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Against Transformationalism



by Ryan McIlhenny

... the world and its fullness are mine!

—Psalm 50:12

Do we not see with what a quantity of gold and silver and garments Cyprian, that most persuasive teacher and most blessed martyr, was loaded when he came out of Egypt? How much Lactantius brought with him? And Victorious, and Optatus, and Hilary, not to speak of living men! How much Greeks out of number have borrowed! And prior to all these, that most faithful servant of God, Moses, had done the same thing; for of him it is written that he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. And to none of all these would heathen superstition... have ever furnished branches of knowledge it held useful, if it had suspected they were about to turn them to the use of worshipping the One God, and thereby overturning the vain worship of idols. But they gave their gold and their

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silver and their garments to the people of God as they were going out of Egypt, not knowing how the things they gave would be turned to the service of Christ. For what was done at the time of the exodus was no doubt a type prefiguring what happens now. And this I say without prejudice to any other interpretation that may be as good, or better.

—Augustine, *On Doctrine*

God will transform the fractured world of nations that are scattered under the judgment of God into the new humanity that will be redeemed by the blood of Christ from every tribe, nation, tongue and language, and will be gathered to worship our God and Savior.

—Christopher J.H. Wright

Transformational

A few months ago, a Reformed pastor wrote a blog post calling for grace in the dialogue between Neo-Calvinists and Two-Kingdomers. It wasn't the now-hackneyed "call for grace" typical among cagey evangelicals timid over theological discussions that caught my eye (or the fact that a dialogue actually exists), but the use of the highly ambiguous "transformationalist" moniker to classify Abraham Kuyper and his followers in their approach to cultural engagement.¹ Indeed, a quick Google search through the blogosphere shows that "transformational" has quickly become *the* term to describe Neo-Calvinism, sadly intensifying the communication breakdown within the Reformed community over the church's cultural witness. Grace should always hold a central place in any discussion, but it must also be accompanied by justice—in this case, articulating both sides in a fair, equitable manner.

Words that connote transformation are un-

doubtedly employed by those who lean more toward Neo-Calvinism.² But Two-Kingdoms proponents fail to represent their Neo-Calvinist brothers appropriately when the former offer a very narrow definition of “transformational.” First, for Two-Kingdomers, the word seems to refer to some culture-warrior-turned-walking-dead that continues to find energy, feeding on the dying remains of the evangelical Right, apparently possessed by the theonomic spirits of Rushdoony and Bahnsen. Second, “transformationalism” intimates a formulation of human-centered works righteousness that removes Christ from creational renewal. But in combing through Neo-Calvinism’s literary compendium—not exhaustively by any means—I have yet to come across an agreed-upon definition.³ Erskine College’s William Evans suggests that Abraham Kuyper’s transformationalist language was “at best provisional, temporary, and incomplete.”⁴ Even David VanDrunen, a leading neo-Two-Kingdom advocate, admits that the term is “somewhat ambiguous, capable of various permutations.”⁵ “Reformed transformationalism,” he continues, “is far from monolithic.”⁶

Yet not only do Two-Kingdomers speak as if there is a uniform meaning of *transformational* but they also imply that it is *the* central doctrine, the capstone, of Neo-Calvinism. But I wonder: Does a vague or problematic term like the one discussed here—or any inherently unstable “ism” word—dismantle the main features that make up Neo-Calvinism? Does the failure of one term somehow undermine the meaning of the system’s main tenets: antithesis, common grace, sphere sovereignty, and the cultural mandate? The answer to these questions is a resounding “no.” Sadly, an unstable descriptor is the key adhesive—a weak adhesive—in the construction of a straw man. Contemporary Two-Kingdomers have created a problem that doesn’t exist. Neo-Calvinists have qualified—some have ignored, others abandoned—*transformational* without relinquishing the church’s calling to commune with a broken world.

Reformational

Transformational calls to mind a more accurate Neo-Calvinist signifier—namely, *Reformational*.

The two terms are often used interchangeably. One of the important aspects of the Reformed tradition is the call to reform (“Reformed and always reforming”), not in the hollow Americanized consumeristic way, but rather in the Christian’s duty to always go back to the orthodox traditions of the Christian faith. I regularly remind students that a theological understanding of *reform* must never be separated from the historical activity of *recovering*. The sixteenth-century Reformation was a “recovering” of the gospel. Consequently, those saved by God’s grace seek to live in accordance with and reflect back upon the dictates of God’s special revelation, down to the most mundane of tasks.

Reformational is associated with the comparable philosophies of Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven, although Dooyeweerd eventually preferred “Christian” to describe his system. Coined by Calvin Seerveld, Reformational calls for, according to Craig Bartholomew, “philosophy in the Reformed tradition which consciously seeks to be shaped by a Christian worldview.”⁷ Dooyeweerd’s critique of theoretical thought and Vollenhoven’s framing of Western philosophy are two of the best examples of explicitly Christian approaches to thought and society.⁸ In the intellectual realm, this means bringing every thought captive in obedience to Christ, to take and use the “gold of Egypt” in service to God. The transformed mind is one that resists the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is a mind that is always looking back upon the gospel.

In this way, *Reformational/Transformational* recalls the inescapable reality of the antithesis. In his explication of Luther’s Two-Kingdom doctrine—quite different, by the way, from VanDrunen’s—William Wright links the battle against sinful skepticism and despair to the antithesis, though he does not use the latter term. According to Luther, the Kingdom of God’s right hand counters the sinful tendencies endemic to the fallen natural kingdom. The Scriptures must be studied and practiced in order to combat the “continuous alternations” between skepticism and despair, “which,” Luther writes, “are customary in the lives of the saints and of all believers who wish to please God.”⁹ Fallen creation still contains the good that God intended for it, but it must al-

ways be checked by his redemptive hand. Craig Bartholomew likewise suggests that “transforming” refers to the daily and “ultimate religious conflict” against sin:

Reformational, then, refers to the Christian’s resistance to idolatry or any spiritual force against the sovereign God.

There is a battle going on at the deepest level in every society and within every human person—a struggle between the inclination to submit to God and the inclination to rebel against God. This personal and public conflict between the kingdoms of light and darkness Neocalvinists call the antithesis. This struggle is not relegated to some spiritual realm above, or alongside, or in paradox with everyday, common life. Rather, it is a spiritual struggle for everyday life itself. The antithesis issues forth a clarion call for Christian cultural activity in opposition to every manner of idolatry. *Glorifying God in everyday life is what Neocalvinists mean when they speak of “redeeming” or “transforming” culture and societal spheres.* It is a transformation from various ways of life that are sinful or at odds with the truth, to ways that are lawful and according to the truth, by the sanctifying power of Christ’s Spirit.¹⁰

Reformational, then, refers to the Christian’s resistance to idolatry or any spiritual force against the sovereign God. This is what Bartholomew means by “transforming.” Why would the Two Kingdoms oppose this qualification? Well, they wouldn’t. Westminster’s Carl Trueman, quick to characterize Neo-Calvinist “transformationalists,” recognizes the impact of a gospel-renewed (transformed?) life: “Christians hear the word each week and receive it by faith, as they grasp the significance of their baptism, as they take the Lord’s Supper, as they worship and fellowship with other believers, their characters are impacted and shaped; and that this will affect how they behave as members of civic society. In short, they will be those whose faith informs how they think and behave as they go about their daily business

in this world. Christianity makes a difference—through the lives of the individual Christians pursuing their civic callings as Christians, not through the political posturing and lobbying of the church.”¹¹ How is this approach incompatible with a Neo-Calvinist understanding? Abraham Kuyper did not believe that Christians transform the *ding-an-sich* of human culture; he fought for a confessional church, “not,” he wrote, “a confessional civil society *nor* a confessional state”¹²; rather, Christianity, has a “betokening” influence upon society—one that follows from special grace. In reference to the concept of a Christian society, Kuyper wrote in *Common Grace*,

The adjective “Christian” therefore says nothing about the spiritual state of the inhabitants of such a country but only witnesses to the fact that public opinion, the general mind-set, the ruling ideas, the moral norms, the laws and customs there clearly betoken the influence of the Christian faith. Though this is attributable to special grace, it is manifested on the terrain of common grace, i.e., in ordinary civil life. This influence leads to the abolition of slavery in the laws and life of a country, to the improved position of women, to the maintenance of public virtue, respect for the Sabbath, compassion for the poor, consistent regard for the ideal over the material, and—even in manners—the elevation of all that is human from its sunken state to a higher standpoint.¹³

Along with the spread of the gospel, the concerns God has for society—to take care of widow and orphan, to alleviate the plight of those economically oppressed, to battle racism, sexism, or the negative social consequences of globalization—should be concerns of the church. Addressing these issues will not necessarily Christianize society—whatever that means—but it will, because of faithful witnesses, not only make life a bit easier but also highlight the Christian witness behind such *shalomic* activities. Christians who participate in successfully rescuing a child from sex trafficking or standing up to racism do so precisely *because* they are Reformational followers of Christ. Delivering someone from oppression or convincing someone of the sinful error of his or her ideology is transformational, but it is also missional.

Missional

As changing historical circumstances contribute to variations within a school of thought, and as disagreements inevitably emerge with any “neo-system” in a variegated “post-whatever” setting, Reformational philosophers have found an ally in the more definitive “missional” over the less-clear “transformational,” given recent developments in the evangelical world. To be “missional” is to recognize the church’s status as a community not only called out of the world but also called to offer a specific message to that world. The Christian mission is “to make known the kingdom of God—the end goal and goal of history.”¹⁴ For Christopher J. H. Wright,

There is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that God has a mission—a mission that will ultimately be accomplished by the power of his Word and for the glory of his name. That mission, according to Paul, includes the unifying of all creation under Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10), and the reconciliation of all creation through the cross and resurrection of Christ (Colossians 1:15-20). Within that, it includes the blessing and healing of the nations, as the good news of the redeeming work of Christ and all its implications is made known to the ends of the earth.¹⁵

There is nothing new in the mission imperative of the gospel: God’s people are to offer the message of redemption to all creation (Mark 16:15). The “mission of Jesus’ followers,” write Bartholomew and Goheen, “is as wide as creation itself.”¹⁶ But *missional* is somewhat nuanced in the contemporary evangelical setting, for it represents, it seems to me, the sigh of a community suffering from culture war fatigue. Eschewing overly confident political occupations, many evangelicals have become increasingly concerned with issues once ignored by the now effete conservative Right: global poverty, disease (e.g., AIDS), racism, and war. Thanks to developments in contextualization theory, the missional church has renewed its global awareness, which, I believe, accords better with the directives of the gospel.¹⁷ Yet at the same time the missional church is local. There is greater emphasis on the power of the gospel to impact local communities through dialogical relationships, faithfully translat-

ing the gospel to fit the idiosyncrasies of a particular culture. Both the global and local perspectives that shape the contextualized missional church certainly mean a rejuvenated evangelical activism but one not obsessed with implementing a blueprint for social transformation.

A unique contribution offered by Reformational thinkers to the idea of being missional is the awareness that Christians are situated in a dialectical narrative. This narrative is related to social involvement. Stories situate us: they give us meaning not only about who we are but also about the world around us. Stories—especially good ones—give us new eyes and a new relationship with the world, but good stories can never be applied in a singularly mechanical way. The postmodern condition is not so much incredulity toward grand narratives as it is incredulity toward “closed” narratives. If there is one thing that theory has taught us in the last few decades it’s that the human-centered effort to exhaust the limits of reality leads to cold static subjugation, the closing of the world. “[T]his ambition,” one writer suggests, “leads to the gulag.”¹⁸ This is not to say that Christians should not seek to understand the totality of the meaning of the cosmos as it’s held together in the person and work of the divine *Logos*, but to realize that our human perspective requires wisdom, a wisdom that forces us to keep our minds open to the direction of the creator and his creation. Cartesian certainty is the enemy of Godly wisdom. Christians are not the sole owners of creation, but they are invited to participate humbly—recognizing the limitations of their new eyes (they don’t see everything)—in its ongoing development.

Applying story in a formulaic manner is a residual of modernism. Evangelicals take portions of the organic development of God’s six-act story presented in scripture, reducing redemption to a series of isolated propositions.¹⁹ Meaning depends on the relationship among other propositions, what we may refer to as context. Context determines the meaning of the parts, and the parts can often be placed within a different context, which, in turn, changes the overall meaning. Michael Goheen and Albert Wolters make the case that parts will always have a whole:

To miss the grand narrative of Scripture is a serious matter; it [is] not simply a matter of misinterpreting parts of Scripture. It is a matter of being oblivious to *which story is shaping our lives*. . . . When the Bible is broken up into little bits and chunks. . . . then these bits can be nicely fitted into the reigning story of our own culture with all its idols! One can be theologically orthodox, devotionally pious, morally upright, or maybe even have one's worldview categories straight, and yet be significantly shaped by the idolatrous Western story. The Bible loses its forceful and formative power by being absorbed into a more encompassing secular story.²⁰

There is always a context into which parts will be situated. If Christians abstract portions of the scriptural drama from the overall narrative, they will impose a foreign context—a non-biblical story—that will change the meaning of the whole. “The problem comes,” Goheen and Wolters continue, “when any of these uses of Scripture lose their grounding in the narrative context of Scripture and become abstracted chunks that are accommodated to a more ultimate story that is not rooted in Scripture.”²¹

None of these terms—Transformational, Reformational, or Missional—need to mean that human beings redeem individuals or cultures in the sense of applying the righteousness of Christ by human effort alone. Without a “vital connection with the person and cross of Jesus Christ,” Wolters argues, kingdom engagement with culture “loses authenticity, depth, and power.”²² Nor do the terms necessitate social or political “triumphalism.” Triumphalists, according to Richard Mouw, want to claim the fruits of Christ’s victory. It is easy to see how Kuyper’s “every square inch,” Mouw writes, “can function as a triumphalist rallying cry. Since every square inch of the creation belongs to Christ, shouldn’t we go out and conquer it all in his name? Why allow trespassers to occupy territory to which they have no rightful claim?” Instead, believers must realize that

claiming the spoils of Christ’s victory is not the appropriate means of displaying our confidence in that victory. When the biblical writers encourage us to show our confidence in Christ’s triumph, they do not tell us to do so by claiming the victory prize here and now. Instead, we best demonstrate our participation in

the benefits of Christ’s redemptive work by our willingness to suffer in a Christlike manner as we await the outcome he has secured.

[To] “be like Jesus” is not to claim the triumph and then proceed to take over what is rightly ours. It is to participate in Christ’s sufferings in full confidence that our Lord has guaranteed a victorious outcome.²³

Missional offers a less aggressive (but no less deliberate) engagement with the world, for it encourages an attitude of openness—openness in the sense of a submission to God’s ultimate direction. To paraphrase what I wrote about culture in *Kingdom Apart*, humans can direct cultural activities, but they rarely determine cultural meaning(s). There is certainly an activism that characterizes the Christian life—an activism that follows from a Reformed/Transformed mind (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23). Christians are to demonstrate the love of God to others; they are agents of reconciliation, bringing shalom to a lost and dying world. Kingdom work in all of life is done through a community directed by a sovereign God. All this is clear. But we need to remind

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ourselves that God is the one who has completed and will complete his work. Christians live every moment in service to God and humanity, but we must let go of the idolatry of controlling consequences, of transforming the world into our image. The church waters (I Corinthians 3:6), but God causes the growth.

Endnotes

1. <http://theaquilareport.com/mite-vs-might-calling-for-a-truce-in-the-two-kingdomtransformationalist-war/>
2. I'll admit that the title of this essay is a bit misleading. Although I'm not one to use the term in a regular sense, I do acknowledge that transformations occur regularly in varying degrees and on multiple levels—economic, physical, intellectual, political, social, and—yes—spiritual. This essay addresses the constrictive use of the term by neo-Two Kingdomers when it comes to the social activities of the church organic.
3. As I wrote this essay, the thought came to mind that an important marker of the place of *transformationalism*, its strength or weakness, could be demonstrated in the “mission and purpose” statements of the institutions comprising the Association of Reformed Colleges and Universities (ARCU). In a cursory overview, I found that only three of the nine institutions use the term “transform” in regards to engaging culture. These three institutions identify directly with the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition, but they're not the only three that do so. But none of the three uses “transform” the way it's defined by Two Kingdoms advocates. The Presbyterian and independently Reformed institutions do not use “transform” in their mission statements, although some refer to the “cultural mandate.” Instead, they use other terms—e.g., “faithful stewardship”—in reference to cultural activity. The uses of these different terms to describe Christian activity in the wider world do fit a Two Kingdoms definition. Thus, in regards to mission and purpose, none of the ARCU institutions align themselves with a Two Kingdoms outlook on culture. Each institution is unified in the commitment to cultural engagement, but ARCU institutions do not exhibit a transformationalist consensus.
4. <https://theecclesiacalvinist.wordpress.com/2013/08/18/lets-give-credit-where-credit-is-due/>
5. David VanDrunen, “Two Kingdoms” *CTJ* 2005, 248.
6. *Ibid.*, 249.
7. Richard Hess and Gordon Wehnam, *Making the Old Testament Live: From Curriculum to Classroom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 30.
8. In their latest book, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic and Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen utilize Vollenhoven's format to present the history of western philosophy. An earlier and somewhat clearer use of Vollenhoven's method can be found in John Kok's *Patterns of the Western Mind* (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 1998).
9. William Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 157.
10. <http://kuyperian.blogspot.com/2004/09/relevance-of-neocalvinism-for-today.html>
11. <http://theecclesiacalvinist.wordpress.com/2013/09/14/whats-wrong-with-2k/>
12. James Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 197.
13. Opponents are quick to point out the failures of Neo-Calvinism, but hardly do they recognize that Neo-Calvinism has had a tremendous impact on contemporary thought. See Eric Miller, “How Dutch Neo-Calvinism Helped Birth an Intellectual Movement” *Christianity Today* 57: no. 3 (April 2013), 65. See also J. Klapwijk, “Reformational Philosophy in the Boundary Between the Past and Future” in *Philosophia Reformata* (1988). Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Mark Noll, and George Marsden, to name a few, are world-recognized intellectuals who make no apology for the influence of their Reformed heritage. Consider likewise the thousands of graduates from Reformed institutions involved in a host of issues who are having a positive impact on society.
14. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4. See also Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 199.
15. See Christopher J. H. Wright's preface in Samuel Logan Jr., ed., *Reformed Means Missional: Following Jesus Into the World* Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2013, x.
16. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living*, 6.
17. See Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Age of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church in Influencing the Way We Think and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012); A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*

(Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012).

18. Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London: Verso, 2014), 16.
19. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).
20. Michael Goheen and Albert Wolters “Postscript: Worldview Between Story and Mission” in *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 126.
21. *Ibid.*, 126.
22. <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/282/what-is-to-be-done-toward-a-neocalvinist-agenda/>
23. Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2010), 6.