Polishing Brass on a Sinking Ship:
Toward a Traditional Dispensationalist Philosophy
of the Church and Cultural Engagement

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Dispensational premillenialists have long been charged with cultural retreat, characterized by J. Vernon McGee's infamous question to his radio audience, "Do you polish brass on a sinking ship?"[2]

This paper will show that, despite the rhetorical extremes of some dispensationalists, dispensational premillenialism does not necessitate withdrawal from cultural engagement; rather, it actually provides a theological basis for equipping Christians as they are active in society. After exploring the underlying rationale for common portrayals of traditional dispensationalism as culturally impotent and briefly summarizing the alternative evangelical philosophy of cultural transformationalism, the paper will present a traditional dispensational philosophy of the church and cultural engagement along four lines:

First, it will explore dispensationalism's understanding of the biblical distinction between the universal sovereign rule of God over all things by means of human institutions and the future localized rule of Messiah on earth. This provides the framework for assessing the extent to which cultural pursuits in this age relate to the kingdom of God.

Second, it will argue that traditional dispensationalism's notable contribution to the subject of cultural engagement lies precisely in its ecclesiology; traditional dispensationalism distinguishes between unique roles in culture for both church as institution and individual Christians, which differs from the Neo-Calvinist missional philosophy that has come to dominate evangelicalism. The church's role is specifically to disciple Christians, who then live out their Christianity in the cultural spheres to which God has called them. Thus, churches have a role in cultural engagement that is related to, yet distinct from and more narrow than the role of individual Christians. Further, it will show that philosophy of cultural engagement falls more properly within discussions of personal sanctification than in missiology or eschatology.

Third, the paper will suggest that dispensationalism's idea of "restraint" (2 Thess 2:6–7) is a better category for understanding Christianity's affect upon culture than "redemption."

Fourth, it will show that dispensationalism's emphasis upon the physical aspects of the future millennial kingdom strongly imply that current cultural pursuits are valuable. This leads to a decidedly optimistic perspective of cultural pursuits for individual Christians since whatever in this world is worthwhile will endure into the kingdom.

Therefore, a traditional dispensationalist philosophy of cultural engagement resembles something like Reformed Two Kingdom theology and provides a very practical framework for preventing churches from losing their biblical mission while at the same time discipling Christians to actively engage in cultural endeavors.

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[2] Cited in Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism Is Paralyzed* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993), 100.

Portrayals of Dispensationalists as Culturally Impotent

Dispensationalism has often been criticized as culturally impotent since the early days of its development. These came from liberal social gospel advocates to be sure,[3] but they came from theological conservatives as well. For example, an 1879 *Lutheran Quarterly* article claimed that premillennialists who deny "that Christ is enthroned, or that his kingdom is established, or that his church, with the Holy Spirit's energy, is to convert the world, and asserting that the world will wax worse and worse until the second advent" have "such a gloomy view of things, and give such little encouragement for hearty labor."[4] A later 1882 article suggested that an "evil fruit" of premillennialism was that "it takes away the very highest incentives to labor for the conversion of the world."[5] Likewise, in 1958,[6] Lefferts A. Loetscher wrote, "By its heightened supernaturalism, dispensationalism deliberately widened the gulf between Christianity and its environment, thus at once protecting its own faith and reducing the possibility of effective Christian influence on thought and society,"[7] and N. C. Kraus asserted that dispensationalism was open "to the charge of escapism and obscurantism."[8] In 1972, David O. Moberg claimed that premillennialism "played a part in the Great Reversal that made evangelicals become aloof from active social involvement,"[9] and in 1979, Timothy Weber argued that [premillennialism] "broke the spirit of social concern which had played such a prominent role in early evangelicalism."[10]

Complaints about the impact of dispensationalism on cultural engagement reached a climax with the rise of New Evangelicalism in the 1940s and 1950s. New Evangelicals tied their criticism of fundamentalist's lack of attention to social matters directly to fundamentalism's dispensationalism.[11] As Marsden notes, "Although the millenarian movement and the anti-

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[3] "[Pessimistic belief in supernatural forces of cultural evil] will be confined to narrow circles, mostly of premillennialists" (Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922], 86).

[4] C. A. Briggs, "Origin and History of Premillennialism," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (April 1879): 241, 244–45.

[5] J. I. Miller and A. M. Staunton, "Practical Objections to Chiliasm," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (April 1882): 161.

[6] Much fewer examples can be found in the early twentieth-century, likely due to the World Wars, when the premillennialists predictions "came true."

[7] Lefferts A. Loetscher, "Foreword," in *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development*, by C. Norman Kraus (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), 7.

[8] N. C. Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), 136.

[9] David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Reconciling Evangelism and Social Concern* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 37. This volume was originally published in 1972 with the title *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott).

[10] Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183.

[11] Russell Moore traces this development favorably in *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). For examples of fundamentalist evaluation of this point, see Preston Mayes, "Fundamentalism and Social Involvement," *MBTJ* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 29–64; Mark A. Snoeberger, "Where's the Love?: Understanding the Marginalization of Dispensational Theology" (Unpublished paper presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching, 2012); Larry Oats, "Dispensationalism: A Basis for Ecclesiastical Separation," *MBTJ* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 72–103; Mark A. Snoeberger, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms: The Struggle for the Spirituality of the Church and the Genius of the Dispensational System," *DBSJ* 19 (2014): 53–71; Mark Sidwell, "Fundamentalism and Cultural Engagement: The Historical Context" (Unpublished paper presented at the Bible Faculty Summit, 2015).

modernist movement were by no means co-extensive, dispensationalism was nevertheless the most distinctive intellectual product of emerging fundamentalism and is the best indicator of one side of its basic assumptions."[12] This was at the core of Carl F. H. Henry's complaint in his 1947 *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* that fundamentalists lacked a necessary concern for social action, which he suggested resulted from dispensationalism's belief that the church in this age should be concerned "only with 'calling out' believers."[13] Henry indicated a similar sentiment later in his 1957 *Christian Personal Ethics*, in which he argued that dispensational theology "evaporates the present-day relevance of much of the ethics of Jesus."[14] He claimed that a so-called "postponement theory" of the kingdom of God that saw its coming as only future prevented fundamentalism from recognizing the church's responsibility toward society. Rather, Henry advocated for an "already/not yet" realized eschatology that rejected both postmillennial social gospel and premillennial social disengagement in affirming that "the kingdom is here, and that it is not here."[15]

Harold Ockenga similarly explained that New Evangelicalism differs from Fundamentalism "in its willingness to handle the social problems which the Fundamentalists evaded. . . . There need be no disagreement between the personal gospel and the social gospel."[16] He complained that dispensational fundamentalism "believed that conditions would grow worse and worse so that until Christ came again, the only effective application of the gospel could be to the individual."[17] Richard Quebedeaux later described fundamentalism "with its dispensational pessimism about the human situation" as having "nothing to offer" culture.[18] Even D. A. Carson describes the "fundamentalist option" as one that "tended to withdraw from serious engagement with the broader culture,"[19] and Andy Crouch characterizes the fundamentalist posture as "condemning culture."[20]

Ironically, the emergence of progressive dispensationalism came partially as a result of similar embarrassment over what figures such as Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising considered to be traditional dispensationalism's lack of social engagement. Blaising and Bock argue that the church does have a responsibility to engage culture since "the church is a manifestation of the future kingdom."[21] This understanding "gives the church a basis for an evangelical participation in the political and social affairs of this world"[22] that, in their view, it would not otherwise have.

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[12] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Second edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44. Interestingly, as Marsden notes, the fundamentalism of the early twentieth-century included some who desired to "preserve Christian civilization" or transform culture; yet by the mid-twentieth-century dispensational premillennialism, along with its accompanying views regarding cultural engagement, largely dominated fundamentalism. See also Oats, "Dispensationalism: A Basis for Ecclesiastical Separation."

[13] Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Originally published in 1947; reprinted (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 52.

[14] Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 550–51.

[15] Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 48.

[16] Harold J. Ockenga, "Press Reslease on 'The New Evangelicalism,'" in *Be Ye Holy: The Call to Christian Separation*, by Fred Moritz (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994), 117–18.

[17] Harold J. Ockenga, "From Fundamentalism, Through New Evangelicalism, to Evangelicalism," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 43.

[18] Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 25.

[19] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 209.

[20] Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 84–85.

[21] Darrell L. Bock and Craig Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 286.

[22] Ibid., 290.

Similar criticisms have appeared more recently. In 1997, Joel Carpenter described fundamentalism's "premillennialist, futurist, dispensational theology" as an "alarmist, conspiratorial, and alienated outlook."[23] Likewise, in his 2007 monograph, *Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel, and the Church*, Stephen Sizer summarizes the general sentiment of dispensationalism and culture:

> Sadly, the mistaken idea of a secret rapture has generated a lot of bad theology. It is probably the reason why many Christians don't seem to care about climate change or about preserving diminishing supplies of natural resources. They are similarly not worried about the national debt, nuclear war, or world poverty, because they hope to be raptured to heaven and avoid suffering the consequences of the coming global holocaust.[24]

Theological Foundation of Cultural Transformationalism

In contrast to what many evangelicals considered the "Christ Against Culture"[25] posture of traditional dispensationalists, the dominant perspective that has emerged and even come to be described by Russell Moore as "evangelical consensus" is cultural transformationalism, often described as Neo-Kuyperianism or Neo-Calvinism.[26] Although this perspective has characterized different traditions and has taken a variety of forms, several key underlying theological ideas remain consistent. As Moore notes, "Evangelical theology has emerged with a near consensus on the relationship between the kingdom and the church, along with remarkably similar concepts of how the church should relate to the world in the present age."[27]

First cultural transformationalism is rooted in at least some form of "already/not yet" inaugurated eschatology. As Moore points out, this does not mean that all evangelicals agree on every aspect of eschatology but that most evangelicals at least believe that the church "maintains some continuity with Israel as the people of God," is "a new stage in the progress of redemption, brought about by the eschatological nature of the coming of Christ," is "an initial manifestation of the kingdom," and is "the focal point in the present age of the inaugurated reign of Christ as Davidic Messiah."[28] As noted above, new evangelicals found "already/not yet" eschatology to be the necessary basis for early justification of their philosophy of cultural engagement. Important to note here is that Moore demonstrates that these beliefs are held by most evangelical covenantalists *and* progressive dispensationalists alike.

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[23] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 249.

[24] Stephen Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel, and the Church* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 136–37.

[25] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, 1975). While the taxonomy H. Richard Niebuhr presented in *Christ and Culture* is considerably limited in these discussions, his basic language and categories nonetheless remain helpful.

[26] Popular defenses of the transformationalist philosophy include Cornelius J. Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005); Michael Goheen and Craig G. Bartholemew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

[27] Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 131.

[28] Ibid., 147.

Second, evangelical transformationalism is based in the idea that God intends to redeem, not just elect individuals, but all creation, at least in part during the present age. "The Christian message," Henry argued, "aims at a re-created society."[29] Moore notes,

> Just as Henry called for an "already/not yet" model of the kingdom of God that could transcend biblically the reductionistic debates that hinder the neo-evangelical hope for an engaged evangelical movement, he also led the way in calling for a full-orbed doctrine of salvation that concentrated the Christian focus on a world-and-life view that embraced all of life.[30]

Transformationalism's philosophy of culture engagement is centered in soteriology, and thus language of cultural "redemption" is at its heart.

Third, transformationalism derives from the belief that God's mission and the church's mission are one and the same. Moore explains, "If the kingdom is to be understood as having a present reality, and that reality is essentially soteriological, then the kingdom agenda of evangelical theology must focus on the biblical fulcrum of these eschatological, salvific blessings: the church."[31] The so-called *missio Dei*, the idea that God is a sending God who desires to redeem all creation, is the basis for understanding the church's mission in transformationalist thinking. In essence, the Great Commission is simply a continuation for the present age of what they call the "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:28.[32] This is often framed in language of "Creation-Fall-Redemption," a description of both God's mission in history and the church's mission in culture. Christ is presently ruling all things as King, they argue, and it is part of the mission of the church to extend that rule into all spheres of society. They love to quote Abraham Kuyper's well-known statement, "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!'"[33] in support of their view. Transformationalist Albert Wolters[34] argues, "Mankind, as God's representatives on earth, carry on where God left off."[35] He claims that the church's cultural production will climax one day in "a new heaven and a new earth" that will maintain an "essential continuity with our experience now."[36]

As such, cultural transformationalism insists that "the church *qua* church must engage the social and political structures because the church must counter the flawed assumptions of the world."[37] Because evangelical transformationalists believe the church to be an initial manifestation of the kingdom, they see a distinctive social mandate as inherent in the church's mission. Furthermore, transformationalists tend to minimize any distinction between the mission of the church as a gathered, organized institution and individual Christians in society.

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[29] Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 84.

[30] Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 102.

[31] Ibid., 129.

[32] See Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashiville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 84.

[33] Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 488. Emphasis original.

[34] Moore quotes Wolters approvingly in *The Kingdom of Christ*, 244n. 214.

[35] Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 41.

[36] Ibid., 48.

[37] Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 139.

A Traditional Dispensational Philosophy of the Church and Cultural Engagement

Having presented a brief survey of criticism of traditional dispensationalists as culturally disengaged and a description of the alternative transformationalist perspective, I will now sketch an approach to cultural engagement that is rooted in core ideas at the heart of traditional dispensationalism. I use the term "traditional" dispensationalism here deliberately, to distinguish this set of beliefs from those of progressive dispensationalism, for reasons apparent above.

The only traditional dispensationalist to my knowledge that has offered a fully robust philosophy of cultural engagement tied directly to dispensational tenets is Charles Ryrie. Ryrie delivered a series of lectures on social ethics at Grace Theological Seminary in 1976, which were published in *BibSac* the following year.[38] Ryrie expanded upon these lectures in his 1982 book, *What You Should Know About Social Responsibility*,[39] later republished in 2008 as *The Christian and Social Responsibility*.[40] However, both Alva J. McClain and Michael J. Vlach also explicitly address the issue in their respective treatises on the kingdom of God.[41] Furthermore, Rolland McCune responds to the New Evangelical transformationalist perspective from within his traditional dispensational framework in *Promise Unfulfilled*,[42] and he articulates several key principles for a dispensational philosophy of culture in his three volume *Systematic Theology*.[43] Finally, Mark Snoeberger has recently treated the matter from several different perspectives,[44] suggesting that a philosophy for cultural engagement that avoids both the extremes of cultural withdrawal and cultural transformationalism "has as its greatest potentiality for biblical development the fertile soil of traditional dispensational thought."[45] It is from these and others who share core beliefs that I will draw in summarizing the implications of traditional dispensational thought on philosophy of cultural engagement.

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[38] Charles Ryrie, "Perspectives on Social Ethics, Part I: Theological Perspectives on Social Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 533 (January 1977): 33–44; Charles Ryrie, "Perspectives on Social Ethics, Part II: Old Testament Perspectives on Social Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 534 (April 1977): 114–22; Charles Ryrie, "Perspectives on Social Ethics, Part III: Christ's Teachings on Social Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 535 (July 1977): 215–27; Charles Ryrie, "Perspectives on Social Ethics, Part IV: Apostolic Perspectives on Social Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 536 (October 1077): 314–28.

[39] Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Social Responsibility* (Chicago: Moody, 1982).

[40] Charles Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008).

[41] Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IL: BMH Books, 1959); Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017).

[42] Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2004).

[43] Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 1: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God and Angels* (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009); Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 2: The Doctrines of Man, Sin, Christ, and the Holy Spirit* (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010); Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 3: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Allen Park, Mich.: Detroit Baptist Theological Se, 2010).

[44] Mark A. Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization: How Culture Receives the Gospel," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 345–78; Mark A. Snoeberger, "D. A. Carson's Christ and Culture Revisited: A Reflection and a Response," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 93–107; Mark A. Snoeberger, "History, Ecclesiology, and Mission, Or, Are We Missing Some Options Here?" (Unpublished paper presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching, 2010), http://www.dbts.edu/pdf/macp/2010/Snoeberger,%20History%20Ecclesiology%20and%20Mission.pdf; Snoeberger, "Where's the Love?"; Snoeberger, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms."

[45] Snoeberger, "History, Ecclesiology, and Mission," 10–11.

First, traditional dispensationalist belief that "kingdom" language in Scripture takes two distinct forms within God's plan in history impacts a dispensation theology of culture.[46] There is one clear sense in which the Bible refers to a kingdom that is eternal (e.g., Ps 145:13) and universal in scope (e.g., Ps 103:19). On the other hand, there is another clear sense in which the Bible describes a kingdom that is entirely future (e.g., Dan 2:44) and localized (e.g., Isa 24:23). This reveals what McClain calls "two kingdoms" over which God rules and accomplishes his purposes on earth.[47] The first is the "universal kingdom," God's sovereign superintendence over all things, including creation and human institutions, cultures, and societies, which God governs through "natural law."[48] The second is the "mediatorial kingdom," "God's rule on the earth through man who acts as God's representative."[49] While these two kingdoms are to be distinguished, McClain insists "in thinking of them as *two aspects* or phases of the one rule of our sovereign God."[50] Thus, dispensationalists agree with Kuyper's claim that the Son of God rules over all; where they would differ is that the Son rules all things in his role as Creator and Sovereign, not yet in his role as Redeemer.[51]

Traditional dispensationalists recognize that God's first expression of the relationship between humans and creation was in the dominion mandate[52] of Genesis 1:26–28 in which, as Vlach notes, man, as an image-bearer of God, "is now positioned and equipped to rule and subdue the earth on God's behalf,"[53] a role McClain asserts "was regal in character."[54] "This mandate," explains McCune, "underwrites true science, technology, and the necessity to develop a God-glorifying culture; in other words, this action of *subduing* denotes a conscious effort to discover the secrets and treasures of creation for the enrichment of humans to the glory of God."[55] Importantly for the present discussion, this rule was given to all humanity. As McCune explains, "The pre-fall 'dominion mandate' of Genesis 1:28 . . . is given to all men as human beings, not only to men as believers or covenant keepers; i.e. *all* people are to 'subdue' the earth for the benefit of mankind to the glory of God."[56] Responsibilities given to Adam and Eve in conjunction with this rule over the earth also included abstaining from the tree of the knowledge

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[46] Although some older dispensationalists attempted to explain this distinction between two kingdoms as one with clear lexical delineation (i.e. "kingdom of God" vs. "kingdom of Heaven"), most recent dispensationalists argue this theologically and see no absolute distinction between terms used in Scripture. See R. Bruce Compton, "The 'Kingdom of Heaven/God' and the Church: A Case Study in Hermeneutics and Theology" (Unpublished paper presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching, 2010).

[47] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 21.

[48] Ibid., 26.

[49] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 55.

[50] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 21. Emphasis original.

[51] McClain explicitly asserts that God's rule over the universal kingdom is through the Son (ibid., 31–34). Interestingly, John Calvin articulated this in the same way dispensationalists do, arguing that the Son of God's rule existed as a dual mediatorship in which he ruled all things in his role as Creator and exercised spiritual rule over the church in his role as Redeemer (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960], 1.13.7; 2.12.6).

[52] Dispensationalists call this the "domination mandate" (McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 42–44; McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 2*, 33), "kingdom mandate" (Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 63), or sometimes "creation mandate" (ibid., 458).

[53] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 60.

[54] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 42.

[55] McCune, *A Systematic Theology: Volume 2*, 33–34. Emphasis original.

[56] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 261.

of good and evil (Gen 2:17). Theoretically, had Adam and Eve obeyed this mandate, they would have been confirmed in holiness, and mankind would have continued to perfectly rule the natural world as mediators of God's universal rule. However, Adam's disobedience brought a curse upon humankind and all creation. This curse did not end the universal rule of God over all things as Creator, but with regard to the mediatorial kingdom, it "introduced into the stream of human history a hiatus which to the present hour has not at any time been wholly remedied";[57] indeed, "the storyline after the fall of man in Genesis 3 will be the process by which God restores man to the kingdom mandate of Genesis 1:26–28."[58] Furthermore, atonement and redemption were now necessary as a condition in the perfect kingdom on earth. The protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 is God's redemptive promise that one day a seed of the woman would emerge from his confrontation with the serpent victorious, thus qualifying him as the perfect mediator between God and man, earning him the right to rule as Adam had failed to do and providing the necessary atonement for entrance into the kingdom.[59]

Yet because there remained no perfect mediator to rule the natural world on God's behalf, both mankind and nature quickly fell away from God's purposes. Therefore, God judged the earth and then established a covenant with Noah, his descendants, and indeed "every living creature" (Gen 9:1–11), that repeated many of the same language as the dominion mandate but added additional measures that would "preserve the stability of nature."[60] This covenant offers no new redemptive revelation with respect to the mediatorial kingdom; rather, it is in this covenant that God created an earthly institution as a "form of control upon the lawless impulses of men": human government. [61] Again, this responsibility to govern the world and its people is given, not specifically to God's redeemed people as such, but rather to mankind in general. Therefore, as McClain notes, this earthly institution consists of "human rulers who, whether they acknowledge [God] or not, are nevertheless 'ordained by God' as 'ministers' of his."[62]

Having established human government through which God would providentially rule his universal kingdom, God formed his mediatorial kingdom on earth within the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Moses was its first mediator, and in this role he both "represented Jehovah toward the people" and "represented the people of Israel toward God."[63] This kingdom united spiritual qualifications with moral and civil, which "produced effects which extended into numerous other realms," such as were outlined in the Law of Moses.[64] As McCune explains, "In ancient Israel the civil and religious arenas were combined in the theocratic polity, in effect a *union* of church and state. The Law governed every aspect of the people's lives including the social sphere."[65] Israel's mediators continued through the judges and kings of Israel, but since no mediator was able to perfectly fulfill his God given responsibilities, "the mediatorial kingdom of Israel was

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[57] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 43.

[58] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 63.

[59] See ibid., 546.

[60] Ibid., 72.

[61] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 46.

[62] Ibid., 47.

[63] Ibid., 57–58.

[64] Ibid., 68.

[65] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 262.

officially terminated by the departure of the Shekinah-Glory" from the Temple, recorded in Ezekiel 11.[66]

Christ's first coming never brings with it the same union of the civil and spiritual that existed in Israel's mediatorial kingdom, although his incarnation, life, and death both qualified him as the perfect mediator of God's mediatorial kingdom and accomplished the means of redeeming a people who would comprise the citizenship of that kingdom. Vlach insists, "Jesus' assumption of the Davidic throne on earth is still future (see Matt 19:28; 25:31), yet his authority to rule as Messiah is granted to him. The authority to rule will culminate in a kingdom reign."[67] Although Christ has accomplished redemption for his people, the restoration of all things— including creation and culture—will not take place until the coming of his kingdom. In other words, since the mediatorial kingdom will not again be established on earth until after the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the union of socio-cultural spheres and the redemptive sphere will not take place until the millennial kingdom. Vlach summarizes the future union of the two kingdoms well: "When the ultimate Mediator, Jesus, successfully reigns over the earth, the mediatorial kingdom will be brought into conformity with God's universal kingdom (see 1 Cor 15:24, 28). And God's will on earth will be done as it is in heaven (see Matt 6:10)."[68]

Thus, the first important tenet of traditional dispensationalism that impacts its philosophy of cultural engagement is recognition that God works differently in sovereignly ruling over all things through natural law and human institutions on the one hand, and in his intention to establish his mediatorial kingdom on earth. No union between the two will exist until Jesus comes again.

The Spiritual Nature of the Church

Second, traditional dispensationalism's understanding of the New Testament church's relationship to these two kingdoms is essential to its philosophy of cultural engagement. Traditional dispensationalism explicitly emphasizes what is sometimes called the spirituality of the church.[69] This doctrine teaches that the church as an institution is related only to the redemptive sphere of God's rule and therefore must directly engage only in purely spiritual matters and not in political or social issues, which are the responsibility of other secular institutions. "The church's primary responsibility in this age," argues Vlach, "is gospel proclamation and making disciples. . . . the church's mission is not cultural or societal transformation."[70] Important to this doctrine is distinguishing between the church as institution and individual Christians in society.[71] McCune insists, "No social program is given in Scripture

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[66] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 126. Cf. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 194–96. See also J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come: Tracing God's Kingdom Program and Covenant Promises Throughout History* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995), 162.

[67] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 398.

[68] Ibid., 56.

[69] For an explanation of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and a brief historical survey of its practice, particularly within dispensationalism, see Snoeberger, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms." Moore explicitly rejects this application of the spirituality of the church (Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 167–68).

[70] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 541.

[71] Ironically, Abraham Kuyper argued this very sort of distinction by differentiating between the church as institution (which is limited to specific ecclesiastical matters) and the church as organism (which encompasses all of life for the Christian and extends to any sphere in which he finds himself) (Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 194–99).

for the institutional church in relation to civil society in general."[72] Individual Christians, however, as members of the universal kingdom of God, participate in various societal institutions. Cultural matters, as part of the universal kingdom of God, have been designated by God as falling under the superintendence of earthly institutions such as government and family, of which individual Christians are participants, rather than the church as an institution.

While certainly in no way unique to traditional dispensationalism, as Mark Snoeberger suggests, the spirituality of the church was at the heart of early dispensationalism. In fact, Snoeberger convincingly argues that "the eschatological notions of premillennialism and pretribulationism are *implications* of the dispensational system and not the *cause*. The historical *cause* for the birth of dispensationalism was strict subscription to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church."[73] Early dispensationalists were attempting to "recover a more modest goal of ecclesiology in the face of a church obsessed with cultural activism."[74]

McClain articulates the problem with losing this doctrine as a result of equating the kingdom and the church:

> The identification of the kingdom with the church has led historically to ecclesiastical policies and programs which . . . have been far removed from the original simplicity of the New Testament *ekklesia*. . . . Thus the church loses its "pilgrim" character and the sharp edge of its divinely commissioned "witness" is blunted. It becomes an *ekklesia* which is not only in the world, but also *of* the world.[75]

Instead, Ryrie argues that "the commission to the church is to preach [the] good news and to teach the Word," not to "effect worldwide justice."[76]

Consequently, traditional dispensationalism also denies that God's mission and the church's mission are the same. According to dispensationalists, God's mission is to bring himself glory through creation, the judgment of sin, and the redemption of his elect, culminating in his "rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship with human beings in his image and dwelling with them forever."[77] The church takes part in this mission through making disciples, but this role is but one smaller part of God's larger agenda. Some dispensationalists even affirm God's desire to restore all creation. For example, Vlach insists that "God does not abandon his creation—he will restore it."[78] Nevertheless, God will accomplish this with the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth; the church has no direct responsibility to redeem anything.[79]

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[72] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 259.

[73] Snoeberger, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms," 65. Emphasis original.

[74] Snoeberger, "Where's the Love?," 2.

[75] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 438–39. Emphasis original.

[76] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 19.

[77] McCune, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1*, 137.

[78] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 14. Ryrie notably disagrees with this perspective, insisting that "holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society" Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, Rev Exp (Moody Publishers, 1995), 176.

[79] A possible exception is found in Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5—"redeeming the time," but this command does not appear relevant to the present discussion.

Third, although the spirituality of the church means that the church does not have a direct role in external cultural affairs, traditional dispensationalists do highlight a secondary role directly tied to the church's mission of making disciples. While the church *as* church has no social responsibility outside of itself, this does not mean that Christians must refrain from involvement in cultural spheres. According to McCune, "a church saint lives in two separate spheres, the church and the state,"[80] and as such, individual Christians are "dual citizens" who can and should engage in politics, arts, education, law enforcement, science, and other cultural activities. However, "this is in their capacity as citizens of earth," not as "the church."[81] This is why Ryrie's treatment of the subject discusses specifically *the Christian* and social responsibility, not *the church* and social responsibility.

Yet an individual Christian's role in society is not connected directly in any direct way to God's plan to establish his mediatorial kingdom on earth and restore all things. Further, when a Christian acts in society, it is not out of a motivation to fulfill the "cultural mandate"; as Vlach argues, only "the 'Son of Man,' and 'Last Adam' (see 1 Cor 15:45) can fulfill the kingdom mandate originally tasked to Adam. He can represent man and do for mankind what mankind on his own cannot do,"[82] and this will occur in the future kingdom "after his present session at the right hand of the Father."[83]

Rather, from a dispensational perspective, Christians should consider their lives in general society on the basis of the following biblical principles: First, the Bible commands Christians to live holy lives (e.g. 1 Peter 1:15). Ryrie calls this the "top of the list" when considering an agenda for Christians and social responsibility.[84] Second, the Bible gives specific commands regarding how Christians should live in their various human vocations such as husbands, wives, parents, children, employers, and employees (Eph 5:15–6:9; Col 3:18–4:6). Third, all Christians have some responsibilities toward society, such as submitting to governmental authority (Rom 13:1–7) and rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's (Matt 22:21). Fourth, Christians should consider how their beliefs and relationship with God necessarily affect other aspects of human life in society. Vlach summarizes, "Although such [societal] matters are not the church's emphasis in this age, Christians are called to apply their Christian worldview to every aspect of the environment. Thus, Christians can be involved in all aspects of culture including music, the arts, architecture, agriculture, politics, education, sports, etc. for the glory of God."[85] Fifth, Ryrie emphasizes the *imago Dei* and "oneness or solidarity" of humanity as a basis for which Christians do good in society.[86] He reminds believers that, despite the fact that the church's "social" responsibility is primarily inward, Christians are nevertheless commanded in the New Testament to "do good unto all men" (Gal 6:10), and this is a motivation for any social action in which individual Christians take part.[87] Sixth, part of the motivation given in Scripture for Christians living good lives in the world is witness. This is behind Christ's

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[80] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 262.

[81] Ibid., 260.

[82] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 546–47.

[83] Ibid., 458. Vlach also affirms that when Jesus fulfills the dominion mandate in the kingdom, he will also "empower those who belong to him to do so" as he shares his rule with them.

[84] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 93.

[85] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 541.

[86] Ryrie, "Perspectives, Part I," 39.

[87] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 38.

description of his followers as "the light of the world." He admonishes them, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:14–16).

Yet this is also why the church's task of making disciples does have a secondary role in cultural engagement; the church should instruct believers in what it means to live Christianly in their various spheres. Part of what it means to fulfill the Great Commission is to teach Christians how to live out the implications of their relationship with God and how to obey the Great Commandment through being holy, active citizens in the society for the good of their fellow man. Dispensationalists also stress the church's responsibility to care for its own, even materially. McCune suggests, "The New Testament teaches the benevolence of the local church to its own members; it does not portray the church as the God-appointed watchdog over the social welfare of the world at large."[88] Similarly, Ryrie insists that "the church's social responsibilities are primarily directed toward the body."[89] Further, the church should also speak to relevant moral issues under attack in society as part of discipling Christians to know how they should live in that society. However, churches may not speak beyond Scripture, may not require of their people what Scripture does not require, should motivate Christian views of education, the arts, politics, or social matters in terms of sanctification rather than redemption or eschatology, and should not in any official capacity meddle in civic affairs. Instead of motivating Christians to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in their roles within the universal Kingdom of God in soteriological or eschatological terms like "cultural redemption," "cultural transformation," or "kingdom work," dispensationalists teach that Christian social responsibility is rooted in their sanctification.

Restraint

Fourth, the ministry of the Holy Spirit during the Church Age is key to a dispensational philosophy of cultural engagement. Dispensationalists consider the period between Pentecost and the rapture as "a time of special ministry by the Holy Spirit."[90] While the Holy Spirit is active in all ages through the miracle of regeneration, he is active in the world through the church in a manner unique to the church age, a key argument in defense of a pre-tribulation rapture. This unique ministry of the Holy Spirit will commence again once Christ is physically present on earth during the millennial kingdom.[91]

On this understanding of the Holy Spirit's unique work through the church from Pentecost to the Rapture of the church, rather than categorizing the church's role in society as one of "redemption," a traditional dispensational perspective would see such a role as one of "restraint" through the indwelling ministry of Holy Spirit in the church (2 Thess 2:6–7).[92] This also relates to Christ's description of his followers as "the salt of the earth," those who, through

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[88] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 261.
[89] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 37.
[90] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 375.
[91] "On the basis of Christ's finished work, the Spirit's ministry becomes possible, not only in the age of Christ's absence, but also during his bodily presence in the coming age of the kingdom" (ibid., 376).
[92] For dispensationalist interpretations of 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7, see Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1991), 99–102; Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 324–25; Walvoord, John F., *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 231; McCune, *A Systematic Theology: Volume 2*, 298.

living in "peace with one another" can serve to preserve righteousness in the world (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:50). Ryrie observes, "To be salt in this world means to give life, preserving influence, stability, and holiness to this world."[93] With this perspective, the church will no doubt have influence on broader culture to one degree or another. But as McCune notes, "The church influences the state through the regenerated lives of the saints acting as individual Christian citizens in civil society and not as people ecclesially structured in a corporate body."[94] Rather than this being a particular political strategy or set of cultural programs, this kind of restraint or preservation is accomplished by churches discipling believers to live Spirit-controlled lives and Christians submitting to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in every aspect of life and simply living as separated Christians in society. In this way, Christians are salt and light, helping through example and act to restrain human depravity in the surrounding culture. They are participating as citizens in the human institutions created by God in Genesis 9 for the purpose of ordering the natural world and providing restraints upon human sinfulness, not accomplishing "redemptive kingdom work." As McCune notes,

> Whatever beneficial cultural impact an individual Christian may have is a by-product of his sanctification and implementation of Christian principles in his social milieu. Christians do not have biblical warrant to bring into the organized church programs and schemes of sociopolitical involvement in the name of "service."[95]

The Physical Nature of the Future Millennial Kingdom

Finally, traditional dispensationalists teach that, although the millennial kingdom is entirely future, it will be an earthly, physical kingdom. This implies that physical, cultural activities matter and why, as McClain explains, "There was a social element in our Lord's message of the kingdom."[96] Furthermore, since there is continuity between this present age and the future millennial kingdom, "Life here and now, in spite of the tragedy of sin, is nevertheless something worth-while; and therefore all efforts to make it better are also worth-while. All the true values of human life will be preserved and carried over into the coming kingdom; nothing worth-while will be lost."[97] Vlach agrees: "Man was created to interact with his environment, including culture. He will continue to do so in the kingdom of God in a holistic manner. This involves international harmony, tranquility in the animal kingdom, planting of vineyards, and the building of houses."[98] This is because it is God's intention to restore not just individuals, but all creation. "This restoration of all creation," according to Vlach, "includes the planet, animal kingdom, agriculture, architecture, and all God-honoring cultural pursuits (Isa 11; 65:17–25)."[99] He explains that "not only does Jesus' death atone for the sins of God's image-bearers, it is the basis for the reconciliation of all things in his kingdom."[100]

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[93] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 49.
[94] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 262.
[95] Ibid., 260.
[96] McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 289.
[97] Ibid., 531.
[98] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 16.
[99] Ibid., 536.
[100] Ibid., 446.

Yet what an entirely "not yet" understanding of the kingdom does insist is that, while cultural pursuits are valuable, motivation for such is never founded upon desire to "redeem culture" or anticipation of large-scale cultural transformation. McCune explains, "The church is not the kingdom and cannot participate in any social proposals attributable to the kingdom, and for this reason there can be no tenable sociopolitical kingdom advancement by the church in the present age."[101] Ryrie agrees when he insists that "promoting kingdom righteousness in the present time is not the mandate of the church, though progressives make it so."[102] He warns that "people get sidetracked when they attempt to impose kingdom ethics on the world today without the physical presence of the King."[103] Instead, the church's responsibility is discipleship: "The changing of individuals, not institutions, is primary," insists Ryrie.[104]

Furthermore, even if God intends to restore all things, this is not happening during the present age, and the church has no role in such restoration. Instead, traditional dispensationalists make much of the fact that the NT promises this age will continue to grow, in the words of John Walvoord, "increasingly wicked as the age progresses" (2 Ti 3:13), and thus although cultural pursuits are worthy, "the premillennial view . . . presents no commands to improve society as a whole."[105] Yet, this pessimism about the trajectory of the world's systems in this age is balanced with an optimism in the power of the gospel to change lives and the reality of Christ's coming again to set up his kingdom on the earth. Only he can accomplish societal transformation.

Conclusion

What the foregoing has demonstrated is that traditional dispensationalism's core theological commitments provide a basis for a rather robust philosophy of cultural engagement, which could be summarized as follows:

1. God has established two kingdoms. The first is his sovereign rule over all things by means of natural law and mediated through human institutions that he has ordained. The second is a future kingdom on earth wherein he will rule his people by means of his Word and mediated through the physical presence of his Son, the man Christ Jesus.
2. Christians are citizens of both of these kingdoms. As citizens of the universal kingdom, they should live holy lives, demonstrate kindness toward all people, and apply what it means to be a Christian in whatever cultural sphere God has called them. As citizens of the future kingdom, Christians should proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, working toward gathering more into that citizenship.
3. The church has a unique and focused spiritual mission of making disciples, which includes equipping them to live Christianly in their roles as citizens of this world. But the church should not directly involve itself formally in social, cultural, or political affairs and should not frame any discussion of cultural engagement in eschatological or soteriological terms.

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[101] McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 264.
[102] Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 176.
[103] Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility*, 16.
[104] Ibid., 93.
[105] Walvoord, John F., *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 134.

In short, evangelical criticism of dispensationalists as hostile toward a biblical mandate of cultural engagement is a classic example of begging the question. Dispensationalists have not denied any role for Christians in society; the issue is that dispensationalists did not articulate Christianity and culture in the way New Evangelicals assumed was the correct posture. Henry's *Uneasy Conscience* was a philosophy of cultural engagement in search of an eschatology; only later did George Ladd[106] and others develop such an "already/not yet" realized eschatology that fueled the New Evangelical strategy and has come to characterize Neo-Kuyperianism and what Russell Moore calls "a kingdom consensus" of modern evangelicalism.[107] As Joel Carpenter rightly observes, Ladd's *The Gospel of the Kingdom* was a deliberate attempt to "replace dispensationalism with an evangelical view of the kingdom of God and the end-times that was . . . more able to sustain evangelical social engagement."[108] The cart of social engagement came before the horse of "already/not yet" eschatology.

Further, I present this paper, not only in vindication of traditional dispensationalism, but out of a conviction that this perspective concerning the church and cultural engagement is most faithful to Scripture in that it protects the unique mission of the church to make disciples and avoids triumphalistic "kingdom" motivation so characteristic of evangelical discussions of Christianity and culture today. Expanding the Great Commission to include more than simply making disciples almost always results in failure to fulfill the mission Christ gave to his church. Furthermore, most permutations of evangelical desire to "transform culture" are little more than claims that cultural forms are mostly neutral and adaptation of the world's cultural forms, resulting in worldliness. As Andy Crouch has astutely observed, "The rise of interest in cultural transformation has been accompanied by a rise in cultural transformation of a different sort—the transformation of the church into the culture's image."[109]

The philosophy of cultural engagement stemming from traditional dispensationalism is more similar to Reformed Two Kingdom Theology[110] than Neo-Kuyperian Transformationalism. However, since Two Kingdom Theology also assumes an inaugurated eschatology and equates the kingdom of God with the church, I would suggest that a traditional dispensational philosophy of cultural engagement is what I described in *By the Waters of Babylon* as a "Sanctificationist" view of Christianity and culture, that is, a philosophy of culture firmly planted in the doctrine of sanctification rather than the kingdom and in the church's mission to make disciples rather than redeeming the world.[111] In other words, a traditional dispensational philosophy of culture does not understand a church's role toward culture to be in terms of cultural redemption, the *missio Dei*, "work for the kingdom," the "cultural mandate," or any missiological or eschatological motivation. Rather, dispensationalists view the church's exclusive mission as one of discipling Christians to live sanctified lives in whatever cultural sphere to which God has called them. This is the extent of the church's so-called "responsibility" toward culture, and anything more than this threatens to sideline the church's central mission.

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[106] George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (London: Paternoster Press, 1959).

[107] Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 25.

[108] Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 195.

[109] Crouch, *Culture Making*, 189.

[110] For a thorough treatment of this philosophy, see David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

[111] Scott Aniol, *By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2015), 115–16.