

Summary of H. Richard Niebuhr "Christ and Culture"

1. *Christ against culture.* According to this perspective, Christians must **live in opposition** toward their culture. They must live by the standards of the Kingdom of God, quite apart from an involvement in the world. Believers have a choice: they can live in the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of the world, one or the other, but not both at the same time. A Christian must not and cannot "traffic" with the exceedingly sinful world without compromise and contamination. The Church is therefore a counterculture, a culture within culture, a culture that lives by Kingdom principles and values and whose true citizenship is in heaven. Any attachment to this world — its goals, knowledge, wealth, etc. — must be denied for the sake of Christ and the kingdom of God. So, when the question of Christ and culture is presented to this group, they choose Christ, not culture.

2. *Christ of culture.* This point of view is the opposite of the previous outlook. Christians in this camp assume a **more liberal perspective** in contrast to the radical conservatism of those who stand in opposition to culture. This group is at home in their relationship with Christ, but more so in their relationship to culture. There is no great tension between them. In fact, advocates of this school of thought view culture to some extent through the eyes of Christ. But they are also willing to submit their understanding of Christ to the values and attitudes of their culture. For them, both Christ and culture possess authority over their lives, and both are modified to fit as deemed necessary. Such believers are for the most part oriented to "this world," yet they do not deny the world above. Still, culture tends to have the upper hand in thought and life for these believers.

3. *Christ above culture.* For Christians in this group, the issue of Christ and culture is not an either/or decision, but is both/and. For them, there are two basic layers to human existence. First is the cultural layer, the natural life of human beings that includes various obligations to society—work, education, political life, the arts, and so on. But there is also the spiritual layer of life in Christ that transcends natural life in culture. Believers must be **loyal to both realms**, to both culture and Christ. Both must be taken very seriously. To choose Christ over culture as the first group does, or to choose culture over Christ as the second group does is wrong. The radical requirements of Christ and culture must be kept in the here and now. What is unique about this group is how Christ is set on top of culture. Christ enters into life from above with gifts like salvation and revelation which human reason and effort cannot attain on their own. Rather, they are bestowed from above and added on top of natural life: hence, Christ above culture. One can see how easy it would be for Christians in this camp to compartmentalize faith and seal it off from regular life.

4. *Christ and culture in tension or paradox.* For believers who adhere to this model of relating Christ and culture, the matter is once again both/and, rather than either/or. Yet they relate these two domains in a different way than the immediately preceding group. There are two kingdoms existing side by side: the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. Believers must recognize the role that both kingdoms play in life, and learn how **to live obediently in both** simultaneously. The Christian is forced to live in obedience to God and in obedience to the sinful structures of a created, but fallen world (ordinances of creation family, business, secular government, etc.). The doctrine of creation asserts the goodness of the world. The doctrine of the incarnation testifies that Christ assumed the created order and participated in it. In light of creation and incarnation, the doctrine of redemption entails that all of life has been redeemed potentially—already, but not yet. There is a tension between what is and what will be, and the Christian and the Church is caught up in that dilemma. In short, there are two realms of existence: one for the non-Christian and one for the Christian, but the Christian must live in both simultaneously, and this puts all believers in tension and in paradox. How to live in the world meaningfully as a Christian without succumbing to its perversions is the key issue in life.

5. *Christ the transformer of culture.* According to this point of view, the various structures of this life can be **restored in Christ**. There is no withdrawal from culture as the first group recommends, but engagement. Christ is not accommodated to culture as the second group does, but culture is subordinated to Christ. Christ is not placed on top of culture as the third group recommends, but culture is rooted and grounded in Christ. Christ is not placed beside culture as the fourth school of thought advocates, but rather is located at its center. From that vantage point, He exerts His redemptive power through the agency of His Church. Consequently, no aspect of life is alien to the gospel or the kingdom of God. It belongs to Him and must be influenced by the gospel through the Church. This view assumes neither an optimistic or pessimistic position toward the world, but one that is realistic. It is neither triumphalistic nor defeatist, but trusts in God for the victories He provides. It recognizes the power of sin, and yet the greater power of God's kingdom. Thus, its goal is to advance the redemptive rule of Christ in all areas of thought and life by the power of God. The Church as the community of Christians exists to glorify God on earth by carrying out the original purposes of God as specified in the creation decree or cultural mandate in the context of redemption in Jesus Christ.