

The Pilgrim's Pathway

***Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Review (5) - Kuyper (i)***

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[Published in *Christian Renewal*, vol. 29, no. 6 (December 15, 2010), pages 38-40, 50.]

*Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, by David VanDrunen. Emory University Studies in Law and Religion. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009.

***Abbreviating this review***

With this installment we are publishing a fifth article reviewing the volume identified above. Such extended attention poses several risks, suggesting the wisdom of heading toward a concluding summary wrap-up in the not too distant future. So we'll be abbreviating the number of installments devoted to this review, for a number of reasons.

First, institutional friends and defenders of NL2K are mistakenly characterizing this extended review as a personal attack or worse, an institutional polemic, neither of which has ever been the case. I have been writing this review as a Reformed theologian and ethicist who for several years has been vigorously and publicly disagreeing with the project and analysis being promoted by NL2K representatives, during which time I have never written as an institutional representative. Until now I had failed to realize that, as one respondent has put it, in criticizing Dr. VanDrunen's views I would be perceived to be criticizing his school. Are we to conclude, then, that his NL2K project is that of an entire seminary? Moreover, the refusal of these friends and defenders to engage the substance of my observations in this review, which have been supported by contextual citations, numerous source references, and sustained argument, seems to suggest that there is more interest in securing turf than in seeking truth.

Second, if there is any institutional interest compelling me to publish this analysis, it is and

always has been the life and identity of the United Reformed Churches in North America, and those sister churches in fellowship with this federation. Stated simply, given the history and identity of these URCs emerging from controversy within the CRCNA, with which I have been intimately involved, I judge the NL2K project to be an alien intruder that will eventually erode historic commitments and challenge significant sacrificial programs among us, especially in the areas of Christian day school education and Christian socio-political activity in the public square. Perhaps it would be better to fortify and promote that positive agenda among us than to weary ourselves with the distraction of replying to those seeking to undermine it.

Third, other scholars are providing quite probing reviews of this book, making some of our own analysis redundant and unnecessary. I have in mind specifically the competent reviews published online by Steven Wedgworth (available at [http://www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=218:two-kingdoms-critique&catid=96:theology&Itemid=122](http://www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=218:two-kingdoms-critique&catid=96:theology&Itemid=122)) and by W. Bradford Littlejohn (available at <http://www.swordandploughshare.com/main-blog/tag/vandrunen>). These scholars have stated with eloquence a number of similar observations and reservations about the book under review and about the project the book is spearheading among people in Reformed and Presbyterian circles.

Fourth, for the sake of sustaining reader interest, chapters 4 and 5 of the book can better be left to others for review and analysis, whereas our readers would likely be more interested in a review of the Dr. VanDrunen's treatment of Abraham Kuyper and his heirs, among them the author's announced target: North American neo-Calvinists.

***The magnet as metaphor for a method***

As a lad, I often spent time in my father’s carpenter workshop, entertaining myself with his tools and carpentry materials. Among his assorted tools I once discovered a magnet, and spent many a childhood hour marveling at its power to attract metal objects of different kinds and sizes. All except objects made of copper, or zinc, or nickel, or . . . . Well, you get the idea. A magnet attracts, basically, only objects made of iron.

That, I fear, is a metaphor suitable for describing the work under review. Rather than a work of thorough historical analysis, this volume is more like a lawyer’s brief constructed to persuade a jury to convict a defendant as a guilty criminal. Facts are marshaled, to be sure, but only those facts favorable to the lawyer’s NL2K case. Citations are selected, numerous and footnoted, but only those citations are pasted together in a manner likely to garner the juror’s nodding agreement as “the case” is presented.

The criminal, in this case, is neo-Calvinism. And the argument conducted in chapter 7, as we intend to show, is designed to set the reader up for the *coup de grâce*—the executioner’s death blow aimed to end the criminal’s life.

### ***Abraham Kuyper and NL2K: what you will read***

Chapter 7 is entitled, “An Ambiguous Transition: Abraham Kuyper on Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms.” In the opening paragraph of this chapter, readers are warned that despite Kuyper’s larger than life presence in the development of Reformed social thought, not only was his word not the [39](#) last word, but it was a misleading word, since he inspired subsequent Reformed theology to depart decisively from the Reformed tradition. To argue this part of his case, Dr. VanDrunen proposes to drag the magnet of “the traditional Reformed doctrines of natural law and the two kingdoms”—not yet carefully defined nor clearly enunciated—through

Kuyper's work. Once again, as with Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, the jurors are instructed that Kuyper, too, uses the categories (though not the language!) of NL2K, though Kuyper "spoke and acted in ways that suggest tension [read: contradiction] with these basic convictions . . ." (278).

In the section on "Kuyper and Natural Law," Kuyper's treatment of the traditional distinction between general revelation and special revelation receives attention. Although Kuyper's treatment bears distinctive marks, it lies entirely in line with John Calvin in maintaining, to use VanDrunen's description, that:

In the post-lapsarian world, life is not divided into compartments known by general revelation and those known by special revelation. Rather, Kuyper asserts that there is one knowledge, drawn from general and special revelation, sources 'whose waters have mingled themselves.' From this idea flow several consequences. Special revelation is not limited to matter of salvation, but extends to those matters made known in general revelation. Further, natural knowledge becomes of service only with the help of special revelation (280).

That last sentence is crucial, essential to our consideration of natural law: "Natural knowledge becomes of service only with the help of special revelation." This sounds like Calvin's "spectacles of Scripture" analogy describing the necessity of Scripture for properly apprehending natural revelation.

In connection with natural law, we learn next of Kuyper's frequently used phrase, "divine ordinances," which the author claims really refers to natural law. We are told that in his 1898 Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Kuyper identifies the "divine ordinances" with the "laws of Nature" engraven on the heart of every human being and renewed by God at Sinai. The footnote directs us to pages 70-71 of Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* for validation of this assertion. There Kuyper does indeed mention that these divine ordinances are called laws of Nature, a term he accepts with numerous significant qualifications. There are moral laws built into creation that

function in a way similar to the laws of physics and of chemistry. Moreover, there can be no separation between these laws of Nature and specifically Christian commandments, since God rules as the Eternal, Unchangeable One.

But the author neglects to tell us of Kuyper's further qualification of this moral order. Proper apprehension of this moral order and any ability to live by it come through Christ! Here is the uncited Kuyper:

Verily Christ has swept away the dust with which man's sinful limitations had covered up this world-order, and has made it glitter again in its original brilliancy. Verily Christ, and He alone, has disclosed to us the eternal love of Christ which was, from the beginning, the moving principle of this world-order. Above all, Christ has strengthened in us the ability to walk in this world-order with a firm, unflinching step (*Lectures on Calvinism*, 71).

But now pay attention to the distinction among human hearts in relation to God's moral order.

The uncited Kuyper writes:

Hence it is that, for the Calvinist, all ethical study is based on the Law of Sinai, not as though at that time the moral world-order began to be fixed, but to honor the Law of Sinai, as the divinely authentic summary of that original moral law which God wrote in the heart of man, at his creation, and which God is re-writing on the tables of every heart *at its conversion* (*Lectures on Calvinism*, 72; italics added).

Did you catch that? God is re-writing the original natural law on every heart at its conversion!

Yes, the Sinai Law is the summary of the natural moral order. Yes, the natural moral order was placed within the human heart at creation. Sin darkens natural law, and sinners suppress it. But here Kuyper is asserting the recovery, the renewal of the Sinai Law (and thus of the natural moral order) *at a person's conversion*. This recovery and renewal of the natural moral order applies to Christians, according to Kuyper! This explains why Kuyper summarizes John Calvin regarding this recovery of the divine will as directing *all of Christian living in the world* (a

summary omitted from VanDrunen's discussion of Kuyper):

Love and adoration are, to Calvin, themselves the motives of every spiritual activity, and thus the fear of God is imparted to the whole of life as a reality—into the family, and into society, into science and art, into personal life, and into the political career. A redeemed man who in *all* things and in *all* the choices of life is controlled solely by the most searching and heart-stirring reverence for a God Who is ever present to his consciousness, and Who ever holds him in His eye—thus does the Calvinistic {40} type present itself in history. Always and in all things the deepest, the most sacred reverence for the ever-present God as the rule of life—this is the only true picture of the original Puritan (*Lectures on Calvinism*, 72; italics original).

Natural law? Yes, of course! But, as VanDrunen himself observes, Kuyper considered the honest recognition of the effects of sin on human perception of natural law to be the chief difference between his Christian approach and the approach of his opponents. Why, then, did the author not integrate this principal Kuyperian emphasis as part of Kuyper's view of natural law? Apparently the author's magnet did not attract this nail!

Once again, the theologian under discussion (this time, Abraham Kuyper) is praised for vigorously rejecting biblicism. This means that he refused simply to duplicate the situation of Israel and to use the Bible as the handbook of Christian law for the state. Kuyper supposedly rescues himself from this absurdity by assuring us that natural law, in the form of history, human experience, and moral conscience, is the source of civil laws. Nevertheless VanDrunen felt compelled to add this summary in Kuyper's own words: "We have refuted the notion that we entertain the foolish effort to patch together civil laws from Bible texts, and we have declared unconditionally that psychology, ethnology, history and statistics are also for us givens which, *by the light of God's Word*, must determine the standards for state polity." Again, notice carefully: natural law operates *by the light of God's Word* in determining the standards of civil government. It is extremely misleading to suggest simply that Kuyper taught that natural law by itself determines the standard for civil law. Holding solidly to Calvin's analogy of the spectacles of

Scripture that are required to interpret natural revelation aright, Kuyper insisted that Scripture clarifies the things revealed in nature and allows people converted to Jesus Christ again to perceive aright the principles governing human life. Could the matter be clearer? “What life itself, distorted and derailed by sin, could no longer reveal, God in his love made known in his Word, also for our political life,” wrote the uncited Kuyper. Of course the application of biblical principles to contemporary issues should be adapted to various times and peoples. But note well: *According to Kuyper, the Bible functions in illuminating and directing the right use of natural law!*

The irony here is nothing short of breathtaking! Abraham Kuyper’s opponents had pasted him with this logic: If you say, Dr. Kuyper, that human sin vitiates every effort to base political theory on the study of general revelation, then you, Dr. Kuyper, must be committed to finding the rules of civil government in the Bible alone. Either you ground public social and political ethics in natural law, or you derive them from Bible verses only. Does that choice sound familiar? Critics of NL2K, those of us who insist that sin vitiates the grounding of public social and political moral standards exclusively in natural law, are given only one other choice: we must therefore be biblicists who want to have a Bible verse for every political policy and social moral standard. With Kuyper, we would defend the use of Scripture for public social and political ethics that illumines and directs proper appeals to natural law. The choice is not either the Bible or natural law, but both the Bible and natural law—*and in that epistemological order!*

If at this point our reader were to complain that all of this seems little more than a matter of nuance, a case of intellectual hair-splitting, perhaps the following will demonstrate otherwise.

The author’s summary of Kuyper’s teaching on natural law correctly points out Kuyper’s continuity in numerous respects with the Reformed tradition. But precisely at that very point

where the debate is raging, at that very point where its critics are vigorously opposing the NL2K project, we are treated to a magic shuffle, a maneuver of “giving with one hand while taking with the other.”

Here’s how it goes. The very point of debate involves our use of and appeal to Scripture in public moral discourse, the authority of Scripture and the rule of Jesus Christ over Christian living in the world, involving issues like education, sexual ethics, marriage, euthanasia, and the like. We have just seen how Kuyper insisted on the need for, and priority of, Scripture for rightly interpreting and applying the natural law concretely. So far, so good. But here is what we’re given as the conclusion of the matter:

Though Scripture, very significantly, clarifies general principles of the natural law obscured by sin, the concrete application of even these principles requires recourse to natural law and not Scripture. *For Kuyper, then, natural law serves as the standard for civil law, though the clarifying lens of Scripture greatly aids the understanding of this standard.* Of course, as noted above, Kuyper at times spoke of Scripture’s role in political life in ways that seem overstated in comparison with the position he articulated elsewhere. . . . He rejected any simplistic appeal to Old Testament civil laws as the standard for contemporary law and pointed to the appropriate application of natural law (as clarified through general principles revealed in Scripture) as the alternative (288; italics added).

Did you catch the illusion? We have a brand new, unargued conclusion: The general principles of natural law are applied by recourse to . . . natural law! And this is followed by a brand new, unargued non-sequitur printed in italic: Natural law is the standard for civil law. But Kuyper said no such thing!

Dr. VanDrunen wishes at all costs to maintain his claim {50} that natural law is the standard for civil law. He is therefore compelled to reverse Kuyper’s emphasis that *the Bible’s principles* find concrete natural-law-guided application in various times and places, to say now that *natural law principles* are merely clarified by the Bible; but after all is said and done, it is the natural law

principles that are applied by recourse to natural law. And incidentally, if you thought you heard Kuyper defend using the Bible for public policy, well, that was allegedly simply a case of overstatement (the author's magnet didn't attract that nail). Rather, faced with only two possible choices, either simplistically appeal to Old Testament law as the standard for civil law, or use natural law as the standard for civil law, Kuyper supposedly chose the latter.

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Thus far, in this NL2K trial of neo-Calvinism, our review of Dr. VanDrunen's presentation of the testimony of each theologian whom he has enlisted as prosecutorial witness in service to his "case" has been guided by two simple, straightforward analytical questions. Question 1: Were the sources of the theologian that Dr. VanDrunen employed to argue his case before the jury used properly, fully, and accurately? Question 2: As he argued his case before the jury, did Dr. VanDrunen incorporate into his case all the relevant testimony of the theologian being called as witness?

Thus far, with Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, the answer to both questions has been the same: No. Now again, with Abraham Kuyper, we have shown that the sources for his testimony were not used properly, fully, and accurately. Next time, in answering Question 2, we will show that significant relevant testimony from Abraham Kuyper has been kept from the jury.