

Response

by

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In his paper, *Beyond Christ and Culture*, Hitoshi Fukue describes “fundamental differences” between Asian and Western cultures, and how these contribute to variations in theology for Asian and Western Christians. He suggests that we “take an interpenetrating approach in matters of Christ and Culture.” He submits that in this approach “Asians and Western Christians will interpenetrate each other with their own unique understanding of faith and greatly contribute to each other,” and “in taking this approach we would perhaps become more authentic Christians for the twenty-first century.”

First, I want to affirm the importance of addressing this issue, and thank Dr. Fukue for his illustrative reminder of one of the critical ongoing challenges the Church faces, as we endeavor to know Christ and be the church Christ intends us to be in a world with a wide variety of cultures. We see this challenge in the New Testament as Jesus endeavors to make Himself known in His world of Jew and Gentile, Pharisee and fishermen. The Wesley brothers endeavored to make Christ known in their world of monarch and minion, Anglican and miner. For the Church of the Nazarene in 1908 it was holiness folks from a variety of USA cultures gathering at Pilot Point, Texas. As our Church is now fast approaching being represented in 150 world areas, we endeavor to make Christ known and be the church He intends us to be in virtually all of the cultures of the world.

Even in the tiny portion of the world where I serve, Arizona and Southern Nevada USA, we are endeavoring to know Christ and be His church within the context of an astounding variety of ethnic and socioeconomic cultures — represented by communities as diverse as Las Vegas and Yuma, Scottsdale and Bard, along with distinct people-groups — Hispanics, Asians, Anglos and others. Certainly, a similar story might be told by each participant in this global gathering of theologians conversing as the church in the world. We live, converse, and minister at the intersection of Christ and Culture.

Adequate theological expression calls us to reflect on this important relationship between Christ and Culture, and to consider the implications for proclaiming the gospel faithfully in our present age. I submit that this calls us Wesleyans to live in the tension of that relationship. Various efforts have been put forward to resolve the tension between Christ and Culture. We find explanations in systematic listings of potential categories by Richard Niebuhr, John Howard Yoder, Charles Kraft, and others. But not sufficient theological expression can fit neatly into these categories. At best, there is the continued tension of needing to hold in balance any number of categories in order to move towards an adequate expression. One potential implication would be that Fukue’s *‘Beyond Christ and Culture’* becomes simply another category among the many others that seek to remove us from remaining in the dynamic tension of the relationship of Christ and Culture.

For our global church, living at the intersection of Christ and Culture presents profound implications for the way we do theology and ministry. Fukue describes one example in contrasting

theology in Asia and the West in C. S. Song's thesis. Song offers "a strong criticism of western theology and assertions of Christian faith in a radically different manner of expression from that of the western Christianity." Part of the tension for a global church is to appreciate the various cultures in which Christ reveals Himself. This calls both Asian and Westerner to resist "a strong criticism" of each other's theology, because of "a radically different manner of expression."

"Interpenetrating" can only begin when the various descriptions Fukue refers to — "rationalistic and abstract," "relational and concrete," "philosophical, analytical and conceptual," "rational," and "intuitive" — become observations of cultural differences and when we come to appreciate theological diversity instead of expressing theological provincialism. At the same time, in the "interpenetrating" of cultures, Scripture must provide a "shared center" for our cultural expressions as they shape theology. "Wesley's Quadrilateral" may assist us here in a bit different way, as it affirms the primacy of Scripture, and at the same time recognizes the contribution of the elements of "reason" (West) and "experience" (Asia).

Within every culture we face another dimension of the same tension as theology is expressed in the church and ministry. Living at the intersection of Christ and Culture, John Wesley gave expression to a very practical theology. We may sum up theology in four words, "Faith working through love." The culture of Wesley's day, like the cultures of our day, included its own set of desperate social ills. Tragically, the church of Wesley's day had found a comfortable place, removed from the tension of Christ and Culture. W. H Fitchett gives a graphic description:

The fatal thing in the religion of the age was that it had ceased to be a life, or to touch life. It was exhausted of its dynamic elements — the vision of a redeeming Christ; the message of a present and personal forgiveness. It was frozen into a theology; it was spun out into ecclesiastical forms; it was crystallized into a system of external ethics; it had become a mere adjunct to politics (*Wesley and His Century: A Study in Spiritual Forces*, 1906).

For Wesley, "The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness." He lived at the intersection of Christ and Culture, and chose to remain in that place of great theological and practical tension as he preached in the fields, composed new lyrics put to familiar tunes, and served those almost everyone else refused to see. For today's church, it is not in singing Wesley's Hymns or articulating Wesley's theology that makes us Wesleyans. Like Wesley, we must live at the intersection of Christ and Culture, navigating the tensions of being His Church redemptively, engaging the cultures and social ills of the present age. As Dr. Ray Dunning challenges us, "If we are going to improve on Wesley, we have to catch up with him first."

Questions for Dialogue

1. Is there a place in our conversation regarding Christ and Culture for an approach to theology that might appropriate Wesley's "third alternative"? For example, is there a way for Asian and Western theology to come together in a synergistic third alternative?
2. How would we define the "shared center" of a global / culturally diverse church?
3. How do we assure that we remain faithful to the Wesleyan spirit of practical theology and do not "mature" into the lifeless church described by Fitchett?

