

IN DEPTH BIBLE STUDY: SPIRITUALITY OF THE CROSS

CLASS 21 and POWER POINT 21:

LIVING IN TWO KINGDOMS: The Sacred and the Secular:

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE:

1. Others act heroically, when faced with this conflict. They try to change the world. They plunge into social activism for social reform. Through legislation, political power and social engineering they believe that society can be reorganized to follow God's law. Such activism has a long and often distinguished history and has been practiced by partisans of both left and right wing political activism. When churches turn into political action committees, however the danger is that they lose their supernatural focus concentrating instead on earthly programs and becoming just another worldly institution.
2. If they are successful in making a perfect society, what would they have? Another divinized culture. Heaven built by human hands is not the same as eternal life, again, Christianity always has to be more than a cultural religion. Other Christians respond to faith and their culture by withdrawing from the sinful world. They separate themselves from secular amusements and institutions. Some take the ascetic route, they deny themselves the pleasure, social involvements and entertainment options enjoyed by their more secular members. Others allow entertainment as long as books, films and videos have explicit Christian doctrine. Those who separate themselves from the culture often attempt to set up their own communities along Christian principles. The classic example is the Amish, who go so far as to reject modern technology to keep their community pure. This can also be seen in Christian communes.
3. This can be also seen in the rise of distinctly Christian businesses and institutions, which constitute a Christian sub-culture. There is much to admire here. Christians do need to separate from sin as self-denial and rejection of worldliness are genuine virtues. This approach, however can become problematic as the Bible calls us into service and action in the world. Pulling back into Christian enclaves and letting the world, go literally to hell, is a retreat not sanctioned by Scripture. Besides, the resulting sub culture tends to acquire cultural problems of its own. The same political games, status seeking, and worldly concerns that characterize the outside culture. The paint of sin that spoils all culture is not so easily escaped.
4. Whether the church tries to rule the culture or make its own culture, sin runs too deep. None of these schemes are ever successful. Christian monarchies succumb to corruption. Even Christian Communes dissolve into jealousy and personal conflicts and overt sin. No one, Christians included, live a perfect Godly life and much less force anyone to do so. And to this fact, attempts to enshrine a perfectly Christian culture flounder.
5. Whether the preaching the need to conform to society, reform it or separate it, all of these are theologies of the L, not G. They reduce Christianity to rules, behavior and codes of conduct- neglecting the fact that human beings are in such bondage to sin, they cannot fulfill the demands of the L. More profoundly, they forget that Christianity is about God's grace, the atonement of Christ and forgiveness of sins. Put another way, in their ambitious kingdom-building, they exhibit the TOG, more than the TOC.

CITIZENS OF TWO KINGDOMS:

6. There is validity in both the way of activism and the way of separation from the world. Is it possible to do both? The Bible seems to call for a much more complex stance to the problem of Christianity and culture. When Jesus prayed for His followers, before His arrest in Gethsemane, He set the terms. Read John 17:14-18.
7. His followers, those who do and those “who will believe in me through their message,” (John 17:20), namely us—are not “of the world,” yet He sends them, “into the world.” Somehow, Christians must be “in, but not of”—engaged in the world, while still being otherworldly.
8. In Niebuhr’s rehearsal of the various stances Christians have taken to the problem, he describes the Lutheran position as “Christ and culture in paradox.” Lutherans call it the doctrine of the TK. According to this view, God does rule the culture and God does rule the church, He rules them in different ways. According to the Lutheran Theology of culture, God is sovereign over all of existence, from the sparrow that falls to the motions of the nebula, from the working of every individual’s conscience to the vast affairs of nations. The so-called secular realms are under His domain.
9. Even those who do not believe in God remain under His rule and care. They are under His moral law, which restrains sin and effects of sin. If the human proclivity for sin were to be fully released, it would tear apart any human relationship. Sin unbound would undercut any sort of cooperation and interdependence that are necessary for any kind of society. Culture would be impossible. God’s L is thus manifest in the restraint of conscience, external social constraints, legal structures and moral teachings that all cultures uphold.
10. All human beings, of all beliefs or lack of beliefs are under God’s providential care. “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45). And his providential power operates through the normal living and working human beings. He is masked even to those who don’t know Him. That is to say, He works as we have seen in vocation. His whole creation constitutes His kingdom.
11. God, however has another kingdom, one of salvation/grace. He relates in a different way to those He reaches down to save, gathering them together in the church, which He guides through the Holy Spirit. God rules His earthly kingdom, they are active in the tasks to their vocations. Christians must function in both realms at once, they are “in, but not of” the world.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TWO KINGDOMS (TK):

12. The doctrine of the TK does encourage Christian activism. Lutheranism is often accused of encouraging servile obedience to the state. If the ruler’s vocation makes him a mask of God, as those Lutheran believe, then resistance to an unjust ruler would be construed and resistance to God. If the secular authorities are part of God’s kingdom and if the church is to be purely spiritual, then L would seem to keep people from criticizing their leaders or working for social change. This view of the TK is then a sheer misunderstanding (even if some Lutherans have had the same misunderstanding). When it comes to social and political structures, God, let it never be forgotten, is the king. While He does work through earthly institutions, they are all subject to His law.