



INTERSECT

Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms

Christ and Culture and Concordia

We are habituated to them. Otherwise, on a stroll around campus the banners would remind us every few yards about Christ and culture: FOR CHURCH AND WORLD SINCE 1894. The banner, though appropriately declaratory, also raises questions. How exactly is Concordia for church and world? Is this prepositional phrase synonymous with “for Christ and culture”? How shall we understand such expressions and convey that understanding to students and constituents? And how does such language inform our identity and make a good fit with our Lutheran tradition?



At our recent Table Talk, we considered H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology of five Christ-and-culture perspectives. These have long served church scholars as a set of reference points for assessing the relationship of the Christian and Christianity to the world. Briefly the five perspectives, in Niebuhr’s terms, are: 1) Christ against culture; 2) the Christ of culture; 3) Christ above culture; 4) Christ and culture in paradox; and 5) Christ transforming culture.

The point of our conversation was not to subscribe to Niebuhr’s categories or terms, entirely or singly. Several participants rightly alerted us to ambiguity in his concepts. What is culture? Are Christ and Christianity the same things? How closely should we define his relational prepositions such as “against” or “above”? How have these relationships been manifested in the ancient and recent church? And this is precisely why the typology is useful: not because it is conclusive but because it provides a framework to prompt discussion

and reflection on how the church and world are or are not related. A helpful body of literature now exists that addresses these and other issues in the Christ-and-culture discussion (see the endnotes for examples).

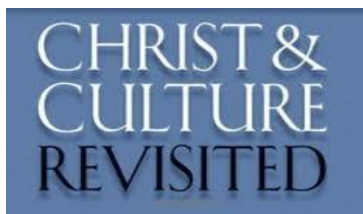
Nevertheless, the typology includes the Lutheran answer—sort of. Niebuhr cites the Lutheran tradition as the source of 4) Christ and culture in paradox while the other four he associates with other traditions (which are also very much worth examining). But many maintain that Niebuhr misuses “paradox” and misses some key insights about Luther’s (and Paul’s) rich, nuanced dimensions of sin and the re-creative power of grace, and the dimensions of vocation as both God’s calling us to our identity as his own and his calling us to enact that identity in the world. These pairs—sin and grace, justification and sanctification—are not paradoxes (two contradictory truths such as sinner-and-saint or God’s autonomy and our agency) but are the ways that God’s two words of Law and Gospel become actual in the life of the Christian and, through that Christian, in the world. They go together and they work together, though they are two different words.

If not Christ and culture in paradox, then what phrase might estimate the Lutheran perspective? Alternate expressions in the literature that may get us better mileage include “Christ and culture: two dimensions,” “Christ and culture in parallel,” “Christ and culture in simultaneity,” “Christ and culture in complementarity,” “Christ and culture co-existing,” or “Christ and culture in tension.” If this lingo seems a bit clunky (and I think it does), pause and consider that our comprehending a very good creation corrupted by sin but now under a campaign of restoration demands more than a bumper sticker or an aphorism. The Gospel itself is plain enough and can be grasped by a four-year-old. A cosmology and anthropology that can accurately account for the world’s condition according to 66 books of Biblical content deserves at least a few years of higher education for sinners.

These expressions of a Lutheran take on Christ and culture are intended to help us and our students with that cosmology and anthropology. For example, “Christ and culture co-existing” may be open-ended enough to induce questions and comments implied by the other

expressions and about the alternate Christ-and-culture perspectives used by other theological traditions. What does this co-existing refer to and amount to? Do Christ and culture interact or intersect? If they are parallel, are they compartmentalized? Does the tension between them sometimes escalate to conflict? Should we seek to integrate them as some traditions advocate? Notice also how “Christ and culture co-existing” brings the other four perspectives and their traditions into view for comparison.

And now we have a framework (that is, another framework—we have others besides Christ-and-culture) and terms for our work with students on a variety of important matters across several disciplines. These issues and events include the science-and-religion debates, works of art and literature as reflections on the human condition, church-and-state topics, sanctity of life and health care views, the same-sex marriage disputes, the potential incursion of federal control in church education, how to define “family,” the impact of cyber-life, and many more examples.



What’s more, “Christ and culture co-existing” sets up a further discussion for the Reformation insight about God’s two kingdoms. Lutheran philosopher Angus Menuge argues that, “Any adequate account of Christ and culture should yield a principle of discrimination, a way of telling which aspects of culture should be affirmed, and which should be rejected [and I would add, which should be adjusted]. The two kingdoms doctrine and the doctrine of vocation together accomplish just that.”¹

The Christ-and-culture typology also offers us one way to conduct the worldview discussion, a frequent and fitting topic for our campus. Reformed theologian D.A. Carson defines a worldview this way:

A worldview must be comprehensive enough to address the question of deity (If there is a God, what is he like?), the question of origins (Where do I come from?), the question of significance (Who am I?), the question of evil (Why is there so much suffering?), the question of salvation (What is the problem and how is it resolved?) and the question of *telos* (Why am I here and what does the future hold?).²

Carson further says that a worldview need not explain everything but, rather, it must be broad enough to see the shape of the whole—which is precisely what the Bible provides.

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Our banner calls for and claims a worldview: Concordia is “for church and world.” Our classes are for students. And a coherent and versatile theological tradition is for teaching and conversing with students, both undergraduate and graduate, about the many ways they can be God’s person for church and world. Here are the makings of a coherent working view on church and world.

—R. Moulds

1. *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*. Angus Menuge, gen.ed. (Concordia Publishing House, 1999) p. 50.
2. *Christ and Culture Revisited*. D.A. Carson. (Eerdmans, 2008) p. 95.

A colleague responds:

For the Church and Culture

The dialogue between church and culture must be a nuanced one—sometimes coexisting, sometimes changing, others times absorbing. But above all, they must be in dialogue. At Mars Hill, Saint Paul did not condemn the Athenians, nor did he distance himself from them and their altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:16-34). Instead, using their own Greek poetry, he redirected them to the One to whom that altar pointed. I do not think the church needs to be frightened of culture; I think it needs to respect it. We fear what we don’t know. And, just as the Athenians were ignorant of Christ, perhaps part of the tension between the church and world is that the church is ignorant of the world’s culture and those whose lives find meaning in its practice. It’s the people that need salvation. All the other messy stuff called culture is a reflection of the incredible complexity of what it means to be a human being searching for truth, trying to figure out God. In this manner, the church is the bearer of an unusual conversation centered on grace.

—Jim Bockelman

For further reading on cultural exegesis and the arts see *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*, Daniel A. Siedell (Baker Academic, 2008).