

Christ Presbyterian Church
Katy, TX

Aliens or Transformers: How Should the Church Engage the World?

Here No Enduring City: the New Testament vision of waiting for heaven

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I. Introduction

- A. Brief Bio: liberal Episcopalian to reformed Presbyterian and U.S. Army officer
- B. Thesis: The Gospel is about fitting souls for heaven through the ministry of the Church; and while it should have a leavening influence upon society, such is a byproduct of the Church's mission and not an explicit goal of the NT.

1. The Kingdom of God is real, physical and ultimately victorious. (A two-kingdom approach is neither gnostic nor defeatist.) *Matthew 16:18-19*

2. The Kingdom of God is the Visible Church on Earth (WCF 25.2).

Its mission is to “gather and perfect the saints” (WCF 25.3). As part of this perfecting, the Church must do two things: take care of its own through a strong diaconal ministry; and teach its members how to honor God in their families and secular work. *Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 6:1-9*

3. In the end, however, what endures into the New Earth is the Invisible Church. *Hebrews 13:14; II Peter 3:10*

4. The way the Kingdom of God advances is contrary to the ways of this world

E.g., through preaching (seen as foolishness); prayer (weakness); suffering (failure); and service (demeaning). But in this age, due to ongoing sin, such methods are inevitably compromised whenever Christians gain an “upper hand” in society. *James 1:9-10; 5:1-11.*

I am farther than ever I was from expecting great matters of unity, splendour, or prosperity to the church on earth, or that saints should dream of a kingdom of this world, or flatter themselves with the hopes of a golden age, or reigning over the ungodly.... On the contrary, I am more apprehensive that suffering must be the church's ordinary lot, and Christians indeed must be self-denying cross-bearers, even where there are none but formal, nominal Christians to be the cross-makers; and though ordinarily God would have vicissitudes of Summer and Winter, day and night, that the church may grow extensively in the Summer of prosperity & intensively in the Winter of adversity, yet usually their night is longer than their day, and that day itself hath its own storms and tempests. ~ Richard Baxter, 1660s England

5. In the meantime, Christians live as part of two kingdoms, with differing obligations to both, both of which honor God. *I Thessalonians 4:11*.

Sirrah, ye are God's silly vassal; there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: there is king James, the head of the commonwealth; and there is Christ Jesus, the king of the Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, not a lord, not a head, but a member.

~ Andrew Melville to King James of Scotland, later to become James I of England

II. The Problem in conservative Presbyterianism:

A. Historical: disentangling ourselves from 1,500 years of Christendom, in which church and culture, grace and worldly power became intermixed

B. The doctrine of “the Spirituality of Church” became aligned with the Confederate cause due the Gardiner Springs Resolution at the PCUSA General Assembly of 1861

C. More recent: untethered transformationalism

1. Christian America: reclaiming our heritage, e.g. D. James Kennedy; often conflating the cause of Christ and the United States; the “culture wars.”

2. Federal Vision: majors on post-millennialism and having a “Christian view” of literally everything, esp. Doug Wilson in Moscow, ID:

~ how to clean ~ Christian jellybeans ~ Confederate cause

3. Keller in NYC: Redeemer PCA “for” the City, not just “in” the City; multiple classes on art, jazz, baseball, dance, etc. as part of the church’s program

4. Overstating the physical carryover into the New Heavens: Covenant Seminary’s Mike Honeycutt in a recent article, *All Rocks go to Heaven*.

5. Confusion as to what is redemptive work: PCA churches brewing their own beers as “redemptive activity;” art shows, wine tastings; “preaching w/o words.”

III. Recent Critiques of Transformationalism

A. Meredith Kline contra Theonomists

1. Noahic Covenant as basis for Common Grace to govern human societies
2. Redemptive History wrapped up in other Covenants (“cult vs. culture”)
3. Sinai (Old Covenant) largely a foil for the NT economy, due to the Cross

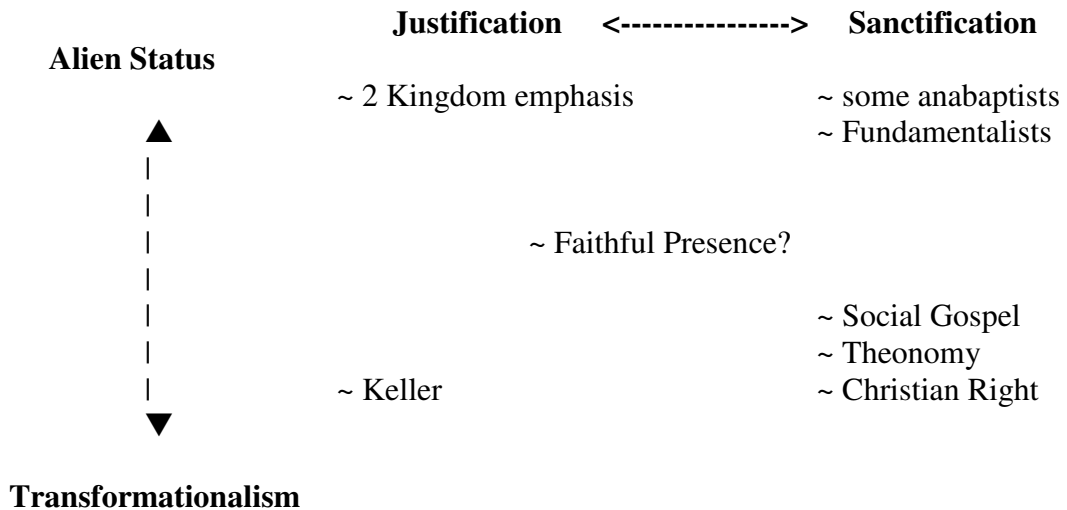
B. Westminster-West (Kline; Hart; Horton; Clark; Van Drunen; Stelman)

C. James Davison Hunter in his 2010 book: *To Change the World*

IV. Four Tensions (or emphases) to keep in mind as we figure out where we each stand

1. Preaching emphasis: Justification vs. Sanctification (WCF 14.2)
2. Cultural emphasis: Alien Status vs. Transformationalism
3. Eschatological emphasis: Pessimism vs. Optimism (in terms of KOG growth)
4. Continuity emphasis: OT/NT continuity vs. OT/NT discontinuity (Heb. 10:1)

Suggestion of where folks may fit in their emphases:



Anecdote: friend who was part of a transformationalist study program who was continually made to feel like a failure for his lack of impact and success; stems from emphasizing “transformationalist” sanctification over the central doctrine of justification

Weary with the conflicts of the world, one goes to Church to seek refreshment for the soul. And what does one find? Alas, too often, one find only the turmoil of the world. The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of mediation and power, not with the authority of God’s Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problems of sin. Such is the sermon. And then perhaps the service is closed by one of those hymns breathing out the angry passions of 1861 . . . Thus the warfare of the world has entered even into the house of God. And sad indeed is the heart of the man who has come seeking peace. Is there no refuge from strife? . . . Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus’ name, . . . to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.

~ J. Greshem Machen in *Christianity and Liberalism*

V. Some Key Texts

1. Genesis 1:28: the “Cultural Mandate” given before the Fall. The question is: how does that translate into our NT era? What is the “ground” we are to cultivate? What is the “city” we are to build?” See Hebrews 13:14: *Here no enduring city.*
2. Jeremiah 29:4-7: *Seek the peace and prosperity of the (pagan) city to which I have carried you into exile.* See also Esther and Daniel as examples of saints working in/for a pagan regime, working for good; while at the same time refusing to compromise their religious practice as practical examples of “two kingdoms” aliens. See I Peter below.
3. Jesus in the Gospels:
 - a. Render unto Caesar: Mark 12:17
 - b. Before Pilate: John 18:36
 - c. High Priestly Prayer: John 17:15-16 ~ *in the world but not of it*
 - d. Peter and the Sword: Matthew 26:51-53; cf. Ephesians 6:10-20
3. Acts 15: that the Kingdom of God is no longer associated with any one culture or nation, but is to expand, borderless through all cultures and lands. The Church is the New Israel, cf. I Peter 2:9, Galatians 6:16; a Holy Kingdom within the kingdoms of man.
4. Philippians 3:20: our citizenship is in heaven, and we await a Savior from there.
5. Romans 12-13, contrasting the two ethics: that of the Church, and that of the civil government (see appendix). Here is the dilemma for the Church: whenever we advocate any public policy position, we are de facto advocating the use of the sword to enforce it.
6. I Corinthians 1-4, comparing the way of the Cross to the way of the world: God chose those who were foolish, weak, lowly and despised. So, for instance:
 - a. Mark 12:43: how can the widow’s mite be worth more than the others?
 - b. Luke 14:7-14: whom do you invite to the table as a “key player?”
 - c. James 2:1-7: how are the poor able to impact society?
7. I Corinthians 5:12: *What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.* The church’s jurisdiction is its own.
8. I Peter 2:9-25: *I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men... Love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*
 - a. Peter here clearly distinguishes between our two callings: as Royal Priests in the Holy Kingdom, and as citizens in an unjust world, submitting nonetheless, following in Christ’s steps as a suffering servant.

b. Fits I Peter 1:3-9: *awaiting our inheritance, kept in heaven for us, preparing our minds for action, but setting our hope fully on the grace to be given us when Jesus Christ is revealed.* Also fits Jeremiah 29:4-7.

9. Philemon: Here is the classic text of Paul using persuasion and motivation by love, to enforce a “social justice” within the Church rather than by fiat or coercion. Why? Because true sanctification matters more to God than outward conformity and justice.

10. Romans 14-15: Christian Freedom as foundational to authentic sanctification. Christians are free to work out their salvation in the world as they see fit.

11. Ecclesiastes 2:24 (and repeated often): *A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This is from the hand of God.* In other words, enjoy this life and enjoy your work! Do it because it honors God, regardless of what temporal impact it may or may not have. This is the freedom Christ brings to us in our justification by His works.

12. Some “transformationalist” texts:

a. I Corinthians 10:31: *Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it the glory of God.* Of course this is a general rule, but the context is that of Christian freedom as individuals, not some sort of social agenda.

b. II Corinthians 10:5: *Take every thought captive.* The context is how the Corinthians ought to conduct themselves in the Church, and that we fight by persuasion, not by worldly methods of power.

c. Galatians 6:10: *Do good to all men as you have opportunity, especially to the household of faith.* The Greek word “especially” is hard to translate, and may mean, “namely” (cf. T. David Gordon). However, I think this verse should be taken straight up; serve all in your life. But the only *formal relief programs* we see in the NT are to take care of those *within* the Church, cf. Acts 6, I Tim. 5, Galatians 2:10.

Example: our deacons expanding our “expectant moms” meals to the local Pregnancy Resource Center

d. Colossians 1:20: *Christ reconciling to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, on the cross.*

Must interpret with Colossians 3:2: *Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things;* and 4:22: *Slaves, obey your earthly masters... with reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with your all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.*

e. Revelation 21:5: Jesus stating: *I am making everything new*. This is certainly true – at the resurrection in the new heavens and new earth, which is the clear context of the passage. Only an extreme form of post-millennialism could apply that to every earthly thing now in this age. What about our bodies? II Cor 4.

VI. Some Qualifiers and Dangers of a Two Kingdom Approach:

- A. The Two Kingdom approach does not teach that secular jobs are less important than Church work. They are not “redemptive,” but that does not mean they are worthless.
- B. The Two Kingdom approach does not teach that we are to leave our faith at the church door. We are to live every moment of every day under Christ’s Lordship. How this works out is often a matter of wisdom and Christian freedom. *Ex: Kuyper on Art.*
- C. The Two Kingdom approach does not mean that we are to be silent in the face of injustice. As individual Christians, and sometimes as the Church, we are to stand for truth and justice at home, work and society (cf. WCF 31.4). At the same time, we recognize that God gives to us particular flocks and particular fields of influence. We do not need to rush to the sound of the guns of every cultural battle the media foists upon us.
- D. The Two Kingdom approach does not mean we cannot influence government as Christians. The problem is when we take official stances as the Church regarding specific policies of the civil government. So we can say, “Abortion should be outlawed,” but the Church should not support a particular way to do it.
- E. The Two Kingdom approach does not censure Christians who feel a call to address particular social ills or matters of justice. It is just careful to protect the Christian freedom of others who sense a call to focus elsewhere.

APPENDIX: Suggested Romans 12-13 outline showing how living in this world under a civil government fits into the overall scheme of Christian love

12:9 ~ Heading: “*Love* must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

12:10-16 ~ Love fellow believers with the spiritual zeal, fervor, joy, patience and prayer which comes from serving the Lord

12:17-21 ~ Love our enemies, personally showing mercy not justice (since we are *not of* this world): “Do not repay *evil* for *evil* (v. 17).... Do not be overcome by *evil*, but overcome *evil* with good (v. 21).”

13:1-7 ~ Obey the civil government, which shows justice not mercy (since we are still *in* this world): “The authorities that exist have been established by God... to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”

13:8-9 ~ Love for all men, owing no one anything except love

13:10 ~ Closing: “*Love* does no harm to its neighbor. *Love* is the fulfillment of the law.”

CHRISTENDOM

Ten proper Calvinists, keenly apace
Marching adroitly, Left and Right face!
Bearing Ye Answers for Every Last Case,
Neatly rolled up, each one in their place.

Ten sable presbyters, without whimsy or lace
Armed with the doctrines of explainable grace.

Off now to battle, bold banners unfurled
Down from the pulpits -- into the world!
Come forth storm and come forth hail
Capture each thought and send it to jail!

Schoolyard and hospice and right scrubbed face
Soap, stitch and nail now the Means of Grace,
Refitting teacher and butcher and baker
Neatly reshelved in accord with their Maker.

All is in order, all is in place
Armed with our doctrines of explainable grace.

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Comes now the True Storm, comes now the hail  
Ripping out stitch and unfastening nail,  
Trestles give way and crossbars fail  
As all of Ye Answers turn vague and turn pale.

Crashing of Mystery rends silent the soul  
As Passion run floods soak through every scroll.

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Ten proper Calvinists, keenly aloof
Marching in circles -- up there on the roof.
Back to the pulpit, explaining each proof
And trying again to flatten God.

~ C. A. Hutchinson

NOTES

Line 5 -- TS Eliot, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"

Line 10 -- 2 Cor. 10:5

Line 12 -- Henry Ward Beecher, endorsing a brand in a newspaper ad: "Since cleanliness is next to godliness, then Soap must be considered a Means of Grace."

Line 17 -- Job 38:1