

“Christ and Culture”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
March 16th, 2014

Romans 4:1-11

John 3:1-21

*‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’*

John 3:16

Let us pray... O God,
Help us to see the difference between you and our culture as human beings;
and though we may reject, coexist, synthesize with, war against,
or just live in the midst of what is happening around us,
you created us to begin with and you are the same, now and forever,
always there for us, waiting to be discovered.

Amen

John 3:16 – *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’*

This is one of the most familiar Bible verses not only for Christians
but in our popular culture – whether or not it is believed and accepted.
For some, it is a trite phrase – symbolic of a “One Way” mentality
that enshrines the exclusiveness of Christianity.

The verses that follow are even more specific:

*[17] For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.*

*[18] [The one] who believes in him is not condemned;
[the one] who does not believe is condemned already,
because [they have] not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

That “condemning” part never did quite sit right with me.

I remember going to a Christian coffeehouse and some young man
with long hair and a beard wearing a tweed jacket, telling me that
there was only ‘one way’ to be saved and that was Christ.

I asked him,

“Well what about Polynesians living where they never heard about Christ?”
but he wouldn’t budge on that conviction that there’s only ‘one way’
and that all others are lost.

I am not the only one to struggle with the notion of a triumphant Christian culture
that sees itself as the only way to salvation – yet I remain in the Church.

Many people these days go so far as to self-identify themselves as
“spiritual but not religious” – unaffiliated with any church,
and about 20% of Americans define themselves this way, saying,
“I don’t need to go to church, because I can find God on my own.”

Willard, p.2

There is someone who has effectively spoken up against the “spiritual but not religious” ambivalence

who happens to be a United Church of Christ minister...

The Rev. Lillian Daniel is a UCC pastor and a frequent contributor to the Stillspeaking devotional, who wrote a book entitled,

When ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ Is Not Enough

The first time I became aware of her mission to take up the challenge to advocate for the traditional church, was her devotional entitled, “Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me”.

In this essay, she describes sitting next to someone on an airplane flight and having a conversation about faith.

Lillian Daniel says that when people find out she is a minister, they seem obligated to explain why they don’t go to church because – for example, they feel closer to God walking on a beach at sunset.

So, she says in her essay:

Thank you for sharing,

spiritual but not religious sunset person.

You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture,

right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.

<http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>

The crust of tradition associated with this “ancient religion” of Christianity, with its inconvenient dogma and ritual, came from the same place – the culture we create in trying to interpret who Christ is and who we are.

In his book, Christ and Culture , which has become a theological classic, H. Richard Niebuhr – who is also associated with the UCC, compares Christ and culture in terms of how Christians have struggled with what it means to be a Christian in the midst of the social cultures that make up “the world”.

First, there is *Christ against Culture*:

This is the “exclusiveness” of Christ such that

Christ and culture are incompatible.

It is represented by monastic movements – or like Abraham & Sarah who left Sumerian civilization to seek a homeland in the wilderness.

This view anticipates the future decline of the established culture to be replaced by a Christian one.

Willard, p.3

Next is *Christ of Culture*:

This is the “accommodation” or coexisting of Christians with non-Christians, especially Jewish people, with no agenda to convert them.

The Christian Gnostics of the 2nd Century and American mainline Protestants are examples of this where the established culture is accepted “as is”.

Such Christians live within social parameters, generally not taking a stand through sacrifice and martyrdom.

Then there is *Christ above Culture*:

This is the “synthesis” or integration of Christ with culture, but with the understanding that Christ is superior.

For example, scientific discoveries are assumed to support Biblical truths.

Culture is embraced, but subject to the authority or “lordship” of Christ.

Somewhat of a combination is *Christ and Culture in Paradox*:

This is a “dualism” where Christ and Culture are incompatible and struggle against each other.

The principal conflict is between ‘faith’ and ‘unbelief’ and anticipates the triumph of Christ over culture.

Finally, in Niebuhr’s model, there is the dynamic of Christ Transforming Culture.

This is “conversion” or the transformation of culture by Christ that is not so much expected in the future,

but is an ‘awareness’ that God has the power to do so now.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H. Richard Niebuhr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Richard_Niebuhr)

I believe all of these modes have been active possibilities throughout the Church’s history – I see virtues in a combination of each perspective.

To some extent, we as Christians here at The Villages have withdrawn from the predominant, local culture;

In The Villages area, we coexist with a diverse group of people – sometimes whether we like it or not;

To some extent we have synthesized with The Villages and believe that Christ is actively at work through us here.

As a progressive church, we are in some competition within a predominantly conservative Christian community, whom we expect will one day come around to our way of believing.

And as individuals and as a faith family, we are on a journey where some of us are already there in that Beloved Community that is possible, yet requires us to help it happen for all and not just some.

How well do we do that? Well, remember we are imperfect humans created in the likeness of God’s “humanity”.

Willard, p.4

Churches in general these days come under fire for not living up
to the love and grace, justice and peace that we are supposed to be about.
Younger generations look upon the Church with suspicion –
though they still have the spiritual needs for which
faith communities have always provided.

By the way, our Church Growth Committee came across a video resource
that we all liked which included everyday people talking about
why they were in church.

One burly fellow said in words to effect,
“The church is full of hypocrites. One more won’t hurt!”

We can’t really escape the culture of the Church no more than we can escape
the culture of human society.

That part – the cultural part, is what comes from us;
but we have to remember that this is where we meet God,
who is alive and independent of what we believe, think, and do.

Yet our religious culture is how and where we as Christians
work out what it means to be people of God through Christ.

Our Christian church culture has come from those who came before us
in their encounters with God in the past,
to guide us in the present, and for what is still to come.

Lillian Daniel disparages the self-centered religious culture that says,
“Aren’t we lucky to be living in a place that is so blessed”, and stop there
without the slightest concern for those places in the world
where people are not so blessed.

That does not do justice to a God who was willing to suffer as one of us
on a cross.

Luck notwithstanding – except maybe the luck of the Irish,
we are blessed by those who came before us to be a blessing
for those who will follow us.

Lillian Daniel concluded her Stillspeaking devotional by saying:

*Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped
by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead?*

*Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough
to encounter God in a real human community?*

*Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side,
holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me,
just like we try to do in church.*

<http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>

Amen

Our lesson today from Romans 4:1-11 in which the Apostle Paul clarifies that our salvation is not earned by doing something...

^{4:1} Well then, what can we say about our ancestor Abraham?

² If he became acceptable to God because of what he did,
then he would have something to brag about.

But he would never be able to brag about it to God.

³ The Scriptures say,

“God accepted Abraham because Abraham had faith in him.”

⁴ Money paid to workers isn't a gift. It is something they earn by working.

⁵ But you cannot make God accept you because of something you do.
God accepts sinners only because they have faith in him.

⁶ In the Scriptures David talks about the blessings that come to people
who are acceptable to God,

even though they don't do anything to deserve these blessings.

David says,

⁷ “God blesses people whose sins are forgiven
and whose evil deeds are forgotten.

⁸ The Lord blesses people whose sins are erased from his book.”

⁹ Are these blessings meant for circumcised people
or for those who are not circumcised?

Well, the Scriptures say that God accepted Abraham
because Abraham had faith in him. ¹

^o But when did this happen? Was it before or after Abraham was circumcised?
Of course, it was before.

¹¹ Abraham let himself be circumcised to show that he had been accepted
because of his faith even before he was circumcised.

This makes Abraham the father of all who are acceptable to God
because of their faith, even though they are not circumcised.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

John 3:1-21

- [1] Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicode'mus, a ruler of the Jews.
- [2] This man came to Jesus by night and said to him,
"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."
- [3] Jesus answered him,
"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew,
he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- [4] Nicode'mus said to him,
"How can a man be born when he is old?
Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"
- [5] Jesus answered,
"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit,
he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
- [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh,
and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- [7] Do not marvel that I said to you, `You must be born anew.'
- [8] The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes;
so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."
- [9] Nicode'mus said to him,
"How can this be?"
- [10] Jesus answered him,
"Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?
[11] Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know,
and bear witness to what we have seen;
but you do not receive our testimony.
- [12] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?
- [13] No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven,
the Son of man.
- [14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of man be lifted up,
[15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."
- [16] For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- [17] For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
- [18] He who believes in him is not condemned;
he who does not believe is condemned already,
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
- [19] And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world,
and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.
- [20] For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light,
lest his deeds should be exposed.
- [21] But he who does what is true comes to the light,
that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

May the road unfold
 ever onward before you;
With the Sun
 to light your way,
The Wind at your back
 to push you along,
The Moon
 to shepherd you at night,
And Christ
 to keep you company
Till we meet again...

Amen