

Sermon: In the world but not of it (preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 17, 2026)

Early in the year I had shared with you of the youth revival that was happening in Mistissini, Quebec, a Cree town located in the Baie-James Municipality, about 10 hours drive north of Ottawa. In a community of 4,000 people, sixteen hundred of them had gathered in the community centre, led by local pastors and local youth, for what could only be described as a good old fashion Christian revival. They gathered for singing, dancing, weeping, confession their sins, repenting before Christ, praising and worshipping God. Scenes and stories that came out of Mistissini were simply beyond belief, they were shared all over social media, at least among those whose interests are primarily Christian as determined by algorithmic logic of media platforms.

My interest in this revival is primarily based on fact that I participate in a mentoring group, where one particular participant has been working tirelessly and diligently with youth in Mistissini for over twenty years. His ministry, though he is actually based in Ottawa and has travelled up to that community for retreats and missions, has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the revival. He still provides our mentoring group with regular updates on the aftermath, and asks that we continue to pray for the work of discipleship he has undertaken with the Cree youth in Mistissini. What an amazing pastor he is, even though he is technically retired (twice already), that hasn't seem to have slowed him down one bit. Being a pastor is not just any other job, it is a vocation where one is called upon and sent forth by the One True Triune and Holy God, Creator of the universe, the heavens and the earth and everything in between. To God be the glory and praise forever and forever. Amen.

I did notice the complete lack of coverage from the Canadian national broadcasters, whether public or private. For days after the initial revival, I waited with bated breath to see what the mainstream media would say about what's happening in Mistissini—crickets... Then finally, about two weeks after the revival, a breaking news from Mistissini, Quebec, came through the wire. It was not about the revival, but about couple of people who were fatally shot by a teen, who was subsequently arrested and charged. Tragic, yes. News worthy? I suppose. But more news worthy than half of the town, and most of their youth have pledged their hearts and lives to Christ Jesus? I don't think there is necessarily a conspiracy of silence by

Canadian media outlets on Christian related coverage, although George Orwell did warn (from his preface to *Animal Farm*) that “unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban”. My concern is that by determining what is not covered, media outlets are actually defining for the general public what is and should be considered important. And in the case of Mistissini, violence and death appears to more important, more news worthy than half of the town coming to Christ.

Moving away from simply critiquing this lack of media coverage of the revival in Mistissini, I think the deeper issue is what Niebuhr’s characterized, in his groundbreaking 1951 classic *Christ & Culture*, as the ‘enduring problem’ of the tension between the teaching of Jesus Christ and human society. What does Jesus actually say about how his followers ought to engage the world? In our Scripture reading today of John 17, Jesus prays. The whole chapter records Jesus’ final prayer before his betrayal and crucifixion, and this pastoral prayer can be broken down into three sections: where he prays for himself (v.1-5), where he prays for his disciples (v.6-19), and where he prays for all believers (v.20-26). It is in the middle section we find the heart of this pastoral prayer as Jesus intercedes for his followers, asking the Father to protect them evil and harm, as he will soon be departing from the world, while leaving his followers in the world. Twice in this middle section Jesus reiterates “*they* (meaning his followers) *are not of the world, just as I am not of the world*”, though the Lord does not actually spell out what it means, and how it looks like to be ‘in the world but not of it’. This brings us back to Niebuhr’s book on *Christ & Culture* as he outlined five primary ways the Church has historically navigated the relationship between the two.

First, **Christ Against Culture**. This approach views the secular society as fundamentally corrupt and opposed to God. Christians are called to withdraw from worldly institutions to maintain purity, to be set-apart as holy. We see examples of this approach in the Amish society and the Anabaptists movement in the 16th century.

Second, **Christ of Culture**. This approach seek to minimize the tension between faith and the world. It strive to align Jesus with the best value of the prevailing society, essentially viewing Christ as the great, perhaps the greatest enlightener of culture. Historical example includes the 19th century liberal Protestantism with traces of its influence still prevailing in mainline Western churches of today.

Third, **Christ Above Culture**. This approach argues that although Christ and culture have their distinct identity, culture in itself is incomplete without the divine revelation and grace found in Christ. In a sense, Christ as the good gift from God completes culture, should the culture wishes to accept Christ.

Fourth, **Christ and Culture in Paradox**. This dualistic model views both Christ and culture as distinctly authoritative, yet in perpetual, irreconcilable conflict. Christians must live in the world, in tension, as citizens of both the secular world (where sin and corruption reign) and the Kingdom of God (which is here but not fully yet). The teaching of Martin Luther of the Two Kingdoms is the prime example of this paradox.

The front cover of this week's bulletin displaying the art work of Edie Mae Herrel would fit nicely to this approach, of the two separate worlds: secular and spiritual. Though if you look closely at the print, the interactions between these two world seem quite multifaceted.

Edie Mae Herrel is a multi-talented and award-winning artist, who has developed her distinctive style in etching and printmaking, characterized by delicacy and attention to detail. Her artwork, stimulated by the Scripture, encourages her observers to connect deeply with spirituality and inspires them to live by the values of love, truth, and joy.

Finally, the last approach of **Christ the Transformer of Culture**. Also known as the conversionist model, this approach acknowledges that although culture is corrupted by human sin, it can nevertheless be redeemed and renewed in Christ. Christians are thus called to engage with the society actively, while seeking to transform the existing cultural structures to reflect the glory of God.

One gets the impression that Niebuhr himself favoured this approach. Certainly, many fellow students in my seminary days, myself included, were in favour of this approach. I would add also, these words of the Apostle Paul to us, in Romans 12:2, "*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*"

I would also add these approaches, though helpful in orienting our thoughts with regard to Christ and culture, they lack specificity in the how's. Take for example, how does a faithful Christian transform culture? Just the thought of it seems incomprehensible, unreachable; it is simply too big to wrap one's mind around!

To that, I go to the idea advanced by Andy Crouch in his book *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Crouch argues that instead of settling for passive or negative response to society, faithful Christians should seek to change culture by creating new, tangible things that reshape the world. Drawing on the idea of cultivation, like in farming, one tries to create through repetitive acts the most fertile conditions for good things to survive and thrive. Or like in cooking, small and seemingly insignificant act as they are, can have a profoundly powerful lasting impact. Here is how Crouch explains it, “If I make dinner tonight for my family, nothing much will change in my family’s culture. But if I make dinner tonight, tomorrow night, next Tuesday and for the next fifteen years of our children’s lives, seeking to do so with creativity, skill and grace that grows over time—even if I never become an avant-garde chef and always follow the recipe—that discipline alone will indeed create a powerful family culture with horizons of possibility and impossibility that we may not even now be able to glimpse.”

Small and meaningful acts repeated over and over again, with discipline, with creativity and grace that grows over time. That has been a sort of guiding principle in how I approach pastoral ministry, and how I counsel parishioners entrust to me. I don’t know if I have in me to transform a town and bring half of its population to Christ, like my fellow pastor in the mentoring group, but that has never been the goal, merely the byproduct of being called to follow Jesus. For we know that “*with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*” (Matthew 19:26).

So go forth in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Triune God, through small acts of grace, repeated over and over again, whether they be picking up a phone and call someone that God has put in your heart to care, or knocking on the door of a long estranged friend, even family members, or making preparation to serve during the Coffee Hour after the Sunday service, or contributing to a committee meeting on a Tuesday evening, when all you want to do is the lay back, to stretch on a sofa and watch a playoff hockey game. Whatever those small gestures of grace maybe, do them diligently, faithfully, cheerfully, and watch how the Spirit of God takes what we bring and magnifies it ten fold, a hundred fold, until the Kingdom of God is all the sudden manifested in our midst. And I should think when that day comes, and come it will, even the CBC will have no choice but to report on it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**