Part 5: Cultural Engagement

Adapted from Chapters 15 to 18 of Center Church
(Redeemer City to City and Timothy J. Keller, Center Church
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2012))

Introduction

There is perhaps no more divisive a question than how Christians should relate to our broader culture. Christians cannot avoid "engaging culture" because they live here, so they need to actively think about culture and engage it positively, or be unwittingly shaped by it.

Some believe that we should adapt more to the culture. Others believe that the church is already too influenced by the culture. Most church leaders are somewhere in the middle, but can't agree on what we should confront and to what we should adapt.

In this section, we will be looking at the relationship between the church and the broader culture in which it finds itself. The study will be divided up into the following sub-headings:

- The Cultural Crisis of the Church
- The Cultural Responses of the Church - Analyzing the Models
- How all the Models are Right—and Wrong.
- Cultural Engagement through Blended Insights

I. The Cultural Crisis of the Church

Evangelicals in the western societies were historically somewhat indifferent to culture. In the middle of the 20th century, however, a "basic shift of mood" happened in our culture. There was a *crisis of confidence* regarding the idea of moral authority itself. At that time, Christians discovered that the cultural institutions were no longer inculcating the basic beliefs and sentiments about life and morality that made much of the church's message seem true and coherent to the listeners.

II. The Cultural Responses of the Church – Analyzing the Models

[In presentations of the gospel], people do not simply reject the classic gospel presentations—they don't seem to even understand them.

Over the last few decades, the church has developed a number of models for how it should relate to culture. Briefly, they are:

- The 'pietist' model - It believes that the main problem of society is that there are not enough real Christians. Therefore, the main thing

REDEMPTION HILL CHURCH

we can do to help the world and change society now is to put all of our effort and emphasis on evangelism.

- The Religious Right (late 1970's) led by Jerry Falwell who came to believe that American culture was losing its moral basis and so he led conservative Christians to become a political force within the Republican party.
- The 'Seeker Church' movement (late 1970's and 80's) who 're-invented church' so that it was appealing to secular, unchurched people, using sophisticated marketing and product-development techniques from the business world.
- The "Two Kingdoms" model claims that God rules everything in two distinctly different ways. In the church he rules Christians through his Word. In the world, he rules all people through common grace and natural revelation—wherein God gives all people intuitively a sense of right and wrong apart from the Scripture. This group argues that "kingdom work" does *not* include transforming and redeeming culture, but only building up the church.
- The "World-view" model which believes that all cultural activity is based on some world-view, some set of beliefs about God, human nature, right and wrong, human destiny, and so on. If Christians simply do their work and cultural activity from a Christian world-view, this will necessarily result in cultural transformation.

The above models can be re-characterized in the following manner:

1. The Transformationist model which advocates that the church engages culture largely through emphasis on Christians penetrating the culture with their Christian world-view, especially through political and single-issue activism such as education, social intervention, etc.

2. The Relevance model believes the primary solution is for the church to adapt and connect to what is happening in the world. It is optimistic about what God is doing out in the world and culture apart from the church and therefore calls for re-inventing the church's ministry so it is relevant to the needs and sensibilities of people in the culture, and to being more committed to the good of the human community.

3. The Counter-Kingdom model's emphasis is on the church being a "contrast" community to the world. Absolute antithesis between the "kingdom of this world"—a system based on power and human glory—and Christ's kingdom: based on love, service, and giving up power. Neither the church nor Christians should expect to see improvements in society, and certainly not culture transformed along Christian lines. The real problem today is that the church is not truly being the *church*. The church is to be a counter-culture that is a "sign of the kingdom" to the world.

4. The Two Kingdoms model's core teaching is that God rules all of creation, but he does so in two distinct ways. First, there is 'common kingdom' where all human beings are members, and where people know

REDEMPTION HILL CHURCH

right and wrong through natural revelation or "common grace." Second, there is the spiritual kingdom of God, and the only members of it are Christians. The Two Kingdoms model celebrates a secular, neutral state, and tells Christians to pursue their callings in the world with skill and joy, whatever they may be. They warn us not to be grandiose in our expectations of social improvement. We should not expect too much out of life—we should set all our hopes fully on the future hope of Christ's final salvation and return.

III. How all the Models are Right – and Wrong

The way forward on engaging culture is a careful balance between a number of polarities. Each of the models holds up a very important truth. Each sits on the precipice of a particular "cliff" that it is important we not plunge over.

In one sense, dividing people into broad categories, or models, always has pitfalls. Some people conform well to the type, while others do not. Within a given model, we can find areas of pointed disagreement. And as we've seen in the case of the Christ and culture issue, people change over time; thoughtful proponents a given model should always be open to having their views tempered and enriched by insights from the others. We see also a growing body of work that appreciates and criticises the various Christ and culture models and calls for a nuanced and balanced approach.

Each of the four models we've looked at has biblical support, and each effectively responds to a key problem the church faces in relating to culture. And yet none of the models, taken alone, give us the full picture. None of them have been able to win the field. Keller states that most of the concerns with the varying models standing alone can be reduced to two fundamental questions. The first question deals with our attitude toward cultural change. *Should we be pessimistic or optimistic about the possibility for cultural change?* The second question exposes our understanding of the nature of culture itself and speaks to its potential for redemption: *Is the current culture redeemable and good, or fundamentally fallen?*

Cultural changes tend to flow out of urban and academic centers. But these changes are typically not initiated by the innermost elites with the highest positions of prestige, for they have a vested interest in the status quo. Nor are they started by grassroots people at the periphery of cultural power, for they are often powerless to effect lasting change. In addition, the culture changes more readily when networks of common cause overlap different cultural fields. Each of the four models of the church's relating to culture has a tendency, especially among some of its more strident proponents, to be either *too optimistic or too pessimistic* about culture change.

D.A. Carson helps address the second question about the nature of culture when he points out how each of the models for cultural engagement fails to do justice to the fullness of the biblical story line or "metanarrative"--the great turning points and stages in the history of God's redemption: (1) creation, (2) the fall into sin, (3) redemption first through Israel and the law, then through Christ and the new covenant, and finally (4) heaven, hell, and the restoration of all things. Each model tends to overlook the implication of the points on the biblical storyline other than the one around which it finds its center of gravity.

IV. Cultural Engagement through Blended Insights

As we have seen in this week's study, the cultural situation in the West has forced every church to adopt some model of relating Christ to culture. Keller believes many pastors are largely unaware of the presuppositions, historical roots, or weaknesses of their model, or of the biblical merits of other models. How should we seek the center?

The first principle is that the proponents of each model should do their best to discern and incorporate the insights of the other models. A *Center Church* approach seeks to blend the cultural and biblical insights of all the models into our actual practice and ministry. We should also recognize that Christianity's relationship to a culture goes through cycles which Keller has posited as seasons:

- *Winter* describes a church that is not only in a hostile relationship to a pre-Christian culture but is gaining little traction.
- *Spring* is a situation in which the church is embattled, even persecuted by a pre-Christian culture, but is growing (e.g, as in China).
- *Summer* can be called the "allied church," where the church is highly regarded by the public and we find so many Christians in the centers of cultural production that Christians feel at home in the culture.
- *Autumn* is where we find ourselves in the West today, becoming increasingly marginalized in a post-Christian culture and looking for new ways to both strengthen our distinctiveness and reach out winsomely.

Keller also posits that pastors and leaders also need to follow their convictions and be true to their gifts and calling. Each model tends to attract people on the basis of their different ministry gifts and callings. As the apostle Paul has famously told us, while all Christians must have the Spirit's fruit, no Christian has all the Spirit's gifts. Keller states that differing gifts are often revealed by the different human needs with which they resonate. Evangelizing is a duty of a Christian, as is helping the poor. But these ministries are also gifts--some people are especially gifted to do evangelism, and other to show mercy to those in need.

REDEMPTION HILL CHURCH

So what does this mean? Keller believes it indicates we should inhabit the model that fits our convictions, whose "tool kit" best fits our gifts. Once we know our model, we should be able, depending on the cultural seasons and context, to use tools from the other kits. We exhibit a basic modal stance, or posture, toward culture, yet we can also "gesture" on an ad-hoc basis from another model.

One of the greatest points of tension between the models is in the way they understand the *mission* of the church. The traditional understanding of the Great Commission is that the church has been given the mandate to go into all the world to preach the gospel in order to make disciples of men and women from all nations. But three of the four models seem to add significantly to this mission. Many fear that emphasizing mercy and justice, or political and cultural engagement, will displace or at least severely erode the church's capacity for evangelism and discipleship.

At this point, it is important to remind ourselves of the critical distinction between the "church institutional" and the "church organic." Abraham Kuyper taught that the church institutional was the gathered church, organized under its officers and ministers. It is call to do "Word and sacrament"--to preach the gospel, baptize, and make disciples. This he distinguished from the church organic, referring to all Christians living in the world who have been discipled and equipped to bring the gospel to bear on all of life.

Theologian John Bolt writes the following: "In Kuyper's view, Christians who go out into their various vocations do so neither as direct emissaries of the institutional church nor as mere individual believers... Christian social, cultural, and political action does not flow directly from structures and authorities of the church, but comes to expression organically in the various spheres of life as believers live out the faith and spirituality that develops and is nurtured in the church's worship and discipline."

This distinction helps to bridge the gaps between the Christ and culture models. If it is maintained, then those becoming enamored with justice and cultural engagement will avoid falling into the error of the older mainline churches that lost their vision for evangelism and discipleship. On the other hand, faithful churches concerned to maintain the mission of the church as disciple making will disciple people to evangelize--but also engage culture and do justice.

V. Looking Ahead

How do Christians engage and influence culture?

By being famous for our commitment to the common good, but integrating our faith with our work, by working with visible and admirable skill and excellence and doing so within the cultural centers and institutions, by forming and being embedded in beautiful and 'thick' Christian counter-cultural communities, and by being sensitive to the

REDEMPTION
HILL CHURCH

distinction between the church gathered and dispersed, being sure to release the church for vigorous evangelism and discipling.

Questions for thought or discussion:

1. Do you think there is a "Cultural Crisis" in the church? Give, first, reasons for your opinion, and secondly, your recommendations for how the church should engage with culture.

2. This week's study summarizes four models of cultural response:

- Transformationist model
- Relevance model
- Counterculturalist model
- Two Kingdoms model

Which of the four models do you think most closely represents RHC? Why?

3. Though one might be critical of some aspect of each of the above models, do you have a sense that though flawed, each is not without some merit? If so, how do we avoid "throwing the baby out with the bathwater?" How might we reconcile these different perspectives while retaining the best of each?

4. This week's study provides two fundamental questions about culture to consider:

- Should we be pessimistic or optimistic about the possibility for cultural change?
- Is the current culture redeemable and good, or fundamentally fallen?

How would you answer each of these two questions? On a scale from 0 to 10 (0=not at all, and 10=highly), how optimistic are in about the ability of believers to change culture. On the same scale, how redeemable do you believe culture to be? Do you find yourself leaning in one direction or the other on each question? If so, why?

5. What do you think of the distinction between the role of the church as an organized institution and the church as an organic body of individual believers? How does this distinction aid in thinking about cultural engagement and the mission of the church? Do you believe it is a biblical distinction?