

Christ & Culture



Culture is the entire way of life for a given group of people.

Culture is the arena where our shared human nature (universal) takes on unique expression (particular).

The perennial challenge for Christians, since the beginning, is how live faithfully under Christ's lordship while inevitably participating in human culture.

Christ Against Culture (Separation/Isolation)

Core Question:

-How can Christians preserve faithfulness to Christ when culture is corrupt and hostile to God?

Challenge it addresses:

-The danger of compromise and assimilation—how to remain set apart (John 15:19).

Christ Against Culture (Separation/Isolation)

Answer/Strategy:

- Withdraw from culture; reject its values and institutions.
- Human culture is under the dominion of Satan

Ongoing Challenge:

- Risk of irrelevance, sectarianism, or failing to love neighbor.
- Propensity for high anxiety and conspiratorial disposition towards cultures that differ from their own family, church, etc.
- It also denies that they are already perceiving Christ through some cultural lens.

Christ Against Culture (Separation/Isolation)

Examples Today:

- Amish communities that reject modern technology to preserve distinctiveness.
- Common to Independent Fundamentalist Baptists
- Pentecostal “holiness” communities

- Some Evangelical subcultures that avoid participation in “secular” entertainment or institutions

Christ of Culture (Assimilation)

Core question:

Is Christ the fulfillment and confirmation of the highest truths and moral ideals already present in culture?

Challenge it addresses:

- People see real beauty, wisdom, and moral progress in philosophy, science, democracy, art, etc and want to name that as Christ's work.
- The lack of appeal of Christianity to those who see truth, goodness, and beauty in their culture and don't want to abandon it

Christ of Culture (Assimilation)

Answer/Strategy:

- Identify Christ with what is perceived as the best of human wisdom, morality, and progress.
- Present Jesus as the supreme cultural hero — the embodiment of what society already knows to be good, true, and beautiful.
- Harmonize gospel and culture so that faith crowns cultural achievements rather than standing against them.

Ongoing Challenge:

- Christ is only a mirror of your culture's ideals and values. Nazi Germany?
- The prophetic, countercultural voice of the Gospel gets muted.

Christ of Culture (Assimilation)

Examples Today:

-Progressive cultural Christianity that equates the Gospel with tolerance, inclusion, and personal authenticity, while downplaying sin and the Cross. The Bible has the same authority as any work of literature or movie.

-Civil religion / Americanism where Christianity is merged with patriotism, democracy, or capitalism so that being “a good American” = being Christian. If singing the “National Anthem” gives you the same goosebumps as “How Great Thou Art.”

Christ Above Culture (Synthesist)

Core question:

-How does Christ not get reduced to culture and still transcends culture, while acknowledging that real truth, goodness, and beauty is found in culture?

Challenge it addresses:

-How to affirm cultural goodness without collapsing Christ into culture or dismissing culture as worthless.

Ordering human achievements under the lordship of Christ.

Christ Above Culture (Synthesist)

Answer/strategy:

-Recognize these as good but incomplete — “seeds” or “fragments” of truth.

-Place Christ above culture as the fulfillment and perfection of what culture seeks but cannot reach on its own.

-Integrate faith and reason into a single, coherent synthesis where revelation crowns and directs cultural achievements.

Ongoing challenge:

-Falling into the “Christ of Culture” ditch

-Risk of domesticating Christ as the capstone of human wisdom, but diminishing the “message of the cross is foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:18)

Christ Above Culture (Synthesist)

Examples:

- Notre Dame's "Touchdown Jesus"
- Catholic
- Paul on Mars Hill?



Christ and Culture in Paradox (Dualist)

Core question:

-How can Christians live faithfully under Christ's grace while also participating in a fallen culture that remains necessary for order and survival?

The Kingdoms of the World and the Kingdom of God are distinct realms (dualist perspective), how do we live in both?

Challenge it addresses:

-The tension between the Kingdom of God and the "world" found in Christ Against Culture, without total isolation/separation

-How governments, institutions, etc are fallen, and yet Christians should remain as witnesses within their culture

-The need for order: Culture provides law, government, and structures that restrain chaos & evil

Christ and Culture in Paradox (Dualist)

Answer/strategy:

- Acknowledge the tension as permanent this side of eternity.
- Distinguish between Grace/Gospel (God's saving action in Christ) and Nature/Law (human institutions that restrain evil).
- Live in both realms, obeying cultural structures where necessary, but knowing only Christ brings salvation.
- Accept paradox rather than seeking synthesis or withdrawal.

Ongoing challenge:

- Can slide into fatalism or passivity, expecting little change in culture.
- Risks moral compromise, since one might accept cultural evil as inevitable.
- May neglect the church's prophetic role by reducing it to managing sin until Christ's return.

Christ and Culture in Paradox (Dualist)

Examples Today:

-“I want to work ethically, but I know capitalism won’t ever perfectly align with the gospel. My faith belongs to Christ; my job exists in a flawed system I still must serve in.”

-Lutheran “two kingdoms” mentality

-the church belongs to Christ’s redemptive kingdom, while cultural and political life belong to a common kingdom under God’s providence.

Christ the Transformer of Culture (Conversionist)

Core question:

-Can Christ redeem and renew not only individuals but also the cultural systems, institutions, and achievements of humanity?

Challenge it addresses:

-The persistence of sin in culture: Is it possible for broken systems to be reoriented toward God's purposes?

-The Christian's calling in the world: Should disciples merely endure culture or actively reshape it?

-The scope of redemption: Does salvation touch only souls, or does it extend to art, politics, economics, science, and society?

-The cultural mandate (Genesis 1): How do humans fulfill the call to cultivate and steward creation under Christ's lordship?

Christ the Transformer of Culture (Conversionist)

Answer/strategy:

- Goodness of Creation and Culture: The view starts from the premise that creation and the human capacity for culture are fundamentally good, though fallen and in need of redemption.
- Affirm that while culture is fallen, it can be redeemed through grace.
- Christ doesn't just complete culture (Above) or tolerate it (Paradox) — he actively transforms it.
- Christians are called to participate in God's renewing work, reshaping cultural institutions, practices, and artifacts to reflect God's kingdom. Engage culture as a field of mission, vocation, and reform

Ongoing challenge:

- Danger of politicizing the gospel — confusing cultural reform with the kingdom of God.
- Vulnerability to disappointment when transformation is slow, partial, or resisted.
- Temptation to collapse eschatology into present activism.

Christ the Transformer of Culture (Conversionist)

Examples:

-William Wilberforce (1759-1833. Evangelical leader in Britain who, driven by faith, campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade.

-Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) “sphere sovereignty”

A biology major pursuing cancer research because they believe healing bodies participates in Christ’s restorative work.

Theology of Culture Spectrum

