

**Revelational Authority and the Public Square  
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**A Christian Society? Witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom  
In the Public Life of Western Culture**

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*The Issue*

In Lesslie Newbigin's lecture "What Kind of Society?" he argues that in the 20th century two forms of civilization that have their roots in the Enlightenment have struggled for world dominance--the Marxist form and the liberal, capitalist, democratic form. With the sudden and dramatic collapse of Marxism as a world power it appears that the liberal, capitalist, democratic form of a secular society is the dominant global ideology that is seeking to extend its power into every part of the world.

This secular ideology claims to be neutral, i.e., society is a level playing field in which differing beliefs and ideals have an equally just opportunity to express themselves. However, this claim to neutrality is an illusion. In fact, our society operates with a very clear view of the human situation and the goal of history. A central place is given to science which explains reality in terms of cause/effect relationships and not purpose. So the plausibility structure of a fact/value dichotomy occupies the central shrine of our so-called secular society. Any truth claim that can be proved by the scientific method occupies the high ground of public facts to be accepted as truth by society. Truth claims that cannot justify themselves before the bar of neutral, scientific reason are relegated to the place of private values that can be held as personal opinions by members of society but must not play a role in the public life of the nation.

This public doctrine dominates the secular nations of the west today. Far from being neutral this confessional vision has dismissed the gospel as public truth. The claims of Jesus Christ over all of creation are relegated to the inferior status of private religious tastes. This has crippled the mission of the church in the west. The church has allowed herself to be banished to the private sphere and become a chaplain to society. The powerful "gospel" of neutral scientific reason, free-market economics, democratic politics, and impartial public education is embraced uncritically and propagated by the church.

The only other global ideology which seriously calls this view of society into question is Muslim fundamentalism. Precisely in the failure of the secular west to create a just international economic order Islam protests. Western society--capitalist economics and democratic politics--is not a scientifically neutral project. Rather politics and economics--indeed all of life--must be brought under the authority of the Shariah law.

If one rejects the alternatives of either a secular, liberal, democratic, and capitalistic society or Muslim fundamentalism, what form of society ought the Christian community to struggle for?

Lesslie Newbigin proposes that we seek a Christian society--that is, a society shaped in the light of the gospel. This would be a society in which the political, economic, educational life--indeed, all of the public life--would be salted by the gospel.

This begs the question: If one wants to embody the gospel in the areas of business, politics, education, media and so forth, where does one find the norms for these institutions and arenas of creational life? A secular society acknowledges "no divinely given guides, no Torah, no divinely given pattern by which life should be governed."<sup>1</sup> **It is precisely this lack in the secular society that incapacitates a secular, neo-pagan society from meeting the aggressive challenge of the Muslims. So, where is this "*divinely given pattern*" to be found?**

**Maybe this question can be further clarified by opening up further comments made in the lecture "What Kind of Society" about the subject of economics. Adam Smith who was the original prophet of laissez faire capitalistic economics was primarily a moral philosopher. According to Smith, laissez faire economics would only work if pervaded by moral sentiments. Economics was a branch of ethics in that it gave normative direction to human living in a certain area of life. According to Newbigin, Alfred Marshall of Cambridge took the decisive step of severing the ties between ethics and economics, establishing economics as a self-standing science. Economics was now a neutral science in which laws could be determined by autonomous rationality. It graduated from the realm of values to the realm of facts.<sup>2</sup> How are we to find the divinely given pattern for economic life? If we reject the**

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1 p. 8, "What Kind of Society?"

2 I am affirming the problem that Newbigin points to here. I am not so happy with the categories with which he formulates the problem. The problem Lesslie Newbigin rightly notes is that economics has been swallowed up by the voracious appetite of scientism. It becomes an autonomous science divorced from the divine authority. Methodological reason, shorn of all traditional and revelational authority, is capable of discerning the truth about the world; there is no need for revelation that reveals what is good and bad economic functioning. Economic life becomes an autonomous sphere of activity. Economics is a "free standing science" in that human rationality is capable of discerning the truth about economic life by the scientific method. This is a critically valuable insight. However the language used is not so helpful. Newbigin speaks here of separation of ethics and economics. Implied in this way of putting it is the idea that economics is a neutral, autonomous area of human life that needs ethics from the outside to give it normative direction. It appears that here Newbigin is indebted to the Thomistic tradition that has so influenced theology. In a nature/grace dualism, economics is an area of life in nature that is governed by neutral rational laws. God's revelation in Scripture, found in the realm of grace, deals with theology and ethics. Thus to bring God's revelation to bear on the natural life, one must import ethical categories and bring them to bear on an otherwise neutral, autonomous sphere. In my view economics has its own inner normativity by virtue of the kind of creature it is. In other words economics is an area of creation that must function in accordance with its role and place as determined by God's creational word. Economic life is to be normed by God's word of stewardship. To import ethics from outside to apply to the already

authority of autonomous rationality to identify and describe healthy and just economic life, then where do we go? How can we establish divinely normative direction for economic life?

Can we say that these norms flow from the gospel? That depends on what is meant by "flows from." The gospel is the announcement of good news. It proclaims that in Jesus Christ God has acted decisively to redeem His creation from sin. It is an announcement of the climax of God's redemptive work. God has acted in Christ to restore all of creational life--including economic, political, and educational life. However, the gospel does not reveal to us the content of a normative economic or political life; it is simply an announcement of restoration of those spheres of creation. The point at issue here is the proper relationship between redemption and creation. As Newbigin has said: "Salvation is the fulfilling of God's original purpose in creation."<sup>3</sup> Redemption is God's work to rescue the creation from sin's grip and restore it to what it was meant to be. If the gospel is the announcement of salvation and salvation is the fulfillment of God's original purpose in creation then the question is begged: what was God's original purpose in creation for economics, education, politics, industry, and media? While the gospel will provide indispensable light, it cannot give a specific answers to that question. Its language of discourse is not economical, political or scientific in any way. Where can we find the criteria for the normal and healthy functioning of these areas of creation?

Are these norms then found in Scripture? Lesslie Newbigin rightly avoids the Biblicistic temptation. The temptation for the Christian church in a secularized society is to seek to find the divinely given pattern for these various creational spheres of life in the Bible. Newbigin rightly recognizes numerous problems with such an approach. He gives an example in the second lecture he gave at Duke on the authority of Scripture. He contrasts Romans 13 and Revelation 13 on the subject of political authority. These two texts of Scripture speak of the state in entirely different historical contexts. The differing historical contexts lead to differing interpretations of political authority. One cannot read Scripture as a divinely inspired book that lays out the blueprint normative for political authority. If this is the case, then where do we find a divinely given pattern for political life?

This summary shows that Newbigin has avoided two mistaken options. He rejects the autonomy of reason and science to determine the truth about the world. He also rejects the problem of biblicism. Biblicism seeks to find the divinely given pattern for various spheres of creational life in the Bible. If these options are rejected then where does one find the

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existing sphere of economics can then too easily fall prey to a fact value dichotomy. The fact of autonomous economic life must be supplemented by the values of ethics to give it direction. Perhaps here would be a good place to join the discussion. Does the *law of the creator* come from outside applied to a self-contained, already existing social, economic, political order? Or is the creational law of God intrinsic to that area of creational life?

3 Sin and Salvation. SCM Press, 1956. p.14

norms for the various institutions and spheres of the public life of culture and society?

I believe that the answer to this question must be found in Scripture's testimony to God's order for creation. If we are to answer Lesslie Newbigin's call to pursue a Christian society and engage the public life of western culture then we must affirm a normative creation order for these various zones of creational life. But when we turn to Lesslie Newbigin's work we find a curious situation. On the one hand, an extended treatment of this theme appears to be entirely absent. It can be said of Newbigin what has been said of theological discourse in the last four or five decades. "In judging a theology it is important not only to state carefully what is said and written but also to pay attention to that which is *no longer* being said. Certain words or concepts, to use an expression which is often used in social intercourse, "glitter by their absence."...Something similar has been happening with the concept of creation ordinance."<sup>4</sup> This seems to be true of Lesslie Newbigin's work.<sup>5</sup> A discussion of many important issues of creation order, revelation or ordinances glitters by its absence. This topic does not find any extended discussion in his work.

On the other hand, a careful reading of Newbigin's work indicates that some such notion is just below the surface of his work. I have already referred to his critique of western culture where he rejects a secular society because it does not acknowledge a "divinely given pattern" and to numerous discussions on the principalities and powers. But there are other hints throughout his written work. In his first book Christian Freedom in the Modern World he discusses law and morality. He remarks that there is "an order of values which stands in our own right above and apart from our judgements." In other words, there is an "objective moral order." There is an "objective moral order to which we ought to conform."<sup>6</sup> In a lecture given at the a regional leaders' conference in Madras, December, 1945, entitled "I Believe in Christ", Newbigin speaks of "the will of his creator"

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4 Van Egmond, A. and C. van der Kooi. "The Appeal to Creation Ordinances: A Changing Tide" in God's Order for Creation. Published by Potchefstroomse Universiteit, 1994. p.16.

5 Perhaps this is stated too strongly. It is true that Lesslie Newbigin attempts to deal with these questions with the categories of the principalities and powers. See for example chapter 16 in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. Indeed, in private communication about Al Wolters' Creation Regained, he states: "This Dutch school has much to teach which is not usually heard in England (as compared with USA). But I am still inclined to think that the best way to tackle these issues is through the Pauline doctrine of the powers, the word Paul uses when dealing with the State, the law, religion, philosophy. That the powers are created in Christ, exist for him, are in rebellion against him, have been disarmed by him in the cross (not destroyed) and that it is the duty of the Church to make known to them the absolute authority of Christ (Eph.3) and that they will all finally submit to him (I Cor 15)--I find this a more biblical way of dealing with the issues that Wolters discusses."

6 Christian Freedom in the Modern World. London: SCM Press, 1937. p.22f.

as being the basis of "moral values." Over against Marxism who derives moral values from the social order Christians believe that ultimate reality is personal and so man is created to apprehend the will of His Creator.<sup>7</sup> In Truth to Tell Newbigin argues against those who see the Christian moral order as house rules that are normative only for Christians. He warns that the danger of viewing the church as a voluntary society "is that the ethical implications of the gospel come to be regarded as merely house rules for the Church, guidance for Christian behaviour rather than the *law of the creator* with jurisdiction over the entire human family."<sup>8</sup>

These few references suffice to show that while Lesslie Newbigin has not provided us with an explicit discussion of creation revelation or normativity such a notion forms the solid, yet implicit, backdrop for his work. In contrast, the Dutch Kuyperian tradition has made the notion of creation order or creational revelation an explicit cornerstone in their reflection on the mission of the church in the public life of Western culture. I believe that the tremendously fruitful work of Lesslie Newbigin in challenging us to engage the public life of Western culture with the gospel would be greatly enriched by the Dutch neo-Calvinistic reflection on Scripture regarding creation revelation.

### *A Biblical Doctrine of Creational Revelation*

1. Paul's thinking began with Christ. He could sum up his entire ministry with the declaration "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (I Cor.2:2). Jesus Christ, as revealed in the gospel, became the clue that Paul and other New Testament authors followed as they sought to make sense of the world and their mission in that world. And so it must be our starting point. It is this commitment that Lesslie Newbigin so admirably exemplifies and models for us. But as Paul and other New Testament authors follow that clue seeking to make sense of the comprehensive scope of Christ's redemption and rule they were driven back to confess Christ as the One who has created all things and continues to order all things by His word (Col.1:15-20; Heb.1:3).

2. Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God. To understand Christ one must see Him in the context of the full canon of Scripture. He can only be understood as He is placed in the story that the Scriptures tell. As Newbigin has reminded us: "We cannot understand Jesus except in the context of the Bible as a whole. To detach Jesus from this story is to create a mythical figure."<sup>9</sup>

3. Jesus Christ is the Word of God revealing God and His redemptive will to us. The Scriptures are the Word of God and bear divine authority in witnessing to God's

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7 "I Believe in Christ", in Ed. M.A. Thomas, I Believe. Madras: SCM, 1946. p.110.

8 Truth To Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992. p.70.

9 Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. p.88.

redemptive work that find their centre in Jesus Christ. So we must begin our reflections on revelation and creation order with the light of Scripture. Having begun with that unshakable confession of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture, we find that, as we read Scripture, it points to a word of God beyond itself. The gospel as it witnesses to Jesus Christ in the Scriptures is neither the *only* nor the *first* revelation of God. Scripturally, the word of God cannot be reduced to either Jesus Christ or the Scriptures.

4. The Biblical story begins with Genesis and Genesis begins with creation. It is here in the first chapter of the Bible that we are given our first exposure to God's word. In Genesis 1 the author narrates the creation in a two part literary structure. In part one (Genesis 1:1,2), God--Father, Son, and Spirit--calls this world into being out of nothing. This world is dark, formless, and empty. In part two (Genesis 1:3-31) the Triune God begins to give shape and order to the creation. He removes the darkness with the creation of light. He gives shape to the formless earth by structuring it into sky, dry land and seas. He fills those compartments with stellar creatures, marine life, birds, animals, and finally humankind. This literary structure highlights the fact that it is the *word of God* that gives shape and order to the creation. At the beginning of stage one the earth lies as a dark, formless, and empty mass. At the end it is an orderly, inter-related cosmos. Between the two lies the ordering commands of God--and it is that word addressed to the creation that issues in an orderly and structured world. It is the word of God that defines the structural being and the function of each creature. Again and again the Scriptures testify to this originating word of God in creation (Ps.33:6,9; Heb.11:3).

5. In Genesis 1 God refers to the Triune God revealed in the story of the Bible. The work of creation--and subsequently the work of ruling and upholding--is the work of the Father, Son and Spirit. In a number of places in the New Testament we are told that God creates the world through (*dia*: John 1:3; Heb.1:2) and by (*en*: Col.1:16) Jesus Christ. Christ is not only the mediator of redemption; He is also the mediator of creation. So it is God--Father, Son and Spirit--who called this world into being out of nothing and gave it shape and order by a commanding word.

However, it would be a mistake to identify God's originating words which constitute the universe with Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. While it is understandable to link the word "by which" and the Word "through whom"<sup>10</sup> the world was made, such a connection faces the following two problems.<sup>11</sup> First, it violates the common everyday language of the Bible. Word is first of all a semantic category. Word of God is used most often in Scripture to refer to a verbal message--promise, command, warning, and so forth--from God. It can be used in a derived sense to refer to the power of God's command to effect what He orders. It can be used in a derived sense to refer to Jesus Christ as God and His

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10 Al Wolters, Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. p.21.

11 Al Wolters. *Theses on "Word of God"* in Anakainosis. A Newsletter for Reformational Thought, Volume 6, No.3, March, 1984. p.1.

will expressed in human form. To identify these two derived senses of the term "word" is to assign a fixed semantic content to two very different derivations of logos.

A second problem is that it comes into conflict with the testimony of Scripture. In Heb.1:3 we read that the Son sustains all things by His powerful word. Here the Word made flesh is distinguished from the sustaining word.

6. This word of God cannot be conceived simply as an *originating* word. God continues to uphold and rule the creation by His word. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." (Heb.1:3). Peter tells us that there are scoffers who "deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water." He goes on to tell us that it is "by that same word" the present heavens and earth are being kept and reserved for purifying fire of judgement. (2 Peter. 3:5,7). The Psalms continually resound this theme (Ps.147: 17-19; 148:8). His word continues to give order, shape, and structure to the creation. God is king and his original creating word becomes a law-word, a decree for the creaturely subjects of His kingdom--a decree that continues to define the boundaries of their existence and their future unfolding and development. The psalmist bears witness to the abiding word of God when he exhorts the whole creation to praise the Lord

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for He  
commanded and they were created.

He set them in place for ever and ever; He gave a  
decree that will never pass away. (Ps.148:5,6)

7. It is this word of God that constitutes the law side of the creation. These are God's ordering words for the creation. There is also a subject or factual side of creation--the creature for which the law holds. All creation is formed to respond to God's structuring word. The creation is thus constituted as an ongoing response to the word of God. In this statement we see both the distinction between God's word (law side of creation or God's structuring word for creation) and the creation's response (subject side of creation or structures of creation) as well as the correlation or bond between the two.

8. When we consider the response of the creatures it becomes clear that the response of the non-human and human creation differs in significant ways. While the response of the non-human creation is "necessary" (as in the case of the stormy wind that does his bidding [Ps.148:8] or the ice that melts in the spring thaw [Ps.147:18]) or "instinctive" (as in the case of a bird that builds its nest), the response of human creatures is free, responsible, and creative. Al Wolters calls the word of God to the non-human creation "laws of nature" and the word to the humankind "norms." While the non-human creation cannot but obey God's word, norms "can be violated in any number of ways, and they also leave a good deal to the resourcefulness and responsible imagination of the human being who is called to implement them."<sup>12</sup>

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12 Creation Regained, p.15f.

**It is this differing pattern of responses to God's word, when twisted by a tradition of scientism, that has led to our modern fact/value dichotomy. Modern western man has sought to give expression to and an account of the order in God's creation in the natural and human sciences. Since the behaviour of plants, animals, and things can be predicted based on their constant and steady response to the word of God, these are "facts" to be accepted publicly by all. However, since the human response differs both in a plurality of creative responses and in more or less distorted responses, human freedom is absolutized and the responses labeled values. In both cases the word of God that structures the creation is erased; the stable response of the non-human creation is absolutized into a necessary determinism and the free and creative response of man into unrestricted, autonomous freedom.**

**9. Two further Biblical themes shed light on our discussion--covenant and wisdom. Scripture describes the relationship that God has with the creation as covenantal (Jer.33:20f., 25f. and Genesis 9:12). Biblical scholarship has opened up the Ancient Near Eastern understanding of the covenant that forms the background for its Scriptural use. The Hittite empire administered their kingdom by use of covenants. As a ruling power they entered into parity covenants with kingdoms of equal power and into vassal covenants with weaker nations who lived under their authority. In all covenants there are two parties. In the case of vassal covenants--the background of God's covenant with his creatures--the two parties are not equal. The king stands above the vassal or subject. The king initiates the covenant and sovereignly defines the terms of that covenant relationship. The subjects are called to respond to the word of law laid down by the suzerain in the covenant. We see in this analogy two helpful parallels. First, God's word is the authoritative word and decree of the king. His word initiates, structures and defines that relationship. God remains faithful to his word of creation. It is a sure promise that he will always uphold and sustain the creation. The psalmist confesses this promise:**

**I will not violate my covenant or alter the word  
that went forth from my lips.  
Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will  
not lie to David. His line  
will endure forever, his throne as long as the sun  
before me. Like the moon  
it shall be established forever; it shall stand firm  
while the skies endure. (Ps.89:34-37)**

**In this text the psalmist draws a parallel between the covenant that God makes with David and God's faithfulness to sustain the creation. God will be faithful and dependable in keeping his word to David in the same way that He is faithful and dependable in keeping His word to the creation.**

**Secondly, there are two parties to the covenant. Each of them maintains their own integrity. They cannot be confused or mixed; each maintains its own identity. There is also**



interaction between the two parties. The king gives the decree; the subjects are called to respond to that decree. The king responds in turn with judgement or blessing according to the response. In this interaction there is not parity; the parties to the covenant are radically unequal. It is God who is the great King who sovereignly initiates and imposes the terms of the covenant. It is his word that will continue to define the relationship.

10. The second Biblical theme that contributes to our understanding of creation order is the theme of wisdom. Gerhard Von Rad has made the connection between wisdom and creation. He defines wisdom as "practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world, based on experience."<sup>13</sup> Wisdom is the discovery of the order of creation found both in nature and society and conformity with that order. "It is conformity to the underlying 'world order' and results in appropriate social and personal order in life."<sup>14</sup> According to Al Wolters there are two senses of the word wisdom "corresponding to the law and subject side in creation: on the law side is the divine wisdom, God's plan or order, 'wrought into the constitution of the universe'; on the subject side is human wisdom, the attunement or conformity to the creational order."<sup>15</sup>

Isaiah 28:23-29 provides us with this link between creation and wisdom.

Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say.  
When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually?  
Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil?  
When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and  
scatter cummin? Does he  
not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its  
field? *His God instructs*  
*him and teaches him the right way.* Caraway is not  
threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin;  
Caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick.  
Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on  
threshing it forever. *Though*  
he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it his horses do  
not grind it. *All this also comes*  
*from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent*  
*in wisdom.*

This farmer knows the creaturely nature of the seeds he deals with and the methods of sowing, harvesting, and threshing by virtue of his experience with God's orderly creation.

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13 Old Testament Theology, Volume I. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1957. p.418.

14 Dianne Bergant. What Are They Saying About Wisdom Literature? New York: Paulist Press, 1984. p.5.

15 Creation Regained. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. p.26.

His discernment is not the grasp of autonomous rationality; neither is the instruction of God about farming found in the revealed law of Moses. God instructs, we gain wisdom as we come to understand the order of God's creation through experience. The farmer's wisdom in farming comes from gaining insight into God's wisdom and complying with that instruction of the Lord Almighty, magnificent in wisdom.

11. This tie between creation and wisdom open up a further point. Based on the wide scope of the material with which the wisdom books deal, Von Rad notes that "Israel did not differentiate between a 'life wisdom' that pertained to the social orders and a 'natural wisdom', because she was unable to objectify these spheres in the form of such abstractions."<sup>16</sup> In other words, creation had a much broader scope for Israel than for many today who identify creation with the non-human world or the initial creation that preceded human development. Creation is not only the non-human sphere or the virgin cosmos but covers the whole of society and culture. God's ordering word extends to the whole of human life--personal, societal and cultural. Bound up in the creation from the beginning was the potential for development and God's command to cultivate and care for the creation (Gen.1:26-28; 2:15). Societal institutions are not only subjectively shaped; human forming always responds to the God's ordering word which makes these institutions possible and provides the normative boundaries for these institutions. We have a clue in Scripture when we see that marriage and the preparation of food--both cultural and societal developments--have been created by God and to be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim.4:3f.). Peter tells us that political authority is instituted, (created, Greek is ktisis), by God. God's creational word extends to the whole of human and cultural life. Therefore, in any missionary encounter with the public life of western culture it is essential to understand the essential creational structure for the school, government, media, industry, and so on.

12. Two further points must be made here to head off a couple of common misunderstandings that the notion of creation order often creates. First, the notion of creation order does not resemble a rigid metaphysical box that squelches creativity and a plurality of cultural responses to this word. Rather we must distinguish between the ordering word of God and the positivization or implementation of that word. God's command in creation to the state to "do public justice" can be positivized in a number of faithful (or unfaithful; see next point) ways. There may be many kinds of marital configurations and structures that might conform to God's word to be faithful in the context of a life long monogamous commitment between man and woman. Far from constricting normative concretizations to a monotonous uniformity, God's word opens up the possibility of historical development and a plurality of responses in various historical and cultural settings. There is no single cultural response that can be held as normative for all other responses. The many splendoured glory of God's creation is seen in the rainbow of responses to His word.

13. All societal and cultural structures do not conform to God's will. The formulation of

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16 Wisdom in Israel. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972. p.71.

creation order that has been formulated in this paper does not mean that we justify the existing order as was done by a number of Lutheran theologians in the middle of this century. Both apartheid in South Africa and German socialism have supported the status quo by an appeal to creation order. A number of German theologians protested the Barmen Declaration on the basis of creation order. In their third thesis they state: "The law, the laws, that is the unchangeable will of God, we meet in the total reality of our life, as they are brought to light by the revelation of God. They bind everybody to the situation in which he is called by God and oblige us to the natural orders to which we are subjected, such as, family, people, and race (blood relations). We belong to a particular family, a particular race, and a particular people. Because the will of God touches us constantly in the here and now, he binds us also to these particular historical moments of that family, that people, and that race; that is to say to a particular moment of history."<sup>17</sup> Van Egmond and van der Kooi point out that this kind of identification of ordinance, historical situation, and the will of God has given to every mentioning of ordinances a bad name in theology.

Distinguishing between God's ordering word as it holds for creation and societal and cultural structures as human response to that word will go a long way to head off such a misunderstanding. However, a further distinction brings to light the potential for sinful distortion in human response--a distinction between structure and direction. The distinction of structure and direction prevents us from identifying human implementation of God's ordinances with the ordinances themselves. Structure is the creational integrity of some creature as it is rooted and anchored in God's creational word. Direction has to do with the distortion of these creatures or creational structure by sin and their redemption in Christ. Political tyranny involves both the good creational integrity of political authority and the misuse of that authority in tyranny. The notion of creation order should never lead to a sanctioning of the status quo but a call to a more faithful embodiment of God's creational norms.

14. These creational norms are knowable. The creation order is not a static, inert order that can be rationally investigated at our initiative. God actively reveals His will to us. His revelation is powerful and impinging and cannot be ignored only twisted. This is the significance of Lady Wisdom's appeal in Proverbs 8 to all people to heed her and gain wisdom. Humankind has been created in the image of God with the capacity and propensity to respond to that revelation. In fact, human beings are created as answering and responding creatures. Human life is a series of ongoing responses to God's revelation in creation. The combination of the revelatory nature of God's creational word and our constituted nature to receive that word means that we can know God's will.

This confession of the knowability of the creation order may appear to be facile in light of the profound problems that arise when concrete issues are faced. God's word--the law side

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17 *Ansbacher Verklarung*, Thesis 3. Quoted in A. van Egmond and C. van der Kooi. "The Appeal to Creational Ordinances: A Changing Tide", in God's Order for Creation. p.22.

of creation--is not empirically accessible; we only know God's normative Word by way of historical positivizations. Historically and culturally there is a bewildering number of positivizations. Sin has corrupted and distorted all concrete responses to God's creation order, so how can we possibly know what is normative and what is not? The problem is twofold. How can we know what is a faithful or faithless implementation of God's word? But before that, how do we know what norms hold for various spheres of creational life? For example, is public justice the norm for political authority? If so, how do we know? If we agree that it is, how do we know if the state has implemented that norm faithfully? Are we reduced to subjectivism in determining norms and their faithful and faithless embodiment? In terms of our missionary encounter with western culture, how do we judge faithful economic, political, and educational responses to God's Word?

I believe this is a complex and knotty problem. Perhaps as a fool rushing in where angels fear to tread, I will attempt to sketch the contours of a response below. However, the difficulty in knowing creational normativity ought not to lead us to abandon Scripture's teaching in this regard. We are called to faithfully respond to God's word in creation whether or not it is an arduous and bewildering exercise. In an analogous vein, we would not abandon the authority of the Scriptures because of the bewildering number of interpretations and misinterpretations!

How can we know and discern creational normativity? I submit that there are at least four criteria. First, Scripture provides us with direction. Scripture can provide this direction in at least two ways. Scripture is universal history in that it tells us where the world has come from (creation) and where the world is going (consummation). In this narrative of universal history we have our most profound worldview questions answered: Where have we come from? Where are we going? What is wrong with the world? What is the remedy? What is the meaning of human life?<sup>18</sup> This Biblical narrative provides us with compass headings for our life in God's creation. Three metaphors enable us to understand the relation between Scripture and creation: light (Scripture) and object (creation order), spectacles (Scripture) and book (creation order), probe (Scripture) and patient's body (creation order). Scripture provides the light by which darkness is banished and one is able to see the world in the proper way.<sup>19</sup> Scripture functions as spectacles that enable the

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18 See Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview. Downers' Grove: IVP Press, 1984.

19 "Scripture is like a miner's lamp, which lights up the world wherever we turn to look at it. Miners working in an unlighted underground mine shaft cannot do their work without the lamp fitted to their helmets; they are helpless without it and therefore must take great care to see that it functions properly. Yet their attention while they work is turned to rockface, not to the lamp. The lamp serves to illuminate the environment in which they are called to work, to enable them to discern the nature of what lies before them: earth and rock, ore and gangue. The Scriptures are like that. "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps.119:105). But the path must nevertheless be *found* in the specific experience of my life, whatever my 'walk of life.'" (Al Wolters, Creation Regained, p.33).

poor-sighted reader to see the writing in the book.<sup>20</sup> Scripture functions as a probe that enables the doctor to investigate the inside of a patient's body.<sup>21</sup>

Scripture can also provide us with more concrete and specific direction. We find in Scripture normative concrete positivizations of God's creation order. For example, the Mosaic law is divinely accredited implementation of creational law for ancient Israel.<sup>22</sup> Discerning what is normative and what is not in Scripture is a tricky business. There are three sides to every positivization and command in Scripture--creational order, concrete form taken in the unique historical conditions, and the central religious motivation and root to love God and neighbour. If the historical and cultural situation is dramatically changed, a command may not be normative in another context. Therefore, it is critical in interpreting the Scriptures to discern the historical situation in which each norm is positivized. Many complex questions arise from this and I cannot go into them here. However, those complexities ought not to deter us from seeing that Scripture does enable us to see normative applications of God's creational word.

A second criteria can be found in the constancy we see through time, various cultures, and in the numerous responses within our own situation. Since God's creational word is powerful and God remains faithful to His creation, there will be patterns that emerge through history, across cultures and within our own society.

A third criteria is the discernment of blessing and judgement. Since God has made a covenant with the creation, we will experience God's judgement when we violate God's creational order. The tremendous crises of our times can be seen as God's judgement on a culture that has ignored the proper creational place of rationality, technology, and the

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20 "Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows the true God." (Calvin, Institutes I.6.1).

21 This analogy comes from Michael Polanyi where he distinguishes between tacit and focal knowledge. We indwell a worldview, a language, a tradition and makes sense of the world through that tradition. Newbigin points to the illustration of a physician who indwells a probe to explore the patient's body. (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p.34). In Truth to Tell Newbigin uses this metaphor to refer to our indwelling of Scripture. He says, "...our use of the Bible is analogous to our use of language. We indwell it rather than looking at it from outside...It provides the models and concepts through which we seek to understand and cope with events of daily life." (Truth to Tell, p.47. See also Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p.97f.). I believe this is an excellent illustration of how the Scriptures should function in the Christian community. I will return to this theme shortly.

22 Al Wolters, Creation Regained, p.35.

economy. The growing gap between rich and poor, the carnage of the non-human creation, the growing psychological ills, the broken relationships and loss of community, the overwhelming debt, the loss of hope and meaning--all these and more--bear witness to the fact that we have been violating God's creation order. We will also experience blessing or shalom when we live in obedience to God's creational word.

Finally, our conscience bears witness to God's order in creation. Paul writes: "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Rom.2:14f.). We might define conscience as the intuitive attunement to creational normativity. "As human beings we are so interwoven into the fabric of a normed creation that in spite of our religious mutiny we conform to creational standards 'by nature', by virtue of our very constitution as creatures. Creational law speaks so loudly, impresses itself so forcefully on human beings, even in the delusions of paganism, that its normative demands are driven home into their inmost being, are 'written on their hearts' like the indelible inscription of a law code on a clay tablet."<sup>23</sup>

Understanding the relevance of these criteria for a particular concrete situation is not a *methodological* activity but a matter of judgement, wisdom, and dialogue in a communal setting. Discerning normativity is a judgemental activity insofar as it requires imagination, interpretation, weighing of alternatives, application of the criteria that are essentially open, and a wrestling with all the above criteria. One may put different weight on different criteria. Further, these criteria can be applied differently in different situation. These criteria are sufficiently open that they require interpretation, judicious weighing of alternatives when concrete examples are being considered. This contrasts with a search for rigid rules comparable to mathematical algorithms that will lead to a single conclusion. Alasdair McIntyre explains this practical rationality.

Objective rationality is therefore to be found not in rule following, but in rule transcending, in knowing how and when to put rules and principles to work and when not to. Consider how practical reasoning of this kind is taught, whether it is the practical reasoning of generals, of judges, in a common law tradition, of surgeons or of natural scientists....there is not set of rules specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for large areas of such practices.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding normativity is not first and foremost a methodological activity; neither is it

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23 Al Wolters, Creation Regained, p.25.

24 "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science", in Monist 69, 1977.

an individual activity. For Descartes, the paradigm for knowledge was the individual, solitary knower armed with his/her method. If a methodological rationality is challenged by a more practical rationality, an individualistic rationality must be challenged by a dialogical rationality. In other words, the discernment of creational norms will be the work of the church, as an "universal hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another's cultural biases."<sup>25</sup> Over against our Cartesian legacy in which the individual retreats to the ivory tower of the study to hammer out a methodological course to universal truth that will be agreed upon by all rational people, we must place Ephesians 3:17f.: "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ..." In other words, wisdom about God's creation order will only emerge with a communal struggle within a Spirit filled community committed to the Scriptures, prayer, loving and truthful dialogue, and doing the truth.

15. In theology the term given to the issue I have been discussing is creational or general revelation. This notion of creation revelation I have been articulating must be distinguished from the Roman Catholic notion of natural law. Natural theology/law is a domestication of the Biblical doctrine of creational revelation into a Thomistic dualism and rationalism. Thomas distinguished sharply between the lower order of nature--the terrestrial realm--and the higher supernatural order--the celestial realm. This two story ontology led to a two story epistemology. In the natural realm knowledge comes by reason. Humankind can know many things about the world by autonomous reason. However, there is also a supernatural revelation that must be received by faith. This revelation, received by faith, supplements and corrects the natural knowledge acquired by reason. A number of critiques may be leveled against this notion of natural theology.

First, there is a possibility of true, yet incomplete, knowledge of God apart from and independent of Scriptural revelation. Scripture merely supplements an incomplete, yet genuine, knowledge acquired apart from the light of Scripture. A Biblical doctrine of creational revelation would maintain the indispensability of the light of Scripture to understand creation aright. Much true, yet incomplete knowledge can be gained by building on other foundations than the Scripture.

Second, natural theology is rationalistic in its ontology and epistemology. The world is permeated by a rational order; humankind is equipped with reason to know this rational order. This understanding of creation order hails from the pagan Greek notion of a self-existent world pervaded by an immanent rational logos. This has led to an intellectualism that sees human rationality, ultimately human science, as the best, if not the only, way to know the world. "...the notions of kosmos and sophis become intellectualized in the Greek philosophy, so that both order and wisdom come to be defined in strictly *rational* terms. It now becomes the special province of the *philosopher*, by means of his rationality, to discern the order of the world, now defined in terms of the metaphysical universals behind and in

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25 Paul Hiebert, "The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift", in Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin (May-June), p.16.

the reality of our experience."<sup>26</sup> Autonomous rationality is capable of discerning the natural law, the intelligible logical structure of the world. In contrast, the rational or logical is but one important aspect of God's creational order. Order does not equal rational. Logical analysis will play an important role in understanding the order of creation but it remains imbedded and integrated in the totality of the creation order. It is but one aspect of human functioning. Therefore, all human rational activity will flow from faith commitment.

Third, natural theology is dualistic. The natural realm is a self-contained realm known by reason. While Thomas saw the upper realm as superior and corrective, during the Renaissance, humanistic thinkers, while accepting this dualism, began to place more emphasis on the lower realm. During the scientific revolution, the scientific method was advanced as the means by which man could know the lower story of the terrestrial realm. The Enlightenment philosophers drew the obvious conclusion. If revelation and faith are not needed to know the rational order of this world then they are at best irrelevant. The upper realm was erased. The secularizing tendency that began with a dualistic separation had reached its logical conclusion.

Fourth, natural theology is impersonal. Since this notion is a synthesis with pagan Greek thought, conformity to the world order is impersonal. We conform ourselves to a set of rational principles. A Biblical understanding sees conformity to God's revelation as a religious response of God's image to His Maker. God's word is an expression of his love and goodness to His creatures. Our response is one of trustful and loving obedience.

16. Karl Barth's violent reaction to natural theology is, thus, understandable. This is an attempt to unite Yahweh with Baal, an invention of the antichrist, and double bookkeeping. But in his reaction he denies all creational revelation. There is not divine revelation mediated through reason, conscience, emotions, history, nature, or culture. His vehement counteroffensive was motivated by a profound concern to protect the uniqueness and exclusivity of the gospel. In church history, he believed, we always find the fatal "and": Christ and tradition (Roman Catholicism), Christ and reason (scholasticism), Christ and emotion (pietism). Whenever the gospel is joined to another source, the secondary source soon eclipses the uniqueness of the gospel. While I endorse Barth's concern to protect the absolute necessity and uniqueness of the gospel, he himself comes into conflict with the clear testimony of Scripture. For example, his exegesis of Romans 1 has been described by Paul Altaus as "an act of pure despair." Barth's rejects a dualistic, rationalistic natural theology that sees revelation as two independent sources of revelation that lie side by side, not the Scriptural understanding of the interdependency and inter-relatedness of God's revelation in history from creation through Christ to the consummation.

17. Before I leave the topic of creational revelation and move to its implications for a missionary encounter with western culture, I believe it is important to highlight and elaborate on a point that has been made several times throughout this essay. The light of Scripture is absolutely essential

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26 Al Wolters, "Creation Order: A Historical Look at Our Heritage", in God's Order for Creation. p.46.



in understanding and doing the will of God in the world. The metaphors of light and spectacles are well known in the theological tradition. Not so well known is the metaphor that Lesslie Newbigin has employed which he has borrowed from Michael Polanyi. If the believing community is to know and do God's will they must indwell the Scriptures as a doctor indwells his probe to explore and know his/her patient's body. When a surgeon uses a probe s/he does not focus his attention on that probe. Rather s/he focusses attention on the lumps, cavities, and hollows of the patient's body. The surgeon is seeking to understand that patient's body by way of the probe. S/he is tacitly aware of the probe s/he is using but focally aware of the body s/he is exploring. The surgeon indwells the probe for the purpose of knowing the world. It is almost as if the probe becomes part of the surgeon as s/he examines the patient's body. The surgeon uses that probe acritically. It is the instrument by which the surgeon gains knowledge of the internal configuration of the body.

Scripture ought to function like that. The Christian community must indwell the Scriptural story in order to gain knowledge of the world in which they live. That must become the most real story in which they live their lives. They must so indwell the Scriptures that the images, stories, concepts must become the instruments by which this community knows the world. The lumps, cavities, and hollows of God's creation order must be explored and known with the probe of the Scriptural story.

#### *Creation Order and the Mission in Western Culture*

There are a number of implications of this understanding of creation order for our missionary encounter with western culture.

1. The notion of creation order that has been laid out will give us a way to speak of a "Christian society." The objection that will continually have to be met when this kind of terminology is used is that this is merely a return to Christendom. In spite of Newbigin's continuous protests to the contrary, the charge of a return to Christendom continues to be raised even by many who are extremely sympathetic to his project. When we speak of pursuing a Christian society, it does not mean that there is a particular historical social order that provides the model for our efforts. Nor does it mean that we have fashioned such an ideal society in our theories or dreams. Rather our struggle for a Christian society means that we struggle to see the institutions of our community more faithfully embody the guiding norms laid out for them in God's creation order. Insofar as our societal institutions, structures, laws, and traditions faithfully embody God's word, there we signs of His kingdom, glimmers of a Christian society. Inasmuch as the perverting power of sin and idolatry are pushed back, there our social order more faithfully approximates a Christian society.

2. We do not come to our mission with a clean slate with the opportunity to build from scratch. Rather we are placed by God in a particular historical location where there are political, educational, communication, economic, industrial, and commercial institutions with a long history. We face the question of how to relate to those institutions. We may seek to ignore and bypass them; we may seek to tear them down and build from a new foundation; we may affirm or approve of them. From the standpoint of the notion of creation order and revelation that has been spelled out in this paper, all forms of conservatism that endeavors to preserve the status

quo--whether by outright endorsement or by deliberate neglect--or revolution which seek to sweep away the social order and replace it with some ideal are misguided. Since God is faithful to His word in creation there is no institution that can entirely escape the power of God's word. There will always be some creational good in the institutions. However, all embodiments of God's creational word will be distorted by sin and idolatry. If the understanding of creation order articulated in this paper is on target, in the mission of the people of God to the public life of our culture an approach of subversion or reformation will be the guiding principle. Each institution, insofar as it faithfully conforms to God's word can be embraced and supported. Each institution, insofar as human rebellion has twisted the historical implementation of God's word, must be renewed.

3. It opens up a Scriptural basis for the possibility of co-operation and partnership with unbelievers. Clearly believers and unbelievers all share common concerns--peaceful world, just economic order, stewardly use of rapidly diminishing resources, schools that give insight into the world, for example. How can the church co-operate with unbelievers in these common concerns and not jeopardize their witness to the coming kingdom of God? There are other foundations and bases for co-operation. There is a rationalistic foundation. We all share a common universal rationality and can all discern the universal laws of nature in the world. There is a pragmatic foundation. Here we simply recognize our common crises and threats and band together to combat them. However, if we have different understanding of goal of history, we will participate in these endeavours for different reasons, seeking to embody the kingdom of God. In this we will need to bear witness in word to our reasons for pursuing justice, shalom, stewardship and the integrity of creation. In other words, we will need to be an evangelizing church. But it still begs the question: On what basis can we co-operate with others in pursuing justice?

Unbelievers are created in the image of God. The image has not been effaced in the fall. They continue to live in God's world where His ordering word is powerful, impinging on the lives of all human beings. Since unbelievers may not escape God's ordering word and since they experience the blessing and curse of God's creation covenant, they too will "do by nature things required by the law" (Rom.2:14). "Pagan virtue" (Calvin's term) or "common grace" is the result of God's goodness in upholding the creation by his powerful word. Total departure from that word--if this were possible--would result in total anarchy, nihilism, and chaos. However, God continues to be faithful to his creation. As these unbelievers do by nature things required by the law, we join them pointing to Christ who is both the creational law giver and the one who is renewing all things.

4. Our cultural and missiological endeavours can be seen as a response to God. As we seek a just social order, a compassionate economic order, a political body that seeks public justice, schools that open up insight into God's creation in our creational/mission mandate we do so as a people constantly responding to the ordering word of God. We are not simply attempting to conform to an external or impersonal law code. God's creational word for politics, economics, education, media, business, industry, like Lady Wisdom, calls for our faithful response. We come to see the entirety of our lives as a series of ongoing responses to God's word in creation in the light of the gospel. We are reminded about what sort of being we are--creaturely, dependant, responding servants living out our lives as covenant partners with God.

5. This understanding of creation order will save us from the subjectivism and relativism that infects our post-enlightenment culture. The history of western philosophy can be seen as an attempt to account for the order we find in creation. On the one hand there have been attempts to assign that order to the objective sphere wherein we find a cosmic machinery built in to the world. On the other hand, from the time of Kant's subjective turn, we see order explained subjectively, in terms of the pattern we impose on the phenomena. This, of course, has led to a growing relativism as a foundation in human thought which has proved vacuous. The relativism and pragmatism of postmodern society is a witness to this failure. Order cannot be found in a self-contained mechanistic or rational world or in the rational categories of the knowing subject. Objectivism and subjectivism must both fail. Order is the result of God's creational word.

6. If we understand all human societal institutions to be corporate human responses to God's word then, again, we will avoid two problems. Societal institutions are not arbitrary configurations that serve human ends. But neither must they conform to an monotonous uniformity dictated by imperialistic and rigid laws such as we find in the Islam shariah laws. Rather political institutions, business enterprises, economic practice, schools, media, and every other institution or practice in human society is given expression by a response to God's word for that area of life. This law give each institution its own inner normativity and unique creational structure. This law, unlike the external Shariah laws, are what gives each institution and practice its very nature and role in creation.

7. The notion of the covenant gives us a standpoint from which to critique existing institutions. If God's creational word is rejected we bear the judgement of the covenant. If we violate the kind of creature each institution is, we pay the price. Where we rebel against God we violate not only the Structurer but also the very structure of creation itself. For example, our love affair with progress in economics, has led us to violate the very nature of economic life. We are paying the price for our idolatry (Ezekiel 23:49) in resource depletion, growing gap between rich and poor, unemployment and so forth. This comes to us because we have violated God's law of stewardship for the practice of economic life.<sup>27</sup> **Similar critiques can be effectively levelled against other institutions in our society.**

**8. Understanding creation in this way gives us a biblical description of the kind of world we are seeking to know. In Lesslie Newbigin's work, he has helpfully formulated the place that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience play in our knowing. Reason attempts to make sense of our experience in the context of some socially embodied tradition that is given rise by some kind of disclosure. That disclosure will either be the light of the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ or some other insight into creation that reaches idolatrous status. All traditions continue to meet with changing experiences that lead to either the abandonment of the tradition as incapable of meeting emerging challenges, conservative retrenchment within an outdated and irrelevant tradition or transformation of the**

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27 See Bob Goudzwaard's books Aid for the Overdeveloped West, 1975 and Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society, 1979. Both published by Toronto: Wedge Publishing.

**tradition to meet the new realities.**

**If this is the case, experience plays an important role in the knowing process. But what is the nature of *experience*? Can we give biblical content to this word? How would we account for this significant role of experience in a flexible and living tradition? In the light of Scripture we can say that people are continually bumping up against God's cogent and forceful creation order. All people must take account of it. God's faithfulness to his creation challenges everyone to adopt a tradition that makes sense of the world. A tradition can be judged adequate or inadequate in respect of its perceived capacity to lead its adherents into further truth.**

**This understanding of experience will enable us to see the harmony between our experience and gospel. Experience is our encounter with God's revelation in creation. The gospel is God's revelation of his redemptive plan for the world as revealed in Jesus Christ. There will be harmony in these different facets of God's revelation. Only the gospel will provide the light we need to make sense of the myriad of experiences we have.**

### ***Conclusion***

**Jesus Christ announced the kingdom of God had arrived in Him. That kingdom is comprehensive in scope and restorative in nature. That is, all of God's creation will be restored to again submit to the rule of God. This includes economic, political, educational, business, industrial, and artistic life. We are called to be signs and instruments of that reign. As such we must bear witness to God's rule over all these spheres of life. What does restored economic life, for example, look like? What is the role of politics in God's good creation? How should education function in a world where sin has been defeated? These are questions the church must struggle with so that it may embody this renewal and struggle for it in the public life of our nation. We must be clear that these are areas of God's creation and as subjects in His kingdom must submit to His decree.**