

Christ and Culture

“*Christ and Culture*” is the title of one of the most important theological books written in the 20th century. Richard Niebuhr, the author, wrote this book in 1951, during his long career teaching at Yale. This classic study describes the several ways Christians and the Church have related to the world, to the culture, throughout history.

Christ *against* culture describes the early Church living during the Roman Empire. For the first three centuries, Christians were persecuted, executed by the Roman authorities. The Church existed “underground”. There was a complete separation from the culture, the world.

After Constantine became a Christian in the 4th century and the empire encouraged the Church to be a part of the culture, there were still those who lived apart from the world. The monastic movement began. Men and women formed communities isolated, separated from the world. In every age and in most places, we see Christian communities that live in opposition to the prevailing cultural norms. They are separated from the world.

We see the exact opposite with the Church accommodating the culture. Christ *of* culture can be seen through history whenever the Church and the world seem to live as one, together, mutually inclusive. At its worst and most harmful, we have seen this with Hitler using the German Churches to condone and support the Nazi movement. In our own history, the Pilgrims and Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony hoped to create a kind of theocracy in the 17th century. This led our Founders to establish the principle of the separation of church and state in our Constitution.

The most hopeful relationship Niebuhr describes is Christ the *transformer* of culture. We see this in the prophetic call of Jesus, the incarnation of God’s love in the world. When the Church follows Jesus, the biblical standards of justice, peace, respect, repentance, generosity, and hospitality are extended to all in society. We see the “transformation” of culture in the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, calling for repentance and forgiveness after the Civil War; with Dr. Martin Luther King asking all Christians to support civil rights; and, most recently, in South Africa, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu worked for the transformation of the apartheid system.

In our own day and time we are asked, how do we live in this world? Do we feel separated, against the culture? Is our faith private, personal, detached from the political realities that now define our nation? Do we just ignore the violence, the divisions, the negativity of our culture? Or do we accept the call to be a part of God’s transforming love, bringing reconciliation, respect, and renewal to our society?

The authorities tried to trap Jesus. Pay taxes or not? If Jesus answers “yes”, he has disregarded the Jewish law and tradition. If he answers “no”, he has committed treason, revolt against Rome. We know that both the religious and the political authorities had their reasons to eliminate Jesus. Today, both political and religious authorities try to use Jesus for their own agendas. Jesus show us his wisdom, his faithfulness, in his answer.

Clearly, he had in mind the words of the 24th Psalm, “...the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein...”. Caesar, every Emperor, President, leader in every

age, is under the authority of God Almighty. Every culture is exposed to the light of God's will, the values of God's kingdom.

Shortly before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for his disciples, for the Church in every historical period, for us today. He asks that we be "Sent into the world... sanctified in truth... kept from the evil one... made one" (John 17). So, we are to be in the world, but not of the world. We are to be transformers of culture by the power of God's love as we know this love in Jesus Christ. As some like to say, Christians are called to love God and change the world.

Matthew 22: 15-22