

THE BIBLE ON CHURCH AND CULTURE

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At our church, we often encourage our members to bring the gospel to bear on the culture we live in, whether through working to restore the social fabric of our communities or through bringing a Christian worldview to the workplace. There are critics, however, who say we should instead simply work at “being and building up the church” and avoid any efforts to change or renew culture. I’d like to offer a few biblical texts that serve as a starting point for Redeemer’s approach to this issue.

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

First, Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan teaches that we are not only to love our brothers and sisters in Christ but also our neighbors (Luke 10:25–37). In Jesus’ day, the ideas of “neighbor” and “brother” were the same thing. Love and support were to be shown only to one’s own tribe, race, and faith. By making the parable’s two main figures a Jew and a Samaritan, however, Jesus drove home the fact that Christians must consider anyone at all, *especially* those of other races and classes, as neighbors, even if they are of another faith.

Paul follows up with the command to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10). Here Paul clearly tells believers to serve the interests of their non-Christian neighbors. The word “good” includes giving material benefits (as in the parable of the good Samaritan) out of love and desire for a person’s well-being in every way. Thus Paul calls Christians to consider and work for the common good of their neighborhood and city.

It is no wonder that Christians seeking to obey Christ and Paul over the centuries have worked to

abolish slavery, repeal child labor laws, and open voting rights to all citizens, as well as to begin thousands of programs and ministries that help the poor and needy.

WORKING FOR GOD’S GLORY

Second, the New Testament tells us to do absolutely *everything* “for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31), and this includes one’s vocation and work. Work and cultural production are never neutral but are always driven by particular beliefs about what life is all about, what people are for, and what is right and wrong. In every profession, gospel beliefs will affect how we do our work. How they do so varies greatly from field to field. Sometime the differences between believer and nonbeliever are not very great in practice. But if we practice law and supervise our employees and do art in ways increasingly informed by Christian faith, it will lead at least indirectly to changing social mores and norms.

SALTING AND LIGHTING YOUR WORLD

Third, in Matthew 5:13–16 Jesus tells his disciples they are to be “the salt of the earth” and a “city on a hill” whose “good deeds” are a light that will lead nonbelievers to praise the Father in heaven. Salt dispersed into meat was a preservative, so Jesus is indicating that Christians in the world who are living lives consistent with the gospel keep society from deteriorating morally, socially, and culturally.

In a parallel passage (1 Peter 2:11–12), Peter says that Christians living life in the world evoke persecution in some respects and yet will nevertheless influence many pagans to “glorify God.” In

his article on 1 Peter, “Soft Difference,”¹ Miroslav Volf shows how this tension Peter envisioned does not fit neatly into any of the historic models of relating Christ to culture. Unlike the models that envision a “transformation of culture” or an older “Christendom” alliance of church and state, Peter expects the gospel to always be highly offensive and to never be embraced and accepted by the world. Unlike the models that call for withdrawal from the world and are highly pessimistic about influencing culture, Peter expects *some* aspects of Christian practice to be highly attractive to any pagan culture, shaping and influencing people to “glorify God.”

The classic example of being resident aliens is in Jeremiah 29. The Jews are called both to keep their distinct religious identity, not assimilating culturally to the Babylonians, and yet to be deeply involved in the economic and cultural life of Babylon, seeing to its peace, prosperity and common good.

NOT POWER, BUT SERVICE

The commands of God—to love our neighbor, to do all our work out of a Christian worldview, and to be salt and light, working for the common good of all city residents—mean Christians will of necessity be doing cultural renewal. People who say, “The church should not seek any impact on culture” should be asked, “Should Christians not have worked to abolish slavery?” That was a response to God’s command to love our neighbor, but it

also brought massive social change.

Nevertheless, looking back over the texts I am struck by the simple fact that cultural change is always a by-product, not the main goal. The main goal is always *loving service*. If we love and serve our neighbors, city, and Lord, it will definitely mean social changes, but Christians must not seek to take over and control society as an end in itself. If we truly seek to serve, we will be gladly given a certain measure of influence by those around us. If we seek power directly, just to get power and make the world more like us, we will neither have influence nor be of service. Everyone around us will view us with alarm, as well they should.

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1. Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994). Accessed online at www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/soft-difference-church-culture.pdf (April 7, 2010).