

In the World but not Of the World?

Gospel, Church and Culture

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Introduction

A practical form of atheism has settled over western culture. The residue of Modernity with its coconspirators of secularism and technology are still present. The influence of the social pragmatism of Postmodernism continues to increase unabated as its paradigm progresses in the universities, the media and the political process. Multiculturalism, with its educational agenda, challenges the possibility of ultimate truth or values and replaces it with the socially constructed truth and values of each culture. Diversity has taken on new dimensions as social pragmatism continues to secure dominance in the intellectual life of the west.¹

Diversity and tolerance have always been a part of the cultural experience of the west. There is a sense in which there is a growing pluralism in western nations as globalization and education has contributed to increase the diversity in most nations. Most countries did not foresee the present ethnic and language diversity. It is probably accurate to affirm that one of the meanings of multiculturalism is this growing diversity in the west. Frankly, we would have to agree that there is greater diversity today than in the past.

Pluralism may also denote the need for tolerance between diverse peoples. Tolerance, with its concomitant of civility, has always been a hallmark of common grace that allows for society in a depraved world. Without God's common grace that keeps people from the full manifestation of depravity; both homogeneous and heterogeneous cultures would be in constant turmoil and conflict. This emphasis on tolerance has been a part of the west's response to the diversity within a nation for a significant time period. Often, the protection of diversity has become a matter of law.

Epistemology a Key Issue

Philosophical pluralism, however, goes far beyond these common understandings of the word. Affirming a form of social pragmatism, contemporary pluralism contends that there is no known standard whereby you may judge one culture superior to another or one religion true and others false. What makes this

¹ For an introduction to Postmodernism see: *A Primer on Postmodernism*, by Stanley Grenz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) and *The Way of the Modern World*, by Craig Gay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

approach different is that they do not deny the existence of small truth that is socially formed, but they do deny the existence of any criteria to judge one socially formed truth assertion superior to any other socially formed truth judgment.²

This is the first time in the west that epistemology has been rendered impossible outside of socially formed truth. Each culture is seen to have its own narrative that includes its creed, cult, code, food, dress, music, art, language and so on. In other words, pluralism is a composite of multiple socially formed cultural narratives that are thus socially conditioned. What is denied is the existence of any overarching meta-narrative that can be applied to discern which narrative is true or which value set is superior to all other value sets. The absence of such a meta-narrative should thus produce in each nation the right of each culture to maintain and develop its socially constructed life forms.

Biblical Idea of the World

The word "world" (κόσμος) in the Bible has many nuances in its semantic range. For instance it can be used of heaven and earth, the universe, the world system, people and their behavior, adornment, a large quantity, and a supernatural power.³ In the sense of people and their behavior, it refers to the mass of humanity in their rebellion against God. This rebellion since Babel takes on many forms, but the Bible sums them up in this use of the word "world." "World" represents man's attempt to bring coherence and continuity to life experience by constructing his own order.⁴ The collective expression of this continuity and coherence is usually identified as culture. Behind each attempt to reconstruct reality independent of the true God, is a form of human arrogance that demands autonomy that will enable mastery over reality and people. Technology and science represent the attempt of mastery over things. When this mastery includes financial security in a consumer society, it makes it very possible to live as if there is no God even if religion is an aspect of most of the diversity within the culture.

Culture is a notoriously difficult notion to define. Perhaps a final definition is not necessary and a heuristic definition will serve the present purpose. Weber

² Donald Carson presents a good discussion of these understandings of pluralism in *God and Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, pp. 31-42).

³ Nida and Louw in the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan develops this idea in *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline of Evangelical Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Gay also develops this thesis in his book.

called it "the web of significance, the matrix with reference to which everything makes sense." Geertz called it "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols." Culture may be tentatively defined as the cumulative product of all of man's activity in his signification, development, and expression of God, himself, other selves and the world.⁵ All cultures interpret, develop and express their understanding of themselves, other selves, the reality outside of them and their concept of God. It does appear that one of the Biblical uses of the word "world" fits the pattern of a collective construction of order and continuity.

Kingdom, Church and Culture

One of the key observations of the use of "world" in the Bible is that the New Testament writers never use it for the people of God or the future state. It is never used of God's construction of reality or the continuity that binds it together in the new heaven and earth. The Biblical word that describes both the present and future redeemed people and reality is kingdom (βασιλεία). This point raises the perpetual issue of the relationship of the kingdom to the world. To state the crux differently, what is the relationship of Christ to culture? Niebuhr's five alternatives of (1) Christ Against Culture; (2) Christ of Culture; (3) Christ Above Culture; (4) Christ and Culture in Paradox; and (5) Christ the Transformer of Culture has governed thinking about possible relationship for over half a century.⁶ Finally, the topic may be stated in terms of the relationship of the church to the world.

Enlightenment Captivity of the Church

Since our cultures have become much more pagan than secular, the issue of the relation between the church and the world takes on paramount importance. Defining the world as man's attempt to bring coherence and continuity to lived experience, gives new significance to Christ's assertion that we are in the world but not of the world.⁷ In many settings the church seems much more of the world while in the world. Too often she seeks to legitimate herself and define herself by the standards of the larger culture. Success is measured by the cultural standards of size and influence. While modernity is collapsing in the west, the

⁵ See the following for definitions and functions of culture: Nigel Lee, *The Central Significance of Culture*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976); Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951); Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972).

⁶ Niebuhr, Richard H., *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

⁷ See footnote 4 for the source of this definition.

church is turning to the models of business, sociology and therapy in order to survive the change. She has lost eschatological urgency as her life is framed in the normalcy of the present and not the kingdom to come. Her status and power come from the standards of the world and thus she is seduced to turn the world into the kingdom that avoids the cross, suffering and the good news of the gospel. A strange kind of supply side ecclesiology has emerged on the basis of the needs of the religious consumer. Rather than being led by God's eschatological reign, the church seems to be market driven to meet the needs of the world.

Faithfulness and Effectiveness

Faithfulness and effectiveness do not have equal status in the church. If the day-to-day life of the church is not grounded in and does not embody its theological commitments then it is inappropriate and deficient. God's people organize for only one purpose: gospel mission. Church administration is called to be faithful to her theological roots; to discern, interpret and proclaim the gospel as the liberating power to transform the world. The way the church manages her affairs, makes and implements decisions about planning, staffing, evaluation, and programs - is to be directed by her theological understanding of the vocation of the church in the world. Effectiveness must always be in the service of faithfulness. When it is adopted on its own terms it inevitably leads to unfaithfulness.

Church – Kingdom Relationship

The church is the present mode of the kingdom and is between the gospel and culture.⁸ The kingdom is a gift one receives in the present and in the future. It is a present reality we enter by faith yet it is a gift that awaits inheritance in the future. Kingdom is also a realm that is entered and is not to be identified with any country or political regime. Receiving and entering are actions that mark a turning from other loyalties and hopes to the singular hope and loyalty to the only true God as he has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Instead of defining ourselves by our culture, we need to define ourselves as members of the body of Christ for whom the kingdom in the present and anticipated in the future is the focus of our allegiance and loyalty.

⁸ This material has been gleaned from *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* edited by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Bearing *the Witness of the Spirit* by George Hunsberger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Missional *Church*, edited by Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and *A Peculiar People*, by Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996).

Conclusion

Kingdom and church are not identical realities. The church is a people under the reign of God in Jesus Christ. Not only is she the people of the reign of God, but she also represents that reign as the community who are the light of the world, the salt of the earth and a city set on a hill. Instead of being people living by the standards of the culture who by the way are members of Christ's church, we are citizens of the kingdom and thus represent and serve the kingdom as its messengers. Broken as she is, the church persists by the Spirit as a foretaste of the kingdom that spells hope for the renewal and reconciliation of all things to God and his reign. In the world but not of the world places the church between the gospel and culture and offers the cultural an alternative culture under the reign of God. In this sense the church is the preview community, the foretaste community and the harbinger of the coming reign of God in Christ. As people of the reign of God we are entrusted with the good news of the gospel of the kingdom by which the church offers the world an alternative to its multiple social patterns and orders.

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