

## Geerhardus Vos and Culture

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by William Edgar

On the surface there would appear to be an enormous distance between the trends in contemporary culture studies and any robust theology of culture represented in the venerable tradition of Reformed theology. Literary critic Terry Eagleton examines the state of culture studies today, and concludes, not without alarm, that we are in the midst of culture wars. There are at least three sides: culture as civility, culture as identity, and culture as commercial or postmodern.<sup>1</sup> What he means by “civility” is the view that culture is an ethos, a standard of excellence to which a society should aspire. It’s an Arnoldian call to the finer life of civilization. By “identity” is meant using culture to characterize any cause to which one is tied, be it NASCAR Dads or Soccer Moms, old-world Europeans or romantic rebels from the 1960s. By “commercial or postmodern” is meant the consumerist culture of late capitalism, the fragmented world of anti-foundationalism, or even the mores of “libidinous gratification.”

What, we may ask, do these concepts have to do with what H. Richard Niebuhr calls “Christ the transformer of culture” in the Reformed tradition? Niebuhr argues that over against dualism, which so longs for the end that it downplays the present, “The conversionist, with his view of history as the present encounter with God in Christ, does not live so much in expectation of a final ending of the world of creation and culture as in awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself.”<sup>2</sup> Or what do these warriors have to do with the Kuyperian expression of cultural engagement? One of many articulations of this view is by Albert Wolters in *Creation Regained*. This view holds that every area of life is subject to the Lordship of Christ. Discussing Colossians 1:20 and the comprehensiveness of the reconciliation of *ta panta* (all things), he concludes, “The obvious implication is that the new humanity (God’s people) is called to promote renewal in every department of creation.” He adds, “we have a redemptive task wherever our vocation places us in his world.”<sup>3</sup>

At one level we have such a very different paradigm between the three trends noted by Eagleton and the Reformed tradition’s concern for the great transformative work of Christ in

every realm of the created order, that there appears to be nothing in common. The major difference is in the underlying presupposition that informs the one and the other. Succinctly stated, in much of contemporary culture studies we must begin from below, whereas it is the intention of the Reformed view to begin from above. To elucidate the former, going back to the Enlightenment and the Romantic roots of the contemporary view, we could cite the work of E. B. Tylor (1832-1917). He is perhaps the first to look at culture as learned behavior, that is, as customs or habits that could be passed on. Indeed, he famously defined it this way: “[Culture is] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>4</sup> By saying these habits are “acquired,” he shows his commitments to an evolutionary approach to culture. A well-known characteristic of Tylor’s position is the disparagement of faith. For him expressions of religious belief in his own day meant holding up progress. These were remnants of a more superstitious age. They survived by carrying the vestiges of “primitive religion.” That is, the “belief” part of ancient culture was passed down and uncritically expressed in an age which ought to have gone beyond the earlier stages. According to Tylor, primitive people had developed a belief system which was based on a mistaken notion: that a vital force (or the soul) present in living organisms is detachable and capable of independent existence in its own mode. Perhaps because of dreams, he thought, they surmised that detached and detachable vital forces make up a supra-human, or “supernatural” realm of reality that is just as real as the physical world of rocks, trees, and plants. We now know better, he argued, but we’re still haunted by the ancients. This view has had significant influence, albeit with many variants, right up to the present.

Thus, attempts to build bridges between culture studies and a Reformed approach are difficult at best, some would say impossible. Lest we be too hasty, however, we ought to recognize certain signs of rapprochement. In ways that do not appear to participate in Eagleton’s “culture wars,” we do find some commentators at least attempting to rescue culture from its hibernation into non relevance. Recent trends reflect a move from a rather parochial view of culture to a more healthy recognition of culture’s role. A rediscovery of culture in various quarters wants to connect us with history and to allow a better understanding of people as people. Part of such a rediscovery has been forced upon us by the sea change that occurred at the end of the Cold War. Considering the major transformation in the world’s geopolitical configuration

since the “miracle year” of 1989, David Brooks, commentator for the NYT, said this not too long ago:

Events have forced different questions on us. If the big contest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was between planned and free-market economies, the big questions of the next century will be understanding how cultures change and can be changed, how social and cultural capital can be nurtured and developed, how destructive cultural conflict can be turned to healthy cultural competition.” (David Brooks, *International Herald Tribune*, February 21, 2006, p. 9)

He is not alone. Recently Nassrine Azimi of the United Nations described nation-building in the contemporary world as missing one critical ingredient.

Usually the roles of the military, the strong role of economics, humanitarian relief, education, governance, and the like, are on top of the agenda. But there is a strange neglect of the one element that matters most: culture. As the sign upon the entrance of the Kabul Museum of Afghanistan reads [he reminds us]: “A nation is alive if its culture is alive.”

Thus, culture is being revived because tried and true explanations for world events seem both dated and shallow. This does not mean that we are moving toward a fully biblical view of culture as renewal in every realm of creation. And it certainly does not mean that there is a new longing for the Lordship of Christ. But it does mean we are in a good place to offer our insights into the true nature of culture to a world dearly in need of both.

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Perhaps less ambitiously, but no less urgently, I would submit, this is a good time to look carefully at the biblical teaching on culture and on the Lordship of Christ over all the spheres of

creation, if only that we may move beyond the culture wars and beyond cultural hibernation to something much more theologically responsible. To get at this, what I propose, here, is an examination of the views of Geerhardus Vos on the matter. In part this is to honor Dick Gaffin, in whose honor this is written, and whose great love for the man is patent. And in part, it is because Vos' reflections on culture have never been fully explored, and yet he has much to contribute to the conversation.

It happens that Vos did not say much about culture, at least directly. First, though, he is not altogether silent. And second, we will argue, his entire theological scheme represents a marvelous defense of cultural engagement.

Vos did state his views quite plainly in *The Kingdom of God and the Church*. He says there that the kingdom of God was broader in outreach than the state. Human life reaches far beyond the exclusive domain of church life, and into every realm of legitimate creation activity. Here is a fascinating passage from that work, one which has a decidedly Kuyperian ring to it:

From this [that all authority exercised within the church is Christ the King's], however, it does not necessarily follow, that the visible church is the only outward expression of the invisible kingdom. Undoubtedly the kingship of God, as his recognized and applied supremacy, is intended to pervade and control the whole of human life in all its forms of existence. This the parable of the leaven plainly teaches. These various forms of human life have each their own sphere in which they work and embody themselves. There is a sphere of science, a sphere of art, a sphere of the family and of the state, a sphere of commerce and industry.

He goes on to clarify what these things mean for the Lordship of Christ over all things:

Whenever one of these spheres comes under the controlling influence of the principle of the divine supremacy and glory, and this outwardly reveals itself, there we can truly say that the kingdom of God has become manifest.<sup>5</sup>

As he continues, he mentions that in his earthly ministry Christ did not take the time to spell out the explicit details of what this might look like. Still, there is no doubt about his intention. On the one hand, he says, his doctrine of the kingdom was so comprehensive that everything that is normal and pertains to human life pertains to his kingdom. And then he makes the all important statement, that, on the other hand, this result should not be reached by making human life and its spheres subject to the visible church.<sup>6</sup>

This point is crucial in view of the many forms of church-centered approaches to culture in the evangelical world, both in Vos' times and in ours. This is not the place to investigate such views in any detail. Typically, such an approach refuses to give much countenance to various spheres of social life outside of the church. The state, in one outlook, is more or less a necessary evil, one which accommodates our fallen estate, but which in no way represents the heart of God's concerns, and would not have been necessary in Adam's administration. To single-out only one notable representative, we could cite Richard Hays, the influential New Testament scholar, an ethicist coming broadly out of an Anabaptist tradition. In his magisterial book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Hays argues that the heart of ethics involves "embodying Scripture's imperatives in the life of the Christian community."<sup>7</sup> The church is the "new community" which so identifies with Jesus that it manifests a "glad and generous heart," the sure sign of God's presence, making God's power in the world palpable.<sup>8</sup> The reason the church could "turn the world upside down," he says, is not only that it concentrated on witnessing, but that it could be defiant of Roman authority. Not violently, of course, but in its refusal to accommodate.<sup>9</sup> The only theology of the state here is rather negative.

Indeed, for Hays, not the state, nor any other sphere except the church, can truly display the power of God in a lost world. For him the Sermon on the Mount is where we must live. This message is so important that it represents "Jesus' programmatic disclosure of the kingdom of God and of the life to which the community of disciples is called." Basically, according to Hays, we are to live in a "counter-cultural polis," which Matthew, who records the longest version of the Sermon (chapters 5-7) understood as a fulfillment of the Torah. Accordingly, for example, Hays proclaims that all violence is out of bounds. He cites a number of cases from Jesus' life where he allegedly chose the way of "suffering obedience" rather than the way of violence.

Nonviolent enemy-love is both the eschatological reality and the way of Jesus, he proclaims. Matthew, in this view, managed to undermine the *lex talionis* of the Torah (Dt 19:15-21).<sup>10</sup>

This approach faces a problem when it comes to understanding the authority of the state, and particularly the right of the state to exercise violence when the proper occasion calls for it. A dualistic scheme is the answer. Here is how it works. Hays cites Romans 12:14-21 approvingly. The passage forbids vengeance, tells us to bless those who persecute, and live peaceably with others. Then he turns to Romans 13, which is quite different. He argues that though there may be a sort of necessity for the existence of the state, he cannot condone any Christian participation in the state's call to rule for justice. Astonishingly, he says, "Though the governing authority bears the sword to execute God's wrath (13:4), *that is not the role of believers*. The church is a community of peace."<sup>11</sup> He argues against just war theory, because it fails to recognize that violence begets only violence, and because it is based on the hope that we can approximate God's justice by killing.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is far removed from the tradition that goes by the name of just war. But it is what Hays understands.

The fundamental struggle in such a dualistic approach is that there is no overarching worldview in which a sphere of authority such as the state could be a legitimate entity in itself, and not dependent on the church. This view leads Hays into some strange conclusions. For example, he admits soldiers in the New Testament are not condemned for their profession, but he says the purpose of their being singled out is to show how the gospel reaches the most unlikely people! He cannot fathom a legitimate calling into statecraft. The military is not a Christian option. He adds, good soldiers "weigh negligibly" in a synthetic statement of the New Testament's witness.<sup>13</sup>

While it is not our purpose to provide either a full refutation of this view or a defense of the just war tradition, a couple of thoughts related to our central purpose are appropriate. Romans 12 is not as isolated from Romans 13 as Hays makes it sound. Both chapters are addressed to Christians. Romans 12 forbids believers as believers to exercise private vengeance. God will judge. And he does judge even now, Romans 13 tells us, through the civil magistrate, who is "God's servant," operating in an authority structure which is duly instituted by God. It is perfectly legitimate for a person, believer or not, to aspire to the profession of soldiering. The state is a legitimate sphere for human life, established not because of the fall, but because of the requirements of good order in the world of creation.

Contrary to Hays' radical view, the point of the Sermon on the Mount is not to set up a special ethic for the church, but to proclaim a new world order, one where the kingdom of God has come, one where the blessedness of its members is for now, not just later. True enough, the Sermon tells us about God's radical love in Christ, a love that forgives enemies and gives good gifts to its children. But the Sermon is neither ascetic nor revolutionary. There is no section of life to which it does not speak. The key to the Sermon is 5:17 in which Jesus proclaims he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. His teaching explains the full extent of God's law, and puts an end to casuistry. To understand how the ethics of the Sermon work, one can benefit from navigating the wisdom literature of the Bible. Like the Proverbs, the teachings in the Sermon are cumulative. And as in the wisdom literature, there is not a single, comprehensive application of one part of the law that is not meant to be kept in balance with the rest. For example, in 5:16 Jesus tells us to let our light shine before men, whereas in 6:1 he warns against doing our righteousness before men. And again, in 7:1, he forbids judging another, whereas in 7:6 he tells us to identify dogs and swine. They are not contradictions. Only when we understand the depths of God's love, and the radical claims of his kingdom, can we know when to make one application or another. Therefore, to "turn the other cheek" is not a blanket rule for all of life, nor a better way for believers, as Hays would have it, but exactly the right response in the particular situation where one is tempted to enact vigilante violence.

Herman Ridderbos confirms this view in his wonderful smaller book, *When the Time Had Fully Come*. In the chapter on the Sermon he states:

There is no contradiction, no difference of level, between Matthew 5 and Romans 13. Kingdom of God does not mean the abolition of God's previous ordinances for the natural and social life... On the contrary, social life, political order, international justice as such belong just as well to the righteousness in all sectors of life and that they have to do that in the light of the whole revelation of God to which the Sermon on the Mount refers.<sup>14</sup>

Put thus we can understand that any attempt to dichotomize between the church as the most spiritual location for Christian living, and the world as a necessary holding pattern, is not helpful.

Believing the different realms of creation in which we must somehow navigate are temporary support systems in which we must be careful not to over-invest, is simply sub-biblical. The best of the Reformed tradition, albeit with significant variants, has acknowledged a more holistic worldview approach which sees the state, and every other legitimate sphere of activity, as a place to live-out the full reality of the kingdom of God.

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It is our understanding that Geerhardus Vos confirms this view, and helps us counter the narrow trends inculture sutides and in evangelical dualism. Where should we begin in order to find out how he looks at culture? The first place, quite logically, is in his considerations about the creation and its original purpose. In the marvelous collection of notes which became *Biblical Theology*, Vos stresses the importance of four great principles at work in the preredemptive “primeval revelation.”<sup>15</sup> The first he entitles “the principle of life in its highest potency,” which he says is sacramentally symbolized by the tree of life. Lots could be said here, but what is significant for our purposes is that by placing man in the garden of God, the Lord intends to state at the dawn of creation that human beings were in fellowship with God, the God of life. Indeed, life is virtually synonymous with the call, and the very meaning of humanity. By reiterating the life-giving purpose of placing man in a garden, the prophets, the psalmists, and many authors right up to John’s Revelation (2:7) tell us that to be God’s people is to have life.

As is well recognized, Vos has a strong eschatological understanding of the first creation. While beautiful and satisfying, there was more to come, as indicated by the tree of life. The second principle is that of “probation,” which is also symbolized by a tree, that of the knowledge of good and evil. After discussing various views Vos decides that the purpose of this unique test, not to eat of the fruit of this particular tree, was meant to lead to a higher state, beyond even the perfection of the garden. What is the central idea of this progress? It is the call to greater ethical strength, and thus “to that state of religious and moral maturity wherewith its highest blessedness is connected.”<sup>16</sup> He argues that greater knowledge of good and evil is not a bad thing, because it could have happened without guilty disobedience.

The point for us to notice is that there was a plan for human development, a project for historical unfolding. The third and fourth principles develop these points. They are, the

temptation and sin, and the principle of death. Each of these illustrate God's intention to lead the human race to a higher place. The importance of such an eschatology for understanding culture cannot be missed.

As we know, man fell, and death and dissolution ensued. Vos makes the point that this death was every opposite of life. We know, too, that God in his mercy promised life again to our first parents. The seed of the woman would overcome the seed of the serpent. Again, when he describes death, Vos is in fact concentrating on the reality of life. In his sermon, "The Spiritual Resurrection of Believers," based on Ephesians 2:4-5, he eloquently describes the death which is presupposed in Paul's promise of life. To reckon with the damage done by death is one way to grasp the extent of the principle of life.<sup>17</sup> Life, he says, is an attribute of God, who alone has it truly. Life for the creature is only to be had in fellowship with God. Just as at the beginning, darkness covered the earth until the Spirit of God hovered over it, so we are lifeless until God breathes into our nostrils the breath of life. "As long as love and God's fellowship lived in him, they controlled all lower forces and led them in the right direction so that they could not harm him."<sup>18</sup> But when God's life-power is not longer active, then everything goes wrong.

Thus far, we see that "culture" must be connected to the great original principles set down by God for the government of the world. By living with God we live. And life characterizes everything we do in this place which God has made. While sin corrupts everything, it is not allowed to abrogate the entire world fabric, nor human exercise of culture. The narrative leading up to the flood proceeds in three stages, according to Vos. First, it describe the degeneration in the line of Cain. Even here, though, there is a "working of common grace in the gift of invention for the advance of civilization in the sphere of nature."<sup>19</sup> Sin comes and prostitutes God's common grace gifts, so that what would have been there to protect and enrich people, becomes twisted into arrogant usage. Thus, cattle-raising, music, metallurgy, etc., are good in themselves, but are eventually used for belligerent boasting (Gen. 4:23-24). Next, the narrative describes another line, the Sethites, about which nothing pertaining to culture is said, but that they issued in those who walked before God. Vos is quick to add, though, that "God sometimes chooses families and nations standing outside the sphere of redemption to carry on the progress in secular culture."<sup>20</sup> He then, rather like Calvin, cites the Greeks for their art and the Romans for their jurisprudence. And finally, he says that the contrast of the two lines is only

relative, since both would perish. Third, then, the text shows an intermarriage which ends the distinction.

When the Lord does judge, with the great flood, he then saves one family, and begins the creation dynamic all over again. There is the promise of life, and its protection. There is “the echo of some of the original creative ordinances,” including the command and blessings of fruitfulness. There are differences between the original creation and this re-creation. In the beginning nature, and the animal world, submitted willingly to human rule, but now they do so out of fear. Reciprocally, man must show reverence for life by not eating animals as wild beast do their prey.<sup>21</sup> What is significant for our purposes is to note that what we call culture, the rule, the fruitfulness, the development of humanity, are restored and blessed, even in a fallen world.

Looking at the progress of redemptive history and its coordinate revelation one would rightly conclude that the climax of world events is in the coming of Jesus Christ. In his comments on Galatians 4:4, he asserts that it is “a phrase which certainly means more than that the time was ripe for the introduction of Christ into the world: the fullness of the time means the end of that aeon and the commencement of another world-period.”<sup>22</sup> What should not be missed, however, is that most often Vos considers this culmination, the change of eras, not just as an end point, but as the introduction of the final reality into the present. As he puts it in the same place, the resurrection of Jesus anticipates and secures the general resurrection. And his death, which is an atonement, is also “the securing and embodying in advance the judgment and destruction of the spiritual powers opposed to God,” in other words, the final judgment. This “other great eschatological transaction” is thus brought within the scope of Christ’s present activity, *and* the present activity of the believer.<sup>23</sup>

So for Vos the reality of heaven is already upon us. That maturing into consummate bliss anticipated in the garden is now made a reality, thanks to the grace of God in Christ. In what is possibly his most important contribution to our understanding of the ways of the Lord with human affairs, Vos discusses the “already-not-yet” of the new world order. There is hardly a text from his pen that does not articulate it in some way. To call the “already” presence of the last estate an “intrusion” is perhaps accurate as far as it goes, but it is more exact to speak of the “provisionally-realized final state.”<sup>24</sup> Particularly for the apostle Paul, but most assuredly for other authors of Scripture, including especially the letter to the Hebrews, this present reality is not divided from the future consummation in any simple way. Nor does it mean lowering the

expectation of a world to come. It does mean we live in the reality of the heavenlies (Eph 1:3, 20; Col 1:1, 2, 13; 2 Tim 4:18, etc.).

In the eschatology of the Old Testament, events of the end times had been considered successively, Vos reminds us. Thus we live in the times of anticipation, until the judgment, the ushering in of the new heavens and the new earth, together with the coming of the Messiah, which are telescoped into one great final event. But now, with the coming of Christ, and especially the pouring out of the Spirit, two worlds are superposed: “If the second world has received its actual beginning through Christ, and if nevertheless, as cannot be denied, the first world, this present world, is still continuing in its course, then it is clear that both now exist contemporaneously.”<sup>25</sup> Put another way, the eschatological state is no longer only future, but is present, although, as he puts it, “in a higher way.”<sup>26</sup> Or, again, “the Christian things are not a new product of time; they are rather the descent into time of the essence of eternity.”<sup>27</sup>

Regarding our concerns about cultural life, a basic question does arise. How do we know that Vos is not somehow dualistic himself, when he appears to deny the importance of this first or present world, by calling the second one higher, or calling it eternal vs. temporal? At least two constant themes in Vos’ output would confirm his opposition to any wrong-minded dichotomizing.

The first is his constant reminder that the world of grace does not override the world of nature, but informs it and recasts it. We see this in his treatment of the “psychical man” and the “pneumatic man.” We find it in many places. Take, for example, his review of Von D. Wilhelm Bousset’s important book at the time, *Kyrios Christos*.<sup>28</sup> Vos faults Bousset for finding Paul to erect a dichotomy between *sarx* and *pneuma*. As Bousset would have it, “The Christian state is said to destroy the continuity in the life of man, because in making him *pneuma* it does not restore or develop what was originally given in nature, but supplants the latter by something altogether new.” For Vos this amounts to an opening for Gnosticism and a split between nature and grace. For Paul does not use the term *sarx* to represent the original natural condition of man. Rather, it is synonymous with sin, and therefore is not the product of creation. Christ came to reverse what *sarx* destroyed. Certainly, alongside that, the world of the Spirit lifts us to a higher stage which even Adam did not possess. But, as he insists, “Still, it would be incorrect to find in this a suspension of the continuity or identity of life.”<sup>29</sup>

In his remarks on 1 Cor. 15:45, Vos notes that when Paul contrasts the state of creation to the eschatological state he compares not the *sarkic*, but the *psychic* man in creation with the pneumatic life of the resurrection.<sup>30</sup> He reiterates this interpretation throughout his writings. In an important section of his article, “Paul’s Eschatological Concept of the Spirit,” he comments on the passage 1 Corinthians 15: 42-50.<sup>31</sup> The passage contrasts the “pre-eschatological” body with the “eschatological” body. The former is characterized as *psychikon*, while the latter is *pneumatikov*. True, Paul adds to the contrast the perishable, dishonorable, weak body from the fall with the imperishable, glorious, powerful body of the resurrection (vv. 42-43, cf. 50). But the more fundamental contrast is between our natures as characterized either in Adam or in Christ (vv. 44-49). The former represents the order of things established at the creation, while the latter is a second world order, established in Christ, who is “life-giving Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> The former is of the earth, the latter is from heaven.<sup>33</sup>

Christians live in this double reality, in two realms which themselves open up into two. On the one hand, we are still bound to our earthly condition, which is both blessed as deriving from creation and cursed as deriving from sin. On the other, we live in the reality of the heavenlies, which is already here, but which will one day become fully manifest. Here we must exercise our cultural mandate. Vos instructs us that *because* the resurrection is in view, we now have all we need to live out our calling faithfully. In answer to the question, what do we do with the apparent gap between Jesus’ resurrection and the believer’s, which might destroy their organic coherence, he answers:

What we desire is to be able to show, that the believer’s whole ethico-religious existence, the sum-total of his Christian experience and progress, all that is distinctive of his life and conduct demands being viewed as a preparation for the crowning grace of the resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

This life of preparation is the opposite of otherworldly or dualistic, since it operates in the eschatological reality that was intended right at the creation, and is now accomplished in Christ.

Put differently, the future certainty of consummation is so tied to the present that it informs our way of life. “Nothing is more characteristic of this eschatological outlook than that

the highest privilege awaiting the people of God consists in an unlimited opportunity for engaging in religious service... Face to face with the new Jerusalem Isaiah's interest still centers in the fact that there the perfect religion will be realized..."<sup>35</sup> Far from detaching us from this world, such a vision gives it a basic meaning found nowhere else.

While Vos makes very few direct applications to cultural life, his point for the Christian's calling is clearly to establish such a continuity between the world to come and the present manifestation of that world that everything we think and do has meaning. Literally, this is the meaning of life! As he puts it, "For 'life' is undoubtedly with Paul, and before Paul with Jesus, especially in the Synoptical teaching, an idea that is in the first instance eschatologically conceived and thence carried back to the present."<sup>36</sup>

The second great principle which confirms Vos' refusal of dualism is, of course, his God-centered theology. The unity of human life is assured by its singleness of purpose before God. Vos writes so often about this, and so eloquently, that one hardly knows where to begin. Since the fundamental arrangement that characterizes our relation with God is the covenant, we might look first at the way Vos handles this central precept. In the address, turned into the article, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," he notes that it was particularly in Reformed theology that the covenant idea was highlighted.<sup>37</sup> Why was that the case, since it is a Scriptural doctrine, open to anyone's investigation? Simply, he suggests, because the background for the covenant is "the preeminence of God's glory in the consideration of all that has been created." He eloquently states that the existence of man is because of God, which is "written at the entrance to the temple of Reformed theology."<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the article Vos underlines matters related to the glory of God as they connect to the covenant. Looking at the covenant of works, he notes that the Reformed approach stresses the "antecedent work of God." The covenant in which man is placed is "a gift flowing out of the condescending mercy of the Lord." Furthermore, God opened up a way for him to attain unlosable eternal life. To help him appreciate that it is not the blessedness of this eternal life in itself but the presence of God which produces that blessedness, he was put to the test, so that he would be "led up to it in a rational way." The image of God which we are must be brought forth into full consciousness and even extended. When it comes to the covenant of redemption, all of this is intensified. All is centered in Christ, who acquired the virtues we need to exercise our part of the covenant. In contrast to Lutheranism, which considers redemption to be a restoration, the

Reformed view considers it to be far more. What was promised to Adam in the Tree of Life is now accomplished in Christ in the covenant of grace, so that “The Christian knows that he is a party in God’s covenant and as such has all things and spans at any moment the whole orbit of grace, both in time and for eternity.”<sup>39</sup>

The implication of this God-centered covenant for cultural life is clear. We have “all things” at any moment, and thus there is nothing at all that lies outside of this fullness. The full sovereignty of God in Christ does not make us passive nor inactive. Quite the contrary. Not only in our consciousness do we experience the God of the covenant, but in our manner of life. Indeed, if Christ is Lord, then he will produce much fruit in us, who are his subjects. And this in every area of life. Again, echoing Kuyper, he says:

[Christ] cannot be quiet and inactive in us. His kingdom is only fully manifest when we are so governed by His Word and Spirit that we are wholly subject to Him. Christ is the anointed King, not only over His church, but also He has been given to her as Head over all things. Hence, in the activity of believers, by which His rule is realized, lies also the urgency to work *in all spheres of life*. For the Reformed believer Christianity, by virtue of its covenantal character, is a restless, recreating principle which never withdraws itself from the world, but seeks to conquer it for Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Note the balance here. Our work is in every sphere of life. We are cultural beings. Yet no work is an end in itself. Our cultural involvements are the reflection of the deeper reality of our relationship with God.

Perhaps nowhere does Vos put this more beautifully than in his article, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke.”<sup>41</sup> In hardly any other New Testament writing is the Christian religion characterized as face-to-face intercourse with God than in the Hebrews:

To be a Christian is to live one’s life not merely in obedience to God, nor merely in dependence on God, nor even merely for the sake of God; it is to stand in conscious, reciprocal fellowship with

God, to be identified with Him in thought and purpose and work, to receive from Him and give back to Him in the ceaseless interplay of spiritual forces.<sup>42</sup>

So God is at the center. This is what is missing in so many of the pursuits of culture in today's research. As a result, culture becomes more and more difficult to understand. Neither culture as civility, culture as identity, nor culture as commercial or postmodern phenomena can be properly analyzed. Not can they be put back together into any meaningful whole. Because culture is divorced from life, and because life can only make sense in covenant relationship with God through Christ, only when we begin from this higher place, the glory of God, can we begin to understand culture and engage it. Geerhardus Vos has not addressed himself particularly concretely to the issue of culture. But he has given us the vision to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton: *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 64. These "culture wars" bear no resemblance to the notion set forth by James Davison Hunter, in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York: Basic Books, 1992, and subsequent works, which pits the "orthodox" vs. the "progressive" poles in America.

<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr: *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper & Row, 1951, p. 195. By quoting Niebuhr I do not mean to endorse his general approach to the subject, fascinating and lucid though it be. With various critics I agree that both his definition of "Christ" (somewhat Neo-Orthodox) and "culture" (a somewhat static view appropriated from Malinowski) are in need of revision.

<sup>3</sup> Albert M. Wolters: *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> From E. B. Tylor: *Primitive Culture* (London, 1871), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Geerhardus Vos: *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1979 [henceforth, *KGC*], pp. 87-88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-131.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 324-25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 335-37.

<sup>14</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos: *When the Time Had Fully Come*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Geerhardus Vos: *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948 [henceforth, *BT*], 37 ff. Vos had originally wanted these studies to be called "the history of special revelation."

<sup>16</sup> *BT*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Geerhardus Vos: *Grace and Glory*, Edinburgh & Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1994 [henceforth, *GG*], pp. 209-232.

<sup>18</sup> *GG*, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> *BT*, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> *BT*, p. 58.

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- <sup>21</sup> *BT*, p. 64.
- <sup>22</sup> “Paul’s Eschatological Concept of the Spirit,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., editor, Phillipsburg: P & R Publishers, 1980 [henceforth, *SW*], p. 93.
- <sup>23</sup> *SW*, p. 93.
- <sup>24</sup> Geerhardus Vos: *The Pauline Eschatology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952 [henceforth, *PE*], pp. 38-39.
- <sup>25</sup> “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke,” in *SW*, pp. 197-98.
- <sup>26</sup> *SW*, p. 198.
- <sup>27</sup> *SW*, p. 199.
- <sup>28</sup> Book review, Von D. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus*, orig. in *Princeton Theological Review* 12 (1914): 636-645, reproduced in *SW*, 534-543.
- <sup>29</sup> *SW*, p. 541.
- <sup>30</sup> *SW*, p. 542.
- <sup>31</sup> *SW*, pp. 105-107.
- <sup>32</sup> *SW*, p. 106. In an elaborate footnote, Vos explains why Paul moves from contrasting the sinful body with the resurrection to contrasting the body of creation with the resurrection in VV. 44 ff. No “Hellenic” thought which says that first there was an ideal man and then an empirical (feeble) man at the creation, can be found here. Paul would never mix the order of creation with the fall. Rather, he is simply moving from a narrow scope, comforting the readers in view of death, to a broader scope, which shows that from the beginning, before the fall, there was an eschatology in view. Cf., *PE*, pp. 166 ff. See Richard B. Gaffin: *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1987, p. 82.
- <sup>33</sup> See *PE*, p. 167-8
- <sup>34</sup> *PE*, p. 157. He adds that so comprehensive is Christ’s enveloping the believer, even the dead are never separated from him, nor he from them (p. 158).
- <sup>35</sup> “Some doctrinal Features of the Earlier Prophecies of Isaiah,” in *SW*, p. 286.
- <sup>36</sup> *SW*, pp. 112-113.
- <sup>37</sup> This rectoral address delivered in Dutch, in 1891, at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, was revised and retranslated, and published privately in 1971. It is reproduced in *SW*, pp. 234-267.
- <sup>38</sup> *SW*, p. 242.
- <sup>39</sup> *SW*, p. 256.
- <sup>40</sup> *SW*, pp 260-61. My emphasis.
- <sup>41</sup> Originally in the *Princeton Theological Review* 13 (1915) pp. 587-632; and 14 (1916), pp. 1-61. Reprinted in *SW*, pp. 161-233
- <sup>42</sup> *SW*, p. 186.