

**Book Reviews of Dr. Joseph Boot's
*Gospel Culture: Living In God's Kingdom***

Review by Bill Lliorca

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Dr. Joseph Boot is the executive director of the Ezra Institute of Contemporary Christianity (EICC) in Toronto, Canada, received his M.A. from Manchester University (U.K.), and his Ph.D. in Christian Thought from Whitefield Theological Seminary in Florida. For several years he served as an apologist with Ravi Zacharias Ministries International, and has publically debated atheists in Canada and the U.S. He's written books on apologetics, spoken at conferences and on the radio, and serves as Senior Fellow of a few different apologetic and cultural ministries. He is also the senior editor of Jubilee, the Ezra Institute's journal.

Gospel Culture is a short book (103 pages) and is the first volume in a series of forthcoming books EICC plans to publish entitled Cornerstones. In the "Preface to the Series", Randall Currie (Board Chair, EICC) explains that these are to be "focused monographs...intended to be an accessible point of entry for thoughtful Christians" to equip them with the answers of a comprehensive gospel in a world "thoroughly saturated by humanistic and pagan assumptions" (P xiv).

I believe this book successfully accomplishes the goal intended above. I've read stacks of books describing the gospel's relationship to culture but this one deserves to be at the very top of the choicest stack for several reasons. It's a clear, succinct, precise, thought-provoking, and beautifully written book that I believe will prove to be a classic statement referred to over and over again.

First, it's a succinct presentation of what can be a very complicated and confusing topic. There have been many books over the years that have been good, even classic approaches to Christianity and culture. I think immediately of Niebuhr's classic taxonomy of various Christian approaches to culture, which divides into 5 essential ways Christians have historically theologized about their relationship to culture. Though I would recommend Niebuhr for good background reading and familiarization with this topic, Boot's book jumps right in with a transformational approach to culture (a biblically modified version of Niebuhr's "conversionist approach"). You know what approach your author is taking and where he's leading you from the start. And from the start Boot leads with a biblically faithful account of man's relationship to culture.

Boot's assessment is that our present age is characterized by madness due to our abandonment in the West of Christianity's biblical definition of man found in Genesis 1:26—the image God. Man, being God's image, is fundamentally a worshipping creature and therefore culture is built upon a religious foundation, because culture is "a state of being cultivated by intellectual and moral tilling in terms of a prevailing *cultus* and, by natural extension, forms a particular type of civilization" (P 3).

Second, what is often a challenging topic Boot simplifies without losing the argument's comprehensive thrust. This simplification also brings an element of clarity that I appreciate in an introductory book. For instance, culture is said to be "what man does with God's creation." Easy as 1-2-3. If culture is all that man does with creation this categorically defines man as a cultural being because he's circumscribed by creation. Creation is his only environment and the only prop with which he works on the stage of his existence. Since man is religious and all that man does is cultural, all culture is religious. Following Henry Van Til, "Culture is religion externalized.". What does man do? He does culture? What is culture? Culture is all that man does with God's creation, and it's necessarily religious because it's all done before the face of God. What effect does the gospel

have on culture? The gospel reconciles a once alienated rebel to God and thereby brings blessing on all his work—that work producing art, science, philosophy, politics, and social institutions now characterized by the peace of Christ.

I think the greatest contribution Boot makes to the Church’s understanding of Christianity’s relationship to culture is his syllogism:

“If culture is the public expression of the worship of a people, and the gospel restores man to true worship (i.e. of the Creator, not the creation), then the gospel restores man to true culture, which is the kingdom of God.”

I’m calling this Boot’s “Gospel-culture Syllogism.” It’s easy, it’s memorable, and is at once an aid to any discussion or debate on the topic. These types of pithy phrases or epigrams are great for helping anchor a conversation without losing ourselves in the mists of ambiguity and passion. Because man is a cultural creature and because culture is necessarily religious, the gospel forms in man a particular desire for a particular culture: a gospel culture. There is then a gospel culture distinct from other religious cultures. This cogency bespeaks what I believe will be the book’s classic characteristic and, thus, gives it staying power: a value beyond our historical and cultural moment.

It’s the third chapter that hit me the hardest and I found to be the most thought-provoking (“The Power Motive of Humanistic Culture”). Here Boot describes man now bereft of real direction as a result of his rebellion against God’s word and left only with his godless desire to remake the world in his own image. Rejecting the gift of revelation, man must gin up his own meaning in the form of incantation; either overt witchcraft or the covert witchcraft of autonomous expertise. Either way, witchcraft is the necessary result of rejecting God’s word. “We can say then that the foundation of all devilry is rebellion against God, which seeks knowledge, power, and dominion through a negation of God’s Word and purpose--this is the essence of the magical worldview” (P 29).

Especially clear is his description of fallen man’s pendulum swing from magician to technician—or to follow the alliteration—from magician to materialist. Anyone familiar with Screwtape Letters will hear C.S. Lewis’s memorable description of the modern tendency—to be either so absorbed by modern scientism as to deny evil spirits’ existence and thereby be their useful idiots through ‘amoral’ tools. Or, to be so absorbed by an obsession with power we resort to overt occult practices and engage in witchcraft. But the reason for this absorption, magical or mechanical, is one: rejecting God’s word and supplanting it with another. Furthermore, because no word but God’s Word gives us a full-orbed definition, lesser words dehumanize and erode man’s flourishing. “The simple truth is that, without love for God and a recognition of his Word-revelation to us in Christ and in Scripture, we are not only unable to truly to love our neighbor, we cannot even identify them truly. We find, in fact, that we cannot answer a most elementary question: “What is a person?” (P 21).

The fourth chapter is the longest and is his critique of “Two Kingdoms Theology” (‘2K’ or ‘R2K’). Summarizing 2K theology Boot quotes Brian Mattson:

“The central dogma is that while God rules over and governs the entire world, he does so in two distinct ways. His rule is divided into two distinct realms, each with its own origin, its own norms, and its own destiny” (P 48).

Boot rejects the 2K approach because of their bedrock denial that all of life is religious. He says “scriptural clarity is missing” when applied to anything outside of a marginalized “church-life” just because 2K denies any application. Boot illustrates that 2K advocates a view of Scripture which denies universal applicability, a view which in the final analysis denies the sufficiency of Scripture to speak to real world issues.

I especially appreciated his candid response to 2K naiveté that insists upon a “common kingdom” agreed upon between believers and unbelievers:

“I do not believe it is viable to take 2K theology seriously in areas of the world where Christians are suffering, sometimes terribly in lands dominated by false religions. It is all too easy to speak of a ‘common kingdom’ governed by norms we can all agree upon from comfortable academic chairs within a culture that has been deeply transformed by the gospel for centuries” (P 54).

Boot goes further in his critique though. He calls 2K advocate’s unwillingness to see biblical norms applied outside of a church context as a “convenient exit,” which I think is helpful because conviction is nothing without courage (P 54). What value does a person's view have whose convictions of reality require no courage because the world is fine so long as you line up quietly within your own private religious closet housed in the civil pantheon? If no one cares what you’re saying then you are not a threat. But heaven forbid if we set theological detonators to the pantheon itself and declare a new King to be both Lord and Savior. Over against 2K theology, “if we have any hope of addressing the challenges facing us in the West today, we cannot allow a doctrine of retreat or escape to rule the church” (P 54).

So it’s succinct and clear but it’s also very hard-hitting. It would be a shame to see the size of the book (103 pages) as any measure of its importance. Dynamite can be packed in a small package—so it is here. (Boot has also written a much larger book on this topic, *The Mission of God*--which I can’t wait to get my hands on). As noted above, I’ve read several similar books relating this topic. In fact, I pointed my wife to my bookshelf with well over 30 books on the topic and told her this book does what all those do but better and with less time. Of course, Boot undoubtedly stands on the shoulders of many of these cultural-theological giants. But he enables the beginner to get his toes wet with this short and power-packed book.

Finally, though Dr. Boot’s topic is focused on a particular topic--culture--the broad range of usefulness this book lends to a worldview introduction should not be underestimated. Precisely because the West generally and Christians in particular have lost, forgotten, or abandoned the necessary presuppositions constituting a harmonious view of reality--the Christian worldview--our culture has degenerated into the insanity that so characterizes our age. Boot does this well by introducing the reader to the mainspring of a Christian worldview: a Christian view of man and his calling as the image of God.

In conclusion, for those interested in a book that challenges some popular approaches to Christianity and culture or just a great introduction to Christian worldview thinking, *Gospel Culture: Living in God’s Kingdom* is an excellent book to pick up. It’s a clear, pithy, succinct, powerful--and most importantly--biblical defense of the Christian’s responsible interaction with culture. *Tolle Lege!*

Review by Dr. John Malcolm

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Dr. Boot is a philosopher and his little volume has one purpose, to demolish not just the partition between secular and spiritual but the whole idea that there are two such spheres. God created this world and the distinction is between believer and unbeliever who live in God's one world. There is no separation into a 'Common Kingdom' and a 'Spiritual Kingdom.'

Dr. Boot further points out that man is a worshipping being. The secularist worships the creature rather than the Creator. He deifies something in creation, maybe himself or another object or person. We are familiar with cultures that encompass all the activities of life, as in Muslim or Hindu cultures. The secularist culture is not neutral. It is just as much an expression of his worship as is the case with other religious cultures and it governs all his thoughts and activities.

One feature of secular culture is the secularist's low view of man as not bearing the image of God. He imagines himself to be liberated when he is really a slave to this idea. From it arises all sorts of sub human desires and degrading actions which Dr. Boot discusses at some length.

We are not up against irreligion but a secularist religion. It is no surprise that secularists often turn to the occult. Finding deification of themselves or others inadequate for their needs they try to harness occult powers. Satan becomes their deity.

Dr. Boot says that Jesus Christ "is both the power and the wisdom of God" (Col. 2:3), adding, "Christ instructed his disciples to wait in Jerusalem, telling them, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you and you will be my witnesses' (Acts 1:8). This is the only source of true and integrating power. And the gospel still has the power to change the world, because it carries with it the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. We are given this unshakeable assurance that, whatever the machinations of darkness may be, 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet' (Romans 16:20)."

The book might almost be entitled, "The problems of the secularist living in God's world." We highly recommend it but one really needs a philosophical turn of mind to cope with all the ideas.