

CURRENT ISSUES

Bible Study

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Kingdom and Our Culture

How can Christians live for eternity without ignoring the present?

When Michael S. Horton looks at American evangelicalism, he sees a tradition whose global positioning system is out of whack. “Instead of being in the world but not of it,” he writes, “we easily become of the world but not in it.” As a result of this error, the church, society, and, especially, the children of believers suffer.

What is God’s kingdom supposed to look like? How does the kingdom come into being? Where do children fit in? These are the questions we’ll explore in this study.

Lesson #152

Scripture:

Exodus 19:10–13; Joshua 23:1–13; Jeremiah 29:4–14; Matthew 13:24–33; 19:13–15; Mark 9:42–50; Acts 2:38–39; Hebrews 12:14–29

Based on:

“How the Kingdom Comes,” by Michael S. Horton, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, January 2006, Vol. 50, No. 1, Page 42



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "How the Kingdom Comes" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

When Horton points out the incongruity of singing both "This World Is Not My Home" and "This Is My Father's World," he taps into a long-running discussion among Christians around the world: How should the church interact with surrounding society? The hymns suggest two answers, but the Christian tradition offers even more possibilities.

In 1949, historian and theologian H. Richard Niebuhr published a now-classic book on this subject, *Christ and Culture*. He posited five general Christian approaches to the church-society question, each with historical exemplars and scriptural warrants, and each with strengths as well as weaknesses. The first two describe church and society in either-or terms, and the last three aim at some version of both-and. In broad outline, the five approaches are:



1. Christ against culture: Christians should withdraw as much as possible from society to practice their own purity and stand as a witness.
2. Christ of culture: There should be no conflicts between Christianity and society, or between faith and rationality. If apparent conflicts arise, religion needs to be reinterpreted.
3. Christ above culture: Christians can honor Christ and culture together, as long as they keep Christ preeminent.
4. Christ and culture in paradox: Because we live under law and grace, Christians have different, though never completely conflicting, obligations inside and outside the church.
5. Christ the transformer of culture: Christians have a responsibility to extend Christ's lordship to all sectors of society.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Which approach best describes the church in which you grew up? The church you attend now? Which approaches seem most and least promising to you, and why?

[Q] Which approach does Horton favor? How can you tell?

Optional activity: Fill in a chart with Scriptures, figures from church history, and current religious thinkers and trends that fit each of Niebuhr's five approaches. (Christ and Culture gives several examples for each, if you want suggestions to start your thinking.)



PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles**Teaching point one: Though God never changes, his kingdom on earth looks different in various times and places.**

As Horton notes, God has not always given his people the same directions for relating to the rest of the world. Joshua 23:1–13 and Jeremiah 29:4–14 describe two different Old Testament scenarios. Jesus offered three additional glimpses of the kingdom in Matthew 13:24–33. Read all three passages.

- [Q] Referring back to Niebuhr's five approaches, which does God instruct the Israelites to take in the Joshua passage? In the Jeremiah passage? Does Israel's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world change from Jeremiah 29:4–7 to Jeremiah 29:10–14?
- [Q] What aspects of Israel's mission seem to change from Joshua to Jeremiah? What aspects stay the same? What might account for the differences?
- [Q] Referring again to Niebuhr's five approaches, which correspond to Jesus' parables of the weeds, the mustard seed, and the yeast?
- [Q] What aspects of the church's mission seem different in the three parables? What aspects stay the same?
- [Q] How is the kingdom of God *today* like a man who sowed good seed in his field (note that the passage compares the kingdom to the sower, not to the good seed), like a mustard seed, and like yeast? Does the modern kingdom fulfill some of these roles better than others? Is it possible to pursue all of them at the same time?

Teaching point two: The kingdom is not something we create, but something we receive.

Horton writes, "The kingdom of God is never something that we bring into being, but something that we are receiving. Cultural advances occur by concentrated and collective effort, while the kingdom of God comes to us through baptism, preaching, teaching, Eucharist, prayer, and fellowship." He draws this insight from Hebrews 12:28–29, which is worth examining in context (verses 14–29), along with one of the Old Testament passages it references (Exodus 19:10–13). Read both passages.

- [Q] Both the Hebrews and the Exodus passages contain a mixture of activity and passivity on the part of God's people. What did God command the Israelites to do at Mount Sinai? What did God command Christians to do through the writer of Hebrews? In both instances, how does human activity relate to God's activity (i.e., does human activity cause God's activity, allow God's activity, make no difference, etc.)?
- [Q] What is the relationship of human beings to a mountain (Hebrews 12:18–21)?



- [Q] What is their relationship to, or role within, a city (Hebrews 12:22–24)? Do the contrasting images indicate fundamental differences between the old covenant and the new?
- [Q] What does the author of Hebrews mean by writing that the kingdom “cannot be shaken”? By contrast, what elements of our churches and culture *can* be shaken?
- In the same section of his article from which the above quotation is drawn, Horton writes of a “holy commonwealth” and a “pseudo-Christian subculture,” then notes that “the church is not really a culture.”
- [Q] What are the differences between a commonwealth, a subculture, and a culture? Which do individuals have the greatest role in building? Which do individuals have the least role in building?
- [Q] Why does Horton prefer the idea of a “holy commonwealth”? Do you agree with him?

Teaching point three: The health of a kingdom depends on its next generation.

As dangerous as it is for Christian adults to get distracted by the trappings of suburb and subculture, Horton writes, the peril for Christian youth is even greater. “The ‘pumped-up’ teens in our youth groups today are often tomorrow’s skeptics and burnouts,” he warns. He links his statements to Acts 2:39, Matthew 19:13–15 and Mark 9:42–50 give additional insights about the significance of children in the kingdom.

- [Q] What is “the promise” of which Peter speaks in Acts 2:38–39? How is this promise related to the kingdom? How do children (and “all who are far off”) participate in the promise and, by extension, the kingdom?
- [Q] What does Jesus mean in Matthew 19:14, when he says the kingdom “belongs to such as these [little children]”? Might this statement have multiple meanings? Why do you think the disciples resisted or misunderstood Jesus on this point?
- [Q] Mark 9:42–50 contains some grim statements. Why is causing “one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” such a terrible error?
- [Q] At the end of the Mark passage, Jesus disdains salt that has lost its saltiness. How does Horton express similar disdain for the evangelical subculture?
- [Q] If consuming “hip Christian slogans,” “wholesome novels with Christian heroes,” and so forth does not make (young) Christians “salty,” what does?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

“Can churches be a counterculture amidst anonymous neighborhoods and tourist destinations, the apotheoses of individual choice, niche demographics, and marketing?” Horton asks.










Though he believes the answer is yes, the challenge is obviously daunting. And though mobilizing a counterculture takes massive communal effort, even nudges in the right direction can make a difference.

- [Q] How could the flourishing of God's kingdom reshape your "anonymous neighborhood"? Where do you see hints of the kingdom, and how can you help them grow?
- [Q] Do you focus more on creating for God or receiving from him? Do you think God is calling you to be more active or more passive in his kingdom?
- [Q] Horton suggests that much contemporary youth ministry, by attempting to cater to a specific demographic, actually hinders children's participation in the kingdom. Has this been your experience, or the experience of your children? What could your church do to help bridge generational divides?
- [Q] The next time you pray the Lord's Prayer, what image or idea will you bring to mind upon reciting the phrase, "thy kingdom come"?

Optional activity: *Pray the Lord's Prayer as a group, pausing after the phrase "thy kingdom come" to allow each group member to add a personal reflection on the kingdom, silently or aloud.*

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor
of *CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY*

Recommended Resources

-  ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Church and State
-Government and Law
-Defining Our Role in Politics
-  *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr (HarperCollins, 2001; ISBN 0061300039)
-  *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Leonard Sweet, ed. (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 0310254876)
-  *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, George Eldon Ladd (Eerdmans, 1959; ISBN 0802812805)
-  *The Kingdom of God*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Good News Publishing, 1992; ISBN 0891076484)
-  *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford, 2005; ISBN 019518095X)
-  *Where in the World Is the Church?* Michael S. Horton (P&R Publishing, 2002; ISBN 0875525652)



CURRENT ISSUES

Bible Study

ARTICLE

How the Kingdom Comes

The church becomes countercultural not by what it gives, but by what it gets.

By Michael S. Horton, for the study, "The Kingdom and Our Culture"

It was confusing to grow up singing both "This World Is Not My Home" and "This Is My Father's World." Those hymns embody two common and seemingly contradictory Christian responses to culture. One sees this world as a wasteland of godlessness, with which the Christian should have as little as possible to do. The other regards cultural transformation as virtually identical to "kingdom activity."



Certainly the answer does not lie in any intrinsic opposition of heaven and earth. After all, Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Rather, the answer is to be sought in understanding the particular moment in redemptive history where God has placed us. We are not yet in the Promised Land, where the kingdom of God may be directly identified with earthly kingdoms and cultural pursuits. Yet we are no longer in Egypt. We are pilgrims in between, on the way.

In Babylon, God commanded the exiles to "build houses and settle down," pursuing the good of their conquering neighbors (Jer. 29). At the same time, he prophesied a new city, an everlasting empire, as the true homeland that would surpass anything Israel had experienced in Canaan.

So both of my childhood hymns tell the truth in their own way: We are pilgrims and strangers in this age, but we "pass through" to the age to come (not some ethereal state of spiritual bliss), which, even now in this present evil age, is dawning.

The challenge is to know what time it is: what the kingdom is, how it comes, and where we should find it right now.

Is Christianity a Culture?

In the Old Covenant, the kingdom of God was identified with the nation of Israel, anticipating the Last Day by executing on a small scale the judgment and blessings that will come one day to the whole world. Yet Jesus introduced a different polity with



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the New Covenant. Instead of calling on God's people to drive out the Canaanites in holy war, Jesus pointed out that God blesses both believers and unbelievers. He expects his people to love and serve rather than judge and condemn their neighbors, even their enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; see also Matt. 7:1–6). The wheat and the weeds are to be allowed to grow together, separated only at the final harvest (Matt. 13:24–30). The kingdom at present is hidden under suffering and the Cross, conquering through Word and sacrament, yet one day it will be consummated as a kingdom of glory and power. First the Cross, weakness, and suffering; then glory, power, and the announcement that the kingdoms of this world have been made the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 11:15; see also Heb. 2:5–18).

So what is the relationship of Christians to culture in this time between the times? Is Jesus Christ Lord over secular powers and principalities? At least in Reformed theology, the answer is yes, though he is Lord in different ways over the world and the church. God presently rules the world through providence and common grace, while he rules the church through Word, sacrament, and covenantal nurture.

This means that there is no difference between Christians and non-Christians with respect to their vocations. "We urge you, brothers, to [love one another] more and more," Paul writes. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thess. 4:10–12). There are no calls in the New Testament either to withdraw into a private ghetto or to "take back" the realms of cultural and political activity. Rather, we find exhortations, like Paul's, to the inauspicious yet crucial task of loving and serving our neighbors with excellence. Until Christ returns, believers will share with unbelievers in pain and pleasure, poverty and wealth, hurricanes and holidays. A believer, however, will not be anxious about the future and will not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope," as Paul adds (1 Thess. 4:13), but will be energized in the most mundane daily pursuits by the knowledge that God will raise the dead and set everything right (1 Thess. 4:14–18). We groan inwardly for that final redemption with the whole of creation, precisely because we already have within us the Spirit as a down payment and guarantee (Rom. 8:18–25).

The earthly citizenship to which Jesus, Paul, and Peter referred is therefore a common sphere for believers and unbelievers. The second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* offers a self-portrait of the early Christian community:

For Christians are distinguished from the rest of men neither by country nor by language nor by customs. For nowhere do they dwell in cities of their own; they do not use any strange form of speech. ... But while they dwell in both Greek and barbarian cities, each as his lot was cast, and follow the customs of the land in dress and food and other matters of living, they show forth the remarkable and admittedly strange



order of their own citizenship. They live in fatherlands of their own, but as aliens. They share all things as citizens and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land. ... They pass their days on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven.

So Christians are not called to make holy apparel, speak an odd dialect of spiritual jargon, or transform their workplace, neighborhood, or nation into the kingdom of Christ. Rather, they are called to belong to a holy commonwealth that is distinct from the regimes of this age (Phil. 3:20–21) and to contribute as citizens and neighbors in temporal affairs. "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). The church, therefore, as the communion of saints gathered by God for preaching, teaching, sacrament, prayer, and fellowship (Acts 2:46–47), is distinct from the broader cultural activities to which Christians are called in love and service to their neighbors. In our day, this pattern is often reversed, creating a pseudo-Christian subculture that fails to take either calling seriously. Instead of being in the world but not of it, we easily become of the world but not in it.

But the church is not really a culture. The kingdom of God is never something that we bring into being, but something that we are receiving. Cultural advances occur by concentrated and collective effort, while the kingdom of God comes to us through baptism, preaching, teaching, Eucharist, prayer, and fellowship. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb. 12:28–29). There is nothing more important for the church than to receive and proclaim the kingdom in joyful assembly, raising children in the covenant of grace. They are heirs with us of that future place for those "who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age"—a holy land "which drinks in the rain often falling on it" and is "farmed" so that it reaps its Sabbath blessing (Heb. 6:4–8).

A Counterculture?

If the church is not to be identified with culture, is it necessarily a counterculture? If Christians as well as non-Christians participate in the common curse and common grace of this age in secular affairs, then there is no "Christian politics" or "Christian art" or "Christian literature," any more than there is "Christian plumbing." The church has no authority to bind Christian (much less non-Christian) consciences beyond Scripture. When it does, the church as "counterculture" is really just another subculture, an auxiliary of one faction of the current culture wars, distracted from its proper ministry of witnessing to Christ and the new society that he is forming around himself (Gal. 3:26–29). This new society neither ignores nor is consumed by the cultural conflicts of the day.



Recently, an older pastor told me that during the Vietnam era, two of his parishioners, one a war protestor and the other a veteran, were embroiled in a debate in the parking lot, but then joined each other at the Communion rail with their arms around each other. Here was a witness to the Sabbath rest that awaits us, realizing that we still have, for the time being, vineyards to plant and wars to be for or against as citizens.

Too often, of course, the contemporary church simply mirrors the culture. Increasingly, we are less a holy city drawn together around Christ and more a part of the suburban sprawl that celebrates individual autonomy, choice, entertainment, and pragmatic efficiency. These are values that can build highways and commerce, but they cannot sustain significant bonds across cultural divides and between generations. Capitulating to niche demographics and marketing, churches that once nurtured the young, middle-aged, and elderly together, with all of the indispensable gifts that each one brings to the body of Christ, often now contribute to the rending of this intergenerational fabric. If this is a worrisome trend in the social sphere, it is all the more troubling for a body that is constituted by its Lord as a covenantal community.

To be truly countercultural, the church must first receive and then witness to Peter's claim in Acts 2:39: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." The promise is not only for us, but also for our children. According to recent studies by sociologists like Christian Smith, evangelical teens are only slightly less likely than their unchurched friends to adopt a working creed of "moralistic, therapeutic deism." As the diet in our churches is increasingly determined by the spirit of the age, and as youth are treated as borderline cases to be cajoled into thinking God is cool, the church risks abandoning that promise. The "pumped-up" teens in our youth groups today are often tomorrow's skeptics and burnouts. They don't need more hip Christian slogans, T-shirts, and other subcultural distractions, but the means of grace for maturing into co-heirs with Christ.

Recently, cnn reporter Anderson Cooper was asked, "Do you think part of your job is to appeal to younger viewers?" "I've never been in a meeting where people said to bring in younger people," he replied. "I think the notion of telling stories differently to appeal to younger people is a mistake. Young people want the same kind of thing older viewers do: interesting, well-told, compelling stories. If you're somehow altering what you're doing because you want to get young viewers, that's a little bit like when your parents go out to buy 'cool' clothes for you." In our culture, relevance is determined—in fact, created—by publicity. But the Word creates its own publicity as it is preached, as the story is told. It creates its own relevance, and as a result, a community that spans the generations.



The promise is not only for us and for our children, Peter says, but "for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). And how does he call them? Through the preaching of the gospel. Peter's promise, in fact, is part of such a sermon, proclaiming Christ as the center of Scripture. Refusing to set a covenantal church ("you and your children") against a missional church ("all who are far off"), the apostolic community stuck to its calling and became both an outpost and lightning rod for God's saving activity in the world.

If ours is to truly be a countercultural community, it must begin with the rejection of any notion of self-founding, either in creation or redemption. It is God's choice, not ours; God's "planned community," not ours; God's means of grace, not our ambitious programs, plans, or achievements that extend the kingdom. Being "countercultural" today often amounts to superficial moralism about sex and suvs, or perhaps creating wholesome novels with Christian heroes, removing offensive language from music lyrics, and encouraging positive values. Beyond that, many of the churches with which I am familiar are captivated by the same obsessions as our culture: religion as individual spirituality, therapy, and sentimentalism. It all serves to keep us turned in on ourselves, like a kid at a carnival instead of a pilgrim en route.

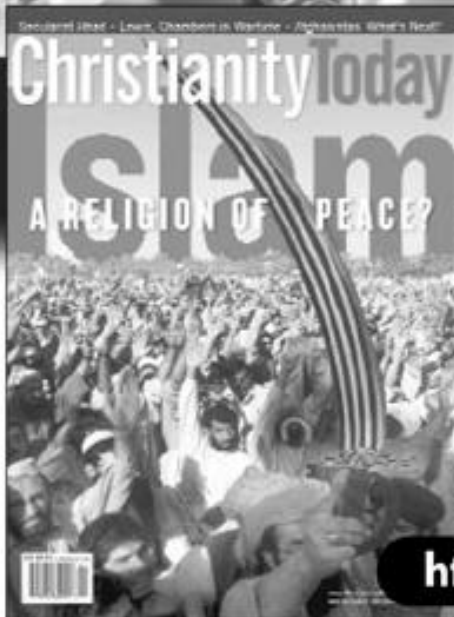
Describing the rapid decline of rural areas that are surrendering to strip malls and homogeneous multinational corporations, Wendell Berry argues, "We must learn to grow like a tree, not like a fire." Berry notes that we are losing our ability to take any place seriously, since this demands patience, love, study, and hard work—in other words, roots. Some use the word "seekers" to describe those we are trying to reach in this culture. But the truth is that they and we are more like tourists than seekers, let alone pilgrims, flying from place to place to consume experiences.

Can churches be a counterculture amidst anonymous neighborhoods and tourist destinations, the apotheoses of individual choice, niche demographics, and marketing? Yes. The church can exist amidst suburban sprawl as easily as in cities or small towns, precisely because its existence is determined by the realities of the age to come—by God's work, rather than by the narrow possibilities of our work in this present age under sin and death. After all, this is our Father's world, even though, for the moment, we are just passing through.

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