

# Presbyterianism and Culture

## I. Introduction

### A. Basic Concepts

1. "Culture"
  - a. The arts, beliefs, intellectual achievements of a society
  - b. The way of life of a society w/ its values
  - c. The world around us
  - d. "What's normal around here"
2. How does a Christian interact w/ culture?

### B. Basis of Analysis

1. *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr (1951)
2. *Fundamentalism and American Culture* by George Marsden (2006)

## II. The Christian and Culture (Niebuhr)

### A. Christ of Culture

1. Example: Classic religious liberalism
2. Christ & culture are in harmony
3. Christ as the embodiment of the best human culture
4. Loyalty to Christ = Loyalty to best human culture
5. Effect: Accommodating the church to the culture

### B. Christ Above Culture

1. Example: Thomas Aquinas
2. Inseparable synthesis between Christ and culture
3. Complexity of Christ as divine/human = complexity of culture
4. One can reconcile Christ & culture

### C. Christ Against Culture

1. Example: Anabaptists
2. Church is distinct not only from the state but also from society
3. Human culture antithetical to Christianity
4. Christians must escape from culture and be "countercultural"
5. "Love not the world ..."

### D. Christ and Culture in Paradox

1. Example: Luther
2. "Paradox" = "apparent contradiction"
3. Tension between "loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture" (Niebuhr)
4. Two spheres (Christ and culture), each with its own rules and principles
5. "Take no thought for tomorrow," but plant, tend, & harvest your crops.
6. One does not try to escape culture nor to Christianize it.
7. Niebuhr's illustration: amphibians, who operate in two realms w/ equal ability.

### E. Christ the Transformer of Culture

1. Examples: Augustine, Calvin
2. Christians must redeem & transform all legitimate culture to conform it to Christ.
3. "Conversionist" view
4. Reformed Examples
  - a. Reformation of morals in society
  - b. Postmillennialism: progressive growth of the kingdom of God on earth

- c. “Cultural Mandate”
      - 1) Popularized by the “Dutch school” of Abraham Kuyper
      - 2) Appeals to the “mandate” God gave humanity to subdue & redeem culture (Gen. 1:26, 28; 9:1-2).
  - F. Observations
    - 1. No one view is likely entirely correct.
    - 2. Christians must distinguish between what is legitimate culture and what is worldliness (Phil. 4:8)
    - 3. Shape what is legitimate (by a Christian worldview) and shun what is worldly
    - 4. All cultural transformation must *follow* true redemption, not precede or even accompany it.
      - a. The Gospel (which does not involve cultural transformation) must have first place
      - b. Cultural efforts must not sidetrack evangelization or sanctification.
- III. Spectrum of Fundamentalism & Culture (Marsden)
- A. Preserving Christian civilization
    - 1. Illustrated by William Jennings Bryan
    - 2. America possessed a Christian civilization to be preserved
    - 3. Maintain the reforming Protestant dominance
    - 4. Expressed by Progressive political reform and crusade against evolution
  - B. Transforming culture
    - 1. Illustrated by J. Gresham Machen
    - 2. Niebuhr’s “conversionist” view
    - 3. Address: “Christianity and Culture” (1912)
      - a. Don’t reject culture or subordinate Christianity to it
      - b. “Consecrate” culture to Christ
      - c. “Enthusiastically ... make the world subject to God.”
    - 4. Dissent: D. G. Hart
      - a. Applies “spirituality of the church” to Machen
      - b. Machen separated kingdom (church) from politics
      - c. To Machen, the *Church* is not the instrument of transformation
  - C. Premillennial withdrawal
    - 1. Illustrated by I. M. Haldeman
    - 2. Dispensationalist pessimism about culture
    - 3. Church is to look for escape from culture
    - 4. Culture is doomed, not redeemable
  - D. “The Central Tension”
    - 1. Tension between ...
      - a. Premillennial expectations of imminent judgment
      - b. Historic evangelical Protestant reformist impulse
    - 2. Perhaps “Christ and culture in tension”
    - 3. Illustrated by Billy Sunday
      - a. Coming certain judgment
      - b. America as exception
      - c. Pro-reform, notably prohibition
    - 4. Perhaps most common: No consistent ideology toward culture by most conservatives