

# CHURCH, CULTURE AND THEIR DIMENSIONAL INTERACTION

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## *Abstract*

*Culture is a term that is commonly used to describe the actual world that people live in. In the existence of the church, it has had to struggle to interact with culture. Jesus who lived in the Hebrew culture became familiar with this culture and also interacted with other cultures. How Jesus uses culture to proclaim His message needs to be observed. Whether Christ opposes culture or uses culture is interesting to consider. Out of this, there are approaches that can be applied as the church relates to culture. In the end, the church can position itself so that it can affect the culture with God's Kingdom or have God's Kingdom diluted in the society as the church is affected by the world.*

*Keywords: Church, culture, interaction, world, God's Kingdom, society.*

It seems that the church throughout its existence has had a struggle with how to interact with culture.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is no stranger to this as He was born into the Hebrew culture and lived among many other cultures. Did He use culture to proclaim His message? Was this both in a positive and negative way? In John 18: 28-38 Jesus is before Pontius Pilate and is questioned as to His kingdom. In verse 36 He says "My kingdom is not of this world," "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." In teaching us to pray in Matthew 6: 10 he says "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." These proclamations can lead to the conclusion that Christ opposes culture and provides a model for how the church should view culture. The result is that today we have local churches that span a broad spectrum between strongly opposing and uncritically accommodating culture.

There appear to be at least four challenges that cause a church to be hesitant when considering the cultural beliefs and practices. Relativism would be the first of these challenges so that we live in a culture that more and more rejects absolutes.<sup>2</sup> Relativism suggests movement while absolutism seems to imply something that is static and set in place. So, does a church that

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<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Norman I. Geisler, "Proclaiming the Changeless Truth in These Changing Times," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55, no 1 (Fall 2012): 37.

connects to a relativistic culture need to change with the times? In belief and practice? A second challenge connected to relativism is tolerance. Here the church may not like or agree with a cultural belief or practice, but it chooses to just let things be for the sake of peace. Confrontation is to be avoided in favor of compromise. A third challenge is that of hedonism or the pursuit of pleasure. The church here may actively or passively promote a materialistic way of life that seeks to make life on earth as comfortable, enjoyable, and pain-free as possible.<sup>3</sup> The fourth challenge is that of pragmatism where the church is willing to believe and practice what seems to work. Particularly so where we live in a time of instant results so that patiently waiting for things to unfold is seen as negative.

Jesus knew this was coming and so in John 17 we have the details of a prayer that Jesus prays for His followers. He knows His time on earth is coming to an end and that His followers will remain to carry on the work of God's kingdom. So He prays for specific challenges they will face and in verses 13 -18 we read these words:

“Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy completed in them. I have given them your word. The world hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world (*Christian Standard Bible*, John 17: 13-18)”.

Jesus makes repeated use of the word “world”. The Greek word is *κόσμος* (cosmos) which can refer to a number of things such as creation, mankind, or a system of life. In this context it seems to best refer to fallen mankind through which a system has come into being that sets itself up in opposition to God and His Kingdom – an unbelieving cosmos that has excluded itself from God.<sup>4</sup>

It also refers to a commitment or allegiance so that in 1 John we also see the use of this word and here it is in a negative sense “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” (1 John 2: 15). It is portrayed as something that would entice and attract us so that we no longer place our affections solely on God.

It is from these passages that we often speak of a Christian being in the world but not of the world. Christ says that He has sent us into the world but our allegiance and affection must not be towards this world. We have to come to a clear understanding of what this means as we try to live out our faith within our culture (world). Our culture puts forth people, products and ideas that call for our allegiance. We need to discover how to affect our culture with God's Kingdom rather than have God's Kingdom diluted in our lives as we are affected by the world. Culture is a term that we commonly use to describe the particular world that we live in. Its definition depends on the context in which it is being used. In our context we consider Niebuhr's proposal that culture “comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts,

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<sup>3</sup> There are various terms used to speak of this phenomenon such as the Prosperity Gospel, and Health and Wealth Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> Murray Harris and others, *John*. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 288.

technical processes, and values”.<sup>5</sup> This is a broad definition which is needed in that we are considering the interaction of the church with all aspects of culture. Christian anthropologist Paul Hiebert explains how we can consider Christianity’s interaction with culture in terms of three dimensions:<sup>6</sup>

### 1. The Cognitive Dimension

This is the shared knowledge between people in the culture that helps them to communicate. It forms consensus as to what is true and real and provides the wisdom and guidance needed to function in daily life. Traditionally this has been preserved and distributed through printed materials, but we now live in such a digital world that knowledge comes to us in vast amounts that are often unsolicited and unedited. A culture, therefore, has difficulty preserving its shared knowledge as more and more its members are exposed to the knowledge from other cultures. How does the church preserve and present a Biblical, universal, supra-cultural knowledge that is able to encounter all the changes that are pressing in on each culture?

### 2. The Affective Dimension

This describes the shared feelings and attitudes within a culture, the emotional aspect of life. It is seen in expressions such as art, music, literature, sports, fashion, housing, cars etc. It also applies to how people interact with each other and the way they communicate love, hate, excitement, acceptance, rejection, etc. This aspect is a significant challenge for the church that wants to minister to different generations and multi-cultural backgrounds, which indeed appears to be the norm for most churches given the cultures we live in?

### 3. The Evaluative Dimension

This is the basis by which a culture decides what is right or wrong, true or false, liked or disliked. Hiebert explains that this forms a culture’s moral code that is used to determine what is seen as sinful behavior or righteous behavior.<sup>7</sup> What does the church do when this moral code is constantly changing and the popular notion becomes that of relativism so that the culture supports a value system that says it is good, right, and true if that is how it feels for you? How does the church promote absolute, unchanging truth?

With this understanding of culture, the challenge for a Christian is how to be in our culture but not of our culture where it contradicts Biblical Christianity. We do not do this alone and we should not read the prayer of Jesus in a purely individual way. True Christianity is lived out within a body of believers and we call this the church, so the question becomes how does the church have a presence in the culture without being of the culture?

Historian Andrew Walls gives a useful description of the challenge a Christian faces in being in the world but not of the world. He argues that throughout history Christians have had to hold in balance a Pilgrim principle and an Indigenous principle.<sup>8</sup> The Indigenous principle advocates for the church to express itself within the culture so that the people in the culture have some level of comfort and familiarity. The church does not come across as strange, disconnected and uninviting. On the other hand, the danger is that the church will go too far and blend in with

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<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hiebert. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 53.

culture so much that it loses its distinctiveness and ends up compromising the very Kingdom it represents. The Pilgrim principle then helps to provide balance and a check for the church so that it does not go too far in accommodating culture. This is where in order for the church to correctly represent God's Kingdom it needs to have a sense and identity of being in tension and even at times opposition to the culture in which it finds itself.

As part of a lecture series at Princeton University in 1898, Abraham Kuyper stated "Two life systems are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own...while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God Himself, are bent upon saving the "Christian Heritage." This is the struggle."<sup>9</sup> His context seems far removed from the world we live in today and yet it illustrates the challenge that has faced the church in each generation. It also raises an interesting term: *Christian Heritage*.

The church in our day and culture requires that we consider this tension between Indigenous and Pilgrim. Have we lost our vitality because we have become so Pilgrim that we do not have a voice or relevance in our culture? So that there is very little about us that appeals to the culture or makes them even take notice? Do we need a good dose of the Indigenous principle? On the other hand, have we lost our vitality in the way that we have so accommodated the culture that we no longer have a prophetic voice or call people out of darkness into the Kingdom of Light? Do we need a good dose of the Pilgrim principle?

What Walls presents in terms of Pilgrim and Indigenous principles is also seen in H. Richard Niebuhr's explanation of Christ and culture where he speaks of the Christian life as existing between the two poles of faith and reason.<sup>10</sup> He explains that the Christian has to consider both the demands of Christ and those of the natural world in living out their faith. The way in which this life between two poles is considered results in various approaches towards how people and churches see Christ and culture interacting.

*Christ Against Culture* is the approach that rejects any accommodation of culture in terms of its claim upon a Christian's loyalty.<sup>11</sup> With this approach the church separates from the culture and can end up promoting the idea that the world and life is separated into the sacred and the secular. Such a church encourages its members to withdraw from culture and live in a separate, Christian only environment so that interaction with the culture is only by necessity for the essentials of life.

The *Christ of Culture* approach does not see a great tension between the church and culture but sees all that is good about culture as coming from Christ.<sup>12</sup> The Christian's present life in a culture is closely connected to their spiritual and eternal life, echoing the prayer of Jesus "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven". As Christians we can work in all parts of society towards a common good so that our culture becomes more and more a reflection of God's Kingdom. This

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<sup>9</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University under the Auspices of the L. P. Stone Foundation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1931; repr. 2009), 11.

<sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xlii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

means that with Christ in mind we actively engage with all the aspects of the culture in which we find ourselves.

The *Christ Above Culture* approach elevates God above culture in the sense that all culture only exists as an act of God's grace.<sup>13</sup> Man can only act because God has acted first. Here the church begins with the commands of Christ which are then applied to the demands of the culture. A Christian experiences the love of God and then lives out that love in the culture. God loves first and defines what love is before the church can then love the culture. We can describe this as a supra-cultural worldview revealed in the Bible which the church then applies to all its interactions in and with culture.

The *Christ and Culture in Paradox* approach proposes that the church needs to live with a distinction between loyalty to Christ and the responsibility for culture.<sup>14</sup> The church will have to accept the tension between living under God's grace on the one hand and living in a culture ruled by sin on the other hand. The church has to see that it has two realms of existence that are not compatible and therefore will need to develop separate ways of living out the Christian faith in each.

The *Christ the Transformer of Culture* approach centers on the idea of redemption.<sup>15</sup> The idea is that all things were created by and for Christ, and even though they may have been corrupted, God's plan is for their redemption. The church is then an agent of this redemption. Culture is not so much to be condemned as it is to be redeemed and transformed so that it reflects God's original intention. The church does not give up on culture no matter how grim things appear, but believes that with God it is possible to redeem many aspects of culture.

While each local church as an expression of God's Kingdom has to consider these principles and approaches to culture, there is the advantage that it is not done in isolation but rather as part of a denominational fellowship so that a number of churches are able to wrestle with the issues and come to a Biblical consensus.

Let's consider corporate worship when we gather together as believers. Specifically in this case we are speaking of the style of corporate worship. In our world today it seems as if music has become a powerful means of cultural communication and expression so that we feel compelled to use it in the church. We can say that corporate worship must honor God. So what does this look like? Has it always looked the same in all places at all times? The answer is clear so that each church at its time and in its context needs to have corporate worship that honors God. The challenge is whether this can be influenced by the style and trends of the cultural context. Should we have an organ, choir, drums, electric guitars, dance, rap, rock, etc? Who gets to decide if any or all of these are honoring to God?

The same can be said for dress code, the use of digital technology, visual and performing arts, place of worship, time of worship, etc. The principle again is how much do we allow for culture, and will the result honor God? Using insights from those who have and are grappling with this issue as well as principles found in the Bible, we can consider that the local church must engage the culture. Jesus said "I have sent them into the world" and "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Paul uses the term *ambassador* in 2 Corinthians 5: 20 which applies to a person who goes out to a new place and represents those who sent them. All this is in the context of God using His people to reconcile a lost world to Himself. We must engage the lost people in the culture around us and by definition, this means we have to deal with culture. Based

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 191.

on these passages and numerous others throughout the Bible, the local church must be involved in the culture if it is to be Biblical. Hiebert gives the church a model for engaging culture when he speaks of *critical contextualization*.<sup>16</sup> The idea is that the church needs to avoid the two extremes of rejecting the culture on the one hand and uncritically accepting it on the other. The beginning point is to make a firm commitment to the Bible as the authority for life. The Bible correctly understood is the standard and filter for culture and not the other way around. Whenever a cultural issue comes up the church makes sure that Biblical truth is applied. At times this will be the application of principles rather than specifics, for example when considering the internet. While we cannot find the internet specifically in the Bible, nevertheless we can apply Biblical principles to how we use the internet.

The next step in critical contextualization is for the church to become a student of the culture seeking a deep understanding of the cognitive, affective and evaluative dimensions. The church should not make surface judgements about the various thoughts, activities, and expressions in the culture without looking carefully at all that is involved. This means that a number of people from diverse backgrounds need to be involved, so that for example, with worship we don't write off a music style just because some people don't like it. It also means recognizing that cultures are always changing so that this is not a one and done exercise but needs to be built into the ongoing life of the church.

The third step involves a study of the Bible around the aspect of culture that is being studied. Even if the Bible does not address specifics such as worship style or dress code, nevertheless there are Biblical principles that do apply and which form the standard by which we consider the various aspects of culture. Building on this step by Hiebert we can go on to consider four questions that can be asked when applying Scripture to the culture:<sup>17</sup>

- a. Does the cultural belief or practice love and honor God? Matthew 22: 37 "He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command."
- b. Does the cultural belief or practice love others? Matthew 22: 39 "The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus goes on to explain how all the law and the prophets are contained in these two commands and so we cannot apply Biblical teaching to any part of the culture without these two questions.

- c. Does the cultural belief or practice cause a person to stumble in coming to Christ, or growing in Christ? Romans 14: 13 "Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister."

The stumbling here clearly applies to God's Kingdom and not any person or group's likes and dislikes. So for example, someone cannot apply it when out of personal taste he or she says "I don't like the clothes you are wearing so they cause me to stumble and you must change them." But if someone's clothing is so noticeable as to be

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<sup>16</sup>Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Keith E. Eitel in his journal article *Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?* (Southwestern Journal of Theology, 55, no. 1, Fall 2012, 74.) proposes a useful model of five key questions for a Christian to ask for filtering culture through Scripture. His model is a complement or alternative to the four questions being discussed.

immodest or distracting from a focus on God's Kingdom then he or she needs to think about how he or she dresses.

- d. Can I accept the cultural belief or practice with a clear conscience? 2 Corinthians 1: 12 "Indeed, this is our boast: The testimony of our conscience is that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with godly sincerity and purity, not by human wisdom but by God's grace."

For some people, drinking alcohol would be a good example. In German culture, it could be argued that drinking a glass of beer or wine does not violate any of the first three questions, but nevertheless, someone who is German may feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit in his or her conscience that he or she needs to abstain.

The fourth step is to evaluate the cultural belief or practice based on the study of the Bible and either confirm, modify, or replace it. Hiebert emphasizes how important it is to involve the ordinary members of the church so that they buy into the decisions and how to keep the church accountable.<sup>18</sup> This is also a key part of discipleship as the members learn to apply this way of interacting with culture to their own lives.

1. The local church must distinguish between essential and non-essential.

Another way of thinking about this is to be clear on what is the core and what is the wrapping? The danger is that if a church keeps adding to the core it will become more and more isolated and legalistic, losing its relevance and connection to the culture around it. The church can allow for a lot of freedom and creativity when it comes to the wrapping or non-essentials, as long as they don't compromise the core. It would serve the church well for them to gather the members for a discussion of essentials and non-essentials, working through Hiebert's critical contextualization approach and the four questions. They can also look to the examples of other churches/ contexts who are doing this well.

2. A local church must avoid the Secular/Sacred lie.

The Bible does not support the idea that a Christian has a sacred/ church aspect to their lives as well as a secular/ non-church aspect.<sup>19</sup> That somehow Sunday is the day for our spiritual lives involving God and the church, and Monday begins our secular lives without God and the church. Whether the church consciously or unconsciously supports this divide, it ends up with members who live separated Kingdom-focused lives and culture/ world focused lives. A church that helps its members to Biblically engage the culture will break this secular/ sacred divide. It will advocate the truth that each Monday begins a week where a member is representing God's Kingdom and thereby the church, in all aspects of their lives. The church leadership will validate and affirm each member's life in the culture so that every workplace becomes an opportunity for engaging culture.

3. A local church must maintain a clear pilgrim component.

Something is wrong when a church seamlessly fits in with its local culture as if that culture is a mirror of God's Kingdom. In Matthew 5 Jesus teaches us that the church is salt and light so that there are times when it needs to confront and oppose that which is unbiblical. Light needs to shine

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<sup>18</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 6 and Colossians 3 are examples of passages that teach about a Christian living all of life with and for God.

in the darkness even if the darkness does not want the light. The church is in danger of losing its identity as a representative of God's Kingdom when it tries to make itself as culturally comfortable as possible. Keeping a pilgrim balance means that if the cultural wrapping does not fit the Kingdom core then the cultural wrapping has to go. How this happens is very important so that the church is not seen as mean and angry, but that the fruit of the spirit are evident.

## **Conclusion**

It appears that God should just take us up to heaven when we are saved so that we can do perfect church without sin and the challenges of the culture around us. His ways however are working towards a perfect future and so we need to embrace the idea that God's perfect plan is for the church to be in the world, reaching it with the Gospel. The church belongs to Him and so His ways are above any human/ cultural ways. We discover His ways in the Bible and out of this understand that there are core principles that are both above all cultures and at the same time applicable to all cultures. The challenge for each local church is to hold on to both of these concepts as it lives out God's Kingdom in the culture.



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