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Christ and Culture Revisited



## CHRIST AND CULTURE REVISITED AGAIN IN THE 2020s

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A Southern Baptist living in the United States of the 1950s would have experienced a far different relationship to culture than one in the 2020s. Almost all Americans (>95 percent) in the 1950s identified as Christian.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the Deep South, the culture would have reflected many values of the SBC. Blue laws remained in effect forbidding many Sunday activities. Counties typically prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages. Baptist pastors preaching against gambling could be seen as one who cared about the health of the greater community.

Fast forwarding to the 2020s reveals an astonishing change in cultural norms. Sunday commerce, including the sale of alcohol, is considered the norm. Legalized gambling is promoted widely and is easily accessible, including via the Internet, not to mention sanctioned in many state lotteries.<sup>2</sup> Surely, a Southern Baptist of the 1950s would not likely have imagined the 2020s with the legalization of pornography, gay marriage, and state mandated transgender bathrooms.

Christians struggling with culture and each other about culture is nothing new. Near the end of the second century, Tertullian sought to dissuade Christians from frequenting the theater and the games. He argued that those belonging to God have more than enough excitement in the truth of their own literature (books, poems, aphorisms, songs) and the bloody victory of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Christian thought about culture has yielded more heat than consensus. But one thing has become clear: the church's history, in

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Newport, "Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down, but Still High," Gallup, December 24, 2015, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/187955/percentage-christians-drifting-down-high.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup>On the explosion of gambling in the 1980s and 1990s, see Thomas Barker and Marjie T. Britz, *Jokers Wild: Legalized Gambling in the Twenty-first Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 41–112.

<sup>3</sup>Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, XXIX.

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one sense, *is* its relation to culture, with types of relationship ranging from Christian martyrdom to Constantinian symbiosis. The modern era has brought forth further reflection and debate about the church in relation to culture. We shall turn later to examine one historically unique aspect of the 2020s that has dramatically changed the way Christians engage this debate. But first we turn to the book that for much of the last century defined the terms regarding the church's relationship to culture.

## I. THE BACKGROUND OF *CHRIST AND CULTURE*

In January of 1949 Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) delivered a series of lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Niebuhr's reputation as a brilliant theologian was established, and these lectures formed the basis of his most influential book published two years later, *Christ and Culture*.<sup>4</sup> Immediately, the book was hailed as “without a doubt the one outstanding book in the field of basic Christian social ethics.”<sup>5</sup> Since then, the influence of *Christ and Culture* overshadows all other works on the subject.

Niebuhr had long wrestled with the relation of church and culture. His own participation in the Evangelical Synod of North America with its German immigrant background led him to consider the effects of assimilation with American culture. At Yale his doctoral thesis on Ernst Troeltsch exposed him to thinking of Christianity in part as a product of historical relativism. Niebuhr specifically cites Troeltsch's *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches as his primary stimulus for Christ and Culture*.<sup>6</sup> But Niebuhr felt that work needed correction because “it is an aberration of faith as well as of reason to absolutize the finite” when one understands that “all of this relative history of finite men and movements is under the governance of the absolute God” (xii).

As we will see, Niebuhr's famous models of the relationship of the church and culture have, with good reason, been seriously criticized for

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<sup>4</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). By 1970, Martin Marty wondered whether since Jonathan Edwards's America had produced a theologian of such “organizing brilliance” as H. Richard Niebuhr. Foreword to John D Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 1970), 7. For an excellent study of Niebuhr's formation leading to *Christ and Culture*, see Jon Diefenthaler, “H. Richard Niebuhr: A Fresh Look at His Early Years,” *Church History* 52, no. 2 (1983): 172–85. By the 1994 centenary of Niebuhr's birth, meetings and articles celebrated and debated his theological legacy.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Ramsey, review of *Christ and Culture*, by H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Journal of Religion* 32, no. 3 (1952): 208.

<sup>6</sup>Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xi–xii. Hereafter I will use parenthetical citations to the page numbers of this book.

theological reasons by evangelicals. Niebuhr was accused of liberalism for not believing in a personal Satan while at the seminary of his denomination, Eden Theological Seminary (now associated with the United Church of Christ).<sup>7</sup> Although he did identify to some extent with American Protestant liberal theology, Niebuhr held “strong reservations” about liberal Christianity in general.<sup>8</sup> Thus, he could write his now well-known description of liberal theology: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr’s theology was closer to (though still critical of) Karl Barth’s, which explains why Niebuhr, as dean at Eden Seminary, was charged with believing the Bible contains, but is not, the word of God.<sup>10</sup>

There is little surprise then that evangelicals discern problems with Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. But the book remains the standard by which other proposals on the subject are compared. Niebuhr’s typologies provide starting points for examining the perennial problem of how Christians should relate to culture. As D. A. Carson notes, however, though everyone references Niebuhr’s iconic book, few today still read him closely.<sup>11</sup> So we revisit Niebuhr’s proposal.

## II. THE ARGUMENT OF CHRIST AND CULTURE

Five of the book’s seven chapters present Niebuhr’s famous models describing how Christians have related to culture.<sup>12</sup> Before presenting the models, Niebuhr proposed in the first chapter what he considered “The Enduring Problem.” The “problem” is recognized in the way Christians handle several “special issues.” Two issues stand out; interestingly, these had been important in his own background.

For example, Niebuhr regarded Christian confidence/distrust in education as an ongoing central Christian concern. How should a Christ

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<sup>7</sup>Diefenthaler, “H. Richard Niebuhr,” 182.

<sup>8</sup>Diefenthaler, “H. Richard Niebuhr,” 183.

<sup>9</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), 193.

<sup>10</sup>Diefenthaler, “H. Richard Niebuhr,” 183–84.

<sup>11</sup>D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xi. The title of this article obviously reflects upon the title of Carson’s excellent analysis of Niebuhr. Carson excels especially in his faithful appropriation of biblical theology as the correct starting point in critiquing Niebuhr and Christian cultural models. Though the secondary literature on Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is now expansive, I find Carson’s work most helpful and will use him as dialogue partner with Niebuhr. For an evangelical work less critical of *Christ and Culture*, see Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>12</sup>Niebuhr actually sees three models, with the final model having three sub-versions. Confusing matters, each sub-version gets a “Christ and...” title and chapter of its own.

follower consider the relationship of Athens and Jerusalem? Niebuhr's own experience is apparent here since his denomination had struggled considerably with the issue. He had personally served as a major force seeking to bolster its confidence in education.<sup>13</sup>

Another perennial cultural problem Niebuhr considered is how Christian ethics should be applied to economic life. His own background is enlightening here, too. He had argued that his synod should not engage only in acts of charity (hospitals, asylums, etc.), but should also be sympathetic with the labor movement. "In Niebuhr's estimation, the church and labor were natural allies in a society in which 'rugged individualism' had become rampant and the profit motive was undercutting human values."<sup>14</sup>

Evangelicals today can agree that education and prosperity present unique challenges to many Christians in the Western world, even if many would differ with the specifics of Niebuhr's own solutions. Niebuhr did, however, consider such "special issues" as part of the more general "enduring problem." The essential question has to do with whether Christians should bear responsibility for the general good of the social order or adopt the norm of "separation of Christ's followers from the world" (1). Presenting the general problem in this way contrasts two particular Christian views which Niebuhr sought to hold in tension. Indeed, one might think that just two models/chapters would then describe his view of Christian cultural response. But Niebuhr admitted there is no single answer to the problem. Thus, he appeared to consider each of his five cultural responses as divinely sanctioned. "Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts" (2).

Yet, Christians with "partial insights" are forced to choose how to live in the world, and this leads to his presentation of the five choices Christians have historically made. Most analysts of *Christ and Culture* quibble a little or a lot with these five typologies. Indeed, Niebuhr himself recognized they are "something of a construct" because no one group or person ever "conforms completely to a type" (44).

Chapter 2, "**Christ against Culture**," might reasonably be argued to be Niebuhr's most consistent model as qualified by the New Testament. One might suspect he began with this type because it is easiest to exemplify in

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<sup>13</sup>Diefenthaler, "H. Richard Niebuhr," 174–75.

<sup>14</sup>Diefenthaler, "H. Richard Niebuhr," 178–79.

the New Testament and early Christianity. Niebuhr noted that prominent second-century Christians wrote of Christianity as its own way of life. Tertullian exemplified the approach, even if perhaps most radically in early Christianity. Politics, philosophy, and plays have no place in the life of the obedient Christian. Niebuhr contended this position is necessary but inadequate because, while Christians with this approach preach the need for culture to reform, Christians employing a less separatist approach must engage the culture as mediators of the message (65). This approach, “important as one movement in the church, cannot itself exist without the counterweight of other types of Christianity” (82).

Niebuhr rightly noted that no Christian truly escapes involvement with the culture. “Man not only speaks but thinks with the aid of the language of culture” (69). Even Tertullian “makes evident that he is a Roman, so nurtured in the legal tradition and so dependent on philosophy that he cannot state the Christian case without their aid” (69–70). This approach has struggled perpetually with reason and revelation, the nature and prevalence of sin, law and grace, and the relation of Christ’s lordship to his being Creator and Governor of the world.

“**The Christ of Culture**,” the subject of chapter 3, has rightly been considered the most controversial of Niebuhr’s models. Those holding this view “feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservatism or progress” (83). Niebuhr described these as the “once-born,” and though he recognized the term “liberalism” is accurate theologically, he believed the approach is “more aptly named Culture-Protestantism” (84). Niebuhr admitted this approach has been historically viewed by most Christians as heretical or apostate. But since the eighteenth century, that which had been “heresy became the new orthodoxy,” and Christ was interpreted as a hero of “manifold culture” (91). Examples include Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and Albrecht Ritschl. Jesus becomes “the great enlightener, the great teacher, the one who directs all men in culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace” (92).

Niebuhr argued that this cultural approach contributes to the extension of Christ’s reign among the leading groups of a society. These “missionaries to the aristocracy” effect change by using the language of the sophisticated, whether philosophy or culture or political or economic (104). “If it is an error to interpret [Jesus] as a wise man teaching a secular wisdom, or a

reformer concerned with the reconstruction of social institutions, such interpretations serve at least to balance the opposite mistakes of presenting him as a person who had no interest in the principles men used to guide their present life in a damned society because his eye was fixed on the Jerusalem that was to come down from heaven” (106). At this point in reading *Christ and Culture*, one might be forgiven for thinking the book could end here. The “Christ against culture” Christians are necessary but need the “Christ of Culture” proponents to balance things out.

Niebuhr did, however, criticize these “cultural Protestants” for finding “it strangely desirable to write apocryphal gospels and new lives of Jesus” (109). If Christ against culture proponents pit revelation against reason, the Christ of culture type pits reason against revelation. Interestingly, Niebuhr recognized that cultural Christianity had met its challenge in naturalism. One wonders how Niebuhr might have valued the “cultural Protestant” approach if he had experienced the radically secularized, post-Christian Western culture today. Again, he sternly warned that loyalty to contemporary culture can radically qualify loyalty to Christ such that he is “abandoned in favor of an idol called by his name” (110).

In spite of Niebuhr’s criticisms of theological liberalism, D. A. Carson suspects that this approach “could add today that Jesus stands for inclusion, for tolerance, for spirituality.”<sup>15</sup> And devastatingly, Carson observes that “Machen, though he wrote three-quarters of a century ago, was surely right: liberalism is not another denomination or any other kind of legitimate option within Christianity. Rather, it is another religion.”<sup>16</sup>

In chapter 4, Niebuhr introduced his model, “**Christ above Culture.**” If his “enduring problem” lent itself to just his first two models, Niebuhr noted his resistance to think in terms of just two classes. So he presented his “above culture” type, as most often exemplified in Christian history, as a view which finds its place between the extremes of the first two models. Confusingly, he proposed that the “Christ above culture” model has three versions: the synthetic, dualist, and conversionist. Therefore, though the synthetic approach is a subset of “Christ above culture” and is explained in this chapter, it is not identical, but only part of the “above culture” approach. Yet he gave “Christ and...” names to the other two subsets of the “Christ above culture” approach.

Niebuhr presented Thomas Aquinas as an example of the synthetic

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<sup>15</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 19.

<sup>16</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 33–34.

version of Christ above culture. Reasonable people will discover in the nature of things broad principles to govern culture. Divine and natural law overlap, though the divine certainly transcends the natural. Niebuhr recognized that a particular modern culture might not even allow for a synthetic Christ above culture approach like that of Thomas, but he presented no answer to the question why.

**“Christ and Culture in Paradox”** (again a version of the Christ above culture model) is the subject of chapter 5. Niebuhr referred to this group as “both-and” or “dualist” in the relation of Christ and culture. The dualist places a greater emphasis upon “the extent and thoroughness of human depravity” (152). Martin Luther exemplified this approach. The corruption of culture is highlighted, and the dualist views the synthesist’s more favorable view of culture as deeply flawed. The dualist thus speaks and lives in paradoxes, especially in law and grace, and in divine wrath and mercy. Niebuhr viewed Paul as a likely candidate of this approach since he held in tension the demands of this age and the next. Paul also always began with Christ, which is not the case with the synthesist who begins with God. Luther’s dialectic approach argues that just as “there is no way of deriving knowledge from the gospel about what to do as a physician, builder, carpenter, or statesman, so there is no way of gaining the right spirit of service, of confidence and hopefulness, of humility and readiness to accept correction, from any amount of technical or cultural knowledge” (176). Evangelicals might be tempted to describe the first two of these “Christ above culture” subsets as stressing either creation (synthesis) or the Fall (dualist), but Niebuhr’s next model makes clear he thought differently.

In chapter 6, Niebuhr presented his last model, **“Christ the Transformer of Culture.”** Niebuhr called this the “conversionist” approach and regarded it as embodied in the great central church tradition. In contrast to the dualist, the conversionist more positively assesses culture. And as opposed to the dualist stressing redemption from sin, the conversionist focuses more on creation. Christ has always ordered culture in some way from the beginning. Unlike the dualist, the conversionist believes culture is corrupted, but not evil altogether. History reveals God’s involvement with humanity rather than his abandonment of a “dying pagan civilization” (195). Niebuhr thought Augustine fit this model, though he admitted Augustine was far too complex to fit it neatly. Cultural “sinfulness is dependent on the presence of a fundamentally good, created order” (213). Calvin, too, fits



the conversionist model even more so with his understanding of human vocation and the need for the gospel to permeate all of life.

Yet Carson notes that “what is striking about this fifth paradigm is that [Niebuhr] offers no negative criticism whatsoever. Most scholars understand Niebuhr thus to be bestowing his approval.”<sup>17</sup> And worse, “F. D. Maurice turns out to be the hero, because he allows the conversionist pattern to take him into universalism — not on the ground that any New Testament document supports this line, but on the ground of what Maurice asserts he is ‘obliged’ to believe in.”<sup>18</sup> In the end, “it is hard to see how this fifth pattern escapes the criticism that Niebuhr himself levels against various forms of liberal theology.”<sup>19</sup>

In chapter 7, “**A Concluding Unscientific Postscript**,” Niebuhr recognized his work was both “unconcluded and inconclusive” (230). The work of other analysts could have been examined, and many other historical figures might have been analyzed. Yet the effort was important because it allowed one “to act in greater harmony with movements that seem to be at cross purposes” (232). But in the end, no insight into the ways other Christians have wrestled with culture relieves “the Christian individual or the responsible community from the burden, the necessity, the guilt and glory, of arriving at such conclusions in present decisions and present obedience” (233).

### III. CHRIST AND CULTURE REVISITED AGAIN IN THE 2020s

Certain critiques have become rather standard of Niebuhr’s now classic book. Carson identifies the most common by noting that even “as influential as it has been in the past, Niebuhr’s fivefold typology now seems parochial.”<sup>20</sup> The model is based on finding multiple allowable paradigms from various parts of the Bible rather than listening to the unified voice of the Bible. Also, Niebuhr’s use of concrete historical figures are not always good fits for his patterns.<sup>21</sup>

But discerning patterns in history is no easy feat, and Niebuhr was well aware of these issues as we have already noted. Niebuhr’s keen sense of our historical limitations is obviously correct in one sense. No human

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<sup>17</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 28–29.

<sup>18</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 38–39.

<sup>19</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 39.

<sup>20</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 201.

<sup>21</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 40–43. Carson especially notes problems with Niebuhr’s understanding of Augustine and Calvin.

interpreter, despite the importance of the effort, will see these matters from a God's-eye perspective.

But Christian historical awareness can lead to historical relativity when the Bible does not remain the essential determinant for understanding these things. Most readers of this journal will recognize Niebuhr's biggest problem is due to his understanding of Scripture. "We do not trust the God of faith because we believe that certain writings are trustworthy. Yet it is our conviction that God is faithful, that He kept faith with Jesus Christ who was loyal to Him and to his brothers; that Christ is risen from the dead; that as the Power is faithful so Christ's faithfulness is powerful; that we can say 'our Father' to that which has elected us to live, to die, and to inherit life beyond life" (255). A standard critique of neo-orthodoxy applies here to Christ and Culture. How can Niebuhr arrive at such "convictions" if the Bible is not believed trustworthy? Carson concludes that Niebuhr's work "is transparently the stance of a mid-twentieth-century Westerner steeped in the heritage of what liberal Protestantism then was."<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, Niebuhr's understanding of Christ is also deeply flawed. "Important as are the once debated questions whether Jesus ever 'really' lived, and the still moot problem of the trustworthiness of New Testament records as factual descriptions of actual events, these are not the questions of primary significance" (12–13). What does matter is how the New Testament Jesus "shapes our present faith and action" (13). Niebuhr has walked himself into a historicist Christological corner due to two particular problems. "The first is the impossibility of stating adequately by means of concepts and propositions a principle which presents itself in the form of a person. The second is the impossibility of saying anything about this person which is not also relative to the particular standpoint in church, history, and culture of the one who undertakes to describe him" (14). Carson rightly notes that "the sweep of the interpretations of 'Christ' that [Niebuhr] embraces is doubtless too broad, if one is trying to limit oneself to the forms of confessional Christianity that explicitly and self-consciously try to live under the authority of Scripture."<sup>23</sup>

Niebuhr faces the same problem with his understanding of culture. At times culture appears to be defined by beliefs and values friendly to Christ. At other times culture functions for Niebuhr like the New Testament "world," that is, not friendly to Christ. Carson notes that the culture

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<sup>22</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, x.

<sup>23</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 10.

terminology has a palpable “slipperiness.” Niebuhr is really talking about two competing authorities within culture, the Christ found in various mainstream Christendom paradigms versus all other authorities “divested of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> The lack of a clear biblical grounding for knowledge of Christ and culture leads perilously close to Christs and cultures.

#### IV. AN APPLICATION OF CHRIST AND CULTURE IN THE 2020s

Having critiqued *Christ and Culture* with D. A. Carson’s help does not alleviate the need for our assessments and actions today. As noted earlier, Niebuhr’s last chapter extends the challenge that no insight into the ways other Christians have wrestled with culture relieves “the Christian individual or the responsible community from the burden, the necessity, the guilt and glory, of arriving at such conclusions in present decisions and present obedience” (233). And though for a variety of reasons it is harder to critique one’s own life and community, revisiting *Christ and Culture* again without attempting personal application would be cowardly.

Southern Baptists, like other Christians, do not always think globally when contemplating cultural challenges. Cultural problems discussed by Western Christian leaders often focus primarily on Western culture. Yet what apparently matters most to the Lord Jesus in building his church is not centered in the United States. Even with an extremely generous estimate of how many U.S. citizens are Christian (76.9 percent), approximately 90 percent of the world’s Christians live elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Contemplating the persecution so many Christians face elsewhere has dramatically changed the way I view my own culture, increasingly anti-Christian though it be.<sup>26</sup> As Carson wisely notes, my choice of options regarding relating to my culture “is a luxury reserved for those who have options.”<sup>27</sup> Even if respected Christian cultural critics like “Abraham Kuyper had grown up under the conditions of the killing fields of Cambodia, one suspects his view of the relationship between Christianity and culture would have

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<sup>24</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 12.

<sup>25</sup>Jeff Diamant, “The Countries with the 10 Largest Christian Populations and the 10 Largest Muslim Populations,” Pew Research Center, April 1, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/>.

<sup>26</sup>Carson notes that when Western Christians reflect on their cultural challenges, they significantly miss the perspective gained from “the voice of the contemporary church in the Two-Thirds world.” Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 31.

<sup>27</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 224.

been significantly modified.”<sup>28</sup> Thus as one who lives in relative security, I humbly offer a perspective on just one significant way in which Christians in my corner of the world “suffer” from an anti-Christian culture.

Conservative Christians such as Southern Baptists are generally alert to dramatic cultural incursions into the churches such as endorsements of same-sex marriage. But I suggest we are very much oblivious to the effects of one of the biggest changes in cultural history: **the digital revolution**.<sup>29</sup> I am not here referring to the digital dangers of pornography or worldly distraction or spiritually destructive teachings. *I am referring to the way Western culture’s new medium with its priorities, attitudes, and consequences has often captivated the church’s thinking.*

**Culture’s medium** is digital and thus allows for virtually instant communication. This wonderful technology has both opened the door for gospel proclamation in closed countries and flooded the world with pornography. A radically new and enormously influential way of communication has become the short message (Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, for example). Digital media has powerfully enabled glorious opportunities for families to stay in touch around the world. For the first time in history, most in the West have access to rapid communication and information.

But also never has such a powerful medium existed to spread so rapidly shallow thinking and misinformation. And Christians, including Southern Baptists, can claim no special exemption from the widespread damage of this powerful cultural force. The loudest voices, whether wise or not, often gain the widest following even in Christian circles. The medium is not conducive to careful conversation. A premium is awarded for reaction versus reflection.

**Culture’s priorities** remarkably often today sweep up Western Christians into their wake. Whereas the issues which might ignite debate among Christians in the past were doctrinally and ethically oriented (e.g., biblical inerrancy), current controversies are often driven by the culture rather than clearly articulated biblical concerns. For example, pandemic vaccines and masks are important issues requiring well-informed decisions. But what biblical mandate leads some Christians to conclude that masking

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<sup>28</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, ix.

<sup>29</sup>“In the space of 50 years, the digital world has grown to become crucial to the functioning of society. The revolution has proceeded at breakneck speed—no technology has reached more people in as short a space of time as the Internet—and it has not finished yet.” Richard Hodson, “Digital Revolution: An Explosion in Information Technology is Remaking the World, Leaving Few Aspects of Society Untouched,” *Nature Outlook*, 28 November 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07500-z>.

or not is a basis to divide from one another?

The **culture's attitude** today has been described as cancel or call-out culture. Western Christians, including Southern Baptists, have become especially adept at call-out culture, the practice of criticizing other Christians publicly on social media. Just like the broader culture, Christians often exemplify anger and self-righteousness in their attacks on other believers. No conversation is attempted, and mature, respectful thinking can be considered a sign of compromise or lack of commitment. Carson, just a few years ago, noted that as "Western culture becomes more polarized, the barriers to meaningful interaction between, on the one hand, Christians who are trying to be faithful to the Bible, and, on the other, people who are committed to one form or another of secularism, become more acute."<sup>30</sup> Today this description of polarization increasingly fits Christians on opposite sides of nonbiblical or nonessential issues.

**Culture's consequences**, then, are tension and division between Christians. Yet because the culture embraces division, Christians have often followed suit with each other without realizing the biblical implications. Sometimes separation is unavoidable between those who call themselves by Christ's name. Indeed, not to separate over doctrinal and ethical issues of first importance is dereliction of one's duty to Jesus Christ. But to call for or incite division over issues that are not biblically critical is something God hates.

## V. CONCLUSION

Debate about Christ and culture typologies will likely endure until he comes. The practice of faithfulness to Christ in the face of culture is not an option, however. Courage is required for his people to remove the cultural logs from their own eyes to see where culture has interfered with allegiance to Jesus Christ. Yet, as H. Richard Niebuhr rightly argued, the effort is critical because it allows one "to act in greater harmony with movements that seem to be at cross purposes" (232).




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<sup>30</sup>Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 119.