

## **Christ And Culture**

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### **Introduction**

- We live in the between-times, between Christ's first coming and his second coming.
- As Christians, we have been transferred into God's kingdom (Col. 1:13).
- Yet we continue to live in this "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4).
- Culture consists of a society's beliefs, values, customs, traditions, and institutions.
- People inherit a cultural perspective from their society.
- How should Christians live out their faith in their cultural context?
- The authorities of Christ and culture are competing for our allegiance.
- Five models for relating Christianity to culture have been practiced in church history.
- See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951).
- See also D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (2008).

### **Antithetical Model: Christ against Culture**

- Culture is inherently evil and hostile toward Christianity.
- Our sole allegiance is to Jesus.
- Christians must make a radical break from their culture.
- Tertullian: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"
- This separatism can be practiced by withdrawing from culture, e.g., Amish.
- It can also be practiced by insulating from culture, e.g., fundamentalists.
- Separatists have an antagonistic relationship with culture ("us vs them").
- Counter-culture communities assemble in a "holy huddle."
- These Christians practice not only separatism but sectarianism.

### **Accommodationist Model: Christ of Culture**

- Culture is inherently good and receptive to cultural Christianity.
- Cultural Christians are those who adopt the culture's perspective of their society.
- Since the Bible is antiquated, its truth and morality must be updated to match culture.
- Example: Gnosticism, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), John Locke (1632-1704), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), Mainline Protestant churches

### **Synthetic Model: Christ above Culture**

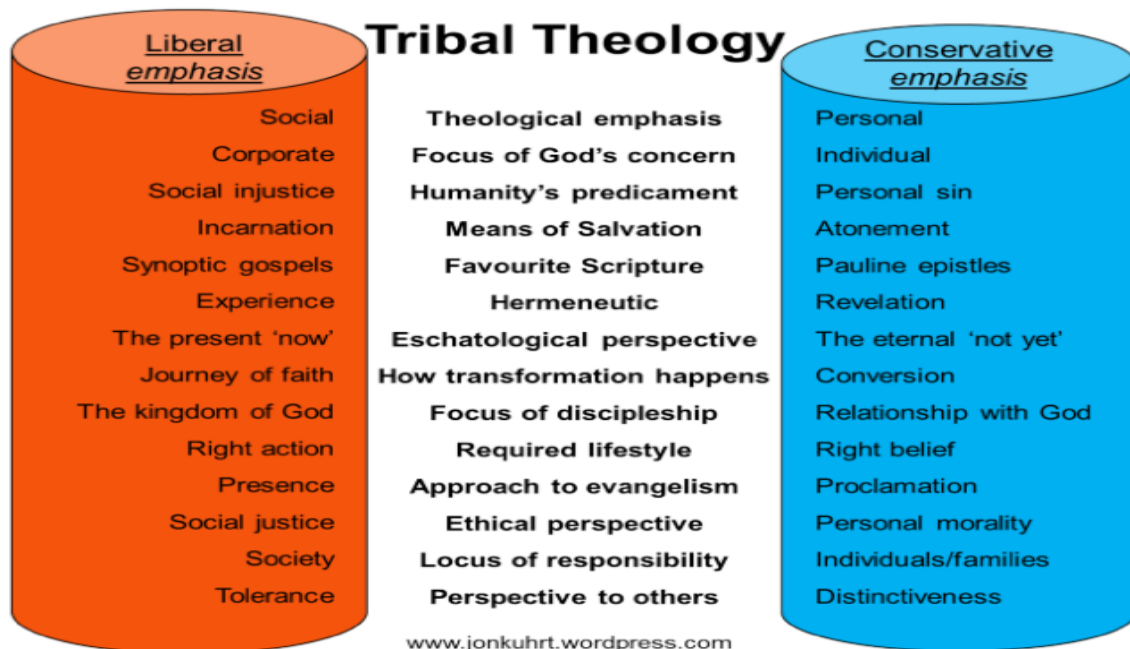
- Culture is mostly good.
- Christ is sovereign over both church and culture.
- Christians should build on the good of culture with Christ.
- Not "either-or" but "both-and."
- Examples: Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Roman Catholic Church
- Dualist model and transformationist models are sub-categories of synthetic model.

## Dualist Model: Christ and Culture in Paradox

- Culture is corrupt.
- Christians are citizens of two distinct kingdoms, kingdom of God and kingdom of men.
- Our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God (Phil. 3:20).
- We are in the world but not of the world (Jn. 17:15-16).
- We are called to live with this tension until Christ returns.
- Examples: Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Lutheran, Reformed, Puritans, Evangelicals

## Transformationist Model: Christ is the Transformer of Culture

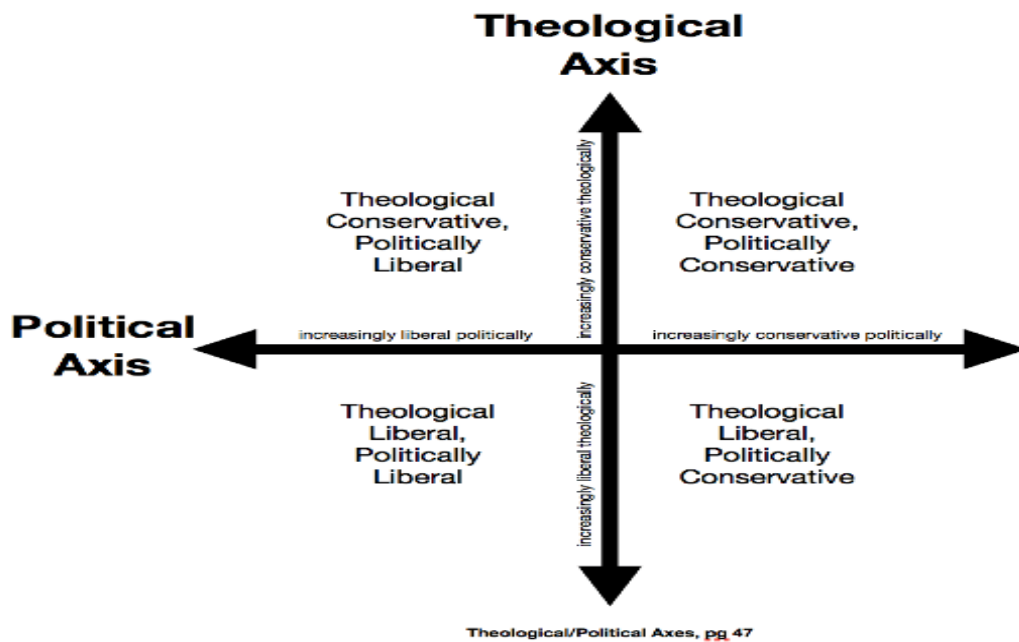
- Culture is both good and evil.
- As “salt and light,” Christian should have a positive influence on culture.
- Christians should transform culture with Christian beliefs and values.
- Transformation may be from the bottom-up through individual conversion.
- Examples: Augustine, Neo-Calvinists, Evangelicals
- Transformation may be from the top-down through political activism.
- The focus here is more on social salvation than on individual conversion.
- Examples: F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), Social Gospel, Liberation Theology, Theonomist Movement
- Proponents differ on amount of transformation that is possible before Christ’s return.
- Is it possible to create a utopic society of perfect peace and justice?





There are two different, but complementary, ways that we can walk the path of love, or caritas. We call these the **"Two Feet of Love in Action,"** based on Pope Benedict XVI's reflections in **Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)** and **Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)**.





### Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. <sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ <sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ <sup>41</sup> “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ <sup>44</sup> “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ <sup>45</sup> “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ <sup>46</sup> “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Mt. 25:31-46).

- Jesus concludes the Mount Olivet Discourse with 3 eschatological parables (Mt. 24:1-25:46).
- The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats illustrate the final judgment (“glorious throne”).
- The sheep on the right will be blessed to inherit the kingdom of God (eternal life).
- The goats on the left will be cursed to suffer eternal fire (punishment).
- The difference is how they treated “one of these least of these brothers and sisters of mine.”

- Treatment includes providing food, drink, hospitality, clothing, care, and prison visitation.
- Least (*elachistos*): a superlative adjective for smallest.
- Jesus refers to his disciples as the “least of these” (Mt. 10:42; 18:6).
- Brothers and sisters (*adelphos*): biological or spiritual sibling
- In Matthew, this often refers to a spiritual brother (5:23-24; 5:47; 7:3-5; 12:48-50; 18:15-35; 28:10).

**Context: Mark 9:37-42.** <sup>36</sup> He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” <sup>38</sup> “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” <sup>39</sup> “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, <sup>40</sup> for whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

<sup>42</sup> “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

**Context: Matthew 10:40-42.** <sup>40</sup> “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup> Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. <sup>42</sup> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

**Context: Matthew 18:6.** “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

**Context: Matthew 12:48-50.** “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” <sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

**Craig Keener:** “But in the context of Jesus’ teachings, especially in the context of Matthew (as opposed to Luke), this parable probably addresses not serving the poor on the whole but receiving the gospel’s messengers... That the ‘siblings’ are here ‘disciples’ is the majority view in church history and among contemporary New Testament scholars, although those who hold ‘siblings’ to be disciples divide sharply over whether they are specifically missionaries or poor fellow disciples in general,” in *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 606.

**John Nolland:** “Jesus had those who are literally his brothers and sisters in 12:46-47; 13:55. But more important is the fictive family created by Jesus’ identification in 12:48-50 of those who do the will of his Father as his brothers and sisters (and mother)... In any case, ‘brothers and sisters’ here identifies the group on the right as composed of disciples committed to doing the will of Jesus’ Father,” in *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC), 1031-1032.

**R. T. France:** “The recipients of the acts of kindness are Jesus’ ‘smallest brothers and sisters,’ and what is done to them is done to him (v. 40). So is the final judgment concerned not with response to human need in general, but to the need of disciples in particular, and thus indirectly with how people have responded to Jesus himself in the person of his earthly representatives? Has their response to disciples in need been their way of ‘acknowledging Jesus,’ which was presented as the basis of judgment in 10:32-33? That interpretation has a firm foundation in the earlier language of this gospel, which has spoken of true disciples as Jesus’ brothers and sisters (12:46-50; cf. 28:10) and has used the phrase ‘these little ones’ to denote members of the disciple community (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14—not particularly 18:6, ‘these little ones who believe in me’), in *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT), 957-958.

**Leon Morris:** “Two ways of understanding *the least of these my brothers* have won wide acceptance. One, is to bear in mind that elsewhere Jesus’ *brothers* are his disciples (12:48-49; 28:10); Jesus may be asserting that the test will be the way people have reacted toward his lowly followers...The other is to say that *brothers* includes anyone in need; in this case the test is the way they behaved toward lowly people in general...The former is probably the way we should understand the words, but that does not give the followers of Jesus license to do good deeds to fellow Christians but none to outsiders,” in *The Gospel according to Matthew* (TPNTC), 639.