

**Mite vs. Might:
Calling for a Truce in the Two Kingdom/Transformationalist War**

*And there came a certain poor widow,
and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.
~ Mark 12:42 ~*

A few years back, my friend, Ken Pierce, and I were asked to speak at a small conference at Christ Presbyterian Church in Katy, Texas, pastored by another dear friend, Fred Greco, who invited us. The subject of the conference was the role of the Church in engaging culture. Ken is a capable scholar and follower of Abraham Kuyper, who famously advocated Christ's lordship over every square inch of creation, the so called "transformationalist" approach to the question. I tend towards the "two kingdom" approach which emphasizes the church's primary responsibility to "gather and perfect the saints" (Westminster Confession 25.3), awaiting our final hope in heaven as pilgrims and aliens here.

We entitled the conference, "Transformers vs. Aliens." So who won? Well, I think both sides did. By the end of the weekend, we all realized that we were closer to one another than we first thought. Of course I affirmed a Christian's responsibility to be salt and light in this world. And of course Ken affirmed that the Church's primary responsibility is to preach the substitutionary atonement of Christ for the salvation of souls. Disagreements remained, but they were far less than the unity we had in Christ and our common adherence to the Reformed faith.

But not all have been able to bridge the divide this way. For some reason, the issue of how the Church is to relate to culture evokes stronger opinions and emotions than almost any other subject we are now discussing across the Reformed church. Deep divisions, disagreements, and misunderstandings on both sides appear to remain.

Personally, I think the discussion needs to continue as some of the disagreements are real and fairly major. They greatly affect what is preached and emphasized from our pulpits. But there is one area where I think we might find some common agreement – a truce if you will, on at least one front of this little war. But such a truce will require that we unite together in common cause against a greater enemy. Let me try to explain.

A few months back I was listening to a sermon by someone clearly on the transformationalist side of the question and his concerns struck me in a new way. He was bemoaning the pressure that some young Christians feel to go into full time gospel ministry in order for their lives to be meaningful. I did not find his solution convincing, which in my view was an unhelpful conflation of the secular and the sacred, of creation and redemption (which begs the whole question). But what I certainly agreed with was that the undervaluing of worthy secular callings is a gross violation of Christian freedom. Secular callings are from God just as much as calls to the Gospel ministry. They are worthy simply because they serve society and help people, period.

And so we must reject this kind of "evangelical" legalism which causes plumbers and painters and police officers to doubt their value and worth simply because they are not vocationally involved in teaching God's Word. And certainly, this kind of legalism is more likely to be found

in churches with a “two kingdom” mindset than those more actively concerned with transforming culture. It stands to reason. But it does not stand to reason that every “two kingdom” church violates Christian freedom in such a way. There is another approach.

Because here is the thing. This same sort of legalism can be found in transformationalist circles as well. What do I mean? I mean that if one defines the Gospel as more than just saving souls, but as including the redemption of all of culture in this era, then our work in this world better be really, really good and influential, or we are just not doing much for the kingdom. In the same way Christians in two kingdom circles can be made to feel they are unworthy if they don’t go into full time ministry, so Christians in transformationalist circles can be made to feel unworthy if their work is anything less than excellent and making real changes in their field.

You can see how this works, can’t you? I have met artists, engineers and others who have been part of such Christian circles who have felt a constant pressure to live up to some culture-impacting standard which they just could not reach. They were too busy trying to pass their classes, and love their wives, and not be too grumpy when their kids kept them up all night. And so they too feel a pressure to be something other than they are; and if they don’t, made to feel that they are not doing their part to advance God’s kingdom in this world.

But it does not have to be this way either. There is another approach. Both my daughters are likely to enter the arts. One is pursuing graduate studies in collaborative piano, while the other is a budding young photographer with her own small business. What am I to tell them? Well, it is certainly not that they need to go into campus ministry or marry a youth pastor; or only play “Christian” music or take “Christian” photos if their lives are to have worth. But nor am I to tell them that must have great impact upon their fields, for fear of failing to be part of God’s great redemptive work in this world. Either of those expectations would be a form of legalism.

No, I am to tell them to enjoy their lives; and whatever their hand finds to do, to do it with all their heart (Ecclesiastes 9:10). I will tell them to live quietly, to mind their own affairs and to work with their hands (I Thessalonians 4:11). I will tell them to love God and neighbor, to remember the Ten Commandments, and to seek the fruit of the Spirit and the wisdom from above (Galatians 5:22-23; James 3:13ff). And in terms of evangelism, I will tell them to walk in wisdom toward outsiders; and for their speech to always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that they may know how to answer each person (Colossians 4:5-6; cf. I Peter 3:15). And in terms of the culture, they are to pursue the welfare of the city in which they dwell, just because that is part of what it means to love their neighbor, all the while knowing that those cities are not ends unto themselves (cf. Jeremiah 29:7; cf. Hebrews 13:14).

That is what God requires of them and nothing more. They are to walk in the good works which God has prepared for them and no others, no matter what preacher tells them otherwise (Ephesians 2:10).

And so here is the truce that I propose: that we may remember the Widow’s mite. That we realize that somehow, in God’s economy, those two mites were worth more than the abundance which the wealthy contributed:

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."
(Mark 12:42-47)

Now, how is this possible? Instinctively, we realize that Jesus is talking about spiritual truths, that man looks at outward appearances, but God looks at the heart. But concretely, surely the wealthier contributions did more practical good. How could they not? Unless. Unless, somehow in God's economy, He was able to multiply those two copper coins into something far greater, even as He once did with five loaves and two fish. That somehow, great wealth can build ministries and visible structures that look like they are doing great good, but actually are not. And that a small offering, but given with great love and prayer, will somehow do far more in the end.

And if we can come to see that – by faith, since eyes will avail not here – then do you see what that does to both sides of this debate? It causes us to, well, give our people a break. To give them grace. To stop putting pressure on them to produce as if God or the Kingdom somehow needed them. It allows us to remind them of their justification; that God has already approved of them through Christ, and granted them peace (Romans 5:1). Oh, their work may suck eggs at times. Their evangelistic skills may be utterly lacking. But God loves them anyway. They will never be failures in his sight, no matter what they do or don't do for the Church or for society. He looks at them and He sees His perfect Son.

That is the truce that I propose. That all sides preach Grace, Grace, Grace. That we take our boots off the necks of our people, and stop pressuring them to join the armies of whatever our particular cause may be. That we not replace legalistic missionary pressure with transformationalist legalistic pressure, or vice versa. And that we not allow the pressing need for ongoing sanctification to obscure the blessed peace which justification brings. (Of course, this can be true only if we maintain a clear distinction between the two, but that is for another essay.)

But you see what this must mean? If two-kingdomers and transformationalists are to unite on the side of Grace, then we must make common cause against the subtle legalisms of our own sides. We must declare war against all religions of works, including those found within our own churches and our own hearts.

Then if we do that, our discussions and debates can themselves be held with more grace because neither side will be conflating our churchly or social agendas into the Gospel itself. We will remember that God justifies by faith alone in Christ alone and not by what we bring to the table. So we are free to get some of these matters about culture wrong, and yet still be justified; still loved of God. My peace with God does not depend upon me getting my politics or cultural responsibilities just right. Nor does it depend on my devotion to ministry.

I must give Christ all my heart as He enables, but it still does not feel like very much, like it will make much difference in this world. But perhaps my two mites are all that I can muster, and all that God asks for. What grace to remember such a thing. And so if that is true for me, so it is for all to whom I minister. If they have trusted in Christ, they are saved no matter what vocation they pursue or how well they pursue it. What they need is not more law – whatever form that may take – but more Christ and His free grace. Let's call this truce, and see what happens.