

Christianity & Culture: God's Double Sovereignty

By [Dr. Gene Edward Veith](#)

Most of the world's faiths are cultural religions. Hinduism with its caste system and social rituals, is inextricably tied to the culture of India. Islam seeks to apply the Koranic law to every detail of society and so creates a specific culture, as evident throughout the Middle East. Tribal religions mythologize tribes' customs, history, and social organization. Secular sociologists go so far as to define religion as a means of sanctioning the social order. According to this line of thought, cultural institutions are invested with a spiritual, divine significance, so that people will more obediently go along with them.

Christianity, on the other hand, is not supposed to be merely a cultural religion. To be sure, sociology's laws and the tendencies of our fallen nature give us a penchant for human-made or culture-made faiths that often hijack the church. The Bible, though, outlines a much more complex approach to culture, one that offers a radical critique of culture while encouraging believers to engage their culture in positive ways.

In the Old Testament, God elects the tribes of Israel, giving them a law and a covenant that turns them into something like a holy culture. But, far from having their social practices sanctioned by their God, the Hebrews are constantly being chastised for their failures to obey God's transcendent demands. Their kings, for example, are constantly being condemned for their unrighteousness by the prophets and the inspired writers of the historical books, something unthinkable by Israel's Canaanite neighbors, for whom the king was an avatar of a god. The people of God were strictly forbidden to follow after the ways of their pagan neighbors. When they nevertheless adopted the lax sexual and ethical mores of their neighbors and developed a syncretic theology that allowed the God of Abraham to be worshipped in the same culture-friendly terms as in the pagan religions, they experienced the full measure of his wrath.

The coming of Christ complicates the believer's relationship to culture even further. Christianity is to be a faith for all cultures, "for every nation, tribe, people, and language" ([Rev. 7:9](#)). Cultural differences are not to obstruct Christian unity, as the controversies in Acts and the Epistles over the status of gentile believers demonstrate. Though Jesus tells his followers to be salt, light, and leaven in the world, he also warns that the world will hate them ([Mat. 5](#)). Christian freedom and service extend to every dimension of life, yet Christians are warned about the temptation of worldliness. Christians are commanded to obey the secular authorities ([Rom. 13:1-7](#)), and yet to obey God rather than men ([Acts 5:29](#)).

Then we have the curious counsel of St. Paul: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" ([1 Cor. 5:9-11](#)). Apparently,

we should not associate with immoral Christians, but we should associate with immoral unbelievers.

Jesus, in his prayer in Gethsemane, sets forth the principle that his followers are to be "in the world," but not "of the world": "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one....As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" ([John 17:14-18](#)). Christians are somehow to be separated from the world, while still being involved, redemptively, in it.

How are we to untangle these paradoxes? The question is especially urgent today. Our culture has virtually cut what ties it may have once had to biblical faith. An ascendant popular culture whose only values are hedonism, entertainment, and consumerism is sweeping away both the traditional values of the folk culture and the rational standards of the high culture and is now demanding supremacy in the church. Though Christianity is facing dangerous cultural contamination, we, as Christians, are still called to serve, influence, and communicate the gospel to this culture. In order to navigate through these cultural challenges, while maintaining both theological integrity and cultural relevance, Christians need to understand the double sovereignty of God.

Theological Alternatives

Richard Niebuhr, in his classic book *Christ and Culture* outlines the different possible relationships between the two, each of which has been advocated in the history of the Church. One option is to put culture above Christ. In this view, Christianity serves culture, or, in the words of the National Council of Churches slogan: "The world sets the agenda for the church." When the culture changes, Christianity must also change to maintain its relevance. This is the path of liberal theology.

There have been many different kinds of theological liberalism in church history. During the Age of Reason of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, many theologians jettisoned the supernatural teachings of scripture in an effort to turn Christianity into a "rational" religion. When the rationalistic vogue gave way to the emotional focus of nineteenth century Romanticism, the liberal theologians changed their tune and taught that Christianity is a matter of religious feelings. After Darwin, Romanticism gave way to a trust in utopian social progress, and the liberal theologians said that's what Christianity is all about. The twentieth century has seen a plethora of intellectual fashions and social movements existentialism, socialism, the peace movement, gay rights, feminism and each has had its liberal theologians revising Christianity accordingly.

Today, in our postmodern era, belief in the supernatural is once again socially acceptable, though the relativism now in vogue makes doctrine and absolute standards of morality highly suspect. Generally, people in our contemporary American culture want to have a good time, have their consumer needs met, and be left alone to their own

values, beliefs, and vices. These new cultural attitudes have given rise, as always, to another form of liberal theology.

Churches that were once evangelical, boldly standing up for the gospel and the authority of the Bible against modernist culture and its liberal theologians, are now changing their teachings and their practices to keep up with the culture. They conduct market surveys to find what the religious consumers of their culture want, then they respond like any other successful business. They throw out time-tested modes of worship in favor of whatever styles are most popular. Told that people do not want to hear about how sinful they are, they switch to more positive messages of self-esteem. They comb the Bible for principles for successful living rather than preaching that Christ died for sinners. Though these Christians may have the best of motives in trying to reach their culture, they often fail to see that, instead, their culture has reached them. Though they often call themselves evangelical, those who uncritically follow the dictates of the culture are not evangelicals at all but simply the latest version of an old theology: they are liberals.

The problem with liberal theology in all of its manifestations is that it turns Christianity into what it must never merely be, a cultural religion. The Church, in passively agreeing with a godless world, and in trying so hard to be relevant, actually loses its relevance. Why should anyone go to church if it offers nothing more than what the culture has already provided? Disabled from being able to criticize or influence the culture and having surrendered its transcendent moorings, religion is reduced to the role that sociologists have assigned it making people feel good about their society by peddling the illusion that their culture is the ultimate reality.

Instead of placing culture above Christ, as the liberals do, other Christians have, more nobly, placed Christ above culture. In this view, Christianity offers standards to which the culture should be made to conform. Those who place Christ above culture will attempt to develop and promote distinctly Christian approaches to art, music, economics, science, and every other sphere of life. Society should be reformed until it approximates a Christian civilization.

This option has also been found throughout the history of the church. The Lordship of Christ over the earthly kingdoms has been emphasized by medieval popes, Reformation commonwealths, nineteenth century social reformers, twentieth century liberation theologians, and some contemporary Christian political activists. Christians with this cultural stance have boldly stood up against social evils and in many cases have exerted a powerful influence for good. Many have adopted this approach, from Puritan revolutionaries in seventeenth century England and eighteenth century America to today's Reconstructionists who seek to make the Bible the law of the land.

While I cannot find anything about theological liberalism to respect, I do admire those Christian reformers and revolutionaries who defy their cultures and attempt to make them conform to God's law. And yet, there are problems with this position. In the first place, it often underestimates the effect of the Fall and the scope of human sinfulness.

No human being, much less a culture, can in fact keep God's law. No earthly kingdom, even one ruled by or consisting of Christians, can be a utopian paradise this side of Eden. All are transient and will prove disappointing, corrupted by injustice or pride, until Christ rules directly in the kingdom of heaven.

There can be no such thing as a Christian culture as such, because Christianity comes from faith in the Gospel, not the works of the Law, and God saves individuals, not nations. Not every member of a culture is going to be a Christian. Since conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to coerce or require anyone to become a Christian. The unregenerate cannot obey biblical principles so as to be part of a Christian culture. Neither, while they are in their fallen flesh, can Christians.

A culture ruled completely by Christ is a reality in heaven and will be realized on earth at his return, but attempts on the part of human beings to establish heaven on earth prematurely by their own efforts and on their own terms, are doomed to fail. At the worst, they result in the divinization of culture, with Christianity reduced, once again, to a cultural religion.

Another option cited by Niebuhr is Christ against culture. This view recognizes the sinfulness of human institutions and calls Christians to separate from the corrupt culture, withdrawing into distinct Christian communities. The church becomes an alternative to the mainline culture, and Christians refuse to take part in the culture as a whole.

This approach characterized the early monastic movement, the Anabaptist subcultures, fundamentalist separatism, and the various experiments in Christian communal living of the last few decades. The Amish are a continual example of a group of Christians refusing to compromise with the worldly culture, rejecting military service, contemporary dress, and modern technology as being unworthy of their commitment to radical discipleship.

Again, this kind of integrity and radical commitment commands respect. But it too is problematic. Besides denying God's sovereignty over the rest of the world, it violates the words of Jesus: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world....As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" ([John 17:15, 18](#)). Jesus directs us not into the protection of a fortified bunker; rather, he sends us into the world in service and evangelism.

Furthermore, the option of separatism, in forming a Christian subculture, has the effect of reducing Christianity into just another culture. The Amish may end up defining themselves by their beards and buggies, rather than by a transcendent gospel. Christianity, once again, becomes a cultural religion.

Two Kingdoms Under One King

The remaining possibility for the relationship between Christ and culture appears to be

the one that best accounts for the scriptural injunctions. Niebuhr calls it "Christ and culture in paradox"; Luther calls it the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. This view accounts for the insights of the other positions, acknowledging that we are cultural creatures, that God is sovereign over every sphere of life, and that Christians must be both separate from the world and actively involved in it.

The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms has been explored not only by Lutheran theologians but by Augustine in his great work *The City of God* and probably describes the way most faithful Christians have always carried out their fidelity to Christ in their secular callings.

According to this view, God is sovereign both in the church and in the culture but he rules the two in different ways. In the church, God reigns through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, expressing his love and grace through the forgiveness of sins and the life of faith. God also exercises his authority and providential control through all of creation upholding the very universe, so that the laws of physics, the processes of chemistry, and other natural laws are part of what he has ordained. Similarly, God rules the nations even those who do not acknowledge him making human beings to be social creatures, in need of governments, laws, and cultures to mitigate the self-destructive tendencies of sin and to enable human beings to survive.

Thus, God has a spiritual rule in the hearts and lives of Christians; he also has a secular rule that extends throughout his creation and in every culture. God reigns in the church through the gospel, the proclamation of forgiveness in the Cross of Jesus Christ, a message which kindles faith and an inward transformation in the believer. He reigns in the world through his law, which calls human societies to justice and righteousness.

Notice that, according to this view, morality is not a matter of religion. Contrary to those who would silence Christian objections to abortion, for instance, on the grounds that moral issues are inappropriate intrusions of private religious belief, the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms insists that God's Law is universal in its scope and authority. As C. S. Lewis has shown in *The Abolition of Man*, it is simply not true that every culture and every religion has its own morality. Principles of justice, honesty, courage, and responsibility to one's neighbor are universal. Though revealed most fully in Scripture, God's law is written on the hearts even of the unbelieving gentiles ([Romans 2:14-16](#)).

Human beings and cultures are, however, in a state of rebellion against him. No individual can keep God's law and entire cultures are subject to corruption, injustice, sexual depravity, and every other kind of evil. While the world is condemned and all human institutions will pass away, God saves some in the ark of his church. Christians, strictly speaking, are no longer under the law at all their new life of faith will make them spontaneously do what God requires, though because of their fallen nature full perfection will be found only in heaven.

In the meantime, Christians have a vocation in the world. They are called to evangelize, serve others, and do good works in the unbelieving world. Christians also must continue

to play their part in their cultures, serving God in his secular kingdom in secular ways. A Christian farmer is expressing his love for God and neighbor by growing food for everyone, not just fellow believers; a Christian CEO serves God and neighbor by selling useful products, giving a livelihood to employees, making money for stockholders, and contributing to the good of the economy.

A Christian is thus a citizen of two kingdoms-the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. These spheres have different demands and operate in different ways. But God is the King of both.

This doctrine has sometimes been misunderstood to mean that the secular government has absolute authority as an agent of God. This is the farthest from the truth. God is the king. His law judges the kingdoms of the earth. A governmental system, such as that of Nazi Germany, which is in stark violation of that law is in a state of rebellion and can demand no allegiance. A nation, however, need not be ruled by a Christian to exercise legitimate authority. The ruler's faith is a matter of the other kingdom and a function of the gospel; even an unbelieving ruler, however, can be held accountable to God's law and to its corollaries in the secular requirements of effective government.

Both kingdoms are binding, but they are not to be confused with each other. The secular values of the culture are not to be imposed upon the church. Nor may the spiritual realm be imposed upon the secular culture. Saving faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit and cannot be a matter of coercion. Nor can the freedom created by the gospel be applied to unbelievers, who are stiff in their sins.

People today who oppose the death penalty, for example, because we should forgive, would be confusing the two kingdoms, as would pacifists who oppose all war because we are told to love our enemies. I recently came across a book that addressed the problem of crime by advocating that all criminals be released from prison. Jesus said that he came to proclaim release to the captives, the author argued. Therefore, we should do as he said, trusting that the gesture would transform the criminals' hearts.

Christians must certainly express the love and forgiveness of Christ in their relationship with others, both inside and outside of the church. But God's other kingdom operates in terms of power, coercion, punishment, and the sometimes harsh demands of Justice. The lawful magistrate is "God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" and "does not bear the sword for nothing" ([Romans 13:4](#)). As a citizen in both kingdoms, a Christian may thus operate in different ways in the two spheres. No Christian should take private revenge, but a Christian soldier, judge, police officer, or juror may well have to "bear the sword."

If the government bears the sword, the church bears only the Word. Though the local church is also an earthly institution and so must be concerned with committees, by-laws, and even politics, the church is not to be run like a business, a nation, or the surrounding culture. It should be a haven of love and mutual forgiveness in the midst of a fallen, sin-sick world.

Christians exercising their vocations in the secular culture must assess their activity in secular terms, which are also under God's sovereignty. A Christian artist may well express his faith in his art, but the quality of the art lies primarily not in its theological message but in its aesthetic excellence, since the laws of aesthetics have been ordained by God in his creation. There is no need for a distinctly Christian approach to music, plumbing, computer science, physics, or wood-carving, because all of these things, no matter how secular or non-religious they appear, already fall under God's sovereignty.

Conversely, the church must never uncritically capitulate to the culture. Money-making, marketing techniques, entertainment ventures, power politics, and intellectual fashions must never set the church's agenda, which must be governed instead solely by the Word of God.

The Two Kingdoms and the Culture Wars

The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms is most often applied to the Christian's obligations to the state, but it also illuminates the cultural controversies which are causing so much confusion in today's church.

Should Christians get involved in politics? Yes, as part of our vocation in God's secular kingdom. The goal should not be necessarily the election of Christian rulers, nor to make America a "Christian nation." Rather, it should be to apply God's law in our social relationships and to establish justice and righteousness in our land. Abortion, for example, is a monstrous crime against the weakest and most defenseless in our society, and Christians are right to work against this evil, as against many others. Christians in politics must play by political rules, whether hard-ball power plays or the arts of compromise and consensus building. The church should be gentle and loving, while never compromising its doctrines. The rough-and-tumble of the political process, however, means that Christian politicians should not be prevented from exercising power or from making a tactical compromise by the charge that to do so is "not Christian." That confuses the kingdoms. Christian politicians, however, like all politicians, must exercise their power justly and in accordance with God's law.

Can a Christian take part in the expressions of the surrounding culture? Yes. Christians are still part of their culture and can be expected to share the tastes of their neighbors. A Christian can enjoy, perform, and get involved in secular art forms; they need not be religious, but they are subject to God's law. Christians need to draw the line at music or any other form of entertainment that violates God's canons of morality by tempting us to sin.

Can a Christian, then, like rock music? Yes, for the most part. This does not mean, however, that Christians should demand rock music in church. The secular kingdom, again, must be kept separate from the spiritual kingdom. Churches must keep themselves distinct from the surrounding culture.

To return to our earlier categories, a liberal would have little trouble accepting any brand of currently popular music and would even import it into the church. By this way of thinking, the church must always give in and conform itself to whatever the culture is doing. A Christian who believes in Christ above culture would reject secular music and try to devise a completely distinct Christian style, to which every subsequent piece of music should conform. A Christian who believes in Christ against culture would allow the world its own music but never listen to it, developing instead a separate Christian musical style.

A Two Kingdoms approach would allow the Christian to enjoy secular music, even, for those with the God-given talent, to pursue a musical vocation. The Christian's standards for this music would be God's moral law, but also God's aesthetic laws, which were built into the created order and human nature by God himself. The Christian musician might express his or her faith artistically, but the work would be assessed not primarily by its theology but by its aesthetic merits, which also come under God's dominion. The music, though, would not have to be explicitly religious at all it is part of God's dominion even in its secularity.

This same Christian musician, whether a rock 'n' roller or a concert violinist, would very likely object to electric guitars or chamber music in church. Art designed to please and to gratify the senses has its place, but worship belongs to the Word of God. Here, theological truth must take priority. The purpose is not to entertain the congregation but to convict them of sin and convert them to Christ. The audience is not the culture but God, whom the entire congregation is seeking to glorify in his terms, not ours.

Ken Myers has said in his brilliant book *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* that the contemporary church has reversed Christ's injunction to be in the world, but not of the world. Instead, he says, we are not in the world with our separate schools, bookstores, music companies, and other cultural institutions, so that we seldom interact with non-believers and yet, we are of the world. Our music, stores, schools, and corporate structures, may be separate, but they are exactly like their secular counterparts.

Recognizing God's double sovereignty over all of life can enable Christians to be engaged in a positive, transforming way, with their culture without succumbing to the deadly, spirit-quenching sin of worldliness. It is a formula for both faithfulness and relevance.

Dr. Gene Edward Veith is Dean of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin. A member of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Dr. Veith is also the author of *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), and a contributor to *Here We Stand!: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).