

CAIN, ABEL, AND KANYE: THE GOSPEL & POP CULTURE

by Dr. Gregory Thornbury, The King's College

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Repairing the Ruins Conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

It is great to be here with you today at this august assembly. I've been here now for a couple of days [and] I was able to speak to the Leader's Pre-Conference but it is especially good to see this group today and I do bring you greetings from your friends, my colleagues, the faculty, staff, and student body of King's College in New York City which is nestled right there in what I call "colonial Disneyland." It is in the same place where most of the Founding Fathers lived and moved and had their being during the American Revolution. We are at the corner of Exchange Place and Broadway. Our campus backs up right to the New York Stock Exchange, right across the street from Trinity Church Wall Street, where six signers of the Declaration of Independence are buried, including a recently sort of rediscovered founding father, Alexander Hamilton, who's gotten a lot of press recently.

A PhD student at Columbia University wrote me last year and said, "I'm doing my doctoral work on John Jay—did you know that during the American Revolution the Founding Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court lived on the corner of Broadway and Exchange Place right where the campus of King's College now sits?" It is a place that has forgotten the convictions and the principles with which our Founding

Fathers gave birth to this nation. Every day that I get off the subway on the "2" train I pass Federal Hall where the Bill of Rights was passed, I see that statue of George Washington and all the people nestled around it taking pictures and I wonder to myself whether or not they understand the reference with his hand held aloft and his other hand leveled low. It's George Washington, of course, taking the oath of office, but what a lot of people don't know is that his hand is supposed to be nestled on a Bible, which is not pictured at that statue. And what even fewer people know is that on his way from the prayer service at St. Paul's Chapel, which is right around the corner, George Washington called out to one of his aides—and made it audible—he said, "I want a Bible." Nowhere in the oath of office does it stipulate that the chief executive take the oath of office with a hand on a Bible. That's something that George Washington instantiated. And furthermore, he added words to the oath of office that were not there and are not required, which are, "so help me God."

We are living in a culture and in a city that has forgotten God, and that is precisely why we need to show up in those places. We need to be there. Because we do live in a "show-don't-tell" culture. What I would like to do with you here this morning is to lay down

Gregory Thornbury, PhD, serves as the sixth president of The King's College in New York City—an institution dedicated to faith, free enterprise, and the American Dream.

a challenge for those that are involved in the process and the prospect of classical education because what I want to say to this group is something that I have experienced and know. Students that come from a classically educated background to New York City are uniquely suited to compete in this global marketplace. We do not want to sell this next generation short on their potential. I want to encourage you because you are doing something that is deeply needed at the center of power and culture. Your students need to be in places like New York City because they are able to think critically.

The *Wall Street Journal* just released a shocking study of seniors from elite colleges and universities in this country on June the 5th that said most college seniors miserably failed a standardized test in critical thinking. They've become sheep and that is "BAA-AA-ad." You are not cultivating sheep, but I want to lay down the challenge for you today—we need a new generation of shepherds in this culture. I believe that is what you are doing and I want to challenge you to encourage your young people not to shrink back into the shadows and simply talk about culture, but to wade into the deep and to do battle with the principalities and powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms in the corridors of power.

That is what is needed at this time. That is what will be a witness to the world. I am all for talk. I am all for symposium—I am talking right now. But sometimes when we use terms like "cultural engagement" it makes us think as though culture is something over there in the next county and we are here piously standing back holding forth for the truth and for the good of God and the glory of God and the gospel as though we were Gandalf standing atop the parapets of Helm's Deep looking down at the orcs, far removed. We are immersed in culture. Our students are swimming in it. You are inside of it, we are inside of it. The only way forward, I believe, is to compete. And that message of competition in faithfulness and fidelity to the truth of

the Bible is everywhere found in Scripture and it is the seed that gave birth to Western civilization.

I've been thinking a lot about this recently because my job as the president of the King's College in New York City is to send students into elite salons of culture where they are able to compete but not give up their faith. As one Broadway producer said to me recently at a party, "Someone told me you're the president."

And I said, "Jawohl."

And she said, "We've hired our second graduate at our Broadway production company from King's College. Do you want to know why we like your kids?"

And I said, "Tell me—I can probably use it in a brochure or something."

And she said, "They show up on time, they're sober when they get there, hard-working, very intelligent, but the X-factor is this: They don't have an entitlement mentality like the kids from the Ivy League schools."

We have adopted this "so sad, sad sack, Eeyore" worldview. "Ain't it bad, ain't it sad, nobody likes us anymore"—it's like sixth grade middle school cafeteria. They may think we're weird, they may think we're alien, they may not know why [we] believe what [we] believe, but they don't mind that kid who shows up to work with his or her sleeves rolled up and [says], "How can I make this institution the best that it can be?" That wins and competes every time. And we need to recover those biblical ideas and motifs that gave lift and gave birth to all that we hold dear.

I have recently rediscovered one of these texts that very much troubled me when I was growing up. I grew up a PK—my father was a faithful, godly pastor in the trenches, in a church in Pennsylvania—same congregation for 44 years. There were certain passages in the Bible that I as a kid had struggled with because they did not make sense to me, they didn't add up for me, and one of them was the miracle of the wedding at Cana because I grew up in a tee-totaling family and this didn't seem to make sense. So I tried to figure out

how to make sense of these texts, to make them work in my own brain. On the wedding in Cana I came up with a very creative solution which was [that] Jesus turned the water into wine, but there were two miracles because Jesus turned the wine back into water before it hit their stomachs. So I was always trying to figure it out. Creative, right? Not quite as smart as the Greek New Testament scholar Don Carson who at the age of five wrestled with how it was possible that there could be five “solos” of the Reformation. That’ll dawn on you later.

But one of these texts that deeply bothered me—tied to this issue that I’m talking about of our young people competing in the global market place—was the Cain and Abel story. I was always bothered by [this] story because it was not clear to me and it has not been clear to me for a very long time exactly what was going on there. There is no reason given or stated in the text itself as to why God preferred Abel’s offering over Cain’s. All it says is that God says to Cain, “If you do well, like your brother Abel, you too will be accepted.” But it just seemed patently unfair to me as a kid, and really this has held throughout my whole life—what’s the reason for this? It just seems like God is being arbitrary here and it can’t simply be that God likes lamb chops better than vegetables.

Now, I totally agree that there is the thread of redemptive history here and that ultimately the image of the lamb connects to the gospel and I am completely fine with that. But there doesn’t need to just be one redemptive understanding of a text. There may be a *sensus plenior* at times. I am wary of explanations of text that are like the youth minister that brought all the little kids up to the front of their church for the sermon. He holds aloft a taxidermist-stuffed squirrel and [says], “Boys and girls, what is this?” The children are silent, [and] one little boy raises his hand and says, “It sure looks like a squirrel, but I know the answer is always Jesus.” I’ve wondered if there’s something else going on in the Cain and Abel story other than just Jesus.

And sure enough—this is a little controversial—but as I began exploring what rabbinical interpreters have said about this, I came across the work of Yoram Hazony who is a leading Jewish biblical scholar and philosopher living in Israel. He is a remarkable man. He wrote a book called *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* and he is at the vanguard in Israel as a faithful Jew trying to lead Israel in a back-to-the-Bible movement. It’s remarkable what he’s doing. He and others have said that [in the Jewish interpretation] there is something else going on here in the Cain and Abel story that we might have missed in our own Christian understanding of this text.

And this is what he says: Cain is a tiller of the ground, he is a farmer, and he basically is out there accepting the results of the curse of the fall upon the ground. So he is out there as a farmer, by himself, presumably with whatever the antediluvian tools would have been at that time, with his hoe and his rake, out there in the field, saying, “Thorns and thistles!” . . . planting his seeds, growing his crops, and bringing them back and giving them back to God, sweat on his brow, doing it all himself. What many Jewish interpreters say is that the difference with Abel is that he is the first exemplar of the “Shepherd motif” in Scripture, which includes this idea of being a master of one’s own domain. Abel innovates sheep technology. Sheep are good for more than just one thing. First of all, they help cultivate the field that will be planted. They’re also good for clothing and they are also delicious! It is a follow-through on the culture mandate in Scripture! Once more, Abel sees himself as truly a divine image-bearer because while the sheep are at work he sits back and watch[es] them do the job for him. He is expansive in his mentality and it is for this reason that the Shepherd motif becomes the dominating idea for the rest of the Bible.

When Pascal was discovered dead and they began to remove his clothes, they found sown into his garments these words: “Fire! God, not of the philosophers, but of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ.” All shepherds.

We call Jesus the Good Shepherd because we are his sheep. And we are doing the work for him on earth while he is at the right hand of God in session with God the Father (Heb. 12:2, 12:24). The idea of this Shepherd is someone who deploys all the vast resources of the created order and is expansive in his thinking and does not have a downcast, servile, grumpy, sweat-of-the-brow, grim acceptance of the curse that is upon this planet—he does not accept it. That is what Abel represents. And, as some of these Jewish interpreters say, that is why Abel’s offering was preferable to that of Cain’s—because it signaled the way the people of God would live and behave for millennia to come. Note that all the other ancient Near-Eastern peoples, the Caananites, the Jebusites, the Hittites, the Moabites, the Amorites, all of the –ites, they all have a servile mentality. They are controlled, and ruled, and subjugated by every chieftain, suzerain, and every would-be man-God. Not the Jew. The Jewish person sees himself as a king, as an image-bearer of God, and that there is no king but God himself. And that is the image—the idea that we need to be cultivating in this generation of our students.

[I]t has played well right down to this very day in modern Jewish culture. Even though they have mostly forgotten or moved away from the true belief in the one true God, you read a book like Dan Senor and Saul Singer’s book *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle* and you quickly understand that there is a reason why Israel is one of the most innovative, technologically advanced, [and] scientifically forward-thinking nations on Planet Earth. Here is this tiny little democratic nation-state surrounded by a sea of totalitarian terror. Bob Dylan once sang on Infidels, “He’s made a garden of paradise out of the desert sand, he’s the neighborhood bully.” One tiny little nation and everybody’s terrified of him. Shepherd motif. Abel. Or look at a book like Seth Siegel’s *Let There Be Water: Israel’s Solution for a Water-Starved World*. I just came from California earlier this week. I realized

that California’s now, by God’s grace, coming out of their drought—praise the Lord for that—but here is Israel figuring out a way to pioneer the widespread and everyday use of desalinization plants for their own purposes. They are independent, self-contained, and self-sufficient.

Now my challenge to our group is, “Is that who we are?” As a Christian community, are we confident enough in the truth of the Bible and in our churches, and in our communities to be those sorts of persons that have a godly humility and swagger? May I speak out of both sides of my mouth? I feel like we need to. I feel like we have gone a little bit retrograde, I feel like we have gone backward, we are back on our heels, we are negative, we’re talking about the things that used to be and are no longer. This is not the Abel mentality; this is not the Shepherd motif. The Shepherd motif, the Abel mentality is to say, “What is in my purview that I can be a part of so I can fulfill the culture mandate with all of my might, with all of my soul, and with all of my strength, and never, ever give up?” I wonder if we still have that mentality or if we’re content being Eeyore. I call it the Eeyore worldview. “I can’t find my tail. Secular pagans out there, tearing down the foundations.”

I feel a little bit like Louis C. K. in an interview that he did with Conan O’Brien a couple years ago when they had just put Wi-Fi on the planes. He was talking to Conan about that. “Here I am on a plane, and they said, ‘Open up your laptop, you can surf the internet,’ and there’s Wi-Fi in the air! It was up twenty minutes and the system went down, and the guy next to me is like, ‘PSH! This is *baloney*!’ How quickly you are entitled to something that only existed *twenty minutes* ago, you non-contributing zero! You are sitting, incredibly, 30,000 feet in the air, *like a bird*, you are *flying*. Did you get aboard this plane and partake in the miracle of flight?” We’re so grim, we’re so serious. “*Why so serious?*” I believe that we need to reinhabit this space of being children of Abel [with joy].

I sometimes joke, I give an absurd example of this, as I go from place to place, just to stir the pot—because what good’s a talk if you don’t have some kind of provocation? So I sometimes say, “I wonder if maybe the most hard-working family man in America is Kanye West?” Everybody’s like, “No! Uh-uh! He interrupted Tay-Tay at the Grammy’s! Not our little angel!” But you know, if you actually read about Kanye West, he is obsessed with honoring his parents. I’m not saying he’s converted, but he wants to go to heaven and see his mother and say, “I gave every ounce of effort in my life to make good on the privileges that you gave to me.” He is so dedicated to, you know, Kim Kardashian that he does not consider it ethical to buy a present for her but rather he has to make gifts for her with his own hands.

I would like us to be generating a sea of young people who have this confident, upright, heavenward, toward-the-City-of-God-while-walking-in-the-City-of-Man attitude that anything is possible with God. Why do we need to give that over to Joel Osteen? Let’s do it better than him so that nobody listens to him ever again! We’re here in Pittsburg. This is the town that Carnegie built. I don’t know if you’ve seen that History Channel docudrama series, “The Men Who Built America,” but you know, think about it: in a relatively short period of time just a couple of men built the basic infrastructure of this country which we are still using to this very day and have not improved upon very much. John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and even Nikola Tesla, despite their various different problems and heresies, were all men inspired by the Christian faith and had the attitude, “I am going to enter into a system and fill it up.” A lot of people don’t know that J. P. Morgan, who revolutionized the banking industry in this country—which by the way is part of the reason why global extreme poverty since 1990 is on the rapid decline—was a faithful member and elder, part of the vestry, at Calvary St. George’s Church in New York City, [and] gave hugely to Christian philanthropic

causes. And my fear, guys,—this is the year of the Reformation, far be it from me to say anything counter to the Reformation, I am five *solas* all the way through—but I am sometimes worried that the preaching of the theology of grace might unintentionally give quarter to a slacker generation that thinks that all is grace.

And so I want to ask the question: who is on Team Jesus that the world is looking to—like those men who built America—who are doing the innovation, who are at the vanguard, who are walking with God through the corridor of power? Who in your school is like that? You need to be identifying them and cultivating them, and giving them the greatest opportunities that you can. Because there is going to come a day when the experiments against reality in our culture are going to run their course. Who is going to be there when the experiments have failed? Who is going to be in place? Who is dreaming the big dreams? Who has that shepherd motif down? As the “Silicon Valley” billionaire and tech pioneer, Peter Thiel, has said, “They promised us flying cars and all we got was 140 characters on Twitter.” We’re stuck! We need Abels. But there is no Abel without faith. There is no true fulfillment of the cultural mandate without belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We need to be recovering the stories for this generation of these heroes. Larry Reed is from the Foundation for Economic Education. I would encourage you all to get his most recent book on heroes. But let me just give you one hero that he doesn’t mention that I sort of discovered by accident.

In the early twentieth century there was a young boy living in Chicago whose name was Bill Lear, whose father was Reuben. Bill’s mom walked out on them when he was a little kid. He grew up going to the Moody Church in Chicago. If you know anything about the Moody Church in Chicago, not only was it a gospel-preaching station for Moody and his heirs to win Chicago for Christ, but they also had a very muscular understanding of what the local church was supposed to

be about. We forget that D. L. Moody started the Sunday school movement not so that the kids could show up and have Elmer's glue and draw pictures [with crayons] of landscapes sprinkled with apostles. That's not what Sunday school was originally there for. It was there as a workplace training organization for underprivileged people. Sunday school was actually *school*. People learned to read. They learned job skills. They came to the church for that. It's made me think that if I were to ever plant a church, I would install desks not pews—to give people the idea that this is the place you come to learn how to live and work in the world.

And so Bill Lear grew up in that environment and together with his father there was this message that *success is in direct proportion to effort*. Anything that Bill Lear did not like or wanted to change throughout the course of his life, he did it. This is a very wonderful PA [speaker system]. I love the sound of my voice, mellifluous, golden, dulcet tones—I'm just kidding! But, do you realize that the miniaturization and amplifier technology was thanks to Bill Lear? He was the one that was unhappy that you had to crowd around the old Victrola in order to hear a piece of recorded music. He loved music! But he thought thousands of people ought to be able to hear a speaker or a concert at the same time. Thanks, Bill Lear! He also didn't like how business men had to travel around the country cattle-car style, so he invented the Learjet in order to expedite the machinations of commerce. While on his Learjet he wanted to listen to his music, and unfortunately LP's tend to scratch and bump and jump around on take-off and landing, so he developed the Lear Infinite Loop Tape System which eventually became the 8-track set tape. Everybody had that in their car. He wanted pilots to have a better experience while flying because it's stressful flying, so he developed many of the radio direction navigation systems, automatic controls, and actuators that are now used. One guy! One kid that went to the Moody Church.

We do not have to adopt the narrative, friend, that exile has to be bad. Yes, we are in exile. But we forget that if you actually look at the text of the Old Testament the only people that were really, really, *really* bummed out at living in Babylon were the sons of Levi. Yes, Ezekiel lay down by the River Chebar and wept. Why? Because there was no temple. But the other ones—the Daniels, the Mishaels, the Hananiahs, and the Azariahs—*flourished*, did not give up their faith, did not bow the knee to Nebuchadnezzar's idols. As the gospel quartet sang when I was growing up, "They didn't bend, they didn't bow, they didn't burn." We remember the Sunday school story, but do we remember Daniel 1:4 that says, "they mastered the wisdom of the Babylonians"? They could compete, they were better than the rest and, because of that, they became the ministers of finance and of culture and the government for generations, as outliers, as exiles, in Babylon. Then they get to the time of Jeremiah 29, "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you, to give you a future and a hope." What is the context of that passage? It is to the exiles and it says, "Go to the city, plant vineyards, sink down roots, for in the flourishing of the city you will find your own happiness."

Is that the message we're giving to our kids? And what's more, those exiles, when King Cyrus made the decree that they could go back to Jerusalem, there was not a rush. No one wanted to go back! We miss this. If you actually read Ezra and Nehemiah, it's kind of a ragtag B-team that shows up. And even Zerubbabel—that's one of my favorites, anybody looking for baby names, right now?—Zerubbabel, I think, is a leading contender. I know you classical people all choose the weird Biblical names—Jedidiah and all that kind of thing—Zerubbabel just sort of mysteriously disappears in the middle of the narrative. He goes and he's the governor and he just disappears. Where did he go? He went back to Babylon! He was happy there! We don't need to adopt the narrative that has been forced on us.

It makes me think that the role of classical Christian education for the coming decades that are before us may not be altogether dissimilar from the work of St. Patrick and his merry band of monks who followed him in Ireland in a situation that was pagan. They had gods like Maeve and Morrigan who were gross, bestial, awful—they were not supple Adonises, like Apollos and Aphrodite. They were grim, brutal gods. They practiced bestiality and human sacrifice. St. Patrick, although a slave who was able to make himself free, went back to say, “You don’t have to live this way.” And they won the day. They were able to replace druid ceremony with Christian worship; they were able to replace magic spells with the “Breastplate of St. Patrick.”

Because the Irish had been so far west, the boot-heel of the Roman military regime had never reached there. So there were no blood martyrs for the faith, red martyrs for the faith, in Ireland. They had the opportunity to be a different kind of martyr. At Skellig Michael, the great

monastery, there were green martyrs, who, because they worked in opposition with ancient Greco-Roman culture, welcomed into their libraries and preserved Horace and Cicero and Marcus Aurelius and Virgil while the barbarian hordes were invading the Roman Empire. They were green martyrs! You are growing a generation of green martyrs who are holding the wisdom of the ages in their minds and their bodies—good for you! But they weren’t content just to be green martyrs. Those Irish monks fanned out into a darkening western landscape and they became white martyrs, those who sacrifice the comforts of homeland to reintroduce Christian literacy to Europe. I salute you, members of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools, for raising up a generation of Abels and white martyrs in the decades which are to come.



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