

Meredith Kline's View of the Cultural Mandate

Charles Lee Irons, Ph.D.

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Introduction

I've been asked to present Meredith Kline's view of Christ and Culture. Kline gave a great deal of thought to the biblical theology of the cultural mandate. He examined the cultural mandate in the course of his interpretation of the first nine chapters of the Book of Genesis.

Before I launch into that, however, let me give a brief sketch of Kline's life. He was born in 1922 and died in 2007 at the age of 84. He was a noted conservative Old Testament scholar who had the highest regard for the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. He rejected the higher critical theories of the origin of the Old Testament, such as the documentary hypothesis.

Kline did his undergraduate work at Gordon College in Massachusetts. It was there that he was introduced to Reformed theology. He told me the story that a classmate of his explained the five points of Calvinism to him. He had never heard them before, but as soon as they were explained to him he instantly thought Calvinism was true. After graduating from college in 1944, he went on to Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, graduating in 1947 with a Bachelor's and a Master's of Theology.

As a student at Westminster Theological Seminary in the 1940s, he sat at the feet of John Murray and Cornelius Van Til. He disagreed with John Murray on some important aspects of covenant theology, but he always admired Van Til and had the highest regard for his thought.

The proof of his admiration for Van Til is that he dedicated his book *The Structure of Biblical Authority* to Van Til. Kline was a Van Tilian. He believed there is no authority higher than God and his Word. This can be seen in his understanding of the Scriptures as covenant documents. God is the Great King, the Suzerain. We are God's vassals, God's covenant subjects. The Scriptures are the covenant document that governs the relationship between God and his people. As God's covenant people, we are obligated to submit to the covenant on God's terms, not ours, and to obey the stipulations of his covenant Word.

Kline was ordained to the gospel ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1948 and remained a minister in good standing in the OPC until his death.

He did his Ph.D. in Assyriology and Egyptology at Dropsie University in Philadelphia, completing his degree in 1956, while he was already teaching at Westminster. At Dropsie he studied under Cyrus Gordon, the great scholar of ancient Semitic languages such as Ugaritic.

Kline taught at three main seminaries: Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Seminary California. I had the privilege of having him as my professor at Westminster California from 1992 to 1996. His magnum opus is *Kingdom Prologue*, which began as a class syllabus for a course on the biblical theology of the Old Testament that he taught many times throughout his long academic career. The final version was published in 2006, one year before he went to be with the Lord. The subtitle is *Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*.¹ This is significant, because it means that he's not just doing biblical theology and covenant theology; he is also trying to establish a comprehensive worldview based on the book of Genesis, which he saw as

¹ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006). Cited below as "KP."

foundational for the whole of the Scriptures and for all of life. A key part of that is to understand the cultural mandate in its historical unfolding.

So let’s dive into Kline’s view of the cultural mandate. I think it’s helpful to break it down into three modes as history unfolds:

1. The Cultural Mandate as Originally Given Before the Fall
2. The Cultural Mandate as Modified After the Fall
3. The Cultural Mandate as Fulfilled by Christ

1. The Cultural Mandate as Originally Given Before the Fall

Let’s begin by reminding ourselves of the key text where God gives the cultural mandate to Adam and Eve—Genesis 1:26–28:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”²

The first thing we observe is that the cultural mandate is rooted in man’s identity as the image of God. Just as God is the creator, so mankind is a creator of sorts, although on a creaturely level. Man’s creaturely activity of filling the earth is an analogue of the way in which God created the various realms of creation—the sky, the sea, the dry land—and then created the creatures to populate, fill, and reign over each realm—the birds, the fish, the land animals and man himself. Man’s creaturely activity of subduing the earth and exercising dominion over the

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

lower orders of creation is an analogue of God's kingly rulership over all creation, including man. So all of these cultural activities of man mirror God's work of creation and providence.

This idea that man's cultural activity is a creaturely analogue of God's creative activity is further developed in Genesis 2:2–3, where God gives the Sabbath ordinance to man:

On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Kline sees this pre-Fall Sabbath ordinance as connected to his identity as the image of God. Just as God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, so man as God's image must go about his cultural labors for six days and rest on the seventh. But man's weekly Sabbath cycle was not to be indefinite or never ending. Rather, it was part of the covenant of works, and therefore the weekly Sabbath contained an eschatological promise. The weekly sign of the Sabbath was a token to Adam that his cultural activity of procreating, filling the earth and subduing it would, or (more accurately) could, come to a consummation, the consummation of entering God's Sabbath rest. Man had the hope that, just as God's creation activity came to a conclusion and God rested on the seventh day, so man's cultural activity could one day be completed and he, together with all his progeny, and all of creation itself, would be ushered into the eschatological Sabbath rest of God himself.

But this glorious outcome was not guaranteed. The covenant of works was a conditional promise. Only if man obeyed and passed the probation, would he receive the eschatological reward. If man disobeyed, he would lose the reward and in fact merit death. This is implied in the text itself. On the one hand, the tree of life was a sign of the positive sanction, the offer of eschatological advancement. On the other hand, the threat of death was explicitly attached to the other tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The point is that the original cultural mandate was an integral part of the pre-Fall covenant of works. That's important because it suggests two things: first, that when the covenant of works is broken by Adam's transgression as the covenant or federal head of the human race, the cultural mandate doesn't continue unchanged as if nothing happened. It does continue, but in a highly modified form. Second, if the pre-Fall cultural mandate is covenantal, then we would expect that, when the cultural mandate is reissued after the Fall in the common grace mode, it would likewise be covenantal.

Now Kline subdivides the primary tasks of Adam's cultural mandate into two aspects: the vertical dimension and the horizontal. The horizontal dimension has to do with man's kingly office as one who cultivates the earth and subdues it. But there is also a vertical dimension that pertains to Adam's role as a priest. He is to take of the fruits of his cultural labors and offer them or consecrate them to God. These two dimensions Kline covers under the terms "cult" and "culture." By "cult," Kline doesn't mean religious cults like the Jim Jones cult or the Jehovah's Witnesses. By "cult," he just means "worship" with a special focus on the priestly work of offering tribute to God in a special holy place or temple.

For Kline, these two aspects—cult and culture—are distinguishable in the pre-Fall situation, yet they are integrated by the theocratic principle, at least before the Fall. The theocratic principle means that culture is subordinated to cult. Kline argues that this distinction between cult and culture lays the formal groundwork for the post-Fall distinction between the holy and the common. However, in the post-Fall situation, culture is no longer subordinated to cult. We'll get to that later. For now, let's continue looking at the pre-Fall situation.

The pre-Fall cultural mandate set in motion a history. Of course, that history was cut short by the Fall, when Adam as the federal head broke the covenant of works and he and Eve

were expelled from the garden. The Bible doesn't explicitly tell us what would have happened if Adam had not sinned and had passed his probation. But we do have enough biblical evidence allowing us to infer what the history of the cultural mandate would have been. Kline thinks it would have unfolded in two stages: a pre-consummation stage and a consummation stage. The pre-consummation stage is an intermediate stage when Adam and his progeny do not yet have glorified bodies. The consummation stage is marked by the glorification of the body, indeed, of all creation.

The pre-consummation phase can be inferred from Genesis 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." The implication is that God wanted Adam to develop the garden into a universal city.

Kline put it this way: "Fulfillment of man's cultural stewardship would thus begin with man functioning as princely gardener in Eden. But the goal of his kingdom commission was not some minimal, local life support system. It was rather maximal, global mastery. The cultural mandate put all the capacity of human brain and brawn to work in a challenging and rewarding world to develop the original paradise home into a universal city" (KP 70).

Adam and his progeny would be building what Kline calls "Megapolis." It is based on two Greek words, *mega*, which means big or great, and *polis*, which means city. So Megapolis is "the Great City."

The second phase is the eschatological consummation phase. Kline's term for this phase was "Metapolis." The word *meta* is a Greek preposition meaning beyond or after. Kline speaks of post-consummation culture as "metaculture," and from that latter word he extrapolates the term "Metapolis." "Glorified mankind is the divine culture, the metaculture *beyond* human culture" (KP 99). In other words, it's Megapolis after it has been metamorphosed or transformed

by the glory of God into the eschatological cosmic temple of God, which is also the eschatological City of God. It is both a temple and a city—as Revelation 21 makes clear.

However, we should not think of Metapolis as the natural development of Megapolis. As Kline said, "Heaven is not a human achievement; it is not the end-product of human culture" (KP 98). In other words, Metapolis shouldn't be thought of as if it were simply Megapolis in its completed state. Megapolis may be in place, but Metapolis has not yet arrived.

What would still need to happen to usher in Metapolis? A special, supernatural divine act of eschatological intervention, in which three things would occur simultaneously: (1) mankind's external culture—man-made cultural artifacts such as buildings, clothing, art, technology and so on—would drop away like scaffolding (KP 99); (2) the veil that separates heaven and earth would be lifted so that heaven, the dwelling of God and his angels, would visibly permeate earth; and (3) mankind itself, the central product of the cultural mandate, would be transformed to enjoy the glorified creation in glorified bodies. To borrow the language from the fulfillment in Christ, the family of Adam would be "living stones" formed together into God's cosmic city-temple.

Megapolis must be transformed into Metapolis, not by a gradual evolution but by a supernatural act of glorification. The continuity is broken as God intervenes in divine power and glory. Just as the present creation came into existence out of nothing, so the new creation will emerge from an "epiphanic flash" (KP 101). It is an apocalyptic event. Kline puts it this way: "Metapolis is not just an enlarged Megapolis, but a Megapolis that has undergone eschatological metamorphosis at the hands of the Omega-Spirit" (KP 100).

Perhaps a biblical analogy would help. Consider Solomon's temple. The construction of the temple itself is like Megapolis. But at this point all you have is the physical structure. It is not

yet consummated. The Glory-Cloud must come and take up residence in the temple. When that happens, the temple is transformed into the dwelling of God. That's a picture of when God transforms Megapolis into Metapolis. It will be an "eschatological metamorphosis." Solomon's temple is more than an analogy. It is actually a type. For Metapolis is not only the City of God but the cosmic Temple of God, the cosmos irradiated by and filled with the glory of God. Solomon's temple was merely the type and shadow of the final temple envisioned from the beginning as the end-product of the cultural mandate as originally given to Adam.

There is much more that could be said, but that's a basic outline of the history of the cultural mandate if Adam had not sinned.

Now we come to the second mode of the cultural mandate.

2. The Cultural Mandate as Modified After the Fall

Man fell into sin and the covenant of works was broken. For Kline the Fall changes the cultural mandate significantly. Here Kline turns to Genesis 3:16–19 to see what happened to the cultural mandate after the Fall. The main thing he sees is that in spite of man's fall into sin and in spite of the consequences of sin—judgment and death—God preserves man alive to continue certain cultural activities. God, in his justice, could have ended everything right there. Adam and Eve could have been destroyed in judgment, and that would have been the end of the human race and the end of history. But in his grace, God had in view the wonderful plan of salvation through the coming Mediator, the Seed of the woman, and therefore, he did not execute the curse sanction of death immediately, but instead set up the order of common grace.

Kline sees both common grace and common curse in Genesis 3. Common grace is evident, since God in his non-saving grace allows the human race, both the godly line and the

seed of the serpent, to continue to marry, procreate, and labor. God will continue to send his rain and sunshine upon the just and the unjust alike.

But common curse is also evident, since the curse affects both the just and unjust. It is not only the ungodly line but also the godly line who will have pain in childbirth and a curse upon the ground that yields thorns and thistles. This is most evident in Genesis 5 when the genealogy of the godly line is punctuated with the refrain, "and he died." So Kline calls this, "common grace and common curse," since both the good and the bad are experienced by both the elect and the non-elect.

Kline sees both continuity and discontinuity between the pre-Fall and the post-Fall cultural mandate. There is continuity, because the cultural mandate is reissued after the Fall. Man is still to marry and procreate and fill the earth. But the cultural mandate undergoes what Kline calls "refraction" (KP 157). The main cultural tasks and functions remain, but the mandate itself is refracted or modified. We see this refraction or modification when we observe that man is now frustrated in his cultural efforts. This theme of frustration is quite prominent in the text. This is what God says to Eve in Genesis 3:16:

"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

The woman will still bear children as part of the cultural mandate, but she will do so with great pain. The marital relationship will also become disordered. Her desire will be to usurp her husband's authority, and he will rule over her in an oppressive manner. Marriage and childbearing, which ought to have been a delight, will be marred by pain and the distorting effects of sin.

Here is what God says to Adam in Genesis 3:17–19:

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

The man will continue to labor and work the ground in order to cultivate it and produce crops, just as Adam was commanded before the Fall. But now his labor will be a hard toil and the earth will produce fruit, but not to the same degree, and with the fruit it will also produce thorns and thistles. And at the end of it all, he will return to the dust of the ground from which he came. Death is the ultimate disruptor and frustrator of human culture.

So we can summarize the main point of discontinuity with the pre-Fall cultural mandate under the term “frustration.” Before the Fall, man could labor in the eschatological confidence that his cultural labors would yield good fruit, that he would succeed in bringing all creation under subjection. He would be able to build Megapolis, a city worthy of being glorified and ushered into the eschatological consummation. But after the Fall, man labors in vain. He labors under the shadow of death. He toils excessively, but his toil only produces thorns and thistles, and he himself dies soon thereafter. There is no promise of eschatological consummation. Indeed, after the Fall, man’s cultural labors will not and cannot enter the heavenly city or Metapolis.

In addition to the frustration motif, Kline points to a telling piece of evidence that the cultural mandate in its post-Fall form has been stripped of eschatological hope. Kline points out that the ordinance of the weekly Sabbath rest is not renewed with Adam after the Fall. The non-renewal of the Sabbath sign shows that man’s cultural activity is no longer stamped with the

eschatological Sabbath promise. Man must work, but he must work without the confidence that the works of his hands will have lasting, eternal significance.

Common grace culture is not headed anywhere. It is headed, in fact, for termination. The Scriptures teach that "The present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), that "The end of all things is at hand" (1 Pet 4:7), and that, "The world is passing away along with its desires" (1 John 2:7). And in the book of Revelation, God says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5). Another way of putting it is this: common grace culture is not building Megapolis. The City of Man, even at its best, is not and never can become the City of God.

To be sure, the City of Man has legitimacy, but it does not have sanctity. It is not holy but common. It has an ameliorative but not a redemptive function. Common grace functions as a restraint upon sin. It keeps fallen society from becoming as wicked as it would be apart from God's restraining activity.

Another key point for Kline is that he sees the common grace mode of the cultural mandate in covenantal terms. He views the post-flood Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9 as the reiteration in covenantal form of the common grace order established immediately after the Fall. This picks up the point I made earlier. The cultural mandate is covenantal. It is part of a covenant. That was true in the pre-Fall context, when it was part of the covenant of works. It is just as true in the post-Fall context, when the cultural mandate is re-issued in modified, refracted form as part of the covenant of common grace in Genesis 9. We're specifically told it is a covenant: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you" (Gen 9:9). It is called an "everlasting covenant" (v 16), meaning a covenant that is perpetual for long ages until the appointed end. And God's covenantal commitment is further reinforced with a covenant sign: "I have set my bow in the

cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen 9:13). Kline calls this covenant "the covenant of common grace."

Importantly, the covenant of common grace renews the cultural mandate. Genesis 9:1: "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'." This repeats almost verbatim the language of the pre-Fall mandate but with one important difference—the word "subdue" is not repeated. This is because subduing the earth is no longer possible for fallen man. That task has been transferred to Christ as the second Adam. He has in principle subdued the earth by his death and resurrection. That's the already. And he will finally subdue it at the end of history when he brings all things into subjection under his feet and ushers in the new creation. That's the not-yet.

The non-repetition of the word "subdue" in Genesis 9:1 supports Kline's thesis that the covenant of common grace is "not a simple reinstating of the creation ordinances, but a revision of them in the common grace mode" (KP 251).

Another key characteristic of the covenant of common grace is that it is universal. It makes no distinction believers and unbelievers, between insiders and outsiders, as the covenant of special grace does. The covenant of special grace is made with believers and their children. There are special tokens, such as circumcision or baptism, to mark out those who belong to the holy, redemptive covenant of grace.

The covenant of common grace has a sign as well—the rainbow. But this sign is given to all indiscriminately. It is a sign of God's promise to never again destroy the earth by a flood. Further, the text of Genesis 9 makes clear that this covenant, unlike the covenant of special grace, is made with all mankind. Listen to the repeated emphasis of the text. This covenant is made ...

- with "all flesh" (vv 11, 15)
- with "all flesh that is on the earth" (v 17)
- with "every living creature" (vv 10, 12)
- with "every living creature of all flesh" (v 15)
- with "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (v 16)

The covenant of common grace is God's promise to keep judgment in abeyance until the appointed time. Never again will God curse the ground or destroy all living creatures as he did in the flood (Gen 8:21). In his common grace, he will preserve the order of nature, "while the earth remains" (Gen 8:22). And this promise applies to all without distinguishing between God's holy people and the seed of the serpent. This is precisely what makes it a covenant of *common* grace, because it is common to the elect and the non-elect. It's not an administration of the covenant of special saving grace.

3. The Cultural Mandate as Fulfilled by Christ

So we've seen Kline's view of the cultural mandate in its original pre-Fall form and in its modified common grace form after the Fall. Now we come to Kline's understanding of the cultural mandate as fulfilled by Christ. We can only touch on this briefly. The key point is that both the original and the fulfilled cultural mandate are eschatological to their core, that is, they have to do with the final consummation of the kingdom of God. The eschatological goal of the original cultural mandate was left seemingly unachieved, suspended due to Adam's sin. But Christ as the second Adam achieves it. He undertakes to fulfill the terms of the broken covenant of works.

The *common grace* form of the cultural mandate therefore differs from both the original and the fulfilled form precisely at this point, the point of eschatology. There is no eschatological consummation for common grace culture. It is destined to be terminated at the day of judgment.

But God has not given up on his original eschatological goal of bringing creation to the omega point, Metapolis. Although that original eschatological goal of the cultural mandate cannot be attained by the efforts of fallen man, it is attained by Christ as the second Adam (KP 156–57). The goal has not changed, but the means of attaining has. Because of Adam's failure, it is not attainable by man's cultural labors. It is attained only through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, by his active and passive obedience, and his consequent exaltation as Lord of all creation. One way we can see that the original eschatological goal is attained through the plan of redemption is that the ultimate goal of Christ's redeeming work is the creation of "the holy kingdom-temple" (KP 156) that was envisioned from the beginning. That eschatological goal, originally man's prospect and hope under the pre-Fall covenant of works, is being achieved by Christ from his exalted position in heaven. From heaven, he now effectually calls the elect, by his Spirit working through the preaching of the gospel. He not only calls them but he brings them into the church and fashions them into a holy temple. The ministry of the risen Christ through the Spirit in the church age is a temple-building project. The temple is growing and will be finally consummated in its fullness in the eschatological kingdom of God. Just think here of all the New Testament passages where we are told that Christ is building a temple made without hands, the temple which is his own body, the church.

According to the witnesses at his trial before the high priest, Jesus said, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands" (Mark 14:58). Of course, we know from the Gospel of John, that we was speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:21).

But it is not only his own physical body, but the entire church as united to him. We, as the church of Christ, are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus

himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:20–22; cp. 1 Cor 3:16; 1 Pet 2:5).

The spiritual temple that the exalted Christ is currently building is partially visible on earth in the form of the visible church, but it is obscured by the fact that the visible church is not perfect and contains many who are not true members. The final temple, which is also the holy city, will be unveiled at the last day:

"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2; cp. Eph 5:27).

The Cultic Boundary

This holy temple-city is the eschatological end-product of the cultural mandate as taken up and fulfilled by Christ. It is a temple-city "made without hands." It "comes down out of heaven from God." As such, it is totally distinct from common grace culture. The one is holy; the other is common. The one is eschatological and will be consummated when Christ returns; the other is temporary and will be terminated when Christ returns. This leads to one of the primary practical implications of Kline's thought, and that is his insistence that we must respect what he calls "the cultic boundary" (KP 179). Before the Fall, cult and culture were integrated under the sovereign lordship of God. Culture was to be consecrated and set apart as holy as part of the cult. Adam was both a king and a priest, and his kingly duties with regard to culture were to be conducted in subordination to his priestly duties with regard to the cult. He was to make culture holy, to bring all of his cultural labors into the temple and consecrate them to God.

But after the Fall, cult and culture have been separated by God himself. The covenant of common grace establishes a cultural realm that is not holy, that is, not bound for eschatological consummation in the eternal kingdom of God. Cult remains holy, but culture is now common. Saying it is common does not mean it is unholy or inherently sinful, but it is non-holy. All that means is that post-Fall culture is not destined to enter into the eschatological new creation, the kingdom of God. Post-Fall culture will end at the day of judgment. It is temporary and non-eschatological.

Therefore, in this present age, prior to the consummation, we must respect the cultic boundary between the holy and the common. That means three things.

First, it means we as believers, who are members of the covenant of special grace and heirs of the eschatological kingdom, should not try to get the common grace realm or any institution within it, such as the state or civil government, to confess or promote the true religion. Nor should we drag the church into the cultural activities and political debates of the City of Man, as if these activities and debates were an integral part of God's holy kingdom program. We must uphold the spirituality of the church as a corollary of the cultic boundary.

Second, it means we as believers, members of the eschatological kingdom, can and should be actively engaged in the common grace realm, but doing so in a way that respects its temporary, non-holy function ordained by God as part of the covenant of common grace. We can engage in pragmatic cooperation with unbelievers for the purposes of achieving temporal, non-holy, non-redemptive ends in this world. Since God has ordained common grace social institutions such as civil government, we as Christians may work together with non-Christians in order to seek to alleviate the most extreme impacts of common curse in this fallen world. Common curse and the effects of the Fall will not be overturned until the eschaton. But in this

present age, by common grace, they can be ameliorated and off-set to some extent, and we as Christians can work together with unbelievers to seek those limited, non-holy, non-eschatological goals.

Third, the cultic boundary has a hermeneutical function. It affects the way we use Scripture and bring it to bear on the common grace realm. The cultic boundary means we ought not to misapply Scripture by, for example, treating ancient Israel and its civil law as a model for common grace governments. Kline sees this misapplication in the theonomic hermeneutics on the right, and in the social justice hermeneutics on the left. In both, Israel is viewed as a model for the nations of the earth. But the nation of Israel was not a common grace civil government. It was a typological anticipation or intrusion of the eschatological kingdom of the new creation. Israel, like the eschatological kingdom, was a theocracy in which cult and culture were institutionally integrated. The culture of Israel was not part of common grace culture. It was cultically-oriented culture, marked with the Sabbath sign, and set apart as holy unto God and with the temple as its cultic focal point. Therefore, it is inappropriate to use the civil laws governing the Israelite theocracy as a model for civil legislation of the common grace nations of the earth (KP 157–59).³

The "No Neutrality" Objection

Now perhaps you're forming an objection in your mind. Perhaps it is the classic Van Tilian objection: "Kline, you make it sound like there is this vast realm out there that is neutral. You don't see it as either holy or unholy, but as common. But there is no neutrality. Everyone is either doing cultural activity for God's glory or in rebellion against God." How would Kline

³ For Kline's critique of theonomy, see his review article on *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* by Greg L. Bahnsen, "Comments on an Old-New Error," *WTJ* 41.1 (1978): 172–189. See also my paper, "The Reformed Theocrats: A Biblical Theological Response," http://www.upper-register.com/papers/reformed_theocrats.pdf.

respond? He would say it is absolutely true that there is no neutrality. Remember, Kline was a committed Van Tilian. That is why Kline acknowledges that all of life is religious (KP 159–60). As believers, we engage in the cultural mandate in its common grace mode, and we do so in obedience to God, who has ordained this common grace culture and who commands us as believers to be involved in it. The fact that we do so in obedience to God “prohibits any dichotomizing of man’s life into religious and nonreligious areas” (KP 67). All that we as believers do, as it relates to both our cultic and our cultural activities, is religious, as Paul himself said: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17, quoted by Kline, KP 160).

But this is what Kline refers to as the subjective, as distinct from the objective, sanctification of culture. This is how Kline explains the distinction:

“Positively, it must be recognized that the whole life of God’s people is covered by the liturgical model of their priestly identity. All that they do is done as a service rendered unto God. All their cultural activity in the sphere of the city of man they are to dedicate to the glory of God. This sanctification of culture is subjective; it transpires within the spirit of the saints. Negatively, it must be insisted that this subjective sanctification of culture does not result in a change from common to holy status in culture objectively considered. The common city of man does not in any fashion or to any degree become the holy kingdom of God through the participation of the culture-sanctifying saints in its development. Viewed in terms of its products, effects, institutional context, *etc.*, the cultural activity of God’s people is common grace activity. Their city of man activity is not ‘kingdom (of God)’ activity. Though it is an expression of the reign of God in their lives, it is not a building of the kingdom of God as institution or realm. For the common city of man is not the holy kingdom realm, nor does it ever become the holy city of

God, whether gradually or suddenly. Rather, it must be removed in judgment to make way for the heavenly city as a new creation" (KP 201).

Kline rejects the objective sanctification of culture, but he affirms the subjective sanctification of culture. We can't make culture or any cultural product holy in itself, but we can engage in cultural activity with a holy motive.

Let's make this concrete by looking at an example. In Genesis 4, Cain is credited with building the first city (Gen 4:17) and his descendants invented nomadic pastoralism, music, and metallurgy (vv 20–22). Interestingly, the godly line did not refrain from these things. For example, Abel was a keeper of sheep (v 2). The godly line didn't create their own holy tents, holy musical instruments, and holy metal works. The line of Seth used the same tents, the same musical instruments, and the same metal works as the line of Cain. They were all part of common grace culture. But they engaged in these cultural activities with a different motive.

I know this can be tough to wrap your mind around. The concept of common grace makes us a tad uncomfortable. We instinctively feel we're supposed to have our own counter culture under the Lordship of Christ. Everything we do is supposed to be holy and special and set apart from the world. But I think it might help to recognize that, for Kline, the common grace kingdom or realm is not inherently sinful or evil. It's not holy, but neither is it unholy. If it were unholy or sinful, then it would only exist by God's permission but not by his blessing. But it does exist with his blessing, at least his non-saving blessing. Let's not forget that this non-holy, common grace realm was established by God himself, first informally after the Fall in Genesis 3, then more formally in the covenant of common grace after the flood in Genesis 9. In Genesis 9, it is specifically called a covenant. It is a divine ordinance. The common grace realm does not exist by a bare permission—the way sin does. Take any sin—like adultery. Adultery is a violation of

God's preceptive will. He doesn't approve of it and doesn't want it to happen. Nevertheless, God in the mystery of his decretive will does allow it to happen. But the common grace realm isn't like that—preceptively forbidden, but decretively permitted. No, the common grace realm is a positive ordinance of God. God *himself* erected the cultic boundary between cult and culture and set human culture apart as a common realm for both the elect and the non-elect as the backdrop for the unfolding of his plan of salvation in the covenant of special grace. That's why Kline emphasizes that it was established by a formal covenant in Genesis 9.

So I think Kline would want to take the Van Tilian "no neutrality" objection and turn it on its head. As a good Van Tilian, Kline would insist that we must submit our autonomous thought to God's sovereign authority as revealed in Scripture. Scripture reveals in Genesis 9 that God himself has established this temporary, legitimate but non-holy common grace cultural realm. So we must submit our thinking to God's covenant word.

As a Van Tilian, Kline would protest if someone said that common grace culture sets up a neutral realm that is somehow godless or unrelated to God. The common grace realm *can't* be neutral, because it has been established by God himself. It exists on the basis of his covenantal authority as the sovereign Lord or suzerain of all creation. As Genesis 9 makes so clear with its repeated statements, God is the suzerain and all living creatures are the vassals in this common grace covenant with God.

Furthermore, the cultural activity of every sinful human being is religiously motivated—either for God's glory or in rebellion against God. The antithesis is real. There is a line going right down the middle of the common grace arena, an antithesis. But we should draw the line where the Bible draws it—not at the objective level of culture itself, but at the subjective level. It is not as if Christians have a fundamentally different way of doing agriculture or medicine, and

so on. Instead, the believer has a different motive for engaging in cultural activity—the glory of God.

How Should We Then Live?

First of all, we should focus our primary energies on the holy kingdom of God, the eschatological culture, which finds its present expression in the church. And as we do so, we should uphold the spirituality of the church—that is, the idea that the church’s concerns and interests are eschatological and not temporal and cultural. Engaging in common grace cultural activities is not one of the tasks that Christ as Head of the Church has entrusted to the church as an institution. Her mandate, her mission, is heavenly, spiritual, and soteriological. Where do we find the church’s marching orders? In the Great Commission. The risen Lord commands his church to preach the gospel and make disciples, not to transform the culture. We must always be on watch against what Michael Horton calls “mission creep.”⁴ You see this in the contemporary “missional movement,” where churches *as churches* want to get involved in social justice activism. We have all kinds of programs that go under the banner of “serving the city,” whether that be homeless shelters, or after school programs for kids, or fighting poverty and racism. The motives are good. We want to do good works in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. Kline was not opposed to these good works. But he would say we have to be careful to make clear that we are doing these things as individual Christians. These activities are not part of the mission of the church as an institution.

But, second, to the extent we do engage common grace culture as individual Christians, we should recognize that we can’t make common grace culture holy. If we succeeded in making

⁴ Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 7–8, 161, 247–48.

common grace culture objectively holy, it would cease to be common. However, we can and ought to engage in the subjective sanctification of culture. This has to do with our motives. We should do all things prayerfully and to the glory of God. As far as the subjective sanctification of culture goes, we should bring out the goodness and beauty of creation according to God's creation norms as revealed in creation and conscience as interpreted in the light of Scriptural revelation about God. This is the distinctive aspect of the believer's involvement in common grace culture. However, the focus ought to be on following God's creation norms as revealed in God's general revelation, rather than on the unique ethics associated with our union with Christ and founded on God's work of redemption.

Third, we shouldn't put our hope in common grace culture, or in common grace culture getting better and better and more Christian. It is not the kingdom of God. Common grace activity is not eternal, not lasting. God has not stamped it as bound for eschatological consummation. He has not put the sign of the Sabbath upon it. Our cultural labors and products won't enter the new creation. The Christian computer engineer won't see his code in the new creation. The Christian cinematographer won't see his films in the new creation.

Fourth, although common grace culture is not bound for eschatological consummation, we should nevertheless engage in common grace cultural activity as part of our Christian witness. When we do our cultural activities as Christians, as those who seek to bring out the goodness and beauty of creation according to God's creation norms as revealed in creation and conscience interpreted in the light of Scripture, we shine as lights in the darkness. The way we as Christians engage in cultural activity, from the standpoint of our distinctive commitments to the one true creator God, communicates to the world our values and our worldview commitments. In that sense, our cultural activities as Christians do have eternal significance.

Finally, we need not be anxious and fearful about the trajectory of common grace culture. If at the moment, it seems to be on a downward slope, we should not fearfully extrapolate its ultimate demise before the coming of Christ. God in his common grace is the one who keeps human culture from sinking to the depths of depravity that it is capable of. There will be times when the culture is getting better, but it will never become the holy kingdom of God. There will be times when it is getting worse, but it will not become totally demonic, except perhaps at the final crisis point just prior to the day of judgment. You can count on it. That is the promise of God in the covenant of common grace made with Noah and all creation.

Perhaps you've heard the statement, "We live in the midst of a dying culture." That is certainly true. But it is misleading if we think the culture only began to die recently. The reality is, God's people have been living in the midst of a dying culture ever since the Fall. The reason human culture has not become totally wicked is because God preserves it in his common grace. Because of common grace, human culture has its ups and downs, moments of greater wickedness, moments of greater civil righteousness, and mixtures of both, at different times and places. It is not our task to make common grace culture objectively holy.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said about Kline's view of Christ and culture, but I think I have provided a good overall sketch. His thought was deeply rooted in Scripture, shaped by biblical theology and covenant theology, and driven by eschatology.

Ultimately, it is a question of our priorities. Our priority as God's people in the midst of common grace culture is to be witnesses to the gospel of Christ. The gospel, not cultural activity, is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). The gospel will never fail, regardless of the ups

and downs of the City of Man. The culture of the City of Man will ebb and flow throughout history. But God's plan of gathering and perfecting the saints through the preaching of the gospel remains unchanging. It is through the gospel that he is building the culture of the age to come.

Appendix: Key Passages in *Kingdom Prologue* on the Cultural Mandate

KP 66–67: God is the Suzerain, Man is the Vassal-King

- Pre-Fall stipulations of the covenant of creation
- Two aspects/roles
 - Vertical dimension—priestly role—cult
 - Horizontal dimension—kingly role—culture
- These two aspects are distinguishable yet integrated by the theocratic principle
- Cult and culture are both religious
- Formal groundwork for post-Fall sacred-profane distinction
- Post-Fall, cultural functions are not holy but profane
- Nevertheless, carried out under God's mandate and therefore thoroughly religious

KP 68–70: The Pre-Fall Cultural Mandate/Commission

- Key texts: Gen 1:28; 2:15, 19–20
- Be fruitful and multiply (marriage and procreation): "Man himself is the chief end-product of human culture" (KP 69)
- Subdue the earth & exercise dominion: develop the garden into a universal city

KP 74–77: Culture and the Imitation of God

- Man as worker like God—construction, art, procreation
- Man as covenant community
- Man as scientist—not an autonomous activity
- Man as maker of clothing and housing—replica of the Glory of God

KP 78–82: Culture's Eschatological-Sabbatical Form

- Man's cultural labor has a historical movement
- The goal—eschatological consummation
- Cultural commission to consummation rest
- All culture is cult-oriented
- Kingship subordinated to priesthood
- Sabbath sign as stamp of consummation

KP 96–101: Consummation of Glory

- Physical glorification—the perfection of the *imago Dei*
- "Heaven is not a human achievement; it is not the end-product of human culture" (KP 98)
- Man's external culture was provisional and is left behind at the consummation
- "Glorified mankind is the divine culture, the metaculture beyond human culture" (KP 99)
- Terms "Megapolis" and "Metapolis" introduced and explained (KP 100–1)

KP 153–60: Post-Fall: The Holy and the Common

- Adam's Fall, yet final judgment delayed/restrained
- Common (temporal) blessing and common curse
- Common grace order first established in Gen 3:16–19
- Common grace order covenantally promulgated in Gen 8:20—9:17
- Culture continued in modified form
 - "Undergoes such refraction" (KP 157)
 - Certain institutional provisions are resumed
 - But they have a different orientation or objective
 - Original goal of the cultural mandate ("the holy kingdom-temple") is attained by Christ & Spirit (KP 156–57)
- Common grace culture is not holy but profane
 - Sabbath promise not attached because it is not destined for eschatological consummation
 - Shared by elect and non-elect
- How does common grace culture relate to redemption?
 - Only indirectly
 - By allowing history
 - By allowing procreation—genealogical history
- All human activities are religious (KP 160; cp. KP 201)
 - Believers do all things for God's glory
 - But distinction between holy and common is not obliterated

KP 162–80: The Interim World Structure

- The story of the city (Gen 4)
 - City of God: City as originally mandated in the covenant of creation
 - City of Man: City as adapted to abnormal situation post-Fall
- Remedial benefits of the city—offsetting evils resulting from sin and common curse
- Legitimacy not Sanctity
 - City not to be identified with the kingdom of Satan
 - City not to be identified with the holy kingdom of God
- "Common/profane" simply means "not holy, not destined for consummation" (KP 169)
- Structure vs. direction distinction (KP 170)
 - Creator himself modifies original structures after the Fall
 - Kingdom as reign vs. Kingdom as realm
 - Hell requires that distinction
- Critique of neo-Dooyeweerdian cosmomic philosophy (KP 170–71)
 - God sovereignly revised the original structure of things so that there is now a distinction between the common city and the holy city
 - We must not deny God's sovereign prerogative to do such restructuring
- Original family vs. common grace family—"continuity but with a difference" (KP 173)
 - Original family was the covenant community
 - But marriage, procreation, nurturing children continue

- Family precedes the state
- State concerned with maintenance of justice/rights in society

KP 199–203: Sanctification of Culture

- Common grace provides a field of operation for kingdom of saving grace
- “Pragmatic cooperation” with unbelievers (cp. KP 179)
- Praying for the peace of the city (1 Tim 2:2; Jer 29:4ff)
- But don’t fix any hopes on the city of man
- Be aware of the mystery of iniquity developing within
- Objective vs. subjective sanctification of culture (KP 201; cp. KP 160)
- Does not change culture from common to holy
- Saints are not building the kingdom of God by common cultural activity

KP 244–50: The Post-Flood Covenant of Common Grace

- This covenant is not an administration of the covenant of redemptive grace
- “I will confirm/establish my covenant” (Gen 9:9, 11)—meaning of verb *hqym*
- It is a unilateral covenant—no conditions that man must keep
- The meaning of the rainbow
- The Gen 9:9 covenant must be distinguished from the Gen 6:18 covenant of grace

KP 250–53: The Cultural Program of the Covenant of Common Grace

- Gen 9:1–2, 7 echoes but does not repeat Gen 1:28
- It is “not a simple reinstating of the creation ordinances, but a revision of them in the common grace mode” (KP 251)
- Continuity and discontinuity between creational cultural mandate and common grace cultural mandate
- Re-authorization of the state (Gen 4:15; 9:5–6)

KP 255, 261: Miscellaneous

- Believers are to join “with unbelievers in common political, economic, and other cultural endeavors and institutions of all sorts” (KP 255)
- Purpose of the covenant of common grace is to subserve the program of the covenant of grace (KP 261)