

***Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet*, by Jason J. Stellman
(Reformation Trust, 2009); reviewed by Rev. Andy Wilson**

Jason Stellman, pastor of Exile Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Washington State, has written a book that is sure to frustrate those Christians who see moral, cultural and social reform as significant elements of the church's mission. This transformationist approach to culture is shared by Christians of various stripes, ranging from N.T. Wright to theonomists to Reformed Christians who have been influenced by the Kuyperian "all of life redeemed" perspective. The point of view advocated by Stellman is in direct conflict with these other ways of understanding the church's relation to the secular world, and for this reason it will incite charges of being "dualistic." As Douglas Wilson notes in his explanation of why he decided to give a detailed review of Stellman's book on his blog, "I have become settled in my conviction that a particular form of dualism is paralyzing the modern Reformed church." The concern of Wilson, and others like him, is that Stellman's perspective undermines the Christian's motivation for seeking to influence the culture for the sake of Christ's kingdom. It is too "otherworldly." The irony is that this charge can easily be turned around, because it is the transformationist perspective that denies the validity of cultural pursuits for their own sake. Instead, it requires the Christian to always have a redemptive agenda when he participates in any aspect of life in the world. This is especially evident in the way in which mainstream evangelicals engage the popular culture. Novels, music and movies have to be employed as tools for evangelism, resulting in the genre of "Christian fiction," the CCM industry, and films like *Fireproof* and *Facing the Giants*.

The charge of dualism stems from Stellman's advocacy of the "two kingdoms" doctrine, a perspective that is summarized by David VanDrunen as follows:

"God rules the world in two different ways. He is the one and only king, but he has established two kingdoms (or, two realms) in which he exercises his rule in distinct ways. God governs one kingdom..., the 'civil' kingdom, as its creator and sustainer, but not as its redeemer. This civil kingdom pertains to temporal, earthly, provisional matters, not matters of ultimate and spiritual importance... The other kingdom..., the 'spiritual' kingdom, is also ruled by God, but he rules it not only as creator and sustainer but also as its redeemer in Christ. This kingdom pertains to things that are of ultimate and spiritual importance, the things of Christ's heavenly, eschatological kingdom. Insofar as this spiritual kingdom has earthly existence, Calvin believed it must be found in the church and not in the state or other temporal institutions."¹

While the two kingdoms view may be out of fashion, it is not novel, having been advocated in one form or another by Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, and, more recently, Darryl Hart and Michael Horton (who wrote the forward to *Dual Citizens*). Reading through Stellman's book, I was reminded at many points of the closing page from Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, where he laments the kind of worship found in so many churches with these words:

¹ *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, 24. This monograph is available from the Acton Institute.

“The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of meditation and power, not with the authority of God’s Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problem of sin.”²

The two kingdoms perspective avoids this pitfall by arguing for the spirituality of the church and its mission, and by seeing the believer’s participation in secular culture not primarily as kingdom-building work but as a common grace vocation. To my knowledge, Stellan’s book is the best introduction to this way of understanding the relationship between church and culture.

The book is divided into two sections: “Christian Worship for Dual Citizens” and “The Christian Life for Dual Citizens.” As Stellan notes in his introduction, the division of the book into these two sections is purposeful, reflecting his argument that there is indeed a division between the sacred and the secular, in spite of the fact that this can sound like heresy to those who have been taught that the Lordship of Christ over all creation means that all of life should be seen as sacred. John Frame serves as one example of this perspective when he contends that “there is no real difference between worship and the rest of life... [for] it is very difficult, in general, to separate ‘life’ from ‘worship’ in a biblical framework.” [xviii] In response to this mindset, Stellan draws insights from the work of Meredith Kline and makes his case for a sacred/secular dichotomy. According to Kline, the church and the world relate to each other in different ways at different points in biblical history. At certain points, there is no distinction between sacred and secular, but at other points they are clearly separate. Prior to the fall, church and world were not distinct. The entire creation was a holy theocracy. But after the fall, church and world became distinct due to God’s postponement of judgment and his establishment of a realm of common grace in which his plan of salvation could be worked out. Stellan spells this out as follows:

“With his fall, however, man incurred the curse-sanction threatened in the covenant of works. But the promise of redemption from the law’s curse was spoken in Genesis 3:15, thus making necessary the postponement of divine judgment in order to allow for God’s salvation promise to come to fruition. Hence, a new set of distinctions arose in the economy of God’s dealings with His people after the fall. With man having declared his rebellious sovereignty, his kingdom became distinct from God’s kingdom, causing an unnatural separation between cult and culture. Since God’s curse on Adam and Eve was not final (resulting in their immediate destruction) but temporary (affecting all aspects of life for the time being), God mitigated the effects of this common curse with common grace, by which He offset the effects of the fall by providing the necessary protection for man to live in a fallen world. Thus, ‘Common grace was introduced to act as a rein to hold in check the curse on mankind and to make possible an interim historical environment as the theater for a program of redemption.’” [54; the final sentence is a quotation from Kline]

² *Christianity and Liberalism*, 180.

We can see the division of cult and culture during the era of the patriarchs, when God's people were religiously distinct while living in a common culture with unbelievers. This changed during the era of the Mosaic covenant, when the church was both religiously and culturally distinct, living under God's rule within the boundaries of the Promised Land, once again constituting a holy theocracy. But things changed again with the ushering in of the new covenant era, during which the church exists in much the same manner as it did during the patriarchal period, scattered in a land that is not our own, religiously distinct but culturally common. In other words, Christians are members of both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. We live as exiles and pilgrims in the realm of common grace culture as we await the day when we will enter into our eternal inheritance in Christ's kingdom, the ultimate and final theocracy. This framework provides the foundation upon which Stellan's book is built, as he seeks to help Christians to better understand the nature of our pilgrim identity as we live in the intersection between the already inaugurated, but not yet consummated, kingdom of Christ.

Stellan presents his clearest and most compelling arguments for the two kingdoms perspective in the first three quarters of the book. He begins in the first section by explaining the nature of the church's ordinary means of grace ministry as it goes about its pilgrim existence in this present age. Chapter 1, "Corporate Worship," explains that, though the church's ordinary means of grace seem weak and powerless from a worldly point of view, they are nevertheless the only means that the Lord has promised to bless. This stands as a much-needed corrective to the contemporary American church's fascination with developing new ways of doing ministry based upon cultural preferences in order to appear relevant, attractive and beneficial in the eyes of the world. This theme is continued in chapter 2, "The Irrelevance of Relevance," which argues that it is in worship that the church is to be most distinct from the world and that it is a grand mistake for the church to mirror the world in its worship in order to try to win the lost. Chapter 3, "Resident Aliens," further emphasizes the otherworldly nature of the gospel and how it makes Christians into a distinct and separate people. For this reason, Stellan contends that it is wrong for Christians to think about their participation in the common sphere in terms of the conversion of cultural structures. He writes,

"Demands for 'Christian' art, music, or dentistry are both an elevation of those legitimate pursuits above their proper station and a debasing of the label *Christian* by applying it to areas concerning which it has little or nothing to say. Hence, culture is sacralized and cult is trivialized, all in the name of a notion of relevance that God has nowhere promised to bestow." [32]

The next three chapters develop several other aspects of how the church should understand its relationship to the broader culture in this present age. Chapter 4, "The Power of Weakness," contends that the church in this present age needs to accept the fact that the victory that it longs for will only be realized in the age to come and that its present existence will always be "characterized by struggle, temptation and a status of underdog." [42] Chapter 5, "Subversive Sabbatarianism," is critical of those who have sought to restore Sabbath observance out of a desire to recover a lost "Christian America" (e.g. the 19th century's blue laws). While advocating

a recovery of Sabbath-keeping, Stellman sees the motivation for resting and worshipping on the Lord's Day not in terms of cultural transformation but in terms of its importance for maintaining our pilgrim identity. Chapter 6, "Suburblyon," draws upon the depiction of the world as Babylon in the book of Revelation to support the notion that no earthly nation-state carries redemptive significance - not even the good old U.S. of A. Instead, every earthly nation participates, in one way or another, in the idolatrous world-system that is spiritual Babylon.

The last chapter in section 1, chapter 7, "Reformed Piety," returns to themes that were addressed from other angles in the opening chapters, laying emphasis upon the centrality of the church's ordinary means of grace for the advancement of the kingdom. To provide historical background, Stellman explains the 19th century debate over means of grace between Charles Finney and John Nevin. In making his case that the communion that we enjoy with Christ is mediated through the church's ministry and that corporate worship is therefore central to the life of faith, Stellman notes the significance of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, where exclusion from the worshipping body is described as being handed over to Satan. He writes,

"[I]f being expelled from the visible church is to fall prey to the wiles of the Devil, what is membership in it but the enjoyment of the protection and love of God?...When your minister faithfully expounds God's Word, *that is Jesus talking*. When he declares the forgiveness of your sins, *that is Jesus forgiving you*. When he administers the bread and cup, *that is Jesus feeding you his body and blood*...It is by means of the official ministry of Christ's church that He meets with us, cares for us, speaks to us, and feeds us. Though we cannot understand this principle fully, Jesus nonetheless taught that when the church does it on earth, it is therefore done in heaven (Matt. 18:15-20)." [82, 83]

Such words may sound shocking to many contemporary Christians, but they are fully consistent with the teaching of the Westminster divines and of Calvin himself. Speaking of the visible church, the Westminster Confession says, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." [WCF 25.2] And Calvin writes,

"as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels, (Matth. 22: 30.) For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify, (Isa. 37: 32; Joel 2: 32.)"³

Our unfamiliarity with this way of thinking only demonstrates the extent to which our piety has been influenced by the revivalistic, privatized Christianity that was promoted by Finney.

³ *Institutes* 4.1.4

The first three chapters in Part 2 provide a biblical argument for living an “otherworldly” kind of life in this present age. Drawing heavily from the books of Revelation and Ecclesiastes, Stellman shows that believers need to recognize that this world is provisional and not ultimate. This is not escapism, though, because it is based upon the truth. In the words of Peter Kreeft, “Otherworldliness is escapism only if there is no other world. If there is, it is worldliness that is escapism.” [121]

Chapter 11, “Worldliness,” provides a helpful corrective to a problem that can sometimes afflict Christians who are committed to an otherworldly way of life. The two kingdoms way of understanding the relationship between church and world does not require us to deny the goodness of this world. On the contrary, “A sense of wonder at and enjoyment of the providential blessings of earth is essential to true humanity, and is also a direct byproduct of a two kingdoms-driven love for all things ordinary.” [130] While the overall argument of this chapter is helpful and sound, some might feel that Stellman’s cultural analysis is a bit off the mark when he diagnoses ours as a culture that encourages us to make work into an idol and to have a deficient attitude towards leisure. This does not seem to ring true when we consider the extent to which our market-driven society pushes us to consume commercially-produced entertainment.

The last three chapters of the book, though still providing a number of helpful insights, are not as strong as the preceding chapters, because the major arguments are unconvincing, unclear or a bit peculiar. An example of one of the less convincing arguments is seen in chapter 12, “Bridging the Gap,” where Stellman contends that “the person living under the jurisdiction of the new covenant is less susceptible to the dominion of sin than was the old covenant saint.” [144] This argument is largely based upon an eschatological interpretation of the struggle that Paul describes in Romans 7:14-25, which Stellman sees as not being about the believer’s ongoing struggle with sin, but about the contrast between the era of the law (the old administration of the covenant of grace) and the era of the Spirit (the new administration of the covenant of grace).⁴ Needless to say, not every reader will agree with this reading of Romans 7. I would also point out that there is plenty of evidence from both the New Testament and church history that would argue against seeing new covenant believers as more spiritually mature than old covenant believers. (Two New Testament texts that immediately come to mind are Paul’s entire first letter to the Corinthians, which paints a rather unflattering picture of one new covenant church, and Revelation 2-3, in which five-sevenths of the church is described as being seriously compromised with the world.) Finally, I would suggest that Stellman’s argument here seems to be somewhat dissonant with his earlier claim that the church’s present existence is “characterized by struggle, temptation and a status of underdog.” [42] The same general criticism applies to the manner in which the topics of Christian suffering, obedience, and assurance are handled in the last two chapters.

As far as peculiar arguments, the prime example is found in chapter 13, “The Bragging Calvinist,” where Stellman uses 1 Corinthians 9:15 to develop the idea that new covenant believers have the opportunity to do more than the law requires by foregoing our rights for the

⁴ Stellman draws heavily from Herman Ridderbos, Douglas Moo, and Gordon Fee in his interpretation of this passage.

sake of Christ's kingdom. The line of thought here is somewhat confusing. Stellan probably needed to do more to clarify that the acts for which we may "boast" are in no way meritorious.

Despite these reservations, I still heartily recommend *Dual Citizens*. It provides an accessible and engaging introduction to the two kingdoms doctrine, a doctrine with which those who respect Calvin, Hodge, and Machen should at least be more familiar.