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I Practicing Discernment

Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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Christianity and Culture

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The close of the twentieth century finds American evangelicals in the midst of a diverse culture. This is true not only as it applies to ethnicity; more importantly, it applies to a diversity of ideas or world views, many of which do not contain a Christian base. These ideas clamor for attention through publications, various media, education, entertainment and other avenues of communication. As a result, the evangelical is challenged to practice *discernment*. His senses are in need of refinement with the Bible as the base for that refinement.

I. Practicing discernment

In order to practice discernment within contemporary culture three preliminaries should be established.

A. *First, the word "culture" is in need of definition.*

The literature on the subject demonstrates the difficulty of affirming a universal definition.

1. Contrary to a popular understanding, a definition is not to be relegated solely to the arts, even though the arts are certainly an integral part of culture.
2. Adamson Hoebel, an anthropologist, states:

Culture is the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance. {1}

3. In an oft-quoted passage T. S. Eliot provides cogent insights:

Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other peoples and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct

civilisation, that it was *worth while* for that civilisation to have existed.{2}

4. A theologian, Donald Bloesch, asserts that

[Culture] can also be defined theologically. In this sense *culture* is the task appointed to humans to realize their destiny in the world in service to the glory of God.{3}

5. Emil Brunner, another theologian, has written

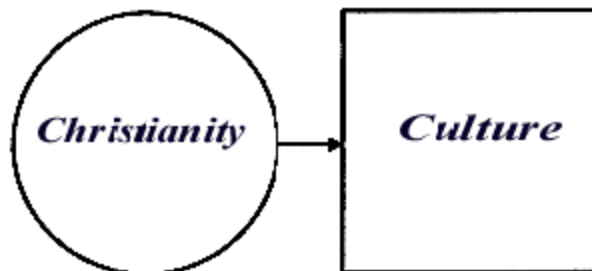
Culture is that which man does beyond biological necessity.{4}

In order to have a guide for our thoughts, we will use this concise statement as a foundation.

2. *Second, the place of the evangelical and the role that he/she should play within culture should be established.*

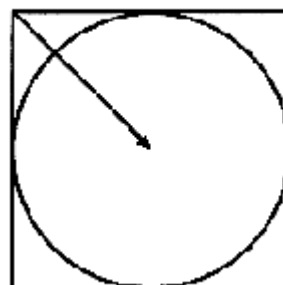
The centrality of discernment obviously means that the Christian is to be involved enough with culture to know what should be avoided and what should be appropriated. Using Richard Niebuhr's paradigm{5} as a guide, a choice is in order.

1. Christ Against Culture *Christ Against Culture* asserts opposition, total separation, and an aura of antagonism. Tertullian, the monastic tradition, Tolstoy, Menno Simons, Jacob Amman, Jacob Hutter, John Nelson



Darby, and Jacques Ellul are exemplars. Charles H. Kraft postulates three serious errors in regard to this position: "First, it equates the concept 'culture' with only the negative use of the Greek word *kosmos* in the New Testament." Second, culture is seen only as an external thing from which one can escape. Third, "Since Satan is able to use culture to his ends, all of culture is evil." {6}

2. Christ of Culture The *Christ of Culture* view "accommodates the gospel to what the world values most dearly." {7} "Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy." {8} The Gnostics, Abelard, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, liberationists, and process and feminist theologies are

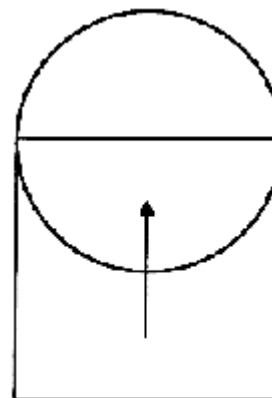


exponents. Harry Blamires cogently responds to this position:

Radical theology is obsessed with the passion for adjusting the faith to the changing fashions of the intellectual *Zeitgeist*. It is desperately anxious to be on good terms with 'the world'. Its fancy has been taken by the possibilities of reinvigorating the Christian body with the supposed insights of humanistic secularism at a time when humanistic secularism is gasping on a bed of sickness. Since its condition is terminal, a great opportunity presents itself. Cut out the theological heart of the Christian Body. Transplant the heart from humanistic secularism in the hope of revitalising the Christian Body for a few more years. But every drop of healthy fluid in the Christian bloodstream rejects the donated organ.{9}

3. Christ Above Culture Those who espouse a *Christ Above Culture* view are what Niebuhr terms the "church of the center." The word *synthesis* is important in a broad understanding of this position.

Their aim is to correlate the fundamental questions of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation. They therefore strive for a theology of synthesis, with cultural expectations subordinated to Christian concerns.{10}



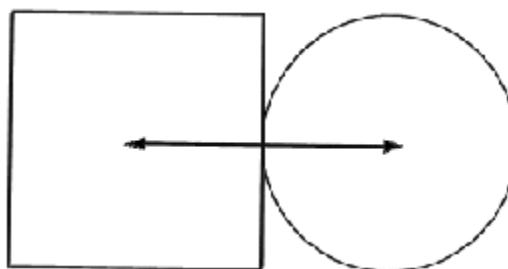
The primary synthesists are Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, and Paul Tillich. This position also displays weaknesses:

The effort to bring Christ and culture, God's work and man's, the temporal and the eternal, law and grace, into one system of thought and practice tends, perhaps inevitably, to the absolutizing of what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite form, and the materialization of the dynamic.{11}

4. Christ and Culture in Paradox

Niebuhr outlines what he calls *Christ and Culture in Paradox*. The *dualists* are found within this view. The "position is dualistic in that the

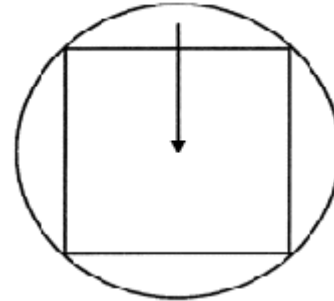
Christian is said to belong to two realms (the spiritual and temporal) and must live in the tension of fulfilling responsibilities to both." {12} Niebuhr uses the term *paradox* to explain the fact that the dualist "is standing on the side of man in the encounter with God, yet



seeks to interpret the Word of God which he has heard coming from the other side." { 13 } Martin Luther is cited as the chief exponent. The dualists contribute much of importance. In particular, their emphasis on human depravity must be a part of our thinking. This depravity is not just individual; it is also corporate. But this emphasis on depravity should not dissuade us from interacting with cultural institutions. These institutions need the influence of a Christian mind. The last view addresses this.

5. Christ the Transformer of Culture

The last perspective is *Christ the Transformer of Culture*. "These are the people who try to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God. In their thinking, Calvary must be fulfilled in Pentecost." { 14 } The major exponents are Augustine, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and Karl Barth. The flaws can include giving culture too much credence; an overemphasis on the works of man instead of God; and centering on man's efforts instead of God's power. But we believe this view honors the biblical mandate. "The 'salt' of people changed by the gospel must change the world." { 15 } But we must remember that this "salt" is to be seasoned with the fruit of the Spirit. As salt, we are to be used by God to add flavor and act to preserve that which is pleasing to Him. We are not to transform the culture by force, but by the power of God's Spirit living through us.



3. *Third, the word discernment must be defined.*

The word *discernment* is deserving of study within its biblical context. In order to transform culture, we must continually recognize what is in need of transformation and what is not. The word and its derivatives are found frequently in Scripture. Several passages, one from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament, demonstrate its usage.

1. Genesis 41 relates the remarkable ways in which Joseph practiced discernment in a culture that was not his own.
2. Matthew 16:3, Acts 17:11, 1 Corinthians 2:14--16, and Hebrews 5:14 include aspects of this term.

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