

Old Testament lesson – Jeremiah 18:1-12

New Testament lesson – Luke 14:25-33

Political Christians

Many years ago, I read a book called Christ and Culture, by Richard Niebuhr. It was written in 1951, and it became one of the most influential Christian books of the past century. Many authors have applied ideas from the book in their own thinking about how Christians relate to the culture in which they find themselves. Even if a more recent author has not read the book, he or she has probably been influenced by someone who has.

Niebuhr starts by defining his title's terms. Christ is actually difficult to define. I suppose that makes sense, when you realize he was God in human form. We have enough trouble really *defining* God. We describe various aspects of what we believe about God, but how can we describe the infinite with finite words?

Defining Christ might be even more difficult, since he had both human and divine natures, and that has presented us with difficulties since the beginning of the Church. In addition, we have a limited amount of source material to work with. As John wrote, all the books in the world could not contain everything about Jesus Christ. Add to that the fact that everyone understands Jesus Christ with the filters and influences of their culture. This explains why we see pictures of a laughing Jesus who looks like a western European or an American.

But Niebuhr says that what we have is adequate for meeting Christ. I suppose we could put it in the terms of John's gospel: He wrote what he wrote so that we "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [we] may have life in his name."

Culture is essentially everything around us that is not part of the natural order – all our activities, structures, institutions, books, inventions, beliefs, ideas, education, government, and so on.

I don't remember whether Niebuhr pointed this out, but within any culture there are also many subcultures. For example, the culture you would find among the faculty of a large

university would be different from the culture in an industrial city, and that would be different from the culture here in an agricultural community. And yet, we might categorize all of them as American culture.

Niebuhr describes five types of relationship between Christ and culture. The first is "Christ against Culture." In this model, Christians believe culture is so corrupt that in order to be faithful to Christ they must withdraw from the culture. You can see this in some monastic orders or in the Amish.

His second model is "Christ of Culture." In this model, culture is basically good and these Christians see no real conflict between Christ and the culture around them. You can easily find Christians like this, people who profess Christian belief but then participate in whatever parts of culture strike their fancy, never bothering to consider whether it contradicts anything about Christ.

Next is what Niebuhr calls "Christ above Culture." In this model, Christians see the good in culture, but they believe it must be interpreted through Christ, and it also needs correction through Christ. His next two models are related to this one.

In "Christ and Culture in Paradox," there is a tension between Christ's values and those of the culture. The Christian lives between these two poles, accepting some values of culture and rejecting others.

Finally, there is "Christ the Transformer of Culture." In this model, the Christian seeks to carry on the work of Christ, which was to transform all of creation. That obviously should include the human creation of culture.

Even though it's a rather academic work, Niebuhr describes in clear terms various ways that we as Christians relate to our culture. In the end, he recommends against adopting one model over any other, because in different situations we might find different models useful. One thing is

abundantly clear to anyone who reads the book: every Christian has a relationship to Christ and they also have a relationship to their culture.

Now, since we all have a way in which we relate to our culture, that is a form of politics. Definitions of the word “politics” usually make reference to government and people who work in government and that sort of thing. But the way in which we relate to our culture is political in nature. The word politics is derived from the Greek word for city, so politics is really anything pertaining to the community we are in, and that can be any level of community. Politics is much, much more than government.

For example, when you buy something at the hardware store or at Walmart or at a grocery store, it will often be a political act regardless of what you intend. Here’s an example. When I buy apple juice, it is a very intentional political act on my part.

I always inspect the bottle before I buy it. You have to look closely, but somewhere on the bottle will be printed the words, “Product of” followed by a country, maybe two. I refuse to buy apple juice from China or Turkey. Chinese apple juice was found to have lead in it some years ago. I don’t trust anything from there, and that is a political decision. The last time I heard anything about Turkey, they had declared themselves against Israel.

My decision to buy apple juice only from American sources is an intentional political act. I think most people are not aware of where their apple juice comes from. But their purchase supports the economy of whatever country produced the apple juice. So if you buy apple juice, it is a political act, even if you do not realize it.

In our OT lesson we observe that God is deeply involved in the politics of nations. God speaks about plucking up a nation and breaking or destroying it. He also talks about building and planting a nation. In each case he is not speaking about Israel only. Every nation that is built up or

brought low is due to the actions of God, working through people in most cases.

If you are a person who is interested in history, you probably find it fascinating to think about the grand sweep of history: the wars and migrations, the development of technologies, the great leaders and the weak leaders who have been so pivotal in the path which the human race has traveled for thousands of years, revolutions and declines of empires and nations. It becomes even more fascinating if you add the idea that in all of this, God had his hand, directing all of it. What was he doing?

Even with the benefit of hindsight, we can tell only a fraction of God’s plan. Paul tells us that Christ died for us *at the right time*. So we know that the death of Christ should not have occurred any sooner or any later. The musical “Jesus Christ Superstar” asked the rhetorical question, why did God “choose such a backward time in such a strange land” for the appearance of Christ. It was a time with no mass communication, and if God had sent him today he could have reached a whole nation.

But God did what he did because he knows what he is doing, at all times. And if he decides to build up or destroy a nation, it is according to his plan. Nations and peoples and kingdoms had been built and destroyed, and when the configuration was exactly what God wanted, he sent his Son into a place that was strange and backward, by the world’s standards.

It is interesting to see how American Christians relate Christ to the culture of our nation. Of course, as I said, we have a lot of different subcultures within our American culture. But it is interesting to see how Jesus appears so much like us in illustrations, such as you might find in children’s books. But I suppose if he were shown as he actually appeared, a Middle Eastern Jew of 2000 years ago might look like a Middle Eastern terrorist of our time.

But I have seen social media posts and that sort of thing in which some people really do think Jesus has a special relationship with

America, or that he somehow loves us more than people of other cultures. And that is extremely troubling.

If such people look at the Word of God with an open mind, they would hear what Jeremiah said to the people of his day: *Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings*. They would hear that, because that is what God says to anyone who thinks that God is on their side no matter what. How many of you know what the belt buckles of German soldiers said in WW I and in WW II? They said “Gott mit uns” – “God with us.”

I think this was offensive enough the first time around, since the Germans were fighting against other Christian nations. But I think it would have offended God even more for a nation to put this on their belts when they were engaged in trying to exterminate as many descendants of Abraham as they possibly could.

I am currently reading a book titled Germany and the Jews. It is rather depressing to read how quickly a good Christian people turned savagely on the ethnic group chosen by God to bring their Savior into the world. I recently finished another book about the Jewish men who were connected to FDR’s administration. Along with the other nations of the world, our government did little to nothing to interfere with what the Nazis were obviously doing to Jews in the 1930s. Why not? Because America and those other nations were also very anti-Jewish. Families like the Ten Booms in the Netherlands or individuals like Oskar Schindler were the exception, not the rule. Those two examples managed to save only 2000 people, which sounds like a lot until you remember that the Nazis killed six million Jews, plus another five million prisoners, and that does not count the casualties of war. Still, I am sure those 2000 people were very grateful.

But somehow the people of Germany managed to reconcile their version of Christ with the culture of Nazism.

I have read enough material about Hitler and the Nazis and WW II to know that our nation is

nowhere close to that kind of evil. Every time I hear someone accuse President Trump of being Hitler or they call everyone who disagrees with them a fascist, I don’t know whether to laugh at them, scream at them in anger, or weep because of the millions and billions of dollars wasted on so-called “education.”

Every Christian lives in some culture. Every Christian has some sort of involvement with that culture. That means that every Christian is political. We are involved every day in activity – or inactivity – that either makes us part of the good things in our culture or part of the evil things in our culture. Many days it may be both. We are involved in politics, even by the apple juice we buy.

What is the cost of being a follower of Jesus in our culture? If Jesus told his followers – the great multitudes, not just the apostles – if Jesus told all his followers to hate their parents and spouses and children and siblings and even their own lives, how much do you think he wants us to love our culture? What about our country?

Any time is a good time to take a long, hard look at the things in life we love, and ask ourselves if we are attached to something that should be discarded as part of the cost of following Jesus.

I would like to propose one more radical political act for our church. And by radical, I am talking about getting to the root of a matter. In Paul’s First Letter to Timothy, he writes this in chapter 2:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior... I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.”

I enjoy chatting with the men by the coat rack before worship every Sunday. But maybe we should listen to Paul here, and spend at least part

of that time praying *before* worship. Like I said, it's a radical idea. And if not before worship, maybe there is another time during the week that would be suitable. And please note, that Paul said "holy hands," not clean hands. If you're in the middle of a dirty job and you notice it's time to meet with the men for prayer, come as you are.

You don't have to run for office to be involved in politics as a Christian. Just living life involves us in political activity. As Christians, we have instructions to pray for people in high positions, and in Paul's time some of those people were not friendly to Christians. Should we do any less? Amen.