

# 'Examining a Christian Posture Towards the World'

## Gospel in Society Today (GiST) committee

### 2021 Presbyterian Church of Queensland Assembly

## Preamble

The purpose of the GiST committee is to equip Christians in Presbyterian Church of Queensland (PCQ) congregations to live faithfully for Jesus in a secular society and engage in gospel-hearted apologetics which point to the great hope they have in Jesus. GiST focuses on areas of ethics, public policy and cultural engagement that impact Queenslanders broadly and does so believing that the gospel of Jesus Christ should shape all areas of life. As a committee of the PCQ, GiST seeks to provide material which is informed by evangelical, Reformed, Christ-centred theology, drawing out implications both for Christians and those who have not yet put their faith in Christ.

This paper seeks to answer the question, "What ought to be the default approach or posture of Christians to the world/society around them?"<sup>1</sup> This paper sits squarely within GiST's purpose since it directly addresses the topic of the attitude of Queensland Christians towards the secular society in which they live, an attitude which has important implications for living faithfully for Jesus in it. The posture Christians adopt towards the world will very much impact on their ethics, cultural engagement, and any public policy work or debates they choose to engage in. Key to the method adopted by this paper is the way the gospel 'moment' of the ascension reveals the changed relationship between God's people and the world that arises on account of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. Its account of this relationship draws especially on the work of Oliver O'Donovan who provides a substantial theological grounding for it from an evangelical perspective.

It would be conceited to presume that the answer given in this paper represents *the* answer on this topic; however in the opinion of the GiST committee it does represent a good answer, and accurately represents the GiST committee's thinking at this time. If this paper assists people in the PCQ and more broadly towards some clarity around this topic then it will have done its job.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: In this paper the terms 'approach' and 'posture' are used interchangeably. The term 'world' is taken as synonymous with 'society' and even sometimes 'community' (as in 'the local community or city in which we live'). Sometimes it overlaps with the terms 'state' and 'government' although it is not usually these that are on view. That is, in this paper the 'world' is taken to be the community or society outside the church. Context should be used to discern which aspect is being emphasised.

## Introduction

The same-sex marriage plebiscite in late 2017 exposed clearly the shift that has occurred in Australian society's attitude towards Christianity. For much of our nation's history Christianity was acknowledged (or at least tolerated) by most Australians as substantially authoritative for moral guidance in the public square. The clear vote in favour of same-sex marriage has made it clear, if it were not already, that this is no longer the case, given that Christian churches in Australia overwhelmingly continued to support the biblical definition of marriage, and a significant portion of the churches actively campaigned for the 'no' case.<sup>2</sup>

This has caused Australian Christians to reflect on their relationship with the society around them. For example in the wake of the plebiscite, the Bible Society's 'Eternity' magazine published a front-page feature entitled "How to be a Public Christian: Speaking to a New Australia" featuring several contributors writing on how Christians ought to respond to this new context.<sup>3</sup> The views expressed by the contributors were diverse, reflecting the disagreement and even confusion that exists amongst Christians on this topic.

In addressing the question, "What ought to be the default approach or posture of Christians towards the world/society around them?" this paper begins by outlining several approaches commonly adopted in the Queensland evangelical context. These are then compared with broader 'models' of approach which have been found over time to be useful for categorisation. A gospel-shaped framework is then examined, based on the work of Oliver O'Donovan, which is then applied to models and approaches to work towards a default approach.

It is important to see that this paper does not seek to outline a 'one size fits all' approach which Christians can apply in every situation they face in their interaction with the world. It seeks rather to work towards defining a 'starting point' (a 'default' approach) which can be applied in most situations - a 'rule' from which particular exceptions can be worked out.

## Common approaches in a Queensland evangelical context

The approaches below are not intended to form a comprehensive list of all possible Christian approaches to the world, but are the ones seen to be most relevant to the Queensland evangelical context. The descriptions below are also necessarily brief; with such a diversity of approaches to be covered, space does not permit longer descriptions.

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<sup>2</sup> In the midst of the campaign Eternity reported that the Roman Catholic, Anglican, ACC, Baptist, Presbyterian, Orthodox, and Seventh-Day Adventist churches (plus others) were supportive of the 'no' case, with only the Quakers supporting the 'yes' case, and the Uniting Church not advising people how to vote. Tess Delbridge, "Fact check: What do Christian churches really think about same-sex marriage?" *Eternity online*, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2017, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/in-depth/fact-check-what-do-christian-churches-really-think-about-same-sex-marriage/> cited 12/11/20

<sup>3</sup> Various authors, "How to be a Public Christian," *Eternity*, Dec. 2017, 'Opinion' section.

## 1. Fight

Represented most publicly by the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) this approach sees Christian interaction with the world first and foremost, in the present context at least, in terms of a battle. The public square in Western societies like Australia, and especially those elements of it historically influenced by Christianity, are seen as being “attacked” as part of a “war”.<sup>4,5</sup> Christians are therefore encouraged to “fight” and “make a... stand” in the battle for society.<sup>6,7</sup> The background to this approach is the culture wars of (primarily) the United States, and especially the so-called ‘Christian Right’ side of it.<sup>8</sup> As in many aspects of culture, Australia seems to take its cue from the US but is several years behind.

In this approach interaction with society has been seen primarily in terms of interaction with government, the “front line” of which is the national parliament.<sup>9</sup> An important goal is therefore legislative: to preserve laws and institutions which bear the marks of Australia’s Christian heritage. Hence, ACL is known for its work in organizing Christians to lobby their government representatives to make or preserve laws consistent with Christian principles.

Underlying this approach is an understanding of the overlap of Western culture and Christianity. Western culture is highly prized, and Christianity is seen as a key contributor to the development of it, as the foundation and source of Western liberal freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion) and the separation of church and state.<sup>10,11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “In Australia as well as across the western world, truth in the public square is being attacked and suppressed.” <https://www.acl.org.au/about> cited 12/11/20

<sup>5</sup> “The international war on our children unmasked.” Headline in relation to Safe Schools program. [https://www.acl.org.au/the\\_international\\_war\\_on\\_our\\_children\\_unmasked](https://www.acl.org.au/the_international_war_on_our_children_unmasked) cited 12/11/20

<sup>6</sup> “Fight for freedoms” is a headline on article on religious freedom on ACL’s website [https://www.acl.org.au/fight\\_for\\_freedom](https://www.acl.org.au/fight_for_freedom) cited 12/11/20

<sup>7</sup> “Make a public stand for truth” is the main headline on ACL’s home page <https://www.acl.org.au/> cited 12/11/20

<sup>8</sup> See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 110-131.

<sup>9</sup> “Thank you for your continued support as Martyn Iles becomes ACL’s new managing director, and Lyle Shelton steps into politics to fight this battle on the *frontline*, in *parliament*.” [https://www.acl.org.au/watch\\_this\\_message\\_to\\_see\\_how\\_our\\_fight\\_for\\_freedom\\_will\\_continue](https://www.acl.org.au/watch_this_message_to_see_how_our_fight_for_freedom_will_continue) cited 12/11/20

<sup>10</sup> For example, Joseph Loconte in an article reproduced on ACL’s website (but since removed): “How did the West overcome its legacy of bigotry and repression? It was only when religious leaders viewed freedom of conscience as a natural right that the politics of persecution came under sustained assault. Religious thinkers from John Locke to James Madison dared to imagine a more generous approach to Christian faith.” He quotes from Locke’s ‘A Letter Concerning Toleration’ in this regard. <https://www.acl.org.au/tags/persecution?page=2> cited 20/6/19. See also Kurt Mahlborg, Kurt, *Cross and Culture: Can Jesus Save the West?* (Unanderra: Australian Heart Publishing, 2020), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Chavura speech, ACL 2016 national conference: “The origins of the separation of church and state in Australia is part of our Christian heritage and something we should

It is important to see therefore that what is being fought for in this approach is society, not primarily the church or the rights of Christians (nor for that matter the souls of people). The freedoms of churches and of individual Christians do come into play<sup>12</sup> but the defence of these freedoms is seen to be for the good of society not just for the good of Christians. The foundational assumption of this approach is that making and preserving good laws, enforced by the courts, is key to winning the war of making or preserving a good society.

Closely allied to the battle waged through legislation and the courts, is the battle waged directly for culture.<sup>13</sup> This aspect has been less emphasised in Australian circles until recently, but that seems to be changing. For example a recent ACL supporters email encourages Christians that "God is calling you and me to be culture changers." ACL also offers training courses creating "culture change saints".<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding the essentially combative nature of this approach, Christians who adopt it do not see themselves as fundamentally antagonistic towards society but rather as defenders of it, for its (and their neighbour's) good.<sup>15</sup> Neither do those who adopt this posture necessarily see it as their only way of interacting with society; many Christians involved with ACL and similar organisations are also heavily involved in their local communities - examples could be multiplied from local churches - and in this local interaction the 'fight' posture is not their default mode of operating.

## 2. Strategic withdrawal

This approach is represented most prominently by Rod Dreher's 2017 book "The Benedict Option". While Dreher is not an evangelical his book has been warmly endorsed by several prominent evangelicals and has been influential in evangelical circles.<sup>16</sup>

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be proud of." *Eternity online*, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/archive/live-australian-christian-lobby-national-conference/> cited 12/11/20

<sup>12</sup> Hence the rationale for a group like the Human Rights Law Alliance: "Human Rights Law Alliance... was ...established in 2016 within the Australian Christian Lobby to connect Australian Christians to allied lawyers in religious freedom matters." Human Rights Law Alliance, "Submission to the Attorney General's Department" <https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/human-rights-law-alliance.pdf> cited 12/11/20

<sup>13</sup> Hunter describes a shift in emphasis in the US political right in the 2010's from politics to influencing culture c.f. The 'Seven Mountains' movement in the US which seeks to "take back the mountains of influence" in Western culture of education, the media, arts & entertainment, religion, business, family, and government. (Hunter, *To Change the World*, 129-131.)

<sup>14</sup> Email from ACL national office, to author, 19/1/21, entitled "Fast start to 2021".

<sup>15</sup> "We want to see Christian principles and ethics accepted and influencing the way we are governed, do business and relate as a society. We want Australia to become a *more just and compassionate nation*." <https://www.acl.org.au/about> cited 20/6/19

<sup>16</sup> For example Carl Trueman - see <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2016/06/eating-locusts-will-be-benedict-optional> cited 22/2/21; also Russell Moore

Like the 'fight' posture above, 'strategic withdrawal' characterises the present state of the relationship between Christianity and the world (at least in the West) as a war. In contrast to the 'fight' posture though this approach sees the war as already having been lost, or at least as unwinnable in the short term. What is recommended therefore is "...a strategic withdrawal - a limited kind of culture-war Dunkirk operation to gain the church militant a space in which to regroup, retrain, and reengage in the long struggle..."<sup>17</sup>

In other words, strategic withdrawal from parts of society is the most effective strategy for Christians to adopt in the short term in order to influence society (i.e. win the culture war) in the long term.<sup>18</sup> According to Dreher this works out practically in the areas of education (withdrawing from state-run schools),<sup>19</sup> work (creating Christian businesses to employ Christians unable to get work in specific areas of society because of their convictions),<sup>20</sup> and in place of residence (groups of Christians choosing to live in close proximity to one another in order to build Christian community).<sup>21</sup> Less physical kinds of withdrawal are also contemplated in the areas of the internet and technology use.<sup>22</sup>

If some of the above sounds somewhat monastic, that impression is intentionally given. Dreher draws parallels between the present cultural moment and the fall of the Roman Empire in the West in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> The withdrawal Dreher is calling for is likened to the flourishing of Christian monasteries in the Middle Ages, in which Benedict of Nursia was a key early figure (hence "The Benedict Option"). Like the monasteries Benedict founded, Dreher advocates:

"...the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life [can] be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness."<sup>24</sup>

Dreher describes many examples of 'Benedict Option communities' which seek to live out the counter-cultural withdrawal principles of this approach. Such diverse examples are given as a lay Roman Catholic community in Italy, Eastern Orthodox mission church communities in rural America, and charismatic Catholic and Protestant communities in urban America.<sup>25</sup> Many positive examples are illustrated, such as the provision of employment opportunities for those unable to find work

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whose endorsement is on the back cover of Dreher's book. (Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), back cover.)

<sup>17</sup> Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, xvii.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to understand that Dreher does not argue for Christian withdrawal from conventional politics, lobbying, or activism, but rather for Christian withdrawal from aspects of society, while maintaining a political witness. (*Ibid*, 98.)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 130-134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 218-236.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 17. Dreher here is quoting from Alasdair McIntyre's 1981 book 'After Virtue'.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 130-132, 140-142.

because of their Christian principles, the encouragement of growth in personal godliness through community, and the importance of church.<sup>26</sup>

However it is difficult to ignore the prominence of fear underlying this approach: fear that children of Christian parents will abandon the faith,<sup>27</sup> fear about the possible “effective death of Christianity within our civilization”,<sup>28</sup> fear that “[t]here is no safe place in the world or in our churches within which to be a Christian”,<sup>29</sup> and fear about how Christians are to “figure out how to make it through the storm and the fog to safe harbour...”<sup>30</sup> Dreher refers to the “great deal of anxiety [he has encountered] from besieged Benedict Option readers...”<sup>31</sup> Without making comment on the validity or otherwise of these fears, it is enough here to note its prominence.

### 3. Focus on core business

In response to the shift in society’s attitude towards Christianity, ‘focus on core business’ encourages Christians to continue to do “the same thing we did yesterday”.<sup>32</sup> However, what “the same thing we did yesterday” is depends on who is making the statement! For Michael Frost (lecturer at Morling College) it means “loving neighbour, giving thanks, and finding the face of God in everyone we meet.”<sup>33</sup> But for many Christians in an evangelical context “the same thing we did yesterday” means focusing on evangelism and discipleship.

John McClean summarises this approach well.<sup>34</sup> Citing DeYoung and Gilbert,<sup>35</sup> he says:

“The alternative view is that the church is called to preach the gospel and disciple people and should stick to that core business. It has no direct social or political role. In this view pastors, as church leaders, do not get involved in politics or speak to the political process. They will say little about politics in preaching and services, apart from praying for the government and encouraging Christians to act as responsible citizens. Churches are unlikely to have programs which address social issues whether that be running a food bank or holding parenting seminars. If those programs are held, they will aim to support evangelism, the ‘core business’ of the church.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 130-133, 190-192.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Frost, “Admit it, YES ‘romped it in’,” *Eternity*, Dec. 2017, Opinion section, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> John McClean, “The church and social engagement,” *Unpublished discussion paper for the Presbyterian Church of Australia Church and Nation Committee* (2018), 7.

<sup>35</sup> K. DeYoung and G.D. Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> McClean, “The church and social engagement,” 7.

In the New South Wales context (which has many similarities to the Queensland one) McClean traces the influence of this approach to two factors. The first is the growing emphasis on social issues which characterized the “liberal years” in Presbyterianism during and post-WWII, leading up to church union in 1977. In response to this liberal emphasis on the ‘social gospel’, “conservative theological positions became more associated with conservative and more ‘quietist’ political views.”<sup>37</sup>

The second factor making this posture influential in evangelical circles was the ‘quietism’ of Sydney Anglicans, which arose as a response to the increasing secularization of Australian society in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. In this regard McClean quotes from Michael Jensen’s book “Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology”:

“Sydney Anglicans faced their loss of social influence ... by reminding each other that that this was not what the call to make disciples of all nations meant anyhow. ... They did not become more politicized, but less.”<sup>38</sup>

In a way then, this posture does represent a kind of withdrawal from society. Not that Christians who adopt it are opposed to engagement with society; on the contrary, they are encouraged to “love their neighbour and so have a positive influence on society.”<sup>39</sup> Also, in this posture evangelism and discipleship are seen as the best way to influence society in the long term (albeit such influence is a by-product and not the ‘main game’). But for Christians adopting this posture a kind of withdrawal is inevitable, if only because engagement with society is simply not a very high priority.

#### 4. Bless the city

‘Bless the city’ is an approach often associated with urban church planting,<sup>40</sup> though it is not exclusive to it.<sup>41</sup> The modus operandi of this approach is a present and ongoing positive engagement with the world. The vision statement of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York is representative: “The Redeemer family of churches and ministries exist to help build a great city for all people...”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 117.

<sup>39</sup> McClean, “The church and social engagement,” 7.

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Duke Kwon’s 2018 article on the Gospel Coalition website, “What we miss when we say we’re ‘for the city.’” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/urban-church-imagined/> cited 4/2/21.

<sup>41</sup> “Everywhere in the world is more urban than it was ten or twenty years ago... In a sense, every church can and must become a church for its particular city - whether that city is a metropolis, a university town, or a village.” (Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 166.)

<sup>42</sup> [https://redeemer.com/learn/about\\_us](https://redeemer.com/learn/about_us) cited 4/2/21.

Often linked with Jeremiah 29:7 (as in Redeemer's case) this approach seeks to "love our God and neighbours by partnering with others to bring about a city that is a thriving and good place for all to live."<sup>43</sup> Habitual good works are therefore seen as basic for Christian interaction with the world, although personal conversion often is also emphasised as one of the ways in which the 'city' is blessed.

In Queensland this approach was given significant impetus by Bruce Winter in his role as principal of Queensland Theological College (QTC) from 2007-2011. Winter had written a book, published in 1994, entitled "Seek the Welfare of the City" examining New Testament and other first century evidence for early Christian benefaction in line with this approach. Students from the time at QTC can testify to the prominence this posture was given.

In understanding this approach, it is helpful to think about its recent provenance, which goes back at least, of course, to 1994 when "Seek the Welfare" was published. Redeemer Presbyterian was also started not long before this, and blessing the city was a foundational goal.<sup>44</sup> What caused 'bless the city' to be emphasised by its proponents at that particular time? For Winter in the 1990's, in a British context and later in an Australian one, the target was the 'ambivalence' of Christians towards society.<sup>45</sup> Having worked early in his career in the public service, Winter was keen for Christians not to withdraw from doing good in the society. In other words, he seems to have been reacting primarily against the 'focus on core business' posture which had become so prominent in parts of Australian evangelicalism.

What caused Keller to emphasise this approach is more difficult to ascertain. One might guess that reaction to the culture wars was a significant factor. It was around this time the term 'culture wars' came to prominence - James Davison Hunter published his influential book "Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America" in 1991 - so the phenomenon was certainly present in his context. In other words, Keller may well have been reacting against a version of the 'fight' posture above. In any case, 'bless the city' functions as a contrast and alternative both to culture war and withdrawal approaches to the world.

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<sup>43</sup> See "Redeemer Guide" page 3 (<https://indd.adobe.com/view/5c3a5d7f-97d3-49b4-a6bb-e19c8d95a291> cited 4/2/21.)

<sup>44</sup> "Our goal was not just for a great church, but for a great city, that we wanted Redeemer to simply be a means to the end of." (Tim Keller, video "Redeemer 2002 Vision" <https://www.redeemer.com/learn/about-us/current-annual-report/past-vision-updates#2002> cited 4/2/21).

<sup>45</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 200,206,208.

## 5. Variations on a theme of pluralism

There are several approaches adopting the label 'pluralism', two of which are relevant here.

### *Confident Pluralism*

'Confident Pluralism' is the title of a 2016 book written by John Inazu, Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University, St Louis. Confident Pluralism is not a Christian book *per se*, but Inazu is a Christian and writes from a Christian perspective. His significance here lies partly in the company he keeps: he has shared a stage and co-edited a book ("Uncommon Ground") with Tim Keller on these issues and writes for the Gospel Coalition.<sup>46</sup> His approach is also referenced by the next view in the 'pluralism' category below.

'Confident Pluralism' is not religious pluralism,<sup>47</sup> but the more basic recognition that differences of viewpoint exist within society – the 'fact of pluralism', as it were.<sup>48</sup> That is, this approach starts with the recognition that there are a variety of views within society about how society should be ordered and what makes for the common good, and on the foundation of that recognition seeks to discern what common ground can be found between people of difference on which to build, in particular situations.

The first half of Inazu's book focuses on legal issues, but Part II on civic practices is more relevant here. In light of the often polarising nature of political solutions,<sup>49</sup> Inazu proposes an approach majoring on (a) the civic 'aspirations' of tolerance, humility and patience,<sup>50</sup> (b) speech which rises above the bullying and hurtful nature of much political discourse,<sup>51</sup> (c) particular care in the taking of collective action,<sup>52</sup> and (d) the building of relationships across deep difference, especially at the local level.<sup>53</sup> Confident Pluralism acknowledges that agreement between Christians and those who are not Christian about the common good may be impossible in many areas, but nevertheless seeks to retain at least a modest level of agreement about how to live together in society with those differences.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/proper-confidence-confident-pluralism/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5H0Jv5xTBk> cited 5/2/21.

<sup>47</sup> Religious pluralism is the idea that religious truth is 'plural' and that all religions are simply different paths to the same grand truth. See for example John Dickson, *A Spectator's Guide to World Religions: An Introduction to the Big Five* (South Sydney: Blue Bottle Books, 2004), 231.

<sup>48</sup> John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, paperback edition 2018), xiii.

<sup>49</sup> Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, 132.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 83-92.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 93-103.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 104-115.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 116-124.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

The label 'confident' is applied to this approach since, Inazu argues, confidence of conviction ought to enable more open engagement with people of differing views not less, without the defensiveness which characterises much interaction between people of differing views. Inazu writes:

"Rather than lashing out at others or remaining in our own echo chambers, we can pursue dialogue and coexistence even when (and perhaps especially when) we believe that our views are in fact the better ones."<sup>55</sup>

Since Christians are confident in God that their views are, in fact 'the better ones', they, most of all, ought to be able to engage non-defensively with the world.

### *Generous Pluralism*<sup>56</sup>

Generous pluralism builds upon the confident pluralism approach outlined above; John Stackhouse's 'Renewed Christian Realism' (described in the next section) is also significantly influential for it.<sup>57</sup> This approach actively seeks space in society for a multiplicity of views to be heard and a plurality of visions of the good life to be lived out.

"...the essence of pluralism is staying at the table while recognizing deep difference, rather than seeking to kick those who are different out of the table..."<sup>58</sup>

"[W]e make [our] arguments by actually listening to and recognizing and engaging with the differences, especially different accounts of what is 'good' or what will lead to a flourishing society..."<sup>59</sup>

"Pluralism is what it looks like to say 'I want our community [the church] to have the freedom to define ourselves and live according to our vision of the good, so I will treat other communities built around different visions of the good with the same freedom.'"<sup>60</sup>

Pluralism in this view is seen not simply in pragmatic terms, but as the right thing to do, based on the Golden Rule (Mt.7:12).

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>56</sup> Nathan Campbell has provided feedback on this section so that it accurately represents his view.

<sup>57</sup> Nathan Campbell, "Why generous pluralism is a better ideal than idealistic purism and provides a better future for our broad church (or why I resigned from GIST)." (Blog post, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <https://st-eutychus.com/2017/why-generous-pluralism-is-a-better-ideal-than-idealistic-purism-and-provides-a-better-future-for-our-broad-church-or-why-i-resigned-from-gist/> cited 9/2/21.) Also John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 326-330.

<sup>58</sup> Email from Nathan Campbell to author, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018. Used by permission.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, no pages.

<sup>60</sup> Nathan Campbell, "Why I'm a generous pluralist, not a pluralist by pragmatism (or a pragmatist), and why we should be ready for a diet of worms." (Blog post, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <https://st-eutychus.com/2017/why-im-a-generous-pluralist-not-a-pluralist-by-pragmatism-or-a-pragmatist-and-why-we-should-be-ready-for-a-diet-of-worms/>, no pages, cited 9/2/21.)

“For me, pluralism... is the right thing to do when you have many communities formed around many religions, and people with no religious affiliation forming their identity around other visions of a good life; pluralism is the right thing to do... because it is what I would have people who disagree with me offer me.”<sup>61</sup>

The ‘generous’ part of generous pluralism is about the lengths to which Christians ought to go in accommodating in society views other than their own, even some views they see as harmful, since others see some Christian views as harmful.<sup>62</sup> This is grounded in an understanding of human beings as fundamentally religious (whether they recognise it or not) and hence as seeking freedom to live out their fundamental religious commitments within society. Therefore, in this view, if Christians want the freedom to live out their own religious commitments in society, they ought to be willing to extend that freedom, generously, to others.<sup>63</sup> Abstaining from voting in the marriage plebiscite, or possibly voting ‘yes’, are ways in which this was envisaged to work out at the time.<sup>64</sup>

## 6. Other views in the background

While not prominent in the Queensland evangelical context, there are some less prominent approaches which are still relevant, because they are influential for other views described above.<sup>65</sup>

### *Faithful presence*

‘Faithful presence’ is the approach described by James Davison Hunter in his 2010 book ‘To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World’. Hunter is a sociologist writing in the US context. Although readership of this book has not necessarily been wide (even in the US) its influence on evangelical professors, pastors and executives has been disproportionately large.<sup>66</sup>

In the first two parts of Hunter’s book he outlines a view of how culture changes, and describes both the Christian right, Christian left, and neo-Anabaptist approaches to culture change in this context. In the third part of the book, Hunter puts forward an alternative approach, ‘Faithful presence’, as an alternative to these approaches (albeit culture change is not the primary objective of Hunter’s approach).

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<sup>61</sup> Campbell, “Why I’m a generous pluralist”, no pages.

<sup>62</sup> Email from Nathan Campbell to author, 14th June 2018. Used by permission.

<sup>63</sup> Email from Nathan Campbell to author, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021. Used by permission.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, “Why generous pluralism is a better ideal,” no pages.

<sup>65</sup> In particular Rev. Nathan Campbell (PCQ minister) affirms the first of these views (faithful presence) as most closely resembling his broader posture towards the world of which the generous pluralism approach described earlier is one facet. Nathan requested this acknowledgement be inserted in this paper. (Phone call to author, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021.)

<sup>66</sup> Collin Hansen, ed. *Revisiting Faithful Presence: ‘To Change the World’ Five Years Later* (ebook: The Gospel Coalition, 2015), 1-2.

Faithful presence is grounded in the vision of 'shalom' that "God intended and that he will, one day, restore."<sup>67</sup> This 'shalom' is not simply peace (as in the absence of war) but "a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being."<sup>68</sup> Hence, in this world, "Christians are to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those within the community of faith, but to all."<sup>69</sup>

For Hunter this means Christians must not withdraw from society but be faithfully present within it, committed to the common good, affirming what can be affirmed within the culture while providing a humble antithesis to it, particularly in practice.<sup>70</sup> This approach also values highly the church as a community of formation for Christians as those who are called to be faithful within an alien culture. Significantly, against the 'fight' posture above and most controversially in the US, Hunter calls for Christians:

"...to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization."<sup>71</sup>

Notwithstanding the influence of Hunter's view, this call has clearly not been heeded by many culture warriors in his country.

#### *Renewed Christian Realism*

'Renewed Christian Realism' is the approach called for by John Stackhouse in his 2008 book 'Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World.' At the time of writing, Stackhouse was Professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College in Vancouver, having succeeded JI Packer in that position.

This approach 'renews' the position of Christian Realism advocated by Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was a prominent neo-orthodox theologian in the US from the 1930's to the 1950's. Niebuhr's approach was to be 'realistic' about the limited nature of human knowledge and the reality of human sinfulness, and hence modest in his expectations of what could be achieved in human society.<sup>72</sup> However he also saw it as a duty for Christians to "approximate the goodness of that better world [i.e. the kingdom of heaven]" in this one.<sup>73</sup>

Stackhouse reprises Niebuhr's approach of Christians' duty to the world in terms of the cultural mandate (Gen.1:26-28), the great commandments to love God and love neighbour (Mt.22:34-40), the new commandment (Jn.13:34-35) and the great commission (Mt.28:18-20), with the goal of creating the most 'shalom' realistically achievable.<sup>74</sup> He concludes by advocating a posture of engagement with the world,

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<sup>67</sup> Hunter, *To change the world*, 228.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 228.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 276-285.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 281.

<sup>72</sup> Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 84-96.

<sup>73</sup> Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 205-220.

characterised by “Dialectic without capitulation”, “Transformation without imperialism”, “Plurality without relativism”, and “Conviction without hubris”, pragmatically ‘making the best of it’ in a world compromised by the Fall.<sup>75</sup>

It is an approach that Stackhouse is aware may be labelled ‘pragmatic’, but he embraces that term as describing the only way to operate in the ‘real’ (i.e. fallen) world, in which Christians are called upon to make as much ‘shalom’ as possible.<sup>76</sup>

## 7. Ad hoc or balanced approaches

It may be apparent from the above descriptions that the approaches outlined are not necessarily entirely distinct from one another nor mutually exclusive. Practical actions arising from one approach in particular situations may be the same as practical actions arising from another approach in the same situation. Also, theological commitments present in one approach may also be present in others. Thirdly, it is possible (and even common) for Christians to operate according to more than one of these approaches at the same time, in different areas of life.

This has led some to advocate for an ‘ad hoc’ or ‘balanced’ approach to Christian interaction with the world, drawing upon multiple postures and depending on the situation.<sup>77</sup> More will be said about this later, after examining broader models of Christian engagement with the world.

## Models of Christian engagement with the world

In seeking to evaluate approaches such as those outlined above (and many others) H. Richard Niebuhr’s ‘Christ & Culture’ has set the framework for much of the discussion in the English-speaking world since its publication in 1951. Niebuhr’s categories (or models of approach) are not universally accepted but have stood the test of time in a way that no other system of categorisation has.<sup>78</sup>

Not all of Niebuhr’s categories are relevant in an evangelical context though, ‘Christ of culture’ in particular, since it is most associated with theological liberalism. Neither is Niebuhr’s terminology particularly transparent. Hence in this paper Keller’s four models of approach have been adopted since they address both these issues. Keller’s models are essentially Niebuhr’s re-badged, with the ‘Christ of culture’ category merged with ‘Christ above culture’.<sup>79</sup>

The usefulness of looking at broader ‘models’ is in bringing to the fore the concerns and biblical themes underlying the approaches described above.

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 350-356.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 105,157.

<sup>77</sup> See for example Keller, *Center Church*, 223-232 and D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008; paperback edition 2012), 43, 59-65.

<sup>78</sup> See Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, x-xi, and Robert C. Crouse, *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities: Mapping Theological Traditions of Church, Culture, and Civil Order* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xviii.

<sup>79</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 195-216.

## 1. Transformational model<sup>80</sup>

As the name suggests, transformationalists seek to transform the culture around them as much as possible, along Christian lines. Two common modes of engagement for those holding to a transformationalist model are political action (as in the 'Fight' posture above) and engagement in education (e.g. the Christian schools movement), although a more general pursuit of individual vocation through economics, business, art, journalism, science, etc., engaged in from a consciously Christian point of view, is also emphasised by some.<sup>81</sup> These different expressions can be, and are often are, found in the one person or group of people in the Australian context.

Transformationalists rally to the catch cry of Abraham Kuyper, theologian and prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905, who famously said: "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>82</sup> It is to one theological stream flowing from Kuyper's thought that transformationalists owe their most substantial theological underpinning - that of neo-Calvinism. Neo-Calvinism seeks to discern which parts of any particular aspect of culture are creational and therefore good, and which parts have been perverted by the Fall. It then seeks to restore/redeem the fallen and encourage the creational. Neo-Calvinism emphasises that all creation is heading towards redemption in the new creation, and seeks to actualize as much of the new creation as possible in the here and now.<sup>83</sup>

While neo-Calvinism provides the most substantial theological basis for the transformationalist model, not all transformationalist groups hold to a neo-Calvinist theology. This certainly seems to be the case in Australia, where the ACL for example (which would fall generally under this model) is intentional in keeping its theological grounding broad.<sup>84</sup> Theological appeals therefore tend to be similarly broad: appeals to love of God and neighbour, for example; love of God in that an attack on creational principles in the public square is seen to be an attack on God himself, a form of idolatry (referencing Romans 1); and love of neighbour since living in a way not aligned to creational principles hurts those who live in such ways (also referencing Romans 1, and summarised by Proverbs 29:2 "When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.") Seeking to transform society along Christian lines (specifically, preserving someone from evil) is seen particularly to be a great act of Christian neighbour love.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This corresponds to Niebuhr's category 'Christ the transformer of culture'.

<sup>81</sup> Keller also highlights that Theonomy is also an expression of the transformationalist model, though not a common one in the present context. (Keller, *Center Church*, 197.)

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>83</sup> See for example Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 87. This whole book expounds this view really, but p.87 contains a neat summary.

<sup>84</sup> The ACL's statement of faith is the Nicene Creed, with two additional footnotes relating to Scripture and sexuality. (Personal message from ACL to author, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021.)

<sup>85</sup> Summarised from Martyn Iles speech to ACL's Townsville public event, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2021, attended by the author of this paper. Martyn Iles is ACL's managing director.

## 2. Counter-cultural model<sup>86</sup>

Counter-culturalists seek not to transform the world but to follow Jesus more authentically within the 'counter-culture' of Christian community i.e. the church. The most important political task the church can perform, it is argued, is "to be the church", modelling an alternative ethic "rather than to transform the world."<sup>87</sup> In other words, "The church doesn't have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy."<sup>88</sup>

Counter-culturalists are often thought of as encouraging Christians to withdraw from the world - the Amish would be an extreme example - but not all counter-culturalists encourage withdrawal; indeed some of this model's most prominent defenders bristle at the suggestion.<sup>89</sup> Rather, the fundamental emphasis of counter-culturalists is the importance of the church: of 'thick' (meaning 'of substance') Christian communities in which Christians can be 'formed' to resist the dominant culture.

The roots of this model go back at least to the radical reformers i.e. to the Anabaptists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Stanley Hauerwas is often put forward as its most robust present-day theological defender, however Radical Orthodox theologians similarly emphasise the church as a community separate from the world, a 'polis' distinct from (though connected to) the world around it.<sup>90</sup>

While the theological resources underpinning this model are substantial, distinct concrete examples of it are harder to point to. Some who would hold to this model, like Hauerwas and Willimon, are from US mainline Protestant churches similar in outlook to the Uniting Church in Australia. Others belong to churches which are descended from the Anabaptists (e.g. the Amish and Mennonites). In Australia distinct groupings are not obvious - the Exclusive Brethren would be one example. However the significance of this model lies not in the number of its adherents but in its disproportionately large influence on people in many distinct church groupings. The Benedict Option posture described above is a good example of this, having within it a strong counter-cultural streak but managing to appeal to people from Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant Reformed churches.

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<sup>86</sup> This corresponds to Niebuhr's category 'Christ against culture'.

<sup>87</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 38.

<sup>88</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 43. Emphasis original.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 6,177. Albeit even Hauerwas and Willimon affirm pacifism and withdrawal from the military; see for e.g. *Ibid*, 47-48.

<sup>90</sup> See James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 231-259.

### 3. Two kingdoms model<sup>91</sup>

Two kingdoms advocates seek neither primarily transformation of the world (at least not along explicitly Christian lines) nor withdrawal from it, but instead divide life into two 'realms' (or kingdoms) ruled by two different governments. The 'spiritual' (or heavenly) realm has its seat in the soul and relates to "piety and reverencing God", while the 'civil' (or earthly) realm regulates outward behaviour such as "the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men."<sup>92</sup> When operating in the 'earthly' realm (e.g. in a workplace) Christians are to obey the civil government; when operating in the 'spiritual' realm, Christians are to obey Christ.<sup>93,94</sup>

The concern of the two kingdoms model is to demarcate clearly which parts of life are regulated by God directly (and to some extent, according to Reformed advocates, by the church) and which are to be regulated by the civil government. The civil realm is to be governed according to natural law - God's eternal law expressing normative human functioning and accessible to all people through conscience (c.f. Rom.2:14-16); the spiritual realm is to be governed according to God's word. This allows Christians to make common cause with their fellow citizens in the earthly kingdom on 'neutral' ground, "affirming the legitimacy of the state and other cultural institutions without looking to them for ultimate rescue." In summary, [Two kingdoms] affirms the antithesis between Christ's kingdom and the dominion of Satan without denying the areas of commonness between Christians and non-Christians in the world."<sup>95</sup>

Two kingdoms is a model which, for all its long history, was relatively neglected in Reformed scholarly circles until quite recently, when writers such as Darryl Hart, David VanDrunen, and Michael Horton have revived it. In Australia, many of the regular contributors to AP Magazine would appear to hold to a two kingdoms model.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> This corresponds to Niebuhr's category 'Christ and culture in paradox'.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15.

<sup>93</sup> Describing the two kingdoms model as seeking to divide 'life' into two realms might seem a little crude but it is the word Calvin uses (Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15), and alternative, more nuanced, words are not obvious. What ought *not* to be concluded from this description is that the two kingdoms model sees the civil realm as being outside God's rule. Rather the picture is that God does rule the civil realm, but through civil governments. (David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 60,71.)

<sup>94</sup> Luther, the original proponent of the two kingdoms model, divided the realms primarily along 'inner life / outer life' lines. Hence for him the visible church is part of the civil realm and so under the rule of the prince. (Crouse, *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities*, 10-12.) For Calvin and other Reformed advocates, the visible church is part of Christ's spiritual kingdom and so not under the civil government. (VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 79.)

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 429.

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, in Australia, some holding to a Two Kingdoms model are also very supportive of a group like the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) even though the ACL's approach falls almost entirely under a different model (the transformational model). This

#### 4. Relevance model<sup>97</sup>

As the name suggests, adherents of the relevance model seek, first and foremost, to be relevant to the world.

"...they locate the main problem in the church's incomprehensibility to the minds and hearts of secular people and its irrelevance to the problems of society. The church has lost touch with the people and the times... It has failed to adapt to cultural changes."<sup>98</sup>

Adherents of this model therefore,

"...seek to engage culture by reinventing the church's ministry to be more relevant to the needs and sensibilities of people in the culture and more committed to the service and good of the whole human community."<sup>99</sup>

"People operating within this model put great emphasis on the 'common good' and 'human flourishing'. They emphasise the modern church's failure to care about inequality, injustice, and suffering in the world. They call the church to work for justice in society, and they declare that only when it does so will it regain the credibility to speak to the society about God."<sup>100</sup>

Many will rightly recognise here the approach of old-style theological liberalism. However the theological approaches which find a place in this model are diverse, including also liberation theology, Roman Catholic theology (at least as springing from Thomas Aquinas), the emerging church movement, and even the church growth movement of the 1980's. Some of these theologies explicitly see God at work in the culture, and therefore see the Christian (& church's) role as being to cooperate with Him in that work. Other theologies in this group tend more towards seeking to express timeless truths in culturally-relevant garb.

The common thread though is the desire to adapt the practices of churches and Christians to be demonstrably more relevant to the world.<sup>101</sup>

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would seem to be because although Two Kingdoms interacts in the civil kingdom on the basis of natural law, historically most versions of Two Kingdoms see natural law as being summed up by the moral law, specifically the ten commandments. (See Van Drunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 100-108,155-171,201-203. Also Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 19.1,2,3,5.) Hence particularly in an environment like 21<sup>st</sup> C Australia where the government is seen to be decreasingly holding to the dictates of natural law, two kingdoms advocates who understand their model often seek to see the moral law reflected or preserved in the laws of the land. Practically this ends up therefore almost indistinguishable from a transformationalist approach.

<sup>97</sup> This encompasses Niebuhr's categories 'The Christ of culture' and 'Christ above culture'. See also Hunter's 'Relevant To' paradigm. (Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215-217.)

<sup>98</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 202.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>101</sup> Some adherents of the relevance model would of course go beyond adapting their practices to adapting their beliefs (at which point they would cease being evangelical). This however is not the essence of the relevance model; one can seek to demonstrate relevance without adapting one's beliefs.

## Relating models and approaches

Having outlined broad models of Christian interaction with the world it is worth seeking to relate the approaches outlined earlier in this paper to those models.

Some postures (approaches) fall substantially under one model. For example, the 'Fight' posture can be seen to fall almost entirely under the Transformational model, since its primary agenda is the transformation of society (or the preservation of aspects of it) along Christian lines. Similarly, 'Strategic withdrawal' draws almost completely from the Counter-cultural model (notwithstanding its secondary goal of 're-populating' the culture in the long term) since its primary strategy is the creation of counter-cultural structures in parallel with and separate from society. 'Focus on core business' fits fairly neatly under the Two Kingdoms model.

Beyond those though, other postures considered earlier fall much less neatly under one model. For example, it could be argued that a 'Bless the city' posture could operate from within almost any of the models. Pluralistic approaches seem to be influenced at least by the Relevance model since they seek to engage with the world on present issues of concern, but also draw on the Two Kingdoms model in emphasizing the making of common cause with the world, and on the Counter-cultural model in working from an explicitly Christian (and hence counter-cultural) framework. 'Faithful presence' draws from several models that Hunter names 'Defensive against', 'Purity from', and 'Relevant to' (corresponding loosely to Transformational, Counter-cultural, and Relevance),<sup>102</sup> while 'Renewed Christian Realism' is particularly eclectic.

This ought not to be surprising, since each model draws from legitimate biblical themes. For example, when Christians pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt.6:10) they are (at least) praying that the society in which they live would increasingly reflect God's revealed will or moral law; the Transformationalist model emphasises this. Similarly there are repeated calls in scripture for God's people to be holy (1Pet.1:16 c.f. 2Cor.6:17), which implies (at least) some degree of 'separation' from the world; the Counter-cultural model emphasises this. Again, while humanity is fallen, the image of God remains in it, albeit marred (Gen.9:6, Declaratory Statement iv), hence common cause between Christians and non-Christians in the world is possible and good; the two kingdoms model emphasises this. Finally, there are good examples in scripture of bringing the relevance of the gospel to bear on particular cultural circumstances (e.g. Acts 17:16-34); the Relevance model emphasises this.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 214-219,223.

<sup>103</sup> See also Keller, *Centre Church*, 230-232 and Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 59-65.

Also contributing to the complexity of particular postures is the influence of different cultural contexts in which Christians find themselves in different times and places. It is no coincidence, for example, that the Two Kingdoms model was formulated in a time and place (16<sup>th</sup> C Europe) in which Christianity had been the dominant religion for centuries. Carson makes this point with characteristic clarity using a different example:

“If Abraham Kuyper had grown up under the conditions of the killing fields of Cambodia, one suspects his view of the relationship between Christianity and culture would have been significantly modified.”<sup>104</sup>

The complex nature of particular postures is also contributed to by the varied nature of the concrete situations in which Christians interact with the world. For example, a conversation with a non-Christian friend in the context of a social setting about (say) gender is very different from a conversation around the same topic at the P&C meeting of a local school, which is different again from a letter written to a political representative who has asked for submissions on the topic, and different also from a document written in a professional capacity seeking to shape policy (whether of government or in private business). The varied nature of these situations (and more) calls for an approach which is able to draw on a wide range of resources.<sup>105</sup>

The above observations and arguments have led some to advocate for an ‘ad hoc’ or ‘balanced’ approach which keeps in tension the biblical themes underlying each model, and allows for Christians to draw on the resources of each as appropriate for particular situations. Keller’s ‘nuanced and balanced’ approach and Carson’s biblical theology approach are examples of this. This is the kind of approach advocated in this paper.

However this raises the question of criteria. If an ‘ad hoc’ or ‘balanced’ approach is to be adopted, what criteria should be applied for choosing which aspects of which model are appropriate for which contexts?<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, ix-x.

<sup>105</sup> This complexity is to be expected, given the complexity of the created order itself. The situation of multiple models drawing on differing biblical themes is analogous to the pluriform nature of moral codes such as the ten commandments. “They [moral codes] are pluriform (consisting in ten commands in the Decalogue and six hundred and thirteen commands in the Pentateuch, or whatever) because the moral field itself is specifically differentiated. The order of reality holds together a multitude of different kinds of moral relation, and orders them without abolishing their differences. Moral codes must teach a moral law which corresponds to the order of reality in its differentiation and complexity.” (Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 199.)

<sup>106</sup> Alternatively, the above arguments may point to the need for a better model. Carson points out that when viewed from a distance of 60 years or so, it is clear the extent to which Niebuhr’s models were influenced by the time in which they were conceived. (Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, x.) The recent substantial interest in Augustine’s ‘Two Cities’ model seems also to point in this direction: ‘Two Cities’ has become such fertile soil in recent times because Augustine’s situation is, in key ways, more like our own

And can the outlines of a 'default' posture be identified, something which provides a starting point from which exceptions can be worked out? In seeking to address these questions this paper now turns to the work of Oliver O'Donovan, specifically his two major works on political theology.

## The people of the ascended Christ: A framework for Christian interaction with the world

Oliver O'Donovan's books 'The Desire of the Nations'<sup>107</sup> and 'The Ways of Judgement'<sup>108</sup> (hereafter designated 'DoN' and 'WoJ') do not primarily seek to provide an account of the relationship between Christians and the world. They are, rather, works of political theology, seeking to give a Christian account (and specifically, a gospel-shaped account) of secular political concepts in general and secular political authority in particular, drawing especially on the 'high tradition' of Christian political thought from the pre-modern era.<sup>109</sup> However in developing an account of secular political authority, O'Donovan cannot help but deal with the relationship between Christians and the world, hence his works are helpful here.

Just as the resurrection is emphasised in O'Donovan's account of evangelical ethics,<sup>110</sup> so the ascension is emphasised in his account of an evangelical understanding of political authority. Not that other aspects of the 'Christ event' - the incarnation, Jesus' life, teaching, and miracles, the cross, the resurrection, and the Parousia (Christ's return) - are excluded. Rather, the ascension is emphasised as a 'way in' to the significance of those events for human political authority, and as the point at which the substantive change the gospel brings was brought to bear upon human political authority.<sup>111</sup>

In the ascension, Christ was raised to the right hand of God and given all authority in heaven and on earth - the Son of Man came into the presence of the Ancient of Days and was given the kingdom (c.f. Dan.7:13-14, Phil.2:9-11, Heb.1:3-13). These are now *present* realities (Eph.1:21): there is no aspect of creation which does not now owe allegiance to Christ first and foremost, notwithstanding the rebellion of great swathes of humanity.<sup>112</sup>

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than (say) Niebuhr's mid-twentieth century context. Whichever it is, O'Donovan's work to which this paper now turns makes a helpful contribution.

<sup>107</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>108</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>109</sup> *DoN*, 1-4, 16-20; *WoJ*, ix-x.

<sup>110</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> *DoN*, 145-146.

<sup>112</sup> *DoN*, 146. O'Donovan notes: "It is wrong to ask at what point in the story Jesus *became* endowed with the authority of the Son, before the resurrection or after it, because the whole story is the story of how he came to be so, and the final moment [the ascension] confirms what the whole story has been about." (*DoN*, 145. Emphasis original.)

The coronation of Christ in the ascension is a *political* act. Referencing the second stanza of the Te Deum, a 4<sup>th</sup> C Christian hymn, O'Donovan notes the prevalence of political language in describing Christ and his work.<sup>113</sup> This kind of language of course has scriptural antecedents: Mary, for example, rejoices in her coming 'saviour', who brings down 'the mighty from their thrones and exalt[s] those of humble estate' (Lk.1:47,52); Zechariah speaks of Jesus as 'a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David... that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...' (Lk.1:69-71) This is political language. The very words 'redemption', 'king', 'Christ', 'kingdom', 'Son of God' and others have (at least) political overtones, and in some cases primarily political meanings. We ought not to empty the gospel of this important dimension.

As a political act, Christ's ascension constitutes a political society, the church. This is not to say that the church on earth is a nation-state like Australia. Rather it is to assert the character of the church as a people ruled by a king:

"The church is not another member of... say... the United Nations Organisation... Describing the church as a political society means to say that it is brought into being and held in being, not by a special function it has to fulfil, but by a government that it obeys in everything. It is ruled and authorized by the ascended Christ alone and supremely; it therefore has its own authority; and it is not answerable to any other authority that may attempt to subsume it."<sup>114</sup>

This is consistent with the witness of the New Testament. For what else does it mean to serve the king but to be a member of His kingdom? What else does it mean to be 'citizens of heaven' (Phil.3:20) than that God has constituted a society ruled by Christ?

Christians therefore are those who have been transferred from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of Christ (Col.1:13). They are citizens of the kingdom of heaven primarily, and citizens of (say) Australia only in a secondary, delegated sense. This is important for how Christians understand themselves.

An illustration may be helpful. Imagine if the Australian government had delegated responsibility for (say) taxation of its people and the provision of health care, to the government of New Zealand. Australian citizens at that point would doubtless be required to 'register' in some way with the government of New Zealand; it might even be called (and practically function as) a low-level kind of New Zealand 'citizenship'. But in such a situation Australians would not think of themselves as New Zealanders (may it never be!); they would still think of themselves as Australians, having allegiance to the Australian government not the New Zealand government, even though they submit to the New Zealand government in certain defined and delegated areas.

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<sup>113</sup> DoN, 1.

<sup>114</sup> DoN, 159.

O'Donovan argues that similarly, Christ as supreme ruler of all, has delegated responsibility for the functions of 'secular government' (i.e. government of things pertaining to this age) to the governing authorities of this world.<sup>115</sup> Christians therefore, rightly, submit to this government (Rom.13:1-6, 1Pet.2:13-14 c.f. WCF 20.4, 23.1&4) but that does not mean they think of themselves primarily as citizens of earthly nation-states (may it never be!). Christians, rather, are first and foremost citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and only submit to secular governments because their king says they should, a submission which is only for a time and whose scope is limited.<sup>116</sup>

There is, therefore, after the ascension a new way in which God's people relate to the world: "members of the church [Christians] are seen as 'aliens and exiles' ...having their own political identity but being resident on alien territory."<sup>117</sup> In other words, they are citizens of another country (1Pet.1:1,2:9-11 c.f. Heb.11:13).<sup>118,119</sup> This connects Christians to a recurring biblical theme: from Abraham the wandering Aramean, to Israel as 'aliens' in Egypt, to Israel in the wilderness, to the 'aliens and strangers' amongst Israel, to the exile, to the physical return from exile with its accompanying 'spiritual' exile, to the diaspora, to the New Testament's description of Christians as strangers, exiles, and sojourners. In that case the argument about whether the situation of Christians in the West today is more like the situation of the Jews in Babylon or Paul in Athens can be seen to be a false dichotomy, since as

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<sup>115</sup> The key passages are Rom.13:1-7 and 1Pet.2:13-17 which O'Donovan sees as answering the question, 'What role is left to earthly governments in light of the ascension of Christ?', in a similar way to how Rom.9-11 has answered the question, 'What role is left to Israel in light of the gospel?' The answer is that earthly governments are left a limited delegated authority, the purpose of which is: (1) the provision of 'social space' within which can occur the church's mission of calling people into citizenship of the kingdom of heaven (c.f. 1Tim.2:1-6); and (2) the display of God's common grace (c.f. 1Pet.2:13-17). The mechanism by which social space is provided and God's common grace displayed is 'judgement' which Christ has delegated to earthly governments in relation to matters of this age. (*DoN*, 147-151.) 'Judgement' as used by O'Donovan is a broad term which encompasses all the functions of secular government that establish justice (*mishpat*) of various kinds. "[Judgement] is an act of moral discrimination that pronounces on a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context." (*WoJ*, 7.) In that case 'judgement' is not limited to the operation of the courts but includes "political authority in all its forms - lawmaking, war-making, welfare provision, education" and more. (*WoJ*, 5)

<sup>116</sup> "...secular authorities are no longer in the fullest sense mediators of the rule of God. They mediate his judgements only." (*DoN*, 151.)

<sup>117</sup> *DoN*, 149.

<sup>118</sup> Paul uses the same paradigm in Ephesians 2 but from the viewpoint of those outside the kingdom of God being aliens and strangers to it - the 'commonwealth of Israel' (v.12). The underlying idea is Christians' primary citizenship being in God's kingdom (v.19).

<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp (mid-2<sup>nd</sup> C) begins: "The church of God which sojourns at Smyrna, to the church of God sojourning at Philomelium..." indicating that this self-understanding of Christians persisted, 'sojourner' being virtually a synonym for 'alien' and 'stranger'. (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 39.)

citizens of the kingdom of heaven living in this world Christians stand in a line of fulfillment with the former, while the latter stands as a practical example of the application of their true situation.<sup>120</sup>

## Implications for a default Christian posture

It remains then to see how O'Donovan's framework outlined above might inform a default approach to Christian interaction with the world. To be clear, arising from the arguments in previous sections, what is being advocated in this paper is an 'ad hoc' or 'balanced' approach. The task of this present section is to identify aspects of each model which might form a 'default' (or starting point) in applying this approach - a 'rule' from which exceptions in particular circumstances can be worked out.

### 1. Distinctness from the world not unity with it

The most obvious implication arising from O'Donovan's framework is that the church forms a people (a 'political society') which is distinct from the world. Christians also, therefore, as citizens of this society (the kingdom of God) are distinct (separate) from the world. It is for this reason that Augustine used the analogy of a city to describe God's people (the 'city of God') which is resident for the present time on the territory of the world (the 'earthly city').

The scriptural warrant for the distinctness of God's people is legion. The holiness of God's people is a major theme running through scripture. Basic to this is the idea of separation or distinctness from the world. "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord..." (2Cor.6:17) "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..." (1Pet2:9 c.f. Ex.19:5-6) The holiness of God's people, and hence distinctness from the world, is therefore essential to any model or posture towards the world which aims to be faithful to the scriptures. The corollary of this is that unity with the world is incompatible with a Christian approach to it. Christians are 'not of the world' (Jn.17:14-16). James too reminds us "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (Jas.4:4).

In light of this, the emphasis of the counter-cultural model outlined above - that the church is to form a counter-culture within which Christians are 'formed' as citizens of God's kingdom - is to be affirmed.<sup>121</sup> Within the churches of the West, influenced by the individualistic culture outside, surely recapturing this emphasis is needed.

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<sup>120</sup> It is important to be careful to distinguish the way the word 'exiles' is used here from the way it is used by some at the present time. It is not that Christians in the West have been 'exiled' within their own countries, since Australia (or the US, or the UK, etc.) is not their true country (Heb.11:10,16). Christians are instead like people who are living in someone else's country for a time.

<sup>121</sup> This is a central idea in the third book in James K.A. Smith's Cultural Liturgies project, "Awaiting the King", in which O'Donovan's ideas from DoN are foundational. The particular ways in which O'Donovan and Smith work this out are not necessarily the point. The point is rather that Christian practices in church ought to assist in forming Christians as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, who can therefore operate appropriately in the world. (DoN, 174-192. James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 53-89.)

Negatively though, excesses of the relevance model must be repudiated. Whatever admirable demonstrations of the relevance of the gospel Christians embark on must never eliminate the 'separation' between Christians and the world. Interestingly, there is a sense in which certain applications of the two kingdoms model can also begin to look like 'unity with the world', since in this model Christians operate as citizens of earthly kingdoms in significant portions of life.<sup>122</sup>

In relation to specific postures, it is pleasing to note that all of the particular postures outlined earlier in this paper include within them (at least theoretically) an understanding of the distinctness of God's people. The 'strategic withdrawal' approach does this most clearly, although perhaps so much that it is to the detriment of other important aspects of a Christian posture.

Stackhouse's renewed Christian realism is the most likely of the specific postures outlined above to be tempted to blur this line practically though. It is by nature an approach in which compromise is accepted, even embraced, as a necessary aspect of 'making the best of it' (getting the best results, creating the most 'shalom') in the 'real' (i.e. fallen) world.<sup>123</sup> 'Compromise' of a kind is appropriate in a fallen world (see Appendix 1 below) but Stackhouse's approach does seem run the risk more than other postures of appearing to be at times (and perhaps even being) in lock-step with the world rather than maintaining an appropriate distinctness.

## 2. Presence in the world not absence from it

A second implication of O'Donovan's framework is that Christians are generally to remain present and engaged in the world/society in which they live. This arises from their status as 'aliens', 'strangers' and 'exiles'.

The Babylonian exile provides the clearest Old Testament example of this.<sup>124</sup> As the oft-quoted verses from Jeremiah's letter to the exiles say, the Israelites were to build houses, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the city in which they were living, and even pray to the LORD on its behalf (Jer.29:4-7). This is a stunning level of 'presence' given the society they were living in.<sup>125</sup> The reason given for it is "for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jer.29:7) That is, the welfare of the exiles was linked to the welfare of the society in which they were living.

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<sup>122</sup> Granted two kingdoms advocates would say this is done under God and has limits. However, practically this is very easily forgotten, especially when two kingdoms proponents speak about every Christian bearing 'two persons' governed by 'two governments' (Luther), and that, 'There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority' (Calvin). (VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 59-61,93; Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15)

<sup>123</sup> Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 313.

<sup>124</sup> Note also other Old Testament situations in which 'aliens' and 'strangers' retain an active presence in foreign societies e.g. Abraham in the promised land (Gen.12:10-20,14:1-24), Joseph in Egypt (Gen.41:46), the Israelites in Egypt (Ex.1:11) and the aliens and strangers within Old Testament Israel itself (Lev.19:33-34, 1Ch.22:2, 2Ch.2:17).

<sup>125</sup> Daniel of course is the most prominent example of this kind of 'presence', serving as he did at the heart of several Babylonian and Medo-Persian regimes for decades.

The letter of 1 Peter is the key part of the New Testament examining this theme. After highlighting the status as God's people as 'a holy nation' (2:9) Peter refers to them as 'sojourners and exiles' (2:11), drawing out the implications of this for their conduct. Christians are urged to keep their conduct among the Gentiles (lit. 'in the nations') honourable, doing good so that people will glorify God on the day of visitation (2:12). Christians are to be subject to governing authorities (2:13-14), and are to do good as a witness to those who speak ignorantly against them (2:15). They are to honour everyone, especially the emperor (2:16), be subject to human masters (even the bad ones) (2:16ff), and operate faithfully and honourably in their marriages (3:1-7) notably so that non-Christian spouses will be won over (3:1-2). The reason given for Christians to act this way is so that, by word and deed, "[they] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light." (2:9)

All of this is consistent with Jesus' own teaching that Christians are to be 'salt and light' to the world (Mt.5:13-16) - salt which must be in contact with the world if it is to have its effect, and light which must not be hidden from the world if it is to illuminate it. Paul too acknowledges that absence from society is a practical impossibility for Christians (1Cor.5:10). Otherwise how would the contrast - the distinctness of these 'aliens', their 'saltiness' to a decaying world, their light to the world's darkness - which glorifies God and draws people to Him, be seen? (Phil.2:14-15, 1Pet.2:11-12, Mt.5:16).

All of the above ways of acting presume a level of active 'presence' in the world on the part of Christians. That is to say, absence from the world (withdrawal) is not generally part of their posture towards it. Perhaps there may be situations in which a greater degree of absence is necessitated, for example when the state becomes the beast.<sup>126</sup> But this then becomes the exception that proves the rule: that absence from society (or even simply inactive presence) is not normal for God's people as 'aliens', 'strangers', and 'exiles'.

In light of this the emphasis of the relevance model, actively to engage the culture, is to be affirmed, as is the urging of the transformational model for Christians to be involved in society, and the encouragement of the two kingdoms model for Christians to make common cause with non-Christians as appropriate.

Negatively though, of all the models, the counter-cultural model is the most prone to 'withdrawal'. This is an accusation Hauerwas & Willimon reject, but as mentioned earlier, there are aspects of society from which even they advocate withdrawal that others do not.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> As per the interpretation of Revelation 13:1-10 put forward by Wilcox, where the state makes war on God's people. North Korea would be a modern example. (Michael Wilcox, *The Message of Revelation* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 122-126.)

<sup>127</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 6,47-48,177

In relation to specific postures, whatever else might be said about the 'Fight' posture, it ought to be applauded for encouraging Christians not to abandon society to its own devices. Most other postures outlined above also include some concept of the active presence of Christians within society; pluralistic approaches are particularly strong in this area. Notably though, 'strategic withdrawal' has a degree of absence from the world built into it. At the very least, Christians ought to be wary of this aspect of it.

### 3. Blessing the world not battling with it

Having dealt with the active presence of Christians in the world, the next implication - an attitude of blessing the world not battling with it - can be outlined more briefly, since there is much overlap between the two.

Again the paradigm of 'alien' and 'stranger' is foundational. In relation to the Babylonian exiles, both their actions and their prayers were to be directed towards the welfare (blessing) of the society around them, tied up as it was with their own welfare (Jer.29:7).<sup>128</sup> The same note is struck in Paul's instructions for Christians 'first of all' to intercede in prayer for all people "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." (1Tim. 2:1-2)

Similarly in 1 Peter, the overwhelming orientation of the 'presence' of Christians in the society is towards blessing; nine times in the verses following Peter's key statements about Christians as a 'holy nation' (2:9) and 'sojourners and exiles' (2:11) he encourages them to do good.<sup>129</sup> The attitude they are to have is summed up in 3:9 "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing." This is none other than the teaching of the Lord Jesus (Luke 6:27-28) grounded in the common grace of God (Mt.5:44-45). The Apostle Paul teaches the same thing (Rom.12:14, 1Cor.4:12).

On the other hand, the language of 'battling' or 'fighting' against society appears to be absent from the New Testament. Where the language of battle is employed the enemy is evil spiritual forces (Eph.6:12ff) or the passions of the flesh (1Pet.2:11, Rom.7:23). The weapons of this warfare are not physical but spiritual, deployed not against people but against arguments and opinions contrary to Christ (2Cor.10:3-5). Granted the world will hate Christians (Jn.15:19) yet even where the state has become the beast, the call is for Christians to respond with endurance and faith, not with battle and fight (Rev.13:10). The 'fight' in the New Testament then is the good fight of faith (1Tim.6:12) not battling with society.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Daniel's personal concern for the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar is striking in this regard (Dan.4:19,27).

<sup>129</sup> See 2:12,14,15 & 20 and 3:6,11,13,16 & 17.

<sup>130</sup> There is, of course, much battling of earthly nations in the Old Testament. However this must be seen in the context of Israel in the promised land being a type of the new creation, not a type of the 'overlapping of the ages' situation of the church in the New Testament.

To a greater or lesser degree, all four models of approach reflect this orientation of blessing. Even the counter-cultural model's emphasis on following Jesus authentically within the Christian community is seen to be (in part) for the blessing of the world.

Similarly, all of the specific postures outlined earlier in different ways seek the bless the world, including the 'fight' posture. However this intent is not always clear. This is particularly so with the 'fight' posture which is explicit and frequent in its use of the language of fight, battle, and war. This language ought to be repudiated.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, it seems that this kind of language in the 'fight' posture does reflect a significant aspect of how some proponents of it see their interaction with the world. To the extent that this is so, this too ought to be repudiated.<sup>132</sup>

A different concern arises in relation to 'generous pluralism'. Generous pluralism certainly seeks to bless the world; in this it is to be affirmed. A key part of the blessing it seeks though is expressed in this way:

"Pluralism is what it looks like to say 'I want our community [i.e. the church] to have the freedom to define ourselves and live according to our vision of the good, so I will treat other communities built around different visions of the good with the same freedom.'"<sup>133</sup>

Yet neither Christians nor the church nor those holding to generous pluralism has (nor ultimately claims) such freedom. The church (Christians collectively) is constituted and held in being by one who governs it in everything, defining for Christians who they are and what ought to be their vision of the good. The church's king claims this right not only over Christians but over all people. In framing things the way it does (that is, using the language of freedom to live our own way) generous pluralism risks reinforcing a way of seeing the world which assumes the world has the right to live by a 'good' it defines for itself. Being clear with our neighbour that neither of us are 'free' to define the good for ourselves, but are obligated to live Christ's good way, is surely one part of blessing the world.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> As Jonathan Leeman comments: "A new-heart politics begins by laying down the weapons of war." (Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 61.)

<sup>132</sup> It might be argued that the target of such language is evil spiritual forces and ideas, not society and people. However in the midst of the culture wars this distinction tends quickly to be lost, both in how such language is heard and in the words that are used.

<sup>133</sup> Nathan Campbell, "Why I'm a generous pluralist", no pages, cited 9/2/21.

<sup>134</sup> Some clarifications: (1) Nothing is being said in this critique about the relationship of a Christian view of the good to the civil law. That is a related topic, but is not the topic being addressed in this paper. (2) Nothing in this critique should be seen as arguing against religious freedom. The point is rather about obligation to Christ. (3) Generous pluralism concurs that Christians do not claim the freedom to pursue a self-defined good, and that Christ defines the good for Christians and for everyone else, objectively. (4) It is less clear whether generous pluralism affirms the obligation of non-Christians (again, obligation to Christ is what is being spoken of here) to live according to Christ's vision of the good. A certain level of discomfort with the language of 'obligation' has been expressed. (Email from author to Nathan Campbell, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2021; email responses from Nathan Campbell

#### 4. Not fearing the future since Christ is ruling

A fourth implication of O'Donovan's framework has to do with fear, specifically that Christians are not to fear the future since Christ rules. This arises from the present and complete nature of Christ's rule.

When Jesus told his disciples "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me" (Mt.28:18) he meant it. In the ascension Christ was exalted to the highest possible place and given the title 'Lord' (Phil.2:9-11). He has "gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (1Pet.3:22 c.f. Eph.1:21) notwithstanding for the present the fulness of this subjection is not yet seen (Heb.2:8).<sup>135</sup>

In that context, Peter's words in 1 Peter 3 are relevant. Speaking of those who would harm Christians he says, "Have no fear of them nor be troubled" (1Pet.3:14). The basis for this is the words following, "but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (v.15). The words "set apart" translate the word ἁγιάσατε ('sanctify').<sup>136</sup> The idea is that just as God is in a class of his own (set apart, 'holy') as compared to everyone and everything, Christ is in a class of his own as compared to every other lord and king. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the "blessed and only ruler" (1Tim.6:14-15 c.f. Rev.17:14, 19:16). Fear therefore does not form part of an ordinary Christian posture towards the world, since Christ is ruling.

The attitude of Christians ought therefore to be the same as that of Polycarp in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, who, upon being brought into the arena and called upon by the Roman proconsul to renounce Christ and swear by the genius of Caesar or be thrown to the lions, answered "Eighty and six years I have served Him [Christ], and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"<sup>137</sup> It is not that Polycarp rejected Caesar's authority or that of the proconsul; on the contrary he confessed openly that both had been appointed by God.<sup>138</sup> It was rather that Christ was (and is) simply a higher authority, and hence well able to do the right thing by Polycarp.

None of the broad models of Christian engagement examined earlier incorporate fear of the world in them. The same cannot be said for all of the particular approaches. As noted earlier, fear is a significant presence in the 'strategic withdrawal' posture. The 'fight' posture too has tended increasingly to use fear of

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to author, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2021; phone conversation from Nathan Campbell to author, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2021. All used by permission.)

<sup>135</sup> It is surprising to note the frequency in the New Testament with which reference to Christ's exaltation to God's right hand is made: 20 times by a crude software search.

<sup>136</sup> Peterson notes the root meaning of the Hebrew word 'holy' (קדוש) is 'separation' and that the Greek Bible uses the ἁγιάζω group of words as equivalent. (David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament theology of sanctification and holiness* (Nottingham: Apollos, 1995), 17.)

<sup>137</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1*, 41.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

the future as a motivator.<sup>139</sup> Granted, the things being feared are not good, but they have to be seen in the context of Christ's supreme rule and his ability to do the right thing by his people which overcomes fear.

## 5. Keeping the mission clear not focusing on its by-product

A fifth implication of O'Donovan's framework is that Christians ought not to confuse the church's mission with the happy by-product of it.

The mission of the church, and of Christians as part of it, is to make disciples of all nations (Mt.28:19). This is the immediate implication of Christ's being given all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt.28:18): because he is ruling, every person owes allegiance to him, and it is the job of Christians to take that message to the world.<sup>140</sup>

The gospel though needs a certain social space in which to be shared; it is difficult for the gospel mission to flourish, for example, in a warzone or where anarchy reigns. A key part of the role Christ has delegated to civil governments is the provision of such social space: Christians are to pray for all people, especially those in authority, in order that they (Christians) might live "peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way" (1Tim.2:2) i.e. that this kind of social space might be provided. This in turn pleases their saving God (v.3) "who desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth." (v.4)<sup>141</sup>

Although it took three centuries, eventually the church's mission became so successful that civil governments began to become attentive to Christ, beginning with Constantine in 313AD. This was the essence of Christendom.

"It is not, as is often suggested, that political order is a *project* of the church's mission, either as an end in itself or as a means to a further missionary end. The church's one project is to witness to the Kingdom of God. Christendom is a *response* to mission, and as such a sign that God has blessed it. It is constituted not by the church's seizing alien power, but by alien power's becoming attentive to the church."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> For example, an ACL email to supporters relating to the Victorian Conversion Practices Prohibition Bill was headed "This is it: the moment you feared". (Email from ACL to author, 2/12/20.) See also James Snare's recent 'gentle critique' "ACL, Fear, and Grace", *Eternity online*, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/opinion/acl-fear-and-grace/> Cited 15/5/21

<sup>140</sup> There are of course other understandings of the church's mission; and of course Christians are also called by Christ to do many things other than make disciples. It is the position of this paper though that collectively (i.e. as the church) the primary task of Christians is to make disciples of all nations. (See for example Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford: St Matthias Press, 2009), 13.)

<sup>141</sup> *DoN*, 146-148. O'Donovan sees the restraint that civil governments put on evil in Romans 13 as similarly preserving a social order which furthers the spread of the gospel. The *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome) for example assisted greatly in the international mobility and contact between people which facilitated the spread of the gospel in the New Testament era.

<sup>142</sup> *DoN*, 195. (Emphasis original.) Note: 'Alien' here is not referring to Christians but to the world i.e. what is alien to Christians.

The influence of Christianity upon Western culture flowed from this over the centuries that followed. That is to say, the ways in which Christianity is reflected in the laws of nations like Australia arose from the success of the church's mission to make disciples of all nations. It did not arise from the church, or Christians, seizing political power. To put it another way, transformation of society along Christian lines (however imperfectly done) was a happy by-product of the success of the church's mission; it was not (and is not) the mission itself.<sup>143</sup>

Part of a default Christian posture towards the world must be a recognition of this. It is true that Christians would wish to see the societies in which they live operate according to Christian principles and laws.<sup>144</sup> But Christian laws presume a preponderance of Christian people. As CS Lewis observed, "A Christian society is not going to arrive until most of us really want it: and we are not going to want it until we become fully Christian."<sup>145</sup>

It is a strength of the counter-cultural model that it understands this. The relevance model is also fairly clear on this point. The transformationalist model however often seeks a greater degree of transformation of society than is realistic in light of the above.

In terms of specific postures, whatever else might be said about the 'focus on core business' posture it has this aspect right. On the other hand the 'fight' posture is clearly weak at this point. Unfortunately the more stridently it seeks to fight for Christian principles to be reflected in society's laws, the more it puts the cart before the horse in focusing on the by-product of the mission, often to the detriment of the mission itself.<sup>146,147</sup> Bearing witness to Christian principles in the public square ought to be pursued, but not disconnected from the gospel.

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<sup>143</sup> See also JI Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 236.

<sup>144</sup> For clarity it should be added that there is nothing wrong, and a great deal right, with bearing witness in the public square to Christian principles; in fact it ought to be seen as part of the proclamation of the gospel itself. "A belief in Christian ethics is a belief that certain ethical and moral judgements belong to the gospel itself; a belief, in other words, that the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as a bearer of glad tidings." This is because part of the gospel summons is the good news that people *can* now live within the objective moral order that God has created. (O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 12,17.)

<sup>145</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1995), 79.

<sup>146</sup> It might be argued that ACL and similar groups are political lobbying organisations and that there are many other Christian organisations whose job it is to proclaim the gospel. However in the current context where lobbying groups have such a loud voice in the public square, often they are the only Christian voice heard by many people. If then that voice is devoid of the gospel then the Christian message heard by most people will be distorted, to the detriment of the mission.

<sup>147</sup> C.f. the warning of the Westminster divines to the institutional church "not to intermeddle with civil affairs" (WCF 31.5). While the ACL and similar groups are not churches, and the situation of 17<sup>th</sup> C Western society was very different from today, there is still relevance in this warning.

## Conclusion

If Christians collectively (the church) were to be pictured as a city resident on foreign territory, what would be the nature of its relationship to the people of the surrounding land? How high would be its walls and how open its gates? Would there be interaction between the two peoples, and if so, how frequent would it be and what would it be like? These are the kinds of questions this paper has sought to answer.

A number of answers that are commonly encountered in the Queensland evangelical context have been outlined, both specific postures, and broader models of approach which seek to categorise specific postures and from which specific postures draw.

This paper has advocated an 'ad hoc' or 'balanced' approach (posture) which draws on multiple models and may draw on different aspects of these models depending on the circumstance. This is because each model picks up on genuine and significant biblical themes, and because different cultural contexts and different situations Christians find themselves in need different kinds of response.

The aspect of the gospel that has been highlighted most in this paper is the ascension, since from it arises the key political fact that the church forms (is) the people of the ascended ruling Christ.

Arising from this, an outline of a 'default' posture (how the relationship between Christians and the world ought to look most of the time), from which exceptions in particular circumstances can be worked out, has been offered. The five aspects of this 'default' posture are: the distinctness of Christians from the world not unity with it, their ordinary presence within the world not absence from it, their orientation of blessing the world not battling with it, the absence of fear in their interactions with their world since Christ is ruling, and their clarity about their collective mission not focusing on the by-product of it. No claim is made that these five aspects are exhaustive; they do seem though the most obvious and relevant at the present time.

How might such a posture be applied? There is much work to be done on that, since the answers to this question are many and varied, corresponding to the situations in which Christians find themselves. It is hoped that flowing from this paper, GiST will produce shorter articles applying this approach.

Finally then, returning to the idea of a 'city' resident on foreign territory, the default posture put forward in this paper can be described as follows. There is a definite boundary to this city - 'walls', as it were. The gates of the city are usually open, and the residents of it are often among the people of the land outside. While among the people of the land, the citizens of the city routinely seek to bless the residents of the land; they do not throw rocks at them from behind the safety of the city walls! While there are dangers outside, the citizens of the city are not fearful to venture there, since their king is supremely powerful both within the city and outside of it. Their king has given them the task of calling the people of the land to join them as citizens

of the city, and to this task they devote themselves. They do not know what success their efforts will meet, but they do know that some of their forebears met with such success that the population of the city grew dramatically as people of the land outside joined it. At that time even many who remained residents of the land claimed to be citizens of the city and even imitated some of the city's ways. One day who knows, perhaps it will be like this again. But in the meantime their king's instructions are clear, and the citizens of the city simply get on with the task.

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## Appendix 1 - Compromise

The appropriateness of compromise in particular situations is worth delving into, in light of the critique offered of Stackhouse's renewed Christian realism above (the final paragraph under the heading 'Distinctness from the world not unity with it').

The kind of compromise contemplated by Stackhouse is based on that envisaged and embraced (albeit awe-fully) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer embraced the kind of compromise which saw him 'break the law' (e.g. the commandment against lying) and so incur guilt, in the pursuit of the defence of his neighbour. Bonhoeffer saw the situation thus: in lying to protect his Jewish neighbours from the Nazis he broke God's law, incurring guilt for which he trusted in God's forgiveness.<sup>148</sup> With some nuance, Stackhouse (generally) concurs in this understanding.<sup>149</sup>

Oliver O'Donovan explains 'compromise' somewhat differently.<sup>150</sup> He divides compromise into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary compromise is seen as a course of action which is unfaithful to God. Secondary compromise on the other hand is seen as a course of action which is chosen in the context of limited available choices, the range of available choices having been limited by the fallenness of the world, and none of which allow the realization of the ideal. 'Compromise' is not a word O'Donovan likes in relation to secondary compromise because it implies finding a 'middle way' between the ideal and the actual:

"the 'actual' does not constitute an opposite pole of attraction to the 'ideal'. It is [rather] about finding the *right* qualification for one's general rule of action which will recognise the *truth* about the circumstances in which one has to act."<sup>151</sup>

Compromise therefore in this secondary sense is not seen as sinful. After all, Jesus himself lived in this fallen world and hence it seems reasonable to assume was presented with situations in which his possibilities for action were limited by the fallenness of the world (sans working miracles in every situation!) yet he always acted faithfully and without sin. His light 'shone in the darkness' as it were.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 6: Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 275,280,297. Quoted in Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 149-151. Bonhoeffer specifically speaks of those acting in this way needing God's "grace" as a result in relation to being justified before God. Yet he can also say that in acting this way they "become guilty without sin". (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 282-3.) How Bonhoeffer holds these two together is not clear.

<sup>149</sup> Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 149-151, 286-287. To be fair to Stackhouse, he also wonders "why Bonhoeffer feels such a person needs mercy from God, since he is doing what he understands God's will to be." (*Ibid*, 150.)

<sup>150</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 96-97.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 96. Emphasis original.

<sup>152</sup> O'Donovan does not give an example from Jesus' life, but one might guess that Jesus' 'failure' to honour his mother might fall into this category. As the son (the eldest son at that) of a widowed mother, Jesus was obligated to look after her; this would be encompassed in his obedience to the fifth commandment (c.f. Eph.6:1-2). Yet his love for the world in the context of its fallenness meant he was going to the cross, and hence was unable to honour his mother in an ideal way. Granted he delegated this responsibility to

Faithfulness then “is a possibility in any situation, however desperate the context or limited the choices.”<sup>153</sup> Bonhoeffer’s choice as above, however difficult, seems to fall into this category. The ethical decisions Christians (and others) face then ought not to be seen as a matter of choosing between competing forms of (primary) compromise.

A relevant example might be the choices available to a Christian married to a non-Christian spouse. In that case ‘ideal’ options in terms of child-rearing and church involvement may not always be available to the Christian, but that does not mean that choosing in such a way that fails to realise the ideal is sinful compromise. Quite the contrary, choices would be available which, while not ideal, surely constitute great faithfulness to Christ.

Interestingly Stackhouse is keenly aware of the temptation to (primary) compromise within his approach.

“We are not to glibly deploy either a shallow love ethic or a ruthless justice ethic or even a well-intentioned shalom ethic, with all of their vulnerability to oversimplification and rationalization along whatever lines suit our interests and sensibilities. We are not, that is, simply trying to maximise shalom, in defiance of explicit teachings of God’s word, nor in simplistic deference to a few verses or principles we think we have adduced from Scripture as applied to our best take on the scene before us. The Bible not only tells us to seek shalom but also gives us considerable detail as to the definition of shalom – of love, justice, and other key terms. We are not free to snatch these words from the Bible, write them on a banner, and then fly that banner over whatever we would like to do.”<sup>154</sup>

Amen to that. Stackhouse sees then, shalom (or the ‘good’) as being defined for us in the Bible in a “richly complicated way”.<sup>155</sup> It is this ‘rich complexity’ and the associated “dangers that lurk around any careless, half-understood, or desultorily undertaken version of this way of being Christian”<sup>156</sup> that are the concern of the very brief critique of Stackhouse in the paper above. The point is not that a renewed Christian realism (Stackhouse’s view) necessarily leads to (primary) compromises; it is rather that in tying itself so closely to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethical choice which sees ethical choice as sometimes being between options all of which are (primary) compromises, the temptation is strong for those embracing renewed Christian realism to choose simply in accordance with the individual’s own preferences and sensibilities (which are often in lock-step with the world) instead of choosing according to God’s word.

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John (Jn.19:26-27) but in an ideal (i.e. unfallen) world there would be no conflict between his love for the world and honouring his mother. Jesus seems to acknowledge that this kind of choice is not only permissible but necessary if one is to follow him (Lk.14:26).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>154</sup> Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 284.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 350.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 351.

Michael Hill's 'retrieval ethic', in which decisions are made in order to 'retrieve' the most good from a situation in which one's choices are limited due to the fallenness of the world, can be seen to suffer from a similar temptation. It is not that the view itself is inappropriate or necessarily leads to primary compromise, but rather that this way of describing things seems to be more easily (than other approaches) taken in the direction of primary compromise by the sinfulness of human hearts.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford: St Matthias Press, 2002), 132-134.