

Title: Analysis and Critique of “Christ the Transformer of Culture” in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the world view slogan, “Christ the transformer of culture,” in the thought of its creator, H. Richard Niebuhr. Although the phrase is popular in Neo-Calvinist circles, this study finds that its meaning in Niebuhr’s theology deviates from Reformed orthodoxy.

In order to understand what Niebuhr intends by Christ transforming culture, we begin by outlining his understanding of the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Niebuhr describes the triadic community that exists between God, individuals, and the rest of creation. Unfortunately, humanity has always broken this community by distrusting God and being disloyal to his cause. Such depravity manifests itself in various henotheisms and polytheisms, which at bottom is form of anthropocentrism. Nevertheless, God will inevitably reconcile the world to himself by instilling radical monotheism within people. Such radical faith learns to trust God and then serve his cause in the world by “transforming the culture.”

In view of his entire theology, we discover that Niebuhr’s signature doctrine of radical monotheism quite possibly influences his failure to make adequate or clear distinctions concerning the transformation of culture in four important areas. First, Niebuhr’s failure to preserve personal distinctions within the Godhead leads him to subscribe to Unitarianism. This Unitarianism prohibits Niebuhr from giving adequate attention to the Holy Spirit, which in turn prevents him from stating precisely how the transformation of culture occurs and from giving humanity an active role in the process.

Second, Niebuhr fails to maintain temporal distinctions between the events of creation, fall, and redemption. This mistake leads him interpret the human problem as ontological rather than ethical and to limit its solution to the cognitive domain. Third, Niebuhr fails to ascertain that various members of the human race will attain different soteriological ends. This universalism leads Niebuhr to espouse inclusivism and to limit divine judgment. Fourth, Niebuhr is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends. This ambiguity prevents him from prioritizing cultural acts, stating precisely how fallen humans may still perform natural good, and understanding how redemption reconciles the present tension between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends.