

## Christ and Culture: A Belated Assessment of H.R. Niebuhr for Preaching

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**Abstract:** *H. Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture (1951) has had enduring scholarly appeal, yet its impact on preaching is unclear. His types can be adapted to represent a range of listener perspectives on controversial issues, or to form categories with which to assess cultural engagement in sermons. Nonetheless, cultural attitudes have changed since Niebuhr's time, and scholarly critiques of his project are instructive in themselves, they can help preachers to be more sensitive in dealing with cultural issues. These shifts in attitude may limit the value of his types, at least without an additional type to better address listeners' needs.*

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951; expanded 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, 2001), has received less attention in homiletics than might have been expected, given the central role culture has come to play in the discipline. In the 50 years of the Academy of Homiletics, no paper was delivered on him; two homileticians have each written most of a chapter on him. Perhaps now he is too dated to consider. A more recent volume to pair with biblical preaching might seem to be Stephen B. Bevans' influential *Models of Contextual Theology*,<sup>1</sup> yet of his six models he says that only one model and "perhaps" a second, "takes seriously the message of Christianity as recorded in scripture and handed down by tradition."<sup>2</sup> There are good reasons to re-examine Niebuhr. No other book has shaped cultural studies as *Christ and Culture* has. While we have no record of what impact Niebuhr's volume actually had on pulpits, he has continuing significance. Among other possibilities, his typologies can be methodologically conceived as tools to present differing stances on controversial subjects. Preachers can use his critics to inform their adaptations of him. Still, his five types are based on a confessional stance that may work better for preachers than for some people in their congregations today. An additional type is needed to address listener's needs today.

### Cultural Relations as Choice

In 1949, people generally accepted that church and culture were separate, like church and state in the United States. Niebuhr taught their interconnection. Christians had choice and responsibility in dealing with culture. He defines culture as, "the total process of human activity and that total result of such activity [including] language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical process, and values."<sup>3</sup> There is no exact Greek equivalent to the English word culture and he equates it with the New Testament idea of world<sup>4</sup>. He wrote to address what he called an "enduring problem", the "many-sided debate about the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised and expanded edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010 [1992]).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>3</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 2001), 32. Pagination of Niebuhr's actual text in this expanded edition is identical to 1951. Hereafter page numbers of this volume will be embedded in parentheses within the text or the volume will be abbreviated in footnotes as *C & C*.

<sup>4</sup> Culture for Niebuhr is the "'social heritage' which the New Testament writers frequently had in mind when they spoke of 'the world'." *C & C*, 32.

relations of Christianity and civilization” (1). He was particularly concerned about Christian social responsibility in the context of social upheaval following World War II.

He developed five ways in which Christ relates to the culture of his time and location. His types were rooted in history and the New Testament, and opened fresh avenues of thought for preachers. The general rule for the pulpit in his time, with the exception of major national events or celebrations, was to stick to the Bible and its key social teachings and doctrines, and to stay out of ‘political’ and economic matters—an attitude still prevalent for instance in some responses of opponents to Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on ecology.<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr did not write to challenge pulpit attitudes, but that may have been part of his effect. His biblically centered confessional stance<sup>6</sup> appealed to many preachers. He reminded all Christians that every part of creation is under Christ’s rule and the ways Christ related to the world can be determinative for them. Preachers heard Niebuhr argue that the church’s relationship to culture is not simply a fixed given. He gave reasons to engage culture and laid out the advantages and disadvantages of his five approaches.

### **Niebuhr’s Five Types as Models for Preaching On Controversy**

Our purpose here is to further assess how Niebuhr might be homiletically or methodologically received. Rather than simply summarize his types as has been done by many authors, we frame our initial review of his types in terms of sermonic application. He intended his taxonomy to contribute to what one scholar calls a public theology,<sup>7</sup> yet preachers could use his types as strategies to present controversial issues and to address different kinds of listeners.<sup>8</sup> He speaks in balanced ways and models respect of positions not his own. Preachers using him might lead church members to increased understanding of one another and of others in society.

Niebuhr did not consider his types to be rigid as some interpreters took him. The types represented a sequence, progression, or continuum of values. For our purposes, his types are to be honored less for their accuracy in describing historical movements than for their ability to describe a broad spectrum of contemporary approaches to culture that might exist in many churches. Some congregations might have individual members who represent all five of his types. Preachers could use the types directly in sermons, or behind the scenes to provide understanding of potential differences among the congregational members, or even to help

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<sup>5</sup> “I think religion ought to be about making us better as people and less about things that end up getting in the political realm.” Jeb Bush in response to the papal encyclical and cited in, “The Republicans have a Pope Problem,” *The Economist*, June 19, 2015. Viewed online on June 22, 2015 at <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2015/06/religion-and-politics>>.

<sup>6</sup> His theological convictions are clear from his first sentence announcing his topic as “the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis....” Niebuhr, *C & C*, xi. They are evident throughout and again in his concluding paragraph, “To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact...that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count. It is to make them in view of the fact that Christ is risen from the dead, and is not only the head of the church but the redeemer of the world. It is to make them in view of the fact that the world of culture—man’s achievement—exists within the world of grace—God’s Kingdom.” *C & C*, 256.

<sup>7</sup> Linell E. Cady, “H. Richard Niebuhr and the Task of a Public Theology,” in Ronald E. Thiemann, ed., *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 107–130.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson uses Niebuhr as a springboard for his own biblically based paradigm to help Christians develop their own perspectives on difficult issues facing the church. See: D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

identify their own sermonic tendencies in engaging culture.<sup>9</sup> The first two types Niebuhr presents as extreme poles:

### 1. Christ Against Culture

Preachers could use this type to represent and understand the views of people in their congregations opposed to cultural change and who reject cultural cooperation. As argued by some medieval monastic orders and sectarian movements, the world is sinful and faithful Christians should withdraw from it. Individuals who follow this path ultimately “are tempted to divide the world into the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm guided by the spiritual God” (81). Niebuhr sees withdrawal and renunciation as “a necessary element in every Christian life” (68), but this type lacks responsible engagement of cultural tasks. He says of Tertullian, the greatest representative of this position in the early church, that he “replaces the positive and warm ethics of love which characterizes the First Letter of John with a largely negative morality; avoidance of sin and fearsome preparation for the coming day of judgment seem more important than thankful acceptance of God’s grace in the gift of his Son” (52).

### 2. Christ of Culture

This type could help preachers to appreciate the cultural stance of individuals who are largely accepting and uncritical of change. They favor accommodating culture. Harmony between Christ and culture is dominant, as exemplified by cultural Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Jesus is associated with the best things in society, people’s “finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophies” (103). Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote to representatives of culture in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* and was “a clear-cut representative of those who accommodate Christ to culture while selecting from culture what conforms most readily to Christ” (94). This position helps people to understand Christ’s “gospel in their own language, his character by means of their own imagery, and his revelation of God with the aid of their own philosophy” (103). However, advocates of this perspective, “take some fragment of the complex New Testament story and interpretation, call this the essential characteristic of Jesus, elaborate upon it, and thus reconstruct their own mythical figure of the Lord.... Jesus stands for the idea of spiritual knowledge; or of logical reason; or of the sense for the infinite; or of the moral law within; or of brotherly love” (109).

The final three of Niebuhr’s categories attempt to hold Christ and culture together as a unity and are mediating positions between the first two:

### 3. Christ Above Culture

Preachers could use this type to speak for people who are open to change yet clear on their own positions and beliefs. They seek a synthesis between reason, found in the best ideals of culture, and gospel revelation. In line with Aquinas, whatever is good in culture is God-given. God sustains culture yet the culture of “moral life through training good habits...intelligent self-direction and...ascetic obedience to the radical counsels of Jesus” (133) can only take one so far in meeting Christ. Grace is needed. Synthesis between Christ and culture is provisional and symbolic, for culture “is subject to continuous and infinite conversion” (148). The danger here is “the institutionalization of Christ and the gospel” (146) and the restriction of God’s grace to the

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<sup>9</sup> This exercise could complement an exegesis of the congregation as discussed by Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 42. It could also complement an exegesis of the self in Stephen Farris, *Preaching that Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 30–33.

church. Also, people may fail to take sufficient account of the pervasive nature of radical evil (148). Still, for Niebuhr, “The synthesist alone seems to provide for willing and intelligent co-operation of Christians with non-believers in carrying on the work of the world, while yet maintaining the distinctiveness of Christian faith and life.” (143-44.)

#### 4. Christ and Culture in Paradox

For some people in congregations, discerning the will of God can be an arduous task involving dialogue and uncertainty. They may affirm value on various sides of an issue without needing to reconcile opposing views. Niebuhr calls this a dualist stance and identifies it with his brother, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther, Emil Brunner, “and perhaps Karl Barth”.<sup>10</sup> The Christian believer faces many paradoxes: “He is under law, and yet not under law but grace; he is sinner, and yet righteous; he believes, as a doubter; he has assurance of salvation, yet walks along the knife-edge of insecurity. In Christ all things have become new, and yet everything remains as it was from the beginning...” (157). Being in the world but not of it is always in play, underlining both an ability and inability to follow Christ in cultural life. The danger is loss of the tension by opting for one position or the other (178) or, in finding paradox, Christians may be less motivated to act. It may seem to make no difference whether people “are sinfully obedient or sinfully disobedient to law” (187).

#### 5. Christ the Transformer of Culture

This type represents the views of those who are essentially positive, seeking Christ’s transformative power at work in cultural change. Christ transforms culture and society must be changed or converted to follow God’s will. This is the only type that Niebuhr does not critique. He connects it with the early social gospel and calls it “the great central tradition of the church” (190). Those who exemplify this type are positive and hopeful towards culture, as is seen in three theological convictions: Christ “has entered into human culture” and orders it (193); culture is “perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion, and not as badness of being” (194); and the end times are less in mind than “awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself” (195). This stance imagines a time of “universal regeneration through Christ” (206). With Calvin it “looks for the present permeation of all life by the gospel” (217) and with F. D. Maurice (1805-1872) it calls on people to “to take account of [Christ] only and not of their sin...as though it were the ruling principle of existence” (224).

### **Further Homiletical Relevance**

In the 1950’s, social unity generally was prized, less suspect than it is in postmodern times, and diversity generally caused tension. Niebuhr did not understand diversity and pluralism as broadly as we do today yet his types model respect for diversity of opinion and the importance of dialogue. He focused on the importance of transformation (in his fifth type) well ahead of the New Homiletic that emphasized transformation over information as a goal of preaching.<sup>11</sup> His types not only draw attention to elements of historical continuity and significance, they also demonstrate his understanding that all ideas are historically rooted and context matters.

William J. Carl III was perhaps the first homiletician to apply Niebuhr, more or less

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<sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, “Types of Christian Ethics,” in Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Many homileticians refer to the importance of transformation. See for instance, Lucy Rose’s discussion of transformational preaching (along with her other types, traditional, kerygmatic and conversational) in her *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

directly, to preaching in 1984. He argued that “the way we preach doctrinal sermons in the context of apologetics and pastoral or moral problems will depend in part on how we view culture” and its relationship to Christ.<sup>12</sup>

In 1991, John S. McClure reworked Niebuhr in significant ways, reducing his five types to four<sup>13</sup>, and reconceiving them as rhetorical styles. McClure’s overall project is too complex to reproduce here, but these four styles were part of his fourth code of preaching, the cultural code. He uses the term code to describe a system of signs, words, or cyphers that help to describe human interactions in sermonic areas, scriptural, semantic, theosymbolic, and cultural. Each code vouches for, promotes, and responds to an established intertext for support, thus the cultural code connects with the intertext of experience, while the scriptural code connects with anamnesis.<sup>14</sup> He conceives of culture as “a kind of outward sedimentation of experience...capable of generating further experiences that follow from the same ordering.”<sup>15</sup> He uses the term homiletical culture to refer to the various cultures and subcultures referenced in a sermon, some unconsciously.<sup>16</sup> His goal with Niebuhr’s types, now converted into styles, is to help preachers diagnose differences between how they handle culture in their sermons and what congregations expect, thereby to learn better how to negotiate a hearing with them and meet their needs. McClure drops Niebuhr’s “Christ” titles and opts for renaming his styles using categories largely drawn from Niebuhr that better serve rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> This shift to communication strategy necessarily moves away from Niebuhr’s emphasis on the activity of Christ.

Though Niebuhr in his time was a theological liberal,<sup>18</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., finds his continuing relevance in evangelical circles, “Evangelicals have inhabited all of Niebuhr’s types.”<sup>19</sup> Christ against culture he finds in individuals and congregations of “Mennonites, Baptists, Christian Brethren, Pentecostals, and most types of fundamentalists”.<sup>20</sup> Christ of culture is seen whenever “we have closely associated God and country and assumed that our nations are Christian, or ‘almost’”.<sup>21</sup> Less common, Christ above culture can be found in “evangelical missionaries who emphasize anticipations of Christian revelation in the beliefs of non-Christian peoples [and those] who affirm the essential congeniality of the gospel with this or that non-Christian author—as the apologists of the early church allied themselves with Plato”.<sup>22</sup> Although “Evangelicalism generally eschews paradox,” Stackhouse thinks it should favor Christ and

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<sup>12</sup> William J. Carl III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 134. See: 126–37.

<sup>13</sup> John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville: John Knox, 2003 [Fortress, 1991]), esp. 143–169. He combines Niebuhr’s Christ above culture and Christ as transformer of culture as two parts under a new dialectical category, see: 149–157.

<sup>14</sup> McClure, 10.

<sup>15</sup> McClure, 140.

<sup>16</sup> McClure, 139.

<sup>17</sup> McClure’s identification style is Niebuhr’s Christ of culture; dialectical style, a) is synthetic or Christ above culture, and b) conversionist or Christ as transformer of culture; dualist style is Christ and culture in paradox, and sectarian style is Christ against culture.

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr continues to be seen in this way. See: Timothy A. Beach-Verley, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “In the World, but...” *Christianity Today* 46 (April 22, 2002): 5, 80. Niebuhr’s relevance is currently affirmed for the Russian Orthodox Church: “all five types illuminate aspects of its complex life today.” John P. Burgess, “Christ and Culture Revisited: Contributions from the Recent Russian Orthodox debate,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31:2 (Fall–Winter 2011): 55–74, esp. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Stackhouse, 80.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

culture in paradox because “God has called us to lives of difficult paradox, of painful negotiation between conflicting and competitive values, of seeking to cooperate with God....”<sup>23</sup> Finally, Christ transforming culture is found in those who believe that, “Society is to be entirely converted to Christianity. Business, the arts, the professions, family life, education, government—nothing is outside the purview of Christ's dominion, and all must be reclaimed in his name.”<sup>24</sup>

Niebuhr's types might be useful in other ways for preaching, as a way to discuss:

- 1) Individual Preaching Patterns over Time: Some preachers might consistently follow one or two of Niebuhr's types when preaching on cultural matters. If they find value in other types, they might become intentional in employing them.
- 2) The General Character of the Preaching in Individual Churches or Denominations: Some churches or denominations have a particular style, character, or theological consistency to their preaching.
- 3) Individual Homiletical Approaches: Karl Barth argued that the preacher is to get out of the way of the Word, rhetoric has no place, and introductions draw attention to the wrong things.<sup>25</sup> Though his theory and practice arguably do not match each other, his theory matches Christ against culture. Christ of culture might represent preaching aligned with the views of a political party, or preaching understood as a form of civil religion. Christ above culture is found in preaching where the focus is largely moral instruction or social justice, the agency may be mostly human, and the motivation may be God's command taken in itself as gospel, without the empowerment that makes for good news.
- 4) Different Aspects Of The New Homiletic: Expressions of the New Homiletic that focus on the human condition and God's response to it (for example, much African American and Lutheran preaching, and the trouble and grace school<sup>26</sup>) tend to present Christ and culture in paradox. On the other hand, when the emphasis is primarily on generating a transformative event often through an image or narrative experience, Christ as transformer of culture may be dominant.

### **Criticisms of Niebuhr**

Niebuhr has ongoing relevance for preaching, yet much has changed since he wrote. Two key areas of change affect his utility. The first change concerns both of his key terms, Christ and culture. The second change concerns the composition of congregations in a postmodern age. Listener needs have shifted in ways that his typologies could not anticipate. We will explore each change in turn.

### **Changes in Conceiving of Christ and Culture**

Scholarly criticisms of Niebuhr can be instructive to preachers today in helping them to avoid his assumptions and limitations as they deal with culture. Niebuhr criticized his own typology and the artificial nature of his historical constructs, “it is evident at once that no person or group ever conforms completely to a type” (43-44). Critics have attacked all aspects of his

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>25</sup> As Barth said of introductions, “No doubt introductions offer many opportunities for much wit and cleverness, but in any case too much precious times is wasted by intellectual gymnastics of this kind.” Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 122.

<sup>26</sup> See Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 101, 115.

program. It is somewhat unsettling that most of the published conversation is amongst white middle-class males, the present author being no exception. Some scholars from other backgrounds may dismiss him on the grounds that he represents a social context and age in which Protestant white males presumed to define culture in a universal manner according to their own standards. Niebuhr's types show his regard for historical conditioning and context, yet he makes almost no reference to cultural issues or events in *Christ and Culture*. From today's perspective that is odd—how can one speak of culture without specifics?—yet that same absence of social issues is found in most pulpits of his day. One socially active preacher that Niebuhr knew well, Harry Emerson Fosdick at Riverside Church in New York City,<sup>27</sup> often mentioned events in the world by way of brief anecdote, illustration, or passing reference, yet he rarely devoted a sermon to a social issue.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, this lack of cultural specificity on Niebuhr's part may have contributed to his enduring influence—he was not easily dated. Among the primary critiques scholars made of him, we focus on several that stress current emphases in cultural studies. These criticisms tell preachers as much about changing attitudes towards culture as they do about Niebuhr.

1) Every understanding of Christ is affected by the culture/s in which it is offered. As Peter R. Gathje poignantly asks of Niebuhr, “How does one give a ‘neutral’ definition or understanding of Christ? How does one give an understanding of culture that does not reflect one’s own view of what qualifies as ‘culture’ and what does not?... [C]ritics of Niebuhr’s project may rightly ask. ‘Whose Christ? and what culture?’”<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr seems to equate believers in Christ with people who “wrestle” with the connection between Christ and culture, but Martin E. Marty notes that in each of the types there may be stances other than wrestling at work.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, there are people devoted to Christ who are not part of a church community, just as there are individuals in the church who are not devoted to Christ.<sup>31</sup>

2) Christ cannot be considered separate from his embodiment in the church. Paul Metzger finds biblical basis for each of Niebuhr's types and reframes them for they are “neither Christ-centered, nor cruciform, nor ecclesially framed.”<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr's two poles lack theological grounding: “The Christ of culture orientation, on its own, does not account for the judgment of the cross. The Christ against culture orientation, on its own, does not account for the transformative work of the resurrection.”<sup>33</sup> Noting the destruction that has often accompanied the cross in Native American communities, Metzger says, “The American church today must not simply bear the cross, but be willing to be hung upon it on behalf of the surrounding world.... the church has often failed to see that God so profoundly and pervasively

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<sup>27</sup> Fosdick actually taught H. Richard Niebuhr pastoral theology at Union Seminary in New York City in 1919. See: Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflection on the Church and the World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 8, n.17.

<sup>28</sup> One notable exception to this is Fosdick's 1934 sermon, “My Account With An Unknown Soldier,” in which he renounces war. See: Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 491. Miller gives a detailed account of Fosdick's social involvement. See: 389–548.

<sup>29</sup> Peter R. Gathje, “A Contested Classic: Critics Ask: Whose Christ? Which Culture?” in *The Christian Century* (June 19–26, 2002), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Foreword,” in *C & C*, xv.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi–xviii.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, “Christ, Culture, and the Sermon on the Mount Community,” *Ex Auditu* 23 (January 1, 2007), 45 n. 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

demonstrates...omnipotence through the weakness of the cross.”<sup>34</sup>

3) Culture is composed of many overlapping cultures that differ in many ways. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., drawing on Kathryn Tanner<sup>35</sup> and others, summarizes changes in cultural understanding since Niebuhr. Culture now may variously mean: high art, ethnic diversity, the common life of a given society, what is made or cultivated, society at large, a dominant way of living in a pluralistic society, and the various subcultures in which an individual participates.<sup>36</sup> Scholars have critiqued Niebuhr’s understanding of culture as singular, monolithic, uniform and universal. Jack Schwandt calls Niebuhr’s notion of culture “innocuous”<sup>37</sup> because politics is strangely absent, “but it was and is politics that gives force to [his] problem.”<sup>38</sup> As John Howard Yoder puts it, Niebuhr showed “no interest in the Christian community as a sociological entity in its own right”<sup>39</sup>. Niebuhr defined culture essentially in the way that the New Testament defined what was demonic and was in need of being saved.<sup>40</sup> The church, Yoder said, has different ways of responding to different aspects of contemporary culture.

4) Christ and Culture are not mutually exclusive alternatives. George Marsden underlines that even attempts to follow Christ are culturally conditioned.<sup>41</sup> Postmodern thought is wary of binaries that serve powerful interests at the expense of other options. Graham Ward says of Niebuhr that, “The models are not discrete, as he is himself aware, but they tend to operate on a governing binary, there is Christ and there is culture, and how the two relate.” Ward avoids the “binary problematic” by beginning “to think through the grammar of Christian believing on the basis that there can be no distillation of Christ from culture.”<sup>42</sup>

5) Typologies are limited. Yoder is scathing of Niebuhr, “One must somehow or other make the claim that the principles of classification one is laying out are ‘really there in the nature of things,’ and are not merely impressionistic...”<sup>43</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are equally dismissive, “We believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*”.<sup>44</sup> James M. Gustafson finds these criticisms misplaced, to discuss Aquinas under Christ above culture does not preclude him from also displaying aspects of the transformationist type.<sup>45</sup> Some scholars want other types: Marsden would make new types with combinations of the original five;<sup>46</sup> Yoder wants, The Church

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>35</sup> See: Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). See 61–62, where she devotes some attention to *Christ and Culture*.

<sup>36</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14–17.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Schwandt, “Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture: A Re-Examination,” *Word and World* (September 1, 1990), 368.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>39</sup> John Howard Yoder, “How Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture,” in G. H. Stassen, et al., eds., *Authentic Transformation*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> See: Ibid., 69.

<sup>41</sup> George Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr’s Categories,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 115:1 (Fall 1999), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Malden, ME and Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2005), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Yoder, 46.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Hauerwas & William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 40.

<sup>45</sup> James M. Gustafsen, “Preface,” in *C & C*, xxix. For a reinforcement of Gustafsen’s defense of Niebuhr’s use of types see also: Diane M. Yeager, “The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in *Christ and Culture*,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23:1 (Spring–Summer 2003), 101–120.

<sup>46</sup> Marsden, 13.

Functioning Within Society<sup>47</sup>. He loses the parallel structure of Niebuhr's titles, but John P. Burgess makes a similar suggestion when he considers the survival of the Christian faith in communist Russia under his new type, Christ in Culture.<sup>48</sup> On the basis of pacifism, Craig A. Carter rejects all of Niebuhr's types in that they seem compatible with actions like "using violent coercion to maintain the position of Christianity within society".<sup>49</sup>

6) Christ implies an ethical life. Niebuhr's Christ seems lacking in ethical teaching or practices. Glen H. Stassen observes: "The farther the book goes, the less specific it gets about the ethics of the New Testament Jesus... Nowhere does the chapter on transformationism indicate Christ's ethics or practices. The result is that readers may be convinced to call themselves transformationists without committing themselves to any specific ethics."<sup>50</sup> The unity of Christ's body and the church implies that the church embodies Christ's values. It stands as an alternative and transforming community in service to the world. As Metzger says, the church is to be "the now of the not yet".<sup>51</sup>

7) Transformation is not necessarily preferable. Hauerwas and Willimon claim that Niebuhr's biases for the transformationist option led him to justify "what was already there—a church that had ceased to ask the right questions as it went about congratulating itself for transforming the world, not noticing, that in fact the world had tamed the church."<sup>52</sup> Yoder considers Niebuhr's notion of transformation to be "so inadequately defined that it is virtually indistinguishable from the Western understanding of progress"<sup>53</sup> and he concludes that Niebuhr had a "low estimate of the power of evil".<sup>54</sup> Glen H. Stassen disagrees with Yoder,<sup>55</sup> countering that the point of transformation is that Christians take social responsibility for a church that is "transformationist rather than conformist".<sup>56</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., makes a strong case to "recover, restate and renew" a priority for Christ in paradox with culture.<sup>57</sup>

### Changes in Congregational Attitudes

Changes have also taken place in congregational attitudes in recent decades that work against Niebuhr's types. Mass media, computers and smart phones have transformed how listeners think and perceive things. The New Homiletic was attentive to this in making the needs of listeners a deliberate focus. Effective oral communication increasingly needed to create images and pictures with words, not stay focused in one place too long, employ narrative, and

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<sup>47</sup> Yoder, 75.

<sup>48</sup> John P. Burgess, 55–74.

<sup>49</sup> Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 17.

<sup>50</sup> Glen H. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation" in Stassen, et al., *Authentic Transformation*, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Metzger, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Yoder, 53. Another Mennonite, Charles Scriven, claims the Anabaptist tradition is "the best way to embody Niebuhr's vision.... The church serves surrounding culture by being an alternative society and a transformative example. In this way it is, under God, an agent of social conversion, midwifing a world whose form is Christ." Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale, PA and Kitchener, ON: Herald, 1988), 192–193.

<sup>54</sup> Yoder, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Stassen, 179.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>57</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Making the Best of It*, esp. 28.

avoid excessive reliance upon propositions. Today's generations are schooled in postmodern thought that challenges the Enlightenment's excessive dependence on reason. Unexamined assumptions are considered dangerous as is blind trust in authority figures. Good reasons need to be offered to support claims. Pulpits may be gradually shifting along with the culture to recognize that in many cases, modernity is the problem, not postmodernity.

A problem with Niebuhr's types is that they all start from the faithful belief that Christ died for all, is raised from the dead and rules over all. For most Christian preachers and church members, this may be a safe starting place. However, many congregations in recent decades have become less biblically informed, or more critical, or more questioning of authority, or more relativist in their perspectives—whatever the cause, people who come to church want good reasons for believing something, reasons not exclusively provided by rational argument. They do not want faith and assent to be simply assumed. They may be more conscious of the suffering in the world. They are not necessarily unfaithful, they reflect a thoughtful generation critically engaged in various cultures. They need sermons to reflect their own experiences and cultural perspectives, to name reality as it often seems to be. For the preacher merely to assert that Christ reigns, never to speak of doubt or cultural issues that challenge faith, may seem blind or unrealistic. It may also deny aspects of their own experience.

The authentic identity of Christ was not in question in Niebuhr's time to the same degree it is today. Christ tends to be identified with the church in contemporary western cultures and often is known in negative ways. History calls attention to terrible deeds still being done in Christ's name. Global news events speak so loudly of evil and suffering that many people are left doubting that God even exists, much less that Christ is risen. Movies and media programs—including some religious ones—tend to depict Christ and Christians in less than flattering ways. From a preaching perspective, these cultural perceptions of Christ and the church are real and exist in the minds of listeners. They may be accurate in portraying aspects of the church at its worst. Still, from a faith perspective, they do not depict the real Christ. People may reject the true Christ, but the Christ known through culture is frequently not this.

How do Christians speak to cultures that have largely made up their minds against Christ? If one does not speak of these other perceptions of Christ, how can one communicate the true identity of Christ? Perhaps we need a new type, Christ Through Culture, to name these perceptions. They are authentic to the degree that they represent real experiences in the culture at large and they are perceived as accurate and true by those who hold them. They are also representations that do not correspond to what is true as witnessed in the Bible and tradition. True and false in this age can be problematic (according to whose standards?), but we name these Christs as false not as a way of denying the reality of people's experience, but as a way of naming the *fidei regula*, a normative range of perspectives discerned by the church and reflected in its teaching about the Triune God. These false Christs<sup>58</sup> are not to be proclaimed by preachers in the manner of the risen Christ. Still, from time to time, like an elephant in the sanctuary, they may need to be named or acknowledged. In faith one may affirm that through proclamation and the power of the Holy Spirit, the authentic Christ who is truth is made known. Here are five ways to conceive of the false Christ that listeners may bring to church. Like Niebuhr's types, these five are suggestive not exclusive. They represent of a spectrum of negative possibilities:

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<sup>58</sup> What term to use is unclear, since a false Christ is an illusion or an imposter. This is not the "antichrist" who denies Jesus Christ in 1 John 2:22, 4:23 and 2 John 1:17, yet even as Niebuhr links each of his types to New Testament passages, this might be a rough parallel.

## Christ Through Culture

This category adds to Niebuhr's original five a sixth that gathers perspectives on Christ that come through the culture, largely as a response to impressions of the church in the world. Here we name a few possibilities, recognizing that false views of Christ are not limited to those outside of the church.

1. Christ as dangerous to culture (The Enemy Christ): This view is enlivened by modern and postmodern critiques of the church. Modernist critiques are still prevalent today, as in Rudolph Bultmann's notion that biblical accounts represent a mythology disproven by scientific worldviews. In some modernist critiques, religion and science are opposed to each other, and science by contrast is understood as fact and certainty. Postmodern critiques challenge the church on several fronts: its historical use of power to dominate and coerce minorities and those who disagree with it; its collusion with colonial powers and oppressive regimes in order to further its own gain;<sup>59</sup> its protection of clergy involved in sexual abuse; and in some cases its contribution to cultural genocide of aboriginal peoples.<sup>60</sup> For many critics, the church is seen as a real danger to society. In faith, Christ can be dangerous to culture, not because Christ is an enemy to it, but because Christ is an enemy to whatever separates us from God, and the gospel often overturns common human expectations and assumptions.

2. Christ as Commerce (The Harmless Christ): This position regards Christ as harmless, possibly even mildly entertaining. This is the Christ whose cross is a mere ornament or piece of jewelry, whose birth supports Christmas shops, whose Easter supports the chocolate industry, whose hymns convert to professional sports songs (e.g., "Glory, Glory, Man United," sung by fans of Manchester United soccer club), whose worship space is sought for weddings for reasons of aesthetics or sentiment, and whose clergy are sought to conduct weddings and funerals with the request not to mention God. In this view, the church is a business that exists to serve the customer's desire, while the minister, pastor or priest is a hired temp to cater to the client's needs. Christ does not rule over culture, commerce rules over Christ.

3. Christ as a Good Cultural Story (The Imaginary Christ): In this view, Jesus is an historical person, a good teacher of morals. He offers a way of thinking about life that is hopeful and he models what it means to love others. His story is good to live by and enriches culture in the confidence that good wins over bad. Many people who hold this perspective regard his life as just a story. They may believe in God yet be uncertain that much can be said about God's nature. Christmas and Easter present a God in whom many people would like to believe, but the story is akin to other childhood stories about Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. Story has its own kind of truth like good literature and movies, though not the same kind of truth as science.

4. Christ as Aloof from Culture (The Impassive Christ): From this perspective, Christ is indifferent to the needs of the world or powerless in relation to evil. Prayer in Christ's name does not seem to work. Disasters strike, tragedies occur, the innocent suffer, wars break out. Christ does not hear, or if he does, he is impassive, unable or unwilling to help. The situation of the broken, the vulnerable and oppressed remains unchanged. For some this may even be a Christ

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<sup>59</sup> See for instance, Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

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<[http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_05\\_31\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf)>.

who suffers with those who suffer, who represents an incarnational God, perhaps even be a resurrected God, and who is nonetheless of small comfort now to most people. As a consequence, this Christ seems largely irrelevant and powerless to alter most human situations. If Christ is able to affect change in the here and now, it is only for those whose faith is much larger than a mustard seed.

5. Christ beyond Culture (The Unknowable Christ): This view of Christ regards him essentially as foreign, unknowable or unknown. People are indifferent to this Christ who may exist or not, alongside other gods or other perspectives on God. This Christ offers and demands nothing. No relationship with this Christ is possible or desired. All gods may be the same, and God may be ultimately a mystery. In effect, Christ has no identity apart from what impression people have of him and may be the Christ loosely understood by someone of another faith. Because this Christ is separate from one's experience, he is beyond culture and makes no difference to it except as a cultural artifact.

The list could go on. Raymond Williams suggested many years ago that whoever describes a culture or context in a sense constructs a world and every world contains new perspectives not least on Christ.<sup>61</sup> All five of these types of false Christ we have named belong under our general category of Christ Through Culture. Of course not just members of the congregation are influenced by false Christs. Preachers participate in many of the same cultures as their people. Even preachers who share Niebuhr's confessional stance might find, in examining past sermons, that they have inadvertently drifted into proclaiming one or more of these false Christs, as though they are authentic. Preachers listen to one another in part with a view to what is said about God. This can be good, not as a way of policing for heresy but of offering supportive critique and holding one another accountable, bringing to attention the inescapable influence of cultures in and around us all.

Perhaps in Niebuhr's age it was safe to assume that people came to church with positive understandings of Christ, and this still may be the case today, but these other ways of thinking are also present and can stand in the way of people effectively hearing, or the preacher proclaiming the gospel. Effective pulpit communication means acknowledging the realities that shape cultural perceptions of the church, whether these are based in lack of knowledge of the Bible or of the Triune God, or in sinful actions committed in Christ's name, or in the ubiquitous nature of sin and evil in the world. In faith, one may affirm nonetheless that preachers may witness, but that Christ alone, through the Spirit, makes known his identity. He rules even over false Christs and the attitudes, situations, or conditions that they represent. Christ names the sin, evil, and brokenness in the world that God opposes and makes disciples to participate in renewing the world in the manner God intends.

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<sup>61</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). One can imagine, for instance, a racist Christ, a misogynist Christ, a sexual abuser Christ, and so on, all as outgrowths of events related to the church though misrepresenting God.