Christians and Culture

What Should We Do with This Thing Called Culture?

What do you think of when you hear the word culture? Perhaps you refer to the arts. You may picture the way people dress, the way they eat, their language, their religion, their architecture, or a host of other perceptions. One of the most succinct definitions of culture is wide-ranging because it refers to "that which man does beyond biological necessity."{1} Obviously such a definition indicates the importance of the term. Our lives are lived within culture. There is no escaping this thing called culture. But how is a Christian to respond?

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Christians who lived in Corinth, a very challenging culture. Where should we stand? Inside? Outside? Ignore it? Become isolated from it? Should we concern ourselves with attempting to transform it?

In 1949 a theologian named Richard Niebuhr delivered a series of lectures entitled *Christ and Culture*.{2} Subsequently his thoughts were published and the book has become a classic. Niebuhr's text focuses on five paradigms that describe how Christians have dealt with culture. A brief survey of these paradigms can help us see ourselves, and perhaps challenge us to consider changing the way we look at the world around us.

The first paradigm, *Christ against Culture,* describes those who choose to isolate themselves from the surrounding culture. A descriptive contemporary phrase might be "the holy huddle" of Christians who dialog among themselves, but no one else. Second, the *Christ of Culture* perspective is exactly the

opposite of *Christ against Culture* because it attempts to bring culture and Christianity together, regardless of their differences. Third, the *Christ above Culture* position attempts to synthesize the issues of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation. Fourth, *Christ and Culture in Paradox* refers to those who understand the tension between the Christian's responsibility to both the cultural and the spiritual realms. Fifth, *Christ the Transformer of Culture* describes those who strive "to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God."{3}

Which of these paradigms describes your relationship with the culture in which you live? Or perhaps you have another paradigm to offer. No doubt we could engage in debate about the merits and demerits of all of them. But since we cannot do that at the moment, let us agree that we should at least give attention to our place in culture.

Christians are to observe and analyze culture and make decisions regarding our proper actions and reactions within it. A struggle is in progress and the stakes are high. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be thoughtful and informed.

Our work through Probe Ministries is dedicated to the proposition that the Lord can use Christians as salt and light. God has called us to offer a voice in both the Christian and the non- Christian communities. Among other things, this means that we have attempted to give attention to how this can be done for the glory of God. In particular, our involvement in the non-Christian community presents a special challenge. Much prayer and study have been focused on principles that should be considered before we engage with the culture. In this article, I will focus on five of these principles that apply to ministry within the culture.

Establishing Biblical Precepts

Unless you live in a cave, you have had to deal with the culture around you. You have sensed the need to give thought to how you might glorify God as you react to your culture. Or you may have experienced times of mental and spiritual trauma as you realized the sinful nature of what you experience around you. If you choose to interact with your culture, there are certain principles to be considered.

The first of these is the need for biblical precepts. That is, our minds should be filled with God's ideas before interacting with the culture. This is an understandable and universally stated declaration among evangelical Christians. Experience tells us we need to give life to the declaration. Are we responding to our culture based on biblical precepts, or are we responding to our culture based on other sources? Are we utilizing a Christian world view as we respond to culture, or are we unwittingly utilizing a naturalistic worldview? When we discuss things as Christians, do we focus on Scripture no matter what we might be discussing? "Contemporary Christianity is all too frequently shaped by the fact that when we meet we do so in an atmosphere resembling that of a committee or caucus, where the style is political and tactical, hardly scholarly, and almost never devotional or genuinely spiritual."{4} Do we give serious attention "to the sacred text as the firm and only basis on which life and decisions should be based?"{5} Indeed, without the "sacred text" evangelicals are left to grapple with their culture in much the same manner as those who do not claim allegiance to that text.

In order to affirm the primacy of Scripture in a cultural critique the Christian should first *read* his culture in the light of the Bible. Proper recognition of the culture is necessary before it can be addressed properly. In other words, we need a biblical "lens" through which we can see the

culture. The light of God's Word needs to be focused on the questions at hand. For example, the culture tends to *secularize* life. Most of us live, work, and play in the secular sphere. But *secularism* refers to a way of life that "excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state."{6}

Harry Blamires, a protégé of C.S. Lewis and an astute cultural critic, offers an insightful critique of secularism. The secularist's position can be defined only in negatives. There is no life except this life in time. There is no order of being except that which we explore with our senses and our instruments. There is no condition of well-being except that of a healthy and comfortable life in time. There is no God to be worshipped, for no God created us. There is no God to propitiate, for there is no God to offend. There is no reward to be sought and no punishment to be avoided except those which derive from earthly authority. There is no law to be obeyed except those which earthly authority imposes or earthly prudence recommends.{7}

Obviously, Blamires' observations are the result of seeing secularism with a scriptural lens. Biblical precepts allow him to offer such a critique. His example can be an encouragement for us. May God guide us as we apply biblical precepts to evaluate our culture.

Rejecting Cultural Biases, Developing Interaction

What do you think of the culture in which you live? In particular, what do you think of the broader American culture in which your sub-culture is found? For example, are you comfortable with the adage: "America: love it or leave it?" Or do you tend to think of certain other cultures as pristine, even if you have never visited them?

I have discussed the need to assess culture through the use of

biblical precepts, the first principle of cultural evaluation. The second principle is focused on what I call cultural bias. If we are to interact with cultures other than our own, and if we seek honestly to evaluate our own, we must be cautious of biases.

Carl F.H. Henry, a great theologian, apologist, and cultural critic has enumerated what he calls twenty fantasies of a secular society. One of these includes the thought that God "will protect the United States and its people from catastrophic disaster because of our commitment to freedom, generosity, and goodness." Dr. Henry writes, "For many, God is an ever-living George Washington who serves invisibly as the father of our country. This vague political theology assumes that America can never drift irrecoverably beyond divine approval, and that the nation is intrinsically exempt from severe and final divine judgment." Another fantasy is "that the American people are essentially good at heart in a world whose inhabitants are more prone to evil."{8} The anthropologist Charles Kraft responds to such thinking by writing that "much of the Christian populace has simply continued to assume that such features of our society as monogamy, democracy, our type of educational system, individualism, capitalism, the 'freedoms,' literacy, technological development, military supremacy, etc. are all products of our association with God and therefore can be pointed to as indications of the superiority of our culture over all other cultures."{9}

Missionaries who serve in cultures other than their own can speak to the danger of such fantasies. But we do not have to be foreign missionaries to experience the effects of cultural bias. The United States has become such a multicultural environment that Christians can and must understand the importance of rejecting cultural biases.

Interaction but not Accommodation

The third principle of cultural evaluation focuses on the need for interaction with culture, but not accommodation. There should be no fear in this if we are using biblical precepts, the first of our principles. But we need to be alert to the ways in which we can become enmeshed in the culture. In addition, we should be accountable to one another by offering warnings when we observe such entanglement.

Without cultural interaction evangelicals leave numerous important facets of contemporary cultural life without the light of truth they can offer. A cursory reading of post-Enlightenment history will demonstrate the progressive decrease of evangelical interaction and the subsequent lack of influence in strategic areas of culture. For example, American higher education has been guided by principles that leave Christian theism out of the picture.

It is crucial, though, that such interaction take place with a sense of accountability. The person who enters the culture without respect for the ideological dangers that reside there will prove to be foolish. The ideas, the sense of progress, and the pride of cultural accomplishment can lead us to give credit to man instead of God. May the Lord receive praise as He uses us to touch our culture!

A Positive Revolutionary Vision

The word *revolution* tends to have a negative connotation for most of us. A revolutionary most often is seen as someone who engenders rebellion and chaos. But a Christian's response to culture should include a positive revolutionary mindset. Christian thought and life should state things to culture that exhibit Christ's revolutionary vision for all people. A type of pluralism that tempts us to negate Christianity's claims and absolutes should not persuade Christians. Donald Bloesch speaks to this tension by juxtaposing what he calls prophetic

religion and culture religion. He writes: “Our choice today is between a prophetic religion and a culture religion. The first is anchored in a holy God who infinitely transcends every cultural and religious form that testifies to Him. The second absolutizes the cultural or mythical garb in which God supposedly meets us.”{10} Our interaction with culture must have a prophetic voice. We must speak boldly to the culture knowing that the source of our proclamation is the sovereign God.

This means that Christians should not relegate their lives to what may be called a “Christian ghetto” or “holy huddle.” Too many Christians live “a split life: they are forced to use many words and images that have a private meaning for them with which they are unable or unwilling to enrich the fund of public experience.”{11} One may have a revolutionary vision and prophetic zeal, but too often it is directed toward his “ghetto” instead of the surrounding culture. To quote an old cliché: “He is preaching to the choir.”

Notice how often conversations among Christians concentrate on problems presented by the surrounding culture. For example, discussion may focus on the latest outrage in the entertainment industry, or the newest bit of intrigue in Washington, or concerns about the sex education emphased in public schools, or controversies surrounding issues of abortion, euthanasia, cloning, homosexuality, child abuse, or a host of other topics. Then notice if constructive suggestions are offered. Is attention given to the ways in which the Christian community might respond to such issues based on biblical precepts? Too often such a scenario does not include positive revolutionary cultural interaction.

Lesslie Newbigin, a perceptive cultural critic, offers two propositions regarding a Christian’s revolutionary vision. First, Newbigin states he would not see Christians just “in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels ‘religion’, but rather in the public sector where God’s will

as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools." Second, "I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world."{12} Christianity is not to be privatized; it applies to all people in all places at all times.

If we choose to take Newbigin's propositions seriously, we must not be naïve about the response we will receive. At this moment in American history the public sector often is antagonistic toward a Christian voice. Thus we should not be surprised when we are rejected. Instead, if we are stating God's ideas we should rejoice, as did the early Christians when they suffered for His name (Acts 5:41). When truth rubs shoulders with untruth, friction is the result.

Glorifying God in All of Life

The words *whatever* and *all* are enormous. Can you think of something more than *whatever* or *all*? When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth he used these terms to describe how they should glorify God in their lives: "Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). Pagan Corinth certainly provided many opportunities for early Christians to learn how to respond to their culture. The same is true for Christians in our time. We live in and associate with a culture that constantly presents challenges. We are to glorify God in all we do, regardless of those challenges. "Where God is acknowledged as the Creator, man knows that the ultimate meaning of His creatures is the same as the meaning of all life: the glory of God and the service of men."{13} Our work within culture and our influence on it are part of what God will judge. Therefore, these works are important.

We are to remind ourselves and tell the culture that "the prophetic church witnesses to the breaking into history of a higher righteousness; it points people to a higher law."{14} Carl F.H. Henry emphasizes this in a passage concerning education, but the implications cover much more:

> *The drift of twentieth century learning can be succinctly summarized in one statement: Instead of recognizing [God] as the source and stipulator of truth and the good, contemporary thought reduces all reality to impersonal processes and events, and insists that man himself creatively imposes upon the cosmos and upon history the only values that they will ever bear.{15}*

God is sovereign; He is the Lord of *whatever* and *all* in all of life.

Thus we must be cautious about our emphases within culture. God changes things; we are His messengers. Our involvement is important, but it must be remembered that it is transitory. As beautiful and meaningful as the works of man may be, they will not last. The theologian Karl Barth emphasized this by relating his comments to the tower of Babel: "In the building of the tower of Babel whose top is to touch heaven, the Church can have no part. The hope of the Church rests *on* God *for* men; it does not rest *on* men, not even on religious men—and not even on the belief that men *with the help of God* will finally build that tower."{16} Our hope is not found in man's efforts. Our hope is found in God's provision for eternity. But this does not denigrate our involvement with culture. "There is a radical difference between human culture generally, which is thoroughly secular, and that which is developed as a loving service to God."{17} Utopia will never refer to this life. Since no culture "this side of the Parousia [Second Coming] can be recognized as divine we are limited to the more modest hope that life on earth may gradually be made better; or, more modestly still, gradually be made less bad."{18} Christian's

response to culture should be described with such modest hopes in view.

This article has focused on five principles that can strengthen a Christian impact on culture. Fill your mind with biblical precepts; be careful that you do not respond to the surrounding culture with cultural biases; be interactive, but not accommodating; develop a positive revolutionary mindset; and glorify God in all of life.

Notes

1. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 142.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
3. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harpter & Row, 1987), 227.
4. Charles E. Kinzie, "The Absorbed Church: Our Inheritance of Conformed Christianity," *Sojourners* 7 (July, 1978), 22.
5. Ibid.
6. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963), 58.
7. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 59-60.
8. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Countermoves In A Decadent Culture* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 32.
9. Charles H. Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?" *The Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977), 182.
10. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience*, 244
11. Julius Lipner, "Being One, Let Me Be Many: Facets of the Relationship Between the Gospel and Culture," *International Review of Missions* 74 (April, 1985), 162.
12. Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 11 (October, 1987), 366.
13. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1948), 157.

14. Donald Bloesch, “The Legacy of Karl Barth,” *TSF Bulletin* 9 (May-June 1986), 8
15. Carl F.H. Henry, “The Crisis of Modern Learning,” *Faculty Dialogue* 10 (Winter 1988), 7
16. Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 349.
17. Joseph A. Hill, “Human Culture in Biblical Perspective,” *Presbyterian Journal*, 18 February 1981, 9.
18. Stephen Mayor, “Jesus Christ and the Christian Understanding of Society,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1979), 59-60.

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