

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

March 21, 2017

With a few short but notable exceptions, I've spent most of my life in what are considered these days to be "red" states: North Carolina; Georgia; Kentucky; Texas; Virginia; and Tennessee. While living in a predominantly "blue" area here at "the Center of the Universe" has required some adjustments, I am, on the whole, having a delightful time.

I delight in all the various ethnicities and national origins evident at the Columbia Mall, at the playground, and right here at The Meeting House, and I'm not sure I'll ever again be able to be content in mono-ethnic kinds of places again.

During the years when it was still a print publication, I got most of my news from *U.S. News & World Report*, which was arguably a "red state" news magazine. When *U.S. News* dropped its print edition, subscriptions were transferred to *TIME*, which is arguably a "blue state" news magazine, and that's what I've read since.<sup>1</sup>

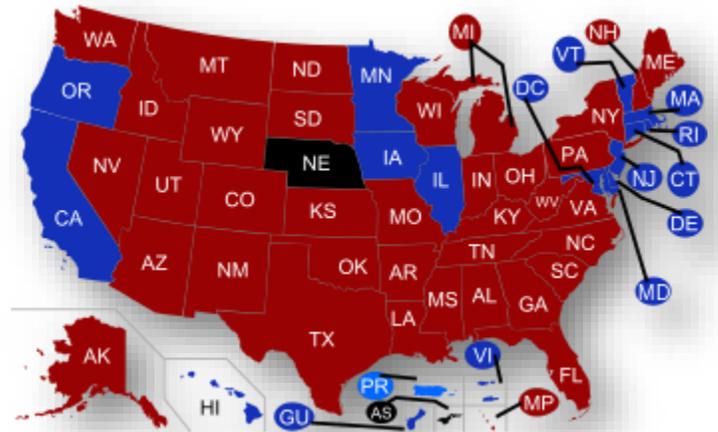
The current issue of *TIME* "explores" ("endorses") "fluid meanings of gender" literally from the front cover to the back cover. Terms such as "lesbian," "gay," "straight," "bisexual," "transgender," and "LGBTQ" are now joined by "asexual," "genderqueer," "flexible," "non-binary," "nonconforming," "demi-girl," "genderless," and "pangender," and *TIME* reports that *Facebook* has 60 (sixty!) options for gender identity.

Persons "on the right" tend to view such developments as signs of degradation and degeneracy. Persons "on the left" tend to view such developments with affirmation and encouragement. And persons who take their following of Jesus with complete seriousness can be found in both camps.

Such diversity of viewpoint is not new, and one of the more helpful approaches to the matter, in my judgment, continues to be H. Richard Niebuhr's classic book, *Christ and Culture* (1951). One of the most important Christian ethicists of the twentieth century, Niebuhr taught for decades at Yale Divinity School, and he was greatly concerned with how human beings relate to God, to each other, to their communities, and to the world.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr identified five major ways in which Christians tend to relate to the world outside the Church, and it seems to me that these five ways also suggest choices we have with respect to cultural issues such as those that occupy this week's *TIME* . . . and pretty much everything else, as well.

Niebuhr's first approach is **Christ AGAINST Culture**. This position, which would describe many Christians "on the right," is one in which the world outside the Church is perceived as dangerous, pagan, dying, and is to be actively and energetically rejected. This



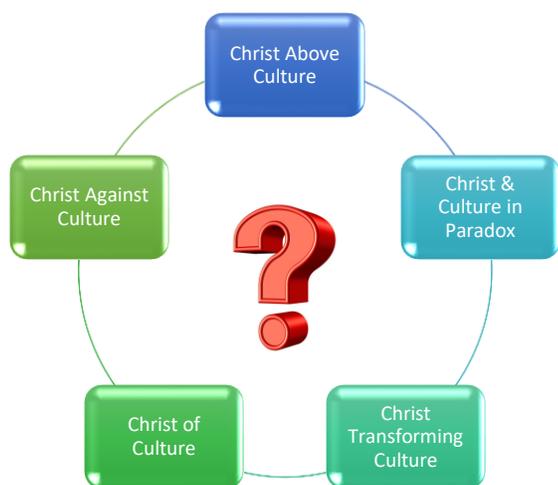
<sup>1</sup> I also read *The Economist*, which may be "purple"; and the only radio I listen to is NPR. No TV.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.\\_Richard\\_Niebuhr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Richard_Niebuhr)

approach tends to try to *destroy* the culture; and, as with the other approaches, persons can take a “Christ AGAINST Culture” approach with grace, and they can also do it with anger.

Niebuhr’s opposite to *Christ AGAINST Culture* is **Christ OF Culture**. Rather than standing over against culture, Christians who take this approach do not experience tension between Church and World, or between Social Mores and the Gospel. Christians “on the left” tend to do their best to *bless* the culture, attempting to reconcile their faith with current understandings of culture, science, and philosophy.

Between these two poles, Niebuhr placed the **Christ ABOVE Culture** approach. Rather than experiencing no tension between Christ and Culture, as the *Christ OF Culture* approach does, *Christ ABOVE Culture* tries to form a *synthesis* between Christ and Culture. Affirming that Christ is Lord of both Church and Culture, this approach affirms both reason and revelation, and believes that culture is both godly and sinful. At the same time, this approach doesn’t really try to *change* the culture.



Also between the poles is **Christ and Culture IN PARADOX**. Rather than the synthetic approach of *Christ ABOVE Culture*, *Christ and Culture IN PARADOX* takes a *dualistic* approach to the world outside the Church. Rather than undertaking the vigorous efforts of *Christ AGAINST Culture* to reshape culture by force, *Christ and Culture IN PARADOX* believers try to live as “in the world but not of the world,” and *avoid* engagement with the world.

Niebuhr’s fifth approach is **Christ TRANSFORMING Culture**, and he called these believers “conversionists.” Christians who are in the *Christ TRANSFORMING Culture* group are more interested in what God is doing in the here-and-now than in what God may be going to do in the life-to-come. *Christ TRANSFORMING Culture* Christians have a more hopeful attitude toward culture than most of the other approaches do, and their general approach is to try to *win* the culture.

At this point, I hope that you can see some connection between these five approaches to culture and five different ways to read and respond to the issues raised by the current issue of *TIME* magazine. I don’t suppose there’s a “right” answer to which of these one “should” choose; but at this point in my life, I am more drawn to the “transforming” option.

Where do you see yourself? And does that suggest anything that you might do next?

Dave