

The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationist Calvin¹

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At least since the appearance of H. Richard Niebuhr's classic study, *Christ and Culture*,² those advocating a transformationist approach to cultural issues have often claimed John Calvin as one of their own. Although the term *transformation* is somewhat ambiguous, capable of various permutations, the idea behind it suggests a conviction not only that Christians ought to adopt a positive stance toward cultural engagement but also that they should aim to bring the effects of God's redemptive work in Christ to bear upon the various spheres of culture.³ Although thinkers of other theological persuasions have flocked to embrace one or another version of the transformationist paradigm, Reformed theologians of late have claimed transformationism as *the* Reformed approach to culture and even as a chief characteristic of Reformed Christianity altogether. Many of these contemporary Reformed theologians find inspiring precedent in the labors of the great Dutch theologian, journalist, and statesman Abraham Kuyper, who sought to infuse the various spheres of life with the claims of Christ. Beyond Kuyper, many Reformed theologians look back to Calvin himself and, with Niebuhr, find a representative of the transformationist vision.⁴

Is such a characterization of Calvin helpful and accurate? In this article, I argue that Calvin's approach to cultural and social matters diverges at crucial

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² It may be noted, however, that Niebuhr also identified areas in which Calvin's view did not fit this ideal-type. See *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 217-18. Interestingly, Niebuhr does not cite a single reference from Calvin's writings to support his interpretation.

³ I wish to avoid offering a strict definition of *culture*, even while recognizing the difficulty of doing so. I refer to culture rather generally as those various spheres of human endeavor that are not ecclesiastical or parochially religious. This is not meant to deny the existence of gray areas or of ecclesiastical cultures.

⁴ For a few examples, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3, 10; Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (1959; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker: 2001), 20, 89; Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), x, xiii.

theological points from the various types of transformationism frequently expounded by contemporary Reformed authors. At the center of this divergence is the nature of Christ's kingdom. While contemporary transformationists ordinarily encourage Christians to view the kingdom of Christ as staking claim in all spheres of human activity—church, politics, education, business, art, and so forth—and to give expression to that redemptive kingship in their cultural endeavors, Calvin's doctrine of the two kingdoms speaks in rather different terms. Calvin clearly distinguished the kingdom of Christ, an eschatological reality whose present realization is in the church, from the civil kingdom. In making this distinction, Calvin adamantly denied that one should expect to find the kingdom of Christ made manifest in the civil kingdom of politics, law, and the like. At the same time, Calvin did not treat the civil kingdom as something evil or even morally neutral. Instead, Calvin viewed the civil kingdom as belonging to God, yet as grounded in the present created order rather than in the redemptive, eschatological order. This approach, in turn, led him to a very modest view of social reform and a qualifiedly positive view of natural law. This two kingdoms idea is too often neglected in scholarship that explores Calvin on culture and too often mischaracterized when mentioned.

In order to make this argument and to explore its ramifications, I first introduce the views of some leading contemporary Reformed transformationists on these issues. I then compare their approach to that of Calvin and his two kingdoms doctrine and then proceed to examine some practical implications that Calvin drew from his general theological considerations. I conclude that contemporary scholars ought to exercise greater care in appealing to Calvin in support of their own cultural approach and may find Calvin to be a helpful corrective to it at points.

Contemporary Transformationism

Contemporary Reformed transformationism is far from monolithic. In fact, coming to grips with the wide variety of agendas advanced in the name of Reformed transformationism is no small task for the interpreter of this school of thought. Not only do the transformationist visions span the left-to-right sociopolitical spectrum, but also the normative starting points differ among creation order and shalom transformationists.⁵ Nevertheless, common features undoubtedly unite the work of Reformed transformationists, even when they heartily dis-

⁵ This latter distinction is made and explored in William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay," *JETS* 42 (June 1999): 271-91. Dennison summarizes: "First, creation order neo-Calvinism emphasizes God's laws or norms in the creation order as the condition for social and cultural institutions and their eschatological transformation in a fallen world. Second, shalom neo-Calvinism emphasizes working within the present conditions of society and culture towards the eschatological restoration of peace and justice, i.e. towards the way 'things ought to be' for humanity and creation" (279). To be clear, neo-Calvinism,

agree about what the ultimate content of a transformed culture ought to be. To keep the present study within reasonable bounds, I focus on the writings of five authors who work self-consciously within the Reformed, transformationist camp and whose writings have become well known in the Reformed community: Henry R. Van Til, Cornelius Plantinga, Albert M. Wolters, Brian J. Walsh, and J. Richard Middleton.⁶ Of particular interest here is their use of Christ's kingdom and Christian eschatological hope to ground cultural activity.

One of the central themes in the transformationist literature under consideration here is that because God has created the whole world and the whole world has fallen into sin, God's redemption comes to bear on the whole world too.⁷ From this basic conviction proceeds the concern that the various spheres of life not be split into those that are good or at least superior and those that are inferior, perhaps even inherently evil. Each sphere of cultural existence is created good, has been corrupted, and is subject to redemption. Consequently, transformationist authors often lambaste various manifestations of "dualism" in the Christian community, that is, the division of life into realms of sacred and secular, or holy and common.⁸ Walsh and Middleton blame dualistic thinking for the failure of Christianity to turn the world "upside-down."⁹ Similarly, Wolters briefly discusses the shortcomings of pietism, Roman Catholicism, and classical liberal Protestantism and concludes that these examples "illustrate that the permanent temptation of Christian thinking is to find new variants of a two-realm theory that restricts the scope of Christ's lordship."¹⁰

One should not conclude, however, that these authors condemn dualities of every sort. On the contrary, they concur in describing a stark spiritual antithesis that animates cultural activity in every area of life. Christians ought not separate the various spheres of culture into secular and sacred spheres but instead acknowledge all of the spheres as the battleground upon which the conflict

generally associated with those drawing inspiration from Abraham Kuyper, is probably the most important and eloquent school of Reformed transformationist commitment. In this article, I try to describe the transformationist views broadly enough to pertain to both the creation order and shalom lines of thought, except where otherwise noted.

⁶ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept*; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*; Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁷ E.g., Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 59-60; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 95-96.

⁸ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept*, 225; Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 89-90, 96; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 96, 123; Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 64-65.

⁹ Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 94-95.

¹⁰ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 65.

between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan is to be waged.¹¹ Several of the transformationist authors appeal to Augustine's "two cities" paradigm at this point¹² and identify this with the two kingdoms idea. Plantinga explicitly connects Calvin (and Kuyper) with Augustine's view of the clash of two kingdoms, God's and Satan's.¹³ However, none of these authors carefully considers exactly what Calvin meant in his appeals to the two kingdoms theme and whether he really had in mind the precise distinction that Augustine was making. To this we will return.

These transformationist authors' view of the kingdom of God/Christ emerges in connection with this antidualist, antithesis-defined approach. Wolters, without doubt, correctly claims that a theology of the kingdom is central for any theological approach to culture.¹⁴ For these writers, the kingdom of God was present already at creation and, because God created all things, encompassed all of reality.¹⁵ Sin has marred all aspects of the creation kingdom, but redemption in Christ is restoring them all. The kingdom of God in Christ, then, encompasses all things, and is precisely the restoration of the original creation kingdom.¹⁶ Consequently, while a certain priority is recognized for the church, these authors wish to see the kingdom made manifest in all areas of life. Wolters mentions, among other things, marriage, politics, art, and business.¹⁷ Plantinga lists government, industries, hospitals, schools, recreational clubs, and Habitat for Humanity as among the institutions beyond the church that God uses to accomplish his kingdom purposes.¹⁸ A couple of key points are worth summarizing here. First, there is no real distinction between the original kingdom of God in creation and the redemptive kingdom of Christ—the latter is the restoration (and further development) of the former. Second, no sphere of culture at present is outside the scope of this kingdom.

Before the conclusion of this section, some comments are also in order in regard to the eschatology that underlies the transformationist vision that these authors advocate. They recognize the rather clear biblical teaching that the

¹¹ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept*; Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 69-71, 88-89; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 111; Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 69.

¹² Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept*, 81-83; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 111.

¹³ *Engaging God's World*, 111.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *Creation Regained*, 64-65.

¹⁵ Wolters, *Engaging God's World*, 104-5.

¹⁶ See Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 57-61. Wolters writes, for example: "the restoration in Christ of creation and the coming of the kingdom of God are one and the same" (60-61). This emphasis seems to characterize the "creation order" transformationists especially, though it is not absent in others.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 108-10.

kingdom is at heart an eschatological reality. In and of itself, however, this affirmation does not tell us everything, for important questions remain as to how this eschatological reality is experienced “already” and how it remains “not yet.” The transformationist authors tend to place rather high stock in the already manifest character of the eschatological kingdom. Although they clearly acknowledge that Christ is coming again and that only then will all things be perfectly restored, it is curious that their common threefold division of history into creation, fall, and redemption does not include the fourth category of consummation.¹⁹ Reading between the lines, I suggest that the rather fluid relationship between transformation of culture now and the final transformation to be accomplished at Christ’s return contributes substantially to the absence of this fourth category. Plantinga is perhaps the most instructive on this point. He looks for “lines of continuity between the work of Christ in the present and in the future” and believes that “what we do now in the name of Christ shall be preserved across into the next life.”²⁰ The work of bringing in the perfect realization of the eschatological kingdom on the present earth begins already in the Christian’s cultural labors here and now. Consummation seems to be the climax of the redemption process already underway rather than a unique, radical event in history.

Calvin on the Two Kingdoms

John Calvin’s approach to culture proceeds from a different kingdom theology, I suggest, and hence is a problematic precedent for the project of contemporary transformationists. To summarize initially, Calvin’s two kingdoms doctrine may be characterized as a dualist approach somewhat akin to certain forms of dualism attacked by contemporary transformationists. He divided the various spheres of life into two, identifying the church with the kingdom of Christ and the various other spheres of cultural activity with the civil kingdom. For Calvin, both kingdoms are God’s—they are legitimate and divinely ordained, and neither is to be godless or morally neutral. God rules the civil kingdom as its creator and sustainer but rules the spiritual kingdom as its redeemer. These two kingdoms, and God’s distinct ways of ruling them, are never to be confused, and the ideas of gospel, redemption, and eternal life are associated with the spiritual rather than the civil kingdom. In short, in contrast to contemporary transformationists, Calvin makes a categorical distinction between the church and the rest of life, and identifies the kingdom of Christ and the promise of redemption only with the former.²¹

¹⁹ Note, for example, that both Plantinga and Wolters structure the main body of their books (chapters 2-4 out of 5 for both) around these three themes: creation, fall, and redemption.

²⁰ Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World*, 137-38; see also xii.

²¹ Calvin provides concise summaries of his two kingdoms view in his *Commentary on Romans*, 13:1 and *Institutes*, 4.20.1. For English translation of the former, see *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). English

One matter to emphasize at this point is the fact that Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine is not identical to Augustine's two cities concept, as generally presented in his *City of God*, contrary to the suggestion of some contemporary transformationists.²² Augustine's two cities theology is not easily summarized nor its nuances appreciated in a brief space. In its main contours, however, Augustine's two cities are characterized by a sharp antithesis. One city is of God, the other of Satan. The citizens of one are believers, of the other unbelievers. The two cities are marked by two loves—the one, love of God; the other, love of self.²³ Important to note here is that Christians, according to Augustine, belong to one city and one city only. He explains clearly that Christians, the sojourning citizens of the heavenly city, share many temporal things with the citizens of the earthly city. They seek and avail themselves of the peace of this earth and do not scruple about following the earthly city's customs and laws (concerning things other than religion).²⁴ Nevertheless, Christians have no dual citizenship; they belong only to the heavenly city, even while making temporary use of the things of the earthly city. Augustine's thinking on this issue tracks closely that of the second to third century *Epistle to Diognetes* and the second century *First Apology of Justin*.

quotations from the latter work are taken from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953). I have decided to use the less commonly utilized Beveridge translation, which I prefer in certain respects. See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68, 218 n26, for positive comments on the Beveridge translation. Many of the other relevant discussions in Calvin's writings on the two kingdoms are discussed below.

²² As cited above, see Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept*, 81-83; and Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 111.

²³ Among the many texts in the *City of God* that express these themes, note for example: "We have learned that there is a city of God, and its Founder has inspired us with a love which makes us covet its citizenship. To this Founder of the holy city the citizens of the earthly city prefer their own gods, not knowing that He is the God of gods, not of false." (11.1). "Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love" (14.28). English translations are taken from Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 19.17: "But the families which do not live by faith seek their peace in the earthly advantages of this life; while the families which live by faith look for those eternal blessings which are promised, and use as pilgrims such advantages of time and of earth as do not fascinate and divert them from God, but rather aid them to endure with greater ease, and to keep down the number of those burdens of the corruptible body which weigh upon the soul. Thus the things necessary for this mortal life are used by both kinds of men and families alike, but each has its own peculiar and widely different aim in using them. The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away. It makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this moral life are administered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony

While Calvin, like Augustine, certainly believed in the spiritual antithesis between God and Satan and between believers and unbelievers, he was not attempting to express *this* distinction in his two kingdoms doctrine. Calvin's two kingdoms were not the kingdoms of God and Satan; instead, God rules both kingdoms—albeit in different ways—and believers belong to both simultaneously. In these features, Calvin's doctrine of the two kingdoms is similar, though not identical, to both Martin Luther's two kingdoms doctrine²⁵ and the

between them in regard to what belongs to it." Yet, "it has come to pass that the two cities could not have common laws of religion This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognising that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessaries of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven."

²⁵ A comprehensive comparison between the two kingdoms doctrines of Luther and Calvin would be a worthwhile endeavor for future study. The main features of the two kingdoms idea as I have just explained it in regard to Calvin can be found in one of Luther's classic expressions of the idea, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 81-139. For poignant examples of how his two kingdoms theology applies to Christian ethics, see his "Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1956), 3-294. Among recent works dealing helpfully, though not entirely identically, with Luther's two kingdoms doctrine are Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), 40-41; John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5-9, 87-117; William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), especially part 3; David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (1986; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 112-25; and also the classic study of Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of his Theology*, trans. Karl H. Hertz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966). One area in which I would identify divergence between Luther and Calvin concerns the relationship of the two kingdoms doctrine to the law-gospel distinction. As a number of scholars have noted, Luther describes God as governing the earthly kingdom by means of the law (that is, what God commands) and the heavenly kingdom by means of the gospel (that is, what God promises). For example, see Witte, *Law and Protestantism*, 5, 91, 104; Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 2:40-41; Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 115, 121-22; Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine*, 8; and Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 389. Calvin certainly agrees with Luther about the necessity of distinguishing law and gospel; on this point see the argument of Michael S. Horton in "Calvin and the Law-Gospel Hermeneutic," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (winter 1997): 27-42. However, Calvin did not seem to relegate one to one kingdom and the other to the other kingdom. Although, as explored in more detail below, Calvin did warn against applying the gospel to the civil kingdom, he did not shrink from seeing the law applied in the spiritual kingdom, in particular in the life of the church. This point of difference may help to explain why Calvin, as seen below, found the spiritual kingdom in the government of the church, while Luther associated the visible, institutional aspects of the church's life with the earthly kingdom.

kingdom theology of his mentor Martin Bucer.²⁶ Calvin's doctrine is also to be distinguished from earlier Christian ideas about the "two swords."²⁷

Perhaps as concise a summary of his two kingdoms doctrine as Calvin provided appears in 3.19 of the *Institutes*, in his treatment of Christian liberty. He writes:

²⁶ Though Bucer, in his great work *De Regno Christi*, does not adopt the two kingdoms language and does not deal with all of the themes in Calvin to be addressed below in this paper, his understanding of the kingdom of Christ bears many similarities to Calvin's. From the start, he identifies the kingdom of Christ as an eternal and heavenly reality; see Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 179. As to its earthly expression, Bucer on many occasions explicitly equates the kingdom with the church; e.g., see *ibid.*, 194, 203, 204-5, 216, 217, 227-28. Bucer certainly believed that the kingdom would best flourish when supported and purified by the civil magistrate. Indeed, he devoted the entire second book of *De Regno* to explaining to his addressee, King Edward VI of England, how he ought to be of service to the kingdom. In many respects, one can hear the echoes here of Calvin's correspondence with royalty, particularly with Jean d'Albret; e.g., see *Letters of John Calvin*, vol.4, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 290-94. Nevertheless, Bucer consistently spoke of Edward's civil kingdom as something distinct from the kingdom of Christ (see, e.g., *De Regno*, 179-91), even if, as he explicitly says, the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of Christ are to be in mutual subordination according to their particular roles (*ibid.*, 186-87). Some aspects of Bucer's kingdom, however, seem to differ from that of Calvin as I expound it below. For example, while Bucer does make very clear that the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of the world are distinct, he does seem rather less clear and adamant than Calvin about the need to keep the two realms separate and unconfused and to make training in piety and divine worship the particular concern of the kingdom of Christ. Furthermore, while Calvin seems to be driven more by somewhat negative concerns about keeping order when speaking about magistrates' responsibilities toward religious matters, Bucer tends to sport a more positive and almost utopian tone in commending their responsibilities. Finally, Bucer's concern that the king actively reform and purify the church seems to go beyond Calvin's concern that the magistrate support and defend the church and get rid of idolatry from the land. For reflection on the relationship of Calvin and Bucer on these matters that seeks to account for both similarities and differences, see T. F. Torrance, "Kingdom and Church in the thought of Martin Butzer," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 6 (April 1955): 58-59; and Willem van't Spijker, "Bucer's Influence on Calvin: Church and Community," in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32-44.

²⁷ Again, any brief summary runs a high risk of over-simplification. Perhaps the most important early expression of the two swords idea, expressed in the fifth century by Pope Gelasius I to the Emperor Anastasius, advocated a basic twofold division of jurisdiction. Gelasius identified the priestly and royal authorities as the two powers by which this world is ruled. He noted that bishops obey the imperial laws "so far as the sphere of public order is concerned," that is, "in mundane matters," but exhorted the emperor to submit to these bishops, who "have charge of divine affairs," in "the order of religion, in matters concerning the reception and right administration of the heavenly sacraments." Gelasius proceeds to affirm that God confers both the imperial and the priestly offices. For English translation of part of the letter, see Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State: 1050-1300* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 13-14. Harold J. Berman calls this the "original" two swords doctrine; see *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 92. This two swords "dualism" is therefore different in important respects from Augustine's two cities "dualism." Gelasius' two swords both concern the rule of the present world. Furthermore, whatever the distinct jurisdictions of the two swords

Let us observe that in man government is twofold: the one spiritual, by which the conscience is trained to piety and divine worship; the other civil, by which the individual is instructed in those duties which, as men and citizens, we are bound to perform. To these two forms are commonly given the not inappropriate names of spiritual and temporal jurisdiction, intimating that the former species has reference to the life of the soul, while the latter relates to matters of the present life, not only to food and clothing, but to the enacting of laws which require a man to live among his fellows purely, honourably, and modestly. The former has its seat within the soul, the latter only regulates the external conduct. We may call the one the spiritual, the other the civil kingdom.²⁸

Although this appears in book 3, Calvin also set down important elements of his two kingdoms doctrine in books 2 and 4 of the *Institutes*, as well as in various places in his biblical commentaries. This fact in itself warns against minimizing the importance of this doctrine for Calvin, as well as against isolating it from his broader theology. To defend the summary of Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine offered above and to fill in further details, I now call attention to Calvin's varied, but consistent, use of the doctrine in the latter three books of the *Institutes*.²⁹

Foundation for Calvin's two kingdoms theology first emerges in the *Institutes* in book 2. Although here he does not use explicit language of two kingdoms, his description of one of the kingdoms—the heavenly, spiritual kingdom of Christ—is clearly crucial background for his later more explicit discussions. In expounding his understanding of Christ's three offices as redeemer, Calvin turns to his kingly office and, from there, to the nature of his kingdom. He writes: "I come to the Kingly office, of which it were in vain to speak, without previously reminding the reader that its nature is spiritual; because it is from thence we learn its efficacy, the benefits it confers, its whole power and eternity." He proceeds to explain, "we see that everything which is earthly, and of

Gelasius presents them not in antithesis but in harmony, and Christians are the proper wielders of both. The two swords idea remained very important in medieval Christianity, though the idea came to be expressed in a somewhat different way in the high Middle Ages—notably by Pope Boniface VIII—from its expression by Gelasius. Gelasius wrote generally of both powers as conferred, seemingly directly, by God. The medieval expression spoke more specifically of the two swords as belonging to Christ, who delivered both swords to the church, which in turn delegated one of the swords to the state. In this scheme, the state was obliged to act according to the church's wishes in its administration of the secular realm. Furthermore, the church retained jurisdiction over a number of matters of seemingly secular concern, such as marriage and family law. See, for example, Witte, *Law and Protestantism*, 108-09; and Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 521, 582 n36.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15.

²⁹ I have called attention to a few of these following points, in less developed fashion, in David VanDrunen, "The Context of Natural Law: John Calvin's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Journal of Church and State* (forthcoming).

the world, is temporary, and soon fades away. Christ, therefore, to raise our hope to the heavens, declares that his kingdom is not of this world.³⁰ Calvin's principal point here, whose importance for cultural matters becomes more clear later in the *Institutes*, is that his kingdom concerns the things of the heavenly, future life, not the things of the present world. This is not to say that Calvin finds no earthly expression of the heavenly kingdom, but in this regard he speaks only of the church.³¹ However, Calvin's emphasis is clearly on the future rather than present enjoyment of Christ's kingdom. He frequently uses the image of Christians as "pilgrims" to describe their status in the present world,³² and he portrays their earthly lot as one of suffering and hardship:

That the strength and utility of the kingdom of Christ cannot, as we have said, be fully perceived, without recognizing it as spiritual, is sufficiently apparent, even from this, that having during the whole course of our lives to war under the cross, our condition here is bitter and wretched. What then would it avail us to be ranged under the government of a heavenly King, if its benefits were not realized beyond the present earthly life?

These words [Romans 14:7] briefly teach what the kingdom of Christ bestows upon us. Not being earthly or carnal, and so subject to corruption, but spiritual, it raises us even to eternal life, so that we can patiently live at present under toil, hunger, cold, contempt, disgrace, and other annoyances; contented with this, that our King will never abandon us, but will supply our necessities until our warfare is ended, and we are called to triumph: such being the nature of his kingdom, that he communicates to us whatever he received of his Father.³³

In contrast, then, to the common interpretation of the kingdom of Christ offered by contemporary transformationists, with its focus upon earthly progress and the redemption of this world's institutions, Calvin wrenched the eyes of his readers away from this world toward the next. Christ's kingship is spiritual and his kingdom heavenly.³⁴

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.3. On the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom, see also "Brief Instruction," in John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 86.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.5.

³² See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.14; 3.2.4; 3.7.3; 3.10.1; 3.25.1-2; 4.20.2. Calvin identifies the end of Christians' lives as the end of their pilgrimage, with the hope of the resurrection the only thing sustaining them in their present suffering; see *Institutes*, 3.25.1-2.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.4. Calvin poignantly speaks of suffering as a mark of the Christian experience in the present age in *Institutes*, 3.8.1.

³⁴ A similar interpretation of Calvin, also in contrast to contemporary transformationism, is presented by John Bolt in *Christian and Reformed Today* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia, 1984), 135-41. My thanks to Professor Bolt for alerting me to this material, as well as for his appreciative and helpful response to the present article at the Symposium on Religion and Politics. Another helpful treatment of many of the issues addressed in this paragraph is offered by David E.

In book 3 of the *Institutes*, Calvin returns to the theme of the spiritual kingdom of Christ, this time in explicit comparison to the civil kingdom. Whereas Calvin discussed the spiritual kingdom in book 2 in the context of Christ's threefold office, he discusses the spiritual and civil kingdoms in book 3 in the context of soteriology, specifically the doctrine of Christian liberty. Calvin treats Christian liberty at this point in his work for very intentional reasons. After expounding the doctrine of justification at great length, he turns to the doctrine of Christian liberty, states that it "seems the proper place for considering the subject," and explains that it "forms a proper appendix to Justification, and is of no little service in understanding its force." He adds shortly thereafter that if Christian liberty is not understood, "neither Christ, nor the truth of the Gospel, nor the inward peace of the soul, is properly known."³⁵ The reason for this is rather simple. People who seek justification not by faith alone, but by their own good works, must always live under the threat of God's wrath. Their consciences are always burdened by the fear that no matter what they undertake or how hard they try, they will fall short and incur God's displeasure. When people turn to Christ in faith, however, their consciences are freed from fear, and they come to know true Christian liberty. Unshackled from the burden of guilt, they now are enabled to pursue holiness with the gratitude and joy that marks true obedience to God.³⁶ For Calvin, therefore, to be justified by faith alone through the gospel is to receive Christian liberty. Thus, when Calvin turns to the doctrine of the two kingdoms at the end of *Institutes* 3.19, he handles the doctrine as one that is crucial for preserving the purity of the gospel itself. In making this connection between the gospel and the two kingdoms, he followed closely on the heels of Luther.³⁷

Calvin teaches here that Christian liberty, attained through justification by faith alone, applies only to the spiritual kingdom. In other words, the redemptive message of the gospel does not pertain to the civil kingdom of the present

Holwerda, "Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's Eschatological Vision," in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 110-39. Especially relevant is his discussion of the idea of pilgrimage in Calvin (see *ibid.*, 118-19) and on Calvin's identification of the kingdom of God with the church (see *ibid.*, 134-35). Most of the claims made in Holwerda's essay are consistent with the thesis of the present paper, including his important statement that "the eschatological reordering of the world occurs here and now—at least in its beginnings—in the believer and the church. Hence, the destiny of the world becomes visible in the reordering occurs in the body of Christ" (*ibid.*, 136). Nevertheless, Holwerda in the end agrees (albeit with some helpful qualifications) with the common judgment, which the present paper seeks to refute, that Calvin was a "social and political revolutionary" (*ibid.*, 138-39). In the passage asserting the crucial connection between Calvin's view of the church as kingdom and his "political activism," however, Holwerda does not demonstrate textually that Calvin himself made this connection, but cites only secondary literature; see *ibid.*, 136-37.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.1.

³⁶ See generally Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.

³⁷ See footnote 25 above.

world. Calvin begins to indicate the connection of Christian liberty with his kingdom theology when, later in *Institutes* 3.19, he states that Christian liberty is “in all its parts a spiritual matter.”³⁸ He returns to this theme again a short while later when he writes words quoted at length above, identifying a twofold government in human beings, one spiritual and the other civil, to which correspond the spiritual and civil kingdoms. Calvin immediately thereafter warns against confusing these two kingdoms, which ought to be zealously distinguished: “Now, these two, as we have divided them, are always to be viewed apart from each other. When the one is considered, we should call off our minds, and not allow them to think of the other. For there exists in man a kind of two worlds, over which different kings and different laws can preside.”³⁹ The ultimate significance of these statements is to protect a point of great importance to Calvin—that the gospel of Christian liberty not be applied to the civil kingdom. The spiritual nature of Christian liberty means that it pertains only to the spiritual kingdom:

By attending to this distinction, we will not erroneously transfer the doctrine of the gospel concerning spiritual liberty to civil order, as if in regard to external government Christians were less subject to human laws, because their consciences are unbound before God, as if they were exempted from all carnal service, because in regard to the Spirit they are free. Again, because even in those constitutions which seem to relate to the spiritual kingdom, there may be some delusion, it is necessary to distinguish between those which are to be held legitimate as being agreeable to the word of God, and those, on the other hand, which ought to have no place among the pious.⁴⁰

At this point again, therefore, Calvin’s teaching contrasts with that of contemporary transformationists. While transformationists obviously cannot be equated with Calvin’s intended opponents in this passage, the anarchist Anabaptists, Calvin’s logic here suggests a more general relevance. Against the attempt to apply redemptive categories in approaching cultural issues, Calvin disallows the gospel, in which the message of redemption lies, from being applied to the civil kingdom.

At the end of book 4 of the *Institutes*, Calvin returns again explicitly to the two kingdoms doctrine. In another move that differentiates him from contemporary transformationists, Calvin does not permit the realms of civil government or civil law to be identified as activity of the spiritual kingdom of Christ. At the same time—and this is important in order to avoid misunderstanding—Calvin views political and legal life as entirely legitimate and God-honoring. He classes such things in the civil rather than the spiritual kingdom.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.19.15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

He begins his treatment of civil government by referring back to the two kingdoms distinction that he made in book 3, writing: “And first, before entering on the subject itself [concerning civil government], it is necessary to attend to the distinction which we formerly laid down lest, as often happens to many, we imprudently confound these two things, the nature of which is altogether different.”⁴¹ He cites contemporary abuse of the doctrine of Christian liberty by the Anabaptists,⁴² and then explicitly dissociates civil government from the kingdom of Christ:

But he who knows to distinguish between the body and the soul, between the present fleeting life and that which is future and eternal, will have no difficulty in understanding that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated. Seeing, therefore, it is a Jewish vanity to seek and include the kingdom of Christ under the elements of this world, let us, considering, as Scripture clearly teaches, that the blessings which we derive from Christ are spiritual, remember to confine liberty which is promised and offered to us in him within its proper limits.⁴³

Calvin concludes this opening section of the chapter on civil government by reminding his readers that “it matters not what your condition is among men, nor under what laws you live, since in them the kingdom of Christ does not at all consist.” From here, Calvin proceeds to defend against an obvious objection, namely, that his separation of civil government from the kingdom of Christ makes the former a “matter of pollution, with which Christian men have nothing to do.”⁴⁴ Much of Calvin’s burden in the rest of this chapter, then, is to defend the dignity of the office of magistrate, the goodness of Christians holding such office, and the legitimacy of civil law and courts. In all of this, Calvin never backs down from his dissociation of civil law and government from the spiritual kingdom of Christ, even when assigning certain seemingly religious functions to magistrates, an issue to be addressed below. In contrast to contemporary transformationists, then, Calvin strictly prohibits Christians from treating the civil realm as an aspect of the kingdom of Christ.

Some Implications of Calvin’s Two Kingdoms Doctrine

Calvin’s distinction between the two kingdoms, as presented here, raises questions about a number of practical issues. Among the concrete implications

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.20.1.

⁴² On Calvin’s deep concern about the Anabaptist movements, see, for example, Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 58-60; Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 98-99, 103; Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 208, 275-81.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.20.2.

of the two kingdoms doctrine is Calvin's treatment of the relationship of church and state, an issue that he constantly faced in Geneva. On a number of fronts, Calvin's description of the relationship follows predictably from the two kingdoms framework. For instance, he strongly advocated the independence of the church's government and jurisdiction from that of the civil government.⁴⁵ Calvin insisted on this point even in circumstances in which the magistrate is a Christian, thereby distinguishing himself from the Lutheran position on this point.⁴⁶ Several Roman Catholic teachings came under attack in this context. For example, Calvin denied the power of the sword to the church, due to its spiritual jurisdiction.⁴⁷ Calvin also rejected Rome's claims that clergy are exempt from the jurisdiction of the state.⁴⁸

Although such positions seem quite clearly consistent with his theoretical distinction between the two kingdoms, theory and practice seem less clearly harmonious when Calvin ascribes various religious functions to civil magistrates. For example, Calvin includes among the objects of civil government that "no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offences to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people."⁴⁹ Calvin himself recognizes that his readers may sense inconsistency in his position, asking that "no one be surprised that I now attribute the task of constituting religion aright to human polity, though I seem above to have placed it beyond the will of man."⁵⁰ However, his interpreters have often not agreed to find his various sentiments consistent and instead have placed a gulf between his theory and his practice.⁵¹ John Witte, Jr., has proposed a reading of Calvin that seeks to account for these various strains of teaching. He argues that Calvin's thought developed somewhat on these matters and that his mature views on religious liberty involved the superimposition of his own version of a medieval two-swords theory upon his earlier, Lutheran two kingdoms theology. In this move, Witte states, Calvin focused more closely on the relationship of church and state as institutions and assigned to the state a moral role in governing what

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.11.1

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.11.4. On Calvin's differences with several other Reformers on such matters, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 56-57.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.11.15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.20.3. Although this quotation comes from a context examined above, many other examples could be drawn from other places in Calvin's writings, including his biblical commentaries and his letters to members of the French nobility.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.20.3.

⁵¹ For example, see the claims in W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and his Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), 158.

he had defined as the heavenly kingdom.⁵² Nevertheless, Calvin clearly continued to make his clear two kingdoms distinction to the end of his life, and questions about the harmonization of Calvin's thought persist.

I do not claim to offer a comprehensive harmonization of Calvin's thought on this question, but I suggest that the concept of order may point in a helpful direction. Much has been made about the concept of order in Calvin's theology. The evidence is so overwhelming that Calvin did indeed have a passion for order that the question is really not whether he did but what its significance is. Some scholars have used Calvin's passion for order to make him a virtual neurotic, but others have explored profitably its ramifications without the psychological speculation.⁵³ Calvin was vividly attuned to the dangers of the present life, and he marveled at the order exhibited in the natural world, attributing it solely to God and his providence.⁵⁴ In both the cosmic and social realms he feared anarchy and chaos and rejoiced when God's benevolent hand kept the order in what would otherwise fall apart. The civil kingdom concerned order in the sense that, for Calvin, its highest priorities were to maintain peace and safety in human society.⁵⁵ For example, he says that civil magistrates "are the ordained guardians and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, honour, and tranquillity, so that it should be their only study to provide for the common peace and safety."⁵⁶ In fact, Calvin's passion for order not only helps to explain

⁵² John Witte, Jr., "Moderate Religious Liberty in the Theology of John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 359-403, especially 375-77. I am not entirely convinced that Witte's conclusion is the best way to describe Calvin's mature views. Nevertheless, I certainly agree with his recognition that Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine not be left at exactly the same point as Luther's.

⁵³ William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), presents a much-discussed psychological portrait of a very neurotic Calvin. Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of his Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1991), lacks the psychological dimension, but explores the ramifications of Calvin's view of order in a number of different areas of his thought, many of which are closely related to the matters discussed in this paper. Note also the centrality of order ascribed to Calvin in Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundation of Modern Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chap. 8.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.11; 1.14.20-22; 1.16.4; 3.8.11; Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 1:18; Calvin, *Treatises*, 243. Note Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 72, on Calvin's interest in astronomy and opposition to the ideas of Copernicus; on similar matters, compare Cottret, *Calvin*, 285-86 and Alistair McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), xiv. See Schreiner, *Theater*, chap. 1, on the role of providence in checking the inherent instability of the cosmos.

⁵⁵ The examples could be endlessly enumerated. See, for example, Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* 13:1-3; *Commentary on 1 Peter* 2:13-14; Prefatory Address, 4; *Institutes*, 2.8.46; 3.10.6; 3.19.1; 4.1.3; 4.20.2-3; 4.20.11; 4.20.23; *Treatises*, 85. For English translation of the second of these, see *The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Hebrews and The First and Second Epistles of St Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). For helpful discussion of relevant issues, see also I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1992), 242, 247; Hopfl, *The Christian Polity*, 48, 67; and Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 129.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

why he opposed civil disobedience and rebellion so stridently (to be examined below), but may even help to explain why the same Calvin who would not allow the kingdom of Christ to have anything to do with the civil kingdom also ascribed distinctly religious functions to the civil magistrate. Calvin, as a man of his time, could not imagine a religiously plural society, and the necessities of peace; safety; and, particularly, order demanded that some uniformity in religious practice be maintained. This work necessarily involved the authority that bore the sword, the civil magistrate. Giving credence to this suggestion is the way in which Calvin on several occasions mentions the religion—protecting and order—keeping functions of the magistrate in the same breath.⁵⁷

Another implication of Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine is his qualifiedly positive view of natural law. Few areas of Calvin's thought have generated as much divergence of interpretation as this. While some scholars have portrayed natural law as playing a positive and central role in Calvin's theology, at least in regard to his social thought, others have dismissed Calvin's appeals to natural law as incidental or even at odds with the genius of his theology. Related to this dispute are debates, along predictable lines, as to the degree of continuity or discontinuity between Calvin's view of natural law and that of his medieval predecessors and his Reformed scholastic successors. In part, the existence of such difference of opinion is understandable. At times, Calvin attributes undeniably positive functions to natural law and its fruitfulness even in the activities of unbelievers. At other times, Calvin speaks of natural law as useless for fallen people except for the negative task of testifying to the just condemnation of sinners.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁵⁸ however, appreciating Calvin's two kingdoms distinction is crucial for navigating this apparent tension in his thought. Calvin was not contradicting himself in these different assessments of natural law but giving expression to his conviction that natural law plays sharply different functions in the two kingdoms. In the civil kingdom, where issues of salvation are not concerned, natural law plays its positive role, enabling even non-Christians to achieve various impressive accomplishments in fields such as law, science, and the liberal arts. In the spiritual kingdom of Christ, on the other hand, where issues of salvation are indeed at issue, the cultural accomplishments enabled by natural law are judged worthless for attaining eternal life. The very

⁵⁷ For example, magistrates are "to foster and maintain the external worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the condition of the Church, to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility" (*Institutes*, 4.20.2); similarly, the object of magistrates is that "no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offences to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people; that the public quiet be not disturbed, that every man's property be kept secure, that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other, that honesty and modesty be cultivate" (4.20.3). See also Calvin's *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 2:2; for English translation, see *The Second Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

⁵⁸ See VanDrunen, "The Context of Natural Law," for a detailed defense of the claims in this paragraph.

same action of the unbeliever performed according to the light of natural law, therefore, at one and the same time, may be admired and provoke thanksgiving from the perspective of the civil kingdom and may be judged of no value whatsoever for advancement in the spiritual kingdom of Christ.

A final implication of Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine to be explored here is the persistently conservative nature of his political and legal thought: Calvin believed that the civil kingdom was to remain the civil kingdom, and he was modest in his hopes of changing it. Nevertheless, various Calvin scholars, viewing Calvin as a social revolutionary or transformationist, have portrayed him as a reformer of society.⁵⁹ In a very narrow sense, this may and probably ought to be affirmed. Calvin was quite concerned that justice be done in society, especially toward the poor. He also held certain views on contentious issues that would prove to have practical social implications—his attitude toward usury and commerce more generally are obvious examples.⁶⁰ In addition, Calvin was not loath to lay down general but earnest instructions on how magistrates should carry out their duties.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the portrait of Calvin as social reformer is subject to innumerable qualifications. Initially, Calvin's refusal to allow the gospel (via Christian liberty) to be applied to civil government drops a weighty barrier in the path of all claims painting Calvin as one who applied the gospel to all areas of life. However, Calvin's conservative, nonrevolutionary posture is perhaps most evident in his instructions to private citizens. He argued at great length in many places, with little hint of any room for compromise, that private citizens are to submit to governing authorities without question, except when ordered to disobey a direct command of God. Magistrates hold power by the providential appointment of God, thereby enjoying a share of the divine honor. The calling to be a magistrate is legitimate, as is the existence of courts and judicial proceedings. Private citizens are therefore to let magistrates do their jobs without interference.⁶² Although Calvin's thought

⁵⁹ Besides the work of H. Richard Niebuhr cited above, see the claims of, for example, William C. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1983), 295-99; Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 87; Mark Valeri, "Religion, Discipline, and the Economy in Calvin's Geneva," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28, no. 1 (1997): 123-42; Bouwisma, *John Calvin*, 192; W. G. Naphy, "Baptisms, Church Riots and Social Unrest in Calvin's Geneva," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 1 (1995): 87-97; C. Gregg Singer, "Calvin and the Social Order; or, Calvin as a Social and Economic Statesman," in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, Jacob T. Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 227-41; Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary*, 11-13, 20-21, and throughout; and McGrath, *A Life*, xii, chapters 11-12.

⁶⁰ See the material in Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary*, chapters 4-5, on Calvin's attitudes toward the poor and commercial life.

⁶¹ See Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* 13:4; *Institutes*, 4.20.6.

⁶² Among many such exhortations in Calvin, see *Commentary on Romans* 13:1, 3, 5; *Commentary on 1 Peter* 2:13-14; *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 2:2; *Institutes*, 2.8.35; 3.10.6. *Institutes*, 4.20 contains perhaps the most focused and lengthy of these exhortations; see especially sections 4:17-20, 22, 23, 25-29, 32. Note also his pertinent comments regarding the Jews' submission to the Romans in Jesus' day, in Calvin, *Treatises*, 87.

developed somewhat on the issue, he believed it rather foolish for people even to discuss which form of government is best.⁶³ This posture of submission to magistrates applies even toward tyrants. Calvin reasoned that even the worst tyranny is better than anarchy, and at times speaks of life under a wicked magistrate as punishment for sin that must be endured.⁶⁴ Calvin allowed the action of a “lesser magistrate” as the only possibility for overthrowing a tyrant. Even here, however, Calvin’s conservative nature is blatantly evident. The only lesser magistrates with authority to dethrone a tyrant are those who have already been appointed in office and who have been entrusted with just such a task.⁶⁵ It is surely noteworthy that the allegedly revolutionary, transforming Calvin granted a much less generous right of resistance than did most of his medieval predecessors.⁶⁶

Are at least magistrates, if not private citizens, to pursue social reform? Though Calvin believed that magistrates are to seek justice, even Calvin’s attitude toward them reveals his nonrevolutionary commitments. Already in his first work, the commentary on Seneca, Calvin resisted the idea that princes are to be active in making new laws, regardless of how conscientious they are to be in executing the existing laws with clemency.⁶⁷ Calvin’s own brief experience in the role of legislator seemed to put into practice such theoretical positions. When set to work constructing Geneva’s constitutions, Calvin largely codified existing practices rather than create a new government out of whole cloth.⁶⁸ Calvin took seriously his own maxim, “All change is to be feared,”⁶⁹ a poor slogan for any social transformer. Calvin believed that the civil kingdom was the civil kingdom, and however marginally more just and loving magistrates and citizens might make it, it was not to be transformed into a different kind of kingdom nor conjoined with the spiritual kingdom of Christ.

⁶³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 211. Calvin’s basic sentiments remain fixed in the final edition (4.20.8), though he goes on there to commend the advantages of aristocracy, mixed with democracy.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 13:3.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

⁶⁶ Compare for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno*, 1.6. See also the discussion in Francis Oakley, *The Political Thought of Peter d’Ailly: The Voluntarist Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 155-58, in regard to several medieval figures.

⁶⁷ See the comments in Hopfl, *The Christian Polity*, 17-18.

⁶⁸ See R. M. Kingdon, “Calvin and the Government of Geneva,” in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, ed. Wilhelm Neuser (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 60; also Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*, 31.

⁶⁹ Schreiner, *Theater*, 86, quotes this phrase from Calvin’s Sermon on Deuteronomy 19:14-15.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that John Calvin's two kingdoms theology represents a distinct approach to matters of politics and culture from that of contemporary transformationists. Calvin, while sharing the transformationist's adherence to an Augustinian antithesis between the kingdoms of God and Satan, also made a separate distinction between the two kingdoms that have been ordained and legitimated by God—the spiritual kingdom of Christ and the temporal civil kingdom. In doing so, Calvin used a dualist category that seems to be forbidden by contemporary transformationists, for by this category he restricted God's present redemptive activity and the application of the gospel's promise of Christian liberty to the kingdom of Christ as it finds expression in the church. Calvin undoubtedly had a positive view of cultural engagement in the wider social spheres, but it was not redemption in Christ that justified such engagement.

Where does one go from here? At the very least, if my contentions are accurate, those interested in defending a transformationist approach to politics and cultural engagement ought to appeal to Calvin as precedent with a good deal more caution and qualification. Perhaps I may be bold enough to suggest that Calvin, the insightful exegete and theologian, was on sounder biblical footing in advancing his theology of the kingdom than are contemporary authors in making the case for transformation by means of their antidualist kingdom theology. A constructive defense of that claim must wait for another day. Yet, I hope that Calvin's approach may serve to sharpen Reformed rhetoric today and modify the way Reformed people describe and justify their involvement in the cultural realm.