



Church, Culture, and the Ekklesia



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"Explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."

1 Corinthians 2:13

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Preaching Christ

“And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you.” Acts 3:20

“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” Acts 5:42

“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” Acts 8:5, 35

“We proclaim Him (Christ)” Colossians 1:28

“For if one comes and preaches another Jesus”
2 Corinthians 11:4

Christ is the Foundation of the Church.¹ Christ is the foundational message of the Church.² The mission of the Church is to communicate Christ.³

This is what the Church⁴ needs to communicate – Christ, not culture – not even a culturalized Christ⁵, but the biblical Christ.

¹ Isaiah 28:16; 2 Timothy 2:19; 1 Corinthians 3:10-13

² 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

³ 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 1:15-18; Colossians 1:28

The biblical Christ, while able to be embraced by every culture, is also counter-cultural to every culture. This is because Christ is divine, originating in heaven, and cultures are human, originating in the world.

⁴ Contrary to what is in vogue today for some, I make no distinction between the Greek word, ekklesia, and its English translation, “church”. I use the two words interchangeably. When I say “church”, I mean the full and accurate biblical meaning of “ekklesia”. Simply using the Greek word, ekklesia, in and of itself, helps no one understand the biblical meaning. The biblical meaning will always require explanation for the unlearned. Therefore, I think the English words, “church”, or “assembly”, or “community” are adequate translations. Not everyone identifying with the word “church” is part of the Ekklesia of God. There is only one true Church made up of those who have received the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-10) - those who “possess the Son”. (1 John 5:11-12)

⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-9

In the World, but Not of the World

Jesus has commissioned the Church as ambassadors of a heavenly King to be “going into all the world, discipling all people groups”⁶ with the Message of Christ - bringing a divine message into a human context - bringing a heavenly culture into the various cultures of the world.

Jesus said that those who made up His Church “are in the world” but “not of the world” – just like Himself.⁷ The people of His Church are *in the world* and therefore “wear” one culture or another, just as one wears clothing. They are *not of the world*. They are born of the Spirit, born from above⁸, and therefore have a heavenly dimension to themselves, hold a citizenship in a heavenly kingdom.⁹, and are ambassadors of a heavenly King.¹⁰

⁶ Matthew 28:19-20

⁷ John 17:11-16

⁸ John 3:3-7

⁹ Philippians 3:20

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20

A Heavenly King & Kingdom

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3

“For I came down from heaven” John 6:38¹¹

“My kingdom is not of this world....” John 18:36

“But our citizenship is in heaven” Philippians 3:20¹²

“... the Jerusalem above....” Galatians 4:26

“... he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Hebrews 11:10

“Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.” Hebrews 11:16

“Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Hebrews 12:22

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” Revelation 21:2

¹¹ Cf. John 3:13

¹² “A colony of heaven” – the Moffat Translation.

Everyone and everything in the Kingdom of Heaven is “born from above” – originates in heaven.¹³ Everything in the Church should originate in heaven – not human culture.

¹³ John 3:3-8; Hebrews 12:22-28; James 1:17; Revelation 21:2

The Challenge

Herein lies the challenge: How do we effectively communicate *through and to human culture* that which is heavenly – that is, beyond human culture? The medium of our communication is human culture; but the content of our message is spiritual and heavenly – often even counter-cultural. On this score, we need to take heed to Marshall McLuhan's insight: "*The Medium is the Message*". In other words, the medium – "the extension of ourselves"¹⁴ – the culture – has impacts and effects in and of itself – namely, it carries its own message – a message, which if we are not careful, can have a greater impact than the content of our communication.¹⁵ If we culturalize Christ, the culture itself impacts that communication in such a way as to carry its own dominant message, mis-communicating the biblical message of Christ – mis-representing the biblical Christ. The danger is that a

¹⁴ Federman, Mark (2004). *What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message?* Reference: McLuhan, Marshall (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw Hill.

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, who also coined the phrase "Global Village", in his book, *Understanding Media* (MIT Press, 1994), wrote: "*The medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.*" (p. 9) "*All media is the extension of some human faculty. The extension of any one sense displaces the other senses, and alters the way we think, the way we see the world, and ourselves....Each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique message..... When you live in an Information Age, culture becomes big business.*" (www.MarshallMcLuhan.com)

foundation, other than the “sure foundation of God”¹⁶ will be laid in the hearts of people and the life of the church. That’s the challenge. There is also a pendulum swing and a slippery slope.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:19; 1 Corinthians 3:10-13

The Pendulum Swing

Let's read some selected verses from John 17, focusing on the phrases stating that the Church consists of those who are *not of the world, but are in the world*.

John 17

v. 6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me **out of the world**. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

v. 9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

v. 11 And I am no longer in the world, but **they are in the world**, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

v. 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak **in the world**, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

v. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because **they are not of the world**, just as **I am not of the world**.

v. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

v. 16 **They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.**

v. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have **sent them into the world**.

We are *in the world*, but not *of the world*. The Greek word translated “world” here is *kosmos*¹⁷, meaning an order, a system; “*the present condition of human affairs in alienation from and opposition to God.*”¹⁸ I believe the understanding is that this fallen “world system” is the product of the adoption of a “world view” contrary to God’s point of view (viz. a Biblical world view), which is manifested or “fleshed out” in human “culture”, the essence of which¹⁹ is generic to the various ethnic and national cultures of the world. So, while various cultures will have their definitives, the world system and world view is essentially the same throughout fallen humanity.

We are *in the world*, but not *of the world*. Throughout church history, it has been, and still is, very difficult for the Church to understand this paradox, and has been even more difficult for the Church to embody its spiritual realities. In his classic work on the subject, H. Richard Niebuhr referred to it as “The Enduring Problem”.²⁰ Here, I would like to state a proposition: Regarding being *in the world*, but not *of the world*. **Historically, the Church**

¹⁷ Strong’s # 2889

¹⁸ *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, W.E. Vine

¹⁹ Essentially, viewing and living life independent from the God of the Bible and His Christ.

²⁰ Chapter 1, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951)

has tended to emphasize one or the other perspective in agreement with or in reaction to the prevailing world view of its cultural context.²¹

Following is a brief outline of the various perspectives and stances (swings of the pendulum) the Church has taken regarding Culture throughout history²²:

The Typology of Ernst Troeltsch

“The Church” - **“IN THE WORLD”**: The Church accepts the necessity of compromise with its ideals for the sake of life in the world and in order to exercise its influence on the cultural ethos and institutions.

²¹ Here, I would also like to put forth two related propositions, which are beyond the scope of this article to deal with: PROPOSITION 2: One’s understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God and the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in this age influences how one perceives the mission of the Church and its interaction with the culture. PROPOSITION 3: One’s particular millennial view (i.e. premillennial, postmillennial, amillennial) influences one’s expectations of the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in this age and therefore one’s perspective on the mission and ministry goals and activities of the Church in its interaction with the culture.

²² A synopsis of material contained in *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951)

“The Sect” - **“NOT OF THE WORLD”**: The church, deeply suspicious of the world, resists compromise and accepts distance (and marginalization) from the ethos and institutions of the world.

The Typology of H. Richard Niebuhr²³

“NOT OF THE WORLD” - “The Sect” - Christ AGAINST Culture:

The church is separated from the world and set against the world, which is regarded as ruled by sin and death.

- Tertullian
- Tolstoy

“IN THE WORLD” - “The Church” - The Christ OF Culture:

The church is indistinguishable from the world, which is regarded as itself the work of God.

- Gnosticism
- Abelard
- A. Ritschl

²³ Christ and Culture, (New York, Harper & Row, 1951) placed in these contexts and as summarized in Readings in Christian Ethics, Ed., Eerdmans: [H. Richard Niebuhr: professor of ethics at the Divinity School at Yale University. Christ and Culture: A series of lectures given for the Alumni Foundation of the Austin (TX) Presbyterian Theological Seminary in January 1949. The book is a “supplement to” and a “correction of” Ernst Troeltsch’s The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches. {see Acknowledgments, p. x}]

MEDIAN POSITIONS:

Strategies for preserving Christian integrity without sacrificing responsibility in and for the world (and without accepting marginalization from the ethos and institutions of the world).

Christ ABOVE Culture: The world lost something in the Fall and needs something additional from God's grace.

- Thomas Aquinas

Christ and Culture in PARADOX: Two orders - God is the Creator and Preserver of the world and its culture, and the Redeemer of the Church.

- Luther

Christ the TRANSFORMER of Culture: The world is the creation of God deeply distorted by sin and in need of God's work of transformation. The Church can contribute to that work by modifying and qualifying the ethos and the institutions of the world.

- Augustine
- Calvin

The Historical Perspectives of W.A. Dryness²⁴

The Early Church:

- “IN THE WORLD”:
 - Justin Martyr (100-163)
 - Constantine (312)
- “NOT OF THE WORLD”:
 - Tertullian (155-222)
- MEDIAN:
 - Augustine (354-430) City of God

²⁴ The analysis of W.A. Dryness, Dictionary of Evangelical Theology, Ed. Walter Elwell (IVP) combined with the typologies of Troeltsch and Niebuhr and set in the contexts of “**IN THE WORLD**” and “**NOT OF THE WORLD**” and the Median Positions.

The Slippery Slope

In an effort to not be “worldly”, groups in the Church have established a culture of “religiosity”.²⁵ But here’s the slippery slope: In an effort to not be “religious”, groups have established yet another culture – “non-religiosity”. Both are merely cultural expressions – neither effectively communicating the biblical Christ. As we see in the gospels, Jesus of Nazareth did not fit into either of those cultures.²⁶ It was His own society that instigated the political plot for His crucifixion. Was Jesus “culturally relevant”? Yes and No. Yes, He was a Jew; and was “Jewish”. No, He offended them; and they rejected Him. **God’s Christ was “in” culture, but not “of” culture. The same should be true of His Body, the Church – “in the culture”, but “not of the culture”.**

²⁵ This is a common, but unfortunate use of the word, for “religion” is a biblical word; and there exists a “true religion” (James 1:27). But here the negative connotation is meant. Viz. A reactionism to the world rather than a response to the Holy Spirit, resulting in man-made formalism, legalism, and externalism, being a false holiness. Colossians 2:23.

²⁶ Luke 7:31-35

What Defines the Church?

Simon Chan asks: *“Is the church to be seen as an instrument to accomplish God’s purpose in creation, or is the church the expression of God’s ultimate purpose itself?”* He then goes on to say: *“If the church is essentially instrumental, then its basic identity can be expressed in terms of its functions.... But if the church is God’s end in creation, then its basic identity can be expressed only in ontological rather than functional terms.”* *“(If) the church is only a subspecies of creation, (it) must discover the clue to its identity within the created order.... This implies that the church derives its basic identity from the larger world.... A better way to conceptualize the Bible’s narrative God created the world in order that He might enter into a covenant relationship with humankind.... The covenantal relationship always involves the election of a people from among humankind.... Implied in this newer canonical narrative is another way of looking at the relationship between the church broadly conceived and creation, and that is to see it not as another entity within the larger creation but as prior to creation. The church precedes creation in that it is what God has in view from all eternity and creation is the means by which God fulfills his eternal purpose in time. The church does not exist to fix a broken creation; rather, the creation exists to realize the church.”* (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 13:8) **THE CHURCH IS NOT AN ENTITY WITHIN THE LARGER CULTURE BUT IS A CULTURE.**²⁷

²⁷ Chan, Simon (2006) *The Ontology of the Church*, Chapter One, *Liturgical Theology, The Church as Worshiping Community*. InterVarsity Press.

A Colony of Heaven

The Church is not defined by culture. It is a culture – a heavenly culture – and a witness of such to the cultures the world. The Church is not defined by what it DOES in the context of being “culturally relevant”. It is defined by what it IS in God’s eternal plans and purposes – namely: “A Colony of Heaven”. In Philippians 3:20 Paul writes: “Our commonwealth is in heaven....” (RSV) Or – “Our homeland is in heaven....” (NCV)²⁸ James Moffett translated Philippians 3:20 in this way: “**We are a colony of heaven....**”²⁹.

The Greek words for “household”³⁰ and “kingdom”³¹ are different. But I believe the two are essentially connected in that, the “administration” or “economy”³² of God’s Household is the activity of the Kingdom of God. The first mention of “the house of God” in the Scriptures – Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-19 - depicts this heavenly culture of the Church:

²⁸ (Greek) *politeuma*: The administration of civil affairs or a commonwealth.

²⁹ *A New Translation of the Bible* by James Moffett (1926)

³⁰ Greek: *oikos*, Strong’s # 3624

³¹ Greek: *basileia*, Strong’s # 932

³² Greek: *oikonomia*, Strong’s # 3622

“Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top **reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.** And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! **This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.** So, Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz.”

Everyone and everything in the Kingdom of Heaven is “born from above” – originates in heaven.³³ Everything in the Church should originate in heaven – not human culture.

³³ John 3:3-8; Hebrews 12:22-28; James 1:17; Revelation 21:2

The Ekklesia

(Called Out, in Culture, but not of Culture)

The Ekklesia which Jesus is building³⁴ is a people extracted – called out and gathered together³⁵ - “from every tribe, and language, and people and nation”³⁶ to be citizens of another kingdom – “a heavenly country”.³⁷ This is a definitive description of God’s people which runs through the whole of Scripture:

Abraham’s Calling to Father God’s people

“Now the LORD said to Abram, **“Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house,** to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Genesis 12:1-3

³⁴ Matthew 16:18-19

³⁵ Greek: *ekklesia*, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

³⁶ In other words, “multi-cultural” and “multi-ethnic”. (Greek) *fulē*: “tribe”, *glossa*: “language”, *laos*: “people” (group), *ethnos*: “nation”. I think this may be a repetition for emphasis on the part of John; but it would prove interesting to investigate the various shades of meaning and implications of these words.

³⁷ Hebrews 12:22-23

Israel's Calling to be the People of God

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then **you shall be My own possession among all the peoples**, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Echoed by Peter in I Peter 2:9: “But you are **A CHOSEN RACE, a royal PRIESTHOOD, a HOLY NATION, a PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION**, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has **called you out** of darkness into His marvelous light.” Exodus 19:5-6 ³⁸

The Prophetic Calling of the Bride

“Listen, O daughter, give attention and incline your ear: **Forget your people and your father's house**; then the King will desire your beauty. Because He is your Lord, bow down to Him.”

Psalms 45:10-11

Christ's Description of His Disciples: In, But Not Of the World

“I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves **are in the world**, and I come to You Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one

³⁸ Cf. Titus 2:14

of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. But now I come to You; and these things I speak **in the world** so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because **they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world**. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are **not of the world, even as I am not of the world**.” John 17:11-16

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles,³⁹ we see a **people extracted – called out and gathered together**⁴⁰ - “**from every tribe, and language, and people and nation**”⁴¹ to be citizens of another kingdom – “a heavenly country”.⁴² The Church consists of those who have heard a calling *out of a culture of the world* (spiritually), and have answered a calling *into a heavenly culture*.

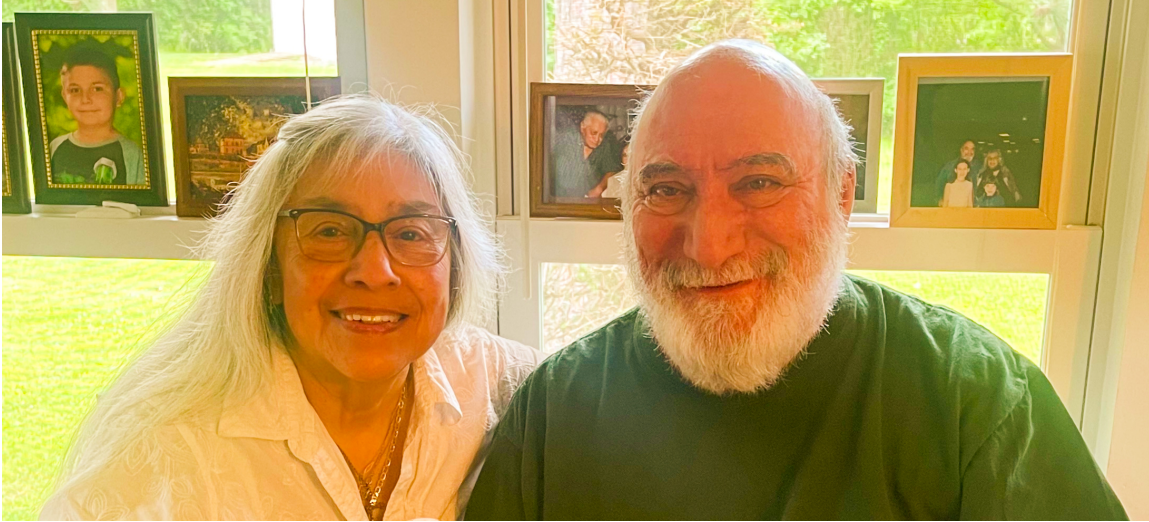
³⁹ Romans, I Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians

⁴⁰ (Greek) *ekklesia*, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

⁴¹ (Greek) *fule*: “tribe”, *glossa*: “language”, *laos*: “people” (group), *ethnos*: “nation”. I think this may be a repetition for emphasis on the part of John; but it would prove interesting to investigate the various shades of meaning and implications of these words.

⁴² Hebrews 12:22-23

Bill & Frances Furioso
~ At Christ's Table ~



Bill Furioso and his wife, Frances, have been married for more than 40 years, and have two children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Bill and Frances served as missionaries in South Africa for thirteen years making disciples, establishing churches, and training church leaders. Over a span of 40 years, they also traveled extensively in an itinerant Bible teaching ministry which took them to hundreds of gatherings on four continents ministering in churches, conferences, spiritual formation seminars, and home gatherings. They have shepherded several churches, discipled many to Christ, and mentored church leaders in the USA and abroad.

Being an avid student by nature, Bill has done both formal and informal study in various fields including Education, Music, Philosophy and Theology. As a writer, he has authored many publications which are distributed worldwide. Because of Bill's disabilities resulting from a spinal cord injury, he can no longer travel, so their ministries of writing, recording, distributing, mentoring, and correspondence are now shared primarily via the Internet... www.AtChristsTable.org

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