

ARISE & BUILD

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HEALING THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY BAD THEOLOGY

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



A recurring theme in my writing over the last forty years is that we keep reinventing the wheel, being ignorant of those who have already claimed the ground we're battling over for Christ, or who have already cleared the air of life-sapping doctrinal errors that once again obstruct the gospel's progress in every area of life. There are reminders in Scripture that, by rights, should prevent such self-inflicted amnesia, and we examined one such text in a previous issue of *Arise and Build*:

Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn,
and to the hole of the pit whence ye are
digged. (Isa. 51:1b)

While we find excellent material throughout the works of R. J. Rushdoony that answers to the description above, it is important to note that God had called other men to put their shoulder into similar tasks (if for no other reason than the one stated in Nehemiah 4:19b: "The work is very great and large, and we are few and far apart along the wall"). Introducing our readership to valuable scholarship from other quarters of Christendom helps to broaden our collective horizons.

And while we have a "Swiss Rushdoony" in Jean-Marc Berthoud, or a "French Rushdoony" with Pierre Courthial, or other men of similarly broad learning and growing impact (e.g., Vishal Mangalwadi), we'll be casting our gaze in a different direction. This is not to slight

these men, nor a failure to notice important new works that appeared at the end of 2021, such as *The Beast, the Whore, and the Forgotten Vision* by Ron Kronz. But we will take a step backward in time to consider an important book by Dr. C. van der Waal, one that confronts some of the more crippling misconceptions that dominate the minds of Christians today.

Cornelis van der Waal (1919-1980) was a scholar that I've drawn attention to twice before, in respect to his book *The World, Our Home*.¹ It might surprise many to learn that his name has appeared in other studies² alongside the names of Rushdoony, Bahnsen, Van Til, Gentry, North, DeJong, etc., whereby we're served notice that his contributions would be equally valuable for us to consider. His is a name that should be better known, especially given that his survey of the entire Bible (available free online) is an impressive work in its own right.³ Not all of his material has been translated out of the Dutch, which has tended to restrict its circulation, but *The World, Our Home* is an important exception.

When referencing van der Waal's book, I will simply put the page numbers in brackets behind the relevant citation to simplify matters.

Our focal point will be van der Waal's dismantling of the scriptural texts that are used to justify Christian inaction, impotence, and irrelevance in respect to culture. His handling of the concepts of the *stranger*, the *alien*, the *sojourner*, the

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desert motif, appeals to *here we have no lasting city*, and the denigration of our cultural responsibilities, deserves a wider audience. By clearing these supposed obstacles out of the way, by denying slothful Christians these alleged prooftexts to justify the perpetual warming of pews (what Ron Kronz calls “their static approach to Kingdom business”), he guides us back to our duties to our King.

NO LASTING CITY HERE?

In the spirit of Proverbs 18:17, van der Waal casts a critical eye at the texts deployed by those who defend the cultural retreat of Christians into a spiritual ghetto. One of these is Hebrews 13:14, and his comments are worth reproducing here.

[Hebrews 13:14 in the ESV] is translated as follows: “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” This text has been interpreted very piously to suggest the abandonment of earthly life ... But the text demands that we read it in its proper context ... The whole letter to the Hebrews speaks of the fulfillment and the realization of the shadows and figures of the old covenant, but also exhorts the believers to break with Jewish worship and to join the Christian church.

A compelling ground is given as well: the old city Jerusalem is not permanent; we do not have a lasting city here ... the author speaks in clear terms about the covenant wrath that will come upon the covenant people who reject Christ as High Priest ...

... we must explain Heb. 13:14 in light of the prediction of Christ about the destruction of Jerusalem. We are not permitted to use this text to describe our resignation to the fact that everything is in vain. We cannot permit ourselves to base our pessimism about culture on this text ... When Bible quotations are used as popular expressions we must always be on guard!

Hebrews is not speaking about what we accomplish, but about the antithesis between synagogue and church. How often has not a pietistic approach taken texts out of their covenantal context only to

give them a completely different meaning? There is such a thing as pietistic demythologization! In shunning culture, many have grasped the opportunity to use isolated texts to support their position ... It is useful though to investigate the traditional slogans of cultural pessimists. They lack solid ground to support their interpretation. [34-35]

And we must agree: it is indeed “useful to investigate the traditional slogans of cultural pessimists” so that they are understood properly, and are set aside as faulty rationales for cultural abstention. We’ll take a look at a few more examples of van der Waal’s analyses to whet the reader’s appetite for more.

THE VALE OF TEARS

The idea of this life being “a vale of tears” has been urged as proof that the Heidelberg Catechism also ultimately promotes cultural pessimism, despite the cultural achievements of Christians in Heidelberg at the time. Several illustrations of this optimism in the relevance of God’s Word to culture in that era are put forward by van der Waal, who then identifies (and corrects) the fly in the ointment:

But, someone will remark, in spite of all this the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 9 speaks of this “jammerdal” (vale of tears).⁴ And that is true. But the Latin text says here: *aerumnosa vita*, that is, the life that is full of hardship.

Moreover, “vale of tears” is an expression of Luther. In Psalm 84:6, he translates “valley of balsam trees” into German as “jammerthal” (“vale of tears”). In Psalm 84:6 it is clear, whatever the correct translation may be, that there is a promise of water for those who pass through the thirsty valley ... It is therefore incorrect to say that this earth is a vale of tears and that we are not at home on this earth ... The people on the journey through the thirsty valley make it a place of springs; they do not display an attitude of passive surrender to God, but are full of *cultural* activity. They do not say: we are not at home here. In spite of difficulties, they do their work. [38-39]

So you might then conclude, “Perhaps

van der Waal has neutralized two texts (Heb. 13:14 and Ps. 84:6) used to justify cultural pessimism, but there are *many, many more* such texts. He'd have to walk through all of them and make equally strong refutations of how they are popularly understood." This is precisely what van der Waal's *The World, Our Home* purports to do: analyzing each class of proof-text used to keep Christians culturally impotent. And we clearly can't provide every example here within a short article in *Arise and Build*, but we can illustrate by example his approach to these objections to Christians being culturally effective.

A LONG LEGACY OF PESSIMISM

Dr. van der Waal points out that we've inherited many of our faulty ideas from earlier giants of the faith. The impact of Neoplatonism has done immeasurable harm in this regard. Small wonder that Dr. R. J. Rushdoony devotes one of his books to exposing its inherent dangers (*The Flight from Humanity*), for its effects are utterly pernicious. On van der Waal's part, he sees Augustine as the man who injected these philosophical toxins into the bloodstream of Christian theology:

Augustine worked with the notion of pilgrimage and placed the kingdom of God outside of the social realm. Neoplatonism had an impact on Augustine's thinking, creating a contrast between earth and heaven. The stamp of "Babylon" is thus pressed on society and culture.

The ideas of Augustine so seized the church of old that there was barely any opportunity for the development of a Christian culture. The pilgrims meditated and theologized, but earthly life was, as Seneca said, merely a *hospitium*. Only the heavenly city was important. [32]

After illustrating the shifting meanings of "Jerusalem" and "Babylon" throughout history under the influence of "dualistic interpretation" [33], van der Waal shows that "Babylon" was first connected with "the papal church of Rome" and later to

"the world state and world culture of the future. 'Come out of her, My people.'" [33] Here van der Waal corrects the misconception and subsequently draws an important conclusion:

The symbol "Babylon" is therefore not *in itself* a word that disqualifies culture (from the processing of flax to the purifying of gold). As we have already seen, in the New Jerusalem there is an abundance of works of culture. With all due respect to Augustine, let us steer clear of the Neoplatonic and Augustinian false dilemmas between an earthly and a heavenly city. Such false dilemmas create a wrong approach to culture, and cause us to waste the opportunities provided by God. [34]

If you find it shocking that Babylon (yes, Babylon) is somehow a redeemable entity, consider the equally astounding text of Psalm 87:4-5 which speaks of the nations that comprise the glorious Zion of God:

For I will make mention of Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon as knowers of Me; behold Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: this man was born there. And of Zion it shall be said that each and every man shall be born in her, and the Most High shall establish her. (Psalm 87:4-5 from the Hebrew)

Just as the first two great enemies of God's covenant people, Egypt and Assyria, become covenanted to God and build legitimate altars to His glory (Isaiah 19:18-25), a similar transformation is promised for later enemies of the Lord's people. Dr. van der Waal shows how misuse of Revelation 17 and 18 at this point has wrought serious damage to the Christians who have been influenced by such interpretations.

IMPLICATIONS OF RETREATIST THEOLOGY

We invite the reader to walk through the entire argument made by van der Waal, as we do not have space to provide further examples. It is important, however, that we examine the implications of these various distortions of Scripture and the impact such misunderstandings have had upon His people, historically speaking. Van der Waal holds that the

transition began after the Reformation.

[During the Reformation] there were dangers, persecutions, and many tears! But people did not feel burdened by all those thoughts about their existence as sojourners, thoughts which promote passivity. They had plans and goals to fulfill. They were a generation that produced works of great renown in many areas of life ... The Reformation ... liberated the church from the differentiation between clergy and laity. Each baptized Christian had his office in which he was to work to the honor of God. That was his *calling*. Though Calvin spoke about our pilgrimage, he put the emphasis on our *office*. This thought went to the hearts of the learned and the laborers.

In the centuries after the Reformation, a “Further Reformation” (“Nadere Reformatie”) took place with the arrival of pietism. It was, in other words, not a true reformation. Troubles and problems that had not played a role in the Reformation were introduced. The Bible was explained in a different manner. One sees the differences immediately when the sermons of the time of the Reformation are compared with those of the Further Reformation. The Reformation emphasized our calling in daily life and called the church to service. The Further Reformation busied itself with the “precious soul,” with “heaven,” and with the “perils of Babylon.” The accent was placed on the *soul* and not on the *office* of the Christian. Thus *man* stood in the center, instead of his *task*. The earth was merely a thoroughfare. [48-49]

Concerning students in the Third World, van der Waal adds, “let us hope that they are not burdened with a wrong understanding of the sojourner motif that puts the brakes on true Christian cultural activity.” [52] The impact that pietism has had on the arts deserves special censure from van der Waal:

How many artists have we lost for the church, because the church paid no attention to their profession? ... While Vincent van Gogh lived in Amsterdam, he heard sermons in the white plastered church buildings of the Dutch Reformed church. They did not help him, however, because they were moralistic or focused

on the supernatural, and drove him into the desert. [52]

At this point, van der Waal quotes from the poet H. Marsman:

When things become tense or oppressive, the Christian withdraws, with or without pretense, back to the kingdom that is not of this world and leaves us, including the poets, alone, with the chestnuts still in the fire. This is also what makes the Christian an unreliable player in the affairs of this world, particularly in culture, and especially from the Protestant one can expect nothing when push comes to shove. He is constantly ready to flee. [52]

It is as if the counterpart to Ron Kronz’s book, *Fighting to Win: And Other Things I Didn’t Learn in Sunday School* is the pietist’s idea to *Flee so We can Flee Again Tomorrow*. It is for this reason that Cornelis van der Waal surveyed the “mishandled texts” [53] that sap our collective Christian strength and resolve.

We’ve only scratched the surface of this issue, but we must recognize that a problem exists (diagnosis) and apply the appropriate measures. We start with works like van der Waal, and then put forward *good theology* that is God-honoring, scripturally solid, and promotes the imperatives laid down for God’s image-bearers in the world that He has sent his Holy Spirit to convict of sin and of righteousness. 🙏

1. C. van der Waal, *The World, Our Home: Christians Between Creation and Recreation* (Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2013). The book can be purchased at this link: <https://inhpubli.vercel.app/products/14574>
2. e.g., Mark Robert Kreitzer, *Paradigm Shift in South African Dutch Reformed Social Theology (1974-1990)* (Busan, S. Korea, n.p., May 2013).
3. <https://www.monergism.com/search-scrip-tures-10-volumes-pdf>
4. Here, van der Waal adds an explanatory footnote in brackets: [In the English version of the Heidelberg Catechism, the phrase is actually “life of sorrow,” which is closer to the Latin “aerumosa vita” (wretched life) than the Dutch “jammerdal.”]

HUMANISTIC STATISM IS DYING. WHAT WILL REPLACE IT?

BY MARK R. RUSHDOONY

The death of an age is a bloody business. Men, disillusioned with the promises of their faith, yet unwilling to surrender them, strike out at everything in rage and in frustration. Like a rudderless ship, the civilization loses its direction and is driven by events instead of driving through them. Today, in the last days of humanism, as men steadily destroy their world, it is important for us to understand the meaning of the times and act in terms of that knowledge.¹



Those familiar with my father's writings or lectures will likely recall his recurring theme that we were approaching the end of the age of humanistic statism. The words above were written in 1970. The prior decade was an unprecedented time of political, social, religious, and economic change; *revolutionary* is not too strong of a characterization. Given those changes and the uncertainty they fostered, my father's words seemed ominous.

Yet there was another perception that then held sway in some people's minds, and that was the sense of technological progress and a rising standard of living. Disneyland had an attraction called "Carousel of Progress" that originated from its display at the 1964 World's Fair; people stood in long lines to view it and hear its theme song called "The Best Time of Your Life."

What has been called the "cult of science" was also very much still alive in 1970. The U.S. had recently landed two manned missions on the moon, the medical profession was universally respected, and "new inventions" that would "improve life" were routinely reported in the news."

Moreover, despite some unsettling monetary inflation (which most dismissed as corporate greed) we were still in the post-WWII inflationary economic boom. Chalcedon sponsored an economics seminar in Southern California each year featuring Hans Sennholz of Grove

City College, in which he tried to explain the destructive inflationary course of U.S. monetary policy. He was discouraged because he so often found the only interest of his audience was how they could make money off of inflation. Few looked down the road to which he was trying to point them.

Today, it is rare to see anything remotely approaching the level of optimism that still prevailed half a century ago. It has been supplanted by discouragement, cynicism, disillusionment, and uncertainty. It is worth noting why my father believed we were at the end of an age and what he thought the Christian response ought to be.

WHAT IS HUMANISM?

My father frequently referenced the temptation of Satan to Eve, which claimed she and Adam could "be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). He did so because he thought it represented the essence of all humanism, to "know" or determine good and evil for themselves apart from God's Word. Either God's Word is authoritative or man's word is. Humanism is the elevation of man to supremacy.

When God is denied His position as Sovereign, whether self-consciously or practically, all that is left is the authority of man. A hierarchy that eliminates God leaves man as supreme. The result is humanism in some form. But what man or group of men has priority? Is it man collectively or men individually? Humanism may be expressed either way, either

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in statism in the name of collective man or anarchism's defense of the individual's autonomy.

Both anarchism and statism are expressions of humanism, the only difference being the locale of "man's" authority. Historically, statism in one form or another has prevailed, because a collective group of men are always stronger than any individual. The history of humanism therefore has been largely one of various forms of statism.

WESTERN HUMANISTIC STATISM

The ancient world was strongly dominated by severe forms of statism. Most often the kings either claimed divinity or the special favor of the gods in some way. When a ruler claims to be god, there can be no liberty from his authority. To challenge such a ruler becomes at the same time both treason and blasphemy. When the Roman Republic dissolved into the Empire after Julius Caesar it quickly returned to the older pattern of claiming its emperors to be gods.

After the Western Roman Empire's slow self-destruction, Europe saw the development of Christendom. Complain as we do about the practices of the Roman Church, Europe had a God-centered worldview, even if much harm was done by directing this toward a church-centeredness.

The Renaissance was an intellectual movement we often wrongly define as merely an artistic period. It was also a rebellion against the Christian worldview that self-consciously looked to ancient Greek thought. Intellectually it was a return to paganism (necessarily man-centered) and saw the rise, not surprisingly, of absolutist monarchs. The Renaissance greatly impacted the church, so much so it seemed humanism was poised to overcome it. Corruption abounded in and out of the church. Venereal disease was rampant in Europe.

The Protestant Reformation, which began early in the 16th century, saw a strong reaction against Renaissance humanism and a return to Scripture as the

basis of authority. Rather than autonomy from God, man sought to serve Him. This service included more than church. The "priesthood of all believers" made man's calling the exercise of God's will in his vocation. The energy this supplied was a major factor in the technological changes, productivity, and growth of capital about to sweep Europe. In America, it became "the Puritan work ethic" and was a major factor in the advance of the colonies and then the fledgling United States. The Reformation rescued Europe from a self-destructive course.

The Enlightenment, which began in Europe in the 17th century, revived humanism's emphasis on man. Again, there was an attempt to blend an emphasis on man's authority and his reason into religion by way of the vague notion of "Natural Law." As Pietism's emphasis on man gradually eroded the resistance of the old Calvinistic Puritanism, the Enlightenment's rationalism increasingly dominated the Western mind. Intellectually, we are still living in its shadow; no movement has supplanted it. One, however, destroyed its intellectual foundation.

Charles Darwin single-handedly destroyed the intellectual basis for the Natural Law argument by positing that chaos, not order, was the realm of man's past and present. While statism continues to prevail in government forms, the belief in the cathartic effects of chaos has fed man's anarchistic tendencies, as has been evident in revolutionary groups as well as the modern intellectual and moral repudiation of all that is held in contempt. The Darwinian belief in the regenerative power of chaos has influenced modern man to destroy what he sees as regressive with the absurd assumption that something better will "naturally" take its place. This willingness to destroy what is seen as impeding man's evolution is now seen in humanistic statist policy, not just the anarchistic revolutionary individuals. The power of humanist governments is being used to destroy the Christian remnants of our past.

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TECHNOLOGY HID REALITY

By the time Darwinian thought began doing its damage, a technological revolution was underway. The world went from the horse and buggy and sailing ships to trains and air flight within a century. Material prosperity increased so rapidly men began to believe such progress was inevitable, a secularized view of Providence, if you will. Such great and unprecedented advances fostered a belief that man and society were on the right track, and if that were true, one might argue (as many did) that more planning by man was in order, so that Marxist “scientific socialism” might organize this advance and avoid the bumps of the free-market road.

With governments empowered by the post-war fiat currency creation, it is no wonder the “space race” to the moon captivated Americans. In the 1960s U.S. President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his “War on Poverty,” which was not far removed from one of the Chinese Communist Party’s “five-year” plans. The mid-twentieth century years were heady ones for statist humanists. They seemed to believe their own utopian visions.

THE “LAST DAYS”

We seem far removed from the general optimism of fifty years ago. The humanist still talks of greater things to come, but the bankruptcy of their claim to “be as gods” is becoming ever more apparent. The dreams of the humanist seems even more remote than Eden. Its faithful are good at demolishing but are powerless to “build back better.” The failures of humanistic statism are now increasingly obvious.

In 1943 Prime Minister Winston Churchill acknowledged the increasing calls for government social programs in Great Britain and acknowledged the need for societal concern for all citizens “from the cradle to the grave.” This phrase was still being quoted by American conservatives in the 1960s to decry the expanding U.S. welfare state. In Britain, the concept was expanded even further by the Min-

istry of Health to protection described as “womb to tomb.” After describing a television interview of young children, my father noted their stated wish to be babies, noting that was a reflection of modern man’s immaturity and irresponsibility:

We are thus in the last days of a humanistic era. Man’s attempt to return to the womb is a fast trip to the tomb. The world of humanism is sick; let it die. Its spoiled brats are bent on suicidal destruction. Mature man will work for Christian Reconstruction.²

CHANGE IS AHEAD

The insanity of our time will not continue indefinitely because it cannot. God is not mocked; “he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hated me love death” (Prov. 8:36).

Our response must not be smug satisfaction because we “see it coming,” but Christian Reconstruction, a term my father coined that describes the Christian duty in the face of evil. “The word of God is not bound,” (II Tim. 2:9) nor can it be any more than God or His promises can be. Humanism will fail simply because man is not a god; he lives in God’s world and on His terms.

It is only in Christ that we can find fulfillment and purpose. As long as God gives us breath, therefore, we seek to serve His reign and Kingdom.

This is a time of unequalled opportunity, the greatest age of the frontier man has yet seen. The new frontier is the challenge of a new civilization, of the most sophisticated and intensive pioneering the world has yet seen. It is a time of times, an exciting time to be alive, a time to build and a time to advance. To be most alive is to be alive when and where it counts most, and this is the day. Get with it!³ 🏠

1. *Faith & Action: the Collected Articles of R.J. Rushdoony from the Chalcedon Report, 1965-2004*, Vol. 1 (Vallecito, California: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2019), p. 190 (from *Chalcedon Report* No. 56, April 2, 1970).
2. *ibid.*, p. 38 (from *Chalcedon Report* No. 48, August 1, 1969).
3. *ibid.*, p. 317 (from *Chalcedon Report* No. 95, July 1973.)



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