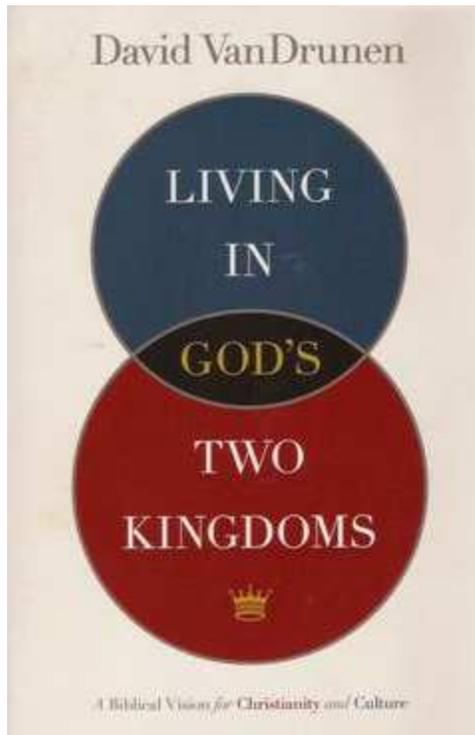


## Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

September 19 2015: Church and the church



I started hanging around this start-up church primarily because their Sunday School was actually useful, not just a shallow Bible study and social hour. It has progressed from an overview of the *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689* to Michael Horton's *A Pilgrim Theology* and now to [Living in God's Two Kingdoms](#) [1] by VanDrunen, whom I believe is one of the pastor's seminary professors. As one who has become aware that most "church people" lack a biblical worldview, I was excited at the prospect of studying a Christian perspective on vocation and cultural engagement within the theological tradition that produced [Abraham Kuyper](#) [2]. I was thinking, if anyone ought to understand the importance of a full-ranging Christian worldview - "There

is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" - it would be a Reformed church.

So I got the "textbook" for the class from the deacon, and read it in anticipation of the class. I am disappointed.

Turns out it is not really, as I had hoped, an introduction to Christian worldview and a conversation on how Christians ought to view vocation and grasp opportunities to influence popular culture. It is more a rebuttal to certain theological camps - identified as "Neo-Calvinism", the "New Perspectives on Paul", and the "Emerging Church" - which hold the position that the cultural works of Christians will survive the end of this present age and bring in the new age of the Kingdom of Christ. Their idea, apparently, is that we are to finish the cultural mandate God gave to Adam and that he failed at. Much of this book is how it is Christ, not the Church, who has *already* fulfilled what Adam failed at. The cultural works of all mankind, including Christians, will be

destroyed at the end of the world when the universe is destroyed by fire (per II Peter). We are living as "resident aliens" in this world, like the exiles in Babylon. The final chapter is the only one that gets into cultural engagement at all, and even VanDrunen remarks that many people would be expecting more of a treatment of how Christians should approach cultural engagement, as if they would be disappointed in what it turned out to be. I was. The only topics it really addresses are education, common vocations, and politics, and And even then, the message seems to be keep your head down, do your best, and don't expect your activities to have much of a lasting effect, because we are "exiles" and "resident aliens" and not citizens of this world.

Furthermore, there are a few points that rather diminish VanDrunen's claim to authority in my view:

- **First**, when he identifies the three movements that claim that the cultural works of Christians will bring in the kingdom, he includes the "Emerging Church", as represented by Brian McLaren. This fails to understand the broadness of the "Emerging Church", most of which is doctrinally orthodox but break away from the traditional church regarding *methodology* and *church culture*. McLaren is a spokesman for a heterodox movement within the "Emerging Church" known as "Emergent Village" or "Emergent Church", which goes farther than merely questioning or attempting to change church culture to questioning and attempting to change historic Christian doctrine. To paint an entire movement the same color as its worst aspect demonstrates ignorance and unwillingness to understand growing movements in Christianity. After all, it didn't take much study of the movement for me to recognize *myself* as an "emerger" and an "exile" from traditional institutional church culture, and to understand the difference between "Emerging" and "Emergent".
- **Second**, his thesis that Jesus has accomplished what Adam failed to do (and therefore contemporary Christians do not) is based on an interpretation of Genesis that, since this world was never intended to last forever, and since God rested on the seventh day and was prepared to bring Adam and Eve into an eternal state of rest, what Adam failed at was completing his work and entering into the new creation. Thus, what Jesus did in fulfilling Adam's unfinished work was opening the way for us to that eternal state of rest. This seems highly speculative to me, asserting as *fact* concepts that are *not clearly set forth* in Scripture. I understand the Genesis account of God resting on the seventh day is a foreshadowing of the ultimate state of creation. I understand the commandment regarding the Sabbath in the same light; an "object lesson" or a "prophecy" in the Law (as indeed so much of the Law is) and *not* an expression of His will that we should obey because it is a transcendent moral

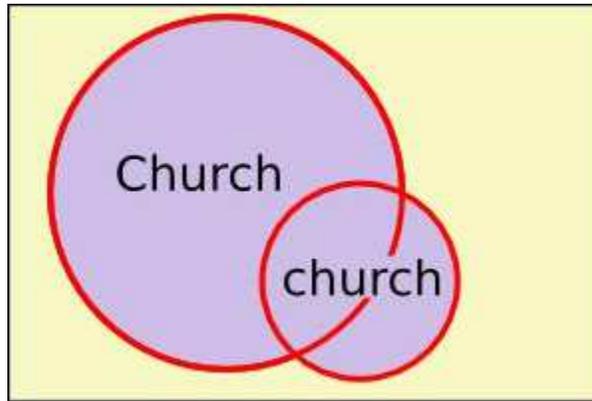
imperative (as indeed it is *not*, as it was not laid upon the Patriarchs, and it is not included in the (very short) list of binding observances as determined by the apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)). I think the notion that the sabbath rest was a promise to Adam himself is alien to Scripture and a "weak reed" to lean on as a key premise to the primary argument of the book.

- **Third**, another main premise of his thesis is that the world, and all the works in it, will be destroyed by fire, per II Peter 3. Now, I don't necessarily have a problem with this concept; however, it seems to be a staple of Reformed thought that a literal interpretation of the book of Revelation is a recent product of Dispensationalism, that really, Revelation is "vision literature" not to be taken literally. Further, when Jesus is telling His disciples the things that are going to happen (Matthew 24), these things were fulfilled in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem (even though Jesus was answering their question of "when will You return?", and Jesus certainly did not return in AD 70). So if Revelation is not to be taken as written, and Matthew 24 is not to be taken as written, why should II Peter 3 be taken as written except as required to support a theological theory? I am always suspicious of selective interpretation of Scripture by pastor types who have some cherished tradition to defend.
- **Fourth**, the book starts off with a presentation of the "Two Kingdoms" concept thus: One kingdom, the kingdom of common grace, the Noaic Covenant of ecological continuity *as long as the earth exists* (that is, of limited duration), is the realm of human activity and culture, including marriage and family and vocation and building and nation-states. The other kingdom, the kingdom of the elect, the Abrahamic Covenant of divine favour and eternal life (unlimited duration), is the realm of God's direct rule, the kingdom of redemption, the kingdom of heaven. In all of human history and culture, what can we identify as the redemptive kingdom existing separately from yet coincidentally with the kingdom of human culture and achievement? The Church. Well and good. And then, in the middle of chapter 5, he clarifies what he means by "the Church": the visible community of believers united in worship and governed by pastors and elders. In other words, VanDrunen is explicitly identifying "the Church" with the institutional "church".

I see this tension in Reformed doctrine (and, really, in much of the teaching from establishment churches - and a hint in some Emerging writing). There is the "one holy and catholic church" of the ancient creeds (which the Reformed church will teach and often recite during Sunday services), and in the [London Confession](#) [3], section 26, paragraphs 1-4, and then in paragraph 5, it clarifies that the believers, the members of the Church, must band together in churches. So, is

there a "Church" that is separate from "the church"?

This question is illustrated in this diagram. There is no question that part of the "church" is in the Church, the orthodox fellowships of actual elect believers. There is also no question that there is part of the "church" that is *not* in the Church, those fellowships which reject the authority of Scripture and the historic doctrines of Christ and salvation, as well as those individuals (the "tares" of Matthew 13) who are unregenerate yet pass themselves off as Christians in the company of the elect. So right off, all that is "church" is not "Church". Is there "Church" that is not "church"? For instance, a para-church ministry, staffed by elect believers for the purpose of serving others and advancing the Kingdom. It isn't "church", but is it yet "Church"?



Some (including the pastor of the Reformed church I am hanging out with) would say, "No. They don't have pastors, they don't minister the sacraments, therefore they are not churches". To which my unspoken response is, of course they aren't churches, and they don't pass themselves off as churches. Are they part of the Church? Clearly, the Reformed pastor believes that there is nothing inside the Church that is not inside a "church", and clearly, VanDrunen believes the same. I disagree. I assert that denying para-church ministries or neighborhood fellowships or other informal societies of believers a place in the Church is exactly what Paul rebuked in I Corinthians 12; "If the ear says, 'Since I'm not an eye, I'm not part of the body,' that doesn't make it any less a part of the body, does it?" Although the case is more like, "if the eye says to the ear, 'because you are not an eye, you are not part of the body', that doesn't make it any less a part of the body, does it?" I've had the acquaintance of evangelistic-fanatic preachers who pretty much explicitly said, "because you are not a soul-winner, you are not of the body". Armed with I Corinthians 12, I can immediately recognize and reject the error of ministers who wish to exclude others from the Church on the basis of anything other than professing the blood of Christ.

So, I would say, yes; the para-church ministries and the informal gatherings are part of the Church just as much as the church is. Individuals on mission, such as foreign missionaries for whom association in a "church" is not a possibility, are part of the Church. I would further say that the part of the Church that is not the church is far more effective at extending the Kingdom, of the kingdom of heaven

actually influencing the kingdom of human culture, than the part of the Church that is the church.

However, I would also say that the situation is more nuanced than this. The Church is the redeemed people, and these people can be both in churches and in non-churches. In fact, most non-churches (i.e., para-church ministries) expect, even require their participants to be members of churches. I could even allow that nearly all redeemed people should be members of churches (as the *London Confession* section 26 paragraph 12 indicates), excepting those like missionaries who have no access to a church. So the case is really more like the Church is composed almost entirely of churches *and* an overlapping domain of non-churches. Believers should be in churches, and they also can (should?) be in non-churches as well.

Interestingly enough, there is a lack of reciprocity. While non-churches usually expect their members to be members of churches, churches do not expect their members to be members of non-churches. I find this to be indefensible. I find very little support in Scripture for "worship" services, sermons, music (the way churches do it - congregational, choirs, solos, etc. - entertainment or pious ritual), and yet these are what most churches emphasize, even to the point of requiring it of the members. I see much more overt instruction to help the poor and the widows and orphans, to build up marriages and families, to give an answer to the unbelievers - generally, the "good works" for which we were created. We are to "motivate one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24), and a proper church should do this, and not to "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (Mark 7:8). So yes, I hold that Christians *should* be members of a church, but not just any church; rather, one that intentionally equips and sends the members out into the culture, perhaps or preferably through non-church activities like para-church ministry organizations. Another thing I have seen especially in my Southern Baptist churches is the "spiritual gift assessment", a questionnaire or personal survey to identify your "spiritual gifts. I have no argument of the possibility of spiritual gifts (per I Corinthians 12, et al.), but I find it limiting that these surveys always direct expression of "gifts" *in the context of the church*, rather than *in the Church*. I suspect that the gifts were to serve the Kingdom, the body of Christ, the "one holy and catholic Church", not merely the individual institutional corporate entity. I further suspect that churches would help themselves, their members, and the Church much better if, rather than self-serving "surveys" and "questionnaires", they would encourage the members to explore non-church Church opportunities for service, to find their "best fit" experientially.



This past week, I attended a "strategy banquet" of [4Tucson](#) [4]. 4Tucson is a non-church organization which actively attempts to motivate Christians to participate in other non-church

organizations and activities across a broad spectrum of missions directed to engage culture and present a biblical or Christian answer to problems in my native city. This banquet was much more a "worship service" than one finds in any church on Sunday morning, for it was directed towards God for the purpose of "motivating one another to love and good deeds". The banquet had the intention of getting the attenders to sign up to be 4Tucson members: to abide by the 4Tucson "code of conduct" (which includes a commitment to be a member of a local church), to pray for Tucson, to give money (which I see as a better investment than giving money to a local church primarily for salaries of a professional staff and the maintenance and retirement of debt on a building which is in most cases used only for a few hours on Sunday), and to participate in a "domain" according to one's gifts, abilities, and interests. I note that, in addition to individuals who are being encouraged to participate, "Christian" businesses are also listed as supporters... and many churches are listed as "partners". I might expect a 4Tucson partner church to be more inclined to encourage their members to engage culture and serve others and extend the Kingdom than other (unfortunately the majority of) churches which are inwardly focused and not inclined to expect their members to do non-church activities and perhaps even view para-church ministries as threats and competitors.



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1. [www.crossway.org/books/living-in-gods-two-kingdoms-tpb](http://www.crossway.org/books/living-in-gods-two-kingdoms-tpb)
2. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham\\_Kuyper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Kuyper)
3. [www.1689.com/confession.html](http://www.1689.com/confession.html)
4. [www.4tucson.com](http://www.4tucson.com)