

Church-Culture Engagement?

YES AND NO

Draft

Introduction:

Tim Keller makes the point in *Center Church* that lurking behind the diverse array of intramural debates is the question of how “Christians should relate to the culture around us.” He observes:

The church is fragmenting even beyond its old divisions of denominational and theological traditions. Within each of the bodies of Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Pentecostals lie deep divisions over how to engage culture. In fact, there may be no more divisive issue in the contemporary American church today.¹

Keller’s observation sets up what may be the greatest challenge to contemporary *missional* ecclesiology. It calls into question the very meaning of “mission” itself and the inter-related issue of missional strategy with respect to the church of Jesus Christ. And contrary to the “straw man” like trajectories that are too often implied in such debates, there tends to be relative consensus about what the answer is not. For instance:

Virtually every sect of traditional Christianity stands apposed, at least theoretically, to various gnostic like tendencies that would diminish a holistic understanding of salvation and the kingdom of God, whether by affirming neo-platonic “body-spirit” dichotomies or various aspects of “sacred-secular” dualisms.

That is, most Christians within gospel centered and historically orthodox traditions affirm that Christian’s should be actively involved in the so called “public square” as informed by Christian mission and values. There is relative uniformity that such engagement ought to be at once counter-cultural, involved in culture *and for the benefit* of culture consisting of people of all faiths and none.

Moreover, most Christians will affirm that the gospel is holistic as to involve the redemption of both the outward and inward person in the transformative power of the gospel. Reconciliation with God impacts every aspect of the curse upon sinful humanity—socio-economic, physical, emotional and relational. Furthermore, relative to various recent expressions of Christian engagement with culture, we concede with Keller and other “emerging church proponents” a rejection of “the cultural obliviousness of pietism, the triumphalism of the Religious Right (and Left), and the lack of reflection and depth of most seeker churches.”² Respecting all the above, it is here assumed!

Notwithstanding much agreement within the gospel centered and missional church movement about what the answer is *not*, the object of this study is to again concede with Keller that we “have not agreed on what the ideal model for relating to culture should be.”³

The Looming Presence of H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*

Before transitioning to a proposed answer, it can be acknowledge that looming large over the debate and arguably one of the significant contributors to the confusion is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951). For when the question of cultural engagement is enjoined, it is almost guaranteed that this classic and highly influential topology of cultural engagement is referenced.

To be sure, we would ordinarily sympathize with the sentiments of public theologian Martin Marty, that since

¹ Keller, Timothy J. (2012-09-04). *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (p. 181, 188-189). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

“Niebuhr has been dead for forty-three years, the statute of limitations on implicating him in crucial debates ought to have been long in force.” And yet, as Marty also acknowledges, “his [Niebuhr’s] own personal reputation, status, and relevance are seen to rise and fall and rise again,” so that, “those who comment on American public life offer new wrinkles that warrant debate.”⁴ Most recently and within the gospel centered tradition, one thinks of Tim Keller’s Center Church (2012).

To his credit, Keller offers a thoughtful re-examination together with the pro’s and con’s in each of Niebuhr’s five types revised to four. However the Niebuhrian categories still prove formative as to dominate Keller’s lengthy discussion on the issue of cultural engagement which then raises a more substantive question concerning the whole Niebuhrian enterprise itself.⁵ What, by the way the types are oriented as related to an impact on culture, is then categorically dismissed relative to the nature and mission of Christ vis-à-vis the church and its positioning to culture? What Christological and ecclesial “first things” are inadvertently subsumed, at best, under the second things of cultural engagement? In other words, rather than to assume the five (four) categories such as to deliberate their respective virtues and vices, the credibility of the categories themselves, and the degree to which they ought to determine the answer, needs unveiling.

So for instance, are Niebuhr’s five types representative of any Christian tradition, *really*? Or are they better rhetorical “straw-men” in so far as the caricatures themselves bias toward the Niebuhr’s proposed transformist position? By Niebuhr’s own admission, his five types are presented as “hypothetical schemes” and “partly artificial” lacking the nuance fitting historical realities. He further concedes that his typology doesn’t do justice to the “rich complexity of individual events” or describe the manner in which one “historical figure” will at times “show characteristics that are more reminiscent of some other family than the one by whose name he has been called.”⁶ Might then this beg the question of legitimacy relative to the types themselves other than perhaps their their rhetorically usefulness?

Rhetorically brilliant, but arguably misleading! For in the end, *Christ and Culture* at its best is a brilliant rhetorical scheme, less historical reality, that argued for *Niebuhr’s* peculiar, if not erroneous, interpretation of the Calvinist tradition per his paradigm of “Christ transforming Culture (sometimes described as *conversionist* or *world-formative*, paradigm).” For what *real* Christian tradition would actually confess to any one of the other four types, if “nothing but” that type, other than *Christ transforming culture*? Would any Christian actually confess to “nothing-but” the seemingly militant position of *Christ against culture*,” or to “nothing-but” the seemingly compromised position of *Christ of culture*, or to “nothing-but” the seemingly “irrelevant” position of *Christ above culture*, or the somewhat paralyzing position of nothing-but” *Christ and Culture in paradox*?

To Keller’s credit, he correctly stipulates: “the use of models helps us by their very inadequacy. Many people and groups do not fit into any one category because they sense (rightly) that no one model can do justice to all of the

⁴ See more at: <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/niebuhrian-irony-and-drones-%E2%80%94martin-e-marty#sthash.16QvFVpE.dpuf>

⁵ c.f. Center Church Part 5. Niebuhr’s “five” types are summarized by Keller as follows, together with the nomenclature of Keller’s revised “four” noted parenthetically:

1. *Christ against culture*: a withdrawal model of removing oneself from the culture into the community of the church. (Counterculturalist)
2. *Christ of culture*: an accommodationist model that recognizes God at work in the culture and looks for ways to affirm this. (Relevance)
3. *Christ above culture*: a synthetic model that advocates supplementing and building on the good in the culture with Christ. ((Relevance)
4. *Christ and culture in paradox*: a dualistic model that views Christians as citizens of two different realms, one sacred and one secular. (Two Kingdoms)
5. *Christ transforming culture*: a conversionist model that seeks to transform every part of culture with Christ. (“Transformationist”)

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Row: NY, NY, 1951), p. 42-43

important biblical themes.”⁷ But here again, the question this begs concerns whether or not a different paradigm from an all together different perspective would make better sense of the historical nuances in all the various attempts at being biblically faithful that is conceded even by Niebuhr? Are the nuances themselves suggestive of a more dialectical form of engagement in scripture? What other theological axis or dimension might be discovered that could unify a “both-and” answer to all five types even, again, dialectically interactive? The answer to these questions are embedded in yet another rather ominous admission by Niebuhr in his preface.

Although it seems rarely even noticed by those influenced by Christ and Culture, what are the hermeneutic implications that the “Christ” of “Christ and Culture” is left undefined relative to the ways Christ is actually represented or mediated in culture in the present age? Again, and to be fair, Niebuhr was quite intentional about this ambiguity *for the sake* of argument. He explained that by the abstract use of “Christ,” he sought to make room for all manifestations of Christianity “whether defined as church, creed, ethics, or movement of thought.”⁸ This get to the heart of our thesis and comes with the sound of a bombshell. How is it possible that the whole topic of Christ and culture can ensue without an explicit Christology, especially as applied the nature and mission of his ascension ministry today?

Consequently, in one full swoop, any explicit attempt at discerning the question of Christian engagement with culture from the vantage point of a biblically informed Christology as applied even then to Ecclesiology (the nature and mission of the church in its own right) is exempted. The sum effect is to bias the question of *Christ and Culture* from the vantage point of social history for cultures sake (however rhetorically manipulated) less anything inherently worthy of consideration relative to Christ and/or the church for their own sakes.

In the end, the contention here is that even if one were to carefully nuance a unified position based upon the pro’s and con’s in each of Niebuhr’s five types, the church and Christ in their own rights are lost in the discussion. This sets up the possibility of Christ vis-a-vis Church neutered in her power of presence in the world and compromised in her faithfulness of paradigm on behalf of God glory even. And when the subject of Christ vis-à-vis church is left out of the discussion, there results a corresponding “sloppiness” in so far as attempting a biblical delineation of the intended extent and limits of church engagement in the world, which then begs the question itself! But even more pertinent, to dismiss the issue of Christology in relation to ecclesiology in the discussion is to forego the first order question, “how best is God glorified in the world?”

Ecclesiology or Sociology Driving the Question?

As applied then to missional ecclesiology, often lost in the question of cultural engagement is the possibility *that just the church being the church is a mission in its own right in relation to glorifying God*, even then to have a collateral impact upon social transformation. And doesn’t this resonate with the perspective observed throughout redemptive history wherein, such statements as by God are made:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, (Ezek. 36:22)

And by Christ even if to shape his redemptive mission:

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, John 17:1

Such that:

in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ 1 Peter 4:11

More than the casual cliché, the glory of God is the ultimate purpose of salvation and subsequently the driving

⁷ Center Church, p. 195

⁸ Ibid. p.1.

force in how in Christ's name culture ought to be engaged.

More than a mere source of mission for the benefit of culture, in what sense can it be said that the church is a mission in her own right, even then to the benefit of culture in so far as church is identified as the very "body of Christ" on earth during Christ's ascension ministry? Lesslie Newbigin makes this very point when he affirms the how the church is "not merely a source of witness, it is the locus of witness." He further explains:

Just as we insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so must we also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate. An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church."⁹

Clearly for Newbigin, and at the heart of *missional ecclesiology*, is this idea that the visibly organized and apostolic church is a value in its own right such as to invoke a unique set of questions and categories relevant to the issue of cultural engagement. The organized church as such is posited as having an infinitely more lofty conception and nature than merely what it can do for culture, however startling this may sound in the present debate. And yet, in so far as the church is the locus for mission, it may well prove to be a compelling strategy for social transformation as well?

Going forward therefore:

We will first want to address the subject of Christ and culture from the vantage of Christology applied to missional ecclesiology. For instance, what exactly is the nature of Christ's presence in the world during his ascension ministry today? And especially, how does this relate to the "ecclesial first things" such as to determine the second things of cultural engagement by consequence? In so far as it is discovered that the church as the body of Christ is an essential element of Christ's presence and order in the world, the question is then raised concerning the nature of the church and her mission.

Is it Christ in/with/through the church acting jointly (qua the local and global church organized by positive institution in scripture)? Or is it Christ in/with/through the church acting severally (qua church acting through church members and the various subsidiary and para-church organizations)? Furthermore, is it Christ acting directly, or indirectly to engage culture?

Already then, two very different paradigms are beginning to emerge—the paradigm of indirect/direct engagement and the paradigm of church organized by divine law/the church unorganized yet present through her members. And how does it change the conversation relative to the extent and limits of church power and mission? In what sense is the organized church acting jointly regulated differently than how an individual members acting severally are regulated by scripture relative to the extent and limits of church power and mission

But then, what different categories toward the formation of a new kind of typology might this entail, even if to re-orient some or all aspects of Niebuhr's five types along a very different axis of orientation? '

Proposed here is ventured a simple, if not simplistic "yes-no" or "both-and" answer concerning Christ engagement with culture. Our "yes and no" will assume a more "honest" typology of two versus five or even four as to better reflect the biblical orientation corresponding to the dialectical nature of Christ in Christology (word/flesh) and the dialectical nature of the church as the body of Christ (acting jointly/severally) as then related to a dialectical engagement "in but not of the world." The two proposed "types" are perhaps better "orientations" and will at once allow us to expect almost an infinite degree of socio-theological nuancespe as to involve all five of Niebuhr's types in various aspects. Quite simply the two suggested orientations are:

- 1) Christ engaging culture qua church acting severally (through its individual members and subsidiary and para-church organizations)

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 147. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 120.

- 2) Christ disengaging culture qua church acting jointly (through the church designed and organized by divine law upon the apostolic foundation)

This “both-and” way of answering the question of cultural engagement is posited wherein both the church and culture are the recipients of God’s mission even if to distinguish the first things of Christ and the church as then related to the second things of cultural engagement. And whereas the church acting severally is directly engaged with culture, the church acting jointly is indirectly engaged in so far as its values and mission shape the values and mission of her members who then combined with that wisdom common to all people of all faiths and none are enabled to serve the common good and even offer cultural transformation toward greater human flourishing.

A Proposal and Partial Counter-Proposal

To further illustrate this proposal in the context of other proposed, *In the February 13, 2013 blog “Movement NYC”, Tim Keller writes (underlines are his):*

As much as possible, Christians should live, serve, and be deeply involved in the lives of our largest cities. They need to be involved in the life of the whole city, not just their own particular enclave. If you can live and serve in the city, you should.

The Christian church must concentrate the great portion of its resources on ministry to the city. It is our “reasonable service”. To fail to render it is as foolish as it is disobedient.¹

For the sake of argument, these two statements are noted as more or less normative of the growing trend in missional ecclesiology and gospel centered spirituality. Our thesis then is to answer the above two statements with a “yes- and no,” albeit with two important qualifications.

We answer “yes” to Keller’s first statement, in so far as we can strike the term “largest” and modify Keller’s use of the word “city” in order to contain it to a theological vs. any one sociological description. In other words, by the use of “city” in the above statement we would qualify it as the common cultural context that is under the jurisdiction of the state and could as much be rural, suburban and urban. But more to the point, this use of “city” pertains to a common and remedial focused grace of God on behalf of all people of all faiths and none. This “city” is distinguished from that special and redemptive focused grace of God that is under the direct jurisdiction of the church (organized) by divine law (or by positive institution). These two “cities” are as “two kingdoms” albeit both under the sovereign lordship of Christ and both representing legitimate spheres of Christian activism albeit under two separate institutional jurisdictions under God—the church (organized) and state (organized) respectively. As qualified therefore, we say YES to “as much as possible, Christians should live...”

To Keller’s second statement, we answer “no” but again as qualified in so far as the meaning of “church” is understood as the church acting “jointly” vs. the church acting “severally,” albeit *two distinct church realities if never separate!* The church acting jointly is therefore indirectly engaged with culture through her members together with the various church subsidiary and para-church organizations who are directly engaged.

Second, we will want to consider the issue of **Christ and culture as a social strategy**. From having applied Ascension Christology to the “ecclesial first things” to a “yes-no” or “both-and” proposal, we will want to consider whether or not a “yes-no” is compelling for the sake of culture itself as a *social strategy*. How might our proposal prove to be a compelling strategy in relation to cultural transformation even? The so-called “post-liberal” tradition will be invoked, even as it will be suggested, contrary to Niebuhr, that it is consistent with the Calvinist or more broadly Augustinian-Reformed and Scoto-American tradition as well.

By way of conclusion, it is hoped that per the question of cultural engagement, it will be shown how from both the perspective of Christ and culture—the “yes-no” proposal offers a win-win solution wherein in all things Christ is glorified in/with/through his church even to the salvation and restoration of culture, at least eventually!

Christ And Culture As Christology Applied To Missional Ecclesiology

Ascension Christology applied to ecclesiology will present the church as a value concept in her own right. As such, the church is defined and described as the mediatorial presence of Christ for His own glory and mission, NOT as a valuative concept related to her worth for some other ends (albeit cultural). The church is described as the “locus” of witness rather than the mere “source” of witness. This in turn infers that the power of Christ’s ascension ministry is inherently tied to the church *just being the church* as true to herself. She is missionary by her very nature as defined by Christ’s mediated presence.

Herein begs the question of authentic presence that will draw upon a carefully designed and regulated social organization for the sake of a mission reflective of Christ’s mission as her only head and king. For only the church carefully regulated as to BE a true and faithful mediation of Christ is the efficacious church in the manner that Christ envisioned. Therefore, the “first thing” pertaining to the relation of Christ and culture is an informed and biblical ecclesiology, to which we now turn.

1) The Nature Of The Institutional Church: The Mediatorial Temple Of God As Regulated By Divine Covenant In Scripture

The scripture defines the INSTITUTIONAL church as BOTH Christ’s salvific presence “mediated, “fleshed out” and “templed” among us (c.f. John 1:14, Eph.2:18ff or *participazione divina* ecclesiology) AND as Christ’s covenantal institution explicitly and positively organized by “divine law” (Mt 16:18ff, Eph. 1:22, 2:20 or *jure divino* ecclesiology). Together, this two-fold trajectory of God’s saving activity can be discerned throughout the whole of redemptive history. It has been described by Jonathan Edwards as the saving activity of God in both heat and light. Likewise, Meredith Kline described it as God’s “power (of presence) and paradigm” (of law).

The church as divine presence: How would it change the discussion about Christ and culture if the socially organized visible church were the very real temple-presence of God? What are the tragic conditions wherein the scene of God leaving his temple in Ezekiel 10:18-22 is invoked? How is God’s presence acting through and under the direct authority of the church distinct, if never separate, from God’s presence acting through and under the direct authority of the state?

There was never a time in all of redemptive history when salvation was not transacted apart from divine presence as mediated in/with/through the temple-church. In the Old Covenant for instance, Salvation History in the Old Testament was accomplished with such words as dwelling place and tabernacle, even as covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his saving, albeit mediated, *presence* to his people. (Cf. Gen. 15; 26:24; Exod. 29:42; Deut. 12:5; Lev. 22:3; Ps.76.2; Num. 35:34). The description, *God in the midst of us* (Ps 49), was the single most coveted reality, even as “excommunication” was the most feared curse (Gen.3)

Likewise under the New Covenant, the gospel is not a transition from temple presence to “no temple presence,” but rather to temple presence fulfilled and then mediated by Christ during his ascension ministry. For instance, Paul described salvation with the promise “I will dwell with them” (2 Cor. 6:16) just as under the Old Covenant. And lest this “dwelling” be confused with a private experience, Paul, in 1Cor 3, dares to assert “Do you not know that you (plural) are God’s temple and that Gods Spirit dwells in you (plural)? Therefore, throughout the New Covenant, words like “temple” and “tabernacle” and “dwelling place” describe God’s saving presence as pertaining to the “household of God” or “the church of the living God” no less than it did under the Old Covenant context (c.f. Eph. 2:18-22, Rev. 21:3).

As specifically applied to the first things of ecclesiology, the visibly organized church (Eph. 2:21) as built upon the foundation of the apostles (Eph.2:20) becomes the “dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit” (Eph.2:22). By a transaction of participation in holy communion in/with/by this church, it is said that we become “partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The salvific presence must necessarily be qualified as “not necessarily, and not necessarily immediately,” which is to affirm an otherwise fallible church this side of heaven that is always subject

to the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). And yet, the scripture speaks of this church with such transactional power as to “bind and loose on earth what is bound and loosed in heaven (Mt 16). Or as Christ’s commission to the church in John 20:21ff

Just as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

In the words of Cyprian, the church can be compared to a mothers’ womb wherein we are “conceived, nourished and by her spirit animated.ⁱⁱ Or as Augustine once explained from Ephesians 1:22, “to the flesh of Christ is joined the church, and there is made total Christ, head and body.”ⁱⁱⁱ And again, as Calvin described about the church in agreement with Cyprian and Augustine, “no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.”^{iv}

More recently, Thomas Torrance contends that “the Christian Church is what it is because of its indissoluble union with Christ through the Spirit, for in him is concentrated the Church and its ministry... there is only one ministry, that of Christ in his Body.”¹⁰ The sum implications of this is profound, as John Calvin stated it:

“Beyond the pale of the Church, no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for ... the paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.”¹¹

Can you imagine a scenario wherein the temple was not carefully designed and regulated as to preserve the light and efficacy of God’s mediated presence in the world as witness to his exclusive Lordship? A cursory survey of Israel’s history presents judgment against Israel not so much for worshiping other gods, but worshiping Yahweh in a manner like the nations worshipped their gods (cf. Exodus 3 and Dt. 12:7 with Hos.4:15, Ezekiel 20:27-32). Creativity, at least on the elemental level relative to the extent and limits of the temples activity was *not* a virtue! This then brings us to the second trajectory of ecclesiology in redemptive history—the church by divine institution and the so-called regulative principle.

The church as divine Covenant Institution: How would it change the discussion about Christian engagement with culture if the visibly organized church (the church acting jointly) was actually defined and regulated by divine law according to the positive institution of Christ? What are the extent and limits of church power? This last question is in order both to preserve the exclusive crown rights of Christ as head and king over everything concerning church teaching and action, and to preserve the Christian liberty of conscience? Can the church then, acting jointly, just do anything it wants? Is the burden nothing contrary to Christ’s commands in scripture (as would be applied to Christians acting severally) or does it also involve the additional burden of proof as to enjoin nothing even beside Christ’s commands in scripture (as applied to the church acting jointly)?

Today, most people have lost any real conviction that the actions and mission of the institutionalized church is presented and regulated in the apostolic tradition. In fact, most argue today that the problem with the church is that it is too “organized.” I would suggest that the real problem is the church not organized enough—that is to say not carefully regulated by the extent and limits of church power and authority. How can a house succeed if it is divided among itself? And how can the house be unified unless it limit itself to those things wherein all members can participant in by command of Christ? As will be discerned, this is not to be confused with the extent and limits applied to Christians acting individually in the world.

Biblically, *we can say that there was never a time in all of Redemption history when salvation was transacted apart from a covenant transaction such as to satisfy God’s Divine Law.* In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word

¹⁰ Thomas Torrance, “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,” Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 151. Quoted in Purves, p. 134.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4. Again, Calvin would no doubt qualified—not necessarily and not necessarily immediately per the mediated nature of this salvific transaction.

for “covenant” (berith) is used at least 289 times. It is explicitly used to summarize the whole of the Genesis history in Exodus 2:24 and the Old Covenant “Bible” itself was called the “book of the covenant” in Exodus 24:7. And to our point, it would be hard to miss that the temple, acting corporately, was not carefully designed and regulated by the covenant as defined by its distinctively prophetic and priestly role (c.f. Leviticus)

In the New Covenant, the covenant figures prominently as well: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18) Christ is later described as the “mediator of the new covenant” (Heb 9:15, 12:15) by his own atoning “blood of the new covenant” that is specifically related to the meaning and practice of the Eucharistic meal in the new covenant church (Luke 22:20, 1Cor.11:25).

We discern this explicitly in Matthew 16:18-19, and it is further explained by Paul who describes Christ as covenant “head over all things regarding the church” in Eph 1:22. Paul further elaborates that the institutional elements themselves are carefully regulated upon the “foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone” in Eph 2:20. The very efficacy of Christ, in the mediatorial sense, is tied to the church BEING nothing more, nothing less save Christ as informed by Christ her exclusive head and king!

Because the church acting jointly is carefully designed and organized by “positive institution” of Christ upon the foundation of the apostles, it is significant that Christians are morally obligated to support its work and worship. Both for the sake of preserving exclusive crown rights of Christ as head over all things unto the church and to protect the liberty of conscience of those morally obligated to support her, the extent and limits of church power acting jointly must be carefully limited in its power as neither contrary to or beside what can be deduced by good and necessary inference from scripture as her only rule of faith and practice.

Often described as the “regulative principle in ecclesiology, it has throughout the history of the church been the consensus across most self-consciously confessional traditions including the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 section 6:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

The regulative principle is important both for the sake of preserving the exclusivity of Christ's authority over the church and for the sake of Christian charity and Christian liberty of conscience. For instance, the regulative principle as articulated in WCF 1: 6 is specifically applied to the freedom of Christian conscience in chapter 20, “On Christian Liberty,” section 2:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also. [quotes italicized or not??]

Along the lines of Rom. 14, T. David Gordon summarizes,

Charity requires the church not to do anything which *induces another believer to act contrary to conscience*. That is, these two passages do not teach that we must *agree* with the scruples of another's conscience, nor even that we must *act* consistently with the scruples of another's conscience. Rather, the

texts teach that we must not say or do anything which we know will *induce another to act inconsistently with conscience.*"¹²

There are two different ways freedom of conscience works out relative to a Christian's moral obligations:

- 1) A person ought not be obligated to participate in or support the church beyond that which Christ has instituted by good and necessary inference from Scripture (positive institution by divine law).
- 2) A person ought not be prevented from participating in or supporting other Christian causes for the sake of cultural engagement unless contrary to the scripture only.

That is to say, if the church acting jointly is "regulated" by positive command of scripture, church acting severally is only directed by scripture, but can rely upon general revelation and the so called "laws of nature" as well.

2) The Nature of the Church In The World: Church Acting Jointly Distinguished From the Church Acting Severally

The second of the ecclesial first things pertinent to the discussion of Christ's engagement of culture is the way the church is manifest in the world. Throughout the biblical record, one can discern a distinction between the Christian citizen of the organized church in her exclusively spiritual mission acting jointly on behalf of Christ and the Christian citizen of the civil state in her church acting severally through her members and their related subsidiary and para-church organizations wherein they function as Christian informed citizens of the civil state.

Paul distinguished between the things that are "lawful" (as per spiritual jurisdiction—applicable to his authority acting jointly) and the "things that are helpful" (as per spiritual influence—applicable to his authority to counsel severally (c.f. 1 Cor.6:12, 1 Cor 10:23)). One discerns the distinction in Matt. 18:15-16 and the power of the church acting severally through her individual members when seeking to restore a person in fellowship, compared to the "binding and loosing" jurisdictional power (c.f. Mt 16) attributed to the church acting jointly in Matt. 18:17-20.

The distinction between the church acting jointly and the church acting severally has been historically recognized throughout church history. For instance, the Scottish Second Book of Discipline (1578) distinguished between *potestas ordinis* and *potestas jurisdictionis*, or the power of order (acting severally) vs. the power of jurisdiction (acting jointly). It further explained that "these two kinds of power have both one authority, one ground, one final cause, but are different in the manner and form of execution." The one is by "by power of mutual consent" (the church acting severally as not to bind conscience) and the other is by "power ecclesiastical" as pertaining to "jurisdiction" (the church acting jointly as to bind conscience in so far as participating in the visible church of God). The same distinctions can be readily discerning in more recent polities such as the PCA Book of Church Order (c.f. BCO 1:5, 3:2, 8:1).

The crucial distinction was once described by Stuart Robinson in the context of the American Civil War with special relevance to his own congregational situation in the border state and city of Louisville KY.

Individual members of the Church have their responsibilities as citizens and as politicians and their duties are of a totally different sort from those of the church collectively. Their religion should indeed make them better citizens; but their citizenship in this world is one thing, and their citizenship of the great church is another thing. The church owes no allegiance to any earthly power since there is no divided loyalty in it, and no part of the church, in Jerusalem or Antioch, in England or America, on earth or in heaven owes any allegiance which all the other parts do not equally owe. The mistake of confounding the duty of the individual citizen and church-member, with the duties of the church, has led to the most fatal errors in this country.^v

¹² John Murray, "The Weak and the Strong," found in the fourth volume of his collected writings, and also in the twelfth volume of the *Westminster Theological Journal* (1950)

Notice that this was NOT a position of Christian pacifism in so far as cultural engagement or politics was concerned. Nor was it a position describing the church acting jointly as necessarily “non-political” since the church was free to preach and act as enjoined by scripture, however political, or not, it might be. Rather it was a position that was both “high church” and “high state” in so far as their mutual jurisdictions were both by “divine institution yet distinguished”. Individual Christians properly functioned under both God-ordained jurisdictions. It then concerns the proper jurisdictional authority of the church and state as ordained by positive institution by God that determines the way Christ engages or disengages culture.

Ecclesial First Things Applied to Christ And Culture:

1) The Church Acting Severally: The Paradigm of Engagement

“As much as possible, Christians should live, serve, and be deeply involved in the lives of our largest cities. They need to be involved in the life of the whole city, not just their own particular enclave. If you can live and serve in the city, you should.”

In hearty agreement, we have proposed a “yes” answer in so far as we qualify “church” as acting severally and “city” as pertaining to the order of common grace under the jurisdiction of the state (the common kingdom of God) as consisting of all peoples of all faiths and none inclusive of every demographic reality.

That is, it must be stated at the outset that there IS A Biblical mandate for cultural engagement. Speaking of the Old Covenant context for cultural engagement, Meredith Kline summarizes the “priestly mission of sanctifying culture” this way:

Positively, it must be recognized that the whole life of God’s people is covered by the liturgical model of their priestly identity. All that they do is done as a service rendered unto God. All their cultural activity in the sphere of the city of man they are to dedicate to the glory of God. This sanctification of culture is subjective; it transpires within the spirit of the saints. Negatively, it must be insisted that this subjective sanctification of culture does not result in a change from common to holy status in culture objectively considered. The common city of man does not in any fashion or to any degree become the holy kingdom of God through the participation of the culture-sanctifying saints in its development. Viewed in terms of its products, effects, institutional context, *etc.*, the cultural activity of God’s people is common grace activity. Their city of man activity is not “kingdom (of God)” activity. Though it is an expression of the reign of God in their lives, it is not a building of the kingdom of God as institution or realm. For the common city of man is not the holy kingdom realm, nor does it ever become the holy city of God, whether gradually or suddenly. Rather, it must be removed in judgment to make way for the heavenly city as a new creation.

The holy temple building for redemptive purposes is to express itself through individual members via the priestly service of common grace activities that are for the common good.

This is inferred by Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the scribal question “who is my neighbor?” The question was clearly related to the great command of Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In so far as the parable serves to define “neighbor” to include those of other races, classes and even faiths, this encourages Christian to engage culture and to do justice and mercy with/for those outside of the church! Likewise, in Galatians 6:10, as Paul establishes the priority that Christians do justice and mercy for those who are “*especially the household of faith,*” he likewise exhorts Christians to “*do good to all.*”

The language of “resident-aliens” is often invoked as related to a Christian individual duty to the “city.” We think of the precedent-setting circumstances of Israel living in Exile wherein they are commanded in Jeremiah 29:7 to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Likewise, 1 Peter also envisions Christians living in the present world as resident aliens in so far as their true homeland is heaven.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Pet.2:11-12)

As properly commented upon by Tim Keller, "It is no wonder that Christians seeking to obey Christ and Paul have over the centuries worked to abolish slavery, repeal child labor laws, and open voting rights to all citizens, as well as to begin thousands of programs and ministries that help the poor and needy."

Christian's ought to be concerned and involved with social justice and mercy on behalf of the church acting severally-- both as individuals and by means of the various subsidiary types of organizations that can be formed seeking the common good. To be sure, it would NOT be the thesis here that "*we should instead simply work at 'being and building up the church' and avoid any efforts to change or renew culture.*"¹³

While respecting and even enjoining respect for and submission to all lawful civil authorities in Rom 13, 1 Peter 2:13-17, that we often receive such apostolic instructions as to live as "exiles" (1 Peter 1:1, 17) and "sojourners" (1:11) just as the Old Covenant church did in relation to a foreign culture in the time of their exile (Heb.11:13). The concern was that the church not be assimilated into the cultures of the world, even if they must live in the world without losing their Christian identity and witness. And key to this commissioning according to Peter was that they must view themselves as those being "built up as a spiritual house (elsewhere ecclesial language) as to be a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5).

Peter's instructions correspond perfectly with Paul's in Eph 2:11ff and then Eph 5. On the one hand, he gives rather elaborate instructions about the Christian duty to the apostolically organized church to preserve its fundamental integrity as a separate and holy "city" or polity. They are to become:

*fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

Like in 1 Peter, this citizenship is defined in priestly and prophetic terms as related to their being a holy temple presence of God, corporately, in the midst of an otherwise unholy, non-priestly/prophetic world. Paul's subsequent instructions focus upon ecclesial formation and ethics, postured toward culture in a counter-cultural manner ("do not partner with them"), yet for the sake of witnessing light to them amidst the prevailing culture of darkness (Eph. 5:7-14). The relation to culture is indirect.

As Christian related to culture, Peter therefore expects there to be a tension as the Christian will need to proactively serve culture in love. The tension results in a posture of both offensive and defensive tactics. On the offense, Christians are called to engage the world with their good deeds of love and God-informed ethical values, even as their deeds will often be misunderstood and even opposed by the values of another kingdom. Peter therefore says that we should be willing to engage the world both by word and by deed with the hope that is within us, even as our deeds will back up our words (2:8). As a "not of this world" sectarian-positioned community, this would enable them to "proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" to the world (1 Peter 2:9).

2) The Church Acting Jointly: The Paradigm of Disengagement

¹³ Keller, The Bible on Church and Culture (April 2008).

Keller: The Christian church must concentrate the great portion of its resources on ministry to the city. It is our "reasonable service". To fail to render it is as foolish as it is disobedient.^{vi}

From the perspective of missional ecclesiology and understanding "church" as "church acting jointly", we have proposed the answer "no" as previously qualified when addressing the church acting jointly.

In a biblical defense of this position, the passage typically turned to in the Old Testament is Genesis 4. Commenting upon the distinction of church and state in the Old Testament account, Meredith Kline has distinguished the "prophetic cult" or "redemptive city" whose function is purely "priestly and prophetic." This redemptive community is positioned in, but not of, the "Remedial City" and described as "bestial but legitimate" and therefore "legitimate but not sanctified." We see therefore how the remedial is distinguished from the redemptive in so far as the extent and limits of power and jurisdiction are concerned.¹⁴

In the New Covenant, the argument most often begins with the teaching and example of Christ.

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." John 18:36

Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Mt. 22:19-22

In both of the above teachings, the example of Christ is evident. For the great question of His day was the same question of our day – it was the question of loyalty to a particular geo-political-economic vision for cultural transformation in a branch of partisan politics. This was the issue with which they tried to entangle Him. And what he modeled was both an individual Christian's duty of obedience to the civil authorities (c.f. Rom 13), while refusing to decide the question acting as head of the church.

19th century Stuart Robinson described it this way:

"As Christian citizens, church members are to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and as members of Christ's Kingdom, they are to "render unto God the things that are God's." Christ was a citizen, and, as such, conducted Himself as one obedient to the laws of the land. But as the Head of His own Church, and as the example of His own people, He utterly refused to do anything nor to be any thing, as a decider of matters, either legal or political. Nor did He ever teach any thing, nor did He allow His disciples to do or teach any thing looking in that direction."

As pertaining to the church acting jointly, it is therefore significant that in "great commissions" given to the apostles as the founders of the church, it was an exclusively spiritual mission as related to the single command to make disciples in Matt. 28:19-20. This was to be accomplished explicitly to express Christ's prophetic, priestly and kingly offices by the *word* ("teach them), sacraments (baptize them) and ecclesial shepherding or government ("to obey"). This is the exclusive business of the church. By positive institution, to do or teach as the rule of faith and practice for the church anything "contrary to or even beside" this commission is to exceed the limits and extent of church authority acting on behalf of Christ.

Likewise, throughout Acts and the epistles, we see perfect conformity to Christ's teaching and example with respect to apostolic foundation for ministry. Notwithstanding the serious cultural and political issues that confronted individual Christians as citizens of Rome in their day, there is an amazing silence with respect to engaging these issues, except in so far as to teach the rule of faith and practice as pertaining to divine law. The apostles are shown to resist any attempt at coopting the first things of ecclesial mission in so far as to

¹⁴ M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, Two Age Press, 2000, pp. 161ff.)

become participants in cultural transformation and partisan politics- this for the sake of a gospel centered mission!

As these scriptures suggest, the exclusive mission of the church acting jointly is the building up of that kingdom "not of this world" under "spiritual" jurisdiction only! This is argued from scripture as it reflects both the teachings and examples of Christ and reaffirmed by the apostolic foundation.

In summary of the relation of church to culture, there is a parallel in the question of church and state. The two jurisdictions were assigned by God to two different purposes-- the one "spiritual, not having a temporal head on earth" as pertaining to the household of God, and the other "civil" having a temporal head on earth as pertaining to the commonwealth for all people of all faiths and none. It has been said how the two spheres of powers are as two planets orbiting the same sun.

19th century Thomas Peck provided a good summary of the relation of "church" to "state" from his *Notes on Ecclesiology*:

1. In relation to God: *the state is an ordinance of God considered as the creator, and, therefore, the moral governor of mankind, while the church is an ordinance of God considered as the saviour and restorer of mankind. The state is ordained for man as man; the church for man as a sinner in a condition of inchoate restoration and salvation. The state is for the whole race of man; the church consists of that portion of the race which is really, or by credible profession, the mediatorial body of Christ. (275)*

2. In relation to constitution: *The rule of the church is the word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is the statute book of the visible kingdom of Christ. The rule for the state is the "light of nature," or the human reason.*

3. In relation to power: *The power of the church is, strictly and only, "ministerial and declarative"; the power of the state is magisterial and imperative. The church has no power to make laws, but only to declare the law of God. All her acts of government are acts of obedience to her Head and King. The state has the power to make laws as well as to declare them; has a legislative as well as a judicial power.*

4. In relation to sanctions: *The sanction of ecclesiastical government is moral, appealing to the faith and the conscience, a parental discipline, designed for the good of the offender. Its symbol is the "keys." The sanction of civil government is force, appealing to the bodily sensibilities of the subject or the citizen; a penal administration, designed to vindicate the majesty of justice and the supremacy of law, with a very incidental, if any, reference to the good of the transgressor. Its symbol is the "sword." (287)*

Therefore, and as noted by Richard Hayes, there is an "ecclesial basis and orientation" in Biblical ethics.^{vii} He explains:

Paul nowhere sets forth a systematic presentation of "Christian ethics." Instead, he responds ad hoc to the contingent pastoral problems that arise in his churches... he is seeking to shape the life of a particular community in accordance with his vision; his exhortations are aimed at defining and maintaining a corporate identity for his young churches, which are emphatically countercultural communities. Thus, his letters should be read primarily as instruments of community formation... Indeed, the focus on community is a part of the gospel itself. How so? If we ask, "What is God doing in the world in the interval between resurrection and *parousia*?" The answer must be given, for Paul, primarily in ecclesial terms: God is at work through the Spirit to create communities that prefigure and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world.^{viii}

Notice again that this vision is not, as some have portrayed it, "church against the world." Rather, the language of ecclesial "polis" highlights the idea that the church must be both, and at the same time, distinct if also public, or "disengaged AND engaged" with culture albeit regulated by her spiritual mission.

It is the church that maintains its unique Christian identity of being corporately and ethically *not of this world*, while its membership participates "in the world" *and for sake of the world* in so far as the Church is "witness".

Such a vision will stress the *a*-political (vs. *non* or *anti* political) nature of the church when acting in its joint or corporate capacity. Such a church, it is believed, stands to have the greatest social-political impact through its informed and reformed membership who are acting severally and actively within society for social change.

Conclusion:

For more on the church as a social strategy—c.f. *Ecclesial Ethics—The Post-Liberal and Reformational Perspective*, Preston Graham (located on the Mission Anabaino website, <http://www.anabaino.org/missional-ecclesiology>).

ⁱ Understanding The City , By Tim Keller, *Movement NYC Feb 21, 2013* (<http://movementnyc.org/understanding-the-city-by-tim-keller/>)

ⁱⁱ Cyprian, *Treatise 1, On the Unity of the Church*. (A.D 250)

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Augustine, *On the Epistle of John* 1.2.

^{iv} John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37: 48.

^vTP "Wise and Profound Words of Caution from a Secular Journal," May, 22, 1862.

^{vi} Understanding The City , By Tim Keller, See more at *Movement NYC Feb 21, 2013* (<http://movementnyc.org/understanding-the-city-by-tim-keller/>)

^{vii} Richard Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*, p. 4

^{viii} Hayes, p. 1-2.