

“Christ and Culture”
Grove Presbyterian Church **28 November, 2010**

Kirkin' o th' Tartan Sunday

Ah, babies, how we love them.

Ah, babies, how they drive us nuts. Midnight feedings. Diapers. Crying jags. Then soon enough they learn to turn the wiggle into a race and little hands investigate everything.

Ah, babies, how they make us better.

Never understood a line in a poem by Wordsworth:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

The Child is Father to the Man. Never understood it until.... When she birthed our babies, then I got it. The babies taught me to grow up.

We are indebted to our babies. They shift us away from thinking about ourselves.

Their dependency makes us grow up.

How long for human infants? Little Henry here can't even walk. Pick him up, carry him around. Little Janie – she's a toddling, yes, but probably a pretty lousy chef. I bet she couldn't even help you stuff and roast a turkey!

We descend the chain of intelligence. The more intelligent, the longer the infant's dependency upon mommy.

These little ones are utterly dependent for at least eight years (sometimes 21 years).

Lizards don't need mommies. The gecko hatches from the egg and instantly scampers out, instinctively hunting for food.

How long does it take a foal to no longer need mommy? In four to six months the foal is weaned. In one week they eat hay. In one hour they can walk.

Take away this prolonged dependency of the human child and you take away the very origins of morality, family, and society ["The Decisive Babies of the World," Harry Emerson Fosdick]. These babies depend on us to be our best and so they demand that we develop the attitudes of caring, of patience, of education, of nurture. Their dependency brings out in us our impulses of selflessness. Babies truly are decisive. They've changed your lives forever.

Jane, her name is the feminine version of the Hebrew name, John, meaning "God is gracious." God is, these Janie's prove it.

And Henry? His name means 'Ruler of the Home.' Of course he is.

And what specie of adults they become, how decisive they become in their age, depends on those who raise them and those who get their souls.

Which child will we raise? Will we raise those spoilt or generous, industrious or lazy, entitled or grateful, frugal or wasteful? Will we raise children decisive for the cause of Christ, the most decisive baby of them all. Amazing how he too was utterly dependent.

Churches really can imagine themselves as maternity wards.

Anybody can build a house. It requires only money, lumber, concrete, and PVC piping. Far more demanding, and far most lasting, are parents who build a home.

Homes are a choice. Values are a choice. What you do with feelings is a choice. Behavior is a choice. Belief is a choice. The future is a choice.

All our babies ultimately each face a problem to solve, a choice to make. As Christians, how are they going to relate to the world, to our society, to the culture around them? What values? What is their good? What is their hope?

Hope is a choice.

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A teacher named H. Richard Niebuhr offered a variety of solutions about how our babies will learn to address the culture in which they live. Akin to most things in life, none of these solutions are clear-cut; they compare more to way stations along a continuum. And each one has its peculiar deficiencies and contributions.

First solution is called **Christ Against Culture**. Let me depict this solution with the crude model of a castle. *[place on table]* These see culture as the opponent, as if culture is laying siege to their bastion of purity and holiness. Keep out the barbarians! Keep separate. Where do we see this race of Christians? Jehovah's Witnesses. In Monasticism. For them their greatest hope is to preserve themselves unstained, unsullied.

The second solution is called **Christ Of Culture**. We choose a gavel to represent this solution. *[place on table]* Why a gavel? Because Congress and Court best illustrates this one, where Christ and the culture belong together through an enlightened, idealistic, and virtuous people, the triumph of reason, through a people cultivated enough to choose a government, laws, behaviors that will naturally develop a moral and beneficent civilization. Here the hope is the social good. This is humanism; this is Thomas Jefferson's Christ.

The third solution is **Christ Above Culture**. Here let Christ convince culture and overcome culture through Christians becoming responsible for all the great institutions: family, state, church. God mediates God's help through these institutions. What else to symbolize this solution but the cathedral, for we see this solution most excellently in Roman and Anglican Catholicism. *[place on table]* May the church monitor secular culture. Its great hope? Transcendence institutionalized.

The fourth solution is called **Christ and Culture in Paradox**. Here we find ruddy and muscular Luther at work, demanding an absolute obedience to Christ in the midst of a culture we must endure. My symbol here? A jail. *[place on table]* We are imprisoned, captives to this conflict with a depraved society, a culture intrinsically sinful. But we shall prove ourselves holy, loyal, and devout captives. Hope for Luther was found in endurance and rescue.

The last solution (wiser than saying, 'the final solution') is what Niebuhr described as **Christ Transforming Culture**. And yes, here we find Calvin. Here we find Augustine. Here we find the heart of Scottish Presbyterianism: the Reformed Tradition. And for this solution we look to the school, for as John Mackay said, "It is not the purpose of the church to transform society, but to transform the transformers." *[place on table]* Christ continuously reshapes and reforms culture by reshaping and reforming Christians inside out rather than top down. Progressive, personal, and pragmatic conversion. Christ rules not over the externals but over our spirits. For us, culture isn't hostile as it was to pessimistic Luther, but a good that has been warped, distorted. The great hope for this solution is an optimistic Christ-centeredness.

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Enough negativism.

If we were truly pessimists we'd stop making babies.

That hasn't happened. They keep popping out. Keep 'em coming.

How can you not be hopeful about the future when you look at Janie and Henry?

They make us do right by them.