THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND ITS CULTURAL FRUITS

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BABEL AND CULTURE

In the biblical account of the building of the tower of Babel the construction of this temple is depicted as the religious aspect of a larger and more ambitious venture of a cultural nature, namely the building of a city. The general picture that emerges is one of a migrating people who had reached a certain measure of settled life in a plain in the land of Shinar. There they conceived of a grand and bold scheme, the materialization of which would have the twofold effect of securing a more solid foundation for their present social-political existence, as well as guaranteeing a "name" for their communal life and collective achievements which would outlive the brief span of time that is allotted to individual human existence. "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly . . . . Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." 1

Thus, in a few short sentences, a very sketchy outline is drawn as it were, of a development in man’s social life which has extremely important and far-reaching consequences; namely, the transition from the life and organization of nomad existence and primitive agricultural society to that of urban civilization. Man then moves beyond the most basic activities of the tilling of the soil and the tending of the flocks, which furnish him with the essential means for survival, and enters upon collective enterprises which present new and fascinating potentials for political power and prestige, and open up wholly new vistas of cultural pursuit. In religious cultus and cultural creativity man seeks to materialize the new potentials which have been discovered; he builds cities with temples.

Keeping in mind that the narrative of the building of the tower of Babel was quite ostensibly not intended as an object lesson in sociology or the philosophy of culture, and also that the whole enterprise comes under severe divine strictures, let us nevertheless, take a look for a moment at the positive side of the development which we signalized above. As H. J. Muller has well said, "civilization means literally the making

1Genesis 11:3-4 (R.S.V.).
of cities and city life, and is literally impossible without them."

In other words, the stage of urbanization is a very important link in the chain of social and cultural progress. The concentration of population in urban centres and the social-economic organization with the division of labour and the specialization of skills which this makes possible, are prerequisites for a dynamic cultural development, for it is in this kind of a social structure that the surplus energy and resources of society can be created, of which, as Dawson points out, higher culture is essentially the fruit. In primitive society, where the family functions as a more or less self-contained economic entity, such surpluses of creative energy and wealth can hardly be developed.

It may not be superfluous to stress these positive aspects and potentials of city civilization, unless they be lost sight of in a romantic desire to deliver ourselves from the complexities of modern social life by returning to more primitive and simpler forms of social organization. A merely negative attitude toward urban society, emphasizing its corruptive nature and sinful influences is, to say the least, extremely one-sided. Moreover, such a longing to return to a more primitive mode of existence and social organization is quite commonly, although in a most contradictory fashion, accompanied by a desire to live that existence without surrendering the many cultural fruits and technological advantages that have ensued from the developments which are so passionately and radically repudiated.

But what then about the divine judgment upon the building of the tower of Babel which so explicitly comes to expression in the biblical narrative? As was already indicated, we were well aware that by underscoring the positive possibilities of culture and civilization, we had wandered from the central theme of this account, which clearly desires to call attention to the negative possibilities of such a development. Here Babel represents human creativity and cultural pursuit which may become embodiments of impressive religious and cultural achievements but which, nevertheless, from the perspective of the revelation of the God of the Bible, must be characterized as sin and rebellion. To say this, however, is something quite different from identifying sin and culture. The latter the Bible does not do. The Old Testament outlook as a whole is marked by a strong this-worldliness, which accepts the material and physical as-

\(^2\) The Uses of the Past (Mentor Book), 1952, p. 58.
\(^3\) Cf. Dawson, The Dynamics of World History (ed. by John J. Mulloy), 1957, p. 78.
\(^4\) It is interesting in this connection to note the remark of P. Tillich (The Interpretation of History, 1936, pp. 6ff.) to the effect that visits to Berlin in his early childhood saved him from romantic enmity against technical civilization and taught him to appreciate the importance of the big city for the critical side of intellectual and artistic life, while he affirms at the same time his own need for a regular rhythm alternating between town and country.
\(^5\) Cf. Muller, op. cit., pp. 50f.
pects of reality as rooted in the divine creation, and as not at all evil in themselves. True, on the periphery of Israelitish life we find the attitude of the Rechabites, who considered the nomadic life as more consonant with pure spirituality than urban society, or even the settled life of primitive agricultural society, but this view is far from predominant in the Old Testament.

There is, however, throughout the Scriptures a profound recognition that, because of the reality of sin and the corruption of the human heart, any potential can be materialized for good or evil purposes. In the Bible all human actions and achievements are ultimately judged, not from the perspective of the kingdoms of man, but in the light of the kingdom of God. A prophetic historian of the Bible, for instance, may come to an estimate of a king or a kingdom and its culture quite different from the one reached by a secular historian. The reality of the fall, described in Genesis 3 in terms of individual existence, can be, and is constantly being, repeated on the level of social life and collective enterprises. Deeply ingrained in the thought world of the Bible is the conviction that the pride of man, in the compounded and intensified form of the pride of the nations, carries with it new dimensions of evil and magnified potentials of sinful rebellion against God. Isn't this precisely the theme of Genesis 11: 1-9?

"Let us make a name for ourselves..."! In these words the Jahwist writer discerns the heart of human idolatry. The NAME belongs to Jahweh! It represents the revelation of God in his sovereign presence among men. Man is not called to make a name for himself, but to respond to the divine revelation, to acknowledge and worship, and serve the NAME of Jahweh. This man refuses to do. Instead, in his estrangement and sinful declaration of independence from God, in his false sense of autonomy and his desire for self-glorification, man seeks to establish a name for himself, attempting to ascend by his own creative efforts to the very heights of heaven. *Eritis sicut dii...* the fatal dream to be like God, which leads to the loss of our true humanity.

Thus, Babel becomes the symbol of autonomous, and therefore of fallen culture. This theme runs throughout Scripture, from the first to the last book. We repeat, it basically does not stem from an otherworldly and anti-cultural attitude, although here and there it may be expressed in the form of a critique on city life. The biblical criticism of culture

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6Throughout this article I use the concept of culture in a very broad sense and do not distinguish it from the concept of civilization. Sometimes these two are contrasted in an antithetical fashion and it is asserted that “culture, having lost its soul, becomes civilization” (N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, 1936, p. 216), while at other times they are seen as integrally related as in the case of C. Dawson, who considers a civilization as being composed of various regional cultural traditions, while at the same time having a character of its own which
finds its primary source in the prophetic protest against all human self-aggrandizement and the idolatrous self-glorification and trust of man in his own creations. For the prophets, Babel, therefore, represented the hostile power *par excellence*, which sets itself in sinful defiance against God and his purposes. In the apocalyptic perspective of the Book of Revelation, “Babylon the Great” has become the symbolic name for the forces that are at enmity with God and that shall be destroyed in the final struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Between the beginning and the end stands the cross of Jesus Christ. Both the Roman *civitas* and the Jewish synagogue were each in their own way building the city and the temple that are represented by Babel. Consequently they were unable to read the signs of the times and perceive the meaning or the significance of Bethlehem. Pascal has said that Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. These words are superbly applicable to the question which we are considering at present; gospel and culture. The cross is still the response of man, who in his attempts at self-redemption is ascending to heaven, to the God who has descended to earth. In short, it is the rejection of grace, and culturally speaking it means autonomous, instead of “*theonomous culture*” (P. Tillich).

The cross of Jesus Christ as the atoning act has happened once for all. The cross as the human response to the divine offer of grace is an ever-present reality in that the powers of pride and rebellion which were manifested in the rejection and crucifixion of the One who came to save, is still a force operative in all man’s enterprises, in all his individual and social activities and creations. Recognizing this stark fact of sin, the Christian has no illusions that the kingdom of God will come as the culmination of human achievement and social progress. Our cities and civilizations, to the extent that they are ours, will always essentially belong to the realm of Babel. We are reminded of the words of Jesus that his kingdom is not from (*ek*) this world (John 18:36). The realm of the kingdom belongs to the new city—the New Jerusalem—which comes “from heaven” (Rev. 21:2). God himself will do it! Not our creativity, but his redemptive and re-creative work will bring about the reality of the kingdom.

Thus we have touched upon the question of the eschatological emphasis in Scripture, an emphasis which is characteristic of both the Old and the New Testaments, but which has received a new dimension in the New Testament through its witness to the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Christ. This, in one word, is the dimen-
sion of fulfilment. Recent New Testament scholarship has rediscovered the truly eschatological nature of the life and witness of the primitive Church. This emphasis in contemporary theology has effected a wholesome corrective. The eschatological perspective has contributed significantly to a more critical attitude in our theological approach to the questions of history and culture. Belief in progress and cultural optimism, which predominated in the not too distant past, had to be confronted with the profound implications of the reality of the cross.

Thy kingdom come! The Christian knows that this coming of the kingdom will be an act of the sovereign grace of God, and with eager longing the congregation of Christ looks toward the future of the Lord. However, then the question arises (in the minds of countless people it is not a question any more) whether the Church's eschatological expectation does not find its ultimate ground and source in a feeling of the emptiness of existence and the meaninglessness of history; in short, in the absence of Christ and his kingdom. Was it, after all, primarily the experience of the cross, the conviction that all human enterprises are tainted by the power of sin and end in ultimate failure, which imbued the primitive Christian Church with its eschatological vision? Was their urgent orientation toward the future of the kingdom in the last analysis a form of world flight on the part of people who suffered under the absence of their Lord? The persistent misunderstanding on this point must not be attributed solely to the hardness of heart of those who are outside the pale of the Christian community, but as well to the fact that the Christian Church itself has given so little evidence in her life and work that her whole existence is qualified by the fulfilment of the redemption in Christ, and that is precisely the overwhelming richness of the presence of the kingdom which creates the profound eschatological hope.

The early Christians were indeed deeply conscious of the paradoxical nature of existence "between the times." We repeat, in the last analysis it was not their awareness of the dominion of sin in this world and their despair of the ultimate efficacy of all human endeavors which kindled within them the burning fire of eschatological expectation. On the contrary, the last word in the New Testament belongs to the resurrection, the risen One, rather than to the cross. The resurrection, or the redemption in Christ, is seen as both a present and an eschatological reality. Again, stating the matter paradoxically, we must say that as a present reality the redemption in Christ and his kingdom are of an eschatological nature, because it is as yet a hidden presence, a presence in the flesh, and therefore awaiting the final act of revelation in the consummation.

Our contention in this article is that the theme of Babel and culture, although it could be ignored only at great peril to a genuinely biblical
approach to the problem of culture, cannot serve as the central perspective in an attempt to formulate a theology of culture. It seems hardly possible to us to say a theological word about these matters without laying the fundamental emphasis on the theme of the kingdom of Christ and culture. We shall therefore proceed to explore the relationship between the eschatological reality of the kingdom and its presence in the present, and subsequently consider the relationship of the forms and embodiments in social-political and cultural structures which have resulted from the preaching of the gospel to this redemptive presence of Christ and his kingdom. In other words, we must seek to work out the implications of our confession of the presence of the redemption in Christ, both in the human heart and in history; or rather, in history and thus also in the human heart.

THE FUTURE AS PRESENT

The eschaton has entered history; in Jesus Christ the future of God has broken decisively into existence. The divine grace has triumphed; redemption is in Christ! To the extent that the term "realized eschatology" seeks to emphasize this factuality and realization of the redemption as it is grounded in the fulfilled work of Christ, it certainly expresses a genuine New Testament insight, one which is central in the kerygma of the primitive Church. In our judgment, however, it is incorrect to deduce from this "realized eschatology" and the fulfilment in Christ that therefore all elements of a futurist eschatology must be eliminated from theology. The whole biblical perspective is oriented toward the kingdom of God and the redemption of all things. This remains so, yes, is even confessed with increasing intensity, after the fulfilment has taken place. God remains faithful to his creation, and in establishing his kingdom he enters into existence and is redemptively present in the world. This belief is at the heart of Israel's faith as it confesses the historically acting God. Now, in Jesus Christ, in his coming, his life and atoning work, the future of the kingdom is present in a completely unique and decisive manner. "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). In Christ the kingdom is present, and there are signs of the future. Not empty symbols, but events which are laden with the power of the future reality itself.

Jesus Christ is the Lord, the King of the kingdom. His rule is founded upon the victory of the cross and the resurrection. This lordship of Christ can only be known and confessed through the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:3). In faith we know that Christ is the Lord and that his kingdom is a reality. Faith, as rooted in the mystical union with Christ, is itself a stature of the redemptive presence of the kingdom. These are spiritual
realities, as are the kingdom of Christ and its presence in the present. We must, however, be careful to interpret this in a biblical-realistic, and not in a spiritualizing sense. The kingdom as a spiritual reality—as the work of the Holy Spirit—is not an abstraction, an idea or an ideal, but the concrete reality of the redemptive presence of Christ in the power of his resurrection and in the manner of the Holy Spirit. This is the mystery of the hidden but real presence of the future.

Therefore, we affirm that an exclusively futuristic eschatology is inadequate, especially when it is of the world-escaping type. It is true, and we have already strongly emphasized this, that this world is deeply involved in sin and rebellion. We have no desire to counteract the contemporary mood of pessimism and despair with a new naive optimism or progress philosophy, but we do have the gospel of fulfilment. Therefore, in the face of the crises of our time, the Church must have the faith and the courage to live and to speak from the joyful recognition that in this world—in this lost and rebellious existence—God was present in Jesus Christ and is present today. The Word became flesh, and God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (II Cor. 5:19), not only all people, but all things as well (Col. 1:20). The New Testament witness confronts us with a fait accompli; it has happened in Jesus Christ; the new age has come. The New Testament is permeated with this sense of fulfilment, which is basically the belief in the presence of the future. This fulfilment, however, far from precluding the future expectation, is actually its basis.

The lordship of Jesus Christ is cogently expressed in the confession of the ascension. He sits at the right hand of the Father. He has received a name which is above every name. All things have been put under his feet (Eph. 1:20-22). The ascension expresses the glory of the ruling Christ, whose kingdom is as yet concealed, but nevertheless qualifies all existence and becomes manifest in the various signs which faith discerns in history. We would then agree with van Ruler when he says that "the ascension is that moment in the mystery of Christ which accentuates equally the aspects of glorification and concealment."8 The ascension expresses the glory of the reign of Christ and the hidden nature of his kingdom.

In view of the ascension we should be quite cautious in speaking of the continuation of the incarnation, especially when the emphasis is laid one-sidedly on the assumpto carnis—the coming into the flesh—with its abiding "effect" in reality, rather than on the moment of the cross and the atonement. The ascension indicates a "breach"; the incarnation—as presence in the flesh—has come to an end. The ascension, however, opens

8A. A. van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 1947, p. 195.
up widely the perspective of Pentecost. The deepest meaning of the ascension is not absence, but presence *through the Spirit*. He "ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph. 4:10). Thus, as the One who is far above all the heavens, he is present in the fulness of his redemptive work. Ascension means concealment, because it is presence in the flesh, redemptive presence in the world of sin. Pentecost must be seen in line with all God’s historical-eschatological acts through which the future of the kingdom and the redemption of all things penetrates into the present. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit implies more than the Church as the continuation of the incarnation, although it be granted that it is the redemption which was accomplished by the incarnate Lord which is present through the Holy Spirit and that the Church is the sign *par excellence* of the present kingdom. The work of the Spirit, however, encompasses more than the reality of the Church. Like the work of Christ, which it "applies" to existence, it has cosmic implications and historical dimensions.

A theological understanding of the ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit in their relationship to the presence of the kingdom of Christ seems to be of paramount importance for a theology of history and culture. To use the language of "realized eschatology" once more, Pentecost *is* parousia—presence—namely of the reign of Christ, in the dispensation and therefore in the manner of the Holy Spirit, but as such hidden, awaiting the parousia, the consummation, when the redemption in Christ will be revealed in the full glory of the kingdom of God. The traditional pneumatology has generally been concerned too exclusively with the inner work of the Holy Spirit in the souls and the hearts and the minds of people. It stands in need of amplification, so that the work of the Spirit be understood, not only in terms of its personal-mystical, or of its ecclesiastical-sacramental nature, but also in its historical-eschatological dimensions.

Only with such a broadened pneumatology will we be able to do justice to the so-called cosmic aspects of the New Testament witness with its emphasis on *ta panta*—all things. Or must we assume that these are

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9 It has become quite customary nowadays to describe this distinction by the New Testament terms *kata sarca* and *kata pneuma*. I believe that the writers who lately are objecting to this usage are correct, since the apostle in 11 Cor. 5:16 clearly does not refer to the incarnation as such, but to his original misunderstanding of the life and especially the death of Christ, as distinguished from his subsequent spiritual understanding.

10 Here again we refer to the works of van Ruler, especially the one mentioned above, in which he has traced with considerable exegetical skill the New Testament concepts of fulness and fulfillment, both in their Christological and their pneumatological contexts. He arrives at the conclusion that the fulfillment in Christ and the fulfillment through the Holy Spirit are one and the same fulfillment: the presence of the ascended Lord in the fulness of his redemptive work and in the dispensation and therefore in the manner of the Holy Spirit.
motifs in the New Testament which are added later because the expectations of an imminent parousia remained unfulfilled? Must they be regarded as a substitute for the original eschatological hope which ended in a disillusion? In other words, was a kind of massive presence of redemption through the Spirit posited because the vision of the future had become dimmed? But let it not be forgotten that in the New Testament these cosmic emphases are themselves through and through eschatological! All the work of the Spirit is really first fruit, pointing to the harvest, earnest of the coming inheritance, foretaste of the approaching kingdom. It is precisely because of the presence of the kingdom *spiritualis modo* that the whole creation "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). Therefore the Spirit is still called "the Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13, K.J.) even after the Spirit has been poured out at Pentecost, for it is through the Spirit that all things are directed to the future of God; the presence of the kingdom makes all existence eschatological.

Let us seek to clarify the issue by first taking a look at the paradoxical nature of the individual Christian's existence. Those who are in Christ have become a new creation (II Cor. 5:17); the old has passed away and the new man has come in lieu of the old. The Christian shares in the victory of the cross and the resurrection, participates in the kingdom of Christ and consequently belongs to the new age. The New Testament proclaims this emphatically as a present reality. At the same time, however, it is stressed that all this is true *in Christ*, and that therefore this new life—the life of the new creature—is hid with Christ in God and that as a present reality it is eschatological in the sense that it waits to be revealed at his appearing (Col. 3:3-4). In short, "it does not yet appear what we shall be..." (I John 3:2). We have the new life in faith. This is faith in Christ who himself is the new creature, the new man, the first fruits (I Cor. 15) and thus the promise of the new mankind.

The Christian life is lived in the tension of the "already" and the "not yet," which according to Cullman is the only dialectic in the New Testament. Our redemption has been accomplished in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not waiting to be realized, but to be revealed. However, this Christian life between the ascension and the parousia is lived in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. This means, as we noticed already, that the future is present. Our orientation toward the future is not the result of a feeling of emptiness and the experience of the absence of the Lord from the present world which lies in darkness. On the contrary, we, "who have the first fruit of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans..."
8:23). In the last analysis, it is not our poverty, but the fulness and the richness of the redemptive presence that arouses in us the eager longing for the time of the consummation when that which is present now as a sign and seal and first fruit will be revealed in the harvest of the kingdom of God. The mystical experience, the sanctified life and all the other fruits and statures of the Spirit are thus not seen as the kingdom itself, but they are seen as statures of the redemption in Christ and his kingdom in human existence, a breaking through of the future into the present, not to take the place of the future, but to direct all things to it.

Now once again we must put the emphasis on all things. For the New Testament itself ventures beyond the scope of individual existence and sees Christ also as the first-born of all creation, in whom, through whom and for whom all things were created (Col. 1:16), and in whom all things shall be united (Eph. 1:10). To quote E. Brunner: "In Jesus Christ we own both the ground and the goal of creation, the God who is both the whence of my life and life of the world and also the whither of my life and the life of the world." This can be called a "cosmic expansion" (Brunner) of the gospel of forgiveness, although one could as well or perhaps better say that the forgiveness of sins is an aspect of the cosmic reality of the atonement.

The new cosmos—the reality of the new heaven and the new earth—is a confession of faith, just as the new man in Christ is confessed and not observed by empirical means. In other words, the new creature, but also the new creation, are hid with Christ in God. The redemption in Christ encompasses the re-creation and renewal of all things. What is often neglected, however, is that this total redemption and not only personal redemption is present as the divine mystery of the fulness of all things. However, following the example of the New Testament itself, we shall not be led by this consideration to all kinds of cosmological speculations, but rather concentrate on the historical realities. This is also in full accordance with the theme of gospel and culture which is our special concern at the present. We concluded our first section by saying that the theme "Babel and culture" must not be made the determinative emphasis in a Christian approach to the problem of culture. Too frequently such a view, and the resultant attitude of world flight and escape from the realm of history and culture, rest on a false body-soul or nature-spirit antinomy, which in turn leads to a Platonic type of two-world view. We cannot extricate ourselves from the realm of history, simply by regarding it as the domain of Satan, and then seeking to withdraw into the realm of inner experience and timelessness. At least within the context of the Christian revelation this is impossible. We meet God through the

Word and the Spirit as they are operative on the wide field of history. In our rebellious hearts and our rebellious cultures the Word and the Spirit, in which the redemption in Christ and his kingdom are present, do their re-creating and renewing work. We believe in historical revelation; the Word and the Spirit create history!

**Gospel and Culture**

The foregoing thoughts have a direct bearing on the problem of a theological approach to culture. The question at issue is obviously not whether the preaching of the Christian gospel has had a cultural impact or not. The affirmative answer to this question must be regarded as beyond dispute; it can be read from history. The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom has had a revolutionizing influence on the subsequent development of the Western world and has effected immense transformations in its cultural life. Thus the gospel has placed an indelible impress upon Western culture which can perhaps only be removed by destroying this culture itself. Of course, we must be careful not to oversimplify such statements, as if the Christian tradition had been the exclusive influence in the development of Western civilization, or as if the cultural impact of the gospel had always been of a uniform nature. Moreover, by concluding that the gospel has had cultural implications, we have not yet solved the basic question but merely raised it; namely the question, how we must assess this connection between gospel and culture. Is it essential or accidental? Does it imply obedience or apostasy?

From the preceding discussion it should have become apparent that we regard the gospel of Jesus Christ as primarily a message of redemption and not as one possible world view among others. When we have said that, however, we must go on to say that in what the gospel reveals to us about God, the creation and history, the fall and the human predicament, the divine dealings and redemption, it does radically affect our basic outlook on reality and the world. It is particularly in this respect that the gospel has had such a tremendous impact on the world with highly significant cultural implications. Through the preaching of the Word reality is not seen any more as subjected to the rule of demonic powers, but to the sovereign reign of God the Creator who has revealed himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. As Dawson has remarked, “Every religion embodies an attitude to life and a conception of reality, and any change in these brings with it a change in the whole character of the culture . . .”13 This is what basically has happened in the West through the missionary endeavors of the Church. This is still happening in various parts of the world, although we certainly do not mean to imply thereby that missions today ought to entail the transplanting of Western culture on foreign shores. On the

contrary, the gospel must be permitted to do its own work. Then new forms and new cultural statitudes will emerge, which are different from those in the West. The idea of an absolute Christian culture which must be identical everywhere is absurd.

In regard to the "undemonizing" of man's view of reality through the gospel one more observation may be inserted here. We live in a day of immense scientific and technological advancement. One can hardly overestimate the impact modern industrialization has had on man's way of life and on man himself. There seems to be a tendency in some quarters today to identify this entire modern development with an evil secularism. Far be it from us to minimize the insidious threat posed to our individual and social life by the type of secularism in which man increasingly sees himself and his fellow men as things among things, thus robbing life of its ultimate meaning and fostering a mood of nihilism. Still we must be on our guard against an equally dangerous one-sidedness on the other hand by repudiating the whole modern scientific and technological development. We may well keep in mind, as various thinkers have pointed out at times, that this development could take place in the West, because there the ground had been prepared by the right kind of secularism; namely what we have called the "undemonizing" influence of the gospel and the resultant attitude toward reality. The secularism that threatens existence is the kind that ignores the dimension of the divine revelation and thus issues into scientism, technocracy and "thing-ism." However, here we touch on a topic that really must be treated in a separate article.

We have sought to point out that a basic view of reality and a resultant attitude toward reality are implicit in every religious outlook and faith. It is expressed in cultus, but also in culture. This can happen intentionally or unintentionally, but it always does happen. Within the Christian tradition the "Christ against culture" position, for instance, which has tended to find the source of human corruption and evil not in human nature but in culture, has had, as H. R. Niebuhr has pointed out, a great impact on cultural history, albeit quite unintentionally.14 Outside the Christian tradition one can also point to religions which are essentially of a world-escaping and a-cultural nature, but which nevertheless have exerted a significant cultural influence.15

The extreme "Christ against culture" attitude has never been very predominant in the Christian tradition. Nor, for that matter, has been the opposite view, which is prone to interpret the Christian faith in idealistic terms and to see it mainly as a force of social and cultural progress, although this latter position has indeed gained a wide acceptance among

theologians during the past centuries. The most common attitude has been to acknowledge the legitimacy and relative value of cultural activity, while at the same time recognizing that culture in and by itself cannot achieve our redemption and thus usher in the kingdom of God. The true element in the "Christ against culture" position, which often is actually a "culture against Christ" position, is that it recognizes the reality of sin and corruption which is inherent in all cultural endeavors. The strength of what in Niebuhr's book is called "the Christ of culture" position is that it maintains the direct relevancy of the Christian faith for man's life and activity in history. The various mediating positions seek to avoid the pitfalls of the two extremes, but all too frequently such a middle position is achieved by, on the one hand, not identifying cultural activity with sin, while, on the other hand, considering any cultural implications and influences of the gospel as wholly accidental, and really unrelated to the essence of salvation. In other words, some products of cultural pursuit are recognized as being of a salutary nature, but they are not regarded as having a real relationship to redemption. Or again, the cultural fruits of the gospel are seen as accidental by-products, while the real thing, the essence, is sought in the realm of personal decision and the inner life.

It is one of our basic intentions in this article to challenge the last mentioned view, and to defend the thesis that the cultural implications of the gospel belong to the essence of the matter, and that the embodiments of the gospel in existence express something of the ultimate dealings of God with the world which he is saving and in which he is establishing his kingdom. It is quite remarkable that even today, while one can hear it affirmed on all sides with almost monotonous repetition that as far as the individual is concerned salvation does not only refer to the soul, but to the whole person who in the Bible is conceived of as a unity and totality, yet there seems to be so little inclination to draw out the wider implications of the confession that redemption refers to all things, to God's total creation.

Now, what is the real thing in redemption? Is it not ultimately that the redemption in Christ shall find form and expression in existence? In the light of the beginning and the end—the creation and the new heaven and the new earth—can it really be maintained that the essence of the work of the gospel lies in what it does to the inner life of man? The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and the Bible makes it quite clear that he remains faithful to the earth, even much more so than most of his creatures. In no way do we wish to deny or discount the inner aspects of the presence of redemption through the Word and the Spirit. They are important and very precious. Through the preaching of the gospel of Christ man is revealed in his true nature, in his sin against God and there-
fore in his estrangement from his true self and the true life. In Christ, through repentance and forgiveness, man is offered a new life. To use some of the terminology which is quite popular in our day, redemption is of an existential nature; man receives a new self-understanding which leads him to authentic existence; he achieves genuine freedom, and in decision he becomes open for the future and experiences the truly historical nature of being. In these and many other ways we can express the dynamic and personal aspects of revelation and faith. But is this all that is involved in redemption?

It is interesting to note how in our day the two opposites of an extreme and one-sided existentialist theology and an extreme and one-sided fundamentalist theology seem to be allied at least in this respect, that they conceive of redemption primarily and almost exclusively in terms of existential experience, although the former tends to be more docetic in its pneumatology than the latter. However, before we adopt too severe an attitude toward the extremes, we might well remind ourselves that they often merely draw the conclusions more consistently than many others who hold the same basic premises. Much of existentialist interpretation is taking place in circles where the term "demythologizing" is taboo!

However, there also seem to be indications in contemporary theology of a grappling with the problem of formulating a theology of the Word and the Spirit which can do full justice to the existentialist elements of the gospel, while at the same time incorporating the confession of the historical dimensions of redemption and the mystery of the presence of the kingdom. We only have to mention the discussions that are taking place on the question of "Heilsgeschichte," a concept that has gained great prominence in recent theology, but that has remained problematical in many ways. Behind the attempts to define somewhat adequately the meaning and content of the concept of "redemptive history," we discern a wrestling with the problem of the relationship of revelation and history, of redemption and existence. These issues are of paramount importance for a theology of history and culture. Can it be said, for instance, that the revelation comes to a certain relative, preliminary and fragmentary embodiment in existence as the work of the Holy Spirit both in the heart and in history, an embodiment which on the one hand may not be identified with the revelation, nor on the other hand may be separated from it, but which must be regarded as a sign of God's presence and redemptive activity in history and in the world which he is redeeming?

The whole trend of thought in this article points to our preference for the affirmative answer to the above question. This does not mean, however, that we wish to set over against what we consider to be a one-sided existentialist theology a theology which views divine grace in terms of
substance, as something in a world of many things, nor that we are inclined to transplant a theology which thinks in terms of historical realities by one that utilizes predominantly metaphysical and ontological categories. It must of course always be kept in mind that the kingdom and its presence remain God’s mystery, not to be explained or described by us, but to be confessed. In our speaking about this mystery we must seek a via media between an exclusively existentialist and a too crudely realistic mode of expression. We must, however, never surrender the confession itself, that the redemption which is in Christ, finding its ground in his atoning work and involving his lordship and his kingdom in the power of the resurrection, is in a spiritual manner present in existence, as a provisional, fragmentary and relative embodiment in the human heart and the sanctified life as well as in the cultural structures and social-political orders of society. We would submit that from the perspective of the gospel of the kingdom, which witnesses to God’s preserving and redeeming activity with his whole creation, this is the real thing, the essence of God’s intentions with the world. In the terminology of dogmatic theology we would say that the core of God’s redemptive activity is to be found in the atonement, justification and reconciliation. They form the ground of redemption. In sanctification, however, and the transformation of existence we find the ultimate intentions of God with the world; namely the expression of redemption in existence, the establishment of God’s kingdom in the world. In other words, from the perspective of the kingdom of God and the renewal of all things, the converted heart is not more important than the “Christianized” culture. The sanctification of Western cultural and social-political life has been relative indeed, and the kingdom of Christ is very much hidden in the midst of sin and rebellion. Equally relative has been the sanctification of personal lives. Yet, these are signs and statures in which faith recognizes the presence of the power of the redemptive work in Christ. Neither the converted heart, nor the Church, nor Christian culture can be identified with the kingdom; they all find their ultimate meaning and significance in the fact that they are used of God as instruments in his dealings with the world. God does not only use the Church but also cultures in his historical-eschatological dealings with the world.16

We repeat, in this world, the world of sin and rebellion, God is redemptively present. What else can that mean but the presence of the redemption in Christ? There is no other redemption. The Mediator came that there should be the new man and the new mankind; the Christ came that there should be the new creation. The great struggle of God with the world is that what is true in Christ must become true in existence—in all

things. This struggle of God with man is the real drama of history. At times one may wonder whether it isn't basically a story of failure. We look at Israel, and at the Church, and at the embodiments and forms in Western culture that have issued from the preaching of the gospel; we look at the fruits of the gospel among other peoples and cultures, and we cannot fail to see how all this is tainted by sin. Is perchance the cross the last word after all? Our last word, yes, but not God’s! When with the eyes of faith we look again, we do discern signs, cultural fruits of the gospel in the realms of politics (the state!), social and economic life, art and amusement, etc. In the light of the gospel we confess these to be signs of the presence of God in the world and of his ultimate intentions with existence.

Once again we ask: what is the essence of the gospel? In answering this question we turn to the gospel’s witness to Christ. In its witness to his redemptive work we find the essence. We go one step further and say: the essence is that the Word happens! Revelation is more than information, it is dynamic occurrence, redeeming presence. Thus Christ himself is present in the power and the manner of the Holy Spirit. The gospel of the atonement and the forgiveness of sins is preached, and it takes place. Eternal life enters into the present. The power of the future kingdom is present in the renewing work of the Spirit. All this is nothing less than re-creation in Christ.

What we have sought to stress in this article is that the gospel of the atonement encompasses more than the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of the sinner. The gospel is directed to man; it calls him to repentance, and faith, and personal commitment. Preaching, which is essentially the proclamation of the mighty acts of God, does have as a central theme the call to conversion. The fact, however, that the gospel is addressed to man does not mean that it speaks only about man. The whole cosmos and all of history come into view when the Bible seeks to indicate what is involved in God’s redemptive work and purpose.

Many reasons could be adduced why the Church has generally been reluctant to devote too much attention to questions of culture. Foremost among these has undoubtedly been the desire to preserve her distinct nature as the Church, which is essentially not the product of cultural development, nor the promoter of cultural enterprises. She is the Body of Christ and in various respects a foreign element in the midst of our cultural and social-political structures. She should not identify herself with any of these. To the sinner who is desperately searching for a merciful God she preaches Christ and not culture. These insights, which we would regard as genuinely biblical, must, however, not be interpreted as proving that the gospel and culture are therefore heterogeneous and unrelated.
realities. This kind of non-sequitur which amounts to distortion through oversimplification, has in many instances had a fatal influence on the Church's social witness. Such an abridgement of the manifold richness of the gospel and the redemption in Christ can only obscure the full vision of the Church's ministry in the world. The gospel of the fulfillment and the ultimate redemption of all things makes the question of culture an ever pressing one, which should have the constant concern of a prophetic and evangelical Church. Moreover, world conditions in general and developments in Western civilization in particular furnish us with signs of the times which should make this question of the implications of the gospel of the kingdom for the cultural form-giving of life a supremely urgent one for the Church today.