

NATURAL LAW AND THE TWO KINGDOMS: A STUDY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFORMED SOCIAL THOUGHT. By David VanDrunen. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2009. Pp. 512. \$23.10. ISBN: 0-802-86443-0.

David VanDrunen has done a great service for the Reformed Christian tradition and contemporary Christians with a serious interest in the relationship between Christ and culture. In *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* VanDrunen describes in detail the origins, development, regular modifications, and ultimate near disappearance of two doctrines that framed socio-political analysis in the Reformed tradition for over 450 years. VanDrunen clearly believes that these two doctrines—the two kingdoms of God and natural law—are rooted in Scripture (14)¹ as well as the Reformed tradition but is conscientious in his historical analysis. He concludes by noting contemporary challenges to both doctrines (429-34) but urges their continued usefulness to Christians who take seriously the challenging task of understanding contemporary world orders in light of the whole of the Biblical record.

In his own words, VanDrunen believes that

the early Reformed tradition, drawing from and building upon important strands of patristic and medieval theology, developed clear and interconnected categories of natural law and the two kingdoms that played a foundational role in its social thought. In this early tradition, Reformed thinkers grounded social life in God's work of creation and providence, not in his work of redemption . . . (15)

However, in the contemporary era, "Reformed theology [has] largely neglected and often rejected the natural law and two kingdoms doctrines and [has] sought to give a redemptive and eschatological grounding to culture and Christians' participation in it." (15) The justification of these assertions and consideration of the future of these doctrines occupies the balance of *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*.

Beginning with the *Didache*, moving to the *Epistle to Diognetus*, and ending with Augustine's *City of God*, VanDrunen describes a view of the relationship of Christians to Roman culture in terms of

1. For more on VanDrunen's theological argument for the doctrine of the two kingdoms, see DAVID VANDRUNEN, *LIVING IN GOD'S TWO KINGDOMS: A BIBLICAL VISION FOR CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE* (Crossway Books 2010).

progressive toleration, but uneasy coexistence. By the end of the fourth century, Augustine had developed a distinct theory of two kingdoms or cities but it was one in which the city of God opposed the city of the world, largely identifying the former with the church and the latter with the existing world order. The Roman imperial state, even when a Christian occupied its throne, was not part of the city of God, and cultural life generally was destined for destruction. Moving to the medieval period, VanDrunen describes the development of the less antithetical two kingdoms approach to the socio-political order with the rise of Western Christendom. He deftly contrasts the unitary two-swords-one-kingdom approach of Gelasius with the more pluralistic approach of the two kingdoms of God of Ockham and the Franciscans.

To this point VanDrunen's efforts largely involved reworking the best secondary literature with a judicious eye on the primary sources. With the move to the Reformation, especially John Calvin, we see VanDrunen demonstrate his powers as a historian. VanDrunen unpacks Calvin's views on natural law, a topic of much recent scholarly interest, and adds ground-breaking work on Calvin's doctrine of the two kingdoms. VanDrunen's exploration of the Calvin's doctrine of the two kingdoms and his demonstration of its relationship to natural law alone make this volume worthwhile. VanDrunen's use of the two kingdoms and natural law goes on to provide a valuable unified and unifying thematic paradigm for subsequent Reformed thinking on socio-political matters.

Summarizing VanDrunen's careful analysis of over 400 years of Reformed socio-political thought after Calvin² is impracticable. Notwithstanding the usefulness of VanDrunen's paradigm, one problem consistently appears from the sources themselves: the inability of Reformed theologians to clearly identify the borders of the two kingdoms. Calvin himself made the civil government the protector of true religion and granted the church courts investigatory and limited prosecutorial powers, not only over sin, but also over crime. (87) This

2. VanDrunen manages to cover with reasonable clarity contemporaries of Calvin like Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Wolfgang Musculus, Jerome Zanchi; the Marian Exiles (John Knox, John Ponet, and Christopher Goodman); the Huguenot resistance writers (Theodore Beza, François Hotman, and the author of *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*); later English writers George Buchanan and Samuel Rutherford; Continental theologians Johannes Althusius and Francis Turretin; early American writers John Cotton and Stuart Robinson; nineteenth century Americans Charles Hodge and James Thornwell; Abraham Kuyper; Karl Barth; neo-Kuyperians Herman Dooyeweerd, Henry Stob, Cornelius Plantinga, Al Wolters, Craig Bartholomew, and Michael Goheen; Cornelius Van Til and two of his epigones, Greg Bahnsen and Meredith G. Kline.

confusion of the two kingdoms plagued Reformed socio-political theorizing thereafter, even as it gradually moved toward justifying the modern liberal polity.³ VanDrunen works hard to explain the historical dynamics that caused the shifting boundaries, but ultimately recognizes that this problem has been and may always be intractable. (275)⁴

The twentieth century has seen the virtually universal collapse of the doctrine of the two kingdoms and, to a lesser extent, that of natural law, among Reformed theologians. VanDrunen does an excellent job of explaining the internal understandings of the new single kingdom approaches, whether Barthian or neo-Kuyperian, as well as pointing out their failure to deal fairly with the preceding centuries of Reformed two-kingdoms thought. While VanDrunen points to some examples of what he sees as a resurgence of two-kingdoms thinking, it must be observed that these proponents are outliers in a small segment of contemporary Reformed theologizing.

A fundamental question must be addressed: Why have two doctrines so deeply rooted in the classic Reformed tradition experienced the sustained eclipse described by VanDrunen? From medieval common places through Calvin, several subsequent generations of the Continental Reformed, and well into the nineteenth century on both the Continent and in America, natural law and the two kingdoms were the organizing poles for Reformed analysis of the domains of state and church. Wholesale loss of both doctrines in the Reformed world began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated through the twentieth with barely a hint of their existence to be found in the twenty-first. How did this rapid shift come about?

VanDrunen lists five issues that make contemporary use of the two kingdoms and natural law paradigm problematic. (429-34)⁵ I believe three particular factors in this decline and one additional matter should

3. *See generally* VanDrunen chs. 5 & 6 (bookending Samuel Rutherford and Francis Turretin with Stuart Robinson and James Thornwell). One might question VanDrunen's omission of other Reformed theologians like Gisbertus Voetius, Johannes Cocceius, Wilhelmus à Brakel and Hugo Grotius from the Continent, William Ames of England and the Mathers (Cotton and Increase) from America. At 512 pages, however, *NATURAL LAW AND THE TWO KINGDOMS* is already at the limit for popular academic works.

4. ("[T]he Hodge-Thornwell disputes revealed some lingering ambiguity about how the distinction between spiritual and civil affairs was to be understood and how church and state respectively ought to take jurisdiction over them."). *See also id.* at 431-32 ("[I]t has often not been clear exactly what it means for a thing to be 'spiritual.'").

5. Listing the dual mediatorship of Christ, grounding common grace in the Noachic covenant, implications of the death and resurrection of Christ for the authority of the state, the holistic character of the Christian life, and the meaning of "spiritual" in connection with the jurisdiction of the redemptive kingdom.

be investigated further. First, as VanDrunen acknowledges, natural law has become increasingly less plausible in a post-Kantian and post-Darwinian world. Critical philosophy undercuts claims that human moral judgments in some way reflect the mind of God; naturalistic evolution did the same to supporting moral claims by appeals to observations of the natural world.⁶ Reformed theologians generally rejected both Kantian constructivism and Darwinian evolutionism but, particularly with respect to natural law, struggled to find a way to express their belief in objective moral norms to an increasingly skeptical audience.

Second, many Reformed thinkers, and certainly the broader Protestant world of the nineteenth century, believed in divinely directed and continuing scientific and social progress. According to the more liberal strands of Protestant thought, the kingdom of creation would gradually be subsumed by the kingdom of redemption, and already natural law could be replaced by scientific empiricism. The aftermath of two World Wars left few continuing to feel such optimism, but a return to the paradigms of the two kingdoms and natural law did not follow. Instead, two Reformed reactions in the twentieth century responded to the collapse of the optimistic consensus of progress from opposite directions. Karl Barth, neo-orthodoxy, and the Dutch-influenced neo-Kuyperians exemplify one reaction. They related Christ's redemptive kingdom to the creation order by subsuming creation into redemption leaving only the redemptive kingdom. Figures such as Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and the theonomy movement reflect the other reaction that reduced the place of Christ's redemptive kingship to the means by which the Old Testament's legal order could be universalized with as little adjustment as possible; the redemptive kingdom was virtually subsumed into creation.⁷ For the theonomists, however, creation and the moral order were most definitely not explicated in terms of natural law; rather, the divinely ordained laws of the Mosaic covenant should form the structure of contemporary social and political orders.

The third, and in my opinion most profound, factor has been the reconceptualization of the relationship between the two kingdoms

6. The corrosive effects of Freudian psychology on the reliability of the human conscience are of a piece with the modern turns of Kantian epistemology and Darwinian naturalism.

7. This account of the distinctive of theonomy does not accord with VanDrunen's who sees in theonomy an outworking of certain strands of the thought of Cornelius Van Til. VanDrunen at 411 ("Bahnsen's defense of theonomy picked up on some common Van Tilian themes such as the need to resist, in all areas of life, human attempts to be autonomous in thought and action.").

developed by “biblical theology.” Classical Reformed exegesis and dogmatics until the mid-twentieth century conceived of the kingdoms of creation and redemption in parallel and largely static terms. Each kingdom was an ontological “given” and, with some exceptions, most Reformed theologians believed that both would exist until the eschaton when the redemptive kingdom would prevail with barely a trace of the created order continuing. In contrast, theologians like Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Meredith Kline articulated a view that saw the Biblical record describing the eschatological kingdom as completing the kingdom of creation. Redemption takes up that which was created and brings it to an eschatological culmination, not elimination. Avoiding the ungrounded optimism of the nineteenth century, however, they also observed that the potential latent within the fallen creation was insufficient to achieve its eschatological end. A decisive extra-creational intervention was necessary, i.e., the inauguration of Christ’s redemptive kingdom. Without creation, redemption would have had no meaning; without redemption, creation would have remained incomplete.

The newer theological understanding claims that only at the eschaton will the kingdoms of creation and redemption be fully merged. Until then they are comingled and intertwined. Because redemption operates on creation, the continual failure of classical Reformed theology to achieve consensus on the respective jurisdictions of the two kingdoms and their archetypical institutional representatives—state and church—can be understood. Because redemption cannot be identified with creation, however, efforts to maintain a distinction between the two realms—and their institutions—can be justified. Forces present within then-contemporary patterns of social and political life where Reformed theologians worked explain the ever-shifting boundaries between the two kingdoms. Yet, the fundamental reality of the two kingdoms explains the broad consensus among such theologians on matters that indeed fall within the jurisdiction of each. Employment of the doctrine of the two kingdoms can again be useful but only if this dynamic of historical development is included.

If natural law is understood as the ability of the human mind to derive objective moral principles from general revelation, then it should remain useful in structuring human social and political life. However, as J. Budziszewski has recently concluded, “moral knowledge is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of God, and the natural knowledge of

God is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of His word.”⁸ Thus, VanDrunen needs to offer reasons to believe that the classical deployment of natural law in a thoroughly secularized environment will continue to be of anything more than marginal utility.

Finally, the necessity of the correlation of the two doctrines must be considered. While VanDrunen makes the case that belief in two kingdoms virtually requires belief in natural law to provide content for the administration of the kingdom of creation, the converse does not follow. In fact, the widespread use of natural law outside the Reformed two-kingdoms approach suggests that whatever utility remains with natural law arguments today does not depend on retention of the doctrine of the two kingdoms.

Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms is an excellent work of historical theology. Much more work will need to be done, however, before the doctrines of the two kingdoms and natural law will be persuasive for discussions in the contemporary public square.

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8. J. BUDZISZEWSKI, *THE LINE THROUGH THE HEART: NATURAL LAW AS FACT, THEORY, AND SIGN OF CONTRADICTION* 40 (Intercollegiate Stud. Inst. 2009).

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