

The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives

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Leonard Sweet

Introduction

Garden, Park, Glen, Meadow



IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS since the publication of H. Richard Niebuhr's classic text *Christ and Culture* (1951),¹ which asked the question, What kinds of relationships does the church want with the culture? *Christ and Culture* has been described as "one of the most influential Christian books of the past century." One theologian has suggested that "no other book has dominated an entire theological conversation for so long."² Niebuhr's book made a needed clearing in a forest where a great many scholars were lost, and the church has been camping out in Niebuhr's five-fold clearing ever since.³ Yet Niebuhr's words aren't the last on the subject. Five decades after *Christ and Culture*, we're still asking: Is the "lived culture" of Christian faith shaped by criteria intrinsic to itself or in mutual exchange with the culture?

Of course the problem of how Christians relate to culture is as old as Christianity itself. The New Testament makes it clear that there were sharp dif-

ferences of opinion in the first century over how to relate to the culture. Yet, the Christ of the Bible is the Christ of a *culture*. The ultimate act of communication in history, the Incarnation, means that Christ became a part of culture and can't be understood apart from culture. In the same way, you can't live in God without living in the world. That's why this conversation is like debating the relative roles of hydrogen and oxygen in the air we breathe.

The book you're now reading—*The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*—ventures into the same forest as Niebuhr explored. This is a book about relationships: the symbiotic relationships between space and time, time and eternity, gospel and culture, church and world, meaning and form.⁴ It won't be the last word on the subject, but it represents our continuing struggle, as followers of Christ in a changing culture, to live out the meaning of the incarnation. This is the ongoing struggle articulated by Frank Burch Brown: "As a religion develops, it must orient itself both in relation to the culture of its origins and in relation to the contemporary cultures it encounters—each of which presents alternative possibilities that a religion may reject, modify, or eventually adopt."⁵

For us, a half-century after Niebuhr, the "contemporary cultures" we encounter include both modern and postmodern. And to the degree the church has succeeded in linking its identity with the modern Western culture it has both fought and helped form, it now struggles to understand its identity in a postmodern culture characterized by difference, diversity, and divergence from any single norm. (In both—and postmodern fashion, the more we experience global homogenization, the more we value difference and the assertion of identity markers.) So far in this struggle, much of our conversation tends less toward constructing a new postmodern identity than deconstructing an old modern one (see Michel Foucault's "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are").⁶ We find our brainpower drained by issues of boundaries and allegiances during this transitional time: Which culture do we belong to or react against or withdraw from or seek to transform? The dominant-but-fading

modern culture or the fledgling, emergent, divergent postmodern ones? To speak of Christian identity and the identity-culture dilemma in the midst of seemingly parallel cultural universes is to press one of the hottest buttons in the church today.⁷

Today Niebuhr's clearing seems less clear than overgrown with untrimmed notions, overhanging facades, and hanging faces.⁸ While acknowledging its influence, some theologians have also made *Christ and Culture* their number 1 love-to-hate book: "We have come to believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*."⁹ Niebuhr's approach "justifies the self-congratulatory church transforming the world as it is tamed by it. It implicitly denounces alternative approaches as sectarian, and suggests that the church should be willing to suppress its peculiarities in order to participate responsibly in the culture."¹⁰

Painting on so large a canvas would tax anyone, and Niebuhr's hand slips often. For some, Niebuhr's monolithic treatment of culture lacks subtleties of analysis or standards for discriminating the good and bad in culture, the cultural dynamics of race, gender, or ideology, and various cultural spheres such as science, art, and politics.¹¹ For others the "solidity" of Niebuhr's typologies is antihistorical and thus nearly unfalsifiable, with uneasy traffic between the micro and the macro, thereby distorting Christian history and making it difficult for Christians of various tribes and theological stripes to find themselves. Still others take offense at Niebuhr's "rigging of his typology" toward a "conversionist" stance that "sells out to a culture it professes to be transforming" while feigning a pluralist approach and respect for all.

To top it off, there is not much Christ in *Christ and Culture*. In the words of sociologist Robert Bellah, "Niebuhr was nervous about any mediation of God, even through Christ, certainly through the Bible or the church."¹² Jesus' own strategy for cultural interaction—"in," "not of," but not "out of" it either, a triangulation that makes the discussion necessarily complex¹³—makes only a cameo appearance in Niebuhr's discussion. According to theologian Kathryn Tanner, for the Christian, "relations with the wider culture are never simply ones of either accommodation, on the one hand, or opposition and

radical critical revision, on the other, but always some mixture.”¹⁴

In spite of all the criticism, William Werpehowski makes a compelling case for *Christ and Culture*'s “abiding value” based on “its delineation of a set of theological considerations regarding creation, judgment, redemption, grace, and sin that rightly condition the infinite dialogue among Christians as they seek faithfully to witness to God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ Yet while Werpehowski is right that we have yet to come fully to terms with Niebuhr, the critics are also correct: We now need to get beyond Niebuhr, if for no other reason than Niebuhr's theoretical and cultural assumptions were all products of the “tunnel” of modernity.¹⁶

There are three problems with Niebuhr's tunnel vision.

1. First, Christianity began in premodernity, not modernity or post-modernity. St. Paul launched Christianity in the and-also marketplace of Athens (ACTS 17:17), not the Mall of America or the IMS (instant messaging) of AOL. Niebuhr's modern, either-or bias led him to weight the five categories—condemnation of culture, toleration of culture, conversion of culture, adoption of culture, and enrichment of culture—so that his favorite (conversion of culture) would win. But what if Christianity needs multiple ecosystems as much as it needs multiple Gospels? What if God can be found throughout history working in each clearing?

2. Second, Niebuhr understood change in incremental, not exponential, terms. Of course the world has always been changing. Too much hokum goes under the intellectual rubric of “change.” In the early twentieth century, when cars were first being produced, the top speed of automobiles was 20 m.p.h. The “experts” of the day were obsessed with the world's new “speed mania,” even giving that name to a new “medical condition” (shades of ADD/HDD?) of speed addiction. According to William Lee Howard, M.D., in his admonition to parents, “Speed Mania” (1905), “The facts we have to seriously consider are not those dealing with accidents or risks to lives, nor with the effects on the adult of middle life, but the harmful effects on the very young who are being literally whirled through the world at an age when their nervous systems need quiet and normal development.”¹⁷

There is an old Latin expression: *tempora mutantur et nos, mutamur in illis*—“times change and we change with them.” But the enormities of contemporary cultural changes are unprecedented, and Niebuhr didn’t anticipate them. Many are even calling our time a “paradigm shift.” All contexts heretofore will be unfamiliar and unknown. In times of paradigm shift, Thomas Kuhn argued, everything goes back to zero and starts over anew.¹⁸ No wonder Niebuhr’s modern grappling with the Christ-and-culture issue is less than fully satisfactory in our emerging postmodern context.

For the Christian, of course, times of shifting paradigms take us back not to zero, but to origins. Our time is overdue for an original look at the relationship of Christ and culture—not “starting from scratch,” but “starting from origins.” True originality is a homecoming; not overturning doctrines but returning to the origins of the faith and letting the primeval forest reseed.

3. Third, Niebuhr failed to consider what the relationship of Christ and culture might look like from outside Christendom, a world where the church had—at the time of his writing—a much more preferred place at the table. Niebuhr’s assumptions were shaped by a world in which it behooved Robert Chambers, the Victorian Scottish publisher and naturalist, to keep pews in two different churches. If he was absent from one, the congregation presumed he was in the other and his reputation remained intact. In the same way, Niebuhr assumed a world in which Christianity knew its place, and its place was enforced by the back of culture’s hand.

Today, nobody cares whether you’re in church, and the culture is more likely to backslap you if you are there than if you aren’t. The winds of history no longer fill Christianity’s sails, especially in the West. Distinguished literary critic George Steiner calls postmodern culture the “after-life” of religion, dominated as it is by “the malignant energies released by the decay of natural religious forms.”¹⁹ In this “post-religion” era, Richard Roberts argues, “new religious growths sprout fungi-like on the stumps and trunks of the fallen trees of tradition—and humanity dances with its new spiritual masks.”²⁰ Niebuhr never anticipated the emergence of a post-Christendom West, nor a world in which Christianity (especially traditional, mainline