405: Ecclesiology and Sanctification
Dallas Theological Seminary

Dr. Robert A. Pyne
Fall 1998

The Church in the World

Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 155–97. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these issues in class.)

- When he speaks of the church's mission, Clowney distinguishes between the church as "gatherer" and the church as "gathered." Consider your own background and the mission of the church within your tradition. Have you emphasized one of these functions at the expense of the other? Is Clowney right in saying that both are essential?

- No church can fully protect itself from contemporary culture while fulfilling its evangelistic task, but churches that identify too much with the culture risk having nothing distinctive to communicate. How does your perception of the church's mission affect your strategies for cultural engagement with personal (and congregational) purity?

- Given your understanding of human nature and of the gospel, can societies become "moral" apart from revival (i.e., regeneration)? (Cf. Gal. 2:21.) Is it enough that conditions in a given community become a little more tolerable? What is the church's responsibility and/or role in effecting that kind of change?

- Because of our primary allegiance to Christ, we as believers are bound to believe that human governments have limited authority (Acts 4:19–20). However, we are also called to submit to our rulers (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–14). Under what circumstances is it necessary for the church to disobey human authorities?

Comments: The Mission of the Church in the World

From its inception, the church has been tasked with proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). However, it would be inappropriate to say that the church's mission consists of nothing more than evangelism. The church as a redeemed, transformed community is to bring glory to God (Eph. 1:12; 3:20–21; 5:27). This takes place not just through gospel proclamation but through the church's presence as a visible demonstration of God's grace and wisdom (Eph. 3:4–10), through corporate expressions of worship (2 Cor. 4:15; Col. 3:16–17), through mutual service (1 Pet. 4:11), and through faithful obedience in the midst of suffering (1 Pet. 4:12–15; 5:9–10). Believers are expected to assemble together for teaching, fellowship, sacraments, prayer (Acts 2:42), and encouragement (Heb. 10:24–25), and, again, they are expected to preach the gospel to the world (Acts 4:29–31; 1 Thess. 1:8, etc.).

Believers are also expected to care for those with physical needs, especially within the church (Matt. 25:35–40; Acts 4:32–35; Rom. 12:13; 2 Cor. 8; Gal. 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27; 2:15–16; 1 John 3:16–17). Evangelicals disagree over the extent to which this constitutes a vital part of the church's mission, however, and even those who agree that it is important to care for the poor (i.e., "social work") may not agree on the church's involvement in altering the societal structures that have contributed to their

poverty (i.e., "social reform"). There are many reasons for these disagreements, which often have as much to do with culture as they do with biblical interpretation.

The church has always accepted some responsibility to care for the poor, but ever since the fundamentalist/modernist controversy in the early part of the twentieth century, many American conservatives have viewed social ministry as unessential to the mission of the church. This was primarily due to the fact that the more liberal churches had become almost completely caught up in reform movements. Fundamentalists came to oppose social reform in the 1920's not primarily because they were theologically predisposed to reject the concept, but because the modernists had endorsed it so completely. The Social Gospel had become a liberal idol, and the fundamentalists would not bow before it. They focused their attention on what they believed to be more pressing concerns, but those concerns were inevitably defined by the conflict with modernism.

[13] "There Ain't No Santy Claus!" (Ward in *Judge*.)

Editorial Cartoon: Clarence Darrow telling William Jennings Bryan the truth about Santa Claus

Seeking to preserve Christian orthodoxy, fundamentalists emphasized the issues they thought the liberals had abandoned—the central doctrines of the faith, personal moral behavior, and evangelism. Tensions between fundamentalists and modernists had greatly increased during the first world war, when each group tried to demonstrate its patriotism at the expense of the other, and patriotism continued to be a central theme among many conservatives, who associated social reform movements with communism as they attempted to preserve the American (and especially the Southern) way of life. Likewise, after events like the Scopes trial further alienated fundamentalists from mainstream education and media, it became easier for conservatives to isolate themselves from the dominant forces of the culture.

These trends had an especially powerful influence on traditional dispensationalists. Since dispensationalism began in the early nineteenth century as a separatist movement that emphasized the invisible, universal church over the visible, local church, dispensationalists were already somewhat predisposed to isolate themselves from mainstream denominations. Further, their strong ties with revivalism caused them to emphasize personal transformation over social reform. Coupling that

emphasis with a rather pessimistic eschatology, dispensationalists were very unlikely to be involved in cooperative movements toward social reform (the primary agenda of the liberals early in this century), especially movements that did not affirm the necessity of individual regeneration. Dispensationalists also dismissed many of the common biblical arguments for contemporary social ministry, regarding the Old Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, in particular, to be directly relevant only to those living under other dispensations. In spite of these factors, some dispensationalists continued to be very involved in social ministry. However, the tradition as a whole developed a reputation for social disengagement.

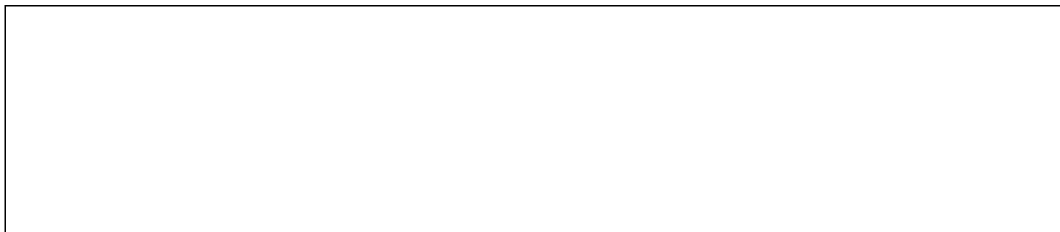
The relationship between the church and the broader culture that was cultivated within American fundamentalism would be considered, according to H. Richard Niebuhr’s now-classic categories, “Christ Against Culture.” As Niebuhr described this model in his book, *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Row, 1951), it maintains a strong distinction “between Christ and Caesar, between revelation and reason, between God’s will and man’s” (66). The best examples of this approach may be seen in Ante-Nicean theologians like Tertullian (who asked “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” and challenged the emperor by saying that “the blood of Christians is seed”) or in groups like the Amish or Mennonites, who have attempted to maintain a distinctively Christian way of life in their own communities. The “Christ against Culture” approach may be very appropriate for a church under siege (as Tertullian’s surely was), but we must also recognize that it has often encouraged a false sense of security among those who believe themselves to be isolated from worldy influences. As Niebuhr wrote, “they cannot separate themselves completely” (73), but they speak as though they have succeeded, not recognizing that they are often uncritically maintaining particular cultural practices and prejudices. When conservative churches in the southern United States fought to preserve the Southern way of life (a way of life which included racial segregation), they thought they were holding the line against worldliness when in fact they were justifying prejudice. Such examples demonstrate the greatest difficulty with this model. Niebuhr wrote, “If the greatest sin is the refusal to acknowledge one’s sinfulness, then it becomes impossible to make the line between Christ’s holiness and man’s sinfulness coincide with the line between the Christian and the world. Sin is in him, not outside his soul and body. If sin is more deeply rooted and more extensive than the first answer of radical Christianity indicates, then the strategy of Christian faith in gaining victory over the world needs to include other tactics than those of withdrawal from culture and defense of new-won holiness” (79). Finally, one must ask whether the “separated” church is really able to fulfill its mission in the world. Take a moment and consider the following Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 5:9–12; Philippians 2:14–15; 1 Peter 2:11–17.

Pop quiz: Who is the figure on the far right?

When Constantine became a Christian (and Christianity ultimately became the official religion of the Roman empire), the prevailing model quickly shifted from "Christ against Culture" to "The Christ of Culture." Here "there is no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization" (Niebuhr, 83). This approach may be seen in many of the theologians of Constantine's era, and even in the artwork involving him. In the drawing on the previous page, the figure on the right is Constantine, receiving the conclusions of the Council of Nicea. If he appears to stand in the place of Christ, that illustrates the major problem with the "Christ of Culture" model. The best modern example of the "Christ of Culture" is that of classic liberalism, which viewed Jesus as a moral teacher, remained indefatigably optimistic about human nature, and generally merged Christian and cultural agendas into one. This approach gutted the Christian message of its distinctiveness, such that Niebuhr said liberals believed "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." There is an additional danger. When the church and the culture are identified, a threat to the culture is a threat to the church. When Rome fell, Augustine wrote *The City of God* to address this very problem, explaining that the city of God is distinct from the city of man. It's a lesson we would do well to remember today.

Many evangelicals, reacting against separatist fundamentalism, have attempted to engage the wider culture so zealously that they risk moving into a "Christ of Culture" model. Those who so closely identify patriotism and Christian virtue that they perceive America (or any other nation) as a new Israel have forgotten some of the basic truths of Christian theology. Before proceeding further with this discussion of the church's role in society, pause briefly to answer the following question:

Identify several theological truths that have direct bearing on our expectations for society and the place of the church in it.



Here are a few that I believe are especially important:

- Authority of Scripture
- Inherent dignity of humanity
- Sinfulness of humanity (individuals and nations)
- Exclusivity of the gospel
- Uniqueness of the Christian experience
- Future hope in Christ

Given these doctrines, we cannot adopt a strict separational model ("Christ against Culture") because it essentially denies the continuing sinfulness of believers while potentially denying the inherent dignity of all humanity. In the same way, we cannot accept an identificationist model ("Christ of Culture") because it denies the sinfulness of humanity, the exclusivity of the gospel, and the uniqueness of the Christian experience. Further, it suggests that our hopes may be realized in this life, which is overly utopian. Richard Niebuhr's brother, Reinhold, recognized the futility of such unrealistic notions. Consider some of his comments about society:

> "The real religious spirit has no illusions about human nature. It knows the heart of man to be sinful. It is therefore not subject to the cynical disillusion into which sentimentality degenerates when it comes into contact with the disappointing facts of human history."
>
> "I would proceed upon the assumption that there are no perfectly just solutions for any of these problems where there are great conflicts of right. We musn't say that our solution is absolutely a just solution for the other person, but try to make it as near perfect as possible."
>
> "Let us be clear that realism means particularly one thing, that you establish the common good not purely by unselfishness but by the restraint of selfishness. That's realism."
>
> "Trust no man. Every man has his own capacities but also his own weaknesses. Every historic group in society has its own unique contribution to make. But there is no form of human goodness which cannot be and will not be corrupted, particularly in the day of its success. Let the wise man destroy the superstitions of the priest, and the poor man disprove the pride of the wise man; but then a new prophet must arise to convict the priest-king of the poor of the perennial sins of mankind to which he is also subject."

Niebuhr suggested three other models, each of which occupies some kind of middle ground between the separationists and the identificationists. "Christ above Culture" recognizes that Christ's authority extends over all things, but maintains that He uses the best features of the culture to His own ends. As one might imagine, this model easily moves into "Christ of Culture," especially when its advocates do not recognize their own prejudices. One finds a stronger view of sin in the model Niebuhr titled, "Christ and Culture in Paradox." Here the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity (even in the church) prevent the two spheres from really overlapping. Niebuhr said that advocates of this model (whom he called "dualists") are much like the separationists (whom he called "radicals"). He wrote,

> Hence the dualist joins the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world of human culture to be godless and sick unto death. But there is this difference between them: the dualist knows that he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it, that God indeed sustains him in it and by it; for if God in His grace did not sustain the world in its sin it would not exist for a moment. In this situation the dualist cannot speak otherwise than in what sound like paradoxes; for he is standing on the side of man in the encounter with God, yet seeks to interpret the Word of God which he has heard coming from the other side (156).

This model is more realistic, to be sure, but it is arguably not idealistic enough about the church. It does not give adequate voice to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Even though we recognize that even our best works continue to be tainted by sin, there really is supposed to be a noticeable difference between believers and unbelievers.

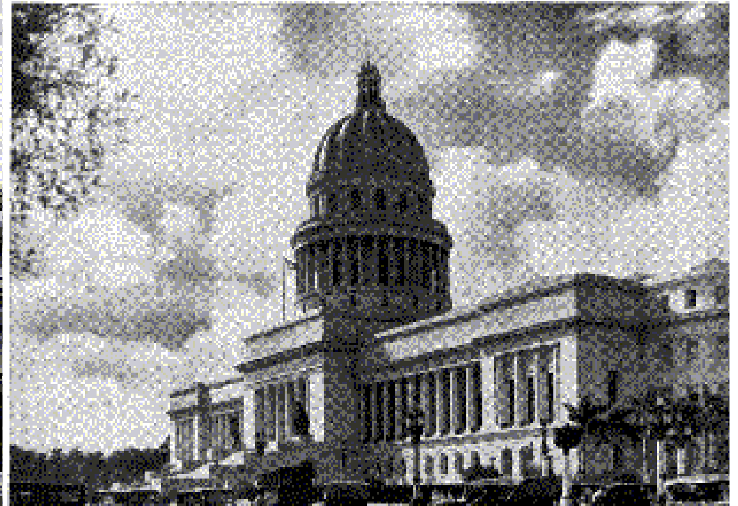
Niebuhr's final model, "Christ the Transformer of Culture," is more optimistic. Advocates of this model recognize the sinfulness of humanity, but they seem to place just as much emphasis on common grace and the possibility of redemption in Christ. As these "conversionists" are described by Niebuhr, they have more "already" than "not yet" in their eschatology.

Given these categories and the theological assumptions identified earlier, I would probably classify myself somewhere between the dualist ("Christ and Culture in Paradox") and the conversionist ("Christ the Redeemer of Culture"). I am more optimistic than the former with regard to the church, but more pessimistic than the latter with regard to the rest of society. (For a further explanation of this distinction, see my article, "The New Man and Immoral Society,"*Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 [July–Sep. 1997]: 259–74, which is included in this lesson.)

Niebuhr discussed the relationship between Christ and "culture," a term that he left undefined but employed to describe human societyin the broadest possible sense. His categories are helpful as we recall once again the church's mission. The church is in the world to glorify God, in large part through preaching and modeling the gospel. If the church is not herself transformed by the Spirit, that mission will go unfulfilled. At the same time, if transformation can come apart from the Spirit, the church's evangelistic mission is unnecessary and the church cannot function as a unique model of the grace and wisdom of God.

Comment: Church and State

What about the relationship between the church and the formal structures of human government? What is to be the relationship between the church and the state? Are they opposing powers? Potential allies?



Left: St. Peters Basilica, Rome

Above: Capitol building, Havana

Take a few minutes to consider the following Scripture passages concerning the church and worldly governments:

Luke 20:19–26
John 18:36
Acts 4:19–20
Romans 13:1–7
1 Corinthians 6:1–7
1 Timothy 2:1-4
Titus 2:8 - 3:2
1 Peter 2:11-17; 4:12-19

Collectively, these Scriptures support several principles which form the foundation for a biblical model of the church/state relationship:

- The government has legitimate, but limited, authority. The authority is legitimate in that it is ordained by God and He commands us to submit to it. At the same time, the government's authority is limited because obedience to the revealed will of God takes priority over obedience to the government when the two are in direct conflict.

- The church should take charge of its own affairs, demonstrating autonomy under God within its own sphere of authority.

- The church should avoid unnecessary conflict with governing authorities, seeking peace and the freedom to pursue its mission.

•The church should not be trying to "take over" the government. However, those who have power are accountable to God for the way they use it.

Many Christians speak as if they are trying to establish a theocratic society in which God's rule is unchallenged in a "Christian nation." However, the principles listed above, together with the historical realities that have shown the liability of overly "identificationist" models of Christ and culture, strongly suggest that this should not be our aim or ideal. Recall once again the example of Constantine. Before the Edict of Milan, it took conviction to be a Christian; afterward, it took conviction to remain a pagan. Stephen Carter wrote,

> One way of losing the power of resistance is to have the state take it away; another is to surrender it willingly in the rush to become part of the very state against which the religions should ideally serve as a bulwark. The Inquisition only became possible when church and state merged their authorities, and neither was available to stand against the other. The church, by becoming the state, surrendered the possibility of acting as an intermediary. It yielded its essential role as the protector of the people of God; it ceased to be able to preach resistance. One might even say that in its grasping for power, the institutional church gave up the right to die for its beliefs in exchange for the right to kill for its beliefs. (*The Culture of Disbelief,* 82).

A more appropriate ideal for church/state relations has been titled "principled (or 'structural') pluralism." This approach describes the relationship between a variety of autonomous spheres of authority in society, two of which are church and government. James Skillen described it this way:

> America consists, in part, of a *political* order—the United States of America—defined by a Constitution, a federal system, various branches of government, and so on. But America also consists of families, churches, businesses, a wide range of voluntary organizations, and many other institutions and associations. All are quite differentiated—as distinct from the political order—which is to say that the many organizational structures exist for different purposes, on different terms, under different authorities, and in considerable independence from one another. Church hierarchies do not rule medical associations; parents do not run the media; and college administrators do not govern the banks. Our society is not ordered by a single hierarchy with the state or church on top, handing down instructions for everything underneath. America is not a simple, undifferentiated whole; it is not a unitary community (James Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 14).

These different spheres are related to one another because each member of the society participates in many of them each day. A seminary student has connections to churches, businesses, families, schools, non-profit organizations, and governments at the city, county, state, and federal levels. Though they do not exist in isolation, each sphere has its own responsibilities and is essentially autonomous. If the federal government intervened in affairs typically handled by local governments, the local authorities would rightly protest. In the same way, if any government tried to handle matters within the church, it would be outside its proper sphere of authority. Anyone who believes in limited government recognizes the existence of such a plurality of spheres, but the difficulty comes when the various authorities seem to have overlapping responsibilities. For example, it is generally recognized that governments have the responsibility to protect society from both internal and external threats, as much as possible guarding each member against harm and danger. It is also generally recognized that parents have the authority to discipline their children. But when parental "discipline" turns to abuse, endangering the well-being of a child, the state has the authority and responsibility to intervene. The parent may argue that the state "has no right" to do such a thing, but the state perceives it as an *obligation* within its sphere of authority. Again, societal controversies (including those between church and state) revolve around the proper division of authority, especially where the spheres seem to overlap.

Stephen Monsma (*Positive Neutrality: Letting Religious Freedom Ring.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993) has attempted to identify the responsibilities of religion and government in society. Religion (including those who would not consider themselves part of the "church" in any sense), is responsible for:

- "developing, shaping, interpreting, and affirming basic answers to ultimate questions,"
- "shaping members' behavior and attitudes in keeping with certain ethical standards or norms,"
- "directly providing a wide variety of services to members and others in society," and
- "participating in society's public policy-making process, broadly conceived."

Likewise, the government should:

- protect the nation's independence and integrity from foreign conquest, domination, or intimidation,
- protect society from harm and danger arising from internal threats,
- promote justice through economic stability and opportunities, and
- provide a vast array of needed services including education, roads, welfare, health care, postal service, safe drinking water, parks, etc.

Within this system, which does not claim biblical *or* American precedent, each sphere is expected to show respect and civility to the others. Monsma contends that the government should maintain "positive neutrality" toward other spheres, such as religion, by taking positive steps to accomodate them. This is to be distinguished from the current form of "neutrality" in American government, which trivializes religious belief by denying its public relevance (cf. Stephen Carter,*The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion.* New York: Doubleday, 1993).

According to this model, the church should resist any attempt to establish a single religion (even Christianity) as the state religion. The establishment of a state religion would be an inappropriate merger of two spheres that are supposed to be autonomous. We resist "taking over" for our self protection as much as for the protection of others. We don't want to take over the government because we don't want to be taken over by it. Does all this mean we cannot or should not speak out against sin in our nation? No—quite the opposite! One of the proper functions of the church is to be the prophetic conscience of the nation, and it performs that duty best when standing outside the walls of the city. As God's prophets knew so well, the king's prophets in the king's court were so compromised by their position that they were untrustworthy.

Additional Questions

•Is it appropriate for us to speak of the United States (or any country) as a "Christian nation"?

•Is it appropriate for the government to have Christian prayers and a Christian chaplain in its legislature?

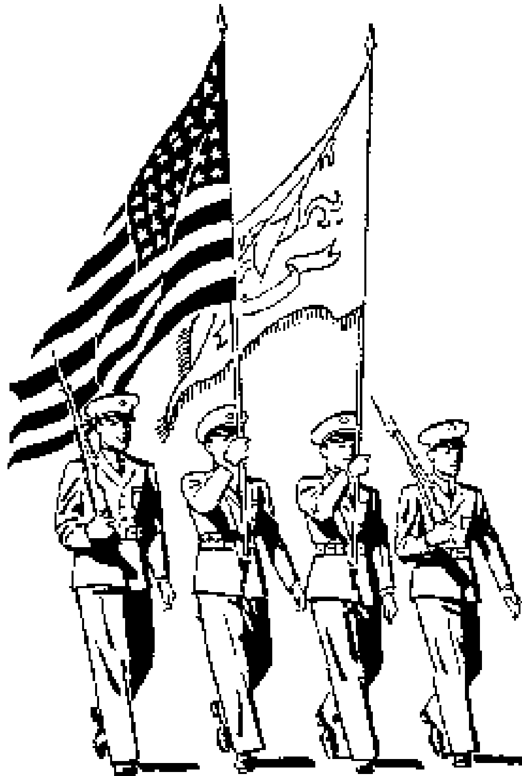
•Should Christians say the Pledge of Allegiance in church?

•Should the state have "in God we trust" on its coins?

•Can members of any "religion" do whatever they want? What if they believe in human sacrifice?

> *Response: When the exercise of some freedom runs up against the proper authority of some other sphere, that authority is rightly brought against it. The court at one time called upon the state to prove a "compelling state interest" in such circumstances, but this has not been widely used. Instead they typically say that it the state is free to rule where it has jurisdiction, even if there are bad implications for one religion or another, as long as the state is not attempting to single out a religion for persecution. The problem is that this standard can too easily be misused, prohibiting free exercise, and it has also led to a "neutrality" that fails to lend adequate support to other spheres. It could conceivably be used against evangelism if the gospel is judged to include some kind of "hate speech" or hurtful message. In that case, we would have to continue with the gospel and bear the consequences of intrusion.*

•What are some ways in which the church can participate as one voice among many in conversations about public policy without trying to "take over"?



•For further discussion of Niebuhr's models of Christ and Culture, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). See also Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

•For further discussion of the treatment of social issues within conservative American churches in the twentieth century, see David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism versus Social Concern* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1972); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming,* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); and Sherwood E. Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

•For a broader historical discussion regarding the church and society, see Dieter Hessel(ed.),*The Church's Public Role* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,1993; and Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

Additional Reading

•For additional perspectives on the role of the church in the world, see StanleyHauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989); Richard Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992); Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

•For additional information on structural pluralism, see Stephen V. Monsma, *Positive Neutrality: Letting Religious Freedom Ring* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); and James W. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). See also the attached articles from Skillen, which come from "The Public Justice Report," a quarterly publication of the Center for Public Justice, of which he is executive director.

•For additional reflection on our varying expectations for the church and the world, see my article, "The New Man and Immoral Society," which is attached to these notes.

All artwork public domain, www.arttoday.com