

Are Christians called to be *always* countercultural?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The aftermath of the Supreme Court's same-sex marriage decision included some thoughtful responses from evangelicals who don't support it. [Mark Galli's](#) is pretty good. So is [this piece by Carey Nieuwhof](#), a useful list of things for anti-SSM church leaders to keep in mind.

I do think Nieuwhof oversells his first point, "the church has always been countercultural":

If you think about it, regardless of your theological position, all your views as a Christian are counter-cultural and always will be. If your views are cultural, you're probably not reading the scriptures closely enough.

All your views? I have some personal sympathy for the idea of counterculturalism as a first principle; as a young musician I was at least as invested in being bohemian as I was in actually writing songs. But I don't think this works for the church.

To be sure, Christianity rightly includes a measure of counterculturalism. [Russell Moore spoke to this well](#) when the Pew religious affiliation numbers came out, noting the problems mainliners and evangelicals alike have had in failing to distinguish ourselves from the wider culture. But when we do define ourselves against it at all, we tend to have particular elements of the culture in mind. A certain sort of social conservative disparages "the world"; a certain sort of neo-Anabaptist rails against "the state"; a certain sort of peace-and-justice liberal lays blame at the feet of "the economic system." These targets may overlap but are clearly not the same, and even combined they don't include the entirety of the culture.

If all your views are countercultural, then you aren't really engaging the culture at all, other than to oppose it; you are infinitely more sect than church. I don't think this is what Nieuwhof has in mind.

In Lutheran circles, talk of church and culture often leads to [the Nairobi Statement](#) [pdf], a 1994 document produced by the Lutheran World Federation. It claims that Christian worship is simultaneously **transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural**. Counterculturalism, then, is one value held in tension with others. Yes, Christian worship “challeng[es] what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture”—but it is also shaped *by* the particularities of culture.

Now, the Nairobi Statement is about worship, not the church generally. We Lutherans have tended to downplay the distinction between the two, a great big topic for another day. But at a minimum, worship is on the short list of great places to engage a difficult and central task: discerning what it means to be not countercultural so much as *faithful*, to variously embrace and resist the culture as the gospel calls us to.

It's as clear as ever that not everyone's going to discern the same answers here. (I respect social conservative Rod Dreher for interrupting his regular “Benedict option” programming to share [this](#).) But taking this task seriously is a better start than simply claiming we must always, everywhere take countercultural views.