

Culture in Your Church

A church's philosophy of mission is greatly influenced by how she views the culture around her. How a church views the culture around her will deeply impact how she responds to the community in which she is placed.

For centuries, Christians have debated what our response to the world around us should be. During the 1940s, Yale professor Richard Niebuhr gave a series of lectures on how Christians have responded to culture. His lectures became a classic book titled *Christ and Culture*. In the book, Niebuhr explains five common Christian responses to the world around us. While my brief take on the five common reactions to culture might differ somewhat from Niebuhr's original lecture, I give him credit for providing a great framework for discussion. There are elements of truth in each view, but there is great danger in fully adopting most of the views. Your church operates predominantly from one of these views.

Christ above culture: Those with this view believe that Christians are above the culture; therefore, they do not need to engage the culture. While surely the values in Christ's kingdom are more beautiful and praiseworthy than the values embraced in any earthly one, this view taken to an extreme leads to isolationism. While those who disengage from the world believe they are obeying God, they are living the antithesis of the gospel and Peter's challenge to live good lives among those who do not know God (1 Peter 2:12). A church with this view will seek to offer a Christian equivalent for everything the world offers with the hope of removing people from the trappings of this world.

Christ of culture: While the first view often swings to fundamentalism, the second tends to swing to liberalism. People who adopt a "Christ of culture" view believe that Christ is fully in the culture. They believe because He is in every thought, every movie, every conversation, and every song, the culture can be fully embraced. While the first view compromises the mission of Christ, this view violates the holiness of Christ (James 4:4). A church with this view will see little distinction between the people of God and those who do not know Him.

Christ against culture: People who are against the culture insist they have an assignment from God to attack the culture, to expose everything that is wrong with the context in which they live. They are similar to the "Christ above culture" group, but instead of choosing isolation, they picket and protest. While the spiritual life is portrayed as a battle throughout Scripture, the battle is against our own desires and against the powers of darkness, not against people (Ephesians 6:12). While there are times we must stand against cultural norms, those who live predominantly with this view fail to love people well.

Christ and culture in paradox: Those with this view attempt to live the paradox between citizenship in two kingdoms. During some moments, they live as citizens of God's kingdom. At

other moments, they walk as citizens of the world. Their values change with their surroundings. This view taken to extremes results in a schizophrenic faith.

Christ transforming culture: People with this view deeply believe that Christ is the missionary God who has the power to transform people and even cultures. Transformers neither isolate (above culture) nor compromise (of culture), but they seek to transform others.

One can see the five views at work in many situations. Let me give a hypothetical example to illustrate. Imagine a strip club or sex store moves into the community where the church abides. How do you respond?

“Christ above culture” (which as a daddy I understand) would print alternative driving directions in the bulletins so church members can avoid seeing the seedy spot. “Christ of culture” would not struggle with the establishment and may even embrace it. “Christ against culture” would picket. “Christ and culture in paradox” would simply live with the tension of two kingdoms colliding. “Christ transforming culture” would pray and seek wise and loving opportunities to serve those involved and affected by the establishment.

While there are times to speak against culture and times to avoid culture, I believe the dominant view for a church must be “Christ transforming culture.” The God who stepped into our culture to redeem us calls us to be a church on mission. A local community does not exist for the church’s sake. A local church must exist for the sake of the community.

Read more from Eric [here](#).