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Bob Dylan and Antithetical Engagement with Culture



by Jeff Taylor

On September 11, 2012, Bob Dylan released his thirty-fifth studio album, *Tempest*, in the United States to critical acclaim—fifty years after the release of his first album. The life and writing of Bob Dylan, singer-songwriter and cultural icon, exemplify a type of Christian engagement with popular culture that is mostly antithetical. In the early 1960s, Dylan influenced pop culture and made a name for himself as a talented and perceptive creator of protest songs. As he moved from overt, sociopolitical “finger-pointing” material to introspective, psychedelic “folk-rock” material, he retained his adversarial stance vis-à-vis the domi-

nant trends and institutions of society. His conversion to Christianity in 1978 did not indicate a renunciation of his countercultural stance. Rather, it was a clarifying, broadening, and deepening of his position.

During the past three decades, Dylan has woven his Christian perspective like a thread through his songs (both recorded originals and performed covers). His theology is based on three sources: the ancient Jewish prophetic tradition, the Jesus Movement tradition coming out of the early 1970s, and the Christian tradition in folk-country-and-blues music. Dylan's example reminds us that engagement with popular culture does not necessarily mean endorsement or emulation. It also reminds us that a transformative approach to culture does not necessarily mean involvement in electoral politics or government. Dylan remains apolitical, a stance that is, in itself, both an engagement with and a rejection of our culture. Bob Dylan's emphasis on what Abraham Kuyper called *antithesis* is not the whole story for a Christian world and life view, but it is part of the story.

Bob Dylan's own story began in Minnesota, as Robert Zimmerman, grandchild of Russian Jewish immigrants; from that beginning, Dylan became one of the most influential musical figures of the second half of the century. With artistic genius and personal charisma, Dylan authored classic songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” “All Along the Watchtower,” “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,”

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and “Forever Young.” By the time he was twenty-five, Dylan had reached a cultural level comparable with the Beatles, with songwriting talent rivaling that of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, especially in the realm of lyrics.

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Moving to New York City in 1961 to join the folk music scene, where his talent for singing, songwriting, and performing was soon recognized, he became famous by writing songs about sociopolitical issues (“protest songs”). Folk singers Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had long been active in left-liberal causes, but they wrote relatively few songs about contemporary issues. Members of the Beat Generation, the Counterculture of the late 1950s, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, expressed themselves by writing prose and poetry, not by writing and singing songs. In other words, Dylan was doing something unique, especially in August 1963, when he sang before 200,000 people at the Washington civil rights march that featured Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

In 1965, when Dylan turned from acoustic folk music to electric rock music with songs such as “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and “Mr. Tambourine Man,” harbingers of the late 1960s’ Counterculture, he was accused by folk purists and protest song devotees of being a traitor, of abandoning The Cause in favor of making self-indulgent pop music. He may have betrayed the high-society intelligentsia that hoped to use him as a front man, but he had not betrayed The Cause—racial equality, economic justice, and world peace. Rock music had always been down-to-earth—emanating from black gospel, music of the working class, at least slightly revolutionary. And this was a time for The Cause: By the mid ’60s, many young people had

lost their early ’60s optimism, JFK was dead, the civil rights movement was splintering, the united black-white effort had mostly collapsed, many northern blacks were becoming more militant, and the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam had escalated. At a time when young people were becoming disillusioned with the political and economic Establishment as well as the lifestyle of their own parents, Bob Dylan’s career peaked.

However, in 1966, when Dylan was as well known and influential as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Elvis Presley, the incredible intensity of his life halted abruptly when he crashed his motorcycle in a near-fatal accident that produced eighteen months of seclusion as well as the release of his next album. As a result, the American Counterculture, emerging in full force—with their long hair, beads, psychedelic clothes, peace signs, free love, eastern mysticism, communes, grass, and LSD—considered Bob Dylan their uncrowned leader, an uncomfortable role for Dylan, who just wanted to be a singer, husband, and father.¹ Even though Dylan would never regain his former commercial success and social influence, he did turn out a number of hit records in the ’70s and was regularly praised by critics.

What is more significant about Dylan in the ’70s is his conversion to evangelical Christianity, marking a new turning point in his life. While his 1978 conversion confused and angered many fans, his first born-again album, *Slow Train Coming*, went platinum, with the single “Gotta Serve Somebody” nearly topping the charts and winning him a Grammy Award. His superstar status having ended in the mid 1960s and his star status having ended in the late 1970s, Dylan was and is still considered a legend. Seen as perhaps the pre-eminent voice of the generation that came of age in the 1960s even though his voice has been widely scorned as too rough and nasally, he has been deservedly praised as a master of phrasing and emotional impact.²

Dylan and Politics

Dylan’s phrasing and emotional impact were especially useful for what could be called socialistic anarchism. Anarcho-pacifism was the “chief intellectual inspiration” of the New Left, which arose

in the early 1960s, fathered by socialistic anarchists Dwight Macdonald and C. Wright Mills.³ The New Left's leading group was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), its founding manifesto was SDS' Port Huron Statement, written by Tom Hayden, and its "most resonant troubadour" Bob Dylan, according to Macdonald's biographer: "As medieval Catholicism cannot be understood apart from Aquinas, so allusion to Dylan is obligatory to any study of Sixties radicalism."⁴ Dylan was also the preeminent hero of the less-overtly-political, more-lifestyle-oriented but still anarchistic Counterculture that developed in the late 1960s.⁵

That anarchistic message is clearly evident in Dylan's first all-electric album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, where he writes that to change the world, people must change themselves.⁶ It could be argued that Dylan did more as a rock star than as a folk singer to revolutionize American society, as his songs stimulated self-understanding and change in millions of young people. Twenty years after Dwight Macdonald published his 1946 article "The Root is Man," which called for the creation of small fraternal groups—organized according to the principles of pacifism and noncoercion—that would challenge the government by draft refusal, by evasion, by argument, and by encouraging attitudes of disrespect, skepticism, and ridicule toward the state and all authority,⁷ Dylan put these attitudes on vinyl for purchase at their local record stores.

During the mid to late 1960s, Dylan mostly ignored the government. When he did refer to it, he usually did so in a somewhat disrespectful, skeptical, or ridiculous manner. Dylan represented indifference toward, if not rebellion against, authority, as his songs bear this out. In "The Times They Are A-Changin'" (released in 1964), he warns senators and congressmen that the battle outside would soon shake their windows and rattle their walls. In "With God on Our Side" (1964), he ridicules patriotism which claims that God is on America's side during every war.⁸ In "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (1965), he says, "you don't need a weather man to know which way the wind blows" and "don't follow leaders."⁹ In "Absolutely Sweet Marie" (1966), he notes that "to live outside the law, you must be honest."¹⁰

This apolitical, anarchistic stance did not change when he became a Christian in 1978; instead, it was strengthened and deepened to what could be described as Christian anarchy. Not long after his conversion, Dylan said, "When I walk around some of the towns we go to ... I'm totally convinced people need Jesus. Look at the junkies and the winos and the troubled people. It's all a sickness which can be healed in an instant. The powers that be won't let that happen. The powers that be say it has to be healed politically."¹¹ Five years later, when asked if some of his post-conversion songs were signs that he had moved to the right, Dylan responded, "Well, for me, there is no right and there is no left. There's truth and there's untruth, y'know? There's honesty and there's hypocrisy. Look in the Bible: you don't see nothing about right or left ... I hate to keep beating people over the head with the Bible, but that's the only instrument I know, the only thing that stays true."¹² In a 1984 interview, Dylan said, "I think politics is an instrument of the Devil. Just that clear. I think politics is what kills; it doesn't bring anything alive." When asked, "So you don't care who's president? It doesn't make any difference?" he replied, "I don't think so."¹³

In an interview during the most recent election season (2012), Dylan declined to say whether or not he votes and dismissed a question about whether others should vote with a perfunctory, "Yeah, why not vote?... We live in a democracy. What do you want me to say? Voting is a good thing." When asked if wanted to see President Obama reelected, Dylan replied, "I've lived through a lot of presidents! And you have too! Some are re-elected and some aren't." Despite repeated, tiresome attempts by the pro-Obama interviewer to elicit an endorsement of, or at least sympathy for, Barack Obama out of Bob Dylan, he would have none of it. The interviewer finally gave up and moved on.¹⁴ Dylan's reticence had nothing to do with support for Mitt Romney or the Republican Party and everything to do with his Christian spiritual perspective.

Dylan's anarchism is reflected in many of his post-conversion songs. In "Gonna Change My Way of Thinking" (1979), he says, "there's only one authority, and that's the authority on high."¹⁵ Drawing on his 1960s' reputation, Dylan told a

concert audience, in 1979, “Never told you to vote for nobody; never told you to follow nobody.” Five months later, he told an audience, “They’re running for president now. They’re gonna save the country But you can’t save nothing unless *you’re* saved.” In another city, he said, “Jesus is for everybody. He came to save the world, not to judge the world. Education’s not gonna save you. Law’s not gonna save you. Medicine’s not gonna save you. Don’t wait too long. . . . Salvation begins right now, today.”¹⁶ As an alternative, his unreleased song “City of Gold” (1980) declares, “There is a City of Peace/where all foul forms of destruction cease/where the mighty have fallen and there are no police/There is a City of Peace.”¹⁷ But his completely negative “Political World” (1989) declares, “love don’t have any place,” “wisdom is thrown into jail,” “mercy walks the plank,” “courage is a thing of the past,” “children are unwanted,” and “peace is not welcome at all.”

Dylan then extends the skepticism in “Political World” to the whole fallen world. In “Everything is Broken” (1989), he says, “Broken hands on broken ploughs, broken treaties, broken vows / broken pipes, broken tools, people bending broken rules / Hound dog howling, bullfrog croaking, everything is broken.”¹⁸ In “Unbelievable” (1990), Dylan looks at a fallen world’s definition of the American Dream: “They said it was the land of milk and honey/Now they say it’s the land of money/Who ever thought they could make that stick/It’s unbelievable you can get this rich this quick.”¹⁹ The very title of Dylan’s 1993 album sums up his attitude toward human authority and society: “World Gone Wrong.”²⁰ Then, his Grammy-winning song “Things Have Changed” (2000) declares, “All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie.”²¹

Dylan the Christian: A Passing Phase?

These lyrics invite us to consider the authenticity of Dylan’s Christian conversion and on-going faith in Christ. During the 1980s, two contradictory sets of rumors suggested that Dylan’s “Christian phase” was over. Either he had lost interest in religion and returned to his worldly lifestyle of heavy drinking and carousing, or he had embraced Orthodox Judaism as an alternative to Christianity. While Dylan’s personal life may invite criticism from a Christian moral perspective—as is true for all of

us—it doesn’t prove or disprove his faith commitment or his status in relation to the grace of God. As for a return to his Jewish roots, this perception was sparked by events such as attending the bar mitzvah of one of his sons in Israel and studying with some rabbis in Brooklyn. These actions don’t prove or disprove his Christian faith. Dylan did not reject his Jewishness when he knelt before Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah. His gospel album *Saved* featured Jeremiah 31:31 on the inner sleeve: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.”

A year after the Orthodox Judaism rumors began, Dylan continued to sing his Christian songs in concert. When a *Rolling Stone* interviewer asked him, in 1984, “Are the Old and New Testaments equally valid?” he answered, “To me.” Dylan also said, “I believe in the Book of Revelation,” and referred to the coming Antichrist. Twenty-eight years later, he repeated the line about Revelation word for word to a different interviewer for the same magazine.²² During his 1986 world tour, Dylan introduced the song “In the Garden,” from the album *Saved*, by saying, “I want to sing you a song about my hero.” That was not the act of an Orthodox

“Jesus is for everybody. He came to save the world, not to judge the world. Education’s not gonna save you. Law’s not gonna save you. Medicine’s not gonna save you. Don’t wait too long. . . . Salvation begins right now, today.”

Jew. He sang both the black spiritual “Go Down, Moses” and his own “In the Garden,” about Jesus Christ, when he performed in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1987.²³ Dylan’s concert set-lists, including his choice of cover songs; his cagey-yet-illuminating interview remarks; and his biblical language, includ-

ing New Testament words, in his songs all attest to his continued Christianity.²⁴ In 2012, he told *Rolling Stone*, “No kind of life is fulfilling if your soul hasn’t been redeemed.”²⁵

Church Out of World, Christ Against Culture

If Bob Dylan were an isolated example of an artistic, intelligent Christian dabbling in theology, his perspective would hold limited value for the wider Christian community. But we can place Dylan in the wider context of a distinct, important tendency within Christianity. In Richard Niebuhr’s five types of Christian response to culture, Dylan is clearly in the “Christ Against Culture” camp.²⁶ He “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty.”²⁷

This is not to say that Dylan’s stance in relation to culture and non-Christians is one of utter negativity or complete rejection. Being in opposition to the world as an organized system does not mean opposition to every aspect of life in the world; it means rejection of the world’s dominant spirit and direction—specifically, rejection of the “‘arrangement’ under which Satan has organized the world of unbelieving mankind upon his cosmic principles of force, greed, selfishness, ambition, and pleasure.”²⁸ Yet God is not absent, even in such a spiritually benighted milieu. In a recent interview, Dylan remarked, “I see God’s hand in everything. Every person, place and thing, every situation.” After acknowledging his use of biblical imagery and reiterating his belief in the Book of Revelation, Dylan went on to say, “There’s truth in all books. In some kind of way. Confucius, Sun Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, the Koran, the Torah, the New Testament, the Buddhist sutras, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, and many thousands more. You can’t go through life without reading some kind of book.”²⁹ Even though this statement could be one of Dylan’s characteristic interview dodges, his underlying point remains: Dylan sees God’s hand in everything—or at least the potential in everything—as well as the existence of sin, falsehood, and evil.

In other words, Dylan believes in what Kuyper called common grace. Kuyper asked, “Does Christ have significance only for the *spiritual* realm or also

for the *natural and visible* domain? Does the fact that he has overcome the world mean that he will one day toss the world back into nothingness in order to keep alive only the souls of the elect, or does it mean that the world too will be his conquest, the trophy of his glory?”³⁰ Kuyper argued for the second answer to each question. However, he did not sugar-coat reality or lapse into syncretistic humanism. His conception of common grace included acknowledgment of sin, the Fall, Babylon, and Antichrist.³¹ Kuyper also distinguished between interior and exterior manifestations of common grace: “The former is operative wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life. The latter is in evidence when human power over nature increases, when invention upon invention enriches life, when international communication is improved, the arts flourish, the sciences increase our understanding.”³²

Kuyper’s view of common grace, echoed in Dylan’s words, is summarized by Richard Mouw’s statement “God mysteriously works in positive ways in sinful humankind. This is how we are to understand the works of beauty that might be produced by a promiscuous, blaspheming artist, or the acts of justice committed by a person who speaks disdainfully about religious allegiances.”³³ The same might be said for truth-telling by someone ignorant of, or hostile toward, God. A song on Dylan’s new CD—“Roll on John”—is an example of Dylan’s appreciation for art, justice, and truth flowing through humanity, regardless of individual spiritual allegiance. Bob Dylan is a Christian; John Lennon was not. Yet Dylan can pay tribute to Lennon because he appreciates Lennon’s positive contribution of shining a light in a dark world.³⁴ With his keen sense of justice and great artistic ability, Dylan himself was a conduit of common grace in his pre-Christian years of the 1960s and 1970s.

With his conversion to Christianity in 1978, in the context of the southern California-based Jesus People Movement of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, Dylan turned to the biblical book of Revelation, which is “radical in its rejection of ‘the world.’”³⁵ As the so-called Jesus Freaks and their allies sought a restoration of the purity and simplicity of the

first-century Church, they emphasized contemporary social ethics as well as eschatological yearning for the Second Coming. The converted Dylan went through intense Scripture study under the teaching of ministers connected with Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a loose-knit denomination that began as a Bible study in the Hollywood living room of Larry Norman. Dylan's study emphasized Revelation, the Olivet Discourse of Christ (Matthew 24-25), and the Old Testament prophetic books, as understood by dispensational premillennial theology—the kind of Bible prophecy popularized by Hal Lindsey in the 1970s.

While Niebuhr attempted to mitigate the enduring anti-culture motif of Revelation because it was written in the context of Roman persecution, Dylan and the Jesus People did not see the book as dated or fulfilled.³⁶ Dylan went so far as to spend considerable time between songs, during his con-

Dylan recognizes the biblical and oppositional distinction between the Church and the World, a distinction foundational to the “Christ Against Culture” position and well-represented in the New Testament.

cert tour of 1979-1980, giving Bible-based insights and advice to his audiences. These insights, coupled with Dylan's refusal to sing any of his pre-Christian songs, confused and angered fans, many of whom heckled or walked out, spreading the word of the new religious Dylan to the media and hurting ticket sales.

Many of Dylan's mini-sermons focused on the End Times. In San Francisco, he said, “There's gonna be a war called the Battle of Armageddon which is like something you never even dreamed about. And Christ will set up His kingdom and He'll rule it from Jerusalem. I know, far out as that may seem this is what the Bible says.” In Albuquerque, he said, “I told you ‘The Times They Are A-Changing’

and they did. I said the answer was ‘Blowin in the Wind’ and it was. I'm telling you now that Jesus is coming back, and He is!... Jesus is coming back to set up his Kingdom in Jerusalem for a thousand years.”³⁷ Dylan's belief in a future, literal, earthly reign of Jesus Christ followed the tradition of Tertullian (160-225 A.D.), father of Latin theology and fellow proponent of “Christ Against Culture.”³⁸ Dylan songs with eschatological and apocalyptic themes include “Slow Train,” “Gonna Change My Way of Thinking,” “When He Returns,” “Ye Shall Be Changed,” “Are You Ready,” “The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar,” “Caribbean Wind,” “Angelina,” “Jokerman,” “Man of Peace,” “Dark Eyes,” “Death is Not the End,” “Ring Them Bells,” “Man in the Long Black Coat,” and “Cat's in the Well.”³⁹

Other major themes of the “Christ Against Culture” type also appear in Dylan's work. For example, Dylan recognizes the biblical and oppositional distinction between the Church and the World, a distinction foundational to the “Christ Against Culture” position and well-represented in the New Testament. The word *Church* comes from *ekklesia*, or *ecclesia*, in the Greek, meaning assembly of the called-out ones.⁴⁰ The Church is called out of the World, as Christ himself declared.⁴¹ (Of course, this is a spiritual separation, not a physical separation.) Even earlier in God's covenant relations with humankind, we see the same principle at work with ancient Israel, for whom the word *holy* means “set apart.” The same root gives us the words *sanctify* and *saint*. Jesus prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” and told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.”⁴²

Niebuhr was correct in pointing out the prominence of the anti-*kosmos* imperative in the writings of John—namely Revelation and the epistles. I John is particularly emphatic, declaring, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” But this is not only a Johannine topic; other apostolic writings also emphasize a spiritual divide. Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”; and “From now on, let those ... who deal with the world [live] as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing

away.” Succinctly enunciating a full gospel of both social justice and personal holiness—a combination not too common for Christians of our time and place—James writes, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” He also writes, “Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”⁴³

Clearly, the Church opposes the World (as an organized system dominated by fallen, ungodly values), partly because Satan is described as the prince of this world during the present age.⁴⁴ Because of these contrasting loyalties, Christ set forth alternate ethics for an alternate society—not for some perfected future but for the fallen present, a present that makes the commands so difficult yet so important.⁴⁵

In addition to references in his songs, including dozens of cover performances of “This World Can’t Stand Long” in concert, Bob Dylan made clear reference to these “Christ Against Culture” verities when he preached on stage in 1979-80. He told one audience, “The Bible says, ‘Friendship with the world is the enemy of God.’ In other words, a friend of the world is the enemy of God. I know that sounds really strange, but sometimes the truth is hard to take. But the truth will set you free.” He told another audience, “You know Satan’s called the god of this world, that’s true, and it’s such a wonderful feeling when you get delivered from that.” He added that Satan “has been defeated at the cross.”⁴⁶

Spiritual Maturity and Artistic Nuance

In these attempts to engage culture as a new Christian, Dylan sometimes sounded superficial and seemed ham-fisted, often criticized for sounding like a second-rate Moral Majority scold during his *Slow Train Coming* period. Even sympathetic fans cringed at some of his lines.⁴⁷ “All that foreign oil controlling American soil/Look around you, it’s just bound to make you embarrassed/Sheiks walkin’ around like kings/wearing fancy jewels and nose rings/deciding America’s future from Amsterdam and to Paris” sounded jingoistic and

bigoted. “Adulterers in churches and pornography in the schools” seemed to be a silly sounding of false alarms, although the next line was better: “You got gangsters in power and lawbreakers making rules.”⁴⁸ One critic attributed such clunker lines to “sloppy writing” and Dylan’s desire to “make a conscious connection for the public between the early ‘protest-singer’ Dylan (still his best-known image) and the present-day, born-again Dylan.”⁴⁹ While some of this criticism is probably accurate, spiritual immaturity was also a factor.

In 1979, Dylan even linked his gospel rap to the Iranian hostage crisis, referring to the Shah of Iran as having “plundered the country, murdered a lot of people, escaped.” He went on: “Now here’s what Jesus would have done. Jesus would have gone back. See, that’s what Jesus did.”⁵⁰ He made a point, but such a simplistic approach whereby every current event is merely grist for the evangelistic mill is not the best example of Christian engagement with culture.

Six years later, Dylan exhibited considerably more spiritual depth when he discussed American culture and the ways of the world. He told an interviewer, “I’ve never been able to understand . . . the seriousness of pride. People talk, act, live as if they’re never going to die. And what do they leave behind? . . . Nothing but a mask.” He condemned the commercialization of the world in a way that went beyond Accept-Jesus-as-your-Savior-or-you’ll-be-in-big-trouble: “Everything’s a business. Love, truth, beauty. Conversation is a business. Spirituality is not a business, so it’s going to go against the grain of people who are trying to exploit other people People who believe in the coming of the Messiah live their lives right now as if he was here.”⁵¹

Dylan’s maturity, lacking in the 1979-80 period, is especially evident in his comments about songs on his *Biograph* box-set compilation. Commenting on “Every Grain of Sand”—one of his most beautiful, hymn-like post-conversion songs—Dylan provides nuggets of wisdom: “The old trades are still the most useful, can get you out of a jam. Everything is crooked now and the signs all point you the wrong way—it’s like we’re living at the time of the Tower of Babel, all our tongues are confused. We’re building a tower to Venus. Where the hell is that? What are we going to find there? God?” And:

“Make something religious and people don’t have to deal with it, they can say it’s irrelevant. ‘Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand.’ That scares...people. They’d like to avoid that. Tell that to someone and you become their enemy. There does come a time, though, when you have to face facts and the truth is true whether you wanna believe it or not, it doesn’t need you to make it true.” Dylan had not changed his commitment to revealed truth or his allegiance to Christ as king, but he had developed a richer vocabulary and could engage a wider area of culture than in earlier years.

Antithesis in the Reformed Tradition

Can we, as Reformed Christians, learn from Bob Dylan and others who emphasize Christ Against Culture? Yes, but we might first have to get past a conceptual constraint. In the Reformed tradition, especially among neo-Calvinists, the “Christ Against Culture” type is often caricatured and condemned because it is pitted against the preferred “Christ the Transformer of Culture” type.⁵² Antagonism between the two types is more perception than reality—there are some legitimate differences in emphasis, but both are parts of genuine Christianity.

Recognition of age-old conflict between the Church and the World is not the property of a narrow, offbeat portion of the Christian tradition. An obvious example during the late ancient period is Augustine’s *City of God*. One analyst comments, “The public practices of the empire are not merely political or merely temporal; they are loaded, formative practices that are aimed at a *telos* that is antithetical to the city of God,” even if Augustine’s critique of the City of Man “does not entail a simplistic, wholesale rejection of Rome or other political configurations of the earthly city.”⁵³ During the past century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to “The Great Divide,” noting that “the followers of Christ” are “separated from the rest of the world” in an ongoing process, in which we guard against false prophets, whose ambitions are “set on the world, not on Jesus Christ,” as they hope for “power and influence, money and fame.”⁵⁴ C.S. Lewis also recognized the power that God allows Satan to exercise in the world during this age: “Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is

the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”⁵⁵

The Church-World divide and the power of Satan are also recognized in the Reformed tradition. After all, it was Calvin—following Luther, following Augustine, following Scripture—who emphasized the depth of sin and the extent of the Fall. Obviously, total depravity carries cultural implications. In a certain light, the “Christ Against Culture” position and “Christ the Transformer of Culture” position appear as opposites, but they need not be viewed as such. Properly understood, they complement one another. Culture would not be in need of transformation if it were not seriously flawed.

Abraham Kuyper recognized this divide, calling it *antithesis*, which means contrast or opposition—in other words, *against*. According to Kuyper, the Bible is plain about the role of Satan: “There is a thinking mind, a personal being, whose unity of plan and conception is manifest in that life of sin and whose mighty but disastrous endeavor is served by all humanity in its pursuit of sin.” In

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regard to world unity, Kuyper observes, “The similarity between God’s plan and that of the world is therefore undeniable.... But as with counterfeit currency, the similarity is only in name.” He, therefore, warns of danger when “the church of Christ or

the Gospel does not act as a yeast in the life of the world but, contrariwise, the principle of the world ...ferment[s] in Christ's church."⁵⁶

Asking if the world will get gradually better and more Christian, if Christ will find a Christianized world when he returns, Kuyper's answer is No: "We are told that a great apostasy awaits us. ...That in the end this opposition will culminate in the advent of an appalling *anti-Christian* world-power which, if Christ did not break it, would rip this whole world forever out of the hands of its God and away from its own destiny." Taking an apocalyptic approach, Kuyper notes, "Someday there will be coercion, when Christ descends in majesty from the heavens, breaks the anti-Christian powers with a rod of iron, and, in the words of Psalm 2, dashes them in pieces like a potter's vessel." This Kuyper statement reminds us of the opening lines of Dylan's song "When He Returns": "The iron hand it ain't no match for the iron rod/The strongest wall will crumble and fall to a mighty God."⁵⁷ More recently, Herman Dooyeweerd, referring to "the monster-marriage of Christianity with the movements of the age, which arise from the spirit of this world," reminds us, "History remains the battle-field between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness."⁵⁸

The Kuyperian emphasis on antithesis is exactly right. It keeps us from being naive, overly-optimistic, quasi-humanistic Panglossians when we toil in the vineyard of the world. Yes, the kingdom has come, but not fully. It is not "God's world" in the sense that this is as good as it gets. And while we are called to advance kingdom values in the present age—rather than just marking time for individual blessedness in heaven or merely seeing our time on earth as an opportunity to convince others to repeat the sinner's prayer—it will take the personal return of Christ himself to fully overthrow the kingdom of Satan.

There is a refreshing realism in Kuyper and Dylan. Both can simultaneously embrace the Christ-as-sovereign-of-creation concept of Colossians *and* the Love-not-the-world concept of I John. Without antithesis, we fall into the current of a fallen-world stream flowing in the wrong direction. Without common grace/cultural mandate, we fall into an unhealthy withdrawal from

the rest of creation and a narrow understanding of Christian life that does not reflect the fullness of the New Testament. It might be assumed that analyzing Christian engagement with culture/world is a dull subject, of importance to only a specialized class of theologians. But, in fact, that analysis is constantly being done by all Christians and is important for all Christians. Bob Dylan expresses his worldview of sin-but-redemption and antithesis-but-transformation primarily through lyrical music, but all Christians can manifest a biblical perspective in a variety of ways.

Despite his fame as a singer, songwriter, folk popularizer, and rock star, Bob Dylan's most important legacy may be his attempt, however imperfect, to embrace, practice, and share the full gospel of the Kingdom of God. It is a high calling. It is a high calling given to each of us.

Endnotes

1. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 114-24.
2. Jann S. Wenner, "Bob Dylan and Our Times: The Slow Train is Coming," *Rolling Stone*, September 20, 1979, 95.
3. Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Critical American: The Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), 101.
4. *Ibid.*, 105.
5. David E. Apter and James Joll, eds., *Anarchism Today* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), 41-69; Dionne, E.J. Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Touchstone, c1991, 1992), 40-41.
6. Gross, *Bob Dylan*, 82; Bob Dylan, *Highway 61 Revisited* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1965).
7. Whitfield, *Critical American*, 70.
8. Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1964).
9. Bob Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1965).
10. Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1966).
11. "Dylan Tells Story of Christian Conversion," *Contemporary Christian Music*, February 1981, 22.
12. Mikal Gilmore, "Positively Dylan," *Rolling Stone*, July 17/31, 1986, 135. A few years after Dylan's interview, Christian theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William

Willimon offered a similar perspective in their book *Resident Aliens*: “The times are too challenging to be wasting time pressing one another into boxes called liberal or conservative. The choice is between truth and lies.” – Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 156, 160.

13. Kurt Loder, “Bob Dylan: The Rolling Stone Interview,” *Rolling Stone*, June 21, 1984, 17.
14. Mikal Gilmore, “Bob Dylan: The Rolling Stone Interview,” *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2012, 49, 48-50.
15. Bob Dylan, *Slow Train Coming* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1979).
16. Bob Dylan, *Saved!: The Gospel Speeches of Bob Dylan* (Madras, India: Hanuman Books, 1990), 43, 81, 109, 110.
17. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-2001* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 434.
18. Bob Dylan, *Oh Mercy* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1989).
19. Bob Dylan, *Under the Red Sky* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1990).
20. Bob Dylan, *World Gone Wrong* [sound recording] (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 1993).
21. *Wonder Boys: Music from the Motion Picture* [sound recording] (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2000).
22. Loder, “Bob Dylan,” 17; Gilmore, “Bob Dylan,” 51.
23. Scott M. Marshall with Marcia Ford, *Restless Pilgrim: The Spiritual Journey of Bob Dylan* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Relevant Books, 2002), 89-90.
24. In the late 1990s, Dylan was performing Christian songs like “Hallelujah, I’m Ready to Go,” “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior,” “Somebody Touched Me,” “I Am the Man, Thomas,” and “Rock of Ages” in concert. See Marshall, *Restless Pilgrim*, for other specific examples.
25. Gilmore, “Bob Dylan,” 48.
26. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951, 1975), 45-82.
27. *Ibid.*, 45.
28. C.I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 1342. Scofield was an influential Bible commentator and conference speaker within the dispensational school of theology. He identifies these principles in his annotation on *kosmos*, in connection with Revelation 13. Scofield goes on to note, “This world-system is imposing and powerful with armies and fleets; is often outwardly religious, scientific, cultured, and elegant; but, seething with national and commercial rivalries and ambitions, is upheld in any real crisis only by armed force, and is dominated by Satanic principles.” The heirs of the Jesus Movement who taught Dylan-the-new-Christian were imbued with a popularized type of dispensationalism, including an emphasis on opposition between a fallen world and a righteous God. Scofield’s description of the world-system sums up Dylan’s own perspective and such thought is present in numerous Dylan songs from 1979 to 2012. Dispensationalism was essentially half of the American fundamentalist movement that arose in the early twentieth century, with orthodox Presbyterianism associated with Princeton Theological Seminary being the other half. Although dispensationalists were more skeptical of culture than the men associated with Princeton theology, and although the latter rejected the premillennial eschatology of the former, both groups were Calvinist in their basic doctrines. See: George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
29. Gilmore, “Bob Dylan,” 51.
30. Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 171.
31. *Ibid.*, 179-82.
32. *Ibid.*, 181.
33. Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 68.
34. Bob Dylan, *Tempest* [sound recording] (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2012).
35. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 45.
36. *Ibid.*, 45-46.
37. *Ibid.*, 47, 12-13.
38. Tertullian, *Apologetic and Practical Treatises*, trans. C. Dodgson (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842) (Nabu Public Domain Reprint), 120-30; Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 49, 51-55. Niebuhr also places Leo Tolstoy in this tradition – *Ibid.*, 56-64. This is an accurate assessment although Tolstoy did not have the premillennial, apocalyptic vision of Tertullian and Dylan.
39. Dylan, *Slow Train Coming*; Dylan, *Lyrics*, 420-21, 453-54, 456-57; Dylan, *Saved*; Dylan, *Shot of Love*; Dylan, *Infidels*; Bob Dylan, *Empire Burlesque* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1985); Bob Dylan, *Down in the Groove* [sound recording] (New

- York: Columbia Records, 1988).
40. The word *ek* means “out of.” The word *kaleo* means “to call.”
 41. Jn. 17:6, 9, 14, 16.
 42. Mt. 6:10; Jn. 18:36.
 43. I Jn. 2:15; Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 7:31; Js. 1:27, 4:4.
 44. Lk. 4:5-8; Jn. 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, 17:15; II Cor. 4:3-4; Eph. 2:1-2; II Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:2, 7.
 45. Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6. For insightful commentary, see: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Collier, 1963), 117-220.
 46. Dylan, *Saved!*, 70, 23-24.
 47. Paul Williams, *Dylan—What Happened?* (Glen Ellen, Calif.: Entwistle Books, 1980), 86-89.
 48. “Slow Train” and “When You Gonna Wake Up?” on Dylan, *Slow Train Coming*.
 49. Williams, *Dylan*, 89, 90.
 50. Dylan, *Saved!*, 35.
 51. Scott Cohen, “Don’t Ask Me Nothin’ About Nothin’ I Might Just Tell You the Truth: Bob Dylan Revisited,” *Spin*, December 1985, 80, 81.
 52. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 190-229. Unfortunately, Niebuhr does not do justice to this type in his book. Rather than focusing on John Calvin and his theological heirs, he chooses a relatively minor historical figure (F.D. Maurice) as the type’s primary exemplar. This short-changing of the type might seem odd since it appears to be Niebuhr’s own favorite, but his bias in favor of the (false) doctrine of universalism appears to have led him to the minor at the expense of the major. John Wesley, who also receives a brief nod in the chapter, would also have been a better choice than Maurice. For a sample of the culturally-transformative power of the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement tradition, see: Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
 53. James K.A. Smith, “Reforming Public Theology: Two Kingdoms, or Two Cities?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (2012), 131. Augustine’s story of his conversion in his *Confessions* provides an interesting parallel to Dylan’s life. Referring to his search for truth and happiness, before becoming a Christian, Augustine writes, “In all the bitter disappointments which, by your mercy, thwarted our undertakings in this world, we tried to see the reason for our sufferings. But darkness overshadowed us and we turned away asking, ‘How long is this to be?’ Again and again we asked ourselves this question, but we did not relinquish our worldly aims, because we could not see the light of any truth that we might grasp in place of them.” On the verge of his own Christian conversion, Dylan’s song “New Pony” contains the refrain “How much, how much, how much longer?” It is sung by the female backup singers who act as a kind of Greek chorus, commenting on Dylan’s description of his decadent lifestyle. The parallel goes further with Augustine referring to his sexual lust and the role of Satan in his lost state, while the object of Dylan’s sexual lust is named Lucifer. – Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 126 (book VI, chapter 10), 129 (book VI, chapter 12); Bob Dylan, *Street Legal* [sound recording] (New York: Columbia Records, 1978).
 54. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 210-13.
 55. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 51.
 56. Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper*, 22, 23, 67, 193.
 57. *Ibid.*, 211, 220; Dylan, *Slow Train Coming*.
 58. Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, trans. John Kraay (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1968), 4, 9; Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Crisis in Humanist Political Theory: As Seen from a Calvinist Cosmology and Epistemology*, ed. D.F.M. Strauss and Harry Van Dyke (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2010), 115.