

The Victory of Christian Culture

An Exposition of Isaiah 65:17-25

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Preface

This work was originally an exposition that I had to write for my D.Min course at The North American Reformed Seminary. By publishing it in this format, I hope to bring the contents to a wider audience. The position which it advocates is what is known as “postmillennialism.” This is not a good term, as it implies that an optimistic view of the future stands or falls on a particular interpretation of Revelation 20. Yet this is not what postmillennialism is really about, it is primarily concerned with defending the idea that Christ’s kingdom will be victorious in history. While a minority view in the modern

Reformed world, it was once the standard Reformed position (as opposed to the pessimism of Lutheranism). Obviously one does not have the space here to answer every objection against, or even make every argument for postmillennialism, nevertheless, this might be a good place for those wishing to look into the issue to begin their studies. Hopefully, it will cause some modern Calvinists to return to the eschatological and cultural transformational views of their Reformed forebears.

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Introduction

Please read Isaiah 65:17-25

It has often been observed that (generally speaking) a person's view of the future will determine how he lives in the present. Today most modern evangelicals have a pessimistic view of the future; they believe that the world will just get worse and worse until Christ returns, and thus they see no point in working to rebuild society on an explicitly Christian basis; for them it is the duty of the Church (as the slogan goes) to 'save souls, not cultures,' and thus Christian involvement in anything beyond the four walls of

the institutional Church and (perhaps) the family is (in their view) a waste of time, because ‘there is no point polishing brass on a sinking ship.’

However, this was not always as prevalent a view as it is now. In the past, many Christians, especially in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, had an optimistic view of the future of Christ’s kingdom, and they believed that at some point in the New Testament age the gospel would substantially transform the world, so that the result would be a worldwide recognition of the Kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ and the establishment of explicitly Christian nations and cultures. This faith in the advance of Christ’s Kingdom led them to endeavour to take the gos-

pel to the ends of the earth and to apply the word of God to all of life, so that everything in a culture would be done to the glory of Jesus Christ and in submission to His royal law.

While they did not always do things well, no doubt their motives were noble. However, we might want to ask ‘was this hope unfounded?’ Well, no, because our studies in Isaiah 65, which was written about 700 years prior to the coming of Christ, will show that the Scriptures declare that the kingdom of the Messiah shall be victorious in history. And thus the theme of our exposition will be: The Victory of Christian Culture.

The Victory of Christian Culture

Heaven Misplaced?

Now, at this stage, you may well be wondering why I am talking about the victory of Christ's Kingdom in history when the passage that we are examining seems to refer to heaven. And if that is what you are thinking then no doubt you are in good company, as many commentators and theologians believe that Isaiah 65:17-25 is referring to heaven. However, I am going to respectfully disagree. No doubt the reason why many believe this text is referring to heaven is because it says in verse 17: 'For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.' And

it is certainly true that elsewhere in Scripture the term ‘new heavens and new earth’ does refer to heaven. For instance, this is how the apostle John speaks of heaven in Revelation 21 when he says: ‘Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away’ (v. 1). However, we need to find out what it means in the particular context that we are looking at in Isaiah 65. Indeed, I believe that there are several reasons why it is impossible to conclude that Isaiah 65 refers to heaven.

Firstly, it cannot refer to heaven because, according to verse 20, people will still be dying: ‘No more shall an infant from there *live but a few* days, nor an old man who has not fulfilled

his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old, but the sinner *being* one hundred years old shall be accursed.’ This cannot refer to heaven due to the fact that in heaven there shall be no more death; as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ (v. 26 ESV) and that this shall be destroyed when Christ returns and the apostle John informs us in Revelation 20 that ‘Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire’ (v. 14) on the day of judgment. However, in Isaiah 65 there is still death in the world, and so Isaiah 65 cannot be talking about heaven.

Secondly, according to verse 23 there is still pro-creation in this new heavens and new earth:

‘They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them.’ Is this a description of eternity? Well no, because as the Lord Jesus reminded the Sadducees ‘in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage’ (Matt. 22:30), yet in Isaiah 65 people are not only marrying, but they are even having children, therefore, since marriage and childbirth is continuing to happen, Isaiah 65 cannot be referring to the place where resurrected saints spend eternity, as resurrected saints will not be marrying or bearing offspring. And there are other things in the passage which would seem to indi-

cate that the prophet is not talking about heaven. Are we to believe, as verses 21 and 22 indicate, that people will be building houses and planting vineyards in heaven? Or, as verse 25 suggests, that there will be animals in heaven? This seems unlikely.

But perhaps the most obvious reason why our passage is not speaking about heaven is due to the fact that Satan is still active on the earth – even though his activity has been reduced. Hence we read in the latter part of verse 25 that ‘dust shall be the serpent’s food.’ This, of course, refers to the curse pronounced upon Satan in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3:14, where God said to him: ‘Because you have done this,

you are cursed more than all the cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.’ But will Satan be crawling around in the dust of heaven? No, because in Revelation 20:10 we are told that at the return of Christ: ‘The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.’ Yet in Isaiah 65, the Devil has not been finally cast into hell, but is still crawling around in the dust. Consequently, since Satan is still, in some sense, active on the earth in Isaiah 65, then the ‘new heavens and new earth’ mentioned in this pas-

sage cannot be referring to the eternal state, because in eternity Satan will be confined to hell.

So what then is the text referring to if it is not talking about heaven? Well some historically have believed that the ‘new heavens and new earth’ refers to the New Testament age, over the course of which, the earth is substantially and largely Christianized. But does such an idea have any support in the rest of the Bible? That is a good question, and we find that there is support for this view throughout the pages of Scripture. Obviously we do not have time to examine all the verses which support this notion, but let us consider a few examples. First of all, in Genesis 3:15, in what is often re-

ferred to as the first announcement of the gospel, God says to Satan: ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.’ The seed of the woman there refers to Christ and all who are united to Him, while the seed of the serpent are the followers of Satan. Yet which of the two seeds has the victory? It is the seed of the woman. And if the seed of the woman crushes the head of Satan, while Satan merely bruises the heel of Christ, is it really too much to believe that the followers of Christ, who have been redeemed from sin by His work of redemption, rather than the followers of Satan, will be the

ones who triumph in history and will be the eventual majority of mankind? After all, does it not seem strange that the verse would speak of Christ bruising the serpents head if Satan's followers are the ones who are to be culturally dominant for all of history? And didn't God tell Abraham that 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3) or, as the verse is quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:8, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed' – notice that God does not promise merely to bless a few people out of the nations of the earth, instead he promises that the nations, as corporate entities, would be blessed as a result of embracing the gospel.

Moreover this idea of the earthly victory of Christ's Kingdom is a recurring theme in the book of Psalms. For instance, in Psalm 22 we are told that: 'All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; all those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him' (vv. 27-29). And in Psalm 72, which speaks of the blessings of the reign of Christ at the right hand of God, we are told that the Messiah's kingdom is victorious: 'In His days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace, until the

moon is no more. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him...And men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed...And let the whole earth be filled with His glory' (vv. 7-11, 17, 19). And we read of similar things in Psalm 102: 'So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth Your glory. For the LORD shall build up Zion...When the peoples

are gathered together, and the kingdoms to serve the LORD' (vv. 15-16a, 22).

And there are similar predictions in the prophets. For now, we shall confine ourselves to Daniel, where in chapter 2 we are told that Christ's kingdom will triumph over the kingdoms of men; thus it says in verse 44: 'And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.' Moreover, later in chapter 7, Daniel tells us that upon the ascension of Christ to the ancient of Days: 'Then to Him was given domin-

ion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him' (v. 14).

And let us not forget the Great Commission, in which the Lord instructs His disciples to 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations' (Matt. 28:19). Now most evangelicals today think that this means 'go and take some disciples out of the nations,' but to merely confine it to that is to miss the greatness of the Great Commission, as the Lord says that we are to 'make disciples of all the nations,' and thus what we are to strive for is that the nations corporately submit themselves to the rule of Christ.

Taking these considerations into account then, we should come to the conclusion that when Isaiah speaks of there being a ‘new heavens and new earth,’ which is a different thing to the eternal state, we should conclude that in the specific context of Isaiah 65 that the reference to a ‘new earth’ is to be understood culturally; and that Isaiah is referring to a period when an explicitly Christian culture will be established throughout the world. At such a time the ‘old things’ (v. 17) of judgment upon a culture, the curses which we read about in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, of devastation and sorrow due to the sinful rebellion of the nations, will largely be forgotten about.

Now this, upon first hearing, might seem a bit far-fetched. However, keep in mind that when Paul describes a person who has been born again of the Holy Spirit, he says that ‘if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new’ (2 Cor. 5:17). Hence if Paul can refer to saved, but imperfect, sinners as ‘new creations’ for whom ‘old things have passed away,’ is it not also possible that when Isaiah speaks of their being a ‘new earth’ he is referring to an earth largely populated by these ‘new creations,’ which, though imperfect, has been largely renewed by the influence of the gospel taking effect upon this world? And since, as we

have seen, the passage cannot be referring to heaven, then we have no other option but to conclude that Isaiah is speaking of a world which has been transformed by the power of the gospel.

Now in case you think that this view that the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65 is not referring to eternity is a novel one, it should be kept in mind that this is also the opinion of some of the greatest theologians in the history of the Reformed Church. Firstly, John Calvin, who was probably the greatest of the Reformers in the 16th century, comments on verse 17:

By these metaphors [‘new heavens and new earth’] he [God] promises a remarkable

change of affairs; as if God had said that he has both the inclination and the power not only to restore his Church, but to restore it in such a manner that it should appear to gain new life and to dwell in a new world. These are exaggerated modes of expression; but the greatness of such a blessing, which to be manifested at the coming of Christ [Calvin is referring here to the first coming of Christ], could not be described in any other way.

Likewise John Owen, who was a chaplain of Oliver Cromwell, and a man who wrote 24 volumes of works, and who is considered by many

to have been the greatest of the English Puritans in the 17th century, writes concerning verse 17:

This is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure forever.

So now that we have considered what the text is not referring to, let us move on to examine more closely the precise nature of the renewed culture that Isaiah is predicting.

Christ and Culture Revisited

So what then, will this new heaven and new earth be like? Firstly, in verses 18 and 19 we are told that the church shall be a praise in the earth: ‘But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying.’ The word ‘Jerusalem’ is often used in the Bible as a term for the church. For instance, in Galatians 4:26, Paul describes the church as ‘the Jerusalem above,’ and in He-

brews 12:22 we are told that ‘you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem.’ So when we read Old Testament prophecies, which are pointing forward to the New Testament age, we should interpret references to Jerusalem, not as referring to a city in Palestine, but as speaking about the Church of Christ in the New Testament. Therefore, what verses 18-19 mean is that God is going to revive and reform the Church at some point in New Testament history so that it is no longer a joke and a by-word among the nations, but that it now rises to prominence in the world. This, of course, is the fulfilment of that promised blessing in Deuteronomy 28:1, that because

of the influence of the obedient Church upon a nation, resulting in a godly society, God promises: ‘Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.’

At this point in history, the Christian Church will be officially established in the nations as the official religion of the countries in which it resides. Hence we read in Isaiah 2:2-3: ‘Now it shall come to pass in the latter days [the New Testament age] that the mountain of the LORD’s house [the church] shall be established

on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.”” The church will have such a place in society that the nations will go to the Church in order to find out how to conduct their affairs in accordance with the word of God. And this is one reason (there are others which we cannot go into now) why the Westminster Confession teaches that ‘magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with, about matters of religion’ (31:2), as the West-

minster Divines recognised that the Church has an obligation to instruct (not govern) the state and society as to how to do all for the glory of God.

As a result of this establishment taking place, the end of verse 19 assures us that the Church's sorrows will be greatly reduced: 'The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying.' Now this is not an absolute promise that individual Christians shall be totally free of sorrow in this life; it cannot mean that because in verse 20 we find that there is still death on the earth and the obvious sorrow which accompanies it. Instead, what the prophet means is that the sorrows of the Church

– considered corporately as a whole body – shall be significantly reduced, so that compared to what it had experienced previously, as a judgment for its disobedience to the Lord, ‘the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her.’ At this point in history, Jesus Christ the King of the Church will, as the Larger Catechism puts it, restrain and overcome all His people’s enemies (Q & A 45) so that His people are no longer a reproach in the earth.

But what are the implications of this exaltation of the Church for wider society and culture? First of all, the blessing of long life; Moses wrote in Psalm 90 that: ‘The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength

they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labour and sorrow.’ However, as the gospel permeates the earth, we find that this will be substantially (though not absolutely) reversed; because it says in verse 20: ‘No more shall an infant from there *live but a few* days, nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old, but the sinner *being* one hundred years old shall be accursed.’ This is the fulfilment of a promise that many of us have read many times but rarely given any serious thought to due to our pessimistic view of history; I am referring here to the promise of the fifth commandment: ‘Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon

the land which the LORD your God is giving you' or as Paul applies it to the New Testament age in Ephesians 6: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.' Now again, this is not an absolute promise of long life to every individual Christian, but it is a promise that over the entire course of history the righteous will be blessed with comparatively long lives. Life-spans in Isaiah's new earth will be so long, that a person who dies at one hundred years old shall be considered to be but a child. And this is the reverse of the curses in Deuteronomy 28 in which the rebellious are warned that they shall 'perish quickly' as God sends plagues, fevers, famine and war among them.

And this leads us on to the blessing of material prosperity promised in verses 21 and 22: ‘They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree, so *shall be* the days of My people, and My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.’ Again in Deuteronomy 28 God had promised to bless the ‘basket’, ‘storehouses’, ‘produce of [the] ground’, ‘herds’, ‘cattle’ and ‘all’ to which the godly society ‘set [their] hand.’ Yet, on the other hand, he warned the rebellious culture that they would be cursed materially, so that: ‘You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you

shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes.’ And so the attempt, made by some interpreters, to allege that Isaiah 65 is really only about ‘spiritual’ blessings cannot be sustained, for the simple reason that, with their background in Deuteronomy 28, Isaiah’s original audience would have known that God does not merely bless people spiritually, but instead they would have understood that God promises to bless those who obey Him materially as well. Indeed in Psalm 1 the psalmist distinguishes between the godly and the wicked by highlighting the fact that the righteous shall prosper in all his affairs: ‘He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its sea-

son, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper. The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which wind drives away' (Psa. 1:3-4). And similar promises are found in Proverbs, for instance, we are told that 'the hand of the diligent makes rich' (Prov. 10:4). Now is this an absolute promise that all believers, in all ages, shall be blessed with health and wealth as the so-called 'prosperity gospel' preachers teach? No, because this is qualified by other things in the Bible, such as the sufferings of Job and the tribulations of Paul. Nevertheless, it is a general promise that, over the course of history, the earthly labours of

the righteous shall be rewarded, so that '[God's] elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.'

The attempt, on the part of some, merely to reduce this to spiritual blessings does not come from Scripture, but from Greek philosophy, the Neo-Platonic view that material things are bad and only spiritual things are good, and that the soul is imprisoned in the body only to be set free at death. Of course if this sort of thinking was correct, then Christ would not have risen and there would be no resurrection from the dead. But the fact that there is a physical resurrection shows us that God is interested in material things. And so it should not come as that much of a surprise that God promises to bless an obe-

dient culture with the material blessings as he does here in Isaiah 65. So although Christians are not to be ‘earthly minded’ in a materialistic sense, which only cares about material things and ignores the spiritual, nevertheless, there is a sense in which the Christian faith – as opposed to Greek philosophy – is very earthly. And verses 21 and 22 of our passage show us that we should be concerned with things like industry, agriculture and business, and that we should seek to exercise rule and dominion over these things for the glory of Christ.

And another earthly blessing is that of godly children. Thus we read in verse 23: ‘They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth children for

trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them.’ The world today views children as a burden, and thus it allows people who do not want to bear the burden the option of murdering their children through abortion. And, sadly, even many Christians frown upon people having large families. However, the Bible views things differently; we read in Psalm 127: ‘Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them’ (vv. 3-5a). But not only does God promise to bless his new covenant people with

children, but he also promises they shall be godly, ‘for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them’ which shows us that God promises to bless His people’s children with salvation, and their children after them. This also demonstrates to us that God’s covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 17 ‘to be a God to you and your offspring after you’ (v. 7 ESV) remains in force in the New Testament age. And if the promise remains in force, then the sign of that promise must still be passed on to the children of believers; in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision, in the New Testament circumcision has been replaced by baptism. Therefore,

since the children of New Testament believers are still included in God's covenant of grace, then they must still be entitled to receive the sign of the covenant, which means that in the New Testament the children of believers are to be baptised.

And in the new covenant we can expect that many more covenant children will keep the way of the Lord than they did in the Old Testament. This is because in the new covenant we are told in Hebrews 8:11, 'None of them shall teach his neighbour, and none his brother, saying, "know the LORD," for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.' Now this is not a promise that absolutely everyone in the

visible church in the new covenant will be born again, or, as our Reformed Baptist friends tend to argue, that everyone in the new covenant is truly saved; if that was true then why does the book of Hebrews itself contain so many warnings to professing Christians against apostasy? As these would be irrelevant if everyone in the new covenant was a true Christian. As we have already seen, the Bible often states comparative differences in what sounds to us like absolute terms; and so what Hebrews 8:11 is teaching is that in the new covenant, contrasted with the old administration, far more people in the visible church and in the outward administration of the covenant of grace, will be saved than in the old

covenant due to a greater effusion or outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament age; because as we are told in Hebrews 8:10 the Spirit of God – in far greater measure than in the Old Testament – writes God’s Law on His people’s hearts. And thus we have reasonable grounds to expect that in the new covenant many of the children of believers will be saved. Although this has not come to full-fruit in history yet, it is worth keeping in mind how many Christians come from Christian families, when you reflect on this we can see that already God is fulfilling this promise in verse 23 of Isaiah 65. And with this promise before us, should we not be encouraging Christians to go

against the cultural-grain and to have large families in order to populate the earth with godly offspring who will take dominion for Christ? Now, obviously, there are some people who for perfectly legitimate reasons cannot have large families, and this is not meant as a criticism of such people, but, nevertheless, Christians should never be among those who frown upon others whom God has blessed with many offspring.

But of course the blessings of the ‘new heaven and new earth’ in Isaiah 65 are not only material; a significant spiritual blessing of this era is speedy answer to prayer. Hence it says in verse 24: ‘It shall come to pass that before they

call, I will hear.’ With the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, believers in the new covenant era are bidden to ‘come boldly to the throne of grace’ (Heb. 4:16) as the Lord Jesus, at the right hand of God, ‘always lives to make intercession for us’ (Heb. 7:25), and so in our prayers new covenant saints have ‘boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus’ (Heb. 10:19). Although there were some Old Testament believers like Daniel who had his prayers answered while he was still speaking (Dan. 9:20-23), yet in the new covenant, with the greater access we have to God’s throne-room due to the shedding of the blood of Christ, we can expect much greater answers to our

prayers than the saints in the Old Testament. And so when New Testament believers pray the prayer of David ‘let the whole earth be filled with [the Messiah’s] glory’ (Psa. 72:19), they can be confident that it will soon be answered, as the new heavens and new earth of which Isaiah speaks of will soon be ushered in.

Interestingly, perhaps to the relief of the farmers among us, the advance of the gospel in the new earth will also have an effect upon the animal kingdom. We read in verse 25: ‘The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox.’ As a result of mankind’s fall into sin, the creation was also brought into bondage. However, as the gospel

brings healing to those men and women who are saved by Christ, it follows that an effect of men and women embracing the gospel is that it brings healing to the creation. Back in Genesis 1 we read that man was originally created to ‘have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’ (v. 26). But, as a result of the fall, it has been much more difficult for man to fulfil this Dominion or Cultural Mandate due to the effect of widespread, heinous sin in the world. But now, in the new earth, as a result of the Holy Spirit regenerating millions of sinners, these free-men in Christ exercise such dominion over

the creatures that even the fiercest creatures like wolves and lions – rather than being a threat to man – can now be employed in his service to help him exercise rule over the earth under God. Indeed, earlier in chapter 11 of Isaiah, we are told (in language reminiscent of the Chronicles of Narnia) that the animal kingdom will be subdued to such an extent that, ‘The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.’ (Isa. 11:8-9)

Of course, this new earth is not perfect like heaven is, because Satan is still active in it, nevertheless, the Devil is no longer in a position of prominence in the affairs of the world, because we read in verse 25 that ‘dust shall be the serpents food’ – Satan is reduced to crawling around like a snake in the dirt. No doubt he is still able to provoke evil, but he is no longer in a position to threaten the prominence of the people of God in the earth.

However it should be remembered that these conditions of which we have been studying here can only come about in a world in which there is substantial peace and the absence of war. Such peace, which is the opposite of the horrors of

war that are recorded in Deuteronomy 28, is promised at the end of verse 25: ‘They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, says the LORD.’ Now this point, about there being a time of substantial world peace, should be obvious from what we have previously considered in the passage. Because, after all, you cannot have long-life, material prosperity or a tranquil animal kingdom in a world that is torn apart by war and destruction; that is not only a legitimate inference from what we have here in chapter 65, but we find it explicitly stated back in chapter 2 of Isaiah. As a result of the gospel advancing and the Church being established among the nations and their submission to God’s law-word,

Isaiah tells us in verse 4 that, ‘They shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore’ (Isa. 2:4). What great blessings await the people of God in history: a peaceful world transformed by the gospel will be their inheritance.

And all this is what we pray for (or, at least, what we should be praying for) in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray: ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10). And this optimistic view of history is standard, historic Reformed teaching; thus in the Westminster Larger Catechism on

the second petition of the Lord's Prayer we read:

Q. 191. What do we pray for in the second petition?

A. In the second petition, (which is, *Thy kingdom come,*) acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in; the church furnished with all gospel-officers and ordinances, purged from corruption, countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate: that the ordinances of

Christ may be purely dispensed, and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, and the confirming, comforting, and building up of those that are already converted: that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him forever: and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.

And in the *Savoy Declaration* that was also written by some of the Puritans we find this statement:

As the Lord in his care and love towards his Church, hath in his infinite wise providence

exercised it with great variety in all ages, for the good of them that love him, and his own glory; so according to his promise, we expect that in the latter days, antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken, the churches of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed. (Chapter 26: Section 5)

Indeed this view is standard Covenanter and historic Reformed Presbyterian teaching; in one of the earlier testimonies of the Reformed

Presbyterian Church of Ireland, that was issued in 1901, it says:

Prophecy shows that a time is coming when the Kingdom of Christ shall triumph over all opposition and prevail in all the world. The Romish Antichrist shall be utterly destroyed. The Jews shall be converted to Christianity. The fullness of the Gentiles shall be brought in and all mankind shall possess the knowledge of the Lord. The truth in its illuminating, regenerating and sanctifying efficacy shall be felt everywhere, so that the multitudes of all nations shall serve the Lord. Knowledge, love, holiness, and peace shall reign through the abundant outpouring of the

Holy Spirit. Arts, sciences, literature, and property shall be consecrated to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. The social institutions of men shall be regulated by gospel principles, and the nations as such shall consecrate their strength to the Lord. Oppression and tyranny shall come to an end. The nations, instead of being distracted by wars, shall be united in peace. The inhabitants of the world shall be exceedingly multiplied, and pure and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound. This blessed period shall be of long duration. It will be succeeded by a time of

general defection from truth and holiness, and of the prevalence of irreligion and crime. This will immediately precede the second coming of the Son of man from heaven.

In light of this historical testimony, an optimistic view of the future victory of Christ's kingdom is not something which can be lightly dismissed.

Objections Considered

We shall now, briefly, consider some objections to what has been taught here. Firstly, it might be objected that ‘this is utopianism; you are saying that there will be a perfect world before heaven.’ Well, no, I am not saying that, because verse 20 teaches that there will still be unregenerate sinners and death in this ‘new earth,’ and verse 25 indicates that Satan is still active to some extent, so I am not teaching that there will be a perfect world this side of eternity. Moreover, when we read about civil rulers submitting to Christ in Psalm 72 and elsewhere, it is obvious that there will not be a perfect world, be-

cause, if there was, then you would not need a civil government to restrain criminals.

But then some might object: ‘How can the majority ever be saved, doesn’t it say in Matthew 13 that the wheat and the tares will dwell together?’ Yes it does say that, but that is not a problem as Isaiah 65 makes it clear that there will always be some ungodly sinners in the world. Moreover, it is interesting that in the parable of the wheat and the tares, Christ does not refer to a field of tares with some wheat in it; no, instead he speaks of a field of wheat which has some tares sown among the wheat. And so those who appeal to this parable in order to defend a pessimistic view of history have got

things the wrong way round. But then what about the statement Jesus makes in the Sermon of the Mount that ‘there are few who find [eternal life]’ (Matt. 7:14)? Well, the problem with assuming that this statement refers to the whole of history is that such an interpretation contradicts other things in the Bible, which indicate that many shall be saved, for instance, Psalm 66:1 says, ‘All the earth shall worship You.’ As a result of comparing Scripture with Scripture, we have to interpret Christ’s statement in the Sermon on the Mount as referring to the fact that very few of the people in His day were saved; it should not be seen as a prediction of

what is going to happen over the whole course of history.

Another objection might be: ‘This is the social gospel!’ Well, no, it is not; the social gospel (which is really no gospel at all) teaches that society can be regenerated by the state passing legislation to solve all the problems in society: it is a gospel of societal salvation by the grace of the state. But that is the precise opposite of what has been argued for here. In order for there to be any lasting change in society individual sinners have to be saved by Christ, and the Church has to be reformed in accordance with the word of God. The effect of this should be the reduction of civil-power to its God-

appointed role, and not the Messianic role which it now has in society. Any lasting, positive effects upon society are the result of gospel taking root in people's lives; as John Jefferson Davis puts it: 'The conditions of health and temporal peace of which Isaiah speaks in 65:17-25 are not the essence of the gospel, but they are properly the consequences of the gospel when its impact is intensive and extensive in the world.'

Another objection could be that this cannot be right as the Bible teaches that there will be a period of distress before the return of Christ. Now while I agree that there will be a brief period of distress prior to the second coming – this period is referred to as Satan's 'little season' in

Revelation 20 – this does not mean that there cannot be a great period of victory for Christ’s kingdom on earth before Satan’s little season takes place. And so this is not a valid objection to what we have been teaching.

But then some might argue that this cannot be right as the world is presently getting worse. This however is not a legitimate way for Christians to argue, because we are to walk by faith in the word of God, not by sight in the newspapers or Sky television. Such an argument forgets that ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God’ and is authoritative for ‘doctrine’ (2 Tim. 3:16). After all, we do not base our doctrine of the Trinity upon what is written in *The Sun* newspa-

per, so why then should we build our doctrine of the last things from uninspired sources? And this objection does not understand the position it is trying to refute, as we are not arguing the world is evolving into a better place, but what we are saying is that, as the gospel advances over the course of history, the world is transformed by Christ. Indeed, the current decline of Western society is a sign that it is under God's curse, and will probably need to collapse before it can be re-built on an explicitly Christian basis again.

Lastly, it might be argued that if what I have said is correct, then Christ cannot return at any minute. Absolutely right! The Bible does not

teach that Christ could return at any minute immediately after His ascension. In Matthew 24 Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would first of all have to be destroyed before He would return, and in John 21:18 he told Peter that he was going to die by crucifixion, but if He could return any minute then all this would make no sense at all, as you could not be certain that anything was definitely going to happen in the future before the Lord's return. Furthermore, in Romans 11 Paul tells us that before Christ returns the Jews will be saved, but this has not yet been fulfilled, and, until it is, Christ will not be coming back. Likewise, in 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul tells them to stop worrying about an imminent return

of the Lord, as Christ will not return before the Man of Sin – which I believe refers to the Papacy¹ – is revealed after the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire, and who is later defeated by the spirit of Christ's mouth. And since it took many centuries for the Papacy to develop, and we are still looking forward to its total collapse, then Paul could not have believed that the Lord could return any minute.

¹ Although I am generally a partial preterist, rather than a historicist, nevertheless, I believe the Westminster Divines were correct to apply 2 Thess. 2 to the Papacy.

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Conclusion: How Then Should We Live?

Let us briefly conclude with a few practical applications. If the kingdom of Christ is going to advance so much in the New Testament era, that it will have the victory in history, how should we live in light of this?

Firstly, we should live prayerfully; in the words of Isaiah 62:7 we should ‘give [the Lord] no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth’ (ESV).

Secondly, we should live repentantly. We should bewail our unbelief for not believing that the Saviour who saved us, miserable sinners who were dead in trespasses and sins, can trans-

form the earth with the power of the gospel. Yes, the world is wicked, but have we forgotten that ‘where sin abounded, grace abounded much more’ (Rom. 5:20)? And we must also repent of the sins of the Church; in verses 17 and 18 we were told that the Church must be revived and reformed before there can be lasting reform in society, and yet Christians today are seeking to reform society while their churches are in a complete and utter mess (whereas in 1 and 2 Chronicles, the reformation of society and the reformation of the church went hand in hand). After all, how can we expect society to submit to the word of God when those in the Church think that they can worship God any way they

see fit or that they can abandon Church discipline to the point that those in the Church are virtually indistinguishable from those in the world? In truth, the moral chaos in wider culture is really only a reflection of the lawless antinomianism that is in the Church, and until it is reformed we cannot expect to have any lasting impact on the world around us. Thirdly, we should be missionary minded. Since God has promised that the nations shall become Christ's disciples, then we must prayerfully support every effort to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Fourthly, perhaps it is about time we started to pay attention to what we are singing every

week in the book of Psalms. Do you believe Psalm 138 when it says ‘all kings upon the earth that are shall give thee praise O Lord, when as they from thy mouth shall hear thy true and faithful word’? How can you sing this and be pessimistic about the future of Christ’s kingdom on earth?

Finally, if we are not Christians then we must believe the gospel. If you are not a Christian your future is bleak; you will be defeated in history as your opposition to Christ will not be able to stop the advance of His kingdom. And if your earthly future, regardless of what temporal prosperity you now enjoy, is bleak, then your eternity is even bleaker: an eternity shut out

from the presence of Christ as you suffer eternal punishment. Turn from your sins and trust in the crucified and risen Saviour, and submit yourself to the royal authority of King Jesus. Amen.

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**A Conquered Kingdom:
Biblical Civil Government**

*Daniel F.N. Ritchie, Reformed Worldview
Books, 2008*

What others are saying:

Daniel Ritchie has produced a helpful, general introduction to Theonomic ethics, the ethical position holding to the continuing validity of God's Law. The reader should find all the basic information necessary for understanding the Theonomic thesis. As an added benefit, he provides material demonstrating the post-millennial hope which opens the door to our labouring toward the implementation of God's law in the modern world.

Dr. Kenneth Gentry

In his work on Biblical Civil Government Daniel Ritchie sets forth helpful insights for the proper understanding and applica-

tion of Biblical Theonomy. In the genre of Rushdoony, North, Bahnsen and DeMar, Ritchie explores the many aspects of Theonomic Reconstruction and Biblical Postmillennialism in clear and understandable language. Ritchie's work is both doctrinally valuable as well as practically useful and his Theonomic proofs from Reformation history during the time of Calvin and Knox are refreshing. With over 1400 footnotes Ritchie's work provides strategic insight as to the issue of God's Law and the Civil Magistrate.

Rev. Paul Michael Raymond

Daniel Ritchie here presents a thorough and Biblical overview of the implications of Christ's Kingship over men and nations, challenging the reader to consider the Scriptural evidence, examine the historical record, and return to a consistent and Christ-honouring view of the Crown Rights of King Jesus.

Rev. Douglas Comin

Daniel Ritchie's book does not promote any new perspective for

the theological landscape. He simply builds upon the foundation laid by other notables that have preceded him. I view it as a tremendous addition to the Christian world. He writes with clarity, a very valuable commodity for theological writers to possess. His book is a faithful and refreshing presentation of Theonomic truths.

Rev. John Otis

I would encourage everyone to purchase Daniel Ritchie's book, especially if you are not a Theonomic Reconstructionist. His book is one of the few that really defines what Theonomy is and clears up the misunderstandings of those who oppose Theonomy. I am learning more from this book than any other I have read in a long time.

Rev. Stephen Welch

In my estimation it is Daniel Ritchie's magnum opus. This book is very comprehensive and touches on both the basic and the deeper teachings of Theonomic ethics. Even when Daniel writes on the more complex issues his style is such that it is easily

digestible. ‘A Conquered Kingdom’ is a valuable resource for both those familiar with Theonomy and those who wish to start investigating it.

Dr. Larry Bray

I know what you’re thinking. “Oh No! Not another big book from a Theonomist on the law of God!” But how would that be much different from one saying in the 17th century: “Not another big book from a Puritan on the law of God!”? The times may have changed, but God’s law has not. Mr. Daniel Ritchie represents a new generation of Theonomists for our 21st century world. And given the wicked and apostate times in which we live, it is a real blessing from God that He continues to raise up faithful defenders of His abiding law, not only for the benefit of an older generation of Christian readers, but also for the new generation of Christian readers throughout the world, and for their covenant children yet to be born.

Mr. Ritchie has added an old theological feature to the Theonomic thesis. That is the doctrines of Social Covenanting and the Establishment Principle, two views which are not found

in previous Theonomic literature. While I am personally not fully convinced of the Social Covenanting thesis, Mr. Ritchie has laid out his case well and I respect those brothers in that theological camp, particularly those from the 17th century who had bravely died for Christ's Crown and Covenant and whose descendents keep their forefather's spirit alive today. The "Establishment Principle" is also handled well by Mr. Ritchie. It's a doctrine that is not familiar to most Christian readers in North America, yet it is an inescapable Biblical axiom, that any national government which seeks to uphold the revealed laws of God, will inevitably be reflecting and thus establishing a particular Christian religion over against other rival religions, including secularism, for no nation can ever be religiously neutral (Prov. 14:34). This isn't to say that a particular denomination must be established by Government decree above all others (as per the Church of England), but it is to say that the Christian faith and its revealed laws must be nationally protected and proclaimed, or else another religion and its law will take its place. Jesus made the antithesis very clear when He said, "he who is not with me, is against me". (Matt. 12:30).

Those who are already sympathetic to the Theonomic position will also benefit from this book, not only from Mr. Ritchie's extensive and well documented historical research and Biblical reasoning and application, but also from being introduced to the aforementioned two doctrines above. I believe that the late Dr. Bahnsen and Rushdoony would have been proud to see their Reformation and Reconstructionist legacy continue on in such faithful writings as "A Conquered Kingdom".

Mr. Colin Tayler

The best overall primer on Theonomy. Daniel Ritchie leaves virtually no stone unturned, synthesizing the best arguments from the doctrine's foremost theologians. This book's depth of info about Theonomy is on an encyclopedic-level.

Moreover, in a section worth the cost of the book alone, Ritchie meticulously chronicles the historic Reformers' favorable positions to the Bible's various capital sanctions, putting to rest the argument that Theonomy is a radical historical aberration. Indeed, Christians who read this book might find themselves

asking whether today's pluralistic Christian views of the state are radical historical aberrations. Highly recommended.

Mr. Stephen Halbrook

A comprehensive overview of the theonomic position. It is a must have for Christians in the current political confusion of the 21st Century. This book perfectly answers the role of civil government, and the limits of civil government. Because these two things are perfectly answered and soundly based in scripture with competent exegesis, a Christian can confidently engage the political arena without sacrificing the conscience of their religious beliefs. This book also puts the political schizophrenia of Christian politicians that try to be Christians in their private lives and secular humanists in their political lives for what it really is, "Baalism". This book perfectly shows that the unity of Christian ethics is for both the private life and the public life, for God rules all and mandates that all bow the knee.

Mr. Keon Garraway

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