

PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The question of how Christian believers, both individually and corporately, ought to go about the vital work of witnessing to the surrounding culture is one which each generation of the church needs to consider, not least in cultures such as twenty-first century Britain where the Christian faith has become increasingly marginalised. Niebuhr's highly influential five-fold taxonomy sought to categorise the various different approaches to the problem of “Christ and Culture”, whilst in contemporary Reformed and evangelical circles the debate is focused upon the so called "two kingdom" and "transformationist" approaches. In other branches of the church other views hold sway. It is noted that very often these competing answers to this enduring problem are characterised by either a misunderstanding or neglect of the doctrines of common grace and total depravity. This leads to a warping of the contours of Biblical theology, consequently failing to do justice to the complex issue of what it means to be "in the world" but not "of the world." In turn, this hampers the church as she seeks to proclaim the gospel to the cultures of the world. This thesis will critique Niebuhr's taxonomy and contemporary debates, after which it will apply the doctrines of common grace and total depravity to the issue of “Christ and culture.” Finally, the thesis will survey the teaching of the New Testament to show how the early church went about the task of proclaiming Christ in the surrounding cultures. In doing so, this thesis assumes the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

*To Mary and Sadie*

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## INTRODUCTION: THE “ENDURING PROBLEM” RESTATED

H. Richard Niebuhr’s highly influential work, *Christ and Culture*, begins by noting that “the question of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one”, and that despite the “repeated struggles” of the church, no single Christian answer to the “enduring problem” has been found.<sup>1</sup> In Niebuhr’s view, the problem consists in the fact that Christ and culture form two different authorities, both demanding our loyalty and devotion.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr argues that understanding how these two authorities relate to one another is the key to understanding how one ought to go about living in the world as a follower of Christ.

In the years which have elapsed since the publication of Niebuhr’s work, Western society has undergone dramatic changes which Niebuhr himself would have found hard to imagine. Consequently, Christians in the West currently find themselves grappling again with what Niebuhr described as the “enduring problem” of culture. The focus of this thesis will be upon the church’s proclamation of Christ in a culture which can increasingly be described as “post-Christian.”<sup>3</sup> What are the challenges and opportunities, the threats and temptations, which the church faces as she seeks to proclaim Christ in a culture where the gospel and the Christian worldview are being increasingly marginalised? In order to answer

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

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis will address trends within “Western” culture in general, but with a particular emphasis on issues pertaining to a British context.

this question, it is necessary first of all to define what is meant by the term “culture”, before surveying the landscape of twenty-first century British culture, with particular attention to the church’s position within it.

### Defining Culture

Broadly defined, we may say that culture is anything which human beings seek to build or achieve through the use of our hands and minds.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is clear that Niebuhr himself had in view this broad and all-encompassing definition of culture, describing it as “the total process of human activity” and the “total result of such activity”, before going on to note that culture is therefore inevitably a social pursuit bound up with man’s life in society, and laden with man’s values.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Edmund Clowney describes culture as “a socially assumed and transmitted pattern of thought and life developed around a scheme of values.”<sup>6</sup> In *Christ and Culture Revisited*, D.A. Carson favours the succinct and clear definition of culture put forward by Clifford Geertz: “[T]he culture concept... 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 towards life.”<sup>7</sup> It is notable that in each of these definitions of culture there is the recognition that human *values* are central to cultural pursuits. Moreover, Niebuhr, Clowney and Geertz all make note of the fact that “culture”

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<sup>4</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 854.

<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, 32-37.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

involves not only the crystallising of these values (in institutions, education, art and such like), but also the *transmission* of these values via the medium of human achievements. At the outset it is therefore apparent that culture cannot be considered as something neutral which Christians can be indifferent towards. Culture of any type inevitably impresses upon its receivers a certain set of values, an understanding of the world and life, and how things ought to be. Consequently, it may be said that a certain culture will always be bound up with a certain *worldview*.

Helpful though these definitions of culture undoubtedly are, we must go beyond them. Scripture teaches us that whilst human activities and achievements all find their place in the broader picture of culture, culture itself finds its place in the broader-yet picture of Biblical theology, and the grand sweep of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. In other words, in order to fully grasp the meaning of culture we must consider it theologically, not merely anthropologically. As John Frame notes, the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-31 is of great importance; the first human experience recorded in Scripture is the hearing of this command.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, human beings are by nature “culture builders” called by God to go about the work of filling and subduing the earth.<sup>9</sup> As we do so, we act as divinely appointed “gardeners” whose task it is to be at work in the creation, working with the raw materials of God’s creation so that the world and all of its inhabitants are able to develop and flourish.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frame, 855.

<sup>9</sup> Dan Strange, “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology” *Themelios*, vol. 36.2 (2001), 238-260.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Every Good Endeavour* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), 58-59.

All cultural pursuits should therefore be seen as subject to the commands and norms of God himself, including our products, our systems of ideas, how we teach them, our institutions and our customs.<sup>11</sup> As has already been noted, cultural pursuits are always unavoidably laden with values, and the cultural mandate of Genesis 1 informs us that the values which culture should be laden with are nothing less than the values of the Creator God. The chief end of man in all his cultural activity ought to be the glory of God.

Of course, the entrance of sin into the world in Genesis 3 has changed the cultural landscape dramatically. Instead of being subject to the norms and values of the Creator, culture has become shaped by the norms and values of fallen man living in autonomous rebellion against his Creator. The result of this is that culture as we currently experience it is a “mixed affair”; on the one hand it is the result of sinful human activity, whilst on the other hand it displays the evidence of God’s good creation and common grace.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, given that creation is the “theatre” in which the great drama of redemption is being played out, we should expect that culture (in some ways at least) is influenced by the presence of God’s saving grace in the world, as history moves towards the great culmination of God’s purposes. Within this broad Biblical understanding of human culture there are, needless to say, many different opinions regarding how the church ought to relate to culture and proclaim Christ amidst culture. A discussion of these views will be deferred until chapter two. Presently, it is necessary to narrow the focus somewhat and consider the characteristics of modern day Western culture, with a particular emphasis on the British context.

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<sup>11</sup> Frame, 855.

<sup>12</sup> Frame, 903.

## The Church in Twenty-First Century British Culture

Almost without exception theologians and social commentators alike agree that in the final quarter of the Twentieth century Western Culture underwent some seismic changes, particularly in the realm of religious beliefs. Writing during the early years of the twenty-first century, Carson notes that twenty-five years previously (in the mid-1970s) atheists in the West were generally “Christian atheists.” That is to say that the God they rejected was specifically the God of the Bible, and that as atheists grappled with the question of God’s existence they automatically thought of God in Judeo-Christian categories. This meant that in proclaiming the gospel the church was able to assume a certain level of Biblical understanding in their hearers.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Keller has commented that before 1970 American evangelicals “could count on their listeners to at least be able to understand the message of the Christian faith – a message largely seen as credible and positive.”<sup>14</sup> In such a culture, it has been noted that Christian parents would spend little time worrying about if their children would grow up Christian, because Christian values were ubiquitous in society and were almost universally regarded as a good thing.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, due to the reasonable levels of Biblical knowledge in society as a whole, there was no fundamental problem of communication when seeking to preach the gospel to unbelievers.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that

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<sup>13</sup> D. A. Carson, “Athens Revisited,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Postmoderns*, ed. D.A. Carson, 384-398 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 384-5.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 183.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 16.

<sup>16</sup> David Smith, “Preaching in the Wilderness: The Challenges of Communicating the Christian Faith in a Secular Culture” *Frontiers* vol. 2.1 (1997), 17.

society was “better” back then than it is now, nor that there was necessarily a higher proportion of Christians within society (though that may well have been the case). Rather, it is to say that the dominant worldview which shaped Western culture was heavily and overtly influenced by Judeo-Christian categories, both for the believer and the unbeliever.

There are numerous reasons why this state of affairs so suddenly disappeared and it would be impossible to do justice to each of them within this brief overview of Western culture. However, David F. Wells cites two dominant influences in the West which have dramatically changed the cultural landscape. The first of these is the pluralism which has resulted from the influx of new and different religions and worldviews.<sup>17</sup> In what might be described as “traditional” societies where there is a stable and largely static population it is possible to go through life and seldom be confronted by radically different ideas about the world. However, as James D. Hunter notes, with the rise of global urbanisation and the growth of technology “instead of just a small minority of any given society coming into sustained contact with the differences represented by competing cultures, now the vast majority does.”<sup>18</sup> The result of this is that different cultures collide and conflict with one another, each jostling for supremacy in the minds and hearts of its members.

Hunter goes on to note that cultures present us with “plausibility structures.”<sup>19</sup> By this, he refers to the way in which the culture we create gives credibility and plausibility to the beliefs which lie behind it. As our definition of culture has noted, culture is unavoidably

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<sup>17</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 311.

<sup>18</sup> James D. Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 200-1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

*value-laden*. Cultural pursuits crystallise, enshrine and promote a certain set of values. In other words, the culture we create is shaped by our values, and our values are in turn shaped by the culture we inhabit. This creates a system of internal feedback and mutual reinforcement between culture and values. Hunter concludes that, given the plurality of worldviews that are present in Western society, “these are social conditions that make faithfulness difficult and faithlessness almost natural.”<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to the second dominant influence in Western culture which Wells points to; the rise of postmodernism, and with it the loss of absolutes.<sup>21</sup> One of the major doctrines of postmodernism is that there is no absolute truth, and therefore there cannot be a *metanarrative* to life which holds all things together.<sup>22</sup> In such a culture, it is inevitable that great emphasis will be laid upon a particular form of so called “tolerance.” If no single worldview is allowed to take precedence over all of the others,<sup>23</sup> then the tolerance of all worldviews must be enshrined in society. “Tolerance”, then, takes on a particular flavour in postmodern cultures. Whereas in the past tolerance may have referred to respecting another person despite disagreeing with their beliefs, “tolerance” in postmodern culture has come to mean that disagreement itself is wrong.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the result of such an approach to differing beliefs is not a greater degree of tolerance, but rather a more sharply focused form

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, 311-2.

<sup>22</sup> Ravi Zacharias, “An Ancient Message, through Modern Means, to a Postmodern Mind” In *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Postmoderns*, edited by D.A. Carson, 19-29 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 23.

<sup>23</sup> D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (Editors), *God and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 38.

of intolerance. Wells writes, “what is not tolerable, and what will not be tolerated [in postmodern cultures], is the kind of faith which makes absolute claims, which recognizes the right of all religions and spiritualities to exist but does not accept as viable their claims to religious truth.”<sup>25</sup> The ubiquitous opinion in such a culture is that “if Christianity has any place in the postmodern world at all, it is in the private sphere of home, family and individual belief.”<sup>26</sup> If a society is going to embrace postmodern principles, then the Christian faith which is based on absolute standards and propositional truth must be kept in the margins of life. If at all possible its influence must be removed from politics, the arts, education, the media, and even from personal social interactions.

#### “We Don’t Do God”

Whereas all of the above applies to Western culture in general, it is the focus of this thesis to place particular emphasis on modern day British culture in particular and to investigate the implications for the church’s proclamation in such a culture. It is noted that over the past 60 years or so there has been the rapid removal of the Bible from public life.<sup>27</sup> Whereas since the days of Henry VIII the monarch (as Supreme Governor of the Church of England) has also borne the title “Defender of the Faith”, Prince Charles has opted instead to take the title of “Defender of Faith” in order to accommodate Britain’s multicultural and less overtly Christian society.<sup>28</sup> Famously, Alastair Campbell (Tony Blair’s director of strategy

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<sup>25</sup> Wells, 312.

<sup>26</sup> Carter, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Strange, 238-40.

<sup>28</sup> *The Telegraph*, 13 Nov 2008.

and communications) repeatedly interrupted an interview in which Blair was asked about his religious beliefs, saying, “We don’t do God”, and on the cusp of hostilities against Iraq commencing Mr Blair was prevented by his advisers from ending his address to the nation with the message: "God bless you."<sup>29</sup> Recently, Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division, spoke of the trends within the British legal system which no longer recognises religious distinctions, and even the Archbishop of Canterbury has argued that the adoption of some aspects of Sharia law is “inevitable.”<sup>30</sup> By some estimates, it is thought that more people in the United Kingdom worship in mosques week by week than in Christian churches.<sup>31</sup>

British culture, then, has gone through a series of dramatic changes over the course of the past 60 years. The dominant trends of pluralism and postmodernism which characterise Western culture as a whole are writ large upon British society today, and are keenly felt by the gradually diminishing Christian population. Christian belief has very suddenly become a “minority subculture.”<sup>32</sup> The challenges which this cultural shift presents to the church are legion, but primary among them is the impact it has had upon the mission of the church in proclaiming Christ to the world. As Carson notes, in the West we have returned to something more like the pluralism the early church contended with.<sup>33</sup> As such, this is not a new problem

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<sup>29</sup> *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2003.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 30 Oct 2013.

<sup>31</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 186.

<sup>32</sup> Carter, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Carson and Woodbridge, 45.

for the church, but it is one which the church in Britain today faces with a new sense of urgency. How do we proclaim Christ in a post-Christian culture? Keller notes that whilst most church leaders are aware that there are times when it is necessary to adapt to culture and that there are times to stand apart from culture in order to confront and critique it, there is often little agreement regarding where the line between adaptation and confrontation ought to be drawn.<sup>34</sup> The aim of this thesis is to bring further clarity to this issue in order to facilitate Biblically informed and culturally appropriate gospel proclamation.

In chapter two we will investigate various ways in which Christians throughout church history have viewed culture, starting with an overview and assessment of Niebuhr's five-fold taxonomy before looking at current debates surrounding the "Christ and Culture" problem. In chapter three our focus will be upon systematic theology, seeing how the doctrines of total depravity and common grace serve to shape our understanding of culture. Finally, in chapter four we will survey the teaching of the New Testament with particular focus on the book of Acts in order to see how the early church understood the mission of proclaiming Christ in divergent cultures.

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<sup>34</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 181.

## CHAPTER 2

### CHRIST AND CULTURE IN CHURCH HISTORY: NIEBUHR'S TAXONOMY AND CURRENT DEBATES

In order to begin our assessment of the various Christian approaches to culture it is necessary to survey the broad landscape of views which have risen to prominence throughout church history up to the modern day. Whilst it would be impossible to discuss every approach to culture which Christians have adopted, this chapter will seek to highlight the views which have exerted the most influence over the church.

#### Niebuhr's Taxonomy Summarised

Niebuhr's highly influential work, *Christ and Culture*, has risen to such prominence in Christian thought that any new treatment of the topic of culture must necessarily take into account Niebuhr's five well known categories. We will therefore take *Christ and Culture* as our starting point in assessing the variety of ways in which the "enduring problem" has been tackled, before turning our focus to current debates in the Reformed and evangelical world.

#### Christ Against Culture

The first of Niebuhr's five categories is based on the principle of *opposition* between Christ and culture, presenting the believer with an "either-or" decision about where their loyalties lie.<sup>1</sup> Those within the Christ against culture category (within which Niebuhr places

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<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), 40.

the early church) are those who whose view of culture “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty.”<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr finds Biblical support for this viewpoint particularly in the book of 1 John, and the treatment therein of “the world.” Based on Niebuhr’s understanding of passages such as 1 John 2:15-17 and 5:5, the “world” is seen as the whole society outside of the church, but within which believers must live. It is a realm under the power of evil concerned with temporal and passing values, a dying realm which will be overcome by Christ, and therefore the loyalty of the believer is directed entirely to the new order of its Lord.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Niebuhr argues that within this first category, “the counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society”, and “a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr argues that the “Christ against Culture” motif was most radically stated by Tertullian,<sup>5</sup> and was later evidenced in the “Protestant Sectarianism” of the Society of Friends and the Mennonites.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, Niebuhr also mentions Tolstoy as a major proponent of the “Christ against Culture” motif, for whom every phase of culture (even the church) falls under indictment, and for whom the state and the Christian church are simply

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 56.

incompatible.<sup>7</sup> Michael Horton notes a similar sentiment in the Anabaptist Schleithem confession: “God further admonishes us to withdraw from Babylon and the Earthly Egypt that we may not be partakers of the pain and suffering which the Lord will bring upon them.”<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr himself describes this category as a necessary and yet incompatible position, arguing that the radical motif within 1 John needs to be balanced with the teaching of Romans 13 concerning the divine institution of governing authorities.<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr understands that it is in fact impossible to completely withdraw from culture because culture is “in us”, just as we are in it.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Niebuhr points out that the radical approach betrays a misunderstanding of the nature and prevalence of sin, acting as if culture is the domain of sin and that Christianity is the domain of purity. Of course, even within the text of 1 John (which Niebuhr sees as central to the radical position) it is untenable to view the church as the “pure realm.”<sup>11</sup> However, for Niebuhr the “knottiest problem” within the “Christ against Culture” category is the relation between Jesus Christ and “the creator of nature and governor of history”, as well as to the Spirit immanent in creation. As Niebuhr writes, “Their rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature’s God.”<sup>12</sup> Frame is right to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 60-1.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Horton, “My Father’s World” *Modern Reformation* Vol. 1, No. 2 (March/April 1992): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 78. See also 1 John 1:9.

<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr, 80-81.

point out that the “Christ against Culture” motif wrongly conflates the idea of culture with the Biblical concept of “world” (when used negatively in Scripture, such as in 1 John 2:15-17). Whilst culture is always a mixture of good and bad, the “world” can be considered the “bad part” of culture.<sup>13</sup> To shun the “world” is therefore not the equivalent of withdrawing from culture.

### Christ Of Culture

The second category in Niebuhr’s taxonomy is known as “Christ of Culture”, which may be considered as the polar opposite of the radical position. To those within the “Christ against Culture” position the central principle is one of *opposition* between Christ and culture, whereas within the “Christ of Culture” position the central principle is one of *agreement* between Christ and culture. In this category, the teaching of Jesus is not seen as standing in radical contradiction to human cultures, but instead it is seen as the epitome of the greatest human achievements.<sup>14</sup> Jesus is regarded as the teacher of all that is noblest and best in the cultural traditions of mankind.<sup>15</sup> As Niebuhr writes, “in every culture to which the gospel comes there are men who hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations.”<sup>16</sup> Borrowing Karl Barth’s phrase, Niebuhr describes this category as

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<sup>13</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 866.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Frame, 868.

<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr, 83.

“Culture Protestantism.”<sup>17</sup> Foremost in Niebuhr’s discussion of the “Christ of Culture” category is Gnosticism. Niebuhr writes that the Gnostics attempted to “reconcile the gospel with the science and philosophy of their time” in an effort to “raise Christianity from the level of belief to that of intelligent knowledge, and so to increase its attractiveness and its power.”<sup>18</sup> The Gnostics therefore projected onto the person and work of Christ their own scientific and philosophical beliefs, the result of which was that “participation in the life of culture was now a matter of indifference [for the Christian]; it involved no great problems.”<sup>19</sup>

Niebuhr gives a mixed review of the Cultural Protestantism position. On the one hand, he objects to the fact that the “Christ” of culture is a “chameleon”, “an honorific and emotional term by means of which each period attaches numinous qualities to its personified ideals”, whilst on the other hand he recognises that the historical Jesus does indeed have many different aspects and numerous points of contact with many different views.<sup>20</sup> Whilst the radicals see the whole world outside of the church as utter darkness, the cultural Protestants have a much more nuanced view, finding points of contact between culture and Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the stark criticism that the radicals level against cultural Protestantism, Niebuhr discerns that at the core they have much in common. In withdrawing from “culture” the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 106.

radicals are in actual fact merely protecting and advocating a certain form of sub-culture, such as the maintenance of early American society with little relation to the New Testament, or a form of bourgeois Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Today, a form of the “Christ of Culture” approach may be discerned in the Christian Left’s pursuit of utopian socialism, as well as in the Christian Right’s commitment to capitalism and American culture.<sup>23</sup> A further similarity between the radicals and the cultural Protestants is in the fact that both neglect the doctrine of total depravity by positing a certain realm which is free from sin. For the radicals this idealised realm is found in life separated from sinful culture, whereas for the Cultural Protestants it is found in the attainment of idealised cultural aspirations.<sup>24</sup> As such, the attacks against cultural Protestantism by the “Christ against Culture” party “is a family quarrel between folk who are in essential agreement on the main point; namely, that Christ is the Christ of Culture, and that man’s greatest task is to maintain his best culture.”<sup>25</sup>

Niebuhr, then, is able to dismiss the “Christ of Culture” type in much the same way as he dismisses the “Christ against Culture” type. However, there are certain additional criticisms which pertain particularly to the cultural Protestants. Niebuhr notes, for example, that in constructing a “Christ of Culture” the advocates of this position take a “pet verse” or concept which is central to their culture and make that the “whole thing”, expanding it into a caricature of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, such people are engaged in the practise of making Christ

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>23</sup> Horton, “My Father’s World,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 108-9.

after their own image. Niebuhr comments, “loyalty to contemporary culture has so far qualified the loyalty to Christ that he has been abandoned in favour of an idol called by his name.”<sup>27</sup> In doing so, the idolising of a “cultural Christ” by the “Christ of Culture” types ends up being self-aggrandising. As Niebuhr notes, this viewpoint has given birth to movements that revel in self-reliant humanism, which finds the notions of God’s grace as demeaning and unnecessary.<sup>28</sup>

### Christ Above Culture

The remaining three categories in Niebuhr’s taxonomy are found in the “centre ground” between the radicals and the cultural Protestants. Rather than placing Christ in *opposition* culture (“Christ against Culture”), or placing Christ in *agreement* with culture as the idealised goal of culture (“Christ of Culture”), the remaining three categories place Christ *above* culture. These are referred to by Niebuhr as the synthesists<sup>29</sup>, dualists and conversionists.<sup>30</sup> Each of these three approaches recognises the universal and radical nature of sin, and yet cannot see the created realm as simply “bad” due to the fact that the works of human culture cannot be separated from the grace of the God who makes them possible.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the radical

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>29</sup> It is necessary to note that whilst Niebuhr includes all three remaining categories under the term “Christ Above Culture,” this phrase has become synonymous with the synthesist position in particular.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, 120.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 117-8, 119.

and cultural Christians, the synthesist recognises that there is good both in Christ and in culture as well.<sup>32</sup>

In the view of the synthesists, there is a gap between Christ and culture which the cultural believer fails to take seriously and which the radical believer does not even attempt to overcome.<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr writes that the synthesist motif is apparent in many places in the gospels and epistles, most famously in the utterance of Jesus in Matt 22:21 where he declares “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”<sup>34</sup> For the synthesist there are therefore two realms to consider: the realm we live in amidst culture, and the realm we aspire to, where Christ is. This is characteristic of the distinction between nature and grace which is a hallmark of Roman Catholic theology. Nature is seen as the world as God made it, which is then developed by humans in their cultural pursuits.<sup>35</sup> Whilst culture can be developed through the employment of natural reason, for salvation we need grace; a “supplement” which Christ adds to nature for the attainment of our higher purpose and ultimate fulfilment.<sup>36</sup>

It is in the theology of Thomas Aquinas that the synthesist viewpoint finds its fullest expression. Aquinas taught a “double happiness” for mankind: one in his life in culture, and a higher one, in his life in Christ. Furthermore, the happiness in culture is also divided into two

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<sup>32</sup> Frame, 869.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>35</sup> Frame, 869.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 869.

parts; practical activity, by which we go about our day to day involvement in culture, and contemplation, whereby we look above to the higher realm.<sup>37</sup>

In defence of the synthesist position, Niebuhr writes that “the synthesist alone seems to provide for willing and intelligent co-operation with non-believers in carrying on the work of the world, while yet maintaining the distinctiveness of Christian faith and life.”<sup>38</sup> However, he also has certain criticisms against the synthesists. Firstly, Niebuhr argues that the synthesist viewpoint tends towards cultural conservatism in the effort to restore or maintain a certain type of culture, thus becoming like the cultural Christian.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the effort to synthesise Christ and culture leads to an institutionalising of the gospel, which in turn leads to a third problem, which is the introduction of a sense of hierarchy into the church. If the practical is inferior to the contemplative, which itself is inferior to the “higher law” of Christ, then it is unavoidable that both the church and the wide culture become organised in a hierarchical system. The monk exists on a higher level than the baker, the priest on a higher level than the politician.<sup>40</sup> In modern parlance, the synthesist viewpoint therefore tends towards a “sacred-secular” divide. Furthermore, the synthesist view wrongly implies that we are able to function adequately on the “lower level” without Christ, and that grace is merely a

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<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr, 128.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 147-8.

“supplement” to what we possess by nature.<sup>41</sup> As a result, in the synthesist position man’s need for grace is underestimated.

### Christ and Culture in Paradox

The fourth grouping within Niebuhr’s taxonomy comprises of those who see Christ and culture in a state of “paradox”, whom Niebuhr also refers to as the “dualists.” Here, the central principle is one of *tension* which the believer in the world inevitably feels. This viewpoint is a traditionally Lutheran one, although today it is also embraced by many Reformed people as well.<sup>42</sup>

For the dualist, the central issue to grapple with when considering culture is the relationship between God and man, and therefore for the dualist the starting point in dealing with the cultural problem must be the great act of reconciliation in Christ.<sup>43</sup> The sharp point of disagreement between the synthesist and the dualist is thus the extent and thoroughness of human sinfulness, which the dualist holds to be profound.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of whether undertaken by a believer or an unbeliever, the dualist holds that all cultural pursuits bear the staining of sinfulness. Niebuhr writes, “thus in the dualist’s view the whole edifice of culture is cracked and madly askew.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Frame, 870.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 870.

<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, 150, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 155.

However, despite this very prominent emphasis on the total depravity which is evident in all of culture, the dualist does not reach the same conclusion as the radical “Christ against Culture” position. Unlike the radicals, the dualist recognises that it is impossible to withdraw from culture into a sanitised enclave of holiness. The dualist “knows he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it, that God indeed sustains him in it and by it.”<sup>46</sup> Herein lies the tension of the dualist position: on the one hand he is highly aware of the sinfulness which marks all human pursuits of culture, and yet on the other hand he recognises that God provides for him by that very same sinful culture. The dualist explains this tension by arguing that the believer lives simultaneously in two kingdoms: God exercises a “double sovereignty”, ruling the church by the principle of grace and ruling the world by the principle of law.<sup>47</sup> A further point of difference between the synthesist and the dualist becomes apparent when considering their respective views of earthly institutions. The synthesist regards all areas of cultural life as fulfilling a positive function, offering the hope of real (albeit incomplete) happiness. In contrast to this, Niebuhr argues that from his dualist viewpoint the apostle Paul views institutions such as civil government as fulfilling a predominantly negative role in restraining sin.<sup>48</sup>

Niebuhr argues that this dualist approach to culture is particularly evident in the writing of the apostle Paul, whose encounter with Christ “relativized” in his eyes all cultural institutions and distinctions, recognising that all cultures alike “stood on the same level of a

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>47</sup> Veith, “Christianity and Culture: God’s Double Sovereignty,” *Modern Reformation* vol. 6, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 1997), 15-19.

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr, 165.

sinful humanity before the wrath of God”, and yet were “equally subject to [Christ’s] redemptive work.”<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr argues that in Paul’s eyes it is both impossible and pointless to seek isolation from pagan culture by creating an alternative “Christian culture” as it is impossible for us to come any closer to the reign of Christ by adapting our cultural customs.<sup>50</sup> It is on these grounds that the dualist position is often considered to be inherently culturally conservative.

Whilst Niebuhr sees the hallmarks of dualism in the writing of Paul, it is in the work of Martin Luther that this motif finds its fullest expression. Niebuhr contrasts Luther’s *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (which emphasises the Christian’s freedom under grace) with his *Against the Murdering Hordes of the Peasants* (which emphasises the use of law to restrain sin in society) in order to show his evident “two kingdom” view.<sup>51</sup> In the dualist viewpoint, these two kingdoms must be clearly distinguished and never confused. According to Luther, we are to refrain from putting wrath into God’s kingdom and from putting mercy into the world’s, which would be akin to putting God in hell and the devil in heaven.<sup>52</sup> The kingdom of the world, operating by the principle of law, can only highlight our sinfulness, whereas the kingdom of God, operating by the principle of grace, is the realm in which man is saved from sin.<sup>53</sup> Whereas God rules the world by his providential control and “natural laws”, he rules

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 160-1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 163-4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 173-4.

the church through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup> The Christian believer must therefore grapple with what it means to live in both of these kingdoms at the same time. Niebuhr writes that “living between time and eternity, between wrath and mercy, between culture and Christ, the true Lutheran finds life both tragic and joyful. There is no solution of the dilemma this side of death.”<sup>55</sup>

As with each of the previous categories, Niebuhr’s assessment of the “Christ and Culture in Paradox” viewpoint is mixed. Rather dismissively, Niebuhr states that “dualism may be the refuge of worldly-minded persons who wish to make a slight obeisance in the direction of Christ, or of pious spiritualists who feel that they owe some reverence to culture.”<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr states that the two main charges which can be brought against the dualist viewpoint are the charges of antinomianism and cultural conservatism, arguing that in this view it makes little difference whether men are sinfully obedient or sinfully disobedient, and that both Paul and Luther seem content to let all non-religious institutions remain relatively unchanged whilst they yearn for the passing of this temporal order.<sup>57</sup> However, Niebuhr also sees certain things to applaud in the dualist viewpoint, arguing that this perspective mirrors the actual struggles experienced by Christians living “between the times”, and that it also takes into account the dynamic character of God, man, grace and sin.<sup>58</sup> Niebuhr also notes

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<sup>54</sup> Frame, 870.

<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr, 178.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 187-8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 185.

that whilst Luther *distinguishes* the two kingdoms, he does not *divide* them, and that he affirms “life in culture as the sphere in which Christ could and ought to be followed.”<sup>59</sup>

### Christ the Transformer of Culture

Finally, Niebuhr arrives at the fifth approach to culture in his taxonomy, entitled “Christ the Transformer of Culture”, or, more succinctly, the “conversionist” viewpoint. As with the dualists, the conversionist viewpoint notes the profound influence of sin upon the world, and recognises Christ primarily as the redeemer rather than merely the giver of a new law.<sup>60</sup> What distinguishes the conversionist from the dualist is their more positive outlook towards culture.<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr argues that this comes about due to three reasons. Firstly, the doctrine of creation is given more emphasis in the conversionist view. Whereas for the dualist (according to Niebuhr) creation is seen merely as “introductory” to the work of reconciliation, for the conversionist creation is a major theme. Christ has “entered into a human culture that has never been without his ordering action.”<sup>62</sup> The conversionist therefore has a more positive view of creation.

Secondly, the conversionist holds a sharp distinction between creation and fall, which in the dualist position is less evident. Niebuhr highlights this difference by arguing that for the conversionist “culture is all corrupted order”, whereas for the dualist culture is “order for

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 172, 174.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 190-1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 191-3.

corruption.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, for the conversionist the problem of culture is not overcome by the final *replacement* of it by a new creation, but rather the *conversion* of culture to bring it back in line with God’s purposes.<sup>64</sup>

Thirdly, the conversionist differs from the dualist in their view of history. Whereas for the dualist history is the story of the struggle between faith and unbelief, for the conversionist history is the story of God’s mighty deeds and man’s responses to them.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Niebuhr argues that the outlook of the conversionist should be characterised by a greater emphasis on realised eschatology (or, to use his own terminology, the “eschatological present”).<sup>66</sup> Whereas the dualist looks forward in time to the final resolution of the tension that comes from living in the two kingdoms, the conversionist has a more immediate concern for the possibility of the transformation of culture in the present. As Niebuhr puts it, for the conversionist “this is what human culture can be – a transformed human life in and to the glory of God.”<sup>67</sup>

Niebuhr argues that the conversionist motif is most prevalent in the fourth gospel. For example, he points to the writer’s appropriation of the Greek concept of the logos which is “converted” into a Christian idea by being interpreted through Christ. The writer also points to physical objects (such as water, bread and wine) showing them not to be evil but instead

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 194-5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 195-6.

pregnant with spiritual meaning. Niebuhr also argues that the language of the “Kingdom of God” in the fourth gospel eclipses references to eternal life, thus placing the focus on the present rather than the future.<sup>68</sup>

Niebuhr also sees the conversionist motif rising to prominence in the fourth century, particularly in the theology of Augustine. Of course, the global landscape was dramatically changed in the early part of the fourth century due to the Constantinian settlement which sparked the conversion of the Roman Empire into medieval Christendom.<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr writes that it is understandable that, in such a context, Augustine saw Christ as the transformer of culture, who “redirects, reinvigorates and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works.”<sup>70</sup>

As in the work of Augustine, so also in the work of Calvin does Niebuhr recognise the conversionist motif, noting that Calvin (more so than Luther) looks for the present permeation of all life by the gospel.<sup>71</sup> However, in criticism of both Calvin and Augustine Niebuhr argues that they have allowed the “separatism” of Scripture regarding the final judgment to cloud their conversionist outlook, which prevented them from envisaging a present “golden age” of converted culture.<sup>72</sup> It is for this reason that Niebuhr looks to the work of F.D. Maurice as the purest example of the conversionist viewpoint, writing that “the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 196-201.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 215-6.

conversion of mankind from self centredness to Christ centredness was for Maurice the universal and present divine possibility.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, for Niebuhr, a high emphasis on realised eschatology is a necessary element of the conversionist approach to culture. The reticence of Calvin and Augustine to focus on the present is seen as an inconsistency by Niebuhr.

Unlike in the other four categories, Niebuhr has no negative criticism to make of the conversionist viewpoint. Therefore, it is implied that Niebuhr aligns himself with this fifth and final grouping within his taxonomy.

### Niebuhr’s Taxonomy Critiqued

Whilst it cannot be denied that Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* has had an enormous influence upon how Christians have understood culture since its publication a little over fifty years ago, there is an increasing feeling amongst contemporary theologians that Niebuhr’s taxonomy is an inadequate framework by itself. As George Marsden notes, Niebuhr’s analysis in its present form may be coming to the end of its usefulness.<sup>74</sup> Amongst the criticisms which Marsden brings against Niebuhr’s work are that his abstract category of “Christ” is inadequate and misleading, his undifferentiated use of “culture” is confusing, the categories themselves are historically inaccurate, and that further categories need introducing.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>74</sup> George Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr’s Categories” (lecture delivered at the Austin Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas on February 2, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures.”

In a similar vein, Timothy Keller notes the weaknesses of Niebuhr's framework. Of the points Keller makes regarding *Christ and Culture*, two deserve particular attention. Firstly, Keller notes that each of the five approaches outlined by Niebuhr has a "healthy side and an unhealthy side."<sup>76</sup> It is therefore unhelpful to pit each of the five views against one another in order that one may be seen to be "right" and the others "wrong." Secondly, Keller notes that Niebuhr's work assumes the Constantinian Settlement.<sup>77</sup> In other words, Niebuhr's work assumes that the majority of citizens within a particular culture will identify themselves as Christian (at least in a nominal sense), and thus the prevailing worldview in society will be aligned with Biblical principles. As we have already noted, this form of "Christendom" has quickly disappeared from Western culture. Though at the time of its writing Niebuhr's work may have held much more applicability to Western culture, today the categories feel a little dated and out of touch with contemporary circumstances.

In addition to these criticisms, D.A. Carson's excellent book *Christ and Culture Revisited* provides a thorough assessment of Niebuhr's work. To begin with, Carson questions whether or not Niebuhr's second category ("Christ of Culture") should be included at all. As Carson notes, the main examples of the "Christ of Culture" grouping, Gnosticism and liberalism, ought not to be considered within the fold of Christianity at all due to their dismissal of the great redemptive historical events which are central to the Christian faith.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 196.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>78</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 36.

Carson also brings into question Niebuhr's use of Scripture. This, Carson argues, is most evident when Niebuhr discusses the conversionist approach. As we have seen, Niebuhr himself places great emphasis on the importance of realised eschatology as an essential hallmark of the conversionist view. However, in citing the fourth gospel as a prominent example of this, Niebuhr has warped the apostle John's doctrines of creation and sin.<sup>79</sup> He overlooks the fact that whilst there is certainly an element of realised eschatology in the fourth gospel the ultimate hope presented therein is not a present transformation of the world but rather the final consummation at Christ's return.<sup>80</sup> It is ironic that Niebuhr's disappointment with Augustine and Calvin is due to their reluctance to follow the conversionist pattern to its ultimate conclusion. Whilst Niebuhr's criticism of the liberals within the "Christ of Culture" view was that they fasten upon one strand of Biblical teaching and make it the "whole thing", Carson notes that in the conversionist pattern Niebuhr himself has done the very same thing.<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr's commitment to "conversionism" is not grounded in a Scriptural mandate for this viewpoint, but rather an *a priori* allegiance to the universalism and realised eschatology which he finds most clearly expressed by F.D. Maurice.

However, the main criticism of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* which Carson offers is that Niebuhr wrongly seeks to divide and categorise Biblical emphases which belong together. In Niebuhr's estimations, the Bible presents the reader with a variety of different (and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 39.

sometimes contradictory) paradigms, any one of which we may choose in order to have a “Biblical” view of culture.<sup>82</sup> As Carson very rightly argues, “we should not think of each pattern in Niebuhr’s fivefold scheme as warranted by individual documents in the New Testament, such that we have the option to pick and choose which pattern we prefer.”<sup>83</sup> Carson goes on to state that “rather, we should be attempting a holistic grasp of the relations between Christ and culture”, understanding that different situation will call for different emphases.<sup>84</sup> Carson’s response (which will be outlined in more detail later on in this chapter) is to assert the centrality of a rounded Biblical theology which simultaneously takes into account all of the major turning points in Scripture.<sup>85</sup> In conclusion, Carson writes that the four legitimate patterns within Niebuhr’s framework are “components of a bigger pattern, which begins to emerge when we follow the Bible’s storyline in the categories of Biblical theology.”<sup>86</sup>

We have seen that despite the great influence which Niebuhr’s taxonomy has exerted upon Christian thought, there are evidently many inadequacies which weaken its usefulness. We may summarise the above mentioned criticisms in two major points: Firstly, the five patterns have become dated and have failed to stand the test of time. *Christ and Culture* reflects a bygone form of Christendom which still held sway in post-war North America, but which now has all but disappeared from Western culture. Secondly, and more seriously, there

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 200.

are major problems with Niebuhr's use of Scripture. Niebuhr evidently fails to view the Bible holistically (never mind as inerrant), treating it instead as a conglomeration of disparate views. Furthermore, this insufficient view of Scripture means that Niebuhr's work is driven by his own bias towards an unscriptural conversionist viewpoint. It is necessary, therefore, to go beyond Niebuhr's influential yet inadequate work. In the remainder of this chapter our focus will be upon contemporary views within Reformed circles in order to see how the task of relating to culture is currently being handled, and where the major areas of disagreement lie.

### Current Debates

Whilst it is possible to find in the contemporary Christian world adherents to some form of each of Niebuhr's five approaches to culture, within the Reformed tradition there are two dominant viewpoints. The first of these is commonly referred to as the "two kingdom" approach, which approximates to Niebuhr's "dualist" viewpoint. Secondly, there is the so called "transformationist" approach, which approximates to Niebuhr's "conversionist" viewpoint. Alongside these two approaches there are also several voices which have formed an expanding centre ground, uncomfortable to be aligned with either the transformationist or two kingdom position, and thus seeking a middle way between the two. Two prominent representatives of this centre ground are Timothy Keller and D.A. Carson. This final section of chapter two will summarise and critique the two kingdom, transformationist and centre ground views, and by so doing give an overview of the prevalent voices regarding culture in the contemporary Reformed scene.

## The Two Kingdom Approach

Central to the two kingdom understanding of culture is that God exercises a “double sovereignty”, ruling over both the church and culture, but in two different ways. God has a spiritual rule in the hearts and lives of Christians, whereas throughout the whole of creation he also exercises a secular rule. Whereas in the church he rules by the gospel, in the world he rules by law.<sup>87</sup> As Luther himself emphasised, there must be a clear distinction between the “left hand” kingdom of law and the “right hand” kingdom of grace.<sup>88</sup>

In the two kingdom approach the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of common grace are both essential foundations upon which the view of culture is constructed. Regarding the doctrine of sin, the two kingdom approach acknowledges that sin is universal, and remains within the Christian throughout the entirety of his earthly existence.<sup>89</sup> For the adherents of two kingdom theology, this fact has two main implications. On the one hand it reminds us of our own on-going need for the presence of law in this life.<sup>90</sup> The law, employed in its so called first and second uses, functions to restrain sin in society and to highlight the guilt of mankind before God. On the other hand, the ubiquitous presence of sin in the world teaches us to adjust our expectations for how life now may develop and improve. For the two kingdom adherent there is little danger of drifting into an over-realised eschatology. It is

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<sup>87</sup> Veith, “Christianity and Culture,” 16.

<sup>88</sup> Angus J.L. Menuge, “Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture Reexamined,” in *Christ and Culture in Dialogue: Constructive Themes and Practical Applications*, ed. Angus Menuge, W.R. Se Carlo, A.L. Garcia, and D.E. Griffin. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999. Available at [issuesetc.org](http://issuesetc.org). Accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

impossible for us to create a perfect, holy or “Christian” society this side of Christ’s return, and in any case that should not be our aim. The larger concern for the two kingdom view is clarifying what falls within the church’s remit and what belongs in the “left hand” kingdom, rather than setting appropriate expectations for the possibility of cultural renewal.

However, this is not to suggest that the two kingdom approach necessarily involves a pessimistic, quietist distancing from culture. Alongside the emphasis laid upon the doctrine of sin the two kingdom viewpoint also places much emphasis on the doctrine of common grace. In the two kingdom view, the “left hand” kingdom was established in Genesis 9 in God’s covenant with Noah, and continues to exist as a “common grace realm.”<sup>91</sup> Mankind, though fallen, is still made in the image of God, and lives in this life as a constant recipient of God’s common grace. Through the abundance of natural revelation around him and within him man is able to function as a full member of the “left hand” kingdom. Common grace institutions such as the state, marriage and family provide structure and coherence to the left hand kingdom,<sup>92</sup> and God’s gracious bestowal of wisdom and skills to mankind in general allows life on earth to flourish. Of course, unbelievers in the left hand kingdom have failed to grasp the gospel, and yet, as Michael Horton put it, “the gospel is not the answer to everything”, because temporal problems demand temporal solutions which the gospel does not provide us with.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 209.

<sup>92</sup> Donald E. Eberly, “The Common Good and Common Grace: Christians at the Crossroads in the Public Square.” *Modern Reformation* Vol. 9, no. 5 (2000): 16.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

This two kingdom framework thus dictates the posture of Christians as they go about their day to day lives in the “secular” realm. Due to natural revelation and common grace everybody in the world is aware of what is right and what is wrong, and it is therefore not the Christian’s calling to impose distinctively Christian standards on society, but rather to appeal to commonly held understandings of what is good.<sup>94</sup> As David Van Drunen writes, “generally speaking, believers are not to seek an objectively unique Christian way of pursuing cultural activities.”<sup>95</sup> Regarding our approach to vocation, then, the two kingdom view affirms “secular” techniques and skills, and does not seek to alter them.<sup>96</sup> The only difference to the Christian’s approach to their vocation, according to David van Drunen, is on the level of motivation. Subjectively, the Christian seeks to serve God and neighbour in their work, but with no *objective* difference in how their work is done, given that the norms which they operate under are common grace norms shared by all.<sup>97</sup> This point was summed up well by Martin Luther when, allegedly, someone asked him, “How can I be a Christian shoemaker?”, and he replied, “Make excellent shoes for an excellent price!”<sup>98</sup>

The two kingdom approach also shapes one’s understanding of civil authorities. Given that the “norms” of the left hand kingdom are evident to all people through common grace and natural revelation, and given that it is neither necessary nor possible to try and create an

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<sup>94</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 209.

<sup>95</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 168.

<sup>96</sup> Menuge, “Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture Reexamined”

<sup>97</sup> VanDrunen, 167-8.

<sup>98</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 236.

overtly Christian society, the two kingdom approach has an optimistic view of the abilities of secular governments to rule wisely. John Calvin expressed such a confidence in the capacity of unbelieving rulers,<sup>99</sup> and the well-known Lutheran sentiment (often though not conclusively attributed to Luther himself) states that it is better to be ruled by a “wise Turk” (i.e. Muslim) than a “foolish Christian.”<sup>100</sup> Of course, this positive attitude toward secular government is held in tension with statements such as Acts 5:29, where it is clear that the governing authority is overshadowed by the ultimate authority of God over the Christian.

The two kingdom view also has some implications regarding the church’s evangelism as well. Given the high emphasis on the doctrine of common grace and the ubiquity of “common grace norms” through natural revelation, it is implied that there are widespread points of contact between the believer and unbeliever as the starting point for evangelistic discourse.<sup>101</sup>

### Criticisms of the Two Kingdom Approach

Critics of two kingdom theology raise a number of objections against its view of culture. Foremost in these objections is the accusation that a two kingdom approach is naïve regarding the necessity of special revelation.<sup>102</sup> As Dan Strange points out, the arrangement of Psalm 19 (which moves from the domain of general revelation to that of special

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<sup>99</sup> See, for example, Calvin’s statements regarding the two kingdoms in *Institutes*, 3.19.15.

<sup>100</sup> Eberly, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Here, we are moving towards a discussion of the role of apologetics in proclaiming the gospel, which will be dealt with more thoroughly in chapter 4.

<sup>102</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 226.

revelation) teaches us something of the “hermeneutically ambiguous” nature of general revelation, such that “God’s words are necessary to interpret and supplement his works.”<sup>103</sup> There is an echo here of Calvin’s famous illustration in the *Institutes* where he comments that Scripture functions like a pair of spectacles to those with failing eyesight in order that they may properly see and understand the world around us.<sup>104</sup> As Strange concludes, “To make such a separation as natural law advocates do seems artificial and lacking Biblical warrant.”<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, as well as the naivety concerning the need of special revelation, critics of the two kingdom approach also highlight a misunderstanding on the level of general (or “natural”) revelation. This criticism focuses on two main points. Firstly, though the two kingdom view states that Christians ought to engage with culture on the basis of commonly held norms which come to us via natural revelation, this view fails to do justice to the fact that natural revelation itself urges us to worship and serve the Creator, as indicated by passages such as Psalm 19:1ff and Romans 1:18-32.<sup>106</sup> Natural revelation, then, is not merely the common ground which believers and unbelievers stand side by side on in their cultural pursuits; rather, natural revelation is by its very nature proclaiming the glory of God to both believer and unbeliever, who respectively accept or suppress its witness. This leads to the second point of criticism regarding general revelation, and that is that in the eyes of its

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<sup>103</sup> Strange, 250.

<sup>104</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.6.1.

<sup>105</sup> Strange, 250.

<sup>106</sup> Frame, 610.

detractors the two kingdom view implies the possibility of religious neutrality.<sup>107</sup> Again, Romans 1:18-32 counsels against this, showing that by nature sinful man suppresses in his heart the witness of general revelation. Therefore, as the unbeliever makes use of general revelation in his cultural activity he is operating on “borrowed capital.” Simultaneously using natural revelation whilst also refusing its claims, there are inconsistencies to his cultural activity which the two kingdom view doesn’t do full justice to. As Keller notes, this glossing over of the internal inconsistencies inherent to secular culture stems from the proponents of two kingdom theology giving too much weight and credit to common grace (important though this doctrine undoubtedly is) and not enough emphasis on the all-pervasive nature of sin in culture.<sup>108</sup>

One final criticism which is often levelled against the two kingdom approach is that it causes Christians to be unnecessarily conservative in their involvement in culture. Given that the left hand kingdom is to be kept separate from the right hand kingdom, there is a tendency to allow secular society to be “sealed off” from the influence of Scriptural teaching. As Frame has pointed out, everything that we do as Christians ought to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>109</sup> For this reason, the Christian should indeed seek to bring Biblical teaching to bear upon every area of life, be that in their vocation, their politics, their evangelistic efforts or in their social involvement.

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<sup>107</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 213.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>109</sup> Frame, 874.

## The “Transformationist” Approach

The second dominant viewpoint which holds sway in Reformed circles today is known as the “transformationist” approach to culture. In contrast to the two kingdom approach, the transformationist approach holds that it is indeed right and proper for Christians to seek to bring overtly Christian standards to bear on all areas of culture in order that the culture may be transformed. This viewpoint was perhaps most famously elucidated by Abraham Kuyper in his well-known statement: “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest. 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!”<sup>110</sup>

The transformationist viewpoint therefore states that Christians ought to pursue their vocations (and other areas of cultural involvement) informed by a Christian worldview in order to transform culture, thinking and acting in a distinctly Christian way.<sup>111</sup> This means that there is an inherently *confrontational* flavour to the transformationist approach which cannot feel at ease with unbelief being in the ascendancy in any domain of life, and must seek to bring change through proclaiming and applying God’s word to the situation. This is in contrast to the two kingdom view in which the “wise Turks” of the world are gladly endorsed. Consequently, proponents of the transformationist approach (including names such as Kuyper, Schaeffer, and Frame) seek to draw together what they believe the two kingdom approach wrongly divides: the physical and the spiritual, the civil and the religious, general

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<sup>110</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

<sup>111</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 195.

and special revelation.<sup>112</sup> Adherents of the transformationist position are reluctant to lay too great an emphasis on such distinctions, concerned that by so doing unbelief is legitimised in certain domains, and Christ's Lordship over all of life is restricted (from the human point of view). Instead, the transformationist view places great hope in the redemption secured by Christ by which the whole of creation in all of its many spheres will be restored, and that this New Creation, inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus and its first fruits, has begun in history.<sup>113</sup>

The transformationist approach is therefore characterised by an admixture of both pessimism and optimism as it assesses culture as we currently experience it. Regarding the presence of unbelievers and the influence that they exert in culture, the transformationist feels a sense of underlying pessimism, knowing that there cannot be a "neutral" standpoint and that therefore "anyone who is not for us is against us"! Consequently, it is evident that where the two kingdom view leans more in the direction of common grace, the transformationist view leans in the direction of total depravity. However, there is also ground for present optimism in the heart of the transformationist too. Due to their emphasis on inaugurated eschatology (about which the two kingdom adherent is more cautious), the transformationist has reason to throw themselves into engagement with culture, hopeful and expectant of seeing real, meaningful and lasting change in society for the cause of Christ.

Before listing some of the criticisms which are commonly brought against the transformationist position, it is necessary to mention one other facet of this viewpoint. Given

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<sup>112</sup> Strange, 247.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

that the transformationist view lays upon Christian believers the responsibility of seeking cultural renewal, the question of the primacy of gospel proclamation within this framework arises. Does social involvement usurp proclamation of the gospel in the transformationist view? In response to this question Machen notes that whilst cultural transformation is not to be confused with the conversion of souls to Christ, God usually exerts his regenerative power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, adding that “false ideas are the greatest obstacle to the reception of the gospel.” Therefore, “as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity.”<sup>114</sup> In saying this, Machen is arguing from a similar basis as J.D. Hunter in his description of “plausibility structures”,<sup>115</sup> by which he refers to the way in which the culture we live in lends credibility to a certain worldview. Put simply, if the arts, legal structure and education system of a culture are based on Christian principles, many of the obstacles to belief which people encounter will be overcome in that culture. This is one way in which the transformationist approach may be seen to tie in with the specific task of gospel proclamation.

### Criticisms of the Transformationist Approach

As with the two kingdom approach, there are several objections which are frequently levelled against the transformationist approach to culture. It is often noted that there is a

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<sup>114</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture” *The Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7.

<sup>115</sup> James D. Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 200-1.

triumphalist and combative tone to transformationist agendas.<sup>116</sup> In the eyes of the two kingdom advocates this stems from the failure of the transformationist view to correctly apply the doctrine of common grace, resulting in an unnecessarily negative assessment of culture as a whole. As Michael Horton notes, this can sometimes be seen in a negative and reductionist view of the rest of society which becomes a “project” to be tackled. With incisive insight, Horton writes:

As long as fundamentalists and evangelicals have a theology which places them in an adversarial relationship to this world and its culture, they will continue to get involved with art only when trying to censor it; with politics, only when they want to get their way among the other lobbies; with science, only when they want to force teachers to give equal time to a view of which the latter are not convinced; with victims of AIDS, only when we remind them that they deserve it, as if death did not come to the rest of us because of sin, too; with education, only when sex education comes up for discussion. . . . Unless we begin to take this world as seriously as God does (in kind, if not in degree), we will continue to create hostility not only toward legitimate Christian involvement in the world, but toward the gospel itself.<sup>117</sup>

As well as too little emphasis on common grace it is often argued that the transformationist approach underestimates the effect of the fall and the scope of human sinfulness.<sup>118</sup> Despite the emphasis on total depravity which is central to the transformationist position, the two kingdom view argues that the transformationist doesn't allow this understanding of sin to fully penetrate their thinking, giving them false grounds for optimism regarding cultural improvement.

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<sup>116</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 226.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Horton, “My Father’s World,” *Modern Reformation* 1, no. 2, (March/April 1992): 1-4.

<sup>118</sup> Veith, “Christianity and Culture,” 16.

The transformationist view has also found itself on the receiving end of the accusation that it exhibits an over-realised eschatology, meaning that “transforming culture” moves too high up the church’s list of priorities, to the detriment of gospel proclamation.<sup>119</sup> Whereas the two kingdom approach seeks to carefully delineate the church’s responsibilities from wider cultural pursuits, the transformationist view is accused of amalgamating many worthwhile but distracting causes into the mission of the church. Finally, it has also been suggested that implicit in the transformationist view is an unhealthy fascination with both intellect and power.<sup>120</sup> Regarding the place of intellect, the transformationist view necessarily requires one to adopt a holistic worldview which is able to critique and assess all forms of cultural expression from a Christian standpoint. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this per se, but it must be admitted that the transformationist viewpoint is a demanding requirement for those not gifted in academia. Regarding the place of power, the transformationist view which encourages the transformation of all aspects of society from top to bottom implies that a key aspect of its vision involves Christians seeking positions of authority. Again, this cannot be disregarded as wrong in itself, but in many parts of the world this is a distant dream, not to mention a dubious goal for those who follow in the wake of a foot-washing Lord.

### The Centre Ground

Whilst it is certainly true that the two kingdom and transformationist views have notable areas of disagreement, recent discussions regarding culture have seen an increasing swell of

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<sup>119</sup> Menuge, “Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture Reexamined”

<sup>120</sup> Timothy J. Keller, “Coming Together on Culture: Theological Issues,” *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, December 15, 2011, accessed October 23, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/12/15/coming-together-on-culture-theological-issues/>

opinion that Reformed Christians need not be forced into an “either-or” choice between these two approaches, but instead we may hold to a more all-encompassing approach which sees the benefits and weaknesses of both positions. Of the voices which make up this centre ground, we will focus upon two in particular as representative of this wider movement: the views of D.A. Carson put forward in *Christ and Culture Revisited*, and the views of Timothy Keller represented in *Center Church*.

#### D.A. Carson

Carson’s main contribution to the topic of “Christ and Culture” is to bring particular emphasis to Biblical theology, by which he refers to the diachronic study of the major turning points of the Biblical narrative.<sup>121</sup> This, says Carson, will prevent us from thinking of Niebuhr’s five categories as a smorgasbord of different approaches from which we can simply select which option suits us most. Carson advises a more flexible approach which has a much more holistic grasp of the whole of the Biblical narrative, and recognises that different cultural situations will demand different emphases.<sup>122</sup> Carson offers a brief overview of the major turning points of the Bible’s story, showing how each part contributes something to our overall understanding of culture. It is worth giving a brief summary of the points which Carson makes concerning each of these major turning points in the Biblical narrative:

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<sup>121</sup> Carson, 44-45.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 43.

## Creation and Fall

The Genesis account of creation impresses upon the reader several pertinent considerations. God is presented as the almighty Creator, who therefore ought to be revered and obeyed in all things. Furthermore, man is created in God's image, teaching that all of human life is invested with great dignity, and ought not to be mistreated or disregarded. The fact that God created embodied existence shows that it is necessary to place importance both on the spiritual and physical wellbeing of the human race. In addition to this, the cultural mandate (Gen 1:26ff) shows that the governance and care of creation is man's responsibility.<sup>123</sup>

The fall, recorded in Genesis 3, shows that at the heart of all sin is idolatry, as mankind tries to usurp God. In response to this, God's judgment is promised, and therefore the only hope for mankind is in Christ, whose final victory is alluded to in Genesis 3:15. Sin's effects are seen to be profound, affecting every area of life, and yet amidst this total depravity God's common grace remains in the world. Carson writes, this world is "simultaneously resplendent with glory and awash in shame... every expression of human culture simultaneously discloses that we were made in God's image and shows itself to be misshaped and corroded by human rebellion against God."<sup>124</sup>

## Israel and the Law

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 46-49.

Carson enumerates five facets of the Old Covenant which are relevant to the discussion of culture:

- 1) Just as God graciously chose Abraham, so also he graciously chose the people of Israel (Deut. 7), and yet it is clear that the peoples of other countries are also included in his purposes, as evidenced by portions of Scripture such as the book of Jonah, or Psalm 87.
- 2) God's law touches all areas of life, showing that God's people must remain God's people in every dimension of their existence.
- 3) In the giving of the law, most space is devoted not to the moral requirements but to the ceremonial aspects, showing that of central importance is the issue of how guilty people can be acceptable to God.
- 4) Israel is a theocracy, meaning that there is no division between "church" and "state", and the whole of Israelite culture was intended to reflect God's truth and character. This is an important area of discontinuity with the New Covenant, as indicated below.
- 5) It is important to remember that the story of Israel is embedded in the bigger story of Abraham and his seed, which is embedded in the larger story of creation, fall and the human race.<sup>125</sup>

### Christ and the New Covenant

The New Testament presents Jesus as the long awaited King and the Mighty God. As the incarnation of the eternal Word, Jesus not only brings the message; he *is* the message. The teaching of Jesus announces and inaugurates the Kingdom of God, which Carson argues

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 50-52.

we should usually understand as the reign of Jesus, which is both “now” and “not yet”, and is now being extended to people of all nations. Jesus himself understands his death and resurrection as the ground of the remission of sins and the inauguration of the New Covenant. In this New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon its members, who together form a transnational people witnessing to all the nations of the world. Necessarily, this involves a degree of conflict between the Christian community and all other communities. Jesus’ statement in Matt. 22:21 further clarifies this, showing that, unlike in the Old Covenant, religion and state are no longer inseparably intertwined with one another. At some level, Christian citizens are required to show commitment both to Caesar (or his equivalent in their culture) and to God.<sup>126</sup>

### Heaven and Hell

Carson writes that the New Testament repeatedly draws our attention to the future, beyond the return of Christ, where there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. This focus on the future reminds us that “current relations between Christ and Culture have no final status. They must be evaluated in light of eternity.” The transient nature of life now means that it is impossible for us to create a utopia here on earth, because we “live with tensions that will not finally be resolved until we live in the New Jerusalem.”<sup>127</sup>

Having given this brief overview of Biblical theology, Carson then draws three main conclusions regarding how Christians ought to approach culture. Firstly, he concludes that

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 52-58.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

the approach which is most likely to be deeply Christian is the one which attempts to *integrate* all the major turning points in in the history of redemption. Secondly, Carson writes that there is a need to *balance* each of these turning points, understanding how they all fit together. Thirdly, Carson concludes that there must be a degree of *flexibility* to our approach, understanding that Christians in various parts of the world will feel the need to emphasise certain parts of the Bible’s storyline. For example, the emphasis needed in the context of extreme persecution in North Korea will be very different to the emphasis needed in America’s “Bible Belt.”<sup>128</sup>

This approach, argues Carson, will result in a greater cross-cultural consensus on what Scripture says, a flexible accommodation to the demands of particular enveloping cultures, and an implicit understanding that when the broader culture changes, Scripture still applies.<sup>129</sup>

#### Timothy Keller

Like Carson, Keller represents a “centre ground” approach to culture (though, when pushed, he identifies himself as “careful two kingdom” in his convictions).<sup>130</sup> In alignment with Carson, Keller argues that each of Niebuhr’s five categories fail to be controlled by all the Biblical teaching all of the time, and that “each has a pivotal theme that is true but insufficient.”<sup>131</sup> Whereas Carson’s great contribution to the debate was his emphasis on the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 81-85.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>130</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 239.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 230.

role of Biblical theology, Keller's main contribution is to offer what he describes as "blended insights", by which he refers to the way in which each of the views adds an important element which must be incorporated into a broader understanding of culture. Keller helpfully provides an overview of the landscape of contemporary Christian views of culture, identifying different trends and the emphases of various models. Keller cites four of these models, each of which can be plotted against the two axes of "common grace" and "influencing culture."<sup>132</sup> It will be helpful to briefly summarise the four models Keller has identified:

### Two Kingdoms

The two kingdom model, which we are already familiar with, has a high emphasis on common grace but a low emphasis on influencing culture. Keller argues that the specific insight which this model contributes is that of "humble excellence." The two kingdom model is humble in recognising its own limitations in changing the world, but through the influence of common grace and general revelation affirms the importance of excellence in our cultural pursuits.

### Relevance

The relevance model is characterised by a high emphasis on common grace as well as a high emphasis on influencing culture. At the extreme end of this model is liberation theology, whereas the more moderate expression of the "relevance" model is found in the seeker-sensitive church movement. The valuable insight which Keller derives from this model is that

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<sup>132</sup> An extremely helpful graphical representation of this is found on page 231 of Keller's *Center Church*.

of the common good, whereby the church seeks to serve the world by meeting the needs of the world.

### Counterculturalist

The counterculturalist model has a low emphasis on influencing the wider culture as well as having a low emphasis on common grace (and, one might add, a high emphasis on the doctrine of total depravity). In its most extreme form this motif is found in the Amish community, whereas in more moderate cases it is evidenced in the theology of neo-Anabaptists. The insight which Keller derives from this model is that of “Church as Counter Culture.” The counterculturalists recognise the sinfulness of the world and the call for the church to be a separate and distinctive community.

### Transformationist

The transformationist model, which we have already looked at in detail, has a lower emphasis on common grace (and higher awareness of total depravity), but also a higher emphasis on influencing culture. In its most extreme form this model is represented by theonomists, whereas Neo-Calvinists are a more moderate expression of the Transformationist view. The valuable insight which Keller identifies within this model is that of a distinctive worldview, recognising that the Christian understanding of the world must inevitably challenge, confront and seek to transform all other worldviews.

Keller therefore allows for differences of emphasis whilst simultaneously holding that each model provides a particular insight which contributes to our overall understanding of how to deal with culture. However, Keller goes beyond this, recognising that the specific

cultural context also has an important influence upon how Christians relate to culture. Keller describes four “seasons” of culture in terms of the church’s place within it:

### Winter

In “winter”, the gospel has only recently been introduced into a certain culture, much akin to the experiences of the first century church. The church therefore finds itself in a hostile relationship to the wider “pre-Christian” culture and sees few signs of growth. The counterculturalist emphasis on the church as “counter-culture” is of particular relevance here.

### Spring

In “spring”, the church remains embattled and persecuted by the wider culture, but there are more clear signs of growth. A modern example of this “season” is China today, where the church is growing markedly, and yet the culture as a whole is still at odds with the Christian worldview and therefore retains much hostility against this church expansion. In this season, the transformationist emphasis on a distinctive worldview is particularly relevant.

### Summer

In the season of “summer”, the church has gained a prominent position within the wider culture, and is generally speaking positively regarded in that culture. In such circumstances the church can feel relatively “at home” in the culture. The persecution which it previously experienced has in large part dissipated, and Christian values and beliefs are held in high esteem. Geneva in the days of Calvin is an example which comes to mind. The humble excellence affirmed by two kingdom theology is an important emphasis in such a context.

## Autumn

Autumn is the “post-Christian” season, which is where British culture has now arrived. The previous positive feeling that the wider culture felt towards the church has now dissipated, and the church becomes increasingly marginalised as a result. Consequently, the emphasis on the common good which the relevance model exhibits is of particular importance to the church as she seeks to maintain a foothold in society.

Of course, the above description of culture and cultural engagement is an over-simplified picture, as Keller himself recognises.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, defining which “season” a culture currently experiences is a subjective and debatable concept, subject to rapid changes in mood which in the long run may prove to be insubstantial. However, the advantage of Keller’s “seasonal” approach is that it recognises the need for flexibility in the church’s approach to culture. Such flexibility is compromised when any one of the four models is adhered to unswervingly. In a similar way, Veith has spoken of the need for a “thermostatic church” which can adapt to the shifting sands of culture. When the culture is engrossed by subjectivity the church must deliberately emphasise the objectivity of the Christian gospel, and when the culture embraces postmodernism the church must be outspoken regarding morality and truth.<sup>134</sup> Both Veith and Keller therefore agree with Carson’s point that flexibility is an important aspect in the church’s relationship with the wider culture.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>134</sup> Gene E. Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 231.

## Summary

Throughout the course of this chapter we have seen a broad landscape of several different approaches to what Niebuhr referred to as the “enduring problem” of Christ and culture. We have seen how Niebuhr’s highly influential *Christ and Culture* has shaped the categories within which Christians since have assessed culture. We have also noted that Niebuhr’s work is compromised by certain weaknesses; with time it has become obvious how dated the work is, his use of Scripture is often dubious, and his agenda is driven by an unhealthy commitment to a certain brand of “conversionism” which fails to find Biblical support.

Turning to contemporary debates, we have seen how the Reformed world has become dominated by two views in particular; two kingdom theology and transformationism. As we summarised and assessed these two views, we noted that there were marked differences particularly in the areas where the two models find reason for optimism and pessimism, and where the line is drawn between the responsibilities of the church and the responsibilities of the culture as a whole. Whilst proponents of both views may hold many theological convictions in common, these areas of disagreement are significant.

Finally, we noted that currently there is a growing “centre ground” which seeks to draw on the positives and discard the negatives of various different viewpoints. This centre ground is well represented by Carson’s emphasis on Biblical theology, as well as Keller’s “blended insights” approach.

What has become obvious throughout this chapter is that, for all of the approaches mentioned above, the doctrines of common grace and total depravity are of central

importance in arriving at a Christian view of culture. That is not to say that these are the only doctrines pertinent to this discussion, but rather to recognise that the understanding and application of these two doctrines are foundational in determining the conclusions which each model arrives at. Therefore, chapter three will focus on each of these two doctrines, seeking to Biblically define them before applying them to the topic of culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### CHRIST AND CULTURE IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: THE DOCTRINES OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY AND COMMON GRACE

An overview of the different approaches to culture inevitably highlights the importance of the doctrines of total depravity and common grace. Niebuhr's first two categories ("Christ against culture" and "Christ of culture") are both recognised as attempts to create a realm in which one can be set free from the futility of sin and its effects; on the one hand sin is fled from by withdrawing into a holy subculture, whereas on the other hand freedom from sin is sought through attaining a certain cultural ideal. The transformationist approach is shaped largely by reservations concerning secularist pursuits due to the profound effects of sin in the heart of unbelievers, whereas the two kingdom model places more emphasis on the presence of common grace in the world, whilst at the same time recognising that sinful man will never be capable of building a truly "Christian" society here on earth. Even in the "centre ground" represented by voices such as Carson and Keller we may note the large influence that these two doctrines exert. Carson's Biblical theology approach, which necessarily starts with the creation and fall, immediately brings the doctrines of common grace (related to our view of creation) and total depravity (related to our understanding of the fall) into the foreground. Finally, Keller's "blended insights" approach recognises that the four models of cultural engagement are each characterised by a higher or lower emphasis on the influence of common grace, and by implication the extent and effects of sin in the world. As we consider

what it means to take the gospel of Jesus to the cultures of the world, it is therefore necessary to establish a clear understanding of both the doctrines of total depravity and common grace. That is the aim of the present chapter.

### Total Depravity

The doctrine of total depravity is one which is largely misunderstood and frequently rejected, even within much modern day evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> We will therefore begin by seeking a clear, Biblical definition of this doctrine, before then seeing what implications it has for our understanding of culture.

### Total Depravity Defined

In defining total depravity it is customary to start by stating what the doctrine *does not* mean, before moving on to what it affirms. The phrase “total depravity” is sometimes wrongly understood as implying that human beings in their fallen state are as bad as they could possibly be. This, of course, is untrue. Nor does this doctrine imply that man is without innate knowledge of the will of God, or bereft of a conscience that is able to discern what is good and what is evil, or that we find it impossible to admire virtue, or that we will each indulge every possible form of sin.<sup>2</sup> As R.C. Sproul rightly points out, total depravity is not *utter* depravity.<sup>3</sup> What, then, is “total” about the depravity of fallen man?

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 247.

<sup>3</sup> Sproul, 117.

The totality indicated to by the phrase “total depravity” is the extent of sin’s presence in the human being. The effect of sin can be seen in absolutely every aspect of fallen man; in our bodies, our souls, our mind, our will and so forth. Consequently, sin is not “tangential or peripheral, but arises from the centre of our being.”<sup>4</sup> As has often been noted, we are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.<sup>5</sup> In our fallen state, sin has become a fundamental characteristic of who we are, and consequently we are simply unable to rectify the problem of sin by ourselves. As Jesus himself declared, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34).

In Romans 3, the apostle Paul carries this doctrine of total depravity to its logical conclusion. The universality of sin for both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 3:9) means that “none is righteous, no, not one... no one seeks for God... no one does good, not even one” (3:10-12). Here, the apostle Paul is showing that a necessary implication of the doctrine of total depravity is unregenerate man’s inability to do even one good thing! This is further implied by Paul’s diagnosis of our sinful condition in Ephesians 2:1, where fallen man is described as “dead in trespasses and sins.” As spiritually dead people we are therefore incapable of raising ourselves to spiritually laudable actions. In the words of Augustine, fallen man is in a state of *non posse non peccare* (“not possible not to sin”).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the doctrine of total depravity and its implication of man’s inability to stop sinning are often met with various objections. The first main objection to this doctrine is that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 118-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 123.

it is demonstrable that even unregenerate people are able to perform good deeds and acts of charity. How do these things fit with the doctrine of total depravity? In answer to this objection, Reformed theology holds to the category of “civil virtue” (or “civil righteousness”). This means that, at an external level, it is indeed possible to perform deeds which are in line with God’s revealed will. However, such deeds must be assessed not merely by their outward manifestation, but by their innermost motivations.<sup>7</sup> The God who looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:17) sees that even in the finest acts of civil virtue fallen man’s motivations are always coloured to some degree by a self-serving agenda which seeks recognition and reward. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, even our so called “righteous” deeds are like a polluted garment in the eyes of God (Is. 64:6).

The second main objection which is often brought against the doctrine of total depravity is that if we are *unable* to perform deeds which meet with God’s approval we cannot be held morally responsible by God for acts of disobedience. Given that Scripture clearly teaches that God does indeed hold people morally responsible, it is therefore assumed that fallen humans must still possess the ability to meet God’s standards, and therefore our depravity cannot be total. This objection is the one which was famously raised by Pelagius in opposition to Augustine, and is manifested more recently in humanistic philosophy which holds that mankind is basically good, despite our lapses into wrong behaviour.<sup>8</sup> In response to this objection, Augustine argues that whilst the fall has certainly changed man’s capacity for moral perfection (making it impossible), God’s requirement of moral perfection is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>8</sup> Sproul, 121-2.

unaffected.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, leaves man in a hopeless position, meaning that the only possibility of being accepted by God must lie in God's free, undeserved grace towards sinners in the gospel. Salvation, then, must originate in the will of God rather than in the fallen, depraved and crippled will of man. Again, the words of the Lord are pertinent, confirming man's inability to come to God and the absolute necessity of God's grace in salvation: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). This lack of ability to contribute anything at all to one's own salvation is summarised well by the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 9.3).

### Total Depravity Applied to Culture

The doctrine of total depravity has numerous implications for our understanding of culture and our Christian witness within it. Below, the four most prominent are listed and explained.

#### The Inadequacy of Cultural Withdrawal

The doctrine of total depravity reminds us that fallen man is stained by sin in each and every aspect of his being. This remains to be the case even for the believer, who will struggle his whole life long with the presence of sin (Rom. 7:21-23). Consequently, it is clear that any answer to the "enduring problem" of dealing with culture which finds its basis merely in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 122.

withdrawing from culture is hopelessly inadequate. Niebuhr's "Christ against culture" model is symptomatic of this mind-set, and the Amish community is an obvious contemporary example of cultural withdrawal. However, in more moderate forms such withdrawal is seen in expressions of Christianity which distance themselves from worldly defilement with echoes of the misguided Colossian requirements of "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch." Paul rightly concludes that such teachings may indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:21-23).

The reason for the inadequacy of cultural withdrawal is that it fails to recognise that sin goes wherever humans go; we carry it with us every second of our earthly existence in every corner of our beings. It is no more possible to create a sin-free sub-culture than it is to create a gravity-free sub-culture. Sin, like gravity, is a fact of life that we must constantly reckon with, whether we want to or not. Furthermore, it must also be recognised that cultural withdrawal, in the purest sense, is impossible. We cannot help but incorporate a certain amount of culture into our Christian practices because culture is, broadly speaking, anything we make of the world.<sup>10</sup>

However, this is not to say that attempting a degree of cultural withdrawal is always the wrong thing to do. The apostle Paul himself acknowledges that there are in fact times when withdrawing oneself from particularly sinful forms of culture is the right thing to do (1 Cor. 10:14). What needs to be recognised, though, is that the doctrine of total depravity reminds

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<sup>10</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 854.

us that cultural withdrawal *alone* is never an adequate solution to the problem of sin. All that it will do in the long run is create a sub-culture which contains in miniature all the same sins which the wider culture exhibits.

### Discernment in Adopting Cultural Forms

Secondly, in contrast to the above point the doctrine of total depravity also instructs us that there is always the need for discernment in adopting cultural forms. Contrary to the relevance model and the seeker-sensitive movement which is representative of it, the doctrine of total depravity shows that there needs to be careful discernment when deciding which aspects of culture are to be incorporated into church life for the purpose of showing “relevance” and maintaining intelligibility in gospel proclamation. No matter how strict our application of the regulative principle (which will be discussed at greater length in chapter four), the need for caution and discernment is never fully alleviated for the simple reason that we are never free from culture. Both in the Christian life generally and in church worship specifically a line needs to be drawn somewhere. Whilst it is impossible to draw the line in order to exclude *all* of culture from church life, it is also not permissible to draw the line so as to include all of culture in church life. The doctrine of total depravity emphasises for us how vital it is to be discerning when deciding where to draw the line.<sup>11</sup>

### The Lowering of Transformationist Expectations

Thirdly, the doctrine of total depravity reminds us that any transformationist expectations which we cling to must be brought in line with the nature of this fallen world.

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<sup>11</sup> Here, we are moving into the area of “incorporating culture” into the life of the church, a subject which will be dealt with more fully in chapter four.

The model of “transformationism” puts into the foreground the laudable desire to see every area of creation and culture brought under the Lordship of Christ, and to redound to his glory. However, the doctrine of total depravity is an important corrective to an unrealistically optimistic expectation of cultural renewal. As two kingdom theology rightly emphasises, it is impossible for us to create a perfectly God-glorifying, Christ-honouring society here on earth. The doctrine of total depravity reminds us just how far short of this we will inevitably fall, no matter how abundantly God may move to bring revival to a particular culture. This is not to say that transformationist approaches to culture are inappropriate, but rather that the expectations which guide these approaches must necessarily factor in the pervasive nature of sin this side of glory.

### The Impossibility of Neutrality

The doctrine of total depravity is a much needed reminder that there is no such thing as “neutrality” before God. The apostle Paul’s words in Romans 1:18-32 assert that the unbelieving heart is one which is not indifferent to the truth, but in actual fact has actively suppressed the truth of God, exchanged it for a lie, and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. In proclaiming the gospel to the world we are therefore reminded that, although at times we may agree on certain aspects of truth or morality,<sup>12</sup> our discussion must go deeper than these areas of agreement and address the heart of the problem, which is man’s sinful rebellion against his Creator. As will be seen in chapter four, the doctrine of total depravity shows that gospel ministry will always have a necessarily *confrontational*

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<sup>12</sup> This will be addressed in the forthcoming discussion of common grace.

component to it. The profound presence of sin within the human heart means that evangelism in general and apologetics in particular cannot be conducted upon neutral “common ground”, for the simple reason that sin impacts the way the human heart views all areas of creation.<sup>13</sup>

### Humility in Cultural Interactions

Finally, the doctrine of total depravity teaches us that whenever we come face to face with a particular culture (be that our native culture or one which we are more unfamiliar with) we should do so with a genuine and heartfelt sense of humility. Recognition of our sinfulness, our own total depravity, and our utter inability to please God through our own efforts ought to remind us that our need for God’s grace is absolute. Any moral improvement we may have undergone in our lives since conversion has only come about through God’s goodness, not our own. The result of this is that whenever we come into contact with a form of culture that we are tempted to look down upon (pop culture, Islamic culture, Western culture, hip hop culture, and so on), the doctrine of total depravity should prevent us from becoming arrogantly judgmental of that culture. Whatever sins appal us in a certain culture, the doctrine of total depravity reminds us that, apart from the grace of God, we ourselves would be far *worse*. As Carl Henry notes, “all of us lack the inherent capacity for spiritual and moral renewal.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, this does not imply that all cultures are equally sinful in the eyes of God. Indeed, Scripture clearly shows that certain cultures are more entrenched in their rejection of God than others (see, for example, Matt. 11:20-24). However, the doctrine

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<sup>13</sup> We see here the need for a presuppositional approach to apologetics, which will be explained further in chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Carl F. Henry, "Facing a Culture in Trouble" *Modern Reformation* Vol. 4, No. 3, (May/June, 1995): 30.

of total depravity does imply that we must recognise our own sinfulness before seeking to criticise the sins of others (Matt. 7:1-5). The doctrine of totality depravity therefore means that we can take the gospel to all the cultures of the world, and do so free from arrogance or a sense of superiority. If God's grace in the gospel is sufficient for totally depraved people like ourselves, we are encouraged to confidently yet humbly preach the gospel of God's grace in Jesus to anybody and everybody, regardless of their cultural loyalties.

### Common Grace

Alongside total depravity the doctrine of common grace is one which also has widespread implications for our approach to culture. The remainder of this chapter will therefore seek to Biblically define this doctrine, before outlining some of the main applications of it to living and witnessing in culture.

### Common Grace Defined

The issue at hand when approaching the topic of common grace is how, in a world of totally depraved sinners, can unregenerate persons still perform outwardly good actions? On one level then, the question of common grace applies to the current state of mankind. However, more broadly the question extends to the whole of creation: how can a fallen world still exhibit beauty and productivity? In answer to questions such as these, Reformed theology has spoken of the category of common grace. In his *Systematic Theology*, Berkhof includes a brief but helpful definition of this doctrine which focuses on the two areas of mankind and creation. Regarding the state of mankind, he writes that "common grace" refers to "those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby He, without renewing the heart,

exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, or is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted.” In relation to creation as a whole, Berkhof writes that common grace refers to “those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to him.”<sup>15</sup> More succinctly, John Murray defines common grace as “every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”<sup>16</sup>

In order to further nuance our understanding of this doctrine, Dr. H. Kuiper in his work *Calvin on Common Grace* identifies three main categories in which it is helpful to think of common grace. The first he labels “universal common grace”, which refers to God’s providential care over every aspect of his creation: humans, plants, animals and so forth. Secondly, he identifies “general common grace”, referring to the grace which applies to mankind in general, and belongs to every member of the human race. In this category, we may include man being made in the image of God, and the day to day providence by which God supplies the needs of his image bearers (Matt. 5:13-16). Finally, Kuiper mentions “covenant common grace”, which refers to the grace which is common to all of those who live in the sphere of the covenant community which inevitably includes an admixture of both the regenerate and unregenerate.<sup>17</sup> Such experiences of this “covenantal” aspect of common grace are implied by passages such as Hebrews 6:4-5, which speaks of the various non-

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<sup>15</sup> Berkhof, 436.

<sup>16</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:96.

<sup>17</sup> This summary of Kuiper’s three categories of common grace is helpfully set out in Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*, pp. 434-5.

salvific benefits which may be experienced by unregenerate members of the covenant community.

There are numerous benefits which the world experiences as a result of God's common grace. In his *Systematic Theology*, Berkhof lists five in particular, which are summarised in under the headings below:<sup>18</sup>

#### A Stay of Divine Execution

Though God has announced that the penalty for sin is death (Gen 2:17, Rom 6:23), through common grace the execution of this verdict is delayed. Rather than immediately facing the full force of God's wrath against sin, sinful man is instead given breath and life, is made the recipient of God's good gifts and is allowed to flourish in this life for a season. God, in his patience, thus extends common grace to all of mankind, leaving ample opportunity for repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

#### The Restraint of Sin

As we have seen in our treatment of the doctrine of total depravity, fallen man is not as evil as he possibly could be. This is due to the influence of God's common grace, by which He restrains human sinfulness. This restraint may be the result of diverse causes, such as the fear of punishment which would result from law breaking (Rom 13:1-4), or from the internal voice of conscience which, though in itself fallible, is written upon the human heart (Rom 2:14-15). Consequently, the presence of common grace restrains sinful activity in the world. Furthermore, through God's common grace He also subdues the effects of sin. In his mercy,

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<sup>18</sup> Berkhof, 442-3.

God does not always allow us to experience the full consequences that our sinful attitudes and behaviours could otherwise have.

### The Preservation of Truth, Morality and Religion

A third benefit which common grace brings to the world is the preservation to some degree of truth, morality and religion. Speaking of unregenerate man, the apostle Paul is able to speak of the plainness of God's general revelation in the creation (though it is suppressed, Rom. 1:18), and in discourse with the philosophers of the Areopagus he is able to comment upon their fervour for religion (Acts 17:22). Of course, such manifestations of interest in spiritual matters and concern for morality fall short of saving faith, but nonetheless preserve in the world the notions of truth, morality and religion for the betterment of society.

### The Performance of Civil Righteousness

Whilst man's fallen nature apart from the saving grace of God renders him incapable of performing works which are good in the ultimate sense of springing from the right motivation and aiming at the right purpose, nonetheless Reformed theologians have insisted that unregenerate man can indeed perform outwardly good deeds of civil righteousness. Through God's common grace it is possible for an unregenerate person to engage in pursuits which on a merely earthly level are laudable and worthwhile. Acts of charity and the employment of abilities which promote the common good are notable examples of this. It is in this sense that Scripture even goes so far as speaking of the works of the unregenerate as good and right, for example in 2 Kings 10:29-30 and Luke 6:33.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 443.

### Many Natural Blessings

The fifth and final fruit of common grace which Berkhof lists is the preponderance of natural blessings which man is able to enjoy in this life. In his common grace towards mankind, God showers upon people of all kinds his good gifts of provision. In Matthew 5:44-45, Jesus speaks of the Father's goodness in sending the rain and sunshine upon both the righteous and unrighteous. By extension, we may include within this gracious bestowal all kinds of gifts to be enjoyed (1 Tim. 6:17), and all human capacities which the unregenerate are blessed with (Genesis 4:21-22).

### Common Grace Applied to Culture

As with the doctrine of total depravity, a clear understanding of the doctrine of common grace shapes our understanding of culture, and guides our approach to it. Here, we shall list several of the main applications of common grace to culture.

### Affirmation of What is Good in Culture

The doctrine of common grace reminds us that unregenerate people are nonetheless capable of civil righteousness, and are supplied by God with many capacities for worthwhile and praiseworthy work. Far from the deep suspicion of the wider culture which characterises the "countercultural" model (to use Keller's categories), the doctrine of common grace acts as an important corrective here. Whilst admitting that the works of unbelievers cannot ultimately meet with God's highest approval, Scripture nonetheless affirms these works and abilities as "good", ascribing to them the status of what Reformed theology calls civil righteousness. An application of this is that as believers we ought to be quick to echo the

Scriptures in affirming what is good in culture. This has traditionally been a particular strength of two kingdom theology which emphasises the dignity of so called “secular” vocations as divine callings informed by the light of general revelation, and therefore important in the eyes of God.

### Thankfulness for What is Good in Culture

Related to our affirmation of what is good in culture is our thankful reception of it. In Paul’s first letter to Timothy he writes that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is to be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4). Specifically, Paul is here addressing an ascetic forbidding of marriage as well as abstinence from certain types of food. Later on in the same letter he speaks of God as the one who provides us with all things for our enjoyment, including material wealth (1 Tim. 6:17). We therefore note that just as Scripture encourages us to affirm what is good in culture, it also legitimises our thankful reception of what is good in culture, recognising that God is the one who has created these things and given them to mankind. Therefore, cultural withdrawal is not only an inadequate solution to the cultural problem, but it is also an unnecessary one as well. This is a weakness most commonly associated with counter-culturalist approaches which advocate withdrawal from culture, and therefore neglect to give thanks for what is good in the wider culture.

### All of God’s Good Gifts can be used in Kingdom Service

As well as our thankful reception of what is good in culture, the doctrine of common grace also undermines what is often referred to as the “sacred-secular divide.” Such a mind-

set implies that the material realm should be seen as inferior to the spiritual. As Dr. Kelly writes, “if we avoid dealing with what the Bible says about the creation of the material universe, then there is a tendency for religion to be disconnected from the real world.”<sup>20</sup> Instead, the doctrine of common grace is a reminder that even in a fallen world every good gift is from God (James 1:17). Consequently, none of these good gifts should be seen as “off limits” to kingdom work. The doctrine of common grace therefore broadens our scope for serving and glorifying God by recognising His provision to us in diverse ways. Those within the “relevance” grouping are particularly quick to emphasise this implication of common grace, incorporating into the life of the church many of God’s good gifts which traditionally have been considered “out of bounds” by those with a more pessimistic view of culture.

#### Encouragement Regarding “Points of Contact”

The matter of finding “points of contact” with unbelievers as a starting place for evangelistic discourse is a matter of controversy.<sup>21</sup> However, at the very least we may safely state that regardless of presuppositionalist or evidentialist convictions regarding apologetics, the doctrine of common grace allows for the establishing of a context within which certain points of contact between believers and unbelievers may be found. The witness of creation, the voice of conscience and the preservation of truth and morality (all of which are examples of God’s common grace to mankind) are three examples of categories which are of central importance in evangelistic and apologetic witness.

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas Kelly, *Creation and Change: Genesis 1.1 - 2.4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms* (Fearn: Mentor, 2000), 17.

<sup>21</sup> This issue will be looked at in more detail in the discussion of presuppositional apologetics in chapter four.

### Optimism Regarding the Prospects for Gospel Proclamation

Finally, the doctrine of common grace allows for a certain degree of optimism concerning the prospects of gospel work. Through his common grace, God restrains sin in the world and subdues the consequences of sin. Prominent in this providential ordering of society is the activity of civil government, which God has instituted in order to reward the doers of good and punish the doers of evil (Rom. 13:1-4). It is likely that in 1 Tim. 2:1-4, when Paul encourages that prayers be made for all people, notably for kings and all who are in high positions, it is with the hope that the peaceful society which results from good government will lead to an open door for the proclamation of the gospel and the salvation of many. We see here a clear link between common grace and gospel proclamation, recognising that as God restrains sin and its effects he simultaneously holds open the door for the gospel to be preached to the world. The two kingdom emphasis laid upon the civil authority as the restrainer of evil makes note of this link to gospel proclamation, which more extreme transformationists (theonomists, for example) often overlook.

### Summary

We have seen how both the doctrines of total depravity and common grace are of central importance in shaping our understanding of culture and correcting many misplaced convictions regarding the proclamation of the gospel in various cultures. These two doctrines speak to each of the diverse views that Christians have held to concerning culture. In various ways they address our optimism and pessimism regarding culture, our level of proximity to

or withdrawal from culture, and the church's demeanour in proclaiming the gospel in culture. With these things in mind we will now turn to the documents of the New Testament in order to explore how the early church conducted itself in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to the cultures they came into contact with as they sought to live in obedience to the Great Commission.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHRIST AND CULTURE IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A brief survey of the existing literature which looks at the church's approach to culture will show that there are certain popular areas of emphasis. Three main areas of focus are apparent: discussions of the relationship between church and state, explanations of a Christian understanding of vocation, and the rationale for the church's involvement in issues of social justice and morality. Of course, these are all excellent and worthwhile pursuits. However, the focus of this thesis is an area which is often overlooked in discussions of culture, and that is the mission of the church in proclaiming Christ to the nations. This final chapter will therefore seek to Biblically define the mission of the church before seeing how this mission was understood and enacted by the early church as they took the gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world.

#### The Mission of the Church Defined

In seeking to define the mission of the church we enter into an area of controversy in contemporary Christianity. At the risk of oversimplifying the debate, it is sufficient to note two prevalent approaches to defining the church's mission which we may describe as the "broad" definition and the "narrow" definition. In the broad definition, the church's mission is understood as everything God approves of his people doing. Therefore, the church's mission can be seen as encapsulating everything from the preaching of the word to feeding

the poor, campaigning for social welfare, and applying political pressure on certain moral issues. In contrast to this, the narrow definition of the church's mission focuses solely on proclaiming Christ to the nations, along with the necessary work of planting churches and discipling new believers. In the eyes of those who subscribe to the broad definition of church mission, this narrow definition can be seen as cold, reductionist and inadequate. In the eyes of those who subscribe to the narrow definition, the broad definition of church mission is seen as distracting from the main task of the church and allowing the latest *cause celebre* to dictate the church's agenda.

It is therefore necessary to clarify what exactly the mission of the church is before we explore its cultural implications. To this end, advocates of the narrow definition of church mission have emphasised a careful distinction between what the church *as the church* is called to do, and what Christians in general are called to do. As De Young and Gilbert indicate, we cannot simply say that whatever is commanded of the individual Christian is *necessarily* a part of the mission of the church, and instead we need to distinguish between the "church organic" and the "church institutional."<sup>1</sup> As an institution, the church has been given the command to preach the word, administer the sacraments and exercise church discipline. As individual Christians we have been called to diverse array of activities, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and caring for the sick. As Keller notes, this distinction finds widespread support, noting that Dan Strange, Don Carson and James Hunter

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin De Young and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 232-3.

“all recommend a chastened approach that engages culture but without the triumphalism of transformationism. All of them also insist that the priority of the institutional church must be to preach the Word, rather than to ‘change culture’.”<sup>2</sup> Important though involvement in society undoubtedly is for the Christian person, it remains the focus of the church’s mission to be engaged in the work of gospel proclamation. Edmund Clowney writes:

[S]alvation comes, not by economic reform, political liberation or ecological stewardship, but by faith in the Saviour, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Witness is by life as well as by word, but never without the Word of God. The cutting edge of the sword of the Spirit is the telling of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Vast as is the indirect influence of the church as salt and leaven in the world, it must first hold forth the light of truth. We must consider the calling of the church in the context of contemporary culture, but its agenda is not that of the world. To accommodate its mission to the underlying assumptions of multiculturalism, radical feminism or even ecclesiastical ritualism is to repeat the mistake of the older liberalism by turning to another gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, J. Gresham Machen affirms this narrow focus of the church’s mission:

The responsibility of the church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life - no, all the length of human history - is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that he has revealed himself to us in his Word and offered us communion with himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth - no, all the wonders of the starry heavens - are as the dust of the street.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 216 n128.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), 165.

<sup>4</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D.G. Hart (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 376.

This “narrow” definition of the mission of the church therefore ought not to be seen as reductionist or cold hearted, but rather a more careful, focused and nuanced approach which does justice both to the centrality of gospel proclamation whilst at the same time commending and encouraging Christians to be involved in the wider work of showing love to their neighbours. Maintaining this distinction is an inherent strength within two kingdom theology, whereas the distinction has the tendency to become somewhat blurred in more overtly transformationist approaches to culture.

### The Great Commission

According to De Young and Gilbert, the mission of the church (which they define narrowly) is summarised in the Great Commission passages (for example Matt 28:16-20 and Acts 1:8), stating that “the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations.”<sup>5</sup> This commissioning of the church, argues Bock, “describes the church’s key assignment of what to do until the Lord returns”, and shows that the church exists “to extend the apostolic witness to Jesus everywhere.”<sup>6</sup> Given this, the book of Acts must therefore have a primary place in our understanding of what it means for the church to fulfil this commission by proclaiming the gospel to the nations of the world. Jesus’ statement in Acts 1:8 is foundational and programmatic in this: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Indeed, J. Gresham Machen describes this statement as “a correct summary of the church’s

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<sup>5</sup> De Young and Gilbert, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 66.

purpose.”<sup>7</sup> The subsequent chapters of the book of Acts can be seen as the unfolding of the commission in Acts 1:8. The account of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 points to the worldwide benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection, as the curse of Babel is miraculously undone and the prospect of a “supernatural, super-cultural overcoming of separation” is glimpsed by the church.<sup>8</sup> Chapters 2 through 7 see the church witnessing in Jerusalem, in chapter 8 the focus moves to Judea and Samaria, and in the remaining chapters the horizon expands as the gospel is proclaimed to the Gentile nations. De Young and Gilbert conclude, “from beginning to end, the story of Acts is of the proclamation of the gospel from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus commanded.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, though the apostle Paul certainly did lay certain emphasis on involvement in mercy ministry (see for example Gal. 2:10), it is evident that he too exhibits the “narrow focus” on gospel proclamation as the mission of the church: it is only when he has planted and nurtured a new church that he can claim that his work is done and can consider moving on to his next location.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, passages such as Phil. 1:12-18, Eph. 6:15 and 1 Cor. 4:16 show that Paul understood that the mission of proclaiming Christ was something which he expected the churches he had planted to pursue as well.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> D.G. Hart, “J. Gresham Machen, the Reformed Tradition and the Transformation of Culture,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* vol. 68 (October 1996): 312.

<sup>8</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>9</sup> De Young and Gilbert, 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. See also Rom. 15:23.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelise?* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster/Wipf and Stock, 2006), 104-5.

In conclusion, it is clear that the narrow definition of church mission finds much stronger Biblical support. Without neglecting the necessary work of showing mercy to the needy and pleading for justice and morality in culture as a whole, the testimony of the New Testament shows that the mission of the church *as the church* ought to be centred on being Christ's witnesses in the world so that people of every culture can be reconciled to God through His Son. As De Young and Gilbert rightly conclude, the story of the Bible "is not about us working with God to make the world right again. It's about God's work to make us right so we can live with him again."<sup>12</sup> Contrary to some of the more extreme emphases that can be found within the transformationist camp, the church is not called to establish or even build the kingdom of Christ, but rather bear witness to it.<sup>13</sup> In summary, "the mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father."<sup>14</sup>

#### The Mission of the Church in Practise

It is with this so called "narrow" definition of the mission of the church in mind that we will now turn to several pertinent passages in the New Testament which speak of the church's implementation of the Great Commission found in passages such as Acts 1:8. For this reason, the focus in this final chapter will remain largely on the book of Acts and the unfolding narrative of gospel proclamation found therein. Other passages from the New

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<sup>12</sup> De Young and Gilbert, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 62.

Testament will also be looked at in conjunction with the book of Acts where they have certain applicability. As we will note, the Biblical accounts of the early church's evangelistic efforts are of particular relevance for the Western church today as she seeks to proclaim Christ in a post-Christian culture. The rise of postmodernism and the expansion of pluralism in the West has placed the church in Britain in a situation which is somewhat analogous to the experiences of the early church in the sense that we must increasingly be aware of the challenges of preaching Christ in a culture which is both unaccustomed to and somewhat suspicious of the Christian faith.

In order to approach the topic of preaching Christ in a post-Christian culture it will be beneficial to explore the teaching of the book of Acts thematically rather than sequentially. To this end, we will be looking at the early church's gospel proclamation under three headings. Firstly, we will look at the theme of "Reaching Culture": in what ways did the early church seek to transcend cultural boundaries in order to reach other cultures with the gospel? Secondly, we will look at the theme of "Confronting Culture": given that all cultures are fallen and therefore subject to God's condemnation, how did the early church go about the vital work of confronting different cultures with the gospel? Finally, we will look at the theme of "Incorporating Culture": as the gospel of Jesus Christ goes out into the world and as his church is established in new corners of the globe it is inevitable that different cultures must be welcomed into the church. What principles did the early church apply as they welcomed new people groups and new cultures into the body of church?

## Reaching Culture

Under the administration of the Old Covenant the people of God were a covenant nation gathered together in a small portion of land in the Middle East. Whilst there were certainly occasions when interactions with other peoples and cultures were necessary (for example in the books of Ruth and Jonah), and whilst God's plan of salvation would ultimately include every conceivable people group (Gen. 12:1-3), in large part the people of God in the Old Testament existed as a monoculture separated from the nations of the world. This distinct separation from the nations of the world was crystallised and maintained by the Mosaic Law, identifying the Israelite nation as set apart for God. In the New Covenant this arrangement has been radically changed. Whereas under the Old Covenant the dynamic of proselytising the nations was one of inviting the nations to "come and see", in the New Testament the dynamic is one of "go and tell." God's people today are a scattered transnational covenant people.<sup>15</sup> The question of how Christians relate to the culture they find themselves in is therefore of vital importance to the fulfilment of the Great Commission. The first issue to be dealt with is one of reaching cultures. Simply put, how ought the church seek to transcend cultural boundaries and barriers for the sake of the gospel?

### Acts 10:1-11:18

The sheer length of the account of Peter's interaction with Cornelius (along with the subsequent discussions which took place in the church at Jerusalem, and later at the Jerusalem Council) shows something of the importance of this event in the larger narrative of

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<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.

Acts. Here, we see the gospel being proclaimed to Gentiles on Gentile territory. As has been noted, in those days “no pious Jew would of course have sat down at the table of a Gentile.”<sup>16</sup> An “impassable gulf” existed between the Jews and the Gentiles in the first century,<sup>17</sup> which presented the largest barrier to gospel proclamation for the early church. It is likely that the cultural barriers which the church faces today are somewhat smaller in comparison.

Luke’s famous account of Peter’s meeting with Cornelius is dominated in large part by the telling and retelling of the events surrounding Peter’s vision. In total, this event is recounted three times in Acts 10 and 11: initially it is reported in 10:9-16, before being referred to by Peter at Cornelius’ house in 10:28, and then is once again regaled to the church in Jerusalem in 11:5-10. Clearly, the meaning of the vision is of central importance to understanding this section of Acts.

Luke reports that the vision itself consisted of something like a great sheet descending from heaven, in which were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air (10:12). A voice accompanied the vision, saying, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (10:13). Peter refused to do so on the grounds that the animals contained within the sheet were to be considered unclean under the stipulations of the Old Covenant law (10:14). God’s response to this was to rebuke Peter with the words, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (10:15). The immediate implication is that the Old Covenant distinctions between clean and unclean food were now to be discarded, as Jesus himself had indicated during his earthly ministry (Mark 7:19).

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<sup>16</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 25-29.

<sup>17</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 185.

However, there is a deeper and more profound meaning to the vision which becomes apparent as the narrative unfolds further. Under the instruction of the Holy Spirit (10:19-20) Peter went with the group of men sent by Cornelius back to Caesarea and to the household of Cornelius. Upon entering, Peter explained the fuller and deeper significance of his vision: “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any *person* common or unclean” (10:28, emphasis added). We do well to note that Peter applied the lesson concerning food types to people types. Under the New Covenant the nations of the world are to be incorporated into the church and not considered “common or unclean.” Subsequently, Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household, and in so doing he emphasised that “God shows no partiality” (10:34, see also verse 43). The preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house was accompanied by an outwardly dramatic work of the Holy Spirit. This, Luke tells us, surprised Peter and the other believers, “because the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45), and therefore the Gentiles also ought to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (10:47-48).

When the news of Peter’s visit to Cornelius’ house reached the church in Jerusalem it initially caused quite a disturbance on the grounds that Peter had fraternised with uncircumcised men (11:3). Peter then recounted the whole episode to the church in Jerusalem, repeatedly emphasising that the Holy Spirit had made “no distinction” between Jew and Gentile (11:12, 15 and 17). Consequently, the church in Jerusalem glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

This ground-breaking account of the church's expansion into Gentile territory is of enormous theological significance. As Andy Crouch has noted, "Jesus asks Peter to set aside the laws of kosher food, one of the most central boundary markers of Israel's cultural identity, in order to proclaim the gospel in Cornelius' house."<sup>18</sup> Peter's initial refusal to "kill and eat", as well as the Jerusalem church's concerns over Peter's behaviour, both show how deeply ingrained the Old Covenant requirements were in the minds of the early Jewish Christians. And yet, for the sake of gospel proclamation, the Lord himself and the Holy Spirit require them to be done away with. Whereas in the Old Covenant a Gentile would have to start behaving somewhat more like a Jew in order to be considered a part of the covenant people (undergoing circumcision, observing food laws and such like), in the New Covenant this dynamic has been almost totally reversed: in order to reach Gentiles with the gospel, the Jewish believers must start behaving rather more like Gentiles, setting aside many of their previous cultural markers.

In order to reach cultures with the gospel, the church must therefore cling lightly to cultural identities. As Edmund Clowney writes, "the transcending nature of the church does not erase ethnic ties, but it bars them from demanding primary, and therefore idolatrous, loyalty."<sup>19</sup> For the sake of the gospel, the church must mirror Peter's readiness to set aside non-essential (albeit strongly held) adherences to certain cultural distinctions, realising that in doing so the door is opened to people of different cultures to be reached with the news of Jesus Christ. As Stott writes, "the same ugly sin of discrimination has kept reappearing in the

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<sup>18</sup> Crouch, 150.

<sup>19</sup> Clowney, 143.

church, in the form of racism...nationalism...tribalism...social and cultural snobbery.”<sup>20</sup> In what can be described as a post-Christian culture, the church will easily find cultural boundaries between itself and the wider culture which can quickly be made into matters of discrimination and exclusion. For the sake of reaching the wider culture with the gospel the church must learn again that God does not show favouritism.

### 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

This short paragraph dovetails well with Luke’s account of Peter’s meeting with Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11. Whilst Peter’s vision teaches the church to be willing, whenever necessary, to lay aside certain cultural markers for the sake of the gospel, in these verses Paul takes this principle a stage further arguing that in order to reach other cultures for the gospel it is sometimes necessary to adopt their cultural markers ourselves.

In order to fully appreciate Paul’s teaching in these verses it is necessary to set them in their wider context in the letter to the Corinthians. Paul’s words here fit into a larger section which commences at the start of chapter 8 and concludes at the end of chapter 10. Chapters 8 and 10 are largely dominated by what is often referred to as the “weaker brother” principle; the principle that Christian liberty on certain issues (such as buying and eating meat previously sacrificed to idols) ought to be surrendered when in the presence of a weaker brother whose conscience would be afflicted by these things (1 Cor. 8:13; 10:28, 33). The wider context is therefore one of surrendering rights for the sake of the gospel. In chapter 9, Paul demonstrates this principle by using his own ministry as an example. For instance, Paul

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<sup>20</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 197.

willingly surrendered his right to earn his living from gospel ministry “rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12).

Paul’s underlying concern, then, is to ensure that all possible obstacles to the gospel are removed so that more people can be won for Christ; an approach to gospel ministry which necessitates the willingness to surrender one’s own rights and instead become a servant of all (1 Cor. 9:19). This reasoning leads Paul to then discuss the “cultural adjustments” he is willing to make for the sake of the gospel, outlined in verses 20 through 23. In his gospel ministry, Paul is willing to surrender his own rights and become as a Jew, or as one under the law, or one outside of the law, or as a weak brother, doing “all for the sake of the gospel.”

Of course, the making of such “cultural adjustments” for the sake of the gospel is an issue which must be carefully handled. Despite what Paul says here, he was not prepared to distort the truth of the gospel in order to embrace a certain culture.<sup>21</sup> Paul’s teaching here does not present ministers of the gospel with a *carte blanche* to liberally affirm anything and everything they encounter in a culture in the name of “seeker sensitivity.” Our study in the doctrine of total depravity has warned us of this already. Nevertheless, Paul’s words here certainly rebuke the rigid refusal Christians have sometimes made to leave aside certain cultural identities and embrace new ones for the sake of the gospel. John Frame writes, “Paul does not hesitate to accept some cultural distinctives of Jews and Greeks (1 Cor. 9:20-23), so that he can bring the gospel to both.”<sup>22</sup> Our grasp of the doctrine of total depravity and its

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<sup>21</sup> Clowney, 169.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 904.

implications for culture must be held in tension with an understanding of common grace in order to rightly evaluate culture. Commenting on Paul's words in 1 Cor. 9, Timothy Keller helpfully articulates the good example Paul sets us: "Paul is reminding us that in every culture there are many things that do not directly contradict Scripture and therefore are neither forbidden nor commanded. In charity and humility, such cultural features should generally be *adopted* to avoid making the gospel unnecessarily foreign."<sup>23</sup>

The nature of the Great Commission outlined in passages such as Acts 1:8 means that reaching across cultural boundaries is a necessary and inevitable part of life for the New Testament church. Furthermore, it is essential for the spread of the gospel into communities where the gospel is scarcely known. For those living in post-Christian Western cultures where knowledge of the gospel and the Christian worldview is fast disappearing from public life, this need for the church to intentionally transcend cultural boundaries is becoming more and more heightened. The passages we have focused upon in Acts 10-11 and 1 Corinthians 9 urge us on the one hand to be willing to lay aside some of our own cultural markers, and on the other hand to be willing to adopt the cultural markers of others for the sake of the gospel. This laying aside and taking up of cultural forms requires a great deal of wisdom. The doctrines of total depravity and common grace provide us with the correctives we need to avoid both the thoughtless appropriation of culture, as well as the stubborn distancing from certain cultures of which Christians have sometimes been guilty.

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 297. Emphasis added.

## Confronting Culture

By its very nature gospel ministry is confrontational. Jesus himself taught his disciples that he came not to bring peace but a sword, and that households would be divided over their response to the gospel (Matt. 10:34-36). The apostle Paul describes the ministry of the gospel as bringing both an aroma of life to those who are being saved as well as an aroma of death to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 2:15-16). It is therefore inevitable that as the church seeks to proclaim Christ in a post-Christian culture that there will be the frequent need to challenge many of the beliefs and assumptions that have become entrenched in a society which has moved significantly away from a Christian worldview. Whilst it is necessary for the church to thoughtfully accommodate itself to culture in order to remove unnecessary barriers to the gospel, this does not negate the fact that the church is also called to go “head to head” with culture, confronting it with the gospel and challenging its presuppositions. It is to this aspect of gospel ministry that we now turn our thoughts.

### Acts 17:16-34

As D.A. Carson notes, Paul’s address to the men of the Areopagus is greatly instructive for the contemporary Western church because it presents us with a model of Paul’s gospel proclamation amongst Biblically illiterate people.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the context of the Areopagus is far removed from the context of twenty-first century Western culture, in terms of the low level of Biblical literacy found in its members there is an important parallel to be drawn. The difference, however, is that in Western culture the diminishing level of Biblical literacy is the

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<sup>24</sup> D. A. Carson, “Athens Revisited” In *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Postmoderns*, edited by D.A. Carson, 384-398 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 387-388.

result of the self-conscious abandonment of a Christian heritage.<sup>25</sup> This means that, for all of the hostility and mocking that Paul experienced in Athens (Acts 17:18, 32), in Western culture it is likely that the church's proclamation of the gospel may sometimes be met with an even more brusque response as the gospel confronts people who have already deliberately opted out of the Christian faith.

Space will not allow for an extended exegesis of Paul's address to the Areopagus, though certain salient points ought to be noted. First of all, Paul is seen to lay great emphasis on the doctrine of God. Paul asserts that the God whom he speaks of is the sovereign Creator of all, and that as such he is entirely self-existent (v24-25) yet at the same time immanent (v27-28). In contrast to this, Paul speaks of mankind as those who through God's creative activity have proceeded from one man and live under the sovereignty of God in every aspect of life (v26). In turn, this places man under certain obligations, namely that we ought to seek to know the true God (v27) and shun false conceptions of who he is (v29). With this wider framework in place, Paul then (and only then!) introduces the person of Jesus, calling for repentance in light of God's coming judgement, proven by the resurrection of the man whom he has appointed as judge (v30-31).

We therefore note that in proclaiming the gospel to the Biblically illiterate it is imperative to ensure that a robust Biblical worldview is set in place at the outset. As we have seen previously, a dominant feature of Western culture is the rise of postmodernism, with its refusal to accept any metanarrative.<sup>26</sup> However, in his address to the Areopagus Paul does not

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 394.

shrink back from presenting the Biblical metanarrative, laying particular emphasis on the doctrines of God, man, sin and redemption. Carson concludes, “However sensitive Paul is to the needs and outlook of the people he is evangelising, and however flexible he is in shaping the gospel to address them directly, we must see that there remains for him irreducible content to the gospel.”<sup>27</sup>

In preaching the gospel in a post-Christian culture it is therefore necessary to be intentionally *confrontational*. This, of course, does not mean the same as being deliberately provocative or antagonistic towards culture. As we have already seen, the apostle Paul himself sets an example in being willing to make a large number of cultural adjustments for the sake of the gospel. However, the “irreducible content of the gospel” is the area where cultural adjustments end, and confrontation with culture begins. At this point, we must follow the example of the apostle Paul in laying before our hearers a distinctly Christian worldview, emphasising where it is at odds with the culture’s prevailing worldview. Paul does not hold back when it comes to preaching the resurrection of Jesus, despite the fact that this is the aspect of the gospel which will be met with the most disdain by Greek dualists who hold that matter is evil, and that therefore resurrection from the dead ought to be seen as a curse rather than a vindication.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is the very mention of the resurrection which prompts the ridicule which Paul faces (v32). Nonetheless, Paul’s refusal to “trim the gospel” to suit his hearers is exemplary.<sup>29</sup> As John Stott notes, even in the few brief verses which Paul’s address

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, “Athens Revisited,” 397.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 397.

occupies in our Bibles we can marvel at the comprehensiveness of his message, which proclaims God as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. Paul takes in the whole of nature and of history, and reviews the whole of time from the creation to the final judgment.<sup>30</sup> Stott concludes that the worldview which Paul presents to the Areopagus is “the indispensable background to the gospel, without which the gospel cannot be effectively preached.”<sup>31</sup> Paul knows that for all of his necessary accommodation to the categories which his hearers will be familiar with (such as referencing their objects of worship and popular poets, vv. 23, 28) this gospel is one of *confrontation*. In a post-Christian culture this need for confrontation is only heightened: the areas of overlap between the prevailing worldview and the Christian worldview have reduced, creating larger areas of disagreement and more occasion for offense to be taken as the gospel makes its unchangeable claims. Truth confronts unbelief, God confronts man, and the gospel confronts culture.

### Romans 1:18-32

At this point it is appropriate to ask the question of whether or not gospel proclamation ought *always* to be confrontational in nature. Paul’s address at the Areopagus shows that when evangelising those who held to the popular worldview of Greek philosophy Paul saw the need to lay before his hearers a distinctively Biblical worldview which he knew would confront and challenge his hearers at certain points. As we have noted, this context is in some ways analogous to preaching Christ in contemporary Western culture with its fast receding Biblical literacy. However, the question arises of how far this principle may be applied. Is

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<sup>30</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

confrontation a necessary or a conditional aspect of gospel ministry? In order to answer this question we turn to another well-known passage of Scripture in which Paul's worldview shines forth.

Paul's concern in the opening chapters of his letter to the Romans is to prove that all of mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, are guilty of sin and therefore in need of the gospel of God's grace shown in Christ. The conclusion which Paul arrives at in Romans 3:10 underlines this: "None is righteous, no, not one." Prior to this, in 1:18-32 Paul has already painted a bleak portrait of the human heart. The opening verse of this section asserts that in unrighteousness man suppresses the truth (Rom 1:18). In particular, Paul goes on to speak of the witness of general revelation, arguing that "what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom 1:19-20). Rather than acknowledging the Creator, the fallen human heart has "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom 1:25).

Paul thus makes it very clear that the witness of general revelation is evident to all people. God's eternal power and divine nature are proclaimed by the things that he has made (Psalm 19:1). However, the fallen human heart has actively suppressed this truth about God, and done so in unrighteousness. It is not a case merely of the unbeliever's ignorance concerning God, but rather one of deliberate refusal to worship and serve the God who has created everything that has been made. Furthermore, this suppression of the truth goes deeper still, in that the worship that the Creator alone deserves is given to his creatures as mankind

engages in idolatry. In response to this, the restraint which God's common grace imposes on mankind has been somewhat alleviated by God as he gives mankind over to various lusts, dishonourable passions, and a debased mind.<sup>32</sup>

Paul's teaching here brings us back once more to the doctrine of total depravity. Sin, we see, is rampant within the human heart, affecting his thoughts, words, will and actions. Even the domain of general revelation (which is sometimes thought of as a comfortable "common ground" between the believer and the unbeliever) is depicted as a battle ground between God and the unbeliever, who twists, distorts and suppresses the witness of creation. It is for this reason that gospel proclamation in any context needs to have a confrontational element to it. There is no such thing as a neutral person or a neutral culture. Though people and cultures vary in their relative sins and virtues, the effects of sin are felt always and everywhere. God's truth is suppressed and God's glory is diverted elsewhere. Put simply, wherever the gospel is preached it will always have something to confront.

### Presuppositional Apologetics

Having seen the need to establish a Christian worldview when proclaiming Christ in a post-Christian culture, and mindful of the necessarily confrontational element that all faithful gospel proclamation entails, we turn now to the role of presuppositional apologetics. The doctrine of total depravity and the implications of it seen in passages such as Romans 1:18-32 have a profound impact on how the church ought to go about confronting the prevailing culture with the gospel. Paul teaches that fallen man's reception of general revelation is done in unrighteousness, suppressing the truth, resulting in a debased mind. The result of this is

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<sup>32</sup> Clowney, 179.

that it is impossible for someone to hold to an entirely neutral, objective view of the world. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and there is none righteous, as Paul contends in Romans 3. As a result of this universality of sin, no one can claim that they themselves can assess the world we live in with an unbiased perspective. As Hauerwas and Willimon note, most modern people presume to be Kantian in their ethics, seeing themselves as independent, reasoning, acting agents who arrive at a grasp of morality by “thinking clearly” by themselves.<sup>33</sup> This reflects a post-Enlightenment enthronement of autonomous reason which lives by the belief that human beings are capable of making sense of the world themselves. This canonisation of reason extends to every area of life, including the treatment of morality and ethics. As Carl Henry writes, “Human freedom is said to require *autonomous* moral decision.”<sup>34</sup> The presumption which has become ubiquitous in the West is that human beings can act as free, neutral, independent rational agents, and that therefore in order to “think clearly” and arrive at an appropriate view of the world and morality it is necessary to cast aside the testimony of religion, any claims of propositional revelation and belief in the supernatural, as well as the traditional values that have been “corrupted” by them. In such a view of things, any discussion of religion must be conducted upon rationalistic grounds, and be answerable to “cold, hard science”, which is seen as the unbiased litmus test of beliefs.

Presuppositional apologetics is a riposte to such claims of autonomous epistemology. Writes Bahnsen, “Van Til [a major proponent of presuppositional apologetics] realized that

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<sup>33</sup> S. Hauerwas and W.H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 98.

<sup>34</sup> Carl F. Henry, "Facing a Culture in Trouble," *Modern Reformation* vol. 4, (May/June, 1995): 31. Emphasis added.

when the believer encounters intellectual objections or challenges to his Christian faith from unbelievers, the dispute between them is almost always generated by, and will be controlled by, their different fundamental assumptions – their presuppositions.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, both the believer and the unbeliever bring their own epistemological bias to the debate, and cannot help but do so. The believer’s presuppositions (their “fundamental assumptions” which necessarily control all other beliefs) are based on God’s Word, whereas the unbeliever’s presuppositions are bound up with their claims of autonomy and their enthronement of reason. An adequate apologetic approach must therefore go deeper than merely the presentation of evidence on what is presumed to be a level playing field between the believer and unbeliever. As Frame argues, “Legitimate apologetic argument presupposes the truth of Scripture, and it renounces the idea of human intellectual independence or autonomy.”<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that apologetic arguments which make use of evidence ought to be disregarded, but rather that such arguments must be always be grounded in Christian presuppositions.<sup>37</sup> This presuppositional emphasis naturally lends itself most readily to those of a transformationist viewpoint who strongly affirm the need for a distinctively Christian worldview.

The need for presuppositional apologetics is heightened in a culture which is moving away from its Christian heritage. With the increase of secular postmodernism and with the rise of pluralism an ever widening gulf is emerging between the presuppositions of believers

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<sup>35</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 461.

<sup>36</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 86.

<sup>37</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 143.

and unbelievers. In Britain, the church faces what Dan Strange calls an “epistemological uncovering”: as the culture becomes less and less Christian, the presuppositions which we hold to as believers will become more noticeably “Scripture-shaped” in the eyes of the wider culture.<sup>38</sup> In proclaiming the gospel in such a context, the church in Britain must therefore be prepared for a deeper, more profound level of confrontation with culture: a confrontation which goes right down to the heart of the presuppositions which have shaped our culture, coupled with an unashamed declaration the Jesus Christ is Lord of all (1 Peter 3:15).

### Incorporating Culture

The need to confront culture with the gospel should not be taken to be indicative of a spirit of separatism from culture. We have already noted that in reaching culture with the gospel the church must be willing to make a number of cultural adjustments for the sake of the gospel, depending on their particular context. Furthermore, it is also necessary for believers to be willing to incorporate people of different cultures into the fellowship of church. As the church seeks to obey the Great Commission by going out into the cultures of the world in order to make disciples of Christ, it is to be expected that God will add to the church those who are being saved. This means that people of many different cultures will be incorporated into the life of the church. At this point, it is necessary to note that missiology finds its place in the larger scheme of ecclesiology: the emphasis shifts from seeking to reach and confront cultures with the gospel to seeking to incorporate people of a different culture into the church. This presents the church with a new dilemma; that of balancing church

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<sup>38</sup> Dan Strange, “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology,” *Themelios*, vol. 36, (2011): 257.

growth with church unity, ensuring that ethnic identities are not obliterated in the church, but that the new identity in Christ takes precedence.<sup>39</sup>

### Acts 15:1-35

Acts chapter 15 has been described as the “dramatic hinge” in the book of Acts, and a “decisive moment” which was foreshadowed by the events of Pentecost.<sup>40</sup> At Pentecost, the international composition of the New Covenant people was emphasised by the church speaking in foreign tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:4). The words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 were fulfilled by the church in their witnessing to Jesus firstly in Jerusalem, then in Judea, Samaria, and beyond. Peter’s meeting with Cornelius in Acts 10 sparked controversy in the Jerusalem church regarding the laying aside of Old Covenant laws. It is therefore of no surprise to read in Acts 15 that the issue of the incorporation of Gentiles into the church became a matter for major debate in the first century church.

The occasion which led to the Jerusalem council was the teaching of a certain group of Jews who came to Antioch, whom we are told were claiming that unless someone was circumcised according to the custom of Moses they could not be saved. In opposition to this, both Paul and Barnabas debated with them, before going to the church in Jerusalem to raise the matter there. We find out that the church in Jerusalem was initially divided over the issue, and in particular some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees argued that it was indeed necessary to order Gentile converts to undergo circumcision and keep the Law

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<sup>39</sup> Clowney, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Crouch, 153.

of Moses (Acts 15:1-5). We are told that, after much debate, Peter stood up to address the council, relating once again his experience of witnessing the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the Gentiles, showing that God made “no distinction” between Jew and Gentile, proving that all alike would be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus and not by works of the law (Acts 15:6-11). Following this, Barnabas and Paul related how they had seen God performing signs and wonders among the Gentiles. Finally, the apostle James spoke, recognising that Gentile inclusion into the church had been promised through the prophetic word. Of the many Old Testament references he could have alluded to in order to prove this, he chose the words of Amos 9:11-12. In conclusion, James argued that the church “should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.”

However, the council’s emphasis on the sufficiency of God’s grace alone to save people apart from works of the law, and the full acceptance of Gentiles as members in the church was not the end of the matter. Following James’ advice, the apostles, elders and wider church agreed to send a letter to the Gentile converts in Antioch, assuring them of their acceptance into the church, and only laying upon them the requirements of abstaining from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled, and from blood (Acts 15:20ff). The church’s recognition that certain requirements *did* need to be laid upon the Gentile converts shows that, in incorporating people of new cultures into the church, a careful approach needs to be adopted. Despite its clarity regarding freedom from the Mosaic Law as a requirement for salvation, the Jerusalem Council is evidently keen to remind the new believers in Antioch that there is nonetheless the need for scripturally informed

discernment when converts from new cultures are incorporated into the fellowship of the church.

In particular, it can be seen that the church in Jerusalem applied three principles in their letter to the believers in Antioch. Firstly, they emphasised that any practices that were intrinsically bound up with *idolatry* (“things polluted by idols”) ought to be avoided. This aligns with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, where he argues that despite the freedom which Christians have to eat whatever meats they purchase in the market (v25), it is not permissible to eat in such a way as participates in the idolatry itself (v20). Secondly, the Jerusalem church indicated a *moral* principle: the letter stated that practices which go against God’s moral law (specifically sexual immorality) must be repented of. The third and final principle the letter emphasised was one of *love for neighbour*. The letter reminded the believers in Antioch that any practices which unnecessarily cause offence to those looking on should also be discarded, such as the eating of meat containing the blood, which would cause offence to the Jewish population of the city (v21). Again, this is in agreement with Paul’s teaching concerning the so called “weaker brother principle” in 1 Cor. 10:28ff, where Christian freedoms are laid aside in order to not trouble the conscience of others.

Consequently, not only did the Jerusalem council safeguard the purity of the gospel from the corrupting influence of works righteousness, but also it protected the early church from fragmentation into Jewish and Gentile factions.<sup>41</sup> In the words of Paul in Ephesians 2:14-15, the dividing wall of hostility which previously separated Jew and Gentile has been broken down, in order that the two may be made one in Christ who is our peace. This

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<sup>41</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 256.

recognition that the Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens to the people of God, but rather fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19) requires the church to be willing to be flexible on certain points of cultural diversity, within the necessary constraints the gospel rightly imposes on us. As John Stott writes, “Once the theological principle was firmly established, that salvation is by grace alone, and that circumcision was not required but was neutral, [Paul] was prepared to adjust his practical policies.”<sup>42</sup> Not only did Paul support the “cultural abstentions” outlined by the letter from the Jerusalem council, but also in the following chapter he saw fit to circumcise Timothy out of consideration for the Jews who would have been offended by his uncircumcision.<sup>43</sup>

The conclusions drawn by the Jerusalem council are therefore of great importance as the church in the West, with its increasing multiculturalism, needs to be reminded of. In order to preserve the purity of the gospel and the witness of the church there are certain cultural practices which must be dispensed with upon profession of Christ as Lord. We do well to remind ourselves of the principles pertaining to idolatry, morality and love for neighbour which the Jerusalem Council employed. However, the Jerusalem Council also reminds us that the gospel of grace must never become adulterated by the church laying upon new converts any requirements which go beyond Scripture’s teaching. Whilst it will always be necessary for new believers to dispense with idolatry and immorality upon profession of faith, Acts chapter 15 urges the church not to become latter day “Judaizers” by imposing on

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<sup>42</sup> Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 256.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-7.

new converts cultural expectations which are out of the tune with the gospel, but instead to welcome them as fellow citizens and full members of the household of God.

### Applying the Regulative Principle

In addressing with the question of how the church today should follow in the footsteps of the Jerusalem Council by seeking to incorporate those of a different culture into the fellowship of the church, the issue of how to apply the regulative principle will inevitably arise. The regulative principle is the principle that “worship is by divine warrant, command, prescription”, often popularly summarised as “whatever is not commanded is forbidden” in worship.<sup>44</sup> The necessary respect for cultural flexibility in the church must therefore be handled in such a way that Scripture’s requirements regarding worship are neither disregarded as the church finds converts in new cultures, nor wrongly imposed by introducing an inappropriate degree of cultural inflexibility into the life of the church.

In accordance with the regulative principle, the Westminster Confession of Faith asserts the sufficiency of Scripture concerning all things necessary for God’s glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, whilst at the same time allowing for the necessity of the inner illumination of the Spirit, and the need for the application of the “light of nature” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6). The Confession therefore protects Christian freedom in worship, recognising that whilst Scripture is sufficient, certain aspects of worship are only indirectly controlled by Scripture. Reformed theology has therefore seen the need to distinguish between the

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<sup>44</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 465.

“elements” of worship and the “circumstances” of worship.<sup>45</sup> Whereas the elements of the church’s worship are those clearly defined and set out in Scripture (prayers, singing, apostolic teaching and such like), the circumstances of worship (such as the time, duration and location of worship services) are aspects which are not directly prescribed by Scripture, and therefore call for wisdom in their implementation. As the Scots Confession of 1560 states, “Not that we think that any policy of order of ceremonies which men have devised can be appointed for all ages, times and places.”<sup>46</sup> When it comes to the circumstances of worships, there is no “set rule” for the church to follow. In matters such as these, the Westminster Confession (1.6) allows for the “light of nature” and the Spirit’s illumination to be our guide.

However, as Frame has helpfully pointed out, the necessary distinction between the “elements” and “circumstances” of the church’s worship does not answer every question that needs to be addressed under the regulative principle. A third category is also required, which many Reformed theologians have referred to as the “forms” of worship.<sup>47</sup> “Forms” of worship may be described as the specific content included in the elements of worship. For example, though Scripture asserts the need for prayers, preaching and Scripture reading in worship, it does not dictate to us exactly the words to use in prayers and sermons (though of course the *theological* content of both are entirely regulated by Scripture), nor the language or translation of the Bible we read from. There is therefore a certain degree of flexibility in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>46</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 299.

<sup>47</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 472.

the forms of worship, whereas the elements of worship are regulated with much greater specificity.

It is therefore helpful to think of the elements, forms and circumstances of worship as three different categories within the regulative principle. First and foremost, the elements of worship are explicitly governed by Scripture. In these matters, cultural considerations are of no consequence; regardless of cultural context the elements of worship remain unchanged. In contrast, the circumstances of worship are only loosely regulated by Scripture. A large degree of freedom is given to the church concerning what time of day to meet, for instance. In matters such as these, cultural considerations will have a major role to play. For example, in certain cultural contexts a three hour service beginning at dawn may be considered the norm. The regulative principle protects the freedom of the church in deciding upon such matters in their particular context. Thirdly, the forms of worship occupy a central point between the elements and circumstances of worship. Here, both Scripture and cultural context will need to be considered. Cultural considerations regarding the forms of worship will include matters such as the particular applications made in preaching, the appropriate use of the vernacular, and the style of music used.

In order to thoughtfully incorporate people of different cultures into the fellowship, the church must therefore be mindful of what constitutes an element, a form and a circumstance of worship, avoiding the distortion of true worship that the pursuit of “relevance” so often incurs, yet allowing cultural flexibility where Scripture permits. In various times and places the church of Jesus Christ will read the Bible in Dutch, pray in Chinese and sing in Patois. They will attend worship in kimonos and suits and T-shirts. They will gather together in

homes, underground and in the open air. They will sing to the tune of organs, guitars and steel drums. In doing so, the elements of worship ought to be unchanged, whereas the forms and circumstances are influenced to a lesser and greater degree by the cultural context.

In considering the regulative principle it is also necessary to discuss the role that tradition has played and ought to play in the church's worship. As John Frame has rightly noted, the regulative principle is often caricatured (by both its proponents and its detractors) as insisting upon "traditional" forms of worship, whereas in actual fact the regulative principle implies quite the opposite.<sup>48</sup> Biblically, the regulative principle is used by Jesus to attack forms of religion which place emphasis on tradition rather than on the Word of God (Matt 15:1-9), and in 1 Corinthians 14 the emphasis is laid upon *intelligibility* in worship so that believers can be edified and unbelievers can be convicted as a consequence of their presence at public worship.<sup>49</sup> A necessary implication of this is that the use of forms and circumstances in worship which are culturally detached and unintelligible ought to be adjusted accordingly, lest they fail to edify. In turn, this means that unflinching adherence to any particular style of worship (either at the cutting edge of contemporary or at the most conservative end of traditional) breaks the regulative principle in that it elevates a certain style to the place of Scriptural authority. Insisting on a particular style of worship is thus treating the forms and circumstances of worship as if they are elements, requiring uniformity in areas where Scripture encourages variety. Such inflexibility concerning the forms and circumstances of worship is most often driven by the desire to see the church appeal to a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 480.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 480-1.

specific demographic (the white, middle class professionals, for example), rather than incorporating the wider culture as well (unemployed immigrants, for example). At the same time, it is necessary to bear in mind that the choice of forms must be handled carefully, informed by the Word of God which calls all cultures to account. Needless to say, the exacting standards of God's Word which we are quick to bring to bear on other cultures apply equally to our own culture as well.

We will give the final word in this chapter to John Calvin. Calvin recognised that whilst the teaching of Scripture informed the worship of the church to a great extent, it was also vital for the church to be aware of its cultural surroundings and to conduct its worship in such a way that it remained intelligible and edifying to the common man. Calvin writes, "If we let love be our guide, all will be safe."<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, the church's application of the regulative principle is shaped not only by their faithfulness to the Word of God, but also to a large degree by their love for neighbour, and a concern to ensure that the worship of God and the proclamation of the gospel is conducted in such a way that people of the surrounding culture are invited in, can comprehend what is taking place, and if God so wishes be made members with us of the household of God.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 300.

## CONCLUSION

Ever since Christ gave the Great Commission to his disciples, believers have faced the question of how they should relate to the cultures of the world as they preach Christ in a variety of different contexts. In chapter two, we saw the diversity and disagreements amongst a whole spectrum of traditional and contemporary approaches to culture. Evidently, the “enduring problem” continues to endure. In cultures such as twenty-first century Britain this dilemma is heightened due to the rapid secularisation of society, the expansion of pluralism, and the spread of postmodernism. Each of these factors presents a series of challenges in proclaiming the gospel to the culture, and with the passing of time each of these challenges are becoming more and more acute.

It is hoped that this thesis will have helped to bring a greater degree of clarity to the debate concerning how the church should view culture and go about the vital work of preaching Christ in a manner suitable to their context. By bringing the doctrines of total depravity and common grace to the foreground, the church may become better equipped to evaluate culture in a theologically informed manner, aware of both the profound impact of sin upon every area of life whilst also appreciating the goodness of the created order and the blessings which God showers upon even the most ungodly of cultures. Historically, the church has experienced difficulties when it has lost sight of one of these two doctrines, consequently becoming either indistinguishable from the world or detached from it.

Furthermore, by thoughtfully considering the specific areas of reaching, confronting and incorporating culture the church can glean important principles from Scripture concerning preaching Christ in cultures where he is scarcely known. Aware of common grace, the church must see the need to make intentional cultural adjustments for the sake of the gospel in order to effectively reach culture, following the examples of Peter and Paul in their own gospel proclamation in the book of Acts. Alongside this, the church must also recognise that in a post-Christian culture it is necessary to start our gospel proclamation “further back” than was previously necessary. As Carson notes, the people we wish to evangelise in a post-Christian culture hold some fundamental positions which they will need to relinquish if they are to become Christians: certain things must therefore be unlearned and rewritten.<sup>1</sup> Gospel proclamation is always confrontational in nature, but especially so in cultures where the influence of gospel preaching has been eroded. In such a situation, we have noted the necessity of a presuppositional approach to apologetics which is able to address and critique the foundational beliefs of secular worldviews as well as articulating and defending the Christian worldview. Finally, in incorporating people from different cultures into the church, the church must recognise the worldwide nature of the New Testament people of God. This implies that cultural barriers pertaining to class, age, taste, ethnicity and such like should not be given an inordinate place in the life of the church. In applying the regulative principle to its worship, the church must therefore recognise the difference between the elements, circumstances and forms of worship in order that the church embraces people from all walks

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, “Athens Revisited” In *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Postmoderns*, edited by D.A. Carson, 384-398 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 386-7.

of life and every different culture whilst remaining faithful to the standards of God's word. In doing so, we will see in the church a glimpse of the final gathering above, made up of people from every nation, tribe and tongue, standing before the throne and crying out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

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