

Faith Pulpit

Toward a Christian Approach to Culture

How should a Christian understand and relate to the prevailing culture? Ignore it? Accommodate it? Engage? The answer to that question determines a Christian's effectiveness in life and ministry. In this article, Dr. Paul Hartog, professor at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, explores the issue of culture and Christianity from a thoroughly Biblical perspective and offers helpful instruction for properly relating to one's culture.

Five Basic Models

In 1951 the Neo-orthodox theologian H. Richard Niebuhr authored the highly influential *Christ and Culture*, in which he proposed five basic models: "Christ against Culture," "Christ of Culture," "Christ above Culture," "Christ Transforming Culture," and "Christ and Culture in Paradox." A perusal of contemporary literature reveals the enduring quality of these classifications as applied to the tensions of "Christianity and Culture."^{[1](#)}

Most often, two of these alternatives are summarily dismissed (at least in their reductionist forms). An isolationist "Christ against Culture" model leads to complete seclusion with the resulting inability to fulfill the church's Great Commission. The "Christ of Culture" model so equates Christianity with reigning culture that it lends no external point from which to critique society.

This leaves the three alternatives of "Christ above Culture" (the nature-grace synthesis of Thomas Aquinas), "Christ Transforming Culture" (the Augustinian/Reformed conversion of culture), and "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms). "The relationship between Christ and culture is one of the most significant elements in Christian moral discernment. How we must answer the Christ-culture question will invariably affect the way we seek to implement and live out the Christian ethic within society."^{[2](#)}

A New Testament Model

But should we be bound by the models of these five neatly-packaged alternatives propounded by this Yale theologian?³ The New Testament itself seems to support a “prophetic-evangelic” dialectic-one that boldly confronts sin within culture (“prophetic”) and also boldly proclaims the gospel (“evangelic”). A culture’s moral failures, including its systemic injustices, must be prophetically denounced. At the same time, cultures can be collectively transformed, especially as individual hearts are personally and radically transformed by the gospel (Acts 19:17–30).

What Is Culture?

A culture involves “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, instructions, and all other products of human work and thought.”⁴ Employing another mot du jour, one might describe culture as the social incarnation of a worldview. Such a definition reveals that every culture is the embodiment of underlying values, since a culture is the socially transmitted manifestation of what a society venerates. In other words, it is impossible for a culture to be value free or value neutral. The arts, acts, and artifacts of a culture may certainly reflect the majesty, goodness, and beauty of creation.

On the other hand, all cultures are also tainted by human depravity. Cultures often take the goods of the created order and subvert the values, sometimes even positioning these goods as idolatrous substitutes for God. Different cultures distort the Biblical worldview in differing degrees. None can be swallowed whole, and all must be assessed with careful, critical discernment.⁵

Reaching People in Their Culture

The gospel (the “good news” which must accompany the “bad news” critique of distorted values in any culture) reaches people where they are. Since humans are divinely created as social beings, any completely “culture-less” person is surely an anomaly. Individuals are inevitably embedded in cultures. Therefore, the ambassador of Christ must understand the receptor culture in which he or she ministers.

As an incontrovertible example, Christian heralds must master the language of their hearers since culture is tightly interwoven with human language. One can also appreciate the reflections and glimmers of the imago Dei represented in wonderful works of human creativity. This admiration especially applies to those enduring artifacts of culture that survive a sifting by the judicious sieve of time.

In varying degrees, cultures reflect the glory of humanity found in God’s original creative intent (Ps. 8:3–9) as well as the ruin of humanity in the fall (Rom. 1:8–32). Blaise Pascal correctly highlighted the theological paradox that is humanity, both our relative greatness (dominion over creation) and our permeating wretchedness (depravity from the fall).

One must always complete the “prophetic-evangelic” task by bringing cultures and culturally-situated individuals under both divine judgment and gospel proclamation. The good news reaches us where we are but has no intention of simply leaving us there. In Acts 17 the apostle Paul began his Athenian sermon with an opening salvo gleaned from careful observation (17:22, 23). He continued by using philosophical and poetic quotations as cultural bridges (17:27–29). But the apostle’s rhetorical road had an unchanging destination—the Christian message of both judgment (17:31) and salvation (implied in 17:30–34 before his sermon was cut short by his detractors).

The Cultural Shift

Most cultural critics (both secular and Christian) predict that our Western culture will continue to move away from its Judeo-Christian foundations. Now, at last, the long shadow of Constantine fades in the twilight of Western civilization. The emerging “post-Christendom” culture is built upon its own religions: worship of self, worship of ease and comfort, worship of entertainment and pleasure, and worship of unencumbered individual freedom. As this continental drift continues, those who would attempt to parrot popular culture and remain Biblically faithful will find that not even Atlas could straddle the great divide.

Have Christians ever been in such a situation before? When one became a Christian in the early church, the new convert stood against the pagan religions, but he or she also became distinguishable from the broader culture built upon those religions. As Anthony Thiselton notes, “some Christians lament that cultural diversity and ‘pluralism’ constitute almost insuperable obstacles to the proclamation of the gospel. It defies imagination what Paul might have thought about these twenty-first-century defeatist laments over ‘pluralism.’”⁶ I personally imagine that the apostle Paul would have replied to such defeatism by shouting, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

Cultural Tensions in the Early Church

When Paul stepped foot into Roman Corinth, he was surrounded by a culture of self-centeredness, self-promotion, autonomy, misuse of freedoms, and misperception of wisdom. Even the church members in Corinth “still carried over into their Christian existence many of the cultural traits that characterized their pre-Christian culture.”⁷ Paul’s response focused upon the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified, as he uncompromisingly placed the Corinthians “under the critique and criterion of the cross.”⁸ The preaching of the cross had the effect of “subverting and reversing the value system that dominated Corinthian culture,” since “the effective reality of the cross is a reversal of all ‘natural’ human values.”⁹ The cross magnifies service for others, strength in weakness, the setting aside of rights and prerogatives, and the surpassing nature of divine wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18–2:2). All of these cruciform themes overturned cultural values in Roman Corinth.

Contemporary Cultural Issues

Because of our contemporary cultural context, the pressure escalates to curtail the full Christian message, especially the summons to sacrifice, discipline, and suffering. Simplistic attempts to preserve the “message” while uncritically adopting all cultural “methods” fail to appreciate the interdependence of form and content. Cultural forms are not merely empty shells—they are the corresponding embodiments of particular values and beliefs. The attempt to conserve the message while facilely embracing counterproductive methods also fails to understand the connection between sign and significance, construct and meaning. The tendency is to adopt the *res* (bare thing) while conveniently disregarding the *ratio* (underlying reason) for the phenomenon embedded in the cultural system of values. But may one casually appropriate certain cultural “signs,” divest them of their cultural significance, and then superficially “Christianize” them like a papal envoy sprinkling the barbarians by royal decree?

Moreover, should one base ministry upon the disordered values of the unregenerate (even when these confused pleasures are represented corporately as “popular culture”)? This strategy eventually leads to a new form of axiological syncretism. Perhaps the subtlest temptation is to preserve a message of truth but not the whole truth. Let me provide one random example: With discernment, a congregation may appropriately utilize sports ministries within a sports-crazed society. But within the overall ministry, if the entire Scriptural ethic is preached, these culturally-embedded hearers must also be prophetically challenged against an imbalanced priority placed upon athletics. The failure to confront a distorted value system is not merely a failure of nerve but a forsaking of truth. A Christian hierarchy of values reflects divinely instituted reality—it is grounded in truth.

A New Paradigm

What might a culturally-engaged yet value-critiquing paradigm look like? I am reminded of that rhetorical gem of early Christian apologetics, The Epistle to Diognetus:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life. . . . But while they . . . follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. . . . They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted.”[10](#)

A cultural engagement with a “prophetic-evangelic” dialectic seems all the more urgent, since many theologians maintain (in a *prima facie* manner) that entire cultures can become collectively hardened to gospel ministry. In this regard, one might learn from J. Gresham Machen’s insightful classic, “Christianity and Culture.”[11](#) Machen not only recognized the defiance of the individual sinner’s heart

but also the possibility of systemic, society-wide resistance. Machen warned of the dire consequences “if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.”

Nevertheless, in hopeful confidence, I believe that, should the Lord tarry, out of the ashes of “post-Christendom” culture will arise churches that function not as political or social power brokers but as counter-cultural communities of sacrificial faith and genuine spirituality. As local churches cultivate flourishing examples of authentic, Biblical community, they will be able to disciple new converts in the Christian totality of communally-transmitted values, virtues, moral habits, and behavior patterns. In a sense, the lines in the sand will be drawn for us by the cultural process of “post-Christianization.”

Being fully Christian will require not fully enjoying our culture’s ephemeral pleasures and not being fully accepted by society. No attempt to cavort with Christian celebrities, athletes, politicians, and popular artists (or to mimic the latest trend by merely glazing on a religious veneer) will be able to mask the truth that being a committed follower of Christ will not be “fashionable.” Churches will earn a hearing not because they blindly imitate culture but because they provide a distinctive alternative for those left thirsty by cultural cisterns that cannot hold soul-satisfying water.

Works Cited

1. Niebuhr’s use of “Christ” must be interpreted within his wider theology. See Kevin Bauder, “A Prelude to a Christian Theology of Culture,” in *Missions in a New Millennium*, edited by W. Edward Glenny and William H. Smallman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 241, n.1.
2. Dennis Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 213-214.
3. See D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
4. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “culture.”
5. A comprehensive analysis would also consider other possible (and debated) distinctions, including those fluid demarcations between “high” culture, “folk” culture, and “pop” culture, as well as the difficult delineation of various “subcultures.”
6. Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 23.
7. Thiselton, 9.
8. Thiselton, 78.
9. Thiselton, 10, 45.
10. English translation from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 701-703. Cf. James 1:27.
11. J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review*, 11, no. 1 (1913), at <http://www.fni.com/cim/technicals/machen.htm> (accessed June 4, 2009).

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