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CHRIST CULTURE AND THE WORLDLY CHURCH



John Stamps

After the publication of his widely unread **Treatise on Human Nature**, David Hume lamented that his book "fell still-born from the press." The authors of **The Worldly Church** have an entirely different problem due to the book's curious reception. **The Worldly Church** has become the Church of Christ version of the Rorschach inkblot test: what you see there is what you read into it! Conservatives accuse the authors of pioneer-bashing, while at the same time they taunt the rest of the church, "We told you so! Once you start tampering with the ancient, restored Gospel, the inevitable result is worldliness." Irate ministers of mega-churches take the book personally, reading it as a slam on their ministry systems and Family Life Centers. Finally, there are others who ridicule the authors as ivory-tower academics who do not understand the day-in day-out pressures and responsibilities of ministering to people with huge, felt needs.

The Problem of Christ and Culture

The title of the book raises again the age-old paradox, "How can the Church be in the world but not

of the world?" The authors argue that the main problem for the Churches of Christ as they face the 21st century is neither gyms nor ministry systems but the worldliness or "secularization" due to the loss of transcendence.¹ In order to survive in the religious marketplace of competing ideas and values, the Churches of Christ have unwittingly accommodated themselves to the modern secular mentality. We have become culture followers rather than culture formers.

But what does it mean for the church to be worldly or secular? Here Richard Niebuhr's book, **Christ and Culture**, might be helpful.² Christians have historically and typically dealt with the problem of Christ and culture in five different ways:

1) **Christ Verses Culture:** Christians from Tertullian to Tolstoy have adopted variations of this position. One good example is our own David Lipscomb, whose strong pacifist convictions led him to repudiate totally Christian involvement in government, military service, and even voting! The logic behind this viewpoint is that culture is evil, fallen, and beyond redemption. In order that their faith might not be infected by worldly temptations, Christians must flee from culture at all costs.³

2) **The Christ of Culture:** This position characterizes versions of Christianity as diverse as Gnosticism or the nineteenth century liberal Protestantism derived mainly from the writings and genius

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of Friedrich Schleiermacher. At its best, this viewpoint maintains Jesus Christ is the supreme example and symbol of universal human goodness, the fulfillment of human cultural aspirations. At its worst, this stance identifies "Christianity uncritically with the best of human culture."⁴ In other words, the modern world calls the shots and the church must conform. This point of view is probably not an option for most people in the Church of Christ. Or is it?

3) **Christ Above Culture:** This framework is associated with St. Thomas Aquinas and the medieval synthesis which arose from his theology. Here Christ and culture are distinguished but not necessarily in opposition. The synthesis of Christ and culture creates a hierarchy of possible goods from which a Christian might choose. In practical terms, cultural aspirations would be considered good, but the pursuit of holiness better.

4) **Christ and Culture in Paradox:** This standpoint shares certain important similarities with the Christ versus culture stance but with one major difference: culture is evil and fallen, but unavoidable. Christians in this type are "acutely conscious of the distinguishing character of the claim of Christ, but they accept realistically their inescapable involvement in the life of human beings, because they too are human beings. They take both faith and culture too radically to find it impossible to achieve a synthesis of them."⁵

Because culture is inescapable, Christians must, in the words of Luther, "sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly still."⁶ Christians remain in perpetual ambiguity and tension with their culture. We participate fully in it, despite its evil and the very real possibility of compromise, but all the while trusting in God's grace and mercy, "who will open up the way of obedience to them in forms which cannot be foreseen."⁷

5) **Christ transforming culture:** This typically Reformed point of view that sees "God as Creator and sustainer, that honors Christ both as Logos and Lord, and that envisions in redemption both the reconciliation of the sinner and the renewal of the created order" is associated with the culture conversionist impulses of John Calvin.⁸ Despite a relentless insistence on total human depravity,⁹ this stance has a generally favorable view of human culture, due mainly to a strong doctrine of creation, consisting of a firm

belief in "common grace," as well as God's "cultural mandate" to subdue and develop the earth.¹⁰ Advocates of this position argue any area of culture can, in principle, be redeemed by Christ, resulting in a "realistic optimism" about the possibilities of Christian victory over evil in the world.

The Worldly Church: In the World and of the World

The history of the Restoration Movement, according to **The Worldly Church**, contains a tremendous irony. In order to restore the New Testament Church of the first century, it seemed self-evident and highly desirable that we escape the effects of culture, history (especially church history), and tradition in our "reading" of scripture. The word "reading" and not "interpretation," is used here quite deliberately, for the assertion was frequently made, and perhaps in many circles still is, "We in the Churches of Christ do not interpret the Bible. We just read it for what it says."¹¹ Alexander Campbell expressed this ahistorical sentiment best of all in the classic statement, "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one

had read them before me."¹² We simply assumed we could escape from or were somehow how immune to the contaminating effects of culture, history, and tradition.¹³ Instead, as **The Worldly Church** tells the story so

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well, seeking to avoid liberalism and humanism, "secularism stalked our blindside" (p. 39).

Particularly ironic was the assumption that secularization only happened to the other churches: Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Methodist, and the mainline Protestant churches. Such a thing could never happen to us, a people who scorned "human traditions and cultural norms" (p. 54), who thought we could restore the New Testament Church in all of its purity and simplicity, using only the New Testament as our authority for faith and practice. But not realizing how we read the New Testament through the grid of Enlightenment assumptions produced certain undesirable and unforeseen side-effects.¹⁴ These included:

1) A firmly entrenched and widespread "self-reliance" (p. 35), or in theological terms, "legalism," the result of a theology which denies God's mystery and transcendence.

2) A "flat" view of scripture, where the New Testament, viewed as a "blueprint" or "constitution," becomes a quarry to be mined for facts to be built inductively into a Christian

system (pp. 56-60).

3) A Holy Spirit without mystery or power, "shackled"¹⁵ to the Bible, operating only through human logic and arguments (p. 57). This led to an overly rationalistic view of faith, where reason and evidence have priority over faith. Here faith became assent to evidence that demands a verdict, or what it really is, evidence with a high degree of probability, but not "faith" in the biblical sense of the term (cf. e.g. John 20:29).

4) An overly optimistic, naive, and consequently shallow, view of the limits and power of sin in the world (p. 30, 41-42).

5) A rabid sectarianism, where we are Christians only and the only Christians (p. 2).

But in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's, many Churches of Christ made a curious cultural transformation. Sectarianism was no longer marketable. Wanting to compete in the marketplace for souls, we followed the lead of "evangelicals who in the 1950's discovered the usefulness of popular psychology and put it to work -- they thought -- in the service of the faith" (p. 36). The old gospel of self-reliance which once produced a rigid legalism had mutated into a new gospel, a mishmash theology consisting largely of doses of Bible mixed generously with self-help, "pop" psychology:

The pop psychology of the evangelicals seemed strangely comfortable -- almost like an old shoe -- and it wore so well and felt so good that many were reluctant to slip it off. The fact is, it **did** fit. It fit because it was, at its core, the old nineteenth-century gospel of self-reliance in new and modern garb (p. 38).

In terms of Niebuhr's typology, many Churches of Christ had changed from a strict Christ verses culture stance to, at best, a Christ transforming culture stance, or at worst, to a Christ of culture one. But to be more precise, the transition was only made in what were thought to be theologically "safe" areas. Psychology, sociology, and business management all became fertile fields to be farmed for techniques to be used in the interests of church growth.

This change of attitude to culture is, again, ironic. According to **The Worldly Church**, early in our history the Churches of Christ scorned "human traditions and cultural norms" and viewed the Church as an "institution that set standards for society." But now we had become an institution whose chief purpose was "to meet the needs of society" (p. 54-55).

Christ and Culture Revisited

It is not entirely clear what role **The Worldly Church** advocates for the Churches of Christ in 20th

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century culture, whether Christians should "transform" culture, stand in paradox to culture, or adopt a variation of the "Christ verses culture" stance. Two points, however, do stand out in their argument.

For starters, the authors argue for a biblically based "worldview, on which to build a meaningful alternative" (p.33) to the current theological quagmire in which our movement is stuck. Otherwise, they believe, we are too easily deceived by the temptations

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of secularization. The development of such a Christian worldview does not mean, however, that we can be naive about "escaping" culture:

The sectarian mind... is unaware of the enormous extent to which culture moulds (sic) lives, shapes faith, and even helps determine the concerns of the church in every age. The power of culture is unavoidable... It is part and parcel of being human, of having limits. Our task, therefore, is to heighten our awareness of culture's power in our lives, for only when we become alert to culture's seductions can we do battle with its principalities and powers, unmask its pretensions, and reject its idiosyncratic claims. To do otherwise is to invite our culture to control our faith and to shape the church in ways we might never intend (p. 31-32).

They also deplore the earlier sectarian attitudes which characterized many Churches of Christ. A third alternative, beyond sectarianism and secularism, is needed: "That better way is allegiance neither to sect nor world but rather to a sovereign God who stands in judgement on both" (p. 2). The solution to our current woes in the church is not "adapting to the pressures and demands of modernity" (p. 13) as a survival tactic. To them accommodation of the Gospel to the modern mentality means selling-out, whether deliberately or unintentionally. Recovering our way demands prophetic courage to proclaim faithfully to both church and world the Gospel message it needs to hear, and not the theological pablum it wants to hear. Once again, the great themes of Scripture need to be

sounded loud and clear from our pulpits:

The sovereignty and glory of God, the debilitating sin of each person, the searching and suffering love of the Father, the incarnation and atoning death of the Son, salvation by grace through faith, and the transforming power of the Spirit at work within us (p. 71).

A Modest Proposal: "Let the Church be a Sect"¹⁷

The Churches of Christ have come a long way since we looked to Pat Boone as our first sign of cultural respectability, the first Church of Christ kid who made it big in American culture. No longer separated from middle-class Americana by railroad tracks, rural roots, and modest wood-frame church buildings, we can finally flex our muscle in American society. Our ministers now pursue advanced theological training at respectable institutions of higher learning. Our laity take their rightful place in the highest echelons of business and society. The question, "Where do we go from here?," is not difficult to answer. In Niebuhr's typology, we have moved from a Christ versus culture stance to a Christ transforming culture one, and liked it.¹⁸ David Lipscomb is out; Chuck Swindoll is in.

But progress carries with it a hidden price-tag. The process of transforming culture has been deadly to our spiritual health. Despite much to commend the standpoint (always worth a try!¹⁹), the temptation which constantly haunts this stance is compromise, "apologetically trying to translate our religious convictions in terms palatable to the world."²⁰ It's all too easy for a church seeking to transform culture to make concessions to culture, if only to get the church's foot in the door of culture in order to transform it.

Christians must be careful of the various conceptual tools, ideas, or concepts they borrow from various academic disciplines. We cannot assume they are "neutral" when they are not. To be used they must be first converted. Christians who adopt a Christ transforming culture stance must have both a firm understanding of the mysteries of the Christian faith as well as of the presuppositions and worldview which lies behind the different techniques of concepts being used.

Furthermore, the scandal and paradox of the cross of Jesus is not easily to assimilate into a Christ transforming culture framework, especially in the academic arena where the Christian scholar seeks to integrate his faith and modern learning. Confronting academic culture with the "scandal of particularity" of the cross does not quite mesh with the live-and-let-live pluralism of the modern university. For better or for worse, the Christian faith is "intellectually 'imperialistic,' a contentious competitor with all other claimants for the truth."²¹

The only hope for Churches of Christ as they face the brave new world of the 21st century lies in recovering, or if you will, "restoring" two dominant

biblical themes: the utter transcendence and mystery of the holy God, and "the fundamental frailty of humankind whose imperfections and limitations place between God and his creation an enormous gulf" (p. 6). Because of the Fall, all humans -- Christians included -- live in the midst of enormous ambiguity. Despite our best efforts to the contrary, sin always remains a powerful force in our midst. It's all-too-easy for Christians, especially Restoration Christians unaware of the grip of Enlightenment assumptions in their history, to "grossly underestimate the power of sin and depths of alienation and estrangement in the lives of every human being" (p. 41).

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become a sect.²² Now for many of us, a sect is the last thing we would want to be, especially given our shameful history of division and in-fighting. But the real issue is not whether the Church ought to be sectarian, **but what kind of sectarians should we be?**²³

The Churches of Christ are in serious need of spiritual and theological resources in this whole question of relating Christ and culture. The value of Niebuhr's typology is that it gave us a handle on the options available to us historically while the inestimable value of **The Worldly Church** is its prophetic insistence that the Church is not called to be successful by the world's standards but faithful to God's story. Such a high calling demands that the Church become a "community of character,"²⁴ consisting of "the tough social formation of a colony, a holy nation, a people, a family, a congregation that is able to stand against the pretensions and the illusions of the world." In short, the church must become a sect because "the sort of life required of Christians is too difficult and peculiar to survive without the Church."²⁵

So what's the moral to the story? For whatever reasons, the Church seems to be healthiest when its message and identity are clearly defined against, or in spite of, culture. It's a sad state of affairs when the Church depends on the surrounding culture as a prop for her faith. Given what arguably appear to be the dangers of the Christ transforming culture viewpoint, the Churches of Christ need to be reminded again that God calls us to faithfulness, not success.