

CHURCH AND CULTURE

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Introductory note: This was written very recently, but its horizon is American culture. I'm well aware of both the differences and similarities with the UK and Europe. I put it out because: a) globalization means many of the movements and conflicts of the American church have influence the church in other lands, b) thoughtful readers will see many transferable concepts in any case.

BATTLES OVER CULTURE

There is no more divisive issue in contemporary evangelicalism than that of how the Christians should relate to our broader culture. Traditionally, evangelicals' attitude toward culture has been one of indifference. This world, it is thought, is only going to burn up in the end, so what matters is to convert as many people as possible. If we do that well, then society will be changed 'one heart at a time.' There are still many churches and Christians take what could be called this '**pietistic**' stance. However, over the last generation American society began to change. Revolutions in attitudes and moral values meant many Christians felt seriously 'out of place' in their own society. Many have felt the need to respond. Therefore, along side of the traditional pietistic attitude, three other strategies for relating Christianity to culture have emerged.

The first group, which I'll call '**conservative activists**,' perceives the main problem today to be the loss of moral absolutes. They believe Christians have become too much like the culture, which no longer believes in absolute truth. In this approach, young people are encouraged to recover a Christian world-view and to penetrate the higher reaches of the cultural economy. They hope for a conservative version of the 'long march through the elite institutions' that the young 60s radicals achieved over the last thirty years. This group also puts great energy into politics and grass roots social activism around issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, father hood, and abstinence education.

In reaction to this movement, there is a second group that insists our main problem is exactly the opposite. They claim church is too withdrawn from the world around them. This group, which I will call '**evangelical relevants**,' complains that Christians are perceived as too hostile and condemning, and that they speak in language that is undecipherable to the average person. Our society, in this view, sees Christians as more concerned more to increase their own tribe than to involve themselves in the suffering of the world. In this model, the church is called to deeply identify with felt needs of people. Instead of denouncing the loss of moral absolutes, Christians should be embodying love and truth by working against inequality and injustice in society.

There is a third approach that has become vocal especially in the last fifteen years. This group, which I will call '**counter-culturalist**,' sees the main problem today to be that the church has tried to reform the world to become like the church. That, they insist, is the 'Christendom mistake', and it only ever results in the church simply becoming like the world. Trying to penetrate elite institutions (like the conservative activists) only turns the church into another power broker. Trying to win people by meeting 'felt needs' (like the evangelical relevants) only turns the church into another consumerist mall of services. In this view, the church needs to follow Christ 'outside the camp' and identify with the poor and the marginalized. It needs to have thick, rich, liturgical worship that shapes Christians into a new society. It needs to be a witness to the world simply by being the church, an alternate society. Christians certainly live in the world and have secular vocations, but in those callings they act as good citizens and neighbors like anyone else. They shouldn't try to 'transform culture' at all.

These four groups are like tectonic plates, along which major and minor eruptions and quakes happen constantly. They are all calling the church to do different things, and they regularly attack each other. Their claims and practices are highly confusing to undecided observers.

AN APPRECIATION

The first thing we notice about these four different approaches is how, looked at 'from 30,000 ft', they are so complementary to each other. Is the lack of very vibrant, effective evangelism a major problem? Of course. The high point of evangelicals' greatest influence in American society was in the 1830s, after a series of powerful revivals had swelled churches numbers and vigor. Is it a major problem that Christians are vastly under-represented in many sectors of the cultural economy? Absolutely. In the visual arts, literature and poetry, theater and dance, academic philosophy, legal philosophy, academic think tanks, major research universities, leading opinion magazines and journals, high-end journalism, most of the major foundations, public television, film, and high-end advertising agencies— there are few or no recognizably Christian voices. Where there are the individual exceptions, they are just that—lone individuals. They do not operate within dense social networks that support, encourage, and sharpen one another.

Is it a major problem that the evangelical church essentially exists in a sub-culture, not able to speak the gospel intelligibly to most Americans, and perceived to be only concerned to increase their own power rather than the common good? Of course it is. Early Christian bishops in the Roman Empire were so well-known for identifying with the poor and weak that eventually, though part of a minority religion, they were seen to have the right to stand and speak for the local community as a whole. Caring for the poor and the weak became, ironically, a major reason for the cultural influence the church eventually came to wield. If the church does not identify with the marginalized, it will itself be marginalized. That is God's (and poetic) justice.

Is a major part of the problem the thin-ness of our Christian communities? This is seen when evangelical Christians refrain from drinking alcohol but are as individualistic and consumeristic, as materialistic and caught up in power pursuits, as everyone else. Of course, that is an enormous problem. The counter-culturalist critique of evangelicalism's shallowness and cultural assimilation is very telling.

Every one of these groups articulates a crucial and irreplaceable part of what is wrong with our church's relationship to culture.

SO WHAT'S GOING WRONG?

And yet, despite the accuracy of all their core insights, each of these parties differ sharply, even violently, from the others in strategy and practice. The pietists, counter-culturalists, and conservative activists all think 'contextualization' is very bad, while evangelical relevants believe it is crucial. The pietists and conservative activists not only vote Republican but question the spiritual condition of anyone who doesn't. Meanwhile the counter-culturalists vote Democrat and the relevants split their vote. Pietists and relevants appreciate church growth literature, but the other parties absolutely loathe it. Relevants and counter-culturalists give major emphasis to social justice while the other two groups believe that is the 'social gospel' or even a capitulation to Marxism. Pietists and counter-culturalists are extremely pessimistic about any cultural change for the good, while conservative activists and evangelical relevants are very hopeful. Their fund-raising literature is based on the claim that they can change things.

If from a top-level view, their main insights seem complementary, why the sharp contentions and even hostility between them?

1. An unbalanced view of themselves. The first reason for all the disagreement is that each group is responding more to the other Christian parties than to the culture. Instead of

formulating a ministry stance toward the world, they are defining themselves over against each other. They are *not* like those Christians over there. Because they do this, they exaggerate the imbalances in the other groups, and, because they do that, they are blind to their own.

Conservative activists tend to see emphasis on social justice to be 'social gospel' so they make little provision for it. But what a problem that is for them. They show so little concern about identifying with the marginalized that their efforts to bring the Christian world-view into the public sphere is being met with enormous resistance, and with cries of 'theocracy' and 'fascism.'

Pietists are very dismissive of any talk of 'contextualization'. The old-fashioned gospel is fine for them. Yet because they are afraid to spend a lot of time listening deeply to the culture, they end using the gospel to answer questions that people aren't asking. Contextualization is *not* giving people what they want to hear. It is giving them Biblical answers (which they may not want to hear) to the questions they are actually asking. Ironically, a fear of contextualization means that this group is often ineffective at their *summum bonum*, evangelism, especially in the more non-traditional parts of our society.

Evangelical relevants are dismissive of the conservatives' and the counter-culturalists' emphasis on creeds, tradition, and liturgy. They have stressed 'contemporary worship' only, and discovered, to their shock, that many young people craved the supposedly irrelevant forms of the past.

Counter-culturalists also over-react to the other approaches. Often they assess all political activism as just a power-play, the 'Christendom' mistake of trying to make the world like the church. But was the abolitionist movement a power play? That was certainly a political movement. To say 'we must never try to change the culture' is simply an over-reaction. No one can live in the world *neutrally*. Culture is living out what we truly worship, and everyone is worshipping something. Simply to work and live in the world, without sealing our faith off from our work, *will* transform culture.

2. An insufficient grasp of the whole Biblical plot-line. Don Carson's new book *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008) looks at the historic and present strategies that Christians have taken with regard to culture. Carson weighs all the models and also finds each one to be reductionistic—too exclusively centered on one emphasis and so closed off from the insights of other groups. But his diagnosis for the cause of this phenomenon is that each approach is insufficiently Biblical.

The Bible's narrative arc is—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Pietists are strong on redemption but ignore the goodness (and therefore the importance) of cultivating the material creation. Conservatives look forward to the kingdom of Christ but tend to be too triumphalistic, not taking seriously enough the cruciformity of Biblical redemption—salvation comes through service, suffering, and loss. Relevants' sometime over-emphasis on contextualization stems from a too optimistic a view of human nature. This leads to a naiveté about the intransigence and darkness of human culture. Counter-culturalists are so inordinately pessimistic about cultural improvement that they are, ironically, naïve about how both sin and grace work. Remaining sin in unbelievers means that the church is never nearly as good and distinctive as its right beliefs should make it; common grace in believers means that the world is never as bad as its wrong beliefs should make it. The distinction, therefore, between the church and world is not nearly as great as counter-culturalists insist it is. Some counter-culturalists are also weak on the doctrine of creation and of common grace.

Carson concludes that each approach represents just one possible emphasis within a comprehensive whole. Some Christians live under totalitarian governments in traditional cultures, while others live in democratic, post-modern cultures. Priorities and strategies will inevitably

differ. The Biblical teaching about Christianity and culture is very rich, and provides Christians in every century and culture with both boundaries and freedom to devise an approach that fits their moment.

3. An inadequate understanding of our current culture realities. It will not be enough, however, to simply stitch together a patch-quilt of each of these approaches. None of them is going deep enough and confronting the two great cultural realities today. As a result they are all being, to a degree, co-opted and ‘conformed to this world.’

Pluralism of belief is the first great cultural reality. Rome was, in a sense, a pluralistic city, since many nationalities dwelt within it. But ultimately it was not a pluralistic culture, because all the important symbols of shared public life pointed toward the pagan gods. The arts, government, the academy, civil society was all based on belief in those gods, though many within the society (such as the Jews) did not adhere to those beliefs. Until recently, all societies had a set of comprehensive religious beliefs (or anti-religious beliefs, as in Communist Russia and China) that were ‘official’. Today, however, no group sees its beliefs reflected symbolically across the spectrum of our cultural institutions. ‘Comprehensive’ religious beliefs are to be kept strictly private, and have no place in public life. Everyone is unhappy, and feels his or her views are under assault. Atheists note all the public language of ‘in God we trust’ and how atheists are never elected to high public office. Christians, however, are told they must not contend for public policy out of their religious values, since that is ‘imposing your beliefs on others.’ They way our culture supposedly keeps the peace is by insisting that everyone keep their faith private, and use only rational arguments and statements in public discourse.

Both pietists and counter-culturalists capitulate to contemporary culture at this point. Pietists are fairly oblivious to the idea of a Christian world-view. They think of Christianity as mainly a matter of the heart anyway. Counter-culturalists, haunted by the debacle of dead state-churches in Europe, insist that Christians should not try to change the world to look like the church. At the end of the day, however, both groups do exactly what the dominant culture wants them to do— seal off their faith from their public life. Christians then become just one more ‘linguistic community’ which speaks coherently to itself but which gives up its responsibility to put the gospel in a language which is understood by the whole society, and rejects the responsibility to be salt and light deep within all sectors of culture, not just in service projects.

Hollowness of language is the second great cultural reality. Contemporary culture at best doubts and at worst denies that there is any real connection between words, truth-claims, and reality. It is the view that ‘words mean only what I say they mean,’ that there are no fixed points of reference, that everything is a matter of interpretation. It is not simply that we now have a diversity of public opinions on specific moral issues like stem cell research, abortion, and homosexuality. There is a deep skepticism about the possibility and even the desirability of living a life based on principle, truth, and fidelity. If there is a consensus belief about the nature of things, it may be that *everybody is really just out for power, especially the people who claim they aren’t.*

This means, first, that individuals today are unusually mistrustful of and hostile to authority. While there is ostensibly a ‘hunger for community,’ it is only for horizontal supportive relationships that can be easily jettisoned if they are too costly. Covenant relationships, in which the relationship is more important than individual happiness, are replaced by consumer relationships, in which individual needs trump loyalty to a relationship. Even marriage and church attendance is now seen in consumer terms, not covenantal ones.

Another implication is that people no longer trust words to persuade and engage. Unconsciously, modern politics (including conservative politics) has been shaped by Nietzschean understandings of reality. It demonizes opponents by exaggerating their flaws and caricaturing all that they say. It

plays the victim and stirs up its demographic base through anger and a sense of grievance. There is no faith in dialogue, in fair-minded debate, in 'my honorable opponent.' All such practices in former times are now seen to have been hopelessly naïve. Nietzsche, of course, believed in the hollowness of truth-language, and that everything was a quest for power. His views have triumphed and shape not only modern politics, but fund-raising techniques for organizations, local neighborhood civic life, and much else as well.

While the pietists and counter-culturalists have capitulated to pluralism, the conservative activists have in a stark way been conformed to the power-politics of the world. Many evangelical fund-raising letters are perfect examples of the demonization and victimization discourse that fits in so well with post-modern discourse that despairs of finding truth through dialogue. Meanwhile many of the older evangelical relevants (the mega-churches) have built large churches in which people are attracted in crowds but consumeristically, without accountability to a community. Emphasis on membership, church discipline, and submission to pastoral authority are all passé. And while newer evangelical relevants see the danger of this, many of them are accepting almost wholesale the post-modern insistence that truth can't be known for certain.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

1. Gospel—rich and sharp. Where do we go from here? First and foremost, we need a richer yet sharpened understanding of the gospel. Evangelicals today are in turmoil over the nature of the gospel. Many look at the traditional evangelical gospel and complain that it has been individualistic, shallow, and 'gnostic.' A classic street version of it was 'Jesus died for your sins so you could have a personal relationship with him.' They argue that this older articulation of the gospel gives the impression that escaping this world into heaven is all that matters.

In the place of this older formulation, many evangelicals say that the gospel is 'Jesus is Lord, the kingdom is at hand.' In this narrative, Jesus' death doesn't assuage God's wrath against our sin so much as it absorbs the world's evil and violence. In his death he defeats the powers of the world, shows the way of non-violence and service, and calls us to join his kingdom community and work for peace and justice in the world. Those who speak in terms of kingdom and overcoming the powers rather than substitution assuaging the wrath, want a gospel that shapes the *practices* of the Christian in the world. They see the effects of a more individualistic gospel on people who treat it as just a 'get out of hell free' card that does not transform their lives. In general, the counter-culturalists and many of the evangelical relevants lean toward this way of communicating the gospel.

The trouble is, however, that this way of speaking often obscures the sharpness of the distinction between Law and Gospel that the Reformers expressed so well, and which was at the heart of the great awakenings. We are saved by grace through Christ's work, not through our own work. If the gospel is mainly, 'repent of living for yourself and join Jesus' kingdom program' it can be just one more legalism. The pietists and the conservative activists will rightly object that the law-grace distinction is often obscured in the efforts to show the gospel's rich relevance to human life and problems.

We must get to the place where we see *both* the richness *and* the sharpness of the gospel. Even more, we must see it is its sharpness that makes it so rich. The implications of the gospel of grace-not works can transform and reshape all attitudes, views, relationships, and cultural interactions. Look at how this works out in the Corinthian letters. When Paul denounces the Corinthians' divisions and party spirit (1:10-17) he says that they comes from pride and boasting, a betrayal of the gospel of sovereign grace (1:26-31.) When Paul deals with the issue of sexual sin and discipline in chapters 5-6, he gives directions for behavior and grounds his appeal in the gospel of justification (6:11) and the fact that they were ransomed by the death of Christ (6:19-20.) In 2 Cor 9:13 he says that radical, humble generosity is being 'submissive to the confession of the gospel' (i.e. materialism fails to take seriously the gospel of Christ's sacrificial death for us.)

Similarly, in Galatians 2:14 Paul challenges Peter's racist attitudes toward Gentile Christians by insisting that he was not 'walking in line with the truth of the gospel,' that truth being the gospel of forensic justification. Gospel ministry, then, is not only proclaiming it to people so that they will embrace and believe it, it also teaching and shepherding believers with it so that it shapes the entirety of their lives, inside the church and out in the world.

For evangelicals to move forward, they must be able to come together around a richer understanding of God's will for a renewed world without losing the sharpness and power of the classic Protestant understanding of the gospel. If our strategy does not arise out of our grasp of the gospel, then will be just one more effort to control culture through some technique. We will then just be like everyone else.

If we do arrive at a consensus, and together hold a rich and sharpened understanding of the gospel, what will our strategy for engaging culture look like?

2. Light - gracious, radical service In Matthew 5:14-16- Jesus tells his disciples they are to be a 'city on a hill' whose 'good deeds' are a light that will lead non-believers to praise the Father in heaven. To be a 'city' means to be a community. You can't be a city on your own! But why does Jesus call us a 'city' rather than just a fellowship? Christians are called to be an *alternate* city within every earthly city, an alternate human *culture* within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in non-destructive ways, re-shaped by the gospel.

Regarding sex, the alternate city must avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of it. It is a community which so loves and cares practically for its members that chastity makes sense. It teaches its members to conform their bodily being to the shape of the gospel—abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within. Regarding money, the Christian counter-culture should encourage a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. Regarding power, Christian community should be visibly committed to power-sharing and relationship-building between races and classes that are alienated outside of the Body of Christ. The practical evidence of this is that our churches are increasingly multi-ethnic, both in the congregations at large and in its leadership.

Yet Jesus' call is not simply to be an enclave off to ourselves. It is the 'good deeds' of this city that will win non-believers to respect and praise of God. The Greek words for 'good deeds' usually means not moral behavior in general but deeds of compassion and service. Here is where the relevant and the counter-culturalists are surely right. Jonathan Edwards wrote that there is no ethical demand made in the Bible more clearly or more emphatically than that we love, give to, and care for the poor. The early church was known to be more committed to and effective in help for the poor than was the Roman government or other cultural institutions. Unless that is true for us today as well, we should not expect cultural impact. The time must come when it is widely known that secularism tends to make people selfish, and religion and morality makes people tribal, but that the Christian gospel turns people away from both their selfishness and their self-righteousness to serve other in the way Jesus gave himself for his enemies.

Just as Israel was told to 'seek the peace and prosperity' of the great pagan city of Babylon (Jer 29:4-7) so Christians should be well know as people who seek to serve people whether they believe Christianity or not. We are called to be a beautiful *city of light* inside every city. And the citizens of the city of God should be the very *best* citizens of their earthly city as well. Until this is the case, the 'cultural impact' that the Bible speaks of in Mt 5:13-16 and 1 Pet 2:11-12 will not happen.

The world will rightly distrust any claim by the church to a voice in public affairs, remembering that past abuses when the church had more power. We have no right to speak to our culture until we can show that we have learned our lesson: that we understand the difference between bearing witness to the truth and arrogant oppression in the name of truth. We must show that we understand that witness "*marturia*" means not dominance and control but suffering.

3. Salt - faithful, cultural presence

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus also calls believers to be '*salt of the earth*'. Before refrigeration salt was a preservative. It kept meat 'renewed' so that it did not go bad. It was also used as a way to keep wounds from festering. Salt, however, cannot do its work unless it is distributed. Jesus is saying that individual Christians can influence and keep society from deteriorating, socially and culturally.

This metaphor is therefore a counter-point to that of light. The light metaphor is grander in its promise. Blind people can come to see! The salt metaphor, however, is more modest in what it holds out for us. Christian living (like salt in the meat) is quite important to keep culture from degrading, but here we are being warned not to necessarily expect fundamental social transformation. Salt is a more negative metaphor as well. Salt in a wound kept it from festering, but it was also painful. This means that Christians are to stand for truth and guard orthodox belief and practice, but there will inevitably be opposition. (cf. 1 Peter 2:12.) The salt metaphor is different in another way as well. Salt must spread out and penetrate to be effective. Christians then do not only effect the world as a counter-cultural community ('light') but also as dispersed individuals who take the Christian message and world view into every circle and sector of society.

The salt metaphor leads me to borrow a phrase from James Hunter that I think strikes the right balance in our relationship with culture. Hunter speaks of Christians' *faithful presence*. Unlike the pietists and counter-culturalists, we are not to be culturally absent. But unlike the conservatives and the relevant, we should be more chastened than to talk about cultural redemption. We should avoid that kind of triumphalism. We should not be as pessimistic about cultural change as the counter-culturalists or as optimistic as the political activists.

A reading of Randall Collins' *The Sociology of Philosophies* shows that the most powerful cultural-changing ideas do not usually arise so much from the grassroots and the masses or from the elites at the very center of politics and power. Usually, cultural change comes from the 'outer elites'—the artists, academics, businesspeople, and others who are newer, younger, well-networked but who are less established in traditional centers of power.

Neither a grassroots-popular movement nor a political movement, then, is likely to see any cultural change. Cultural change can occur if Christians stop being too eager to gain influence or too cynical to use power at all. It can occur if Christians are more eager to serve the common good than rule it, and yet who are not so self-righteous about our society that they refuse to do the hard work of inhabiting every room in our cultural house.

Within and between these two metaphors, of salt and light, we discern this balance which we name 'cultural presence' rather than cultural absence, cultural indifference, or cultural redemption. The salt image means we are to have Christian influence on the broader culture and 'renew' it—invigorating and shaping it in some fashion. Yet the city and light images stress the importance of the church itself as a very distinct and beautiful mini-society. These metaphors hold out the possibility of bringing *some* significant Christian influence into a society but they do not seem to hold out the prospect of any kind of 'take over' or Christianizing of society as a whole.

4. Church- word and deed. We've said the gospel is both sharp and rich. Jesus' salvation not only pardons individuals but brings about a new heavens and new earth.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we find in the Bible not only ringing calls to evangelize the world, but also strong calls to do justice and care for the poor. A case study is the book of James. Protestants who have wrestled with the teaching of James in chapter 2 have concluded that it is teaching “While we are saved by faith alone—we are not saved by faith that remains alone; faith that doesn’t issue in good works is dead, it is not true justifying faith.” But notice that, in the context of the book of James, all the ‘works’ that are the marks of real, saving faith are actions like caring for widows and orphans (1:27,) showing the poor respect and treating them equally (2:2-6,) and meeting material needs for food and clothing (2:15-16.) James says, point blank, that those who say they have justifying faith but close their hearts to the poor are mistaken or liars (2:15-18.) James concludes that *‘judgment will be without mercy for those who have shown no mercy!’* (2:13) The ‘mercy’ James speaks of here is strong concern and help for the poor. (D.Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 117.)

What remarkable teaching! You will not find mercy from God on judgment day if you have not shown mercy to the poor during your lifetime. This is not because caring for the poor saves you, but because it is the inevitable outcome of saving, justifying faith. By deeds of service God can judge true love of himself from lip-service (cf. Isaiah 1:10ff.) If there is a hardness, indifference, or superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth that he or she is a lost sinner saved only by free yet costly grace. Jonathan Edwards concludes, when reflecting on 1 John 3:17-19, that “[*Care for the poor*] is a thing so essential, that the contrary cannot consist with sincere love to God.” (“Christian Charity: The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced” In volume II of the Banner of Truth edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 165.)

However, when we call believers to seek the ‘peace of the city’ and to ‘do justice’ for the poor, there are many questions raised. Conservative activists and pietists point to the historical decline of the mainline Protestant churches. Those churches began with a strong emphasis on service and justice ministries alongside of evangelism, but eventually those emphases came to replace evangelism. Evangelism came to be redefined as ‘making the world a better place to live.’ The gospel came to be redefined as inclusion and justice for all. Completely lost was the concept of evangelism as a call for repentance, faith, and conversion. Many fear that a renewed emphasis on mercy and justice ministries will again displace vigorous evangelism and discipling. They also fear that such work will draw off needed resources from evangelism and traditional missions. In reaction to the new emphasis on doing justice, many insist that the mission of the church is strictly to preach the word, evangelize, and make disciples. Warnings about the ‘social gospel’ are warranted, but we must still come to grips with the calls of the Bible to the Christian community to do justice and love mercy.

An important distinction, between the church ‘institutional’ and the church ‘organic,’ may be a great help here. The Dutch Christian leader Abraham Kuyper taught that the ‘institutional church’ was the church in the world, as organized under its officers and ministers, preaching the gospel, baptizing and making disciples. This he distinguished from the church as ‘organism,’ by which he meant *Christians* in the world, who have been discipled and equipped to bring the gospel to bear on all of life. We should not think of Christians out in the world as merely discrete and detached individuals. They are to think and work together, banding together in all kinds of creative forms, being the church in the world that the institutional church discipled them to be.

*In Kuyper’s view, Christians who go out into their various vocations do so neither as direct emissaries of the institutional church NOR as mere individual believers. . . Christian social, cultural, and political action does not flow directly from structures and authorities of the church, but come to expression organically in the various spheres of life as believers live out the faith and spirituality that develops and is nurtured in the church institutional’s worship and work. (John Bolt *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Eerdmans) p.*

The church's gospel ministry includes *both* evangelizing non-believers *and* shaping every area of believers' lives with the gospel, but that doesn't mean that the church as an institution under its elders is to corporately carry out all the activity that we equip our members to do. For example, while the church should disciple its members who are film-makers so that their cinematic art will be profoundly influenced by the gospel, the church should not operate a film production company—that should be done by the film-makers themselves. While the church should, through its diaconal ministry, do practical acts of service to the unemployed, single parents, the poor in its midst and its neighborhood, yet major programs of social service or social justice should be run through Christians banding together in non-profits, agencies, foundations, political action groups, and so on. Kuyper rightly insists that the church *qua* church is to preach the gospel, worship and observe the sacraments, and engage in church discipline. In these activities it is producing members who will engage in art, science, education, journalism, film-making, business, and so on. But the church itself should not itself engage in these enterprises. It doesn't have the expertise or the calling.

If we are sensitive to this difference between the gathered, 'institutional' church and the dispersed 'organic' church, it gets us beyond the argument about what is the 'mission of the church'—is it primarily evangelism or social concern? More narrowly and formally considered, the institutional church exists primarily to evangelize and disciple people, but considered more broadly, Christians are called to seek to resist and heal all the results of sin in the world—spiritual, psychological, social, and physical. They are to, in Jesus' name, evangelize, counsel, shelter the homeless, feed the hungry, care for the sick, and create a more just society for all.

5. Work – vocation and faith. One of the main ways that the institutional church equips Christians to function as salt out in the world is as it discipled them to integrate their faith with their work. The Great Commission calls the church to make disciples, teaching them to obey Christ in every area of life. However, most churches only teach believers how to be distinctively Christian in their private lives—in the evenings and on the weekends. Our discipleship instructs in personal spiritual disciplines, life within the Christian community, and in how to evangelize neighbors. But there is virtually no attention given to how the gospel shapes and controls the way we work in our careers, our vocations. We need to create possibilities in every congregation for laypersons to seek illumination from the gospel for their daily secular work.

Churches need to teach Christians how our faith informs our work in at least four ways. First, our faith changes our motivation for work. For professionals, who are prone to over-work and anxiety, the gospel prevents us from finding our significance and identity in money and success. For working-class people, who are prone to captivation to what Paul calls 'eye-service' and drudgery, it directs us to 'work unto the Lord.' Second, our faith changes our conception of work. A robust theology of creation, and of God's love and care for it, helps us see that even simple tasks such as making a shoe, filling a tooth, and digging a ditch is a way to serve God and build up human community. Believing cultural production is rearranging the material world in such a way that honors it and promotes human flourishing. A good theology of work resists the modern world's tendency to value only expertise and those things that are difficult to do and therefore command more money and power. Third, our faith provides high ethics for Christians in the work place. Many things that are technically legal but Biblically immoral and unwise are out of bounds for believers, and this should always lead them to function with a very high level of integrity in their work.

Fourth, our faith gives us the basis for re-conceiving the very way in which our kind of work is done. Every vocational field is distorted by sin and idolatry. Christians medical professionals will see that some practices make money for them but don't add value to patients. Christians in marketing and business will discern common practices and accepted patterns of behavior that accrue power, status, and wealth without equitable benefit to customers and other colleagues. A

Christian world-view provides believers with ways to analyze the philosophies and practices that dominate their field, and bring renewal and reform to them.

When most Christians enter a vocational field, they either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout Bible verses at people to get their faith across. We do not know very well how to persuade people by showing them the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone's work. We do not know how to equip our people to think out the implications of the gospel for art, business, government, journalism, entertainment, and scholarship. Developing humane yet creative and excellent business environments out of our understanding of the gospel can be part of this work. The embodiment of joy, hope, and truth in the arts is also part of this work. If Christians live in major cultural centers in great numbers and simply do their work in an excellent but distinctive manner it will naturally produce a different kind of culture than the one in which we live now.

There is not currently a significant network of churches that has a comprehensive Christ-culture strategy and that provide nurturing communities and supportive environments for these Christian cultural leaders who have vision for the integration of their faith with their work. Most of our churches' discipleship models operate by drawing lay people more and more out of the world and in to the life of the church. For example, a Christian CEO, who does not have the time to be a church officer or host a Bible study, is looked at askance, instead of being seen as doing God's work in the world outside the walls of the church. A recent study, *Evangelicals in the Halls of Power* by D. Michael Lindsay (Oxford Press, 2007) shows that Christians most involved in cultural centers and institutions feel very unappreciated by and alienated from the church.

The majority of churches actively undermine Christians who seek to renew the culture. A minority of churches 'do no harm' and wish such people well. But very few churches actively support such cultural leaders with a) regular preaching and teaching that provides a Christian understanding of their work as a Christian calling and vocation, b) discipleship that equips people not only for following Christ in their private lives but their public lives, c) some celebration and appreciation for the work they do outside the walls, d) the embodiment and communication of Christianity in such a way that it addresses the baseline cultural narratives of the outside society and answers the questions our culture is asking with a vocabulary that is perhaps not accepted, but which is nonetheless comprehensible and attractive.

6. Heat – 'ecclesial revivalism.' One of the main weaknesses of the existing evangelical approaches to culture is that none of them take into account both the main traits of late modernity--radical pluralism and the hollowness of language. Is there a way that we can address both at once?

Mark Noll's *The Old Religion in a New World* (Eerdmans, 2002) tells the story of how traditional Christian church ministry in Europe was based on a parish model in which all residents within a defined area were considered to be the responsibility of the local congregation. A person within that locale became Christian through a process that was corporate, gradual, and formal or objective. (We therefore here name it 'the ecclesial way'.) The Christian life was conceived as being a life-long journey, marked by milestones, such as the presentation of an infant for baptism by the whole family, then by catechetical instruction in the church's historic creeds and traditions, looking toward the day when the child would be admitted to the Lord's Supper as a full communicant. Most crucially, no one 'chose' their faith or their church in this way of doing church. The emphasis was on incorporation into a community that traditioned the faith from generation to generation and so deeply shaped the mind and sensibilities of the persons within.

As Noll points out, the ecclesial approach worked well when there was one dominant church and religious tradition in a culture, so that individuals were not in a position to choose among many

churches or even religions. North America, however presented the church with literally a whole new world. The sheer size and space of the new continent, the mobility of the people, and, most of all, the tremendous ethnic and religious pluralism of the country, created, essentially, a 'marketplace' in which any American had a choice among many different churches and religious institutions.

It was therefore in America that a new way of doing church developed. It has been called 'revivalism,' a movement 'away from formal, outward, and established religion to personal, inward, and heartfelt religion.' (Noll, p.51.) Field preaching took the gospel directly to the people (outside of ordinary church services.) Many or most of the listeners were formally baptized members of churches but were called upon to examine their hearts for signs of regeneration and to turn and be born again and converted. In short, this approach emphasized a) the decisions of individuals rather than the incorporation of families into a community, b) dramatic turning rather than a process of liturgy and catechism, and c) experiential intensity and subjectivity rather than reliance on objective way marks like the sacraments. In the revivalist way of doing things, church involvement and the sacraments come well after evangelism and 'follow up', the basics of spiritual formation, is over. In the ecclesial approach, however, church and sacraments are the way to do evangelism and spiritual formation.

What's wrong with revivalism. The more democratized revivalistic forms of Christianity have flourished the most in the U.S. and Canada to this day. But in the last several years, there has been a severe critique of revivalism among scholars and younger evangelical leaders. Revivalist religion is critiqued as being 'Gnostic' (not involving the body, not caring for the physical,) as being individualistic, and as seeking to ground assurance in shifting subjective experience rather than more solid community participation and tradition. The call is for a return to an emphasis on the creeds and liturgy, on catechism and communal process, on looking to the sacraments, rather than to personal experience, for assurance.

Many of the criticisms of revivalism hit home. Our society rejects the idea of authoritative texts or social structures. It considers individual consciousness to be considered sovereign—there is no tradition or truth to which it should be beholden. Revivalism appeals to truth-allergic, experience-addicted people who want a dramatic experience, but who in the end won't accept the loss of freedom and control associated with coming under authority and living communally. Many 'converts' seem to make decisions for Christ, but soon lose their enthusiasm, because they are offered quick programs for 'follow up' and small group 'fellowship' rather than a life-long, embodied experience of community. The communal processes of traditional churches are better at bringing about long, slow, more thorough transformation of life.

What's right with revivalism. However, efforts to revive traditional ecclesial church life are not really addressing that other critical mark of late modernity—radical pluralism. Peter Berger in *The Heretical Imperative* and *The Homeless Mind* is very penetrating on this subject. The strength of one's beliefs depend a great deal on social conditions—not just having other individuals around you who confirm and support your beliefs, but also being immersed in a world in which language, symbols, and social practices in every way express and reinforce those beliefs. In traditional cultures, in which all the shared symbols of common life together pointed to and confirmed the society's religious beliefs, then God seems 'inevitable' and the world-view feels rock-solid stable and plausible to believers. In pluralistic societies, however, the most important symbols of our economic, aesthetic, political, and cultural shared public life do not point to a particular faith in God and reality. Everyone's belief systems in a pluralistic society are necessarily weaker than they have been in the past. Belief is possible, but it is now shot through with uncertainty. So, Berger points out, no one today can really inherit their belief-systems as in former times. Everyone must choose their faith. No matter how hard parents try to raise children in a faith, their children will be bombarded with doubts about that faith and will be presented with many viable and immediate

alternatives to it. To believe requires a consciousness and intentionality that Christians in the past did not know or need.

Revivalists intuitively recognized the changes in the culture that industrialization and urbanization were bringing. To reach people evangelicals *had* to go outside the doors and to do that you have to make appeals to individual decision. Revivalism's historic practices, as we have seen, often promote an unhealthy individualism. Yet its basic insights—that salvation is a matter of the heart, that understanding grace vs works brings about a conversion and spiritual renewal—have plenty of grounding in Biblical teaching as well as resonance in our culture. See the prophets' appeal to have a 'circumcised heart' rather than only formal, circumcised flesh, and the denunciation of those Israelites who honor God with their lips, but have their heart far from him.

The ecclesial critique, then may be making an idol of a kind of cultural arrangement that no longer exists in the West. In that arrangement, the undiluted ecclesial way was fairly effective. But we live in another kind of culture now, one that is just as filled with common grace and sin (though in different ways) as traditional culture. In this culture, the revivalist ethos is to some degree important. It is a cultural necessity that the church go outside its walls and confront individuals with the gospel. And inside the church, people must to be given opportunities for self-examination and re-commitments. The Bible gives us ample resources for doing church one way or the other, or in creative combinations of both together.

Ecclesial revivalism. All good gospel ministry is 'contextualized' without compromise. If you over adapt ministry to culture, you are co-opted by it and you fail to produce disciples that live with distinctive Christ-likeness. On the other hand, if you under-adapt to it, you reach no one, for the gospel must always be translated into terms people can understand. My thesis is that many aspects of an ecclesial emphasis are necessary to *resist* our culture, while many aspects of revivalism are necessary to *adapt* to and connect to our culture. Without a mixture of both, we will be over or under-adapted to our cultural moment. We need both the ecclesial and the revivalist impulses to face contemporary culture effectively.

What does 'ecclesial revivalism' look like? It means that while we preach for conversion, but evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care of the congregation are very much more tied to the celebration of the sacraments. Baptism and the making of vows by new members should be the occasion for testimonies of changed lives, invitation into on going seeker groups and other evangelistic venues, all of which encourage seekers at the service to 'close with Christ.' Discipleship processes should also be highlighted whenever baptism is administered and new members take vows. If a church observes infant baptism, instruction in 'family spiritual formation' and parenting could be connected to the rite of baptism. Also, pastoral care and instruction can be much more tied to the Lord's Supper. For example, for two weeks prior to a Communion Sunday, the entire church through preaching, small groups, and individual self-examination could examine our relationships. Is there anyone I need to go to for forgiveness and reconciliation?

All this drills into the hearts of the congregation that Christian formation is basically incorporation into a community, and a life-long journey with festive, communal celebrations to mark the milestones.

7. City – parish and outreach. Probably no where will this comprehensive strategy bear more cultural fruit than in major global cities. Center city residents and the work they do have a huge impact on society. It has always been this way. Historians point out that by 300 A.D. the urban populations of the Roman Empire were largely Christian, while the countryside was pagan. This was also true for the first millennium A.D. in Europe—the cities were Christian, but the broad population across the countryside was pagan. But when the cities are Christian, even if the majority of the population is pagan, the society is headed on a Christian trajectory. Why? As the

city goes, so goes the culture. Cultural trends tend to be generated in the city and flow outward into the rest of society.

Therefore, people who live in the large urban cultural centers, occupying the jobs in the arts, business, academia, publishing, the helping professions, and the media tend to have a disproportionate impact on how things are done in a culture. Having lived and ministered in New York City for 17 years, I am continually astonished at how often the people I live with and know affect what everyone else in the country is seeing on the screen, in print, in art, in business. I am not here talking so much about the 'elite-elite'—the rich and famous--but the 'grassroot-elites.' It is not so much the top executives that make MTV what it is, but the scores of young, hip creatives just out of college that take the jobs at all levels of the organization. The people groups that live in the center cities in the greatest numbers tend to see their 'values' expressed in the culture.

Do I mean that all Christians must live in cities? No. We need Christians and churches everywhere there are people! The real problem, however, is that Christians and churches are represented far better in non-urban centers than in the influential cities. Missiologists tell us that even in parts of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly, the church is not reaching secular center-city urban residents at all. It is, perhaps, the most influential 'unreached people group' in the world. I follow the late Jim Boice in beating this drum. Jim knew that evangelical Christians have been particularly unwilling to live in cities. In *Two Cities: Two Loves* he asserted that evangelicals should live in cities in *at least* the same percentage as the general population does—or we should not expect to see society be influenced by us.

But not just any kind of church will do in a city. Established and mainline churches in cities have been committed to a traditional parish model of ministry. It is their task to work for the peace and justice of the its neighborhood. It deeply identifies with all the residents and provides services to meet their needs. It is not condemning and essentially allows anyone to be part of the church, regardless of beliefs or moral lifestyle. On the other hand, evangelical have seen ministry primarily as calling people to repentance and conversion. It prophetically confronts the city with its sin, and makes converts and grows in numbers. It has high doctrinal and ethical standards for all members.

8. Movement- eco-systems and new churches. Why is it that major cities are not being reached by the church on any kind of scale? Because it takes a gospel *movement* to reach an urban cultural center. A movement is a network of churches and ministries that grows and propagates itself naturally, without a single command center. Movements reach a 'tipping point' of burgeoning self-propagation when a balanced, mutually energizing and interdependent 'eco-system' of churches and specialist ministries develops that embody the gospel ministry 'DNA' that is outlined in this paper. What are those ministries and what is that 'DNA'?

A. Theological depth

B. Grace-based worshipping communities

C. Initiatives for integrating faith and work

D. Initiatives for seeking the peace of the city

E. Evangelistic venues, especially campus ministry

F. Unified urban leaders from each circle

The core of this eco-system is a growing body of renewed and new churches (see addendum), each of which reflect all these values. These are what Richard Lovelace calls 'secondary marks of spiritual renewal'. These are worshipping communities that ground spiritual growth in the gospel of grace, not moralism, and yet are theologically deep and Biblically sound. These are churches that not only equip people for evangelism but also for faithfulness in their secular vocations.

These churches not only exist as warm, loving, strong communities, but they sacrificially serve the needs of their neighbors in the city who don't believe.

Nevertheless, the institutional church cannot by itself constitute the eco-system. Around this growing core of churches are specialty ministries that drill deep into the city and do things that the 'institutional church' cannot do as well and should not do. So for example, under 'theological depth' there should be both Christian schools for families and colleges and theological schools for leaders. Under initiatives for faith and work are dozens of new for-profit businesses set up by Christians committed to doing new ways of work in their field, as well as associations of believers in every field—arts, business, media, government, academia, etc—for fellowship and support. Under initiatives for peace of the city should be a dizzying array of non-profits and ministries that address virtually every neighborhood or needy population there is. Under 'evangelism' we mean specialty outreaches to new immigrant groups, or business men and women, or especially campus ministry. A vibrant campus ministry in a city supplies churches and the rest of the eco-system with a constant stream of new leaders who stay in the city, marry and raise their families, and work in ministry.

Finally, a healthy eco-system requires Christian business leaders, academics, theologians, pastors, and other leaders to know one another and regard one another without suspicion and 'turf-consciousness.' They need to think wholistically about their city and to find ways that various parts of the eco-system can work together more synergistically.

Many cities or regions today have 2 or 3 elements in place—that does not make an eco-system. You need them all. Some areas have all six, but 2-3 are very strong and 2-3 are very weak. Only when they are all strong and working together does the Body of Christ simply grow and expand organically. The Body is large and vital enough to always produce a variety of strong leaders who rise up and move things forward.

New churches. The kind of church that combines all these traits is rare. It is certainly possible to renew a church so it has this balanced 'DNA'. John Stott, at All Souls church in London in the 1950s, pioneered a kind of church that united a) vigorous gospel evangelism, b) concern for the needs of the neighborhood and the city, c) discipleship of people for the integration of their faith and their secular vocation, and d) a high regard for expository preaching and theology. Most churches tend to major in just one or at most two of these—either evangelism/church growth OR social justice issues OR arts and culture OR sound doctrine and exposition, and so on. All Souls and other traditional 'city-centre' churches (like Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia) in the last generation found ways of balancing these ministries and keeping them inter-dependent and inter-related.

The reality is that most churches cannot 'make the jump' to having this balance that enables them to participate in a transformative gospel eco-system. The best way to produce churches that have this kind of ministry is plant new ones that have the 'DNA' built in from the beginning. Why new churches? New churches reach the non-churched far more effectively than longer-existing churches. Dozens of studies confirm that the average new church will bring new people into the life of the Body of Christ at 6-8 times the rate of an older congregation of the same size. New churches also are crucial because a new church only requires outside, start-up funding at its beginning. Within a few years, it becomes the *source* of Christian giving to other ministries in the city. Finally, new churches are the best way to renew the existing churches of a city. Often the older congregations are too timid to try a particular approach, absolutely sure it would 'not work here'. But when the new church in town succeeds wildly with some new method, the other churches eventually take notice and get the courage to try it themselves.

We understand that the vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for reaching a city. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, mega-churches, consulting, nor church renewal processes--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study of the subject, it is not even controversial.

Summary

Because of the gospel, Christians should have a gracious yet faithful cultural presence, which is sensitive to the distinction between the church gathered and dispersed, and which is embodied in balanced gospel ministry eco-systems everywhere including cities, systems that are built around a core of new, vital churches.

CONCLUSION

Is it difficult to *both* identify with your neighborhood *and* confront people about their sin, to *both* seek the peace of city and evangelistic growth? Yes and no. In some ways the two support each other. New converts have great energy and love to pour out into the needs of the city, and the ministry of justice and mercy make the evangelistic appeal seem more plausible to non-Christian city residents. And yet it is also quite difficult to 'speak the truth in love'—a difficult balance if there ever was one. Fortunately, we have the supreme model for this in Jesus Christ himself. When he went to the cross, there was God identifying with us and loving us in the profoundest way. He became subject to injustice, suffering, weakness, and death—all the things that we face. And yet, at the very same moment, the cross confronts us about our sin. We are so lost that nothing less than the death of the Son of God can save us. On the cross Jesus became the ultimate neighbor, identifying with us and loving us, and yet gave us the most challenging statement of our sin and need for repentance.