



Gospel
in Society
Today

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS INTERACT WITH SOCIETY?

Bible Study



1. STUDY ONE

How Should Christians Interact with Society? Four Common Answers

As Christians how should we relate to the society around us? In a changing world that can be a difficult question to answer.

Back in 2017 after the same-sex marriage plebiscite, the Bible Society's 'Eternity' magazine published a front-page feature, "How to be a Public Christian: Speaking to a New Australia". Several contributors wrote on the topic of how Christians ought to respond to this new context, where people had clearly voted for something that (generally speaking) most Christians were against.¹ Interestingly, there were substantial differences in the views expressed, one saying we should we fight politically against the further erosion of Christian values in the public square, another indicating we should simply love our neighbour and get on with the business of being Christian, and still another saying we should modify the form of our message.

In this, the first of two studies, we look at four answers commonly found in churches and amongst our Christian friends, to the question 'How should Christians interact with society?'

First answer: Fight

The first option as to how Christians should interact with society sees Christian interaction with society primarily as a battle. Christians are encouraged to fight and make a stand, politically and publicly, against the erosion of Christian values in society. The Australian

¹ Eternity reported in the midst of the same-sex marriage debate itself, that the Roman Catholic, Anglican, ACC, Baptist, Presbyterian, Orthodox, and Seventh-Day Adventist churches (plus others) were all 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, 23rd August 2017.

Christian Lobby (ACL) is the most prominent advocate of this approach but there are several other organisations advocating a similar approach.

It's important to understand that what is being fought for in this approach is not primarily the church or the rights of Christians, but Western civilization. The liberal freedoms of the West are seen as closely allied with (and arising from) Christianity, and key to preserving good societies. The foundational assumption is that making and preserving good laws, enforced by the courts, will win the war of making or preserving a good society. The 'front line' in this battle is therefore state and national parliaments. Organising Christians to lobby their government representatives is a major element of this approach.

Second answer: Strategic withdrawal

Representative of the 'strategic withdrawal' approach is Rod Dreher's 2017 book 'The Benedict Option'. Like the 'fight' answer, this approach sees the relationship between Christianity and the world (at least presently) as a war. In contrast to the 'fight' answer though, 'strategic withdrawal' sees this war as effectively lost. Hence what is needed 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..."²

This approach recommends that Christians withdraw from parts of society (at least for the moment), instead creating parallel Christian institutions or structures in these areas. It recommends this as the most effective way of influencing society in the long term. And so, Christians are encouraged to withdraw from things like state-run schools, they are encouraged to set up Christian businesses, and to choose to live in close geographic proximity to other Christians to build Christian community. Less physical kinds of withdrawal (e.g. around internet and technology use) are also encouraged.

² Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), xvii.

Third answer: Focus on core business

A third answer urges Christians to focus on the core business of evangelism and discipleship. John McClean summarises this approach well: “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... 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.”³

While this answer appears to be quite different from the previous two answers, it does share with the ‘strategic withdrawal’ approach the practical outcome of (at least) some degree of withdrawal from society. Not that Christians who adopt this approach are opposed to engagement with society, but in this approach a degree of withdrawal is inevitable if only because engagement with society is just not a very high priority.

Fourth answer: Bless the city

The fourth answer often given as to how Christians are to interact with society, is that they are to interact with society from a fundamental posture of ongoing positive engagement, primarily expressed through good works. In other words, Christians are to ‘bless the city’. The vision statement of Redeemer Presbyterian Church is a good example of this approach: “The Redeemer family of churches and ministries exist to help build a great city for all people...”⁴ However it is important also to recognise that while in this approach habitual

³ John McClean, “The church and social engagement,” Unpublished discussion paper for the Presbyterian Church of Australia Church and Nation Committee (2018), 7. McClean is quoting 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).

⁴ https://redeemer.com/learn/about_us

good works are basic, personal conversion is also seen as fundamental to the way in which the city is blessed.

In Australia, where this approach has been popular, it seems to have been embraced (somewhat) as a reaction to the ambivalence towards society that can arise in the ‘focus on core business’ approach. In contrast to the ‘focus on core business’ approach, ‘bless the city’ stresses that positive interaction with society is a priority. In the United States, on the other hand, ‘bless the city’ seems to be more of a reaction to the culture wars and (hence also) to the ‘fight’ approach. ‘Bless the city’ does function (practically) as an alternative both ‘fight’ and withdrawal approaches.

But wait, there’s more!

The options outlined in this study don’t exhaust the ways in which people commonly answer the question, “How should Christians interact with society?” In the next study, we will look at four more approaches. In the meantime, some questions for personal or group reflection are provided below.

STUDY 1 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Which of the above answers have you come across in your church and among your Christian friends? What other answers have you come across?

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2. Can you think of a strength and a weakness of each of the above approaches? Write them down in the table below.

	Strength	Weakness
Fight		
Strategic withdrawal		
Focus on core business		
Bless the city		

3. Look up the Bible passages listed below, and write down what they have to say about one or more of the approaches outlined above. (If you can you think of more Bible passages that are relevant, then write them down too.)

Matthew 5:14-16

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Proverbs 29:2

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Matthew 28:18-20

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2 Corinthians 6:14-18

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Other

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4. Which of the approaches outlined in this study do you find yourself drawn to, and why?

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2. STUDY TWO

How Should Christians Interact with Society? Four More Common Answers

In the previous study we posed the question, “How should Christians interact with the society around them?” We briefly saw four answers (or options) that are commonly found in churches and amongst our Christian friends. In this second study we look at four more.

Fifth answer: Variations on a theme of pluralism

‘Confident Pluralism’ is the title of a 2016 book written by John Inazu. While not an explicitly Christian book, Inazu writes from a Christian perspective and has also co-edited another book (“Uncommon Ground”) with Tim Keller on these issues.

‘Confident pluralism’ is not religious pluralism (the idea that religious truth is ‘plural’ and that all religions are simply different paths to the same grand truth). Rather, confident pluralism starts with the recognition that differences of viewpoint do exist within society, and on that foundation tries to work out what common ground can be found practically between people of differing views. An example of this might be meetings between pro-choice and pro-life leaders to discuss shared interests, such as the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

The label ‘confident’ is used for this approach since (Inazu argues) confidence of conviction ought to enable more open engagement with people of differing views, not less. 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.”⁵

⁵ John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, paperback edition 2018), 85.

Since Christians have confidence that God's views are the better ones, they (more than most) ought to be able to engage non-defensively with others.

Another view built on the foundation of pluralism is 'generous pluralism', an answer more localized (to Australia, and especially Queensland) in its significance, but worth noting here briefly. Generous pluralism seems to seek to extend more 'space' to those of differing views than confident pluralism might. An example of this is abstaining from voting in the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite, rather than voting 'no'.⁶

Sixth answer: Faithful presence

'Faithful presence' is an approach described by James Davison Hunter in his 2010 book 'To Change the World'.⁷ Although readership of this book has not been wide, its influence has been significant. Faithful presence is grounded in the vision of 'shalom' (peace) that "God intended and that he will, one day, restore,"⁸ "a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being."⁹ Hence, in the world, "Christians are to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those within the community of faith, but to all."¹⁰

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.¹¹ Significantly, in contrast to the 'fight' answer described in our last study, Hunter calls for Christians:

⁶ 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, 14th 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.)

⁷ 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).

⁸ Hunter, *To change the world*, 228.

⁹ *Ibid*, 228.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 230.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 276-285.

“...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.”¹²

Seventh answer: Renewed Christian realism

‘Renewed Christian Realism’ is the approach called for by John Stackhouse in his 2008 book ‘Making the Best of It’.¹³ This approach revives the position of Christian Realism advocated by Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930’s through to the 1950’s. Niebuhr’s approach was to be realistic about how limited human knowledge is (i.e. our views can be wrong) and also about the extent of human sinfulness (i.e. our motives are, at best, mixed). Hence, we should have fairly low expectations of what can realistically be achieved in human society.¹⁴ However, notwithstanding these challenges, Niebuhr also saw it as a duty for Christians to be involved in the world to try to achieve such good as is possible – in other words, to “approximate the goodness of that better world [i.e. the kingdom of heaven]” in this one.¹⁵

Stackhouse renews Niebuhr’s call for Christians to be involved in the world, citing in support: (a) God’s command to subdue and rule over the earth (Gen.1:28), (b) the great commandments to love God and love neighbour (Mt.22:34-40), (c) the new commandment to love (Jn.13:34-35), and (d) the great commission (Mt.28:18-20).¹⁶ He calls Christians to be involved in the society around them even though the extent of positive results might be limited, pragmatically ‘making the best of it’ in a world compromised by the Fall.¹⁷

¹² Ibid, 281.

¹³ John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Ibid, 84-96.

¹⁵ Ibid, 98.

¹⁶ Ibid, 205-220.

¹⁷ Ibid, 350-356.

Eighth answer: Ad hoc or balanced approaches

It may be becoming clear that each of the answers (or options) we've seen so far has things in common with one or more of the other answers given; in fact, in some situations, the practical outcomes from taking one approach might look exactly the same as the practical outcomes from taking one of the other approaches. Also, the portions of the Bible which are appealed to for support for one approach can sometimes also be appealed to by other approaches. We might also notice that sometimes a Christian might operate according to one of these approaches in one area of life or situation, and according to a different approach in a different area of life or situation.

This has led some to advocate for an 'ad hoc' or 'balanced' approach to Christian interaction with the world; in other words, to draw upon different (or even multiple) options/approaches depending on the situation.¹⁸ There is more that could be said about this, but that will have to wait for future studies.

Conclusion

There are (no doubt) even more answers to the question, "How should Christians interact with society?" than we've seen in these two studies. However, these approaches seem to be the ones most commonly encountered in our context. If you would like to delve deeper into this topic, we suggest you head over to GiST's website www.gist.org.au and download our in-depth paper 'Examining a Christian Posture Towards the World'. In the meantime, some questions for private or group reflection are provided below.

¹⁸ 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.

STUDY 2 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What features or aspects can you see are common across two (or more) of the approaches above? (You may also like to consider the four 'answers' given in the first part of this study.)

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2. Can you think of any dangers or pitfalls that might arise in applying any of the above approaches? Alternatively, are there strengths or virtues of each approach that appeal to you?

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3. Look up the Bible passages given in the 'Renewed Christian realism' answer (see below). In the table below, write down which of the answers you think each passage might support.

	Pluralist answers	Faithful presence	Renewed Christian realism
Genesis 1:26-28			
Matthew 22:34-40			

John 13:34-35			
Matthew 28:18-20			

4. What value do you see in adopting an 'ad hoc' or balanced approach? How might this approach help us in different situations?

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5. This whole topic is tricky and we need God's wisdom to navigate it well. What sorts of things should we pray for each other as we wrestle with these questions? Spend some time in prayer.

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