



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

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Gospel and Culture

Fight, adapt, reclaim, or withdraw?

The word “Christian” is overused as an adjective these days. We hear about Christian music, Christian ethics, Christian education, and Christian culture. It is not uncommon to hear some pundit speak of the “Christian response” to a given social or political issue. However, if you listen to Christians, you will hear all kinds of answers to the questions relating to how we are supposed to relate to our culture. There is no monolithic Christian view.

Some Christians would say, “Changing culture is not our priority.” Others would argue, “It is too far gone.” You might even hear some say, “Culture is under the control of evil.” Or some think, “We are so irrelevant, we have nothing to say to culture. It is ahead of the church.” There are also those who say, “The boat is sinking, and there is

only enough time to save a few. We can’t suspend our efforts in getting people saved, just to prop up a culture that is doomed to destruction.” And yet others rally to the cry, “If we will get involved, we can take over this culture for the glory of God. Lets wake up the silent majority.”

In Protestant and Evangelical Christianity, several significant contributors have made an effort to identify the various approaches that Christians take toward cultural responsibility. In the early twentieth century, Richard Neibuhr in *Christ and Culture* spoke of, “the Christ of culture,” “Christ against culture,” “Christ above culture,” “Christ in paradox with culture,” and “Christ transforming culture.” Timothy Keller in *Center Church* uses the terms, “Transformationist,” “Relevance,” “Coun-

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terculturalist,” and “Two Kingdoms.” Each of these systems is instructive and helps us recognize where we stand and why. Though hardly anyone fully identifies with only one approach, the very attempt to classify helps us see the differences in our approaches and hopefully enables dialogue.

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Essentially, Christians have wrestled with whether we should fight culture, reclaim culture, adapt to culture, or withdraw from culture. There is a measure of validity in each approach, depending on the ideological season of the culture, as well as which portion of scripture is emphasized. For instance, when the culture is beginning to idolize values inconsistent with the Christian faith, we are to “keep ourselves unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). When we recognize that Jesus redeemed all that was lost in the fall and that he commanded us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18–20), we are eager to invade culture with the message of hope and restoration. When we realize that the

church has lost its voice in the culture by passivity and irrelevance, we seek to make the timeless message timely by speaking the language the culture understands (1 Corinthians 14:7–12). When the daily dialogue of culture is so different from the truth of Christ’s words, Christians seek to establish community where they can be nurtured by like-minded believers (2 Corinthians 6:14–18). Of course, some have taken their emphasis to extremes without regard for the different perspectives of others. Others have no understanding of why they believe what they profess and continue to follow the traditions of their own tribe, repeating worn out mantras about unexamined ideas.

In what season are we as American Christians? Several theologians have suggested various stages or cycles in the church’s relationship to culture. Following that pattern, I want to suggest four stages. The **Pre-Christian stage** of culture is when a pagan society is being confronted by the gospel of transforming grace. A new kind of peace, divine justice, human dignity, mercy, and purpose is introduced. The human flourishing thermometer rises. Then, there is the **Alliance stage** where there is not much difference in the church and the culture. The church and public schools, local governments, the arts, and civic organiza-

tions proclaim common values. But then the culture moves away from this alliance as idols of human exaltation arise, initiating the **Post-alliance stage**. The church initially responds (after being awakened by a cold slap in the face) by fighting to keep the benefits of the previous alliance. It is a "values war." If **Renewal** does happen, it will be when the focus moves from values to the original message that created the cultural change in the first stage. In trying to identify what stage we are in, I think we can safely say we are beyond stage two. The culture has moved away from previous alliances with the church. The fight is on over values and laws that reflect them. Renewal is scant, but beginning.

The book of Acts records the Apostle Paul's encounters with both the pagan and religious worlds. We don't find him strategizing about affecting culture as much as about getting his message heard. When the whole gospel is proclaimed and practiced, it produces a countercultural community that influences culture like leaven permeates dough. Eventually, people in spheres of influence hear and believe. Then structures of society begin to change.

Paul is clear that God's order is the only way to build. He is not afraid to identify wrong as wrong while he is demonstrating his love for those in the wrong. He shows

both understanding and appreciation for the biblical narrative as the basis of reality. His life-message affirms: (1) The world is created as good. God ordered it according to his love, with blessing in mind. (2) The world is affected by sin. The curse of idolatry affects creation and influences even the most well-intentioned human decisions. (3) The world is sustained by common grace. After the flood, God promised Noah and his descendants that the earth would be sustained by the rhythms and principles of God's grace. But that is not enough for the restoration of creation. (4) The world is redeemed and restored by the special grace revealed in Jesus, his Son. The new creation began in him, and will be consummated in his final return.

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Believers are reconciled to God now and live in the privilege of sharing his very life. They are sustaining salt in culture. They are hope-giving lights in a deceived world. But mostly, they are zealous to reclaim all that their Lord has purchased with his death.

They know cultures will change for the good as they go everywhere proclaiming the word of Christ, and they rejoice that flourishing takes place. But just sustaining culture by the promises of Noah's covenant is not enough. They want to honor their King. Whatever he loves, they set their hearts to

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love. Whatever he redeemed they want to restore. They know that the completion of the new creation awaits Jesus' last coming, but that doesn't stop them from living as new creations while they wait.

We live as citizens of the kingdom of God as well as the nation of our birth. Like Adam, we are given the privilege and responsibility to tend our particular garden. Just because there are gullies in the field and weeds in the rows, we can't walk away. We have been given God's presence, provision, and wisdom. It should be a better garden when we turn it over to our kids and grandkids. We fight the perversion

in our culture, but bless the culture. We reclaim it, not by self-righteous triumphalism, but by proclaiming the message of Jesus with a servant's heart. We adapt to culture by addressing the issues of our day with clear prophetic truth that reveals the incomprehensible love of God through Jesus. We withdraw only to be refreshed and reinvigorated to go again into a world struggling to find hope.

Christians are people of Christ. He is the center of their world. His glory is their highest motivation. His commission is their marching orders. As they take seriously their identity, the atmosphere around them is affected. The people around them have opportunity to touch a kind of love that is from another world. They aren't trying to get the adjective, "Christian" before every noun. They want to liberate the good world God created by simply being faithful Christians, a noun.



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