

**Note:** This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Carter, Craig. "The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder's Critique of H. R. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (July 2003): 387-401.

**The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology:  
Yoder's Critique of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture***

CRAIG A. CARTER\*

*Abstract:* H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* has exerted enormous influence on how we conceptualize the relationship between Christianity and culture. It has persuaded many individuals from pietistic, Anabaptist and fundamentalist backgrounds to view their heritage of opposition to major aspects of the majority culture as something of which to be ashamed, and as something that needs to be discarded in order to become culturally responsible. I argue that John Howard Yoder's trenchant critique of Niebuhr's book has not been given the wide exposure it deserves, especially his argument that Niebuhr's position is vitiated by a weak Christology and a misuse of the doctrine of the Trinity. Niebuhr has introduced great confusion into the debate by treating the "Christ Against Culture" approach as doctrinally deficient, whereas it is his own position that departs from Nicene orthodoxy. I will also show that Yoder's approach to social ethics reveals the radical character of a consistently Nicene approach.

H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture*<sup>1</sup> has been one of the most influential works in social ethics of the twentieth century. Still in print after fifty years—in fact, recently released in a new edition with a new introduction by James Gustafson—this book has been used widely in such courses as Church and Society, Theology and Culture, Christian Social Ethics and the History of Ethics. It has had enormous impact on the way theology students, pastors and college and seminary professors, as well as scholars from other academic disciplines, think about how culture should be engaged today by thoughtful Christians. In many ways, this book has set the terms of the debate and therefore exerted a much greater degree of influence than if it had merely reflected the point of view embraced by the majority of readers, although it did that as well.

In the foreword to Charles Scriven's book *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr*, James McClendon points out that both Niebuhr brothers were attracted to pacifism early in their careers and that both eventually rejected it. He says: "Eloquent and

---

\*Craig A. Carter is Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Academic Dean and Vice President of Tyndale College in Toronto, Ontario.

1. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.

articulate, the Niebuhrs made many young baptists (Mennonites, Baptists, Adventists, and still others) ashamed of their own long heritage of peace."<sup>2</sup> The effect of *Christ and Culture*, in particular, has often been to convince educated young people from peace church, charismatic-Pentecostal, pietistic, fundamentalist, evangelical and other non-mainstream traditions that their heritage of significant opposition to important aspects of the majority culture is something of which to be ashamed and which must be discarded if one is to become responsible and culturally engaged. Ironically, this engagement leads as often to cultural accommodation as it does to cultural transformation. The amount of accommodation to culture that occurs in the name of being "transforming" and "realistic" is little short of astounding.<sup>3</sup> Instead of abandoning a "Christ Against Culture" position wholesale, it may be better for us to acknowledge that any authentically Christian position will be "against culture" to one degree or another and then move on to the task of developing better criteria for distinguishing what needs to be opposed from what does not need to be opposed in the majority culture, and why.

In this essay I will examine John Howard Yoder's critique of Niebuhr's classic work and the implications of his critique for the way we should think about the Christ and culture problem in the future. Space does not permit examining the development and changes in Niebuhr's thought over a writing career of more than thirty years. Instead, I will focus on *Christ and Culture* itself, since it has influenced many people who have never read the rest of Niebuhr's works and who never will. My thesis is fairly simple: namely, that Yoder has exposed certain Christological deficiencies in *Christ and Culture* that undermine what I take to be the book's two main points. First, it argues against the "Christ Against Culture" position (for which H. R. Niebuhr, himself, had earlier shown great sympathy) and second, it argues for the "Christ Transforming Culture" position (which H. R. Niebuhr ultimately embraced, along with his brother Rienhold, as a result of the crisis of World War II).

First, we need to see that these two points are in fact the main points of the book. I anticipate little resistance to this part of the argument, which will be brief. We then need to review Yoder's multi-leveled critique of *Christ and Culture* with a focus on his Christological and trinitarian criticisms. The question of what implications this kind of

---

2. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988, 9.

3. As Michael Cartwright notes, Yoder is very critical of this phenomenon as well.—"Practices, Politics and Performance: Toward A Communal Hermeneutic For Christian Ethics" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Duke U., 1988), 427.

theological critique has for our evaluation, and future use, of this book will then be posed. The final section will show that we need an entirely different approach to social ethics that will frame the basic question in an entirely different way. For the development of such an approach, Yoder provides some helpful hints based on biblical, orthodox Christology, rather than on heretical Christologies.

#### THE ARGUMENT OF *CHRIST AND CULTURE*

Although Niebuhr takes great pains to try to be objective and fair in presenting the five types of how Christ and culture can relate, most readers agree that his book builds a case for the fifth type as the most adequate one. After describing the two "extremes" of "Christ Against Culture" and "The Christ of Culture," Niebuhr then turns to three mediating types: "Christ Above Culture" (synthesis), "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (dualism) and "Christ Transforming Culture" (conversion). The outstanding example of a synthesis of Christ and culture is the bringing together of Aristotelianism and Christianity by Thomas Aquinas. The main example of the dualist type is Martin Luther and his doctrine of vocation, in which Christian ethics applies to the individual as individual, but not to the individual as Father, Magistrate or Soldier (that is, to one's vocation). The Augustinian-Calvinist tradition is the major example of the transforming type.

Not only does the "Christ Transforming Culture" type come last in the list of five types, it is also the only type that Niebuhr does not critique extensively. Each of the three mediating types incorporates the strengths and also transcends the weaknesses of the preceding types. Interestingly, the fifth type is also presented at a higher level of abstraction than any of the others and is not accompanied by specific examples of how and when culture has been transformed in the way Niebuhr approves. For these reasons, this type is the hardest to criticize, and the unwary reader has embraced it before he or she knows it. Paul Ramsey and others have reported that most students, regardless of their denominational background or other predispositions, tend to identify with the transforming position by the time they have finished the book.<sup>4</sup> That is not surprising, given the structure of the book.

The position that Niebuhr is most concerned to argue against is the radical "Christ Against Culture" type. The very fact that the "Christ

---

4. As quoted by John Howard Yoder in "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*" in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 53.

Against Culture" position is presented as one of the extremes sets it up for rejection. Although Niebuhr is careful to assert that all the types are valid in the sense that the church as a whole needs representatives of all of them,<sup>5</sup> he nevertheless makes a number of very strong criticisms of this type. He brings out the heavy artillery of the "orthodox doctrine of the Trinity" in order to refute the radicals. By concentrating on the Lordship of Christ, the radicals are unable to "defend his authority, to define the content of his commandment, and to relate his law or reign to that power which governs nature and presides over the destiny of men in their secular societies."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the radicals' proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ lacks plausibility because they base it on the Scriptural proclamation only (special revelation) and cannot buttress it with some kind of natural theology, which Niebuhr views as revelation from the Father through creation or from the Spirit through the Christian community. Niebuhr also accuses the radicals of tendencies toward legalism and self-righteousness and of refusing to serve the common good by withdrawing from culturally necessary work.<sup>7</sup> But Niebuhr's major criticism of the radical position is that it fails to recognize, along with revelation in Jesus Christ, the revelation of the Father in nature and history and that of the Spirit in the Christian community.<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr also accuses the radicals of inconsistency, since they make use of some aspects of culture, even while rejecting participation in war.<sup>9</sup> He regards the radical position as illogical since its proponents profess to reject what they, in practice, cannot live without. To be anti-cultural, Niebuhr argues, is a necessary but inadequate position.<sup>10</sup> It is necessary as a counterbalance to those who would embrace culture uncritically, but inadequate because it is illogical and theologically deficient. Yet Niebuhr acknowledges that the radical position is closest to that of the New Testament and the early church,<sup>11</sup> therefore having value even though we modern people can not embrace it. It functions as the conscience of the culturally engaged, responsible church.

---

5. *Christ and Culture*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 81.

7. *Ibid.*, 79f.

8. *Ibid.*, 80.

9. *Ibid.*, 55, 69-70.

10. *Ibid.*, 65.

11. *Ibid.*, 45.

YODER'S CRITIQUE OF *CHRIST AND CULTURE*

Yoder's critique of Niebuhr's classic operates on several levels. I will examine the first two levels briefly and then dwell a bit more on the third one, the most important of the three.

The first level is that of the problem of definitions and logical consistency. Here Yoder points out several problems with Niebuhr's definition of "culture." Yoder notes that although Niebuhr defines culture very broadly as everything people do, he also sees culture as monolithic.<sup>12</sup> He points out that Niebuhr criticizes Tertullian and Tolstoy for embracing some aspects of culture (such as Latin philosophical terminology and literature) while rejecting others (such as idolatry or killing in war). The assumption seems to be that one has to transform it all, hold it all in paradox, reject it all and so on. But to state this assumption is to expose its weakness. Yoder suggests that sometimes when Niebuhr says "culture," he really means "the majority position of a given society."<sup>13</sup> It would, of course, seriously weaken Niebuhr's critique of the radical position if he openly admitted that what they were doing was not rejecting culture but only the position of a majority of some cultures at some points in history. That sounds like something that representatives of all five types must do to one extent or another, according to criteria unique to each of them. So Niebuhr's claim can hardly count as a critique of the radical position.

At a second level of critique, Yoder questions the adequacy of Niebuhr's typology. He does not question the usefulness of typologies in general, but he does accuse Niebuhr of categorizing people in ways that result in their not recognizing themselves in Niebuhr's description of them.<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr seems to want it both ways, in that he wants to admit that his "pure" categories do not exactly fit the people to whom he applies them and, at the same time, he wants to criticize those people for not fitting the type perfectly! For example, Tertullian's "inconsistency" is held up as evidence of the inadequacy of the radical position. But if the types are Niebuhr's constructions, how do they make the position taken by real people in history wrong or inadequate? Yoder suggests that the types should instead have a logical completeness that exhausts the possibilities and thus requires everyone to choose among them. However, Niebuhr does not try to justify his typology this way and it is doubtful that he could do so if he did try. Yet much of the rhetorical

---

12. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 54.

13. *Ibid.*, 56.

14. *Ibid.*, 46.

power of Niebuhr's book and its ability to convince readers arises from its use of the types as alternatives in the strong sense.

At a third level, Yoder critiques *Christ and Culture* on the theological level. He notes that Niebuhr cites with approval the Jewish historian Rabbi Joseph Klausner, who sees Jesus as coming to abolish culture.<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr portrays Jesus as pointing away from this world to the Father, who alone is absolute and worthy of worship: "In his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and the pluralism of culture."<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr's portrait of Christ ignores his teaching, his example, his call to discipleship, his promise of the Spirit, his atoning death and resurrection, and his Great Commission to his disciples. Niebuhr's view of Christ has no place for the Lordship of Christ and the community of disciples who live under that Lordship in joyous anticipation of the full coming of the reign of God. Niebuhr does not speak of the church as an alternative polity, a renewed community or a new cultural influence. Christ is simply against culture—something he regards as being of very little importance.

This definition of Christ places Niebuhr's whole project in serious question. If the full biblical witness were allowed to fill the definition of Christ, then Niebuhr's whole polarity between a Christ who points away from culture and the cultural reality in which the Christian is immersed would have to be configured differently. For example, if Christ was affirming of some kinds of social relations (like mutual service) and against other kinds (like exploitation of the weak by the strong), then the polarity would be between different aspects of culture rather than between Christ and culture. Then the strategy of a Tertullian would make more sense and Niebuhr's case against the radicals would need serious revision.

But at a deeper level Yoder's analysis reveals something more profoundly wrong with Niebuhr's view of Christ. The Christ of *Christ and Culture* (which is not the same thing, necessarily, as Niebuhr's overall, considered view) is a docetic Christ who is not really embedded firmly in history. The Jesus of the Gospels is a flesh and blood, Jewish, human being who thinks like a Jew, knows the Jewish Scriptures inside out and preaches and teaches about the Kingdom of God in an effort to reinterpret (within a tradition) the meaning of messiahship. As the overwhelming consensus of Third Quest<sup>17</sup> New Testament scholarship is

---

15. *Ibid.*, 59.

16. *Christ and Culture*, 39 as quoted by Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 59.

17. The Third Quest refers to the post-World War II trend in New Testament studies to view Jesus in his Jewish context. The first quest was described by Albert Schweitzer in his classic *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954). The second,

making clear, Jesus did not so much "reject" his culture as he "reinterpreted" the Scriptures and brought together previously unconnected strands of the tradition to define a new kind of Messiah and a new vision of the Kingdom. As Yoder himself has demonstrated, Jesus was in dialogue with, but clearly different from, the Sadducees and Herodians, the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots.<sup>18</sup>

Orthodox Christology, which emerged in the process of theological debate leading up to Nicea and Chalcedon, recognized this human, culturally embedded Jesus by insisting that he was fully human, yet refused to compromise his unique authority by also insisting that he was fully divine. The full humanity and full deity in one person was a way of saying both that Jesus was a unique, specific person who lived at a particular historical time and also, at the same time, the revelation of God. Orthodox Christology affirmed that Jesus Christ is a man who lived in a particular time and place and not a mere principle, or a symbol, of a wider wisdom. The Incarnation is a historical event.

Yoder also critiqued the doctrine of the Trinity with which Niebuhr worked. Noting the important rhetorical role played by Niebuhr's appeal to this doctrine, Yoder suggests that Niebuhr's use of this doctrine needs to be tested biblically<sup>19</sup> and with reference to the history of dogma.<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr used this doctrine to support his view that the radical and uncompromising ethics of Christ needs to be supplemented and corrected by the more conservative ethics of the Father as revealed in creation and the more flexible ethics of the Spirit as revealed in the historical community of the church. Yet this use of the doctrine of the Trinity does not conform to the New Testament witness where the Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit will be sent by the Father in his (Jesus') name in order to remind them of what he (Jesus) has said to them (Jn 14:26). The unity of the witness of Father and Son (and Spirit) is the point of Nicene orthodoxy. Niebuhr's position is more in keeping with Sabellianism<sup>21</sup> (or Modalism), which was considered and decisively

---

which sought to take into account Jesus' eschatological teaching, was launched by Ernst Kaaseman and others in the 1950s after a period of domination of the field of New Testament studies by the school of Bultmann.

18. "The Original Revolution" in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 13-33. See Yoder's interaction with recent New Testament scholarship throughout the second edition of *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

19. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 61.

20. *Ibid.*, 62.

21. This is the heretical teaching of Sabellius, who said that God is essentially one being who successively takes on three different manifestations of Father, Son and Spirit.



rejected by the early church.<sup>22</sup> By focusing on them one at a time, modalism allows for a much more plausible distinguishing of different social ethics as expressed by the three persons of the Godhead. Orthodox Trinitarian theology, reflecting the concerns of the biblical narrative, stresses that all three persons are involved in the special work of each and thus makes it impossible to play one off against the other. Yoder's Christological and Trinitarian criticisms are much more serious than debates over the adequacy of the types ever could be. If Yoder is right, the whole theological foundation of *Christ and Culture* is severely undermined.

#### WHY CHRIST AND CULTURE WENT WRONG THEOLOGICALLY

Why did things go so wrong theologically in *Christ and Culture*? Why did Niebuhr define Christ in a docetic manner and why did he define the doctrine of the Trinity in a modalist way? What lies behind Niebuhr's strange theological moves in this book? The question is particularly important because evidence shows that Niebuhr's earlier theology was not characterized by these weaknesses and that his overall, considered opinion may have reflected a much more adequate trinitarian theology.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr's Christ is docetic and his view of the Trinity is Sabellian.

In the "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" Niebuhr promotes a social existentialism as a way of overcoming the relativism that threatens to arise out of the historicism which Niebuhr inherited from his teacher Ernst Troeltsch, and that forms the basis of Niebuhr's polite pluralism in *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr is extremely reluctant to call anyone wrong in this book—although it is clear that he will not be displeased if his readers conclude for themselves that the radical position is wrong. Niebuhr's social existentialism calls on the individual to make a choice

---

22. This Sabellian tendency is not just an inference from scattered references in *Christ and Culture*. It is taught plainly by Niebuhr in his famous article "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (July 1946), 371-841. There Niebuhr argues that the unitarians of the Son and the unitarians of the Father and the unitarians of the Spirit are all part of the church and need to be balanced by each other. But the point of Nicea was different; it was that unitarians of whatever type are not part of the orthodox faith. A central point of Nicea is that we can not play the persons of the Godhead off against one another without imperiling monotheism.

23. See Glen Stassen's article "Concrete Christological Norms For Transformation" in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, G. H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, J. H. Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 127-90. Stassen argues incisively and strongly for viewing Niebuhr's overall position as trinitarian, despite the tensions in *Christ and Culture* noted by Yoder. I am not convinced by Stassen's argument, but there is not sufficient space here to join the debate.

that is not a "leap in the dark" but, rather, a historically informed and communally formed choice. He says:

Yet, although this is true that the responsible self acting in the present moment must leave the past and future of speculation and reflection behind, it is not true that we decide in a nonhistorical present and without connection to the past and future.<sup>24</sup>

Yoder complains of the lack of specific, concrete ethical norms in *Christ and Culture* and he notes that the concreteness gets thinner and thinner as the book goes on. But for Niebuhr it is vitally important not to be specific because ethics is a matter of free, existential choice. However, this choice must not be made "independently and without reason."<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr wants us to "choose and reason in faith,"<sup>26</sup> in light of our ultimate object of loyalty.<sup>27</sup>

This ultimate object of loyalty, however, is not Jesus Christ but the Absolute God. Niebuhr, reminiscent of liberal Protestants from Schleiermacher to Bultmann, asserts that it is not faith *in* Jesus Christ but, rather, faith *like* Jesus Christ's which is crucial. He says: "This faith has been introduced into our history . . . through this person . . . without the historical incarnation of that faith in Jesus Christ we should be lost in faithfulness."<sup>28</sup> What does the word "incarnation" mean in this sentence? Is it the incarnation of God in Jesus? Or is it the "incarnation" of saving faith? Are we dealing, in Jesus, with a man who has a highly developed "God-consciousness" or with the incarnate God come to save by his teaching, example, and death and resurrection? I am not claiming that Niebuhr did not believe in the incarnation or deity of Jesus Christ. I am, however, claiming that his Christology in this book is deficient, for a very simple reason.

The reason Niebuhr had a thin, docetic Christology in this book—regardless of whether or not it was his considered, final position—is that his main purpose of arguing against the radical position required it. He had to deal with the difficult fact that the radical position is more in harmony with the Gospels, and he had to provide a plausible explanation of how to reject the ethics of Jesus while still appearing to be Christian.<sup>29</sup> So he set up a dualism between a Christ who points toward

---

24. *Christ and Culture*, 247.

25. *Ibid.*, 249.

26. *Ibid.*, 251.

27. *Ibid.*, 252.

28. *Ibid.*, 255.

29. See Yoder's illuminating list of ways this has been done in *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 4-8.

the Father and away from culture and the culture in which we are inescapably immersed. Then he was able to go searching for concrete ethical norms drawn from experience, reason and common sense, such as "responsibility" and "necessity," in order to provide ethical norms other than the life and teachings of the Jesus Christ of the New Testament. His misuse of the doctrine of the Trinity, by which he appeared to be Christian while making non-Christian norms (natural theology) the basis of his ethics, was another strategy for allowing him to bypass the concrete life and teachings of Christ.

#### THINKING ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF CHRIST AND CULTURE IN THE FUTURE

If the types in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* are as seriously flawed theologically as Yoder argues, what kind of approach to the problems of Christian social ethics would be a better alternative? Yoder once proposed to write a book in which his critique of *Christ and Culture* would be followed by a new typology of Christ and culture.<sup>30</sup> However, Yoder says he came to believe that such a book would not be a good idea because Niebuhr's question is the wrong question. The way Niebuhr defined "Christ" and "culture," Yoder claims, means that there can be no right answer. The more of culture you have, the less of Christ you have and vice versa.

If Niebuhr's question is the wrong question, then what is the right question? Yoder is correct to see that, fundamentally, the relationship between Christ and culture is not the place to start. One must start with the question of the relationship between the church and its surrounding society. But even then, to imply that there is one right "motif" or "model" for the church/culture relationship in all historical periods and all societies is surely inadequate. It is more nearly correct to ask what should be the relationship between the church and its host society or culture here and now. Insofar as the incarnation is taken seriously, the relationship of Jesus Christ to the world of his day must be of foundational importance to any faithful description of what relationship ought to exist between the church and culture.

Framing the question in this way allows the biblical narrative to become crucially important in developing an answer. By reading the narrative of the gospels in the light of the Old Testament and with reference to the rest of the New Testament, we are able to specify ways in which Jesus is normative for his disciples and so begin to construct norms for the church. It also allows us to see how the wider culture is

---

30. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 82.

likely to respond to the church insofar as it follows Jesus faithfully. Yoder, of course, demonstrates the social ethical relevance of Jesus in his most famous book, *The Politics of Jesus*.

Instead of having a docetic<sup>31</sup> Christ functioning as an "ideal," which then should be approximated as closely as possible in the "real world," we thus have the embodied, human, historically situated Jesus Christ of the biblical narrative providing a way of living that his followers adopt as they covenant together in the fellowship of the church. This way of life, which believers adopt, becomes an alternative to the "way of death" that is common in the wider culture in which the church lives. The relationship between the church and the culture is therefore characterized by a tension. This tension can take many forms, depending on several variables: the faithfulness (or the lack thereof) of the church, the degree of rejection and/or acceptance of the gospel by elements of the surrounding society, and the historical trajectories of both church and culture (whether one or both is moving toward or away from Jesus). In this approach, it becomes both possible and necessary to critique both the church and the culture by means of the criterion of the Gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ. Social ethics becomes a theological exercise of prayerful discernment in which the failings of the church are as important as the failings of the wider society.

In contemporary North America, social ethical statements are usually categorized as either conservative or liberal, and rightly so. The Religious Right attempts to baptize conservative politics, while Liberal Protestantism attempts to baptize liberal politics, and the choice between two secular approaches marginalizes the unique social ethics of Jesus and renders the church invisible. *Christ and Culture* facilitates this analysis by setting up the problem as a choice between a conservative approach that errs perhaps on the side of "realism" and a liberal approach that errs slightly in the direction of greater justice or more generosity. If the question is re-framed in terms of the relationship of the church to the culture and of each to the example of Jesus Christ, then the complete inadequacy of the liberal-conservative analysis is exposed. The Gospel simply cannot be fit into the liberal-conservative categories of the secular culture. *Christ and Culture* set up the question in terms of how far, and to what extent, "the ideal of Christ" can be applied to "the real world" precisely in order to allow Christian social ethics to make sense

---

31. Docetism, a heresy in early Christianity, which taught that Christ was truly human. It affirmed his deity but, under the influence of Greek dualistic thinking, was unable to believe that the divine could ever have been joined to what it considered to be the evil physical world.

in the secular context. But he did so at the cost of making the call to radical discipleship and the acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ appear as unrealistic ideals that can never be realized in history. Yoder's critique shows that this approach denies the incarnation. In claiming that Jesus is God come in the flesh, the Gospel stubbornly insists that this so-called impossible ideal has already been realized in history and that the church is the fellowship of those who follow the One who lived a life pleasing to God. Moreover, what H. R. Niebuhr assumes to be "the real world" is exposed by the biblical narrative as a temporary aberration—of creation in unsustainable revolt against the Creator and of a world in the process of passing away. The vanguard of history is not the Communist Party, not Liberal Democracy, and not the United States of America. Rather, it is the messianic community, the church or, as Yoder put it, a "New World on the Way."<sup>32</sup>

The church is always against culture and yet, simply by being itself, it transforms culture. The problem is that culture is stubborn and unpredictable. It never gets transformed all at once and it also does not stay transformed permanently, even once it has been transformed. History ebbs and flows and there is always a dynamic tension between the church and the world. Sometimes the world persecutes Christians. Sometimes it tries to destroy the church. Other times its rulers give Christians the wealth to build magnificent cathedrals. Sometimes rulers convert to faith in Christ. Sometimes they live out remarkably faithful lives of discipleship; more often they smear the name of Christ by doing the very opposite.

Yoder makes two suggestions that can help the alternative approach to social ethics being described here work more effectively. First, Yoder suggests that we do not need a category such as "Against" or "Transforming" into which all of culture as a whole can be placed; rather, we need "categories of discernment"<sup>33</sup> to help us evaluate various aspects of culture and accept some of it, accept some of it with modifications and reject some of it.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the Christian will always be against some aspects of culture (e. g., racism, pornography) and nearly always in favor of some aspects of it (e. g., philanthropy, medicine). The Christian will be discriminating in accepting some aspects of technology and rejecting others. For example, to reject

---

32. This is the title of Yoder's "Stone Lectures" given at Princeton Theological Seminary in January 1980. The first, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics Versus the Wider Wisdom," is reprinted in John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 102-26.

33. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 70.

34. *Ibid.*, 69.

television altogether is probably not necessary for discipleship, but to be discriminating in what is watched and how much is watched and what the television is used for is essential to discipleship. Further, some basically good aspects of culture such as the family will be potentially idolatrous, yet not necessarily so. Jesus called people to leave father and mother and follow him, thereby pointing to the fact that even something as intrinsically good as duty to parents (i.e., fulfilling the Fourth Commandment) can get in the way of discipleship.

In the little book *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*,<sup>35</sup> Yoder provides a biblical-theological study of Christian practices, namely, binding and loosing, communion, baptism, the fullness of Christ and the rule of Paul. These practices of the Christian community demonstrate that the church is a political entity. Yoder's main thesis is that "the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the body of Christ is called."<sup>36</sup> This brief but pregnant book sets forth a kernel of a method for social ethics that could be developed further in a detailed manner. The practices of the Christian community mandated by the New Testament function as the "categories of discernment," which are missing in *Christ and Culture* and which allow for distinguishing between different aspects of cultural and political life that are in harmony with, neutral with regard to, or in conflict with the will of God as revealed concretely in Jesus Christ.

Second, the category of "Transformation" needs to be defined more precisely as bringing the world under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup> As Yoder points out, Niebuhr is vague about how he defines what transformation actually looks like in real life. Yoder argues that the New Testament statement that "Jesus is Lord" should be used to describe transformed culture. Implicit in this attempt to make the Transformation type more specific is the need to move away from making Jesus one pole, with culture being the other pole, toward a model in which the two poles are the Church and the world with the Lordship of Jesus as the criterion for evaluating both.

The Church acknowledges the Lordship of Christ and the world does not. Insofar as the world is converted (transformed), it begins to express the Lordship of Christ and, in so doing, it ceases to be the world and becomes the kingdom of God. Culture is not the opposite of Christ; it is

---

35. Nashville, TN.: Discipleship Resources, 1989.

36. *Body Politics*, ix.

37. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 67ff.

the fleshing out of a worldview in practice and can be either Christian, non-Christian or a mixture of the two. The Church has a culture and it also participates in the non-Christian culture around it. Rather than seeing increased loyalty to Christ as a movement away from culture, Yoder would have us view obedience to Christ as transforming the culture into the kingdom of God. Of course, the church does not always live out the implications of its confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, and part of the task of social ethics is to detail the gap between the Gospel and church life. Sometimes the only difference between the church and the world will be that the church's sin is inconsistent with its own confession of the Lordship of Christ. Yet this slim base can support a great deal of prophetic speech and, as long as the prophetic function of the church is not extinguished, there is hope of reformation in the church (and eventually reform in the wider culture as well).

Another component of a viable alternative to Niebuhrian social ethics, which I think is implicit in Yoder's critique of Niebuhr, is the interpretation of transformation in eschatological terms. One of the major problems of Niebuhr's position is his lack of a futuristic eschatology to balance his emphasis on realized eschatology. The problem is that, when one adopts either a totally realized eschatology (as Niebuhr does) or a completely futuristic eschatology (as premillennialist fundamentalists often do), the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" that pervades the New Testament tends to get resolved in one direction or the other. Yet the witness of the church thrives precisely in the dynamism created by this tension, while accommodation tends to result from the relaxing of the tension in either direction. Niebuhr's "Christian Realist" position thus suffers from the same defect as the Social Gospel, insofar as its eschatology is insufficient to prevent the development of a relaxed relationship to the existing social order and the settling down of the church into a pattern of accommodation to the world. That is basically the same criticism that Niebuhr himself makes of the Synthesist position, but it applies to his whole approach as well.

#### CONCLUSION

In order to do justice to the humanity of Jesus Christ, our response to him must include discipleship, cross-bearing and public witness as part of his body, the Church. Both our discipleship and our ecclesiology must be as embodied and historical as the incarnation. Since the authoritative character of Jesus' life and teachings is sealed forever by the divinity of Jesus Christ (the *homoousios*), and since the incarnation of the God-Man has made it impossible to view living in Christ as a historical impossibility, Christian confession must include following him as Lord.

Therefore, only those movements of Christianity that follow Jesus in rejecting violence, practicing reconciliation and witnessing to the triumph of the Lamb can be said truly to be Nicene in nature. Approaches to social ethics, such as that of H. R. Niebuhr, which relegate the "ideal of Christ" to a realm outside of history are therefore not Nicene.

Niebuhrian social ethics, as exemplified in *Christ and Culture*, are not radical enough to be Nicene. Niebuhr's typological approach contains a built-in bias against a radical discipleship and a believers' church approach. By setting up the problem as "How close to an impossible ideal can we come?" Niebuhr not only fails to take seriously the historical nature of the incarnation, but he also renders his ecclesiology as docetic as his Christology. Yoder's critique consists essentially in challenging Niebuhr's inadequate Christology and the resulting inadequate ecclesiology. An alternative approach to social ethics, developed along the lines suggested by Yoder, would develop concrete ways whereby both the church and the wider culture can be evaluated by the criterion of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Their relationship, then, would be determined primarily by their response to the call of the Gospel to believe in Jesus Christ, follow Jesus Christ and bow the knee to Jesus Christ.