Christian Perspectives
on the
Church and Cultural Engagement

The Goal

❖ To understand different Christian perspectives on the church and its engagement with culture

  ❖ Specifically with an eye towards contemporary issues

❖ To understand each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, all have some Biblical support

❖ To see how we may discern the best approach for our context

❖ To encourage humility about your own personal view

Culture, World, Kingdom, Church

❖ **Culture** (nearly impossible to define but…)

  ❖ the whole of human activity includes language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, history, technology, values, etc.

  ❖ It is primarily social and passed on from generation to generation through the stories and how we live.

  ❖ Churches reflect the culture around. Globally, the church is multi-cultural by definition.

❖ **"The world" is not synonymous with "the culture"**

  ❖ The world stands in opposition to the kingdom of God. John always uses the world in a negative sense, "God loves the world not because it is so big, but because it is so bad." D.A. Carson

  ❖ The world is the moral and spiritual influences in society against God and his ways. It can be invisible values (western individualism) or tangible institutional sin (systemic racism).

❖ **The kingdom of God is not synonymous with "the church"**

  ❖ The kingdom is both a present reality and a goal for the church.

  ❖ We must recognize culture, world, kingdom, church are distinct things but overlap because they all involve people.

What is the problem?

- There is no neutral culture!

  - All cultures are a mix of good and bad (Gen. 1:26-28; 11).

  - The problem is we often criticize another cultures not as Christians but as foreigners.

    - Judging based on our culture while blind to our own culture's problems.

    - We cannot help but see Christianity through the lens of our culture.

- Consider the terms race, ethnicity, and culture

  - How are they different? How do they overlap?

The Basic Questions

- What is the church? What is the work of the church? What is its purpose and means?

- Do you have an optimistic view of culture or a pessimistic one?

- Do you have an optimistic view of the church's ability to influence culture or a pessimistic one?
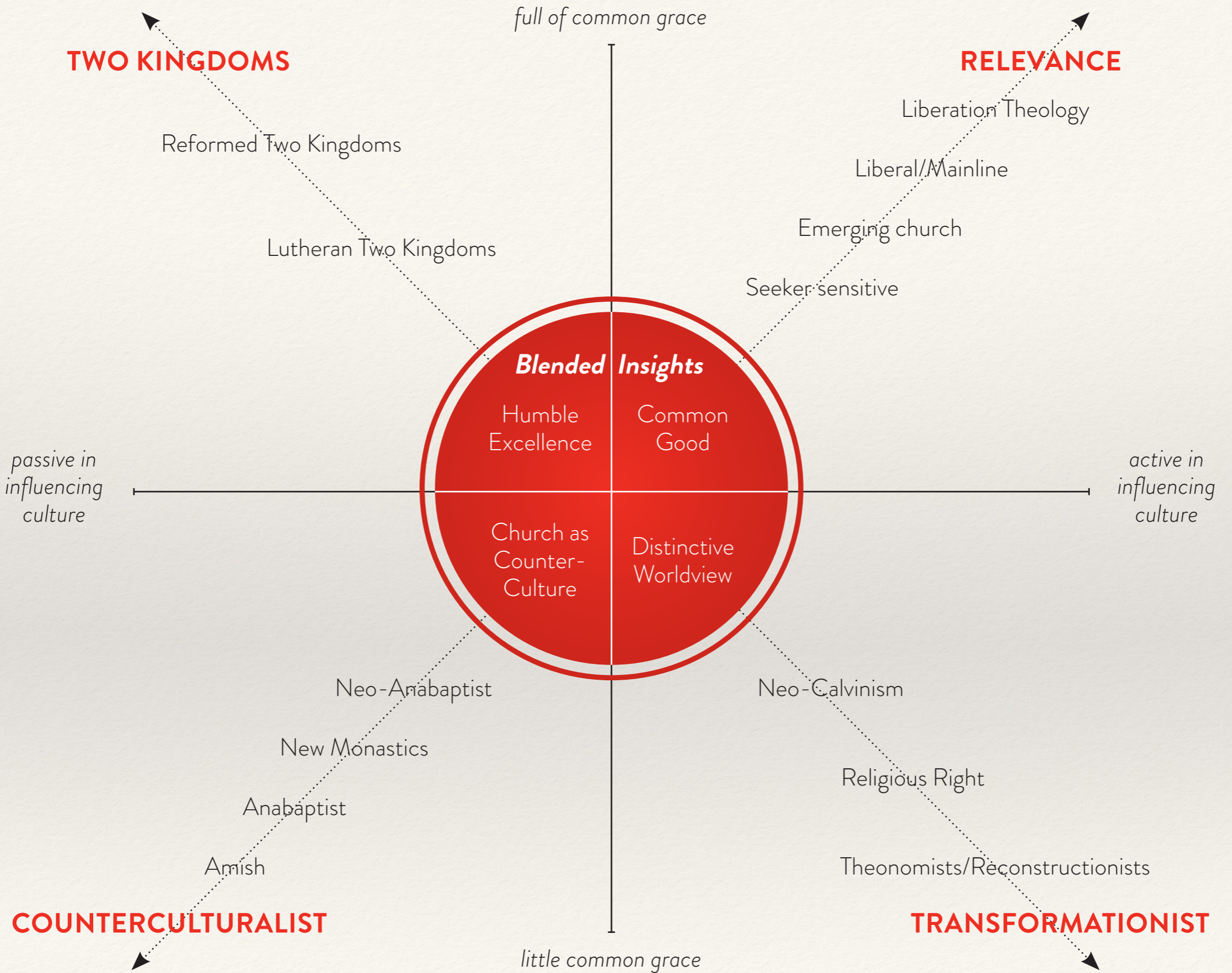
Biblical Reflection

- **Is the Bible pessimistic or optimistic about culture and the church's ability to influence it?**

- **1 Pet. 2:12; Jer. 23:7; Matthew 5:13-16? or Matt. 28:18-20? Luke 21:17? Acts 5:29? Rom. 13 vs. Rev. 13**

- Consider Political and Social Engagement

  - How might one reason the church should or should not engage in political or social issues if they optimistic about culture?

  - How might one engage or not engage if they are pessimistic?

  - What about the church's ability to influence the culture?

Christ and Culture
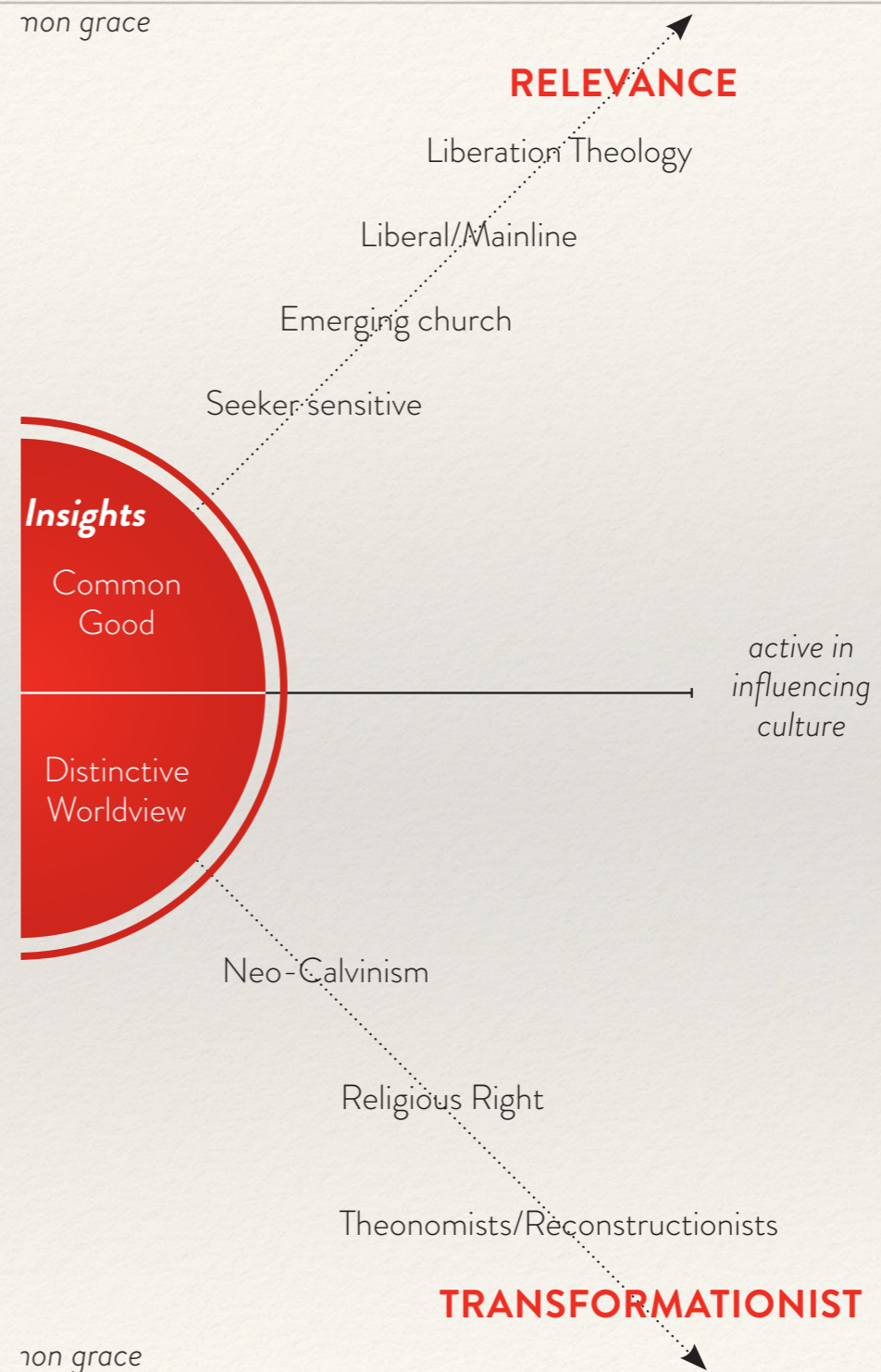
- H. Richard Niebuhr's "Enduring Problem"

    - Christ Against Culture

        - **withdraws** from culture and lives exclusively in the church

    - Christ of Culture

        - **accommodates** to culture and sees God at work in culture

    - Christ Above Culture

        - **synthetic** which builds on the good in culture, Christ makes "it" better

    - Christ and Culture in Paradox

        - **dualistic** there are two kingdoms at work, sacred and secular

    - Chris the Transformer of Culture

        - **conversionist** model that seeks to transform all of culture

full of common grace

TWO KINGDOMS

Reformed Two Kingdoms

Lutheran Two Kingdoms

RELEVANCE

Liberation Theology

Liberal/Mainline

Emerging church

Seeker sensitive

Blended Insights

Humble Excellence | Common Good

Church as Counter-Culture | Distinctive Worldview

passive in influencing culture

active in influencing culture

Neo-Anabaptist

New Monastics

Anabaptist

Amish

Neo-Calvinism

Religious Right

Theonomists/Reconstructionists

COUNTERCULTURALIST

TRANSFORMATIONIST

little common grace

Optimistic about Influencing Culture

- Church to play an active role in trying to shape culture

  - both have been influenced by Pietism, "lets just change hearts"

  - Tended to ignore culture, stress conversions and spiritual growth

- Relevant

  - Christ **of** and Christ **above**

- Transformationist

  - Christ the transformer

The Relevant Disciple

❖ "We need to be relevant…" - Optimistic about culture and about the church's ability to influence it

❖ Engages culture almost uncritically

  ❖ Tend to not talk about "worldviews"

  ❖ Tend to reinvent ministry

  ❖ Tend to have little to distinguish between individuals action in the world vs. the church

❖ Biblical examples: Daniel; Acts 17;

  ❖ Megachurches uses of business practices and marketing

  ❖ Some churches think doing justice *is* evangelism

  ❖ Includes both mainline liberal churches & many evangelical megachurches

The Relevant Disciple

- Problems

  - Adapting heavily and quickly makes you out of date just as fast, can make Christianity irrelevant by being too relevant

  - Often denies the importance of doctrine and insights historically rooted in the Christian tradition

  - Cares more about justice, social service, community building, and making art than evangelism

  - Distinction between the church and the world gets confused

- Challenge

  - What have you adopted uncritically?

  - What does make the church distinct?

The Transformist Disciple

- ❖ "We need to change the culture…" - Pessimistic about culture but optimistic about the church's ability to influence

- ❖ Engages culture more critically

  - ❖ Likes Francis Schaffer, apologetics, worldview analysis

  - ❖ Values Christians who excel at work

  - ❖ Votes for Christian politicians, supports the Religious Right

  - ❖ We need Christian doctors, schools, counselors, music, movies, etc.

- ❖ Antagonistic towards culture, suspicious of its assumptions and value

- ❖ Thinks Christians should do the best work in every job, in every sphere of society. Tendency to think we should run the place, that everything is better if it is supported by a Christian worldview

  - ❖ Includes Religious Right (more Pietistic) and Neo-Calvinists (more focused on education)

The Transformist Disciple

- Problems:
    - Worldview talk can be too intellectual and abstract
    - Under appreciates the church (real work outside church)
    - Can be triumphalist, self-righteous, and overconfident in ability to change things
    - Too much stock in politics/media as an way to bring change
    - Often overlooks the dangers of power
- Challenge:
    - Is there not things to learn from non-Christians? How can we be more humble?
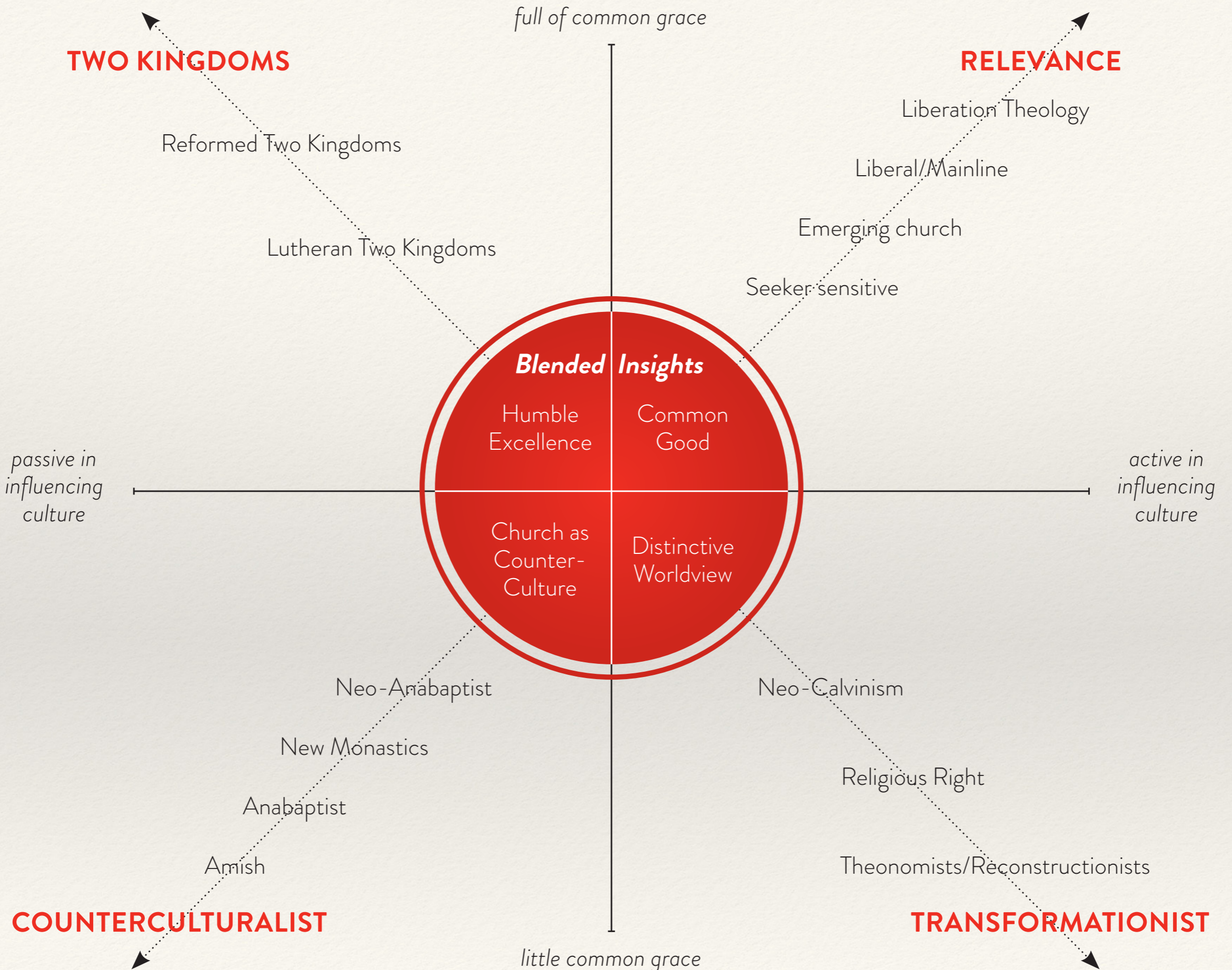   - How has the desire to fight the negative influence of culture become a temptation to power?

Assessing Christian Perspectives on Cultural Engagement – Week 2

Review of Week 1

❖ The church is the redeemed people of God called to be ambassadors of the kingdom

❖ Our basic questions:

  ❖ What is the work of the church, its purpose, and mission? How do we actually apply our answer?

  ❖ Do you have an optimistic view of culture or a pessimistic one?

  ❖ Do you have an optimistic view of the church's ability to influence culture or a pessimistic one?

Review of Week 1

- The "Relevant" Church

  - See a lot of good in culture

  - The church should build off of or work with what God is already doing in the culture

  - This includes seeker-sensitive churches, megachurches, mainline churches

- **The Good:** aim to make sense of the faith to people, active in seeking to do good in broader society

- **The Bad:** minimizes doctrine and the distinction between the church and culture, have often uncritically adopted values or issues from broader culture
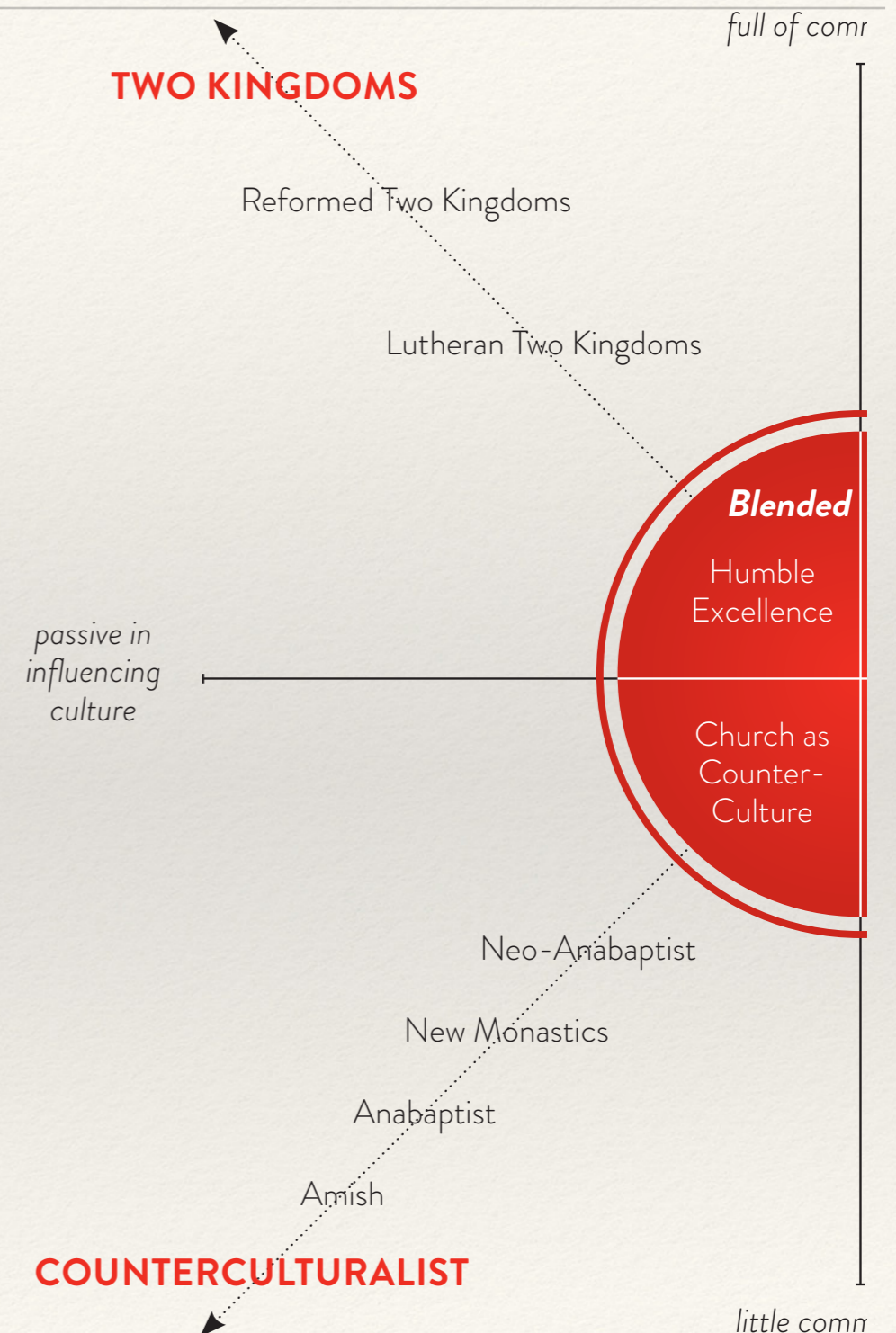
Review of Week 1

- ❖ The "Transformationist" Church

  - ❖ see a lot of bad in the culture and wants to change it

  - ❖ Emphasizes Christian distinctiveness, "Worldview"

  - ❖ Includes evangelicals, "neo-calvinists," Kuyper kind of reformed people

- ❖ **The Good:** engages culture critically and seeks to equip people in their work in a Christian way

- ❖ **The Bad:** can be triumphalist, tempted by power, self-righteous, and can confuse their politics, cultural views with Christianity

Pessimistic about Influencing Culture

- ❖ Church should not be active in changing culture

    - ❖ More Confessional as opposed to Pietism

    - ❖ Be committed to church's doctrine and distinctiveness

- ❖ Counterculturist

    - ❖ Christ **against** culture

- ❖ Two Kingdoms

    - ❖ Christ, culture in paradox

full of comn

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little comn

The Counter-Cultural Church

- "We need to be a different…"
    - Pessimist about culture
    - Pessimist about the church's ability to influence
- Church as a contrasting society, an alternative society to the world
- The church and the kingdom of God are almost synonymous (Matt. 5 looms large here)
- Does not see God working redemptively outside the church
    - The culture is evil, its "the empire," irredeemable contra Relevant and Transformationist
- Avoid trying to be relevant, to reach, or transform the culture
    - Best to exhibit the kingdom through justice and peace of the church community
- Strongly criticizes evangelical, liberal, and megachurches. All corrupted by the "Constantinian error."
- Follow Christ, live simply, identify with the poor and marginalized. Often Pacifists.
    - Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Hays, John Howard Yoder, Mennonites, Amish, Shane Claiborne and Neo-Monastics

The Counter-Cultural Disciple

- Problems
  - Social change is possible: William Wilberforce? Abolitionist movement?
  - Tends to demonize modern business, capitalism, and government
  - Isolating oneself from a culture is impossible
  - Views sin as primarily human relationships and not need to be reconciled to God. Stress Christus Victor of atonement vs. substitutionary atonement
  - Undermines evangelism
- Challenges:
  - In what ways have you retreated from "the culture" but unknowingly still reflect it or deny ways it may be changing?
  - Can the church become irrelevant if it is too different or lose sight of

The Reformed Church

- ❖ "We need to do not worry about culture change. We just need to be the church well."
  - ❖ Optimistic about culture
  - ❖ Pessimistic about church's ability to change culture
- ❖ Talks about "two kingdoms" but not worldview - kingdom of God and kingdom of man
- ❖ No distinctively Christian way to do your job. Just do a good job.
- ❖ The secular and sacred divide is a good thing.
  - ❖ economics or politics are more neutral, not demonic or fallen
  - ❖ The role of government is merely to restrain evil not cultural improvement.
- ❖ "We are not *building* the kingdom." We are just supposed to be the church.
  - ❖ Strong distinction between church gathered for worship vs. church scattered as individuals
- ❖ Likes to argue for what is right and good apart from a distinctively Christian view of things

The "Reformed" Church

❖ Problems:

    ❖ Overemphasize "common grace" at work in society

    ❖ Overlooks how much good in society *is* the result of Christian influence and our Christian heritage (e.g. human rights)

    ❖ Implies life can be lived on a religiously neutral basis, i.e. implicitly supports secularism

    ❖ Can lead to not engaging evils in society. Two kingdoms advocates have supported slavery in America and Apartide in South Africa.

    ❖ Can overemphasize distinction between clergy and laity

❖ Challenges

    ❖ Does the Bible not speak to all of life?

    ❖ If the church should not try to change culture, what role does the church have in social evils?

Personal Questions

- Do you resonate with a particular one? Why or why not?

- What is new to you or that you haven't thought of before?

- How might you apply it to different things?

  - Ethics, Theology, Business, Evangelism, Discipleship, Politics, the Arts

- Can we have a mixed view on different issues or have a consistent approach across a variety of domains?

- What biblical warrant would you find for each?

Assessing Christian Perspectives on Cultural Engagement – Week 3

Review of Week 1 & 2

❖ Our basic questions:

  ❖ What is the work of the church, its purpose, and mission? How do we actually apply our answer?

  ❖ Do you have an optimistic view of culture or a pessimistic one? Is it redeemable and good or fundamentally fallen?

  ❖ Do you have an optimistic view of the church's ability to influence culture or a pessimistic one?

Whats Your View

1. For simplicity, apply it to music and the worship service?
2. How should the church respond to government regulations for COVID?
3. Should the church engage in issues of justice?

Possibility for Cultural Change

Pessimistic   Optimistic

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

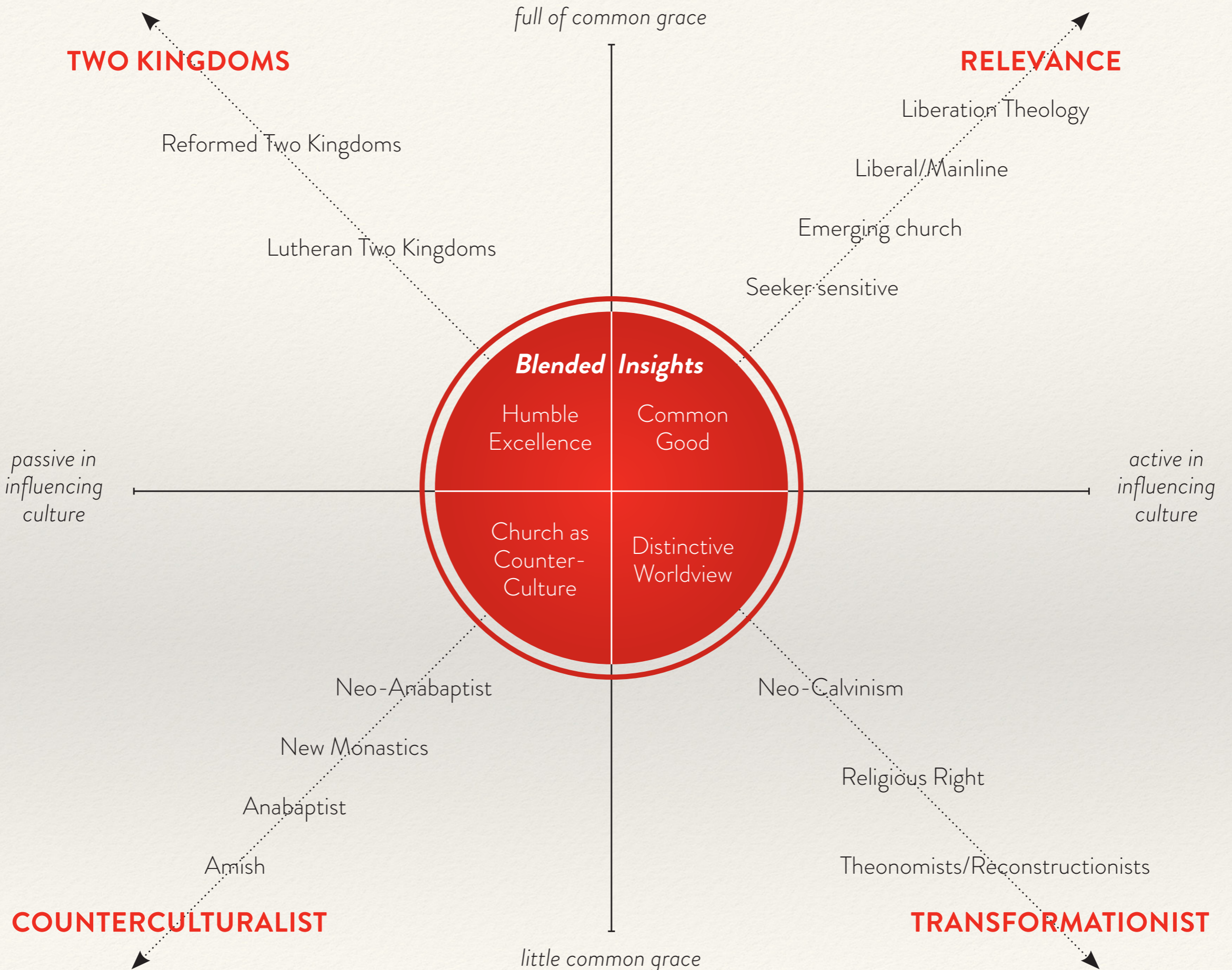## Nature of Culture

Fundamentally Fallen   Redeemable and Good

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

The Four Approaches Again

❖ Relevant Church - inspired by Jer. 29:7 "seek the peace of the city"

  ❖ Sees good in culture to build off of and optimistic about ability to influence culture

❖ Transformationist - inspired to think and live in a distinctly Christian manner (Col. 2:8)

  ❖ Sees bad in culture and wants to influence cultural from a distinctly Christian view

❖ Counter-Cultural - inspired to be a contrast community and sign of kingdom (Mt. 5:13-16)

  ❖ Sees bad in culture and church should be an alternative society, apart from culture

❖ Two Kingdoms - inspired by goodness of creation and excellence (Tit. 3:1)

  ❖ Sees good in culture and the church should just focus on church things

❖ **Where do you think you may be on the graph?**

full of common grace

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Discerning the Season

- D.A. Carson argues each fails to capture the full biblical storyline in different ways

    - Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration

- The goal is appreciating the good things each have to offer and recognizing each have their place

    - The church should seek the common good (relevant).

    - The church should be a contrasting community (counterculture).

    - The church should think and act in a distinctively Christian manner (transforming).

    - The church should be marked by excellence in our worship and work (two kingdoms).

- The challenge is knowing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time.

The Seasons of the Church and Culture

❖ Winter: pre-Christian culture hostile to Christianity, church is embattled and there is little fruit (Muslim countries)

❖ Spring: still persecuted but the church is growing (China)

❖ Summer: church is highly regarded, influential and Christians feel at home in the culture (US and Europe before WWI & II)

❖ Fall: post-Christian culture and increasingly marginalized, church looking for new ways to be distinct and reach out winsomely (US and Europe today)

❖ **Do you think each approach may line up with a particular season? Why or why not?**

The Seasons of the Church and Culture

- Be careful of overgeneralizing "the culture"

    - "The South" may still be in summer but the Bay Area "pre-Christian"

- The different approaches may not overlap with the seasons very easily.

    - Neo-Monasticism does not emphasize evangelism like monasticism in the past?

- People's spiritual gifts cause them to lean to one model too.

    - Your preference for a particular approach reflects your passions and temperament. Do not judge others who are not gifted that way and do not restrain them from serving in that way. Let us inform each other on better ways to use our gifts.

- Recognize distinction between the organic nature of the church and as an organization.

    - Churches should equip in evangelism and discipleship in Christ

    - But they must also equip Christians to engage culture and do justice *faithfully*

1 Peter & Christian Identity

- Ch. 1 -"elect exiles of the dispersion" born again to an eternal inheritance

  - v. 17-20 live out your time as foreigners… ransomed from your former life… with blood of Christ

- Ch. 2 "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation…"

  - What does it look like to be a Christian in a hostile culture as a marginalized people?

  - Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable…" (1 Peter 2:9–12, ESV)

  - "Be subject to… as servants of God." citizens to the state, vv. 2:13-16, slaves to unjust masters, vv. 2:17-25, wife to an unbelieving husband, vv. 3:1-7, persecuted unjustly, vv. 3:8-17

- **"For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." (1 Peter 3:17, ESV)**

Christ and Culture

* Miroslav Volf, *"Soft Difference,"* (*Ex Auditu* 10, 1994)

* *Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the insiders who have diverted from their culture by being born again. They are by definition those who are not what they used to be, those who do not live like they used to live. Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new precisely within the proper space of the old.*

Your Christian Identity

- The command is not, "Don't be like them."

- The command is, "Don't be like you were, but be like Jesus where you are."

- Be humble and aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your limited perspective.

  - Avoid arrogance, blame, frustration, or naiveté

  - Recognize it may be good to switch positions for greater fruitfulness

- How can you seek to avoid reacting to extremes of other approaches? Which do you most often struggle with: arrogance, blame, frustration, or naïveté about cultural engagement?

Desire a better city, a heavenly one

❖ **Hebrews 11:13–16 (ESV)** — These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.