



DAVENANT GUIDES

# *The Two* KINGDOMS

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A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED



W. BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN



DAVENANT GUIDES seek to offer short and accessible introductions to key issues of current debate in theology and ethics, drawing on a magisterial Protestant perspective and defending its contemporary relevance today.

# THE TWO KINGDOMS

*A Guide for the Perplexed*

BY W. BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

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## INTRODUCTION: WHICH TWO KINGDOMS?

FOR the past few years, the narrow world of conservative North American Reformed theology has been torn by one of its regular bouts of internecine strife. This latest round, however, holds more than the usual interest, representing as it does but one form of an identity crisis afflicting every Christian communion in the late modern world. How should we understand the relationship between the public and private dimensions of faith in the aftermath of the breakdown of Christendom and the paradigms for public faith that it offered? These, however imperfect, at least provided some framework for the intersection of Christian faith and citizenship. And of course, although the modern form of this identity crisis is new, the questions behind it are timeless: how do we reconcile loyalty to God, our highest authority, but a hidden one, with loyalty to the very visible earthly authorities that He has set above and around us? How, moreover, does our calling as followers of Christ relate to our calling as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, our spiritual and heavenly good relate to the goods of the earth we have been to protect and serve.

The conflict I refer to, of course, surrounds the emergence of so-called “Reformed two-kingdoms” (R2K) doctrine, which, in its contemporary form, is particularly



associated with theologians at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, CA (thus the occasional moniker “The Escondido Theology”), such as Michael Horton and David VanDrunen, though its most outspoken representative has perhaps been Hillsdale professor Darryl G. Hart.<sup>1</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING THE “REFORMED TWO-KINGDOMS” DOCTRINE

Like most movements in theology, it can be best understood by first understanding what it is reacting against. The R2K theorists have their sights set on a trio of boogeymen within the conservative Reformed and evangelical world: theonomy, neo-Calvinism, and evangelicalism (although a broader array of foes, such as the emergent church and N.T. Wright, are sometimes in view as well). Of these, theonomy (also known as Reconstructionism) is probably the most obscure to non-

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<sup>1</sup> David VanDrunen’s *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) offered what was widely taken to be an authoritative historical survey offering support for the doctrine, while his *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) offered a more systematic and practical sketch of how he intended the doctrine to work in the life of the church. Darryl Hart articulated a similar viewpoint in *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), and *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), as well as being the most forceful and articulate defender of R2K doctrine (or at least his own take on it) at his blog, oldlife.org. There have been many counter-attacks on the doctrine in blogs, magazines, and journals; a good book-length collection of largely neo-Calvinist responses can be found in Ryan C. McIlhenny, ed., *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2012).

Reformed audiences. A movement that enjoyed considerable vogue among the arch-Reformed in the '80s and '90s but has recently faded, theonomy proposed a full-blown recovery of the civil laws of the Old Testament as a Christian blueprint for modern society. Any political theology short of this, theonomists claimed, was compromise with unbelief, privileging man's word above God's.<sup>2</sup>

Neo-Calvinism enjoys a much more mainstream recognition, including (in its broadest construal) such well-known political theologians as James K.A. Smith, John Witte, Jr., and Nicholas Wolterstorff, and serving as a dominant force particularly among the Dutch Reformed. Its card-carrying, doctrinaire membership, however, with whom the R2K theorists are particularly concerned, occupies a somewhat self-enclosed circle among conservative denominations and institutions. They are distinguished by their commitment to the public theology of Abraham Kuyper, mediated through twentieth-century Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd and North American followers such as Henry Stob, Al Wolters and Cornelius Van Til (though this latter offered his own distinctive twists which proved congenial to theonomists). In a nutshell, this tradition's slogan is "Take every thought captive to the lordship of Christ," a determination to "transform" the various "spheres" and institutions of society by grounding them upon the fundamental ideas of a "Christian worldview." Unlike theonomy, neo-Calvinism is concerned more with philosophical "ground-motives"

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<sup>2</sup> Classic texts expounding this perspective are Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1973), and Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1984).

than legalistic prescriptions, with the spirit rather than the letter, but it can be similarly triumphalist in aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

“Evangelicalism” is of course the most inchoate of the three foes, but the one that has been the target of the lion’s share of the more popular level R2K writings, such as those by Horton and Hart.<sup>4</sup> American evangelicals are blamed for a low ecclesiology that devalues the institutional church, its ministries and sacraments, in favor of a naive biblicism that thinks there’s a Bible verse for every problem, and for a belligerent political activism. Taken together, these lead to a confusion of the kingdom of Christ with worldly politics, as evangelicals insist on imposing particular understandings of what Scripture demands on voters and politicians. Of course, stated this way, such criticisms of evangelicalism are nothing new, and would be shared by many beyond the Escondido theologians. Theonomy, too, has few friends nowadays, and although neo-Calvinism may have a strong constituency both at more popular and more intellectual levels, most of its representatives would acknowledge the fairness of many R2K warnings against triumphalism—confusing our own cultural labors with Christ’s transforming work in a way that places both an unreasonable burden of expectation on Christians and unfairly denigrates the goods that non-believers are capable of achieving.

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<sup>3</sup> Key texts expounding this perspective include Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Michael Horton’s *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), and Darryl Hart’s *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*.

The Reformed two-kingdoms movement's chief concerns, then—a desire to re-emphasize the centrality of the Church in the Christian life, a suspicion of over-reaching claims for biblical authority and applicability, a healthy cynicism about the ability to realize gospel norms in temporal and political structures, and a stress on the wide area of commonality between believers and unbelievers in our mundane lives—all seem like salutary ones, shared by most sober and theologically thoughtful commentators. But this does not mean that most commentators would share the theological framework underlying these critiques, which rests on an extensive set of neatly-correlated dualisms: spiritual kingdom vs. civil (or “temporal” or “common”) kingdom, church vs. state, redemption vs. creation, eternal vs. temporal, Jesus Christ vs. Creator God, Scripture vs. natural law. The institutional church, we are told is Christ's spiritual kingdom, in which alone the work of redemption is being carried out for eternal salvation, under the headship of Jesus Christ, who rules this kingdom by Scripture alone. The rest of life, on the other hand (and preeminently the state) is an expression of God's civil kingdom, in which there is no distinction between believer and unbeliever; this sphere serves merely for the temporary preservation of the creation order, under the government of God as Creator, and normed by the prescriptions of natural law, rather than Scripture.

Thus, although the R2K movement has gotten considerable traction from critiquing of overreaching expressions of political Christianity or cultural transformationalism, it has also encountered fierce resistance from those who fear that it wishes to throw out the baby of public discipleship with the bathwater of partisanship and

triumphalism. Indeed, many critics of western evangelical Christianity have complained for years about the “Gnosticism” that they fear infects evangelical faith: an other-worldly concern with saving souls to the exclusion not only of organized social and political action, but of any thoughtful engagement with the cultural and material forms of life on this earth where we are called to witness and enact the kingship of Christ. From this perspective, forcefully articulated both by intellectual heavyweights like N.T. Wright and intellectual lightweights like Brian McLaren, the R2K advocates charged onto the scene with fire extinguishers just at the moment that a healthy passion for displaying Christ *in this world* was finally being kindled among evangelicals. Among evangelicals converted to this new world-affirming Christianity, as well as Reformed folks who have drunk deeply from the wells of neo-Calvinism, R2K doctrine has looked like a summons back to the kind of privatized, other-worldly religion that, we are told variously, is the pernicious fruit of Platonism, or the Enlightenment, or postmodern pluralism.

## THE MAGISTERIAL PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS

In the little book that follows, I will argue that both the R2K advocates and their critics have largely missed something much richer, more fundamental, and more liberating and insightful for the church today: the original Protestant two-kingdoms doctrine, as articulated by such giants as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Richard

Hooker.<sup>5</sup> The Protestant Reformers, I will argue in the pages that follow, offered us a compelling account for a faith that is thoroughly public without being either triumphalistic in the civil sphere or oppressive in the ecclesiastical sphere. Their work was hardly perfect, their words not always clear, and their legacy often ambiguous, and yet their core teachings were coherent and consistent enough for us to speak meaningfully of a magisterial Protestant two-kingdoms theology that can still offer us a compass for thinking about the meaning of Christian faith and discipleship today. This theology, while certainly overlapping on many points with the more recent Reformed two-kingdoms theology, differs fundamentally not just in the answers it yields to certain questions but even in the key questions it is seeking to answer.

Consider the question of the relationship of church and state that has been so prominent in many expressions of recent Reformed two-kingdoms theology. R2K theology, in the hands of at least many advocates, offers Christians the key to endorsing the religious neutrality of

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Wedgworth and Peter Escalante, more than anyone, deserve credit for putting this forgotten perspective back on the table, exposing that both neo-Calvinism and the Reformed two-kingdoms doctrine violated the older Protestant distinctions in key ways. For some of the key earlier polemics in this debate, see Steven Wedgworth, “Two Kingdoms Critique,” *Credenda/Agenda*, June 21, 2010, <http://www.credenda.org/index.php/Theology/two-kingdoms-critique.html>; the collection of articles linked here: <https://wedgewords.wordpress.com/2011/08/20/two-kingdoms-and-political-theology/>; Steven Wedgworth and Peter Escalante, “John Calvin and the Two Kingdoms—Part 1,” *The Calvinist International*, May 29, 2012, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2012/05/29/calvin-2k-1/>; Steven Wedgworth and Peter Escalante, “John Calvin and the Two Kingdoms—Part 2,” *The Calvinist International*, May 29, 2012 <https://calvinistinternational.com/2012/05/29/calvin-2k-2/>. I am deeply indebted to their work throughout this exposition.

modern liberal politics without succumbing to relativism, because they recognize that the task of the state is merely temporal and the claims of Christ speak only to the spiritual work of the Church. It would be difficult to recognize such an account in the political theology of the Protestant Reformers, full as it was of calls to civil magistrates to be new Deborahs, Josiahs, or Hezekiahs, cleansing the church of its idols and protecting and fostering only the true worship of God. To be sure, the Reformers had plenty to say about the distinction of vocation between priest and prince, but they never suggested that one was bound to give public and institutional expression to the kingship of Christ and the other was not.

No, for the Reformers, two-kingdoms doctrine was not primarily about church and state, or even necessarily political theology more broadly construed, even if it had very important implications for political theology, which we will explore in this book. The two kingdoms were not two institutions or even two domains of the world, but two ways in which the kingship of Christ made itself felt in the life of each and every believer. As such, they were tangled up with all the various forms of “twoness” that run through Christian theology on every front: God and the world, special revelation and general revelation, redemption and creation, divine grace and human response, faith and works, justification and sanctification, soul and body, invisible and visible, church and world, etc. Theology, quite clearly, cannot do well without clear distinctions between any of these pairs, even if, equally clearly, it can shipwreck by too sharply opposing any of these two terms

to one another. At each point, a delicate balancing act is in order.

Of course, good theology must also be careful not to treat all these distinctions as just different versions of the same fundamental duality (a temptation that some overzealous two-kingdoms theorists have been prone to)—merely to pick one example, we obviously cannot equate the “redemption/creation” pair with the “soul/body” pair, since Scripture speaks clearly of the redemption and resurrection of our *bodies*. At the same time, it would be an untidy theology indeed that made no attempt to map these various dualities onto one another at all. For instance, for Protestants at least, divine grace, faith, and justification all fit together well on one side, in distinction from human response, works, and sanctification, on the other.

Martin Luther’s theology, for all its notorious untidiness, was particularly characterized by its attempt to tie together these various dualities within a single framework, with plenty of appropriate qualifications (though it usually fell to his successors, particularly Philipp Melancthon, John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Richard Hooker, to spell out those qualifications). For him, then, and for other magisterial Reformers who spoke of “two kingdoms” (or “two realms” or “two governments,” to use perhaps clearer terms corresponding to Luther’s *Zwei Reiche* and *Zwei Regimente*), they had in mind not primarily a pair of institutions (i.e., “church” and “state”) but something much more fundamental. Human life is not a two-dimensional map onto which the two kingdoms are drawn as a dividing line between spheres of jurisdiction; it is rather a three-dimensional reality of which the whole



horizontal dimension is coterminous with the temporal kingdom, with the spiritual kingdom forming the third dimension—the vertical God-ward relation which animates all the rest. At every point, the Christian must be attentive to the voice of God as he speaks in his word, and the face of God as he presents himself in his world, through what Luther calls “masks.”

When one puts it this way, it becomes clear that this dividing line must run right through the church itself. The Reformers could speak of the church, in its visible gathered form, with officers and liturgical orders, as part of the “earthly kingdom”; however, as the company of the elect, mystically united to her head, she is the fullness of the spiritual kingdom. But while the “visible/invisible church” distinction is not far off here, it is not sufficient either, for it, like the language of “kingdom” is much too static for what the Reformers had in mind. The *geistliche Regimente* was the spiritual ruling and reigning of God, His gracious life-giving action through the power of the Spirit. While clearly invisible in itself, this liberating rule makes itself manifest in the powerful reading and preaching of the Word (and that chiefly, but certainly not merely, in the context of formal worship), in the sacraments, and in the loving, faith-filled acts of the saints.

Of course, these acts of love, in which the Christian makes himself “the most dutiful servant of all,” are the very stuff of which the “earthly kingdom,” the space east of Eden and west of the new Jerusalem, subject to human authority and prudential calculus, is made. But this simply highlights the fact that the language of “the two kingdoms” ought not serve to neatly divvy up the various elements of the Christian life into one or another sphere,

but rather, often, ought to be viewed as two different ways of talking about the same elements. We are *simul justus et peccator*, at the same time free lords and dutiful servants, at the same time alive with Christ in the heavenly places and toiling in murky paths here below, and even as we enjoy the liberty of a conscience set free by grace, we live under the laws (natural and civil) that regulate our lives with one another as human creatures. To confuse these two rules is to risk libertinism or legalism, triumphalism or despair.

In other words, when we talk about “the two kingdoms,” we are talking about much more than what it means to be a Christian citizen. We are talking about what it means to be live as a Christian in the world, and “two-kingdoms doctrine” is simply shorthand for the magisterial Protestant answer to that question, an answer that needs to be heard anew in every generation, but especially our own. In the short guide that follows, then, I will offer first a historical sketch in three chapters of the actual evolution of two-kingdoms ideas in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and their implications for political theology, ecclesiology, and Christian life. Then, in the second group of two chapters, I will turn to offer a creative appropriation of the doctrine today in the three key spheres of church, state, and marketplace, suggesting how it can shed fresh light on seemingly sterile disputes over how to live out the lordship of Christ in the 21st century.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chapters Two and Three are based on a series of essays I wrote for *Political Theology Today* in late 2012; Chapters Five, Six, and Seven are adapted from pieces I wrote for *Reformation21* in early 2015. All have been expanded substantially for this book. I am grateful to both web journals, and their editors Dave True and Mark McDowell, for the opportunity to develop these thoughts.