
The Relationship of Theology and Culture

Divorcing theology from life results in a problematic dualism—ivory-tower theology unrelated to life on the one hand, and secular busyness with no thought of God on the other hand. They need to come back together.

Art offers a metaphor regarding the relationship of theology and culture.

Theology is the artist's idea or message; culture is the canvas and paint the artist uses to express the idea. A painting beckons the observer to "do theology" to discover its meaning.

A musician uses sheet music (theology) to play a moving composition on the piano (culture). Sheet music needs a medium to move the notes from the paper to the air waves. A piano needs music or else it merely makes noise.

If theology develops in the context of interfacing God and life, then at some point we must ask what happens at the intersection of God and culture. From a Christian perspective, the insights from H. Richard Niebuhr, the Yale Divinity School theologian have become foundational. *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr, 1951) presents five ways Christians relate to culture.

1. *Christ Against Culture* – because Christ is perfect and humans are sinful, and because culture is where humans live their lives, Christ is against culture because the perfect opposes the sinful. "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them" (1 John 2:15 NIV).
2. *The Christ of Culture* – Jesus came into this world as a human and lived within humanity/culture. We are called to follow this same incarnational model and take Christ to the world. "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. . . I have become all things to all people so that by all means possible I might save some" (1 Cor 9:20-22 NIV). Christ seemed untainted by the culture in which he lived. In contrast, people seem to get tainted fairly easily.
3. *Christ Above Culture* – Christ uses culture to instruct humans on what is good. He gave his law to reveal the right, but Christ remains above the law needed for humans. As Paul wrote, "I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, 'You must not covet'" (Rom 7:7 NLT).
4. *Christ and Culture in Paradox* – culture is not simply good or bad, but both good and bad. Just as humans sin (bad), God provides grace (good). It can be confusing to see God's justice and mercy combined, and yet seemingly opposite. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom 5:20 KJV).
5. *Christ the Transformer of Culture* – the ideal for which the previous explanations serve as a straw man in comparison. God created the world as good. After the Fall, God set about to redeem the world. Therefore, culture, while it contains evil, can be redeemed. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16 KJV; see also Hebrews 12:1-22). Instead of being conformed to culture, Christ invites us to transform it by a renewed mind (Rom 12:3).

For Seventh-day Adventists, reading Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* could be problematic because he's not an Adventist. But we have a remedy. Roger Dudley's *The World: Love It or Leave It* (Dudley, 1986), presents an Adventist rendering of Niebuhr's work, complete with Adventist terminology and illustrations. Similar recasting for the Adventist culture has happened with the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Nichol, 1953) based on Seventh-day Adventist scholars' study of other Christian works.

Seventh-day Adventists have often struggled with new translations of the English Bible. This illustrates the difficulty of wanting something Godly to fit in the contemporary culture while some fear making it current makes it unsanctified. This phobia stems from the idea that a more current medium of communication isn't as holy or as accurate as something older. I recall the warnings I received as a teen when *The Living Bible* (Taylor, 1971) stirred controversy as a paraphrase of God's Holy Word. That fear continues with some (Fuller, 2012), although today's controversy would come from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (Peterson, 2002). Seventh-day Adventists have created their own controversy by having a Bible paraphrase by an Adventist (Blanco, 1994).

Now even the Adventist prophet gets paraphrased, only 100 years following her death. Jerry Thomas adapted *The Desire of Ages* (Thomas, 2002) and *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Thomas, 2009). Steve Case adapted *Steps to Christ* (Case, 2009). Perhaps because these are adaptations and not paraphrases, the push-back against tampering with a prophetic word has been minimal.

The relationship of theology and culture crosses at the intersection of God and life. The idea of God creates merely an abstract concept until it intersects with life by means of culture—what happens at a specific place at a certain time. If you start with culture, it will be merely human elements until it intersects with God.

It is possible for God to intersect with life and for people to miss it or misunderstand it. Consider the biblical examples of Christ on the cross, the stoning of Stephen, manna after 20 years, Paul and Barnabas treated as gods in Lystra, John's revelations on the island of Patmos. Those are biblical examples. Reflect on times during your life in which you saw God's intersection in life and people missed it or misunderstood it.

The reverse is also true. It is possible for life to intersect with God and for people to miss it or misunderstand it. Consider the biblical examples of Noah's ark, Saul being spared by David, nine of the 10 lepers who didn't return to thank Jesus, Pharisees stopping a healed man for carrying his mat on Sabbath, Pilate passing judgment on Jesus, Jericho onlookers disgusted when Jesus chose to go to the house of Zacchaeus, Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus concerned about his drop in business. Once again, reflect on your own lifetime. When has life intersected with God and people missed it or misunderstood it?

Theology without an expression in life is theory. God comes to us where we are, in our culture. To talk about God apart from the context of life makes God imaginary instead of real. Vegetarians might have difficulty accepting that Jesus ate meat. Consider how difficult it would be to say he drank wine! Making either of those acceptable or "good" in your culture today fails to understand Jesus in your own culture.

You can't take Jesus from Jewish culture 2,000 years ago and transplant him into your culture today without first understanding him in that previous culture? Would Jesus wear jeans today? He certainly didn't in Jerusalem or around Galilee. But jeans didn't even exist then! Would he ordain women to lead the church? They weren't even looking outside the tribe of Levi at that time. Those unable to understand Bible times will be susceptible to making outlandish claims about how God relates to culture today.

Only when we understand culture can we grasp the timeless truths and principles that transcend culture. But these still must find new expressions in new or different cultures. Sometimes the new expression will be the same, but at other times it will be different, and might even be opposite (Case, 1996). Paul wrote concerning public worship that "every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head" (1 Cor 11:5 NKJV). A woman who wears a flamboyant hat to church and claims she does so to follow Scripture simply "doesn't get it"! She uses Scripture to sanctify her own pride and ego.

But this doesn't mean we should give up when it comes to seeking and finding the interplay between God and culture. Culture provides the medium to live one's theology. It must be done in life, and we live our lives in some type of culture.

Culture without connection to God yields limited existence. We can live our lives in an everyday, hum drum rhythm. Many people do. They fit into their culture, perhaps seeking nothing more than pleasure or the avoidance of pain. But where is the supernatural? What can they worship? To whom do they express beauty, joy, fear, hope, love? What do they do with death? Just keep going through the motions? Connection with God provides a completely different perspective on one's culture.

Part of the difficulty in the relationship between theology and culture comes from the tension of how God's unchanging nature plays out in a world that is constantly changing and characterized by diversity. Because God takes the initiative to come to us in our context(s), we should expect it to be different from one place to another and from one time to another. "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son" (Hebrews 11:1-2 NLT). In spite of coming in ways unique to each setting and time, people often didn't get it! Some resisted with passion. Religious leaders took the necessary precautions to not violate their Sabbath rules or prevent their participation in Passover rituals as they orchestrated the crucifixion of the Son of God.

We need humility to not be so blinded by our own notions of culture that we follow in similar pathways. We need humility to be gentle and gracious regarding our own grasp of understanding of God. We need discernment regarding God's presence and activity in the world. Young adults and youth generally spurn theological and doctrinal certitude. They reject agendas that protect and preserve church territory, institutions and resources, especially at the cost of relationships.

We also need a bit of reality. In the Western World, Christianity formed key elements of the culture. That can no longer be assumed. While many claim to be Christian, their practice gets individualized. Western culture has drifted to the secular and materialistic. Neither aligns very well with Jesus. It's not that Western culture is overtly hostile to Christianity. It simply relegates it to the periphery or low priority for the majority.

How can we find a Godly consistency in a culture in which God isn't placed in the primary spot? How can our theology be anchored in God rather than in the

culture that drifts away from God? Medieval Christian church music had a *cantus firmus*, a fixed melody, sung by a "tenor" (literally "to hold down") while other music played around it (Metayas, 2010). Likewise, Jesus Christ serves as our *cantus firmus* for doing theology. By holding to Jesus as our *cantus firmus* we can go boldly into the world, testing to see if our music harmonizes. An obvious question becomes, "Who establishes the *cantus firmus*?"

Theology is straining to hear and discern that melody. Too often Jesus gets used as an empty container that anyone can fill with whatever one wants. In contrast, we believe we need some discipline on how we do theology. It must begin in Scripture even though many young people aren't biblically literate. The Bible can shape our mind to interpret reality. If we don't take things to Scripture, we will end up using someone like a current guru or pop culture icon or something like the internet as our source of authority. And it's not just young people who are biblically illiterate. Previous generations are susceptible to relying on established traditions rather than Scripture.

Good starting points for timeless biblical truths to all cultures include love for God and others, the golden rule of treating others the way you would like to be treated, the 10 commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Even Micah's pointed statement of what is good and God requires of us—to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:8 NKJV) can be placed in the foundation of timeless truths.

Resist the temptation to put everyone through the same press to the point of needing everyone to accept Jesus in the same way. The individual struggle to come to the point of experiencing Jesus for one's self cannot be handed down or purchased at discount warehouses. Let your individual struggle make you appreciative of another person's journey. Be ready to share your testimony. Listen for the testimony of others, expecting it to be unique for that person, including the first generation. The acceptance of individual testimonies in no way limits us to a "Jesus and me" religion.

Theology is not a task to be done in isolation, but in the combination of Scripture and culture—where God intersects with people and their lives. Turning to God is a turning to the other, just as a knowledge of God leads to a knowledge of the other. We do this by asking "What is going on?" and then "Why is it going on?" From this description of life, we go to scripture to then ask, "What

should be going on?” After wrestling with scripture we ask, “How shall we respond?”

We can't form a theology for second and third generation youth and young adult ministry without being with young people, listening to them, hearing their struggles and questions and perspectives. But when we do go to them, the resulting theology guides both them and us in life.

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