

Christ and Culture

Week 1: Defining the Terms, Setting the Field

Michael Horton: “It was confusing to grow up singing both ‘This World is Not My Home’ and ‘This Is My Father’s World.’ Those hymns embody two common and seemingly contradictory Christian responses to culture. One sees the world as a wasteland of godlessness, with which Christians should have as little as possible to do. The other regards cultural transformation as virtually identical to ‘kingdom activity.’”

I. Three Uses of the Word “Culture”

“Culture wars”; “high culture... or a cultured person”; “cross-cultural missions”

A. Culture Wars

1. Possibly why many of you are here today
2. A sense of the encroaching danger of forces hostile to Christianity in our country, crowding us more and more, making the future seem dark
3. A loss of Christian privileges, a Christian assumption, “we are a Christian nation”
4. A feared loss of core freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion—because of the rising militancy of left-wing activists who openly deride some of these freedoms because they believe so fiercely in their own perspectives and consider dissent to be evil
5. Rising governmental power hostile to some key convictions... being forced to agree to things we find wicked in order to keep our jobs (“Gay Pride Month,” abortion rights)
6. Is the “culture war” real? Is it Christian to think this way? Is there a Christian alternative approach to these issues?

Al Mohler, "The Briefing," August 23, 2022: "Christians Did Not Start the Culture Wars, But We Cannot Evade Them: The Imperative of Christian Engagement for the Good of Society"

"Are we or are we not in the midst of what's described as 'a culture war?' I'm just going to say simply, straight-forwardly, undeniably, we are! 'Culture war' explains much of what is going on in the world around us. It doesn't explain everything, but it explains why, at the most fundamental level of our civilizational life, there is a war over what is true, what is beautiful, what is good, what should be moral, what is marriage, what does it mean to be male and female, or does it mean anything that's objectively true? Now we need to recognize that the term 'culture war' is descriptive... it describes a fundamental struggle over the future of the civilization, a struggle that is not merely the engagement of partisan politics, not merely an argument over national policy... it's an argument over reality."

Mohler argues against views that would have Christians retreat or feel ashamed of any public square contentiousness as a bad witness. He argues that Christians have an obligation to their neighbors (whether they are Christian or not) to fight for what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

He was arguing against a New York Times op-ed piece by Tish Harrison Warren, "The God I Know is Not a Culture Warrior."

Also T.M. Moore in *Culture Matters* wrote "Aspects of culture disturb us or even threaten our well-being. Culture influences the way we view the world and the use we make of it. It shapes our outlooks and affections, facilitates our work, conveys our understanding and convictions, variously delights and edifies our troubles and dismays us, and constitutes part of the legacy we will leave for future generations... As a result, culture often divides us; but it can also serve as a meeting ground for common concerns. The ongoing **culture wars** remind us that, as Christians, we cannot avoid the luxury of a studied indifference with respect to so potent a subject."

7. Culture wars involves a series of "hot button" issues and widely divergent perspectives on them... the increasingly hostile polarization of Western Civilization (especially for us, America) on such issues as gender-roles, gender itself, homosexuality, race relations, poverty, the environment, politics, religion in the public square, secularization, public education, abortion, etc.
8. Two key concerns of Christians in this aspect of the word "culture" are 1) how can we be protected from the pollution of wicked culture? 2) how can we retard the spread of wickedness through our society? These two verses capture those concerns:

1 John 2:15-16 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.

Matthew 5:13-14 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

These verses imply a terrible danger from engagement in the world, but also a command to retard the spread of corruption and immorality in the world.

B. High Culture, or “a Cultured Person”

1. This has to do with art, music, literature, science, philosophy, government, cuisine, architecture as polished displays of progress over centuries... what distinguishes an **advanced** society from one that is **primitive**
2. Central to this is “the arts” or the things that can be put in a “culture museum” as the highest expression of that people’s civilization
3. From a Christian point of view, this is a display of “common grace,” skills and talents and insights and intellectual achievements that flow from all humans to varying degrees, whether they acknowledge God or not... simply because they are human and God has granted them insights that move the human experience to a higher level
4. The following verse gives a sense of positive admiration of craftsmanship developed in a Gentile man:

2 Chronicles 2:13-14 "I am sending you Hiram-Abi, a man of great skill, ¹⁴ whose mother was from Dan and whose father was from Tyre. He is trained to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, stone and wood, and with purple and blue and crimson yarn and fine linen. He is experienced in all kinds of engraving and can execute any design given to him.

C. Cross-Cultural Missions

1. This is an awareness on the part of messengers of the gospel that there are different cultures all over the world... and that the messengers must do everything they can to fit into the receptor culture and make the gospel intelligible within that culture without compromising biblical standards
2. This gets to a more benign or neutral aspect of culture as having to do with just way of life issues... the way a people has answered the basic questions of existence—language, customs, family rituals, birth, marriage, procreation, child rearing, food, clothing, shelter, etc.

3. Coupled with this is an awareness that, mixed into the receptor culture are inevitably wicked and dark aspects of false religion or corrupt worldviews that must be transformed into biblical norms, at least in the lives of the converts to Christianity
4. The best verse for this use of benign culture in the name of missions is this:

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

We will certainly be walking through this passage in detail later... but this captures the desire to use whatever there is in a receptor culture that doesn't compromise Christian conviction to make connections with lost people in that culture to win them to salvation in Christ.

So... these three uses of the word "culture" shows the challenge of our topic.

II. Definitions of "Culture"

"Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning of further action." [A.L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, cultural anthropologists; cited in Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 2)

"[Culture is] shared understandings made manifest in art and artifact." [Robert Redfield]

"[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." [Clifford Geertz]

"[Our culture is] the artifacts, institutions, and conventions with which we surround ourselves... [that] help us to define, sustain, and enrich our lives and experience." [T.M. Moore, *Culture Matters*, 11]

“Culture is the artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.” [H. Reinhold Niebuhr]

According to Niebuhr, the “essence” of culture: “it is always **social** (i.e. bound up with human life in society), it is **human achievement** (presupposing purposiveness and effort), it is bound up with the world of **values** which are dominantly thought to be for the good of man, and it is reflected in transient and **perishing stuff** (articles and activities that pass away)”

A missiologist’s definition:

“The term *culture* is the label anthropologists give to the structured customs and underlying worldview assumptions by which people govern their lives. Culture, including worldview, is a people’s way of life, their design for living, their way of coping with their biological, physical and social environment. It consists of learned, patterned assumptions (worldview), concepts and behavior, plus the resulting artifacts (material culture).” [Charles H Kraft, “Culture, Worldview, and Contextualization,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 384]

Slightly different take, by Kenneth Clark, Curator of Museum of Fine Art at Oxford University...

“Civilization” ... TV show aired in the spring of 1969:

The series focused on the contrast between civilization and barbarism.

“At certain epochs man has felt something about himself – body and spirit – which was outside the day to day struggle for existence and the night to night struggle with fear; and he has felt the need to develop these qualities of thought and feeling so they might approach as nearly as possible to the ideal of perfection – reason, justice, physical beauty, all of them in equilibrium. He has managed to satisfy this need in various ways – through myths, through dance and song, through systems of philosophy and through the order he has imposed on the visible world. The children of his imagination are the expression of an ideal.” [Kenneth Clark, *Civilization*, 3]

From the dustcover: “The impulses, ideas, discoveries and beliefs which have formed and nurtured Western civilization since the fall of the classical world are most powerfully revealed... in its great works of art, its buildings, books and great individuals. ... [These are revealed in] the works of genius, sculpture and painting, in philosophy, poetry and music, in science and in engineering, which they produced.”

These achievements are a reflection of “common grace,” of the residual of the image of God in all human beings.

YET... scripture puts a strong limit around these:

Romans 1:21-23 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

1 Corinthians 1:20-21 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

III. Some Basic Biblical Realities

A. All Things in Heaven and on Earth Are Christ's

Matthew 28:18-20 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

B. All People Belong to Him

Ezekiel 18:4 every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son-- both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

Acts 17:28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

C. Christ Has Commanded Us to Make Disciples of All Nations

Matthew 28:19-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

D. God Wants Us In the World... Not Out of It

John 17:15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

1 Corinthians 5:9-10 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

E. Satan Dominates the World

1 John 5:19 *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*

Luke 4:5-7 *The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ So if you worship me, it will all be yours."*

F. This World is Mixed Up with Believers and Non-Believers Living in Close Proximity

Matthew 13:24-26 *Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ... The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹ "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest.*

G. God Wants His Church to Be Free from the World's Defilements

Revelation 18:1-4 *After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ² With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. ³ For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries." ⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven say: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues...*

2 Corinthians 6:16-17 *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." ¹⁷ "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."*

1 John 2:15-16 *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.*

IV. Ways Christians Have Sought to Relate Christ and Culture

A. Christ and Culture: H. Richard Niebuhr

In 1951, Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture*, one of the most influential Christian books of the past century.

Niebuhr presented "five types" concerning the interaction of Christianity and culture.

Niebuhr was discussion effectively two sources of authority as they compete within a culture: Christ vs. every other source of authority divested of Christ.

1. Type #1: **Christ against culture**

Sees the world outside the church as hopelessly corrupted by sin. The kingdom of God comes to supersede it – currently in the purity of the church, and ultimately in the messianic kingdom. God calls Christians to "come out from among them and be ye separate" in communities of holiness. Mennonites, Baptists, Christian Brethren, Pentecostals, and most types of fundamentalists have included individuals and congregations that fit this model.

2. Type #2: Opposite extreme... **Christ of culture**

Sees a beautiful harmony between Christ and culture. Christians in this mode seek to discern and then champion the highest moral and spiritual common ground between the teachings of Christianity and the noblest values of contemporary culture. Evangelicals have manifested this type whenever we have closely associated God and country and assumed that our nations are Christian, or "almost," so that with enthusiasm and effort we can realize that ideal.

Now... in between these extremes, three mediating positions

3. Type #3: **Christ above culture**

All that is good in human culture is a gift from God. But to be fully realized, this good requires Christian revelation and the mediation of the church. Thus, for example, Greek philosophers' (like Plato and Aristotle) insights can be received joyfully by the Christian, even as they are recognized as needing Christian theology to fulfill them.

This view is uncommon among evangelicals but not altogether unknown. Consider, for example, evangelical missionaries who emphasize anticipations of Christian revelation in the beliefs of non-Christian peoples. Evangelical intellectuals who affirm the essential congeniality of the gospel with this or that non-Christian author – as the apologists of the early church allied themselves with Plato – might also fit in this category.

4. Type #4: **Christ Transforming Culture**

The most common mediating position in evangelical circles; Puritans in 17th-century England; Puritans in 18th-century New England; 19th-century North American revivalists trying both to evangelize and to reform society; and the late 19th-century Dutch neo-Calvinists – all of these demonstrate its traits. Society is to be entirely converted to Christianity. Business, the arts, the professions, family life, education, government – nothing is outside the purview of Christ's dominion, and all must be reclaimed in his name.

Abraham Kuyper: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

C.S. Lewis: “There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan.”

5. Type #5: **Christ and Culture in Paradox**

Christians live within a strong tension. They believe that God has ordained worldly institutions, and that they must work within those institutions as best they can. At the same time, however, they affirm that God's kingdom has penetrated the world here and now. Thus, under God's providence, they tread a path that can seem crooked and unclear, trying to honor what is divinely ordained in culture (such as family bonds, the rule of law, and deference to legitimate authority) while also living out the distinct values of the kingdom of God as best they can without compromise.

Furthermore, sin mars all of our efforts, evil twists them, and God works in mysterious ways behind the scenes. Thus Christians in this mode are never free of suspicion yet never lacking hope: suspicion that apparently good things are compromised by sin in this not-yet-messianic dispensation, and hope that God nonetheless is working out his good pleasure through all of the means – worldly and churchly – that he has been pleased to ordain and sustain. In this in-between time, even openly evil governments may yet be instituted by God (*Rom. 13:1-5*); we are told to pay our taxes, though we know full well that the money will be used at least in part for ungodly purposes (*Rom. 13:6-7*).

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B. T.M. Moore, *Culture Matters*

Six different contemporary Christian approaches to culture

1. Cultural Indifference

The vast majority of contemporary Christians hardly give culture a second thought, at least as it relates to their faith in Christ. It's not that they're not engaged in culture; they just don't think about their involvement all that much.... They have simply absorbed the tastes, habits, manners, and cultural preferences of their environment throughout the course of their lives.... While most Christians will not condone the more extreme expressions of sensuality, violence, or relativism in the culture at large, still... the culture to which they incline – their tastes in fashion and entertainment, their political inclinations, how they spend their time and money, their topics of conversation – differs little from that of non-Christians.

2. Cultural Aversion

Especially for ultra-conservative Christians, culture is a blight to be avoided, an evil in which we must not participate. They think about these things constantly and are extremely sensitive to the many ways contemporary culture is a threat to their beliefs, morals, and institutions. The best way is to just avoid it, keep away from it, lest it contaminate your faith and that of your children.

3. Cultural Trivialization

These are Christians who take a distinctively Christian cultural expression, but they limit the scope of it to popular forms and artifacts, most of which partake in a tiresome sameness. This includes Christian pop music as well as the Christian bookstore culture – plaques and posters, knick-knacks, jewelry, t-shirts, bumper stickers... plus all kinds of stuff adorned with familiar Bible verses, Christian symbols, cutesy Bible characters. Contemporary Christian music generally imitates worldly music trends, but substitutes Christian words addressing a very narrow range of Christian themes.

4. Cultural Accommodation

Many Christians seem to regard it as the duty of the faithful to make room in their beliefs and lifestyles for whatever new expressions of culture may appear. They espouse a pluralistic, nonjudgmental approach to culture, "live and let live" to matters of taste, preference and practice. They try to find what is good in every era of culture history and accommodate their lifestyle to it.

5. Cultural Separation

They seek to promote and construct Christian alternatives to the existing culture, primarily for their own use and that of their fellow Christian family, friends, and neighbors. They adopt forms of alternative schooling to keep their children free from the influences of secularism, decorate their homes and persons with decidedly Christian artifacts, create Christian sports leagues and other kinds of associations for recreation and ministry within the safe confines of the believing community. They seek to generate a Christian “Yellow Pages” (or whatever now has replaced that online) so that only Christian plumbers will work on their sinks and toilets. They listen to only Christian radio, watch only Christian shows online, etc. Their cultural interests are broader than the cultural trivializers. They seek to protect themselves and their families from the harmful effects of non-Christian culture by providing as wide an array of Christian alternatives as possible so they can live their whole lives within these safe enclaves.

6. Culture Triumphalism

These Christians expect too much of culture. They believe that by voting for the right candidates, changing laws, suppressing this aspect of culture while promoting that, seeking to impose their own cultural preferences and practices on others through legislative, judicial, and ecclesiastical processes they will best be able to advance the Kingdom of God. They are somewhat seeking a Christian utopia by gaining political control in as many areas as possible in society.

Moore’s Summary: “No one adheres to any of these six models as the exclusive or even self-conscious approach to culture matters. In fact, each of us may find aspects of these Christian approaches in our own practice. We are all somewhat inattentive or indifferent toward the way we use culture, in that we do not give consistently Christian thought to all the many forms and aspects of culture in which we engage. We feel aversion to forms of culture that offend Christian sensibilities. We all enjoy a bit of trivialized Christian culture, and we are happy to accommodate aspects of contemporary non-Christian forms of culture that please us or satisfy some need. We all practice a kind of cultural separationism at times—indulging our distinctly Christian interests with Christian friends in acceptable Christian contexts and ways—just as we all relish a little cultural triumphalism when ‘our side’ makes a point or appears to gain ground against competing views. Our confusion over culture matters could hardly be more evident.” [p. 15]

Can we really come to a Christian consensus on Christ and culture? How do we best live life in a world enmeshed with unregenerate people?

C.S. Lewis:

“What is the good of telling the ships how to steer so as to avoid collisions if, in fact, they are such crazy old tubs that they cannot be steered at all? What’s the good of drawing up, on paper, rules for social behavior, if we know that, in fact, our greed, cowardice, ill temper, and self-conceit are going to prevent us from keeping them? I do not mean for a moment that we ought not to think hard about improvements in our social and economic systems. What I do mean is that all that thinking will be mere moonshine unless we realize that nothing but the courage and unselfishness of individuals is ever going to make any system work properly. It is easy enough to remove the particular kinds of graft or bullying that go on under the present system: but as long as men are twisters or bullies, they will find some new way of carrying on the old game under the new system. You cannot make men good by law: and without good men, you cannot have a good society.”