

# REDEEMER VISION PAPER #6

## CHRISTIANS AND CULTURE

A society's 'culture' is a set of shared practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs which are rooted in common understandings of 'the big questions'—where life comes from, what life means, who we are, and what is important to spend our time doing in the years allotted to us. No one can live without some assumed answers to these questions, and every set of answers shapes culture:

- the way we treat the material world,
- the way we relate the individual to the group and family,
- the way groups and classes relate to one another,
- the way we handle sex, money, and power,
- the way we make decisions and set priorities, and the way we regard death, time, art, government, and physical space.

Today an astonishing array of movements, political action groups, social activist networks, foundations, think tanks, experts, writers, artists, as well as religious leaders are all intentionally working for cultural change—and working in extremely different and often contradictory directions. Christians, of course, would love to see their society reflect more and more of the Father's justice, of the Son's sacrificial love, and of the Spirit's life-giving power. How exactly should Christians 'relate Christ to culture' so this happens?

Historically, Christians have adopted three classic approaches that are still in use today. We could call "the conversionist", "the political", and "the separatist" ways.

- *The conversionist* - On the one hand, many believe that the way to change a culture is to change enough individual hearts through personal conversion. Then, supposedly, the culture would change automatically.
- *The political* - At the other end of the spectrum there have been believers over the centuries who wanted to use political power to enact laws that were directly based on Christian theology.
- *The separatist* - A third approach rejects any idea of Christians trying to influence culture. It insists that we should reflect Christian values within our own churches, but we should not try to influence society in any particularly Christian direction.

In such a brief paper, we can not hope to do justice to these three approaches. Each of them provides such telling critiques of its rival views that we must conclude there is no utopian way to create a Christian society. You could certainly make a case that there has never been a Christian society (even though many have claimed to be) and there never will be.

And yet, Christians cannot simply rest satisfied with individual conversions or separated enclaves when they discern the central plot-line of the Bible:

- A) God created a world of peace and life;
- B) The world has fallen into a state of injustice and brokenness;
- C) God has determined to redeem this world through the work of his Son and the creation of a new humanity; until
- D) eventually the world is renewed and restored to being the way that he made it and the way we all want.

In short, the purpose of redemption is not to help individuals escape the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew it. God's purpose is not only to save individuals, but also to make a new world based on justice, peace, and love, rather than on power, strife, and selfishness. If God is so committed to this that he suffered and died, surely Christians should also seek a society based on God's peace and love.

How should we go about it? At Redeemer we have learned something from all the approaches mentioned above, and yet we have struck a somewhat different path. We wouldn't dream of claiming that we have the answer, but our way of seeking to relate Christians and culture is, we believe, extremely promising (though its results to date are only embryonic). The following is a sketch:

**1. Christians should live long-term in the city.** The city is an intense crucible of culture-formation. Cultural trends tend to be generated in the city and flow outward into the rest of society. Therefore, people who live in the large urban cultural centers (working in their institutions, taking jobs in the arts, business, academia, the helping professions, and the media) tend to have greater impact on how things are done in a culture. If a far greater percentage of the people living in cities long-term were Christians, Christ's values would have a greater influence on the culture.

**2. Christians should be a dynamic counter-culture in the city.** It will not be enough for Christians to simply live as individuals in the city. They must live as a particular kind of community.

The Bible tells us that the history of the world is a 'tale of two cities.' The 'city of man' is built on the principle of individual self-aggrandizement (Gen 11:1-4- "*Let us make a name for ourselves*"). What God wants is different. "*In the city of our God, his holy mountain is beautiful in elevation--the joy of the whole earth*" (Psalm 48:2). In other words, the urban society God wants is based on service rather than selfishness, and on bringing joy to the whole world, not just to the individuals within it. Jesus probably had Psalm 48:2 in mind when he told his disciples that *they* were 'a city on a hill' whose life and action showed God's glory to the world (Matt 5:14-17). That is us! We Christians are called to be an *alternate* city within every earthly city, an alternate human *culture* within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in non-destructive ways; to show how classes and races who cannot get along outside of Christ can get along in him; and to show how it is possible to produce art that brings hope rather than despair or titillation.

**3. Christians should be a community radically committed to the good of the city as a whole.** It is insufficient for Christians to form a culture that only 'counters' the values of the city. We must then turn, with all the resources of our faith and life, to sacrificially serve the good of the whole city, and especially the poor. Christians work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether they believe what we do or not. In Jeremiah 29:7, the Jews were called not just to live in the city but to love it and work for its '*shalom*'—its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. Christians are, indeed, citizens of God's heavenly city. But the citizens of God's city are always the *best possible* citizens of their earthly city. They walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.

In the end, Christians will not be attractive within our culture through power plays and coercion, but through sacrificial service to people regardless of their beliefs. We do not live here simply to increase the prosperity of our own tribe and group, but for the good of all the peoples of the city.

**4. Christians should be a people who integrate their faith with their work.** There is a fourth, crucial component to our plan for relating Christians to culture. As we said above, all work proceeds from beliefs about the 'big questions' regarding what life means, what human beings are, and what are the most important things in life. We call the answers to these big questions a 'worldview.' Most fields of work today are dominated by very different worldviews than that of Christianity.

However, when most Christians enter a vocational field today, they either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout Bible verses at people to get their faith across. We simply do not know how to think out the implications of the Christian view of reality for the shape of everything we do in our professions. We do not know how to persuade people by showing them the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone's work. We do not know how to attract people to Christianity by persuasively showing the resources of Christ for resolving baseline cultural problems and for fulfilling baseline cultural hopes.

The Christian church has only done embryonic thinking in this area. When it comes to culture, most Christians know nothing but a privatized faith or a militant, belligerent faith. Redeemer wants to be part of the coming renaissance of Christian cultural engagement in New York City<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> James Boice makes lays out a very similar cultural renewal strategy, based on city-living, distinct Christian community, humble service to the common good, and faith-work integration, in his book *Two Cities, Two Loves* (IVP, 1996,) pp. 166ff. A good place to start thinking about faith-work integration is the book by Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994.)