

## The Kingdom of God and Culture

By the year A.D. 410 the Roman Empire had collapsed and was approaching its end as its capital city, the great and magnificent Rome, was overrun by the barbarian tribes to the north. Pressure fell on the Christians as the pagans charged that Rome fell because of the empire's abandonment of the old Roman gods in its conversion to Christianity under Constantine.

Christians were shocked by this catastrophe as well. Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, observed all this and asked, "What is to become of the Church now that Rome has fallen?" And we can hardly fault Jerome for wondering because for nearly a hundred years the empire had been Christianity's benefactor, defender, and friend. Now it seemed as if the shepherd had been killed, leaving the defenseless sheep to the wolves who had made their way into the pen. How could the church survive without the state? The pagans said it was the church's fault that the state was gone.

It took Augustine 13 years and about 500 pages to answer the pagan's accusation, producing one of Western civilization's greatest works, *The City of God*. It is divided into two parts. The first part (books 1-10) was Augustine's answer to the charge that Christianity was the reason for Rome's collapse. In fact, as Augustine reminded, there were earlier times in the empire's history when she had been attacked and besieged. Where were the Roman gods then? Why had they not delivered? If these gods could not be blamed then, neither could Christianity be blamed now. In the second part (books 11-22) he describes history as the outworking of one universal principle, that of two

opposing cities or societies. They have been formed by two loves: the earthy city, the city of man, is determined by the love of self, even to the contempt of God, and is destined to pass away; while the heavenly city, the city of God, is determined by the love of God, even to the contempt of self, and is destined to endure forever.

The great themes that Augustine developed are obviously still relevant, which causes us to ask the question: What is the relationship between Christianity and culture? Or to put it in the terms of this seminar: What is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man?

Here some church history is helpful, seeing how the Reformers answered this question; and actually how they respond in their sixteenth century context is in some ways not too dissimilar from how we respond in ours. As Michael Horton observes, the Reformers wanted to avoid the Roman church's tendency to confuse the two kingdoms, which resulted in replacing the spiritual concerns of the gospel and the care of souls with secular concerns of money, power, and real estate. But they also avoided the Anabaptist tendency to divorce the two kingdoms, resulting in a rejection of any Christian involvement in the broader culture.

Instead, the Reformers argued that everyone, whether Christian or not, because he has been created by God, has been given a vocation by which to contribute to the wider culture. Horton goes on to summarize this position by saying that "redemption does not change our participation in culture; rather, it changes *us* and, therefore, the character of our involvement." Christians, then, are to be seen as citizens of two kingdoms, with responsibilities in each—though clearly not on an equal level of commitment and

allegiance. Christians are citizens of God's kingdom first, which means that they will operate and conduct themselves within the secular culture as Christians, working for the culture's good with a distinctly Christian perspective, even when the pressures to accommodate and compromise are the strongest.

James Boice suggests three priorities that should govern a Christian's relationship to, and involvement in, our culture. And as this culture becomes increasingly secular, these priorities are all the more vital. The first priority is participation. Christians need to participate in public life, rather than criticize what is happening from the sidelines.

Horton argues in his book, *Beyond Culture Wars*, that evangelicals have little to offer to their culture because they know neither the Bible nor their own theology well enough to make a meaningful and biblically faithful contribution to the cultural battles, which means that far too often what they mostly do is complain about where things are going.

Horton suggests, "If we have not paid our dues by years of making positive contributions to culture, we simply do not have the cultural clout to pontificate about cultural crises."

Only as we participate in the broader culture and put into practice what we believe will we begin to gain a hearing and be effective.

The second priority is persuasion, which Christians must learn if they are to be effective in moving the world in a more righteous direction. The first part of persuasion is that we must learn to really think about the issues, which admittedly takes time and hard work. The second part is to remember that we do not persuade when our only response to the evil around us is to verbally insult those with whom we disagree. The goal is not to gain more secular power by attempting to take over the so-called power

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bases, believing that things will turn around if only certain lobbying groups become more influential and certain people get voted in and out of office. Too often, when the political world is going our way, it is easy to pray for those in authority. But when others hold the reins, we forget that Romans 13 is in the Bible, preferring to turn to one of the imprecatory psalms instead. We must remember—and I suspect that big election years tend to make us forget—that God’s kingdom is not going to advance using secular means. There might be some modest gains, which certainly are not meaningless; but underneath the surface of policy changes, legal rulings, and government funding, we will discover that the wider culture’s fear of God and commitment to the gospel is no more changed than before the election. It is not in the notable turning points of secular affairs that the kingdom of God advances. Rather, it occurs as virtually anonymous Christians faithfully plug away in their callings to make the Word of God more widely known and obeyed. And it is in the individual conversions that the Spirit accomplishes through this Word that, by the grace of God, might be used to transform our world.

This leads to the third priority, that of prayer. As necessary as participation and persuasion are, without a humble reliance on God and his merciful intervention, our best participation and persuasion will produce nothing. The history of the church shows what God is pleased to do, sometimes on a very large scale, when his people fervently come before him, acknowledging their inadequacy and their need for the spiritual success that he alone is able to perform. Secular methods will never deliver because the problem is not one of numbers. The problem is that the world is not only blind to the gospel of the kingdom; it is hostile and will rebel against it at every opportunity. But thanks be to God,

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the universal king, because in his grace the kingdom of this world is already giving way to the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and that kingdom, far and above all earthly powers, is promised to endure forever.