, literature and music. But more broadly, this was the tilling of the human soil that was necessary for a person to grow.²

Genesis 1-2 presents to us the original role of Adam (and, in him as representative, us) as a protective farmer, responsible for using what he’s been given to create something of further usefulness that will bring glory to God and to protect it from any influence that would threaten it.

Sin and Its Curse—Genesis 3

Almost immediately, Adam and Eve completely fail to fulfill their designed roles. Instead of guarding God’s creation from improper influence, they entertain conversation with the Serpent in the Garden. In the exchange between Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 3:1-5, it’s obvious from the beginning that the Serpent is challenging what God had told them. “Did God really say...?” the Serpent asked. Yet, instead of recognizing the threat, Eve allows the discussion to continue and Adam does nothing to intervene. Ultimately, this failure leads to the failure of their dominion role when they eat the fruit forbidden by God in verse 6. By disobeying God’s clear guidelines for the usage of His creation, they join with the Serpent in rebelling against God, switching allegiance from the one who granted them their authority in the first place.

As a result, God assigns a curse on Adam and Eve in verses 16-17 that uniquely affects the roles assigned to them. Adam and Eve are to continue to fill the earth, but the bearing and raising of children will be accompanied by increased pain. Their marriage is to continue to be a helping partnership, but not without conflict. The ground is still to be

² David F. Wells, No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 166.
worked, but not without toil. And ultimately, the very ground which they are assigned to cultivate will swallow them up in death.

In Genesis 3:15, the text also provides the origin of what Francis Schaeffer called “the two humanities.” It comes in God’s curse of the serpent when He says, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. . . .” In the flow of human history since that moment, the descendants of the woman and the descendants of Satan have been battling for supremacy.

From this picture of rebellion against God and his original mandate for how we are to love Him, we understand the basis for why there is no common vision for how to love our neighbor. Cultural war is waged because there are drastically different worldviews competing with one another for supremacy. Cultural breakdown—literally, the disintegration of the elements intended for human success—is a reality because of sin and the resulting justice of God’s judgment.

Of course, there is also hope contained in Genesis 3:15. God’s curse of Satan ends with a promise that the offspring of the woman “will crush” the head of the Serpent. Knowing this offspring of the woman to ultimately be Jesus Christ gives Christians confidence in proclaiming truth to a broken world. However, because victory is accomplished through a “stricken” Savior, we proclaim it humbly, because we know our understanding of truth is only by the redeeming grace of God.

**Government and Its Role**

As humans grew in number, the negative effects of the curse required restraint by God-ordained but human-administered institutions. Even though institutions of human

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government would have likely been required even without the entrance of sin into the world, the need to govern society and manage culture became even more necessary (and extremely more complicated) after the fall. In this section, we will examine the Old Testament foundation for civil government and look at three important New Testament texts. The aim is not to thoroughly develop the origin of civil government nor to fully exegete all of the passages cited. Instead, it is to establish the legitimacy of civil government and the high degree of respect Christians are to have for it as they relate to public issues. When this biblical respect for government authority and its leaders is lacking it can be an impediment to proclaiming the gospel and loving our neighbor.

Old Testament Foundation

Wayne Grudem notes that the most basic role for human government is the punishment of evil and the encouragement of good. The foundation for this role is found in the Old Testament.  

According to Grudem, the first indication for God’s establishment of civil government is in Genesis 9:5-6 when God instructs Noah and his family as they come out of the ark. He tells them that when the crime of murder is committed, he will require “an accounting” that is to be made by other human beings. This is how he states it:

And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.”


5 Ibid., 77.
While no further details are provided here as to how this is to be carried out, the principle is established for a civil response to a moral wrong. Importantly, this happens prior to the establishment of the nation of Israel through Abraham or the giving of law to Moses. It occurs at the renewing of the God’s mandate to fill the earth following the flood.

The second point Grudem makes is that the Old Testament highlights the tragic effects of a culture without civil authority.\(^6\) Specifically, he highlights Judges 18-25 which contains some of the most horrific behavior in the Bible occurring during a period of anarchy in Israel when there was no king and “everyone did as he saw fit” (Judg. 21:25). While one of the main points made by the book of Judges is the failure of Israel to submit to the sovereign rule of God and his law, it also highlights the need for human government in a sinful world.

Grudem also notes the Old Testament’s promotion of government to execute justice and defend the weak.\(^7\) In Psalm 82, God is speaking to earthly rulers and condemning them for their failure to stand up on behalf of those in need of just intervention from civil authority. The psalmist writes in Psalm 82:2-3:

> How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?  
> Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the rights of the poor and the oppressed.  
> Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

Therefore, there is biblical justification for impartial and fair judgment in cases of conflict between parties in society, particularly when one party is being mistreated according to an objective moral standard (“rights”) that needs to be upheld. Further, those in authority are actually commanded to intervene (“rescue” and “deliver”) in cases where such violations are noted.

\(^6\) Grudem, 78.  
\(^7\) Ibid., 79.
For purposes of this paper, it is enough to establish that government has been divinely ordained from the earliest days of human history according to the principles outlined above. That means that the Bible provides a foundation for how we are to view the origin and purpose of government. However, the Old Testament doesn’t specifically speak to the nuances of how Christians should navigate their role in the public discourse within a secular society such as 21st-century America. (The possible exceptions to this are the examples of men like Nehemiah, Joseph and Daniel whose faithfulness to God influenced their roles in secular government structures. We’ll examine these cases shortly.)

The reason the Old Testament, for the most part, doesn’t assume interaction with secular government is that it is primarily concerned with the political nation of Israel, whose specific laws are detailed in the last four books of Moses: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These laws can be useful examples of good government and were “an amazing model of how justice, fairness, compassion for the poor and oppressed, and genuine holiness of life can work out in daily life.”8 However, because of Israel’s unique role in God’s redemptive history, there is much of the Law of Moses that relates to religious practice contextual to that time period and that would not be a model for civil government in the era following the fulfillment of Israel’s national role.9 As a result, let us turn our attention to three foundational passages from the New Testament.

8 Grudem, 84.

9 This assertion would be disputed by some who believe modern government should be based more explicitly on Old Testament civil law, a position referred to as theonomy. For example, see Greg L. Bahnsen’s Theonomy in Christian Ethics (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1977). In support of this paper’s assertion and against theonomy, see Vern Poythress’s The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses (Nashville, NT: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), particularly Appendix B, "Evaluating Theonomy."
Jesus and Caesar—Matthew 22:15-22

All three of the synoptic gospels record a conversation Jesus had with representatives of the Herodians and the Pharisees. Parallel passages are found in Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26, but this is how Matthew records it:

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

The culture in which Jesus lived was politically charged. Rome occupied Israel and not only instituted its own laws but, as imperial powers always do, levied significant tax burdens. That the Herodians and the Pharisees were aligning themselves was fairly remarkable. The Herodians were the faction within the Jewish culture that had accommodated itself to the secular power of the Romans. The Pharisees, of course, represented the conservative religious traditionalists. They agreed on little so their shared opposition to Jesus highlights the political complexities of the time and, as a result, the political brilliance of Jesus’ answer.

The question was intended to be a trap. If Jesus answered that the people should be paying the imperial tax, then his detractors could characterize him as a Roman sympathizer and destroy his popularity among the Jews. If he said they should not pay the tax, then his
opponents could report him to the Roman authorities as stirring up insurrection among the people. Either way, they thought they had trapped Jesus.

But Jesus’ response to their trickery was brilliant in both its simplicity and sophistication. He asked for a coin and had his questioners identify the person on it as Caesar. Then he said they should give “to Caesar what is Caesar’s” and “to God what is God’s.” The first part supports the civil authority of the Roman government and the second part places that authority under the limitation of a higher authority.

For Christians today, this is first a reminder that Christians should recognize, respect and submit to the legitimate authority of the state. We should be the best of citizens, obeying laws, paying taxes honestly and speaking respectfully about our leaders even when we may disagree with their views. James Boice notes on this point that even while on trial, Jesus spoke respectfully to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.10 This must have been a radically different teaching than what the staunch Jewish revolutionary would have been expecting from the long-awaited Messiah.

However, the limitation Jesus puts on civil authority must have been fairly radical, as well. Jesus said that his followers should have another master beyond the civil government and that was God. This means that Christians, like Jesus, have an obligation to speak a higher truth into power structures and into public issues. Jesus spoke respectfully to Pilate while on trial but he also spoke truthfully.

There is something else relevant to observe from the sophisticated way Jesus approached his ministry. Jesus adroitly avoided political labels (and titles)—even common messianic ones—because he knew people would interpret them wrongly. He knew they

10 James Boice, Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 188.
would bring their pre-conceived understanding of that label to bear on Jesus before he was able to correctly identify himself. He often told people early in his ministry not to tell others that he was the Messiah because he knew the people had a preconceived notion of what that meant. Specifically, they believed that the Messiah would be a political savior who would overthrow the political enemies of the Jews. However, that was not Jesus’ intention. He deliberately chose to refer to himself as the “Son of Man,” a more obscure Messianic title from the prophesies of Ezekiel and Daniel. His goal was to rightly define what kind of Savior he was. He was after changed hearts that would lead to transformed communities.

The same principle should be true, in a sense, with Christians and political labels. We live in a highly charged political time and should exercise similar caution in assuming labels and political characterization that fit the easy categories of the world but don’t actually reflect the true message of Jesus.

Paul and Authority—Romans 13:1-7

Jesus’ comments about giving “to Caesar what is Caesar’s” provide the basis for the Apostle Paul’s more extended teaching on the role of government authority in Romans 13:1-7. There, he writes:

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.
This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The primary thing Paul notes here is that everyone is subject to governing authorities because God’s authority has established it. This means that the Christian must submit to civil government because he submits to God. It also means that the non-Christian submits to God as well when he submits to civil government (although perhaps unknowingly).

The concept of submission to authority is challenging for any sinner in any age. The default position of our hearts is self-reign. And this is particularly true, perhaps, in a Western post-enlightenment culture where individual autonomy and freedom of choice are idolized by both those on the political right and left (although perhaps for different reasons). However, it is admittedly easier for someone to submit to rulers of high moral character and who share similar beliefs. Interestingly, when Paul wrote to the Romans, he had no such example of a moral and sympathetic leader ruling the Roman Empire. The Emperor Nero was corrupt and the enemy of Christians.

Now, of course, Paul himself stood rightly against Roman authority when it contradicted God’s command to make disciples of all nations. That command from Jesus in Matthew 28 came from Jesus who had possessed all ultimate authority “in heaven and on earth.” Yet he nonetheless submitted himself to the Roman justice system, treated both Roman officials and Roman guards respectfully and took his Roman citizenship seriously. This text doesn’t answer every specific question about when civil authority is legitimate and when it is not, but it does make it very clear that civil authority is to be taken seriously.

This point is relevant in the church’s effort to influence the culture on public issues. If a hearing for Biblical views has any chance of being gained, civil discourse needs to be maintained. It’s not just wise strategy, it’s the command of Scripture which teaches that the
only words that should come out of our mouth are those that are “helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Eph. 4:29). Sadly, Christians don’t often do this and mistakenly think that their Christian views will be persuasive without a supporting Christian ethic.

Years ago, at a White House prayer breakfast David Kuo, a Christian who had worked as a Republican strategist and speechwriter in Washington for years was convicted not of the wrongness of his views but of his ethic. He approached then First Lady Hillary Clinton after the event and told her, “I spend my days trying to defeat you and your husband, and sometimes that becomes personal anger, and that is wrong and I will never allow myself to do that again.”11 Recovering this Biblical attitude of humility and respect for ordained authority is essential for the Christian to be a good neighbor of the 21st century.

Peter and Authority—1 Peter 2:13-17

Peter also addresses the question of how Christians are to relate to civil authority in his first letter. There he writes in verses 13 to 17:

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

Peter has a similar view of civil authority as Paul. While not as explicit as the words of Paul and Jesus in emphasizing the ultimate authority of God, Peter nonetheless states the derivative place of civil government by calling such authority “instituted,” which implies an

antecedent cause. What he makes very clear, though, is that God uses civil government as a restraint against evil not just among non-Christians but among Christians as well. This again emphasizes the appropriate role of government in punishing injustice. And unlike the earlier discussion of the Old Testament support for this, here Peter has in view a secular government not operating according to a system of God-given law and justice. Nonetheless, the implication is that by God’s common grace, even the Roman government of the first century had enough understanding of certain moral principles that it could act (albeit unwittingly) as a moral agent of God.

The added witness of Peter to the themes previously emphasized by Jesus and Paul demonstrates that a respect for civil government was held by multiple Christian leaders in the earliest days of the church and represents a consistent New Testament teaching of Scripture. But Peter also hints at a strategy for influencing public debate. He concedes in verse 15 that the Christian will encounter those who are ignorant of biblical truth and are foolish in their behavior. That is a description of our culture as well. And Peter’s encouragement to the Christian, which he says is God’s will, is to respond by “doing good.”

“Doing good” in this context is inclusive enough to include a verbal response. Even if Peter primarily intended this to refer to good conduct and acts of mercy, a verbal response to ignorance and foolishness would seem to be a valid application as well. In 1 Peter 3:15, Peter famously encourages the reader to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you.” However, it seems at times that the evangelical Christian response to those who disagree with a biblical worldview is primarily in blogs, speeches, petitions and op-ed pieces. Peter, though, is saying (in both 2:15 and 3:15) that this must be accompanied by two things. First, 2:15 tells us that good
actions accompanying our words are essential for their authentication. Second, 3:15 tells us that even the most accurate of arguments must be presented with “gentleness and respect.”

Citizenry and its Responsibility

The previous section summarized the significant role God gives to civil government and our need to interact with secular authority in a manner respectful of its role. Now, we will look briefly at several examples of how prominent followers of God in the Old Testament related successfully with secular governmental authority, specifically Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah.

It may be tempting to some Christians to find in these three men examples that demonstrate the necessity and requirement for Christians to involve themselves in government, seeking to influence it at the highest levels. However, that would push the analogy too far. The government service of these three men was compulsory and providential, not part of a strategy to influence and change culture.

Nonetheless, the presence of these three men in positions of secular power shows it is possible for believers in God to participate in civil affairs and affect significant positive change. As such, we will conclude that it is not only valid for Christians to be involved in effecting cultural influence through government and the political process, but that it is sometimes God’s specific calling on the life of a believer, often using personal suffering and a humble recognition of his status as an exile to enable influence.

Influence Through Suffering—Joseph

The life of Joseph is recorded in Genesis from chapter 37 to the end of the book in chapter 50. Joseph was the second-to-youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, born of Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel in his old age. From the beginning of his life he enjoyed favored status
in the family and the gift of an ornamental robe from his father was the cause for significant jealousy among his brothers (chapter 37). This jealousy was compounded by several dreams Joseph had which indicated some future position of authority Joseph would have over his siblings. Seeking a final solution to the situation, Joseph’s brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery and fabricated a story about his tragic death to fool his father.

After arriving in Egypt he was sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. He prospered quickly in the house of Potiphar (chapter 39) because “the Lord gave him success in everything he did” (Gen. 39:3). However, when he resisted the sexual advances of his master’s wife, she falsely accused him of trying to assault her. Despite his reputation, Joseph was thrown into prison, where Joseph’s administrative gifts were again noticed and he was given charge of the prison by the warden. However, it was his ability to interpret dreams that ultimately led to his release and service in the court of Pharaoh.

Ultimately, of course, Joseph rose to a position in Egyptian government second in authority only to Pharaoh. Here his gifts allowed him to administer the successful economic and humanitarian rescue of Egypt and, ironically, of his own family. Interestingly, though, there is no evidence of any of Joseph’s political ascendency resulting from any intentional effort on his part to influence Egyptian or regional politics. Joseph’s rise came after many years of slavery, suffering and service. God’s blessing was the cause of his success and his primary influence on the culture was in the area of macro-economic policy rather than social policy.

This results in at least two conclusions that are relevant to our current discussion. First, while the example of Joseph does not rule out the proper place of Christians seeking political influence as a way to influence society, neither can it be used to support it. As stated above, Joseph had little choice about his situation. His goal was, to be sure, to glorify God in
everything he did. But his primary reason for being in Egypt and, ultimately its most influential corridors of political power, was not to influence the culture. It was survival.

There is something else we can learn, though. The second conclusion from the story of Joseph is that patient suffering and faithful service to community can be attractive qualities in the eyes of the world because they break the stereotype of what a follower of God is like. The culture would expect someone who suffers (particularly persecution at the hands of the community) to give up on serving that community. Likewise, the culture would expect that someone who performs excellently would be doing it to gain recognition or gain for themselves. But Joseph broke that mold as did the early Christians we will examine shortly. He suffered at the hands of a community that persecuted him but still served that community with excellence. As a result, when God’s time was right, he had unique credibility and influence to accomplish what God had planned in advance—the preservation of Israel and “the saving of many [including Egyptian] lives” (Gen. 50:20).

Living in Exile—Daniel & Nehemiah

In the years that followed the life of Joseph, the people of Israel grew into a nation. Rescued by God through Moses, they would eventually leave Egypt and re-enter Canaan to claim the land God had promised to Abraham. To govern the nation, God gave them laws that not only codified the moral standards of holiness and the ceremonial standards of religious practice, but detailed the civil standards of the nation. However, when in judgment for their sin God forced his people into exile, the people no longer inhabited the Promised Land. They had new neighbors and lived under the civil authority of another political kingdom.

How then was Israel to relate to this authority? In the Promised Land and under their own rule, the guidelines for how they were to treat non-Israelites were clear. They were to
expel non-Israelites from the community. But what now? Should they rise up in revolt against the Babylonians? The prophet Jeremiah had a different answer. In a letter to the elders, priests and others Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon, Jeremiah writes in Jeremiah 29:4-7:

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 
5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 
6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 
7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

David VanDrunen points out that this would have sounded shocking to the faithful Israelites because their whole experience had been in the Promised Land.12 Sure, there was corruption and in plenty of ways, the kingdom of Judah, failed to live up to the Mosaic standards. However, now they were (literally) in foreign territory. And God tells them they should build houses and start living life among their new neighbors, not just pursuing normal cultural activity but actively praying for and seeking the peace and prosperity of the nation that stood in opposition to everything they had known. God is telling them that things were going to be different in exile. VanDrunen writes: “They were not to pursue their cultural labors physically separated from or economically and politically distinguished from the cultural life of their pagan neighbors. Their cultural life would now be intertwined with that of unbelievers.”13

This situation is a helpful analogy to the present position of the Christian church in our age. We live in a similar age of exile under the authority of another kingdom—one

12 David VanDrunen, Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 92.
13 Ibid., 93.
where followers of God share community with those who do not. Peter uses very similar language to Jeremiah when he exhorts early Christians to live distinctive lives “as aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Pet. 2:11). In fact, he addresses his first letter the same way James addresses his readers, writing to those who have been “scattered.”

In other words, the response of God’s people in the Christian age should be like the faithful Israelites in the Babylonian captivity in Jeremiah 29:4-7. We must accept the fact that we live under a civil authority that may often be hostile to the ways of God. However, we must nonetheless, live among our neighbors, encourage the growth of Christian community, be distinctive in our standards of conduct but willing to work for the common good.

Daniel

Perhaps the best example of someone living out these principles is Daniel. Daniel is similar to Joseph in that he found himself in a prominent government position in the leading political and military power of its age. For Joseph that was Egypt. For Daniel it was Babylon. Taken into exile as a young boy, Daniel lived for decades as an advisor to four emperors. It was an impressive career but one that had its share of hard decisions about how to balance faithfulness to God’s command to be holy and God’s command to serve the community in which he was exiled.

James Boice says there are a number of good reasons why “it’s almost impossible to think. . . of what it means for a godly person to live and labor in a secular environment like Babylon today without thinking of Daniel.” Among them is the fact that Babylon at the time of Daniel was a type of all kingdoms which do not acknowledge God and think they can live

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14 See 1 Pet. 1:1 and James 1:1.
without Him. In addition, Daniel and his friends faced considerable pressure to conform.
Finally, at that moment in history, it might have genuinely appeared as if the enemies of God were winning.\(^\text{15}\)

The situation is similar today. Almost any country in the Western world, including America, fits the description of a nation that believes it can live without God. As a result, Christians can almost universally relate to the feeling that many of their moral values and priorities are not shared by their neighbors. Like Daniel and some of the others who could remember life before the exile, some of us might be able to remember times and places in recent memory where the culture seemed to be more receptive to our way of viewing the world. However, that is not true in most places today and, like Daniel, we need to acknowledge it.

Similarly, we face today considerable pressure to conform to the expectations of our culture. Daniel and his friends resisted this pressure when, likely as teenagers, they refused the food of the King’s table in deference to the Jewish dietary laws. While those laws are not binding on Christians today, we nonetheless face similar pressure to make seemingly small compromises that limit our effectiveness in transforming the culture—the gray-area business practices that ‘everyone’ else does, standards of modesty, the tone we use in relating to family and colleagues. Yet we need to uphold moral standards in a way that allows us to participate in cultural life when obedience to God’s commands is not threatened. For example, Daniel and his friends refused the food given to them, but they welcomed the opportunity to study in the finest educational institutions in Babylon. And when the King

\(^{15}\) Boice, 113.
tested Daniel and his friends, he found them “ten times” more proficient in “every matter of wisdom and understanding” than the best of his kingdom.\textsuperscript{16}

Lastly, the current statistics (some of which we have cited here) show trends on public opinion for certain issues about which the Bible clearly speaks that can be extremely distressing. However, at least in America, we are not yet at the point where Daniel stood. We may get there or we may not. But the testimony of the book of Daniel (not just the history but the prophesy as well) is that God is in control of all history. So we can serve God and our community with integrity and confidence.

\textbf{Nehemiah}

Later in the exile, Nehemiah, occupied a place of prominence in the palace of the Persian King Artaxerxes. He was the royal cupbearer, a chief steward of sorts. Because of the cupbearer’s regular proximity to the king, it was a position that required absolute trustworthiness. And for a foreigner (particularly from a conquered people) to hold the position perhaps speaks significantly to the integrity of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is best known for the rebuilding of the walls around the city of Jerusalem. However, embedded in the feat of organizational skill that was required to do this, is the character of a man who knew how to live purposefully in a hostile culture. Specifically, Nehemiah’s encounter with the king about his desire to return to Jerusalem contains significant applications to our modern situation. The account is in Nehemiah 1-2 and Nehemiah displays several key characteristics that can be instructive to how 21\textsuperscript{st} century American Christians engage their culture.

\textsuperscript{16} See Dan. 1:20.
The first thing Nehemiah did was pray. When he heard about the state of Jerusalem, his heart grieved and he knew he needed to do something. And the first thing he did was go to God. In Nehemiah 1:5-11, an example of Nehemiah’s prayer is recorded but it can be misleading. If you simply read what is recorded, it takes less than a minute. But verse 4 tells us that he mourned, fasted and prayed “for days.” In my experience, it is common for concerned Christians to agree that we should pray for our community, our leaders and our culture. I frequently have emails forwarded to me (or see posted on Facebook) that list all the things wrong in our culture and end with a tagline that says something to the effect of: “Pray for America! . . . And then share this with your friends.” Based on my inbox, I know many are sharing. The challenge for many, though, is to actually pray with the intensity of Nehemiah.

Looking then at the content of Nehemiah’s prayer, the second thing one notices is its humility. In verse 6 he prays, “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you.” And he goes on to recognize that the exile is completely consistent with God’s just judgment against Israel. Now, many conservative Christians are willing to readily acknowledge the sins of America and some are willing to confess the failure of the church. But Nehemiah doesn’t separate himself from the community of sinners. “There was no sin of the people that led to the fall of Jerusalem of which he was not guilty or of which he would not have been capable of committing under the same circumstances.”

Broadly, like Nehemiah, we need to recognize that the cause of our exile is our own sin. Christians live as exiles in the world because that enmity between the children of the God and the children of the serpent is the consequence of humanity’s rebellion against God going all the way back to Genesis 3:15.

\[17\] Boice, 203.
When Nehemiah does finally approach the king with his concerns about Jerusalem, he does so with a remarkable display of respect, loyalty and honesty. In Nehemiah 2:2 the king inquires about his obvious distress, indicating the close relationship they obviously had. Nehemiah was not a faceless servant to the most powerful king in the world at that time. As a result, Nehemiah’s response in verse 3, “May the king live forever,” is not likely vain flattery designed to curry favor but an honest desire for the well-being of the king that had been authenticated through years of faithful service. This relationship is what allows Nehemiah to speak plainly about his concerns for Jerusalem and to ask boldly for the opportunity to leave his post as trusted servant to rebuild the city’s walls. The credit for the king’s response is rightly given to God alone. Yet it’s evident that God used the loyal relationship of trust that existed between Artaxerxes and Nehemiah to favorably predispose the King to his servant’s concern. This is a helpful lesson for Christians seeking to gain influence over culture, whether through government, business or entertainment. Like with Nehemiah, only God ultimately controls whether the Christian will experience favor or persecution. However, the ordinary virtues of loyalty to superiors and respectful, honest communication are not only appropriate behaviors for Christians, they are still largely well-received by those who are not.

The final characteristic of Nehemiah that is applicable to the discussion of our role as Christians in the public sphere is the excellence with which he approached his work and his perseverance. Nehemiah’s accomplishment in overseeing the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls was extraordinary, despite significant internal and external challenges. Books have been written about his excellence as a leader and administrator. Leadership institutions bear

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Pursuing our work with diligence and excellence is absolutely critical if Christians are to influence a performance-based culture. And Nehemiah shows that hard work toward a long-term goal that gains the respect and recognition of the secular world is possible without worshiping the idol of worldly success and popular acclamation.

**Gospel and its Power**

Any review of the Biblical approach to interacting with culture would be incomplete without finally mentioning the uniquely culture-changing power of the gospel itself. Biblically speaking, the restoration of God’s relationship with humanity and the resulting transformation of human culture cannot be reduced to human strategy. It is the gospel itself that changes people and communities. Before closing this section, we will examine two examples.

**Jesus and the Tax Collector**

We have already seen that Jesus’ position on the legitimacy of government taxation was relatively clear. He said that it was appropriate to pay to Caesar that which was owed to him. However, that does not mean Jesus was oblivious to the political corruption that existed in Judea under Roman occupation. Likely many of his followers who heard his answer to the question about the lawfulness of the imperial tax had follow-up questions. It is speculative, of course, but they might have wanted to know whether they should just sit back and accept the fact that they were going to be taken advantage of and cheated. That would have been a legitimate question.

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19 For example, the Nehemiah Emerging Leaders Program in Sacramento, CA (accessed November 8, 2013, http://www.nelpleaders.org/).
Perhaps one of the ways Jesus might have answered them is at the beginning of Luke 19. Here Jesus gives his disciples an alternative strategy to fight corrupt tax collection, one that did not involve tea parties and protests. The strategy was both simpler and harder—get to know the tax collector:

1Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” 6So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

Jesus acts boldly. He invites himself into the home of probably one of the most distrusted and hated officials in town. Tax collectors were agents of the Roman government and so were viewed as traitors among the Jews. In addition, the profession was only profitable by exacting more money from the taxpayers than what they legitimately owed. As a result, tax collectors were not only traitors they were swindlers and extortionists. And for one willing to endure the scorn of the commoners, a position like the one Zacchaeus occupied would have been a prime spot to become wealthy. Jericho was on a major trade route and one of the main hubs for collecting taxes in Israel. And Zacchaeus was the “chief tax collector,” likely meaning that he had others working for him who did the dirty work while he comfortably sat back and took his cut off the top. It should not be a surprise, then, that Jesus’ interest in getting to know Zacchaeus was a bit shocking to the crowd and they “began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (Luke 19:7).

Yet, while changing the system of tax collection in the Roman Empire was not a primary purpose of Jesus’ mission, changing the hearts of tax collectors certainly was. Luke writes:
But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Jesus brings salvation to the house of Zacchaeus and that is, without question, the main point of this encounter. However, the evidence of that salvation is a Zacchaeus who views his job very differently than he did before. Meeting Jesus and trusting him for salvation meant that his behavior came immediately under his Lordship as well. And Jesus did not prescribe the restitution Zacchaeus determines to make. That came from Zacchaeus applying the Lordship of Jesus to his life. In the end, it may have even had a profound impact on the way taxes were collected in Jericho.

Perhaps this can be a model for how to more effectively transform public policy in our culture today. It would be a mistake to think that Christians should disengage entirely from politics. But a new, more effective strategy might involve sincere, thoughtful Christians forming relationships with the politicians who live in their neighborhoods (especially the ones with whom they disagree) with the agenda of breaking social stereotypes, seeking their good, and introducing them to Jesus. It’s not as flashy as waving petitions on the steps of legislative hall. It’s less exhilarating than marching with thousands of people who think like you. And it’s more personally risky than writing blog posts. But it’s probably more obedient to the Great Commission and, as a result, might actually have a higher likelihood of success in achieving sustainable cultural change.

Paul and the Idol Guild

By the time the Apostle Paul rolled into Ephesus in Acts 19, the city’s pagan idolatry was probably fairly obvious. He had been in lots of other Greek cities in the Roman Empire and knew the pain of seeing people devoted to gods that could do nothing but further enslave
the people. If Paul had seen himself as a social activist concerned about the immorality of pagan worship he might have taken a different strategy—perhaps one that would have targeted the passage of legislation prohibiting idol making in the city.

And Paul starts off by doing something that could have come from the social activist playbook. He begins by going to the synagogue to meet with the Jews. Paul, of course, was a Christian with a Jewish heritage. As a result, in the midst of this polytheistic pagan city, the Jews would have been obvious allies to enlist in the cause to stamp out idol manufacturing. But that, of course, is not what Paul does when he gets to the synagogue. Instead, Acts 19:8 says he “spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” In other words, Paul preached the gospel. Unfortunately, the Jews were offended by this, refused to believe and “publicly maligned the Way.” As a result, his potential monotheistic allies were now enemies.

So Paul went to the lecture hall at one of the secular, Greek schools in town and had daily discussions so that, verse 10 tells us, after two years the gospel had been heard by virtually everyone in town. With the power of the Holy Spirit working in people’s hearts, some people began to believe in the Lord Jesus (v.17). As a result, two things happened. First, they repented of their evil deeds (v.18). Second, they collected and burned their occult objects of worship (v.19). In other words, as the people of Ephesus encountered the gospel, the Lordship of Jesus led them to heartfelt repentance and costly lifestyle change.

This alone would prove the point of the gospel’s power but as Acts 19 continues, we also see the economic impact. If Paul had designed it himself, he could not have picked a better way to impact the idol-manufacturing industry in Ephesus. In verse 24, we read that a silversmith named Demetius incites a protest among the other tradesmen because no one is
buying their idol statues of the Greek goddess Artemis. Why not? Because the gospel had changed hearts so that their product wasn’t desired any longer.

In the same way, the American church should be very concerned about the idolatrous content of media and merchandising in our society. And it is tempting to think that lasting change would result from public high-profile boycotts of companies and products. However, one guaranteed way it can happen is when the power of the gospel either changes the “Zacchaeus-like” leaders who control powerful “idol-manufacturers” or changes the hearts of the community so that their products are no longer desired.
CHAPTER 4
THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The above review of biblical texts associated with how God’s people interact with Christian culture is of course theological in the sense that Scripture is the only basis for theology. However, the goal of this chapter is review one of the primary theological approaches to influence this debate, the Two Kingdoms theology. We start with a slightly different, but foundational, concept—Augustine’s Two Cities.

Augustine’s Two Cities

While the early church had to obviously wrestle with questions about how to influence the secular society in which it functioned, the formation of the first sweeping historical and theological analysis of the topic came from Augustine in his classic, The City of God. Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo (a city in northern Africa) and wrote in response to assertions that the fall of Rome in 410 A.D. was because the once-great empire had abandoned its pagan roots in favor of Christianity. He began writing in 413 A.D. and worked on the project for almost fifteen years.

Content

The work is divided into two main sections. The first (books 1-10) was Augustine’s response to the charge of Christian responsibility for the fall of Rome. Here he argued that, on the contrary, it was the sins of the Rome that had led to its collapse—sins against God, ultimately, but ones that manifested themselves in Rome’s gradual drifting from the principles and practices that had made it great in the first place. Augustine argued that by abandoning strong families, honest government, and its commitment to civil law Rome
collapsed under the weight of its own corruption and immorality. He boldly argued that the Roman pagan gods were not the source of Rome’s early success in the first place and ultimately had led the empire into the moral chaos and indecision that was responsible for its fall.

In the second main section (books 11-22), Augustine offers an explanation of human history as the working of two rival societies (or cities) that are governed by two opposed heart commitments. The heavenly city is comprised of God’s people, governed by the love of God and will ultimately prove victorious and rule the world. By contrast, the earthly city is comprised of those opposed to God, governed by the love of self and will ultimately pass away. According to this way of viewing the world, all of history is the story of the battle between these two cities that remain in constant tension with one another. He traces its beginning to the Garden of Eden where God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 establishes enmity between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. He then traces this through the Bible and history, citing the incarnations of the earthly city in Babylon and, in his immediate context, Rome.

Significance & Evaluation

Augustine’s work is firstly significant because it represents the first real attempt to write a Christian philosophy of history. James Boice cites historian Will Durant as saying, “With this book paganism as a philosophy ceased to be, and Christianity as a philosophy began. It was the first definitive formulation of the medieval mind.”

However, perhaps even more significant for the present discussion is the fact that many find in Augustine the precursor for the Two Kingdoms theology formulated by the

reformers. Of course, Augustine was so influential for his time that everyone claims him as his own. As James Skillen points out, in Augustine’s writings, one can find support for several different possible viewpoints (not fully compatible) on how Christians should interact with socio-political life.²

In fact, one could see how what is stated above as the central point of Augustine’s City of God—the strong antithesis between God’s society and the earthly society—can at points seem to imply that there is virtually no righteous way for the one to interact with the other. As Skillen points out, historically some of the more radical Anabaptists and the Calvinist separatists held to this view (which is closest to what earlier we have characterized as “bunkerism”).³

However, elsewhere, Augustine seems to imply that there are appropriate ways for Christians and non-Christians to cooperate in harmony. Citing The City of God, Skillen cites Augustine who wrote in Book XIX:

[S]o long as [the heavenly city] lives like a captive and a stranger in the earthly city, though it has already received the promise of redemption, and the gift of the Spirit as the earnest of it, it makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are administered; and thus as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony between them in regard to what belongs to it.⁴

But even on this point, there can be widely divergent applications. Some believe this means we should passively accept the existence of a society opposed to God (perhaps closest to what we defined as “secularism” albeit with a Christian flavor). Others, though, have

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³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid., 20.
taken this as justification for active engagement with the culture, ranging from activist political action to the approach of transformational influence advocated in this paper.

Without question, the Bible portrays human history since the fall of Adam as the struggle between God’s ways and the rebellious ways of mankind. The cosmic backdrop, starting in Genesis 3 and evident in places such as the book of Job and the temptation of Jesus, is God’s conflict with Satan. Yet, as Augustine points out, this is not a battle among equals. God remains sovereign and is assured of victory. The city of God ultimately wins and the city of man is doomed to failure.

Understanding this is fundamental to both achieving realism and maintaining hope for the Christian seeking to make a transformational impact in the world. On the one hand, understanding the ultimate incompatibility between God’s city and man’s city allows us to avoid false expectations that unconverted sinners will agree (or even sympathize) with our underlying worldview and it keeps us from being surprised when we face stiff opposition to our efforts. However, on the other hand, understanding that God is sovereign over the outcome allows us to boldly engage the city of man and live (as Jeremiah commanded) for its good. Because we know God is sovereign, there is no part of culture not subject to his authority. And the gospel assures the final victory of radical cultural transformation that will be on display in the eschatological city of God.

The Two Kingdoms Doctrine

In the Reformed tradition, the most commonly formulated theological system regarding the intersection of Christianity and culture is known as the Two Kingdoms doctrine. As will be discussed, there has been considerable debate in recent years among subsections of the Reformed theological community as to a fairly narrow application of the doctrine to our current socio-cultural moment. It will be argued that this narrow Two
Kingdoms view is neither exegetically sound nor strategically helpful. However, in a broader sense, the concept of two kingdoms can offer an extremely helpful framework for churches and Christians to understand the essential relationship between the functioning of the Christian church and the functioning of civil society. In the discussion that follows, it is the broader view to which we will refer as “the Two Kingdoms view.” When the discussion turns to the narrow view, it will be noted as such.

Content

The Two Kingdoms view in its most basic form is simply the recognition of the dual obligation expressed in Jesus’ command to “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Matt. 22:21). At each moment, the Christian is subject to God’s government (God’s kingdom) and civil government (the human kingdom).

Now, as we have already examined in the Bible, even the human kingdom exists under God’s authority. As a result, God’s authority, though rejected, is still valid over non-Christians. Jesus was saying that everyone (including the non-Christian) has an obligation to God’s kingdom just as everyone (including the Christian) has an obligation to the human kingdom. The difference, of course, between the Christian and the non-Christian is that the Christian recognizes his dual obligation to the two kingdoms and his need to submit to both. In contrast, the non-Christian sees only one obligation, the one to the human kingdom. Here is reason for Christians to participate in evangelism and community renewal—to proclaim the gospel as the remedy for a world suffering the effects of denying its primary obligation to God.

Perhaps it is also helpful in defining a Two Kingdoms view to distinguish it from Augustine’s Two Cities discussed above. Because there is a logical connection and linguistic similarity between the two, many assume they’re essentially the same thing. However, while
they are related, Augustine’s two cities are different from the concept of two kindgoms. Remember that the two cities Augustine described were mutually exclusive. God’s city consists of true believers in the line of Eve while the earthly city consists of those who reject God in the line of the Serpent. Augustine’s point was that these two cities and their citizens must co-exist in this age, but an individual only belongs to one or the other. In contrast, the Two Kingdoms view describes two types of authority (both ultimately accountable to God) by which he has chosen to administer the affairs of the world, ecclesiastical authority and civil authority. As a result, we can say that the Christian is a citizen of both kingdoms even though he’s only a citizen of one city.

The initial articulation of the Two Kingdoms doctrine is credited to Martin Luther and was obviously influenced by the times in which he lived. Matthew Tuininga argues Luther had three basic concerns in mind. First, he wanted to defend the freedom of a Christian as a citizen of the kingdom of God. Gospel blessings offered to the Christian through the righteousness of Christ cannot be taken away by external circumstances. Second, he wanted to refute the claims of the Roman Catholic Church that it was the source of civil authority. Finally, he wanted to highlight the unique way in which the church grew, not by exercising the sword but by the preaching of the gospel.5

Without question, Luther believed this doctrine to be Biblically based. However, it was also extremely practical for him. It supported perfectly his polemic against the ecclesiastical and theological abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, it also provided theological support for the authority of the German princes against the radical anarchist elements in the reformation movement and among the peasants. In his classic paper

on the subject, *On Secular Authority*, Luther writes: "God has ordained the two governments: the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people; and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they are obligated to keep the peace outwardly. . . ."\(^6\)

Building on Luther, John Calvin also articulated a Two Kingdoms doctrine that emphasized the difference between spiritual and civil power. In the section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* where he is discussing Christian freedom and the gospel, Calvin writes:

> Let us first consider that there is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘temporal’ jurisdiction (not improper terms) by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life—not only with food and clothing but with laying down laws whereby a man may live his life among other men holily, honorably and temperately. For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom.\(^7\)

Tuininga maintains that Calvin’s Two Kingdoms doctrine, like Luther’s, requires contextual and historical understanding as well. Calvin, he says, was responding to the views of some of his contemporaries in the Reformed movement who were arguing that it was the civil magistrate’s role to bring reformation in the church. Calvin, however, opposed that. He believed that the spiritual kingdom should be distinguished from the civil kingdom

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because they had separate roles. Differing from the interpretation of others, Calvin maintained that the ecclesiastical offices of elder and deacon in the New Testament were intended to be permanent offices of the spiritual kingdom, not temporary offices to be ultimately replaced by Christian civil magistrates.8

This point raises a pertinent application to the overall position of this paper. It was obviously tempting for many reformation leaders, particularly if they lived in lands where they had sympathetic political leaders, to have the civil government institute change in the church. However, Calvin said that even if it were politically practical, it would compromise a larger principle that was at stake. Though the point would cause little controversy today, Calvin was importantly emphasizing that the church’s role was not to be confused with the magistrate. The magistrate must be careful not to overstep his bounds, and the church must do the same.

Though the application of the Two Kingdoms doctrine continued to be argued and debated, it nonetheless was solidified among many in the Reformed tradition as a useful expression of how the church was to relate to civil authority. Tuininga notes that “it passed from Calvin to Theodore Beza to the Marian exiles and early Puritans who wanted the English church to be thoroughly reformed in the late 16th century.”

It is through the British reformation that much of today’s Presbyterian church has its roots. Not surprisingly, then, we see a kingdom distinction in the Westminster Confession of Faith where chapter 23 clearly differentiates between the role of civil magistrate and the church. This distinction is reiterated in the Preliminary Principles of the Presbyterian Church in America’s Book of Church order.

8 Tuininga, “Remembering the Two Kingdoms Doctrine.”
The Narrow Two Kingdoms View

There is a great deal of debate among current Reformed theologians about the two kingdom’s doctrine that touches on many of the core questions discussed in this paper. As a result, it is necessary to briefly examine the debate for those who might encounter the discussion in further reading on this topic.

The recent wave of re-emphasis on a narrow Two Kingdoms doctrine was originally driven by what many in the conservative Reformed church rightly saw as a blurring of the kingdoms when the mainline Protestant church began to get involved in social activism in the middle of the twentieth century. As we have earlier pointed out, there is a degree of similarity (in concept though not in issues) between the conservative political activism since the 1980s and this liberal political activism which began earlier. Ironically, then, some of the more recent writings by Two Kingdoms advocates have been critical of activist evangelicals as well.

David VanDrunen is one of the leading proponents of the narrow view in the current discourse. VanDrunen is a professor at Westminster Seminary California and an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in America. His book, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, was published in 2010 with a slightly different purpose than earlier arguments against liberal social activism. VanDrunen identifies one of his primary goals as countering what he sees as a current trend toward “neo-Calvinism” and its approach that culture should be redemptively transformed. His assertion is that “God is not redeeming the cultural activities and institutions of this world, but is preserving them through the covenant he made with all living creatures through Noah in Genesis 8:20-9:17.”

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It is here in this statement that we see two central points of VanDrunen’s argument. First he argues for a discontinuity between Adam’s cultural mandate and the role of the church. Cultural activity is appropriate for the Christian, he argues, but with the recognition that our efforts in this world do not achieve any real lasting transformation of a world that, in the end, will be destroyed. Second, he biblically grounds his Two Kingdoms view in the Noahic covenant which he sees not being made with the whole earth and not specifically with the covenant people of God. This, he argues, is an intentional contrast with the redemptive covenant made with Abraham that is the basis for ecclesiastical kingdom.

Some prominent Reformed theologians have taken issue with these two main premises. John Frame, a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, sees no specifically secular distinction in the Noahic covenant to support the Two Kingdoms view. He writes, “God’s covenant with Noah is an administration of God’s redemptive grace, religious through and through, just as those with Abraham, Moses, David and Christ.”10 In addition, Keith Mathison, a theologian with Ligonier Ministries, argues extensively that both from an historical and a biblical viewpoint, that the redemption and restoration of this present world are valid goals for Christians in this present age.11 For further reading on the debate and the discussion of the narrow view, VanDrunen’s book as well as both the Frame and Mathison critiques are recommended.


Evaluation

There is value in applying a broad Two Kingdoms doctrine to the contemporary discussion about engaging our culture, so long as we continue to maintain God’s final authority over both kingdoms and the redemptive understanding that the gospel does and should change communities when applied consistently to all spheres of life. This simply recognizes what plainly exists and what Jesus taught—a distinction between ecclesiastical and civil rule in the present age.

Matthew Tuininga summarizes well how to understand the nuances of current debate over the narrow two kingdoms view while affirming the broader view when he writes:

I have yet to speak to a confessional Reformed person who does not affirm the two kingdoms doctrine when defined in its classical sense. . . as a simple distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, over both of which Christ rules, though in different ways. . . . We should together affirm that Jesus Christ has been given all authority in heaven and earth, that earthly powers must kiss the son lest he be angry and they perish in the way, and that Christ builds his church as the expression of the kingdom of God through the word and Spirit. We should resist together the twin dangers of the politicization of the church and of the church’s failure to proclaim the whole kingship of Christ over all of life. And then we should get to the real work of figuring out what exactly this proclamation looks like.12

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12 Tuininga, “Remembering the Two Kingdoms Doctrine.”
CHAPTER 5
HISTORICAL APPLICATION

From theology, we turn to briefly examine how cultural change occurred in the Roman Empire during the early years of the Christian church. Similar to the culture of today, ancient Greco-Roman culture of the first few centuries after the death of Christ was marked by rampant sexual immorality, the glorification of violence as sport, and religious pluralism tolerant of everything but exclusive truth claims. The major difference, though, was that early Christians were not even tempted to sit around and wonder if they should pursue a strategy of top-down political and legislative reform. Beginning from the dusty streets of a province on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, Christianity spread within two centuries across the Roman world through North Africa and into Europe. By the time Constantine and the so-named Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. officially recognized Christianity as a religion, it had succeeded in penetrating into the most powerful institutions of government.

The point of this section is to highlight the similarities between the culture in which the early church lived and our culture in the western world of the 21st century and to demonstrate that change in the culture occurred not primarily through political activism or by force. It did so through the faithful witness of Christians loving their neighbors—living distinctively, thinking strategically, and preaching boldly. What follows are some examples in each of these three categories.
Living Distinctively

Around the middle of the second century, a letter was written by an early Christian believer to a man named Diognetus. The prologue explains that the letter was written to respond to Diognetus’ inquiry about the nature of Christianity and why the author had found it appealing. As such, it is not so much a church document as it is an evidence of early Christian witness and evangelism. While it gives a brief explanation of why many were abandoning other belief systems in favor of following Christ, one of the most fascinating sections is when the author describes the distinctive conduct of Christians that he, and others, found so peculiarly attractive.

He writes, referring to Christians,

They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. . . . They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. . . . They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance.¹

The language is striking here because of the style. The author lists a series of descriptions that one would assume to be contrasts with one another. Yet, he maintains, they are consistently maintained within the Christian. In other words, Christianity created totally different categories of living than the world was used to seeing. At the same time, Christians had a radical commitment to sexual purity that nonetheless exalted marriage and childbearing. They not only obeyed the letter of the law but sought an even higher standard

of personal integrity. When insulted, they loved anyway. Though they were poor, they were incredibly liberal with their money. Of these distinctive characteristics, let us examine two a little further, sexuality and generosity.

Sexuality

The Christian ethic regarding sexuality must have been particularly peculiar to the culture of the time. Sarah Ruden, a Yale-trained classics translator, in her 2010 book *Paul Among the People* explains the culture into which Christianity appeared in the first century saying that it was in many ways as corrupt sexually as ours. She says that Paul’s revolutionary teaching on sexual purity and marriage was appealing to the people of the time because it would have been understood as liberating. The Greco-Roman culture of the time, as Ruden describes it, was graphically sexually exploitive—especially of slaves and women, whose value to men was found mainly in their ability to produce children and provide sexual pleasure.

But Christianity offered something different. It restrained exploitive sexuality by calling men to account, elevating the status of marriage, the human body and women in way that would have been both revolutionary and winsomely attractive to a world suffering from the brokenness of sexuality. “It set out a new way of thinking that must have been quite exciting, a hope for something beyond exploitation, materialism and violence. . . .”

Generosity

We take private charity and government social services for granted in today’s western world. And while ancient acts of charity and non-compulsive religious giving no doubt

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occurred, the Christian ethic of generosity was distinctive as an act of selfless love rather than a self-centered purchase of favor from either deity or society. In his *Apology*, the early church father, Tertullian, noted not just the willing giving of Christians but the care with which the funds were used by the church:

> On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety’s deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God’s Church, they become the nurslings of their confession.³

The generosity of the early church also extended to their physical care of others in the midst of disease and suffering. Writing of the heroic care local Christians provided not only to their own but to their neighbors, sociologist Rodney Stark cites the writing of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, around 260 during the time of a great plague:

> Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead…The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.⁴

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Stark then notes the contrast with the way Dionysius describes the behavior of the broader culture:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.5

Part of what makes generosity winsome is the attitude with which it is given and how much it costs the giver to provide it. In the case of early Christians caring for the sick in the midst of plagues the cost was often the Christian’s own life. And yet, what the comments above from Tertullian indicate is that there was a joyful willingness to play this role. The theology of eternal reward through Christ and the model of a Savior who suffers on behalf of those he loves, provided both the hope of life on the other side of death and the motivation for life on this side of it.

**Thinking Strategically**

To say that the power of Christianity in the midst of a hostile culture lay only in its ability to live ethically and suffer nobly is not enough. Christianity did more than simply grow from the bottom up, it transformed culture from the inside out at all levels of society.

We see in the book of Acts that the uniqueness of Christianity was that it appealed to the intellectual as well as the uneducated and oppressed masses. In Acts 17, we see that Paul was quite comfortable among, and that he strategically targeted, the intellectuals in Athens. This is the same gospel that in Acts 16 freed the lower-class slave girl, converted the upper-middle-class merchant Lydia and transformed the lower-middle-class Philippian jailor.

5 Stark, 83.
James Hunter in his book, *To Change the World*, counters the notion that Christianity in its first several centuries changed the culture as a bottom-up, grass-roots movement. Instead, he notes that Paul and early Christianity intentionally targeted urban centers of intellectual and economic influence—Alexandria in Egypt, Carthage in Tunisia, Antioch in Syria, Constantinople in Turkey, and of course, Rome.

“In all of these cities,” Hunter writes, “there are clear indications that Christians had made their way into elite circles of wealth, power, and culture.” He notes that both Paul and the early church historian, Eusebius, specifically mention Christians in the imperial households of the Roman upper classes. In addition, he highlights the significant influence that resulted from the Church’s commitment to scholarship, education and apologetic argument.

In other words, Christianity was not just a grass-roots, rural religion. It intentionally used the network of Roman roads to reach the urban centers of influence where churches could be established that would evangelize and disciple men and women who would end up in culture-influencing roles.

**Preaching Boldly**

Finally, it must be briefly noted that the power of the church’s early historical influence is rooted in the Christian’s obedience to proclaiming the gospel message with his whole life. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the 3rd century wrote:

> There is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attention of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a

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merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well. . . . Thus the
good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.\footnote{Stark, 212.}

This attitude is the essence of the gospel because to love one’s enemies is exactly
what Jesus did for those for whom he died. It is obedience to the great commandment to love
God and love your neighbor. It is recognition that the gospel is “the power of God that brings
salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Historically, it is the power to change lives
and culture.
This paper has maintained that the primary approaches of the church and Christians over the last generation has failed and that a new strategy is needed. While it’s easier for conservative Christians to dismiss those approaches that advocate separatism and those that deny the authority of Scripture, the evangelical church has at least recognized that it must struggle with this question as well. In general, evangelicals have rightly seen the need to positively influence the culture based on the truth the Bible contains. However, those strategies that have focused largely on obtaining and utilizing political influence are neither biblically sound, nor strategically appropriate.

Don Eberly, a political activist from Pennsylvania and the founder of the National Fatherhood Instituted, summarized this reality in an article for Modern Reformation prior to the 2000 presidential election:

Contrary to widespread perception, there is little encouragement from either the Scriptures or Christian history to suggest that national righteousness emanates predominately in the law. Jesus and the early church existed within one of the most politically and culturally corrupt societies in history and offered few political prescriptions outside of ‘giving to Caesar that which is Caesar’s.’¹

To be clear, neither Eberly’s statement nor this paper maintains that Christians are prohibited from being involved in government. There are indeed those whom God has gifted with the ability to govern, plan and administer the practical needs of people living in community with one another. However, even if we were to grant that in the past it might

have been possible for Christians involved in the political process and government service to effect any lasting transformative change in the culture through legislation and court action, it is not strategically possible today anyway. Rightly or wrongly, the voices of evangelical Christians are not likely to be persuasive on the major cultural issues of our day unless the case is made (particularly to the younger generation) in a different way.

So what should we do? The response advocated here is one of gospel transformation, winsomely proclaiming that only through Jesus can people love the Lord with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and love their neighbor as themselves. It is an approach that recognizes the significant limitations of political activism and instead emphasizes personal evangelism and intentional application of a Christian worldview to the workplace and institutions that shape and influence cultural trends.

By following this path, I believe we have a significant strategic opportunity as we lovingly demonstrate through our words and our living how Christianity is uniquely suited to address the inner spiritual longings of our heart and the frustratingly deep brokenness of our contemporary culture. The reason Christianity alone can do this is because both at the individual and the community level, the problem with culture is really our rebellion against God. It is a sin problem. And the way to deal with a sin problem is not to “whitewash the tombs” with better rules but to resurrect the dead with the gospel.

To conclude, this chapter will offer some general principles of how Christians might seize the strategic opportunity afforded to this generation. At the outset, this paper highlighted the current debate over homosexuality as one of the major flashpoints for the need of Christians to think strategically different. As a result, this chapter will refer to the current discussions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage as its example. Doing so is not intending to imply that homosexuality is necessarily the most important issue facing the
contemporary church—simply that its controversial nature (and the paralysis it causes many Christians) makes it one of the best places to apply these principles today. On this issue (as with others), I’ll maintain that seizing the strategic opportunity means Christians must engage the culture at the ‘worldview’ level, create new categories of Christianity in the public’s mind, and learn by example.

Engage at the Worldview Level

A worldview is the lens through which we view the world. It is the overarching storyline into which we fit the chapters of our life in order to make sense of them. Consider three general approaches to how people approach life. Perhaps open to the charge of oversimplification, these categories nonetheless help frame the discussion of why recognizing the importance of a person’s worldview is so important.

The first is the “life as expressive freedom” approach. This is probably the dominant view in western Europe and America and is the typical liberal secular approach. Here, reality is defined by experience, human reason and what feels right. As a result, it can be thought of as a utilitarian relativism. It is utilitarian because its guiding principle is whatever seems to work. It is relativism because everyone gets to decide, more or less, what works according to his own individual standards.

The second approach is the “life as dirty necessity” approach. This is at the other end of the spectrum from the “life as expressive freedom” view and is the typical conservative religious approach. In this view, human culture should be viewed with a high degree of skepticism and physical pleasure enjoyed only where absolutely necessary. Lack of creativity in proclaiming the beauty of the physical world in its original design and its residual wonder leaves the only message of this worldview as a negative one. As a result, people in this group
tend to default to following a rigid moral code while insisting that culture change is nothing more than insisting others adopt that code as well.

The third approach, is the “life as gospel signpost” approach. This is the rightful Christian view. Here, people created and known by a loving and just God, deeply recognize the brokenness in the world that results from rejecting Him. Yet at the same time, they enjoy life according to fixed standards designed for the flourishing of community and the joy of individuals. In other words, the overarching life storyline here is God’s rescue mission and all of life is lived to testify to His greatness.

These three options are not exhaustive and there are many variations of each, but these are examples of how underlying assumptions (lenses) shape how we see the world. Note that each has an ultimate starting point that governs the rest of the worldview. In the first approach, the starting point is reason and pleasure. In the second, the starting point is moral law. And in the third, it is the redemptive story of Jesus. Nancy Pearcey in her book *Total Truth* explains the significance:

> Every system of thought begins with some ultimate principle. If it does not begin with God, it will begin with some dimension of creation—the material, the spiritual, the biological, the empirical, or whatever. Some aspect of created reality will be ‘absolutized’ or put forth as the ground and source of everything else—the uncaused cause, the self-existent. To use religious language, this ultimate principle functions as the divine, if we define that term to mean the one thing upon which all else depends for its existence.\(^2\)

> In other words, a Christian strategic response to culture must first recognize that everyone lives (consciously or sub-consciously) according to an ultimate principle. That internal principle governs external behavior. As a result, solutions that focus on the external behavior and ignore the internal principle will fail.

In a 1993 cover story, *The Nation* identified the gay-rights cause as the “summit and keystone” of the culture war:

All the crosscurrents of present-day liberation struggles are subsumed in the gay struggle. The gay movement is in some ways similar to the moment that other communities have experienced in the nation’s past, but it is also something more, because sexual identity is in crisis throughout the population, and gay people—at once the most conspicuous subjects and objects of the crisis—have been forced to invent a complete cosmology to grasp it. No one says the changes will come easily. But it’s just possible that a small and despised minority will change America forever.³

This writer is clearly supportive of the gay rights cause and the change they hoped was happening in America. However, what’s fascinating is the way in which the author sees the change is coming—through the invention of a “cosmology”—a worldview about sexuality and its relation to human identity and freedom.

Rod Dreher, writing in the American Conservative in April 2013, commented on this twenty-year old prediction:

They were right, and though the word ‘cosmology’ may strike readers as philosophically grandiose, its use now appears downright prophetic. The struggle for the rights of ‘a small and despised sexual minority’ would not have succeeded if the old Christian cosmology had held: put bluntly, the gay-rights cause has succeeded precisely because the Christian cosmology has dissipated in the mind of the West.⁴

In other words, Dreher is saying that what we’re experiencing in the debate over the purpose and practice of sexuality is a clash of cosmologies that have different underlying assumptions as their ultimate principle. This means that to the extent we see the battle being lost for a Biblical worldview, it is because the cosmology ‘invented’ (or at least packaged for


⁴ Dreher.
our time and culture) by the gay rights movement has filled the gap left by the dissipation of the Christian cosmology.

Dreher argues that this did not happen in just the last couple of years but that the battle regarding homosexuality was lost back in the 1960s—when the sexual revolution won the cosmological war about sexuality among the mainstream. Slowly, this was seen in the decline of a high view of marriage in general (even among professed Christians) and changing underlying views of sexuality that centered on individual rights and personal satisfaction. Interestingly, at the surface level of moral views, the majority of people still felt homosexuality was morally wrong. However, the cosmological cultural storyline had been re-written—a storyline that fits both heterosexual and homosexual sin. All it took in the last 20 years is the very effective articulation of that by the gay rights lobby. Dreher puts it like this:

Conservative Christians have lost the fight over gay marriage and. . . did so decades before anyone even thought same-sex marriage was a possibility. Gay-marriage proponents succeeded so quickly because they showed the public that what they were fighting for was consonant with what most post-1960s Americans already believed about the meaning of sex and marriage.

He goes on to comment on the need for the church to accordingly adjust its strategy:

Too many of them [meaning conservative Christians] think that same-sex marriage is merely a question of sexual ethics. They fail to see that gay marriage, and the concomitant collapse of marriage among poor and working-class heterosexuals, makes perfect sense given the autonomous individualism sacralized by modernity and embraced by contemporary culture—indeed, by many who call themselves Christians. They don’t grasp that Christianity, properly understood, is not a moralistic therapeutic adjunct to bourgeois individualism. . . but is radically opposed to the cultural order (or disorder) that reigns today. They are fighting the culture war moralistically, not cosmologically. They have not only lost the culture, but unless they understand the
nature of the fight and change their strategy to fight cosmologically, within a few
generations they may also lose their religion.\(^5\)

While the Bible does not share the pessimism of Dreher’s very last phrase, his overall
point is nonetheless well stated. The church must shift its strategy. The battle is lost when
we mistakenly think the war is being fought over external behaviors. We must begin to
contend for the truth ‘cosmologically’ at the worldview level.

Create New Categories

The starting point for fighting cosmologically is for Christians to intentionally create
new categories of what a Christian is. In other words, the world believes it already has a
category for what a Bible-believing Christian is like. In some cases, the definition goes like
this: “Christians hate people who don’t agree with them while at the same time living like
them.” In other cases, the presumption is that Christians care only about a narrow set of “pet
sins.” In whatever case, because they have already decided how a Christian worldview is
defined, they’re unwilling to listen to a winsome explanation of it.

In a recent panel discussion with fellow-pastors John Piper and Matt Chandler, David
Platt concluded by saying:

I don’t think there’s a discernment [among those in our culture] that has categories for
‘I’m against abortion, I’m against poverty, and I’m against so-called gay marriage.’
The world certainly doesn’t have categories like that. But we really need to create
categories. . . .\(^6\)

Here, Platt is getting at something important. The first step to breaking the stereotype
of Christianity is to intentionally live in a way that is impossible for people to fit what they

\(^5\) Dreher.

\(^6\) “Social Justice and Young Evangelicals: Encouragement and Concern,” The Gospel Coalition,
are witnessing into the common categories. The example Platt gives is of a Christian who opposes same-sex marriage and abortion and yet actively advocates on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. While the combination of these things is not radical compared to a Biblical definition of historic Christianity, it is radical compared to the current stereotypical view most secular people would have of conservative Christians. Hence, the strategic opportunity to be distinctive is available because of common stereotypes that can be profoundly challenged by Christians being nothing different than what Jesus originally commanded them to be.

James Boice offered advice to fellow evangelicals in creating new categories when he wrote: “It would do a great deal for the cause of Christian conservatives if some of them would do battle on behalf of those with whom they disagree. Homosexuals, for instance. Or abortion doctors. They could condemn harassment of both groups and fight discrimination against homosexuals in jobs and housing, just for starters.”7

The reason this advice sounds radical is because it has not been the typical approach of the church to serve those who disagree with them. However, Boice is not advocating a softening of conviction. He is simply saying that consistently living one’s convictions require that Christian principles of justice, fairness and care apply equally to all. And when that happens, people will begin to take notice because it breaks their preconceived definition of a Christian. It creates a new category of Christian in their mind. One whose worldview may now warrant a hearing. One they had not expected. But one that is actually truer to the Bible than their original stereotype.

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7 Boice, 161.
Learn by Example

To examine further how Christians can create new categories, we will conclude by looking at three examples of how it has been applied to the current issue of homosexuality.

John Freeman

The first example actually comes out of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where James Boice was the pastor from 1968 until his death in 2000.

In the spring of 1983, John Freeman was studying at Westminster Seminary just north of Philadelphia and taking a missions class with the late Harvie Conn. He said Harvie came into class one day and said that he was going to talk about what he considered to be the largest unreached mission field and the largest hidden mission field in America. The largest unreached mission field he said was the gay and lesbian community. And the largest hidden mission field was the people sitting in Christian churches struggling with the pain, guilt, and heartache of sexual sin and brokenness.

John said he asked Dr. Conn after the class if he knew of anyone intentionally ministering to these mission fields. He said that he did not. But, he told John, if anyone would be interested it would be Tenth Presbyterian in Center City Philadelphia because of their location in the city and proximity to the gay community. John approached Tenth and they started by hosting support groups for people struggling with homosexuality and sexual sin. In addition to the Tenth bulletin, they advertised in local newspapers, attracting people of all different backgrounds to attend groups that discussed the issues of sexuality from the perspective of a Christian worldview.

In 1986, as the AIDS crisis was at its height, a number of Christian doctors in Philadelphia began approaching John and asking if he would be willing to talk with their dying AIDS patients who had requested someone to come pray with them. In most cases,
these patients were not church attenders, but individuals who had been isolated from society in general (and the church in particular) because of their lifestyle and disease. A ministry called HOPE spun out of this for about 16 years that ministered to the spiritual and practical needs of AIDS patients and families in the Philadelphia community.\(^8\)

John Freeman is still the Executive Director of Harvest USA, the ministry that formed from these beginnings and one of the most winsome voices for truth and grace to those suffering from sexual brokenness. Harvest’s current and ongoing ministry is significant in itself, but what is most significant about its origin is the way in which it demonstrates the power of creating new categories. For an evangelical church located near the heart of the homosexual community in Philadelphia to offer hope and compassion to hurting people is different than what might have been expected of them. Tenth had several options in approaching this issue (and ministry in general) in the 1980s. It could have left the city entirely and retreated to the suburbs like many conservative urban churches did, trying to find cultural enclaves where more people agreed with their worldview. They could have built figurative walls around the church like many other urban churches did, and suffered the dwindling influence of their worldview. Or, they could have gone militant by protesting the sin they saw in their neighborhood, making themselves popular with some but virtually ensuring that none of their opponents would ever listen to their point of view. All three of these options would have fit into an existing category of how a church reacts to culture. However, Tenth Church chose none of these. It created a new category.

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\(^8\) John Freeman, phone interview by author, October 23, 2013.
Rosaria Champagne Butterfield had everything she thought she wanted. She was a tenured professor of English and Women’s Studies at a major research university. She had a vibrant community of friends and relationships and a worldview that made complete sense to her. As a leftist lesbian she says she despised Christians—“stupid, pointless, menacing”—particularly the Christians of the conservative right variety.⁹

In 1997 while beginning research for a book on the Religious Right, she wrote a letter to the local newspaper about the men’s movement, Promise Keepers. Promise Keepers had come to Syracuse to hold an event and she viewed it as a perfect opportunity to showcase her views about “the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics and patriarchy.”¹⁰ The letter generated considerable response from readers, responses that fit fairly neatly into one of two expected categories—hate mail and fan mail. Her fans enthusiastically supported what she wrote and her detractors strongly voiced their disagreement. She piled each stack on her desk in two big boxes.

But there was one letter that did not fit either category. It was from Ken Smith who was the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. She describes the letter as “kind and inquiring,” asking respectful questions about the presuppositions of her position. It was not fan mail because he was not agreeing with her. Yet she could not in good conscience put it in the hate mail pile either. She did not know how to respond. So she threw it away. But later that night she retrieved it from the recycling bin and put it back on her desk. A week later she accepted Ken’s invitation to call him and join his family for a meal. So began

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¹⁰ Ibid.
a multiple-year journey for Rosaria where she began to understand the nature of sin, grace, biblical authority, and transformation.

There are many remarkable things about this story of conversion. However, two things are most notable as to the strategy of how Christians confront culture. First, is the way Ken Smith intentionally created a “new category” by challenging Rosaria’s preconceived definition of an evangelical Christian. He did not compromise a bit of his orthodoxy but instead returned to the holistic understanding of a Christian who loves his neighbor in the way that he would want to be loved.

The second notable thing is the way Ken Smith’s letter (and the many subsequent conversations with Rosaria) forced her to examine her worldview assumptions rather than focusing on the outward expressions of her morality. His letter asked her hard questions about her presuppositions and the ‘cosmological’ system that supported her social and political stances. Rosaria commented, “As a postmodern intellectual, I operated from an historical materialist worldview, but Christianity is a supernatural worldview. Ken’s letter punctuated the integrity of my research project without him knowing it.”

Dan Cathy

A final example of building behind-the-scenes relationships involves Shane Windmeyer, the founder and executive director of Campus Pride, a leading national organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender college students. For years he had protested the views and giving practices of the fast-food chain, Chick-fil-A, and its president Dan Cathy—views and practices that supported a biblical definition of marriage. In the summer of 2012 when the nationwide controversy about Chick-fil-A was at its height, Windmeyer got a call from Dan Cathy. Windmeyer was skeptical, thinking he would either get verbally rebuked by Cathy or used as some public relations ploy. But despite his
reservations, Windmeyer returned the call. The first call lasted for more than an hour and in the following months the two built a relationship through phone calls, text messages and face-to-face meetings. They talked about differences and sought to listen to each other. In the end, the relationship was made public when Windmeyer wrote a blog article about his “coming out as a friend of Dan Cathy.”

Unlike the example of Rosaria Butterfield, Shane Windmeyer has not converted to Christianity. He insists that he will not change his views. Yet, his preconceived understanding of a Christian man was completely upended when that Christian chose to treat him differently than he had ever been treated before. Windmeyer writes,

    It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another. . . . Dan sought first to understand, not to be understood. . . . Dan expressed a sincere interest in my life, wanting to get to know me on a personal level. . . . Dan, in his heart, is driven by his desire to minister to others and had to choose to continue our relationship throughout this controversy. . . . It was Dan who took a great risk. . . .

Whether consciously considered by the Christian or not, the risk associated with loving someone who disagrees with you and treating them with dignity is an extremely strategic action. Shane Windmeyer did not have a category for that kind of behavior. As a result, Dan Cathy—like John Freeman and Ken Smith—is able communicate truth in a credible way that actually earns a hearing.

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12 Ibid.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The question of how the church engages with political and public issues is one that will not go away and one that defies easy and simplistic answers. Good Christian people will continue to disagree on the church’s appropriate public response as specific issues arise. And so, with grace and charity, churches must honestly discuss each situation and provide guidance for its members.

The goal of this paper has been to provide a practical resource to help local church leaders and members consider these challenges from a Biblical, theological and strategic point of view. And the conclusion we have reached is that the political process is severely limited in its ability to achieve lasting individual and cultural change, particularly in a 21st century western society. However, the answer is not for the church to retreat and hide. Instead, we have argued that the local church has a responsibility to engage contemporary culture through personal evangelism and the intentional application of a Christian worldview to institutions that shape and influence cultural trends.

As we have maintained, there is nothing particularly innovative about this approach. Jesus summarized God’s law in two commandments when he said to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and secondly, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). In other words, Jesus instructed his followers to live in a proper, peaceful and loving relationship with the God who made them and with the culture in which they lived. Yet, these are impossible standards and the gospel is the only message that will uniquely enable us to meet them. That
means lasting cultural change only results when the gospel is preached, believed and put into practice.

We have seen that this is the emphasis of the Biblical witness whenever followers of God were faced with having to live in cultures hostile to their beliefs. In the Old Testament, men like Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah had significant impacts on culture from positions of influence. However, rather than rely on intentional political strategies for influencing government, their primary strategic approach was to live faithfully, work excellently and seek the good of the culture where God had placed them. Further, the New Testament evidence demonstrates repeatedly a focus on gospel proclamation as the primary agent of cultural change in the ministry of both Jesus and Paul.

Theologically, we have seen that there is indeed a useful distinction that can be made between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. However this must be done while maintaining God’s final authority over both and recognizing the redemptive understanding that the gospel does and should change culture as it is applied consistently to all spheres of life. When this happens consistently, as it did historically in the early church, a distinctive and hopeful worldview alternative is presented to a culture struggling under the weight of the consequences of its rebellion against God.

Here is the strategic lesson for us. If we return to the text in Jeremiah 29 we see that Christians today are living in a world that looks much more like the exile in Babylon than the promised land of Jerusalem. Yet what does God tell us to do? Seek Babylon’s prosperity, not by emulating its rebellion against God but by obediently living the Kingdom of God in its midst—exceling in our professions, sacrificing comfort for the sake of others and creating new categories that the world’s culture does not know what to do with. That is how Christians will influence culture and individual hearts will be changed.
Commenting on this passage from Jeremiah 29, Tim Keller writes:

‘For you,’ God says, ‘the route to gaining influence is not taking power. Influence gained through power and control doesn’t really change society; it doesn’t change hearts. I’m calling you to a totally different approach. Be so sacrificially loving that the people around you, who don’t believe what you believe, will soon be unable to imagine the place without you. They’ll trust you because they see that you’re not only out for yourself, but out for them, too. When they voluntarily begin to look up to you because of the attractiveness of your service and love, you’ll have real influence. It will be an influence given to you by others, not taken by you from others.’ Who is this model for that way of gaining influence? It’s Jesus himself, of course. How did he respond to his enemies? He didn’t call down legions of angels to fight them. He died for their sins, and as he was dying he prayed for them. And if at the heart of your worldview is a man dying for his enemies, then the way you’re going to win influence in society is through service rather than through power and control.¹

This is the probably the most helpful strategic realization of all. Atop all our strategy sits Jesus Christ. He is the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth.² Ultimately, Christians are incapable of changing the culture on their own. We do not have the power to change a single heart like Rosaria Butterfield’s or influence a community like Center City Philadelphia. However, we can point people to Jesus.

When Jesus met Zacchaeus in Jericho, Jesus both changed a heart and influenced a community. Zacchaeus experienced personal salvation and the community experienced the result as he gave generously to the poor and returned fourfold what he had unjustly acquired. And it happened because Jesus chose to align himself with someone who had a different worldview with a very strategic result. Yet, the primary authority of Jesus to affect culture change is demonstrated not in Jericho but in Jerusalem. In Luke 19, Luke tells the reader that


² See Matt. 28:18.
Jesus was only passing through Jericho. He was on his way to Jerusalem where the cross and the resurrection set into motion the only true, enduring culture change possible.

So with confidence, we point people to Jesus, the one who broke all the religious categories of his day, who models perfectly the principle of influencing others through self-denying sacrifice, and who alone has the power and authority to change the world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary


Secondary


