



The Multi-Dimensional Issue of Culture and Christian Ministry.

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Abstract

The categories of the theology of culture developed by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* can be applied to approaches to ministry. Empirical studies of the church in northern Thailand demonstrated that in terms of architecture, the forms of service and other observable forms, the churches were often 'counter-cultural'. However, in other ways, such as in the themes of sermons and how they were developed, there was a strong Thai cultural flavour. Observations show that many mainstream Australian churches express themselves in ways which are counter to contemporary culture, for example in their architecture and forms of music, although their values and emphases often reflect contemporary culture. Charismatic churches more frequently use contemporary forms of architecture and music, but are counter-cultural, for example, in their teaching on many aspects of life, such as pre-marital sexuality. Heelas and Woodhead argue that charismatic churches are closer to contemporary culture in the ways they are open to the 'subjectivity' of formation of the self in contemporary Western societies, and suggest that may explain their greater appeal to many younger people than the appeal of the mainstream churches. There are several dimensions to ministry, including, for example, contextual, substantive and essential, which may all relate to culture in different ways. The challenge for theology is to work out in which dimensions ministry should be cultural, in which it should be 'counter-cultural', and in which it should be seeking to transform the culture.
