Christianity and Culture

At the close of the twentieth century American evangelicals find themselves in a diverse, pluralistic culture. Many ideas vie for attention and allegiance. These ideas, philosophies, or world views are the products of philosophical and cultural changes. Such changes have come to define our culture. For example, pluralism can mean that all world views are correct and that it is intolerable to state otherwise; secularism reigns; absolutes have ceased to exist; facts can only be stated in the realm of science, not religion; evangelical Christianity has become nothing more than a troublesome oddity amidst diversity. It is clear, therefore, that western culture is suffering; it is ill. Lesslie Newbigin, a scholar and former missionary to India, has emphasized this by asking a provocative question: "Can the West be converted?"(1)

Such a question leads us to another: How is a Christian supposed to respond to such conditions? Or, how should we deal with the culture that surrounds us?

Since the term *culture* is central in this discussion, it deserves particular attention and definition. Even though the concept behind the word is ancient, and it is used frequently in many different contexts, its actual meaning is elusive and often confusing. *Culture* does not refer to a particular level of life. This level, sometimes referred to as "high culture," is certainly an integral part of the definition, but it is not the central focus. For example, "the arts" are frequently identified with culture in the minds of many. More often than not there is a qualitative difference between what is a part of "high culture" and other segments of culture, but these distinctions are not our concern at this time.

T. S. Eliot has written that culture "may . . . be described simply as that which makes life worth living."(2) Emil Brunner, a theologian, has stated "that culture is

materialisation of meaning."(3) Donald Bloesch, another theologian, says that culture "is the task appointed to humans to realize their destiny in the world in service to the glory of God."(4) An anthropologist, E. Adamson Hoebel, believes that culture "is the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance."(5) All of these definitions can be combined to include the world views, actions, and products of a given community of people.

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. Harry Blamires writes: "No thoughtful Christian can contemplate and analyze the tensions all about us in both public and private life without sensing the eternal momentousness of the current struggle for the human mind between Christian teaching and materialistic secularism."(6)

Believers are called to join the struggle. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be informed and thoughtful Christians. There is no room for sloth or apathy. Rev. 3:15-16 states, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I spit you out of My mouth."

God forbid that these words of condemnation should apply to us.

Transforming Culture

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Where should we stand? Inside the culture? Outside? Ignore it? Isolate ourselves from it? Should we try to transform it?

The theologian Richard Niebuhr provided a classic study concerning these questions in his book *Christ and Culture.* Even though his theology is not always evangelical, his paradigm is helpful. It includes five views.

First, he describes the "Christ Against Culture" view, which encourages opposition, total separation, and hostility toward culture. Tertullian, Tolstoy, Menno Simons, and, in our day, Jacques Ellul are exponents of this position.

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. Liberation, process, and feminist theologies are current examples.

Third, the "Christ Above Culture" position attempts "to correlate the fundamental questions of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation."(7) Thomas Aquinas is the most prominent teacher of this view.

Fourth, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" describes the "dualists" who stress that the Christian belongs "to two realms (the spiritual and temporal) and must live in the tension of fulfilling responsibilities to both."(8) Luther adopted this view.

Fifth, "Christ the Transformer of Culture" includes the "conversionists" who attempt "to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God."(9) Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards are the chief proponents of this last view.

With the understanding that we are utilizing a tool and not a perfected system, I believe that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" view aligns most closely with Scripture. We are to be actively involved in the transformation of culture without giving that culture undue prominence. As the social critic Herbert Schlossberg says, "The 'salt' of people changed by the

gospel must change the world."(10) Admittedly, such a perspective calls for an alertness and sensitivity to subtle dangers. But the effort is needed to follow the biblical pattern.

If we are to be transformers, we must also be "discerners," a very important word for contemporary Christians. We are to apply "the faculty of discerning; discrimination; acuteness of judgment and understanding."(11) Matthew 16:3 includes a penetrating question from Jesus to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were testing Him by asking for a sign from heaven: "Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?" It is obvious that Jesus was disheartened by their lack of discernment. If they were alert, they could see that the Lord was demonstrating and would demonstrate (in v. 4 He refers to impending resurrection) His claims. Jesus' question is still relevant. We too must be alert and able to discern our times.

In order to transform the culture, we must continually recognize what is in need of transformation and what is not. This is a difficult assignment. We cannot afford to approach the responsibility without the guidance of God's Spirit, Word, wisdom, and power. As the theologian John Baille has said, "In proportion as a society relaxes its hold upon the eternal, it ensures the corruption of the temporal."(12) May we live in our temporal setting with a firm grasp of God's eternal claims while we transform the culture he has entrusted to us!

Stewardship and Creativity

An important aspect of our discussion of Christians and culture is centered in the early passages of the Bible.

The first two chapters of Genesis provide a foundation for God's view of culture and man's responsibility in it. These chapters contain what is generally called the "cultural mandate," God's instructions concerning the care of His

creation. Included in this are the concepts of “stewardship” and “creativity.”

The mandate of stewardship is specifically found within 1:27-28 and 2:15, even though these two chapters as a whole also demonstrate it. Verse 28 of chapter 1 reads, “And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This verse contains the word *subdue*, an expression that is helpful in determining the mandate of stewardship. First, it should be observed that man is created “in the image of God.” Volumes have been written about the meaning of this phrase. Obviously, it is a very positive statement. If man is created in God’s image, that image must contain God’s benevolent goodness, and not maliciousness. Second, it is obvious that God’s created order includes industriousness, work—a striving on the part of man. Thus we are to exercise our minds and bodies in service to God by “subduing,” observing, touching, and molding the “stuff” of creation. We are to form a culture.

Tragically, because of sin, man abused his stewardship. We are now in a struggle that was not originally intended. But the redeemed person, the person in Christ, is refashioned. He can now approach culture with a clearer understanding of God’s mandate. He can now begin again to exercise proper stewardship.

The mandate concerning creativity is broadly implied within the first two chapters of Genesis. It is not an emphatic pronouncement, as is the mandate concerning stewardship. In reality, the term is a misnomer, for we cannot *create* anything. We can only redesign, rearrange, or refashion what God has created. But in this discussion we will continue to use the word with this understanding in mind.

A return to the opening chapter of Genesis leads us to an intriguing question. Of what does the "image of God" consist? It is interesting to note, as did the British writer Dorothy Sayers, that if one stops with the first chapter and asks that question, the apparent answer is that God is creator.(13) Thus, some element of that creativity is instilled in man. God created the cosmos. He declared that what He had done was "very good." He then put man within creation. Man responded creatively. He was able to see things with aesthetic judgment (2:9). His cultivation of the garden involved creativity, not monotonous servitude (2:15). He creatively assigned names to the animals (2:19-20). And he was able to respond with poetic expression upon seeing Eve, his help-mate (2:23). Kenneth Myers writes: "Man was fit for the cultural mandate. As the bearer of his Creator-God's image, he could not be satisfied apart from cultural activity. Here is the origin of human culture in untainted glory and possibility. It is no wonder that those who see God's redemption as a transformation of human culture speak of it in terms of re-creation."(14)

As we seek to transform culture we must understand this mandate and apply it.

Pluralism

Pluralism and *secularism* are two prominent words that describe contemporary American culture. The Christian must live within a culture that emphasizes these terms. What do they mean and how do we respond? We will look at pluralism first.

The first sentence of professor Allan Bloom's provocative and controversial book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reads: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."(15)

This statement is indicative of Bloom's concern for the fact that many college students do not believe in absolutes, but

the concern goes beyond students to the broader population. *Relativism, openness, syncretism,* and *tolerance* are some of the more descriptive words for the ways people are increasingly thinking in contemporary culture. These words are part of what I mean by *pluralism*. Many ideas are proclaimed, as has always been the case, but the type of pluralism to which I refer asserts that all these ideas are of equal value, and that it is intolerant to think otherwise. Absurdity is the result. This is especially apparent in the realm of religious thought.

In order for evangelicals to be transformers of culture they must understand that their beliefs will be viewed by a significant portion of the culture as intolerant, antiquated, uncompassionate, and destructive of the status quo. As a result, they will often be persecuted through ridicule, prejudice, social ostracism, academic intolerance, media bias, or a number of other attitudes. Just as with Bloom's statement, the evangelical's emphasis on absolutes is enough to draw a negative response. For example, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Such an exclusive, absolute claim does not fit current pluralism. Therefore, the pluralist would contend that Jesus must have meant something other than what is implied in such an egocentric statement.

It is unfortunate that Christians often have been absorbed by pluralism. As Harry Blamires puts it, "We have stopped thinking christianly outside the scope of personal morals and personal spirituality."(16) We hold our beliefs privately, which is perfectly legitimate within pluralism. But we have not been the transformers we are to be. We have supported pluralism, because it tolerates a form of Christianity that doesn't make demands on the culture or call it into question.

Christianity is not just personal opinion; it is objective truth. This must be asserted, regardless of the responses to the contrary, in order to transform culture. Christians must

affirm this. We must enter our culture boldly with the understanding that what we believe and practice privately is also applicable to all of public life. Lesslie Newbigin writes: “We come here to what is perhaps the most distinctive and crucial feature of the modern worldview, namely the division of human affairs into two realms– the private and the public, a private realm of values where pluralism reigns and a public world of what our culture calls `facts.'”(17)

We must be cautious of incorrect distinctions between the public and private. We must also influence culture with the “facts” of Christianity. This is our responsibility.

Secularism

Secularism permeates virtually every facet of life and thought. What does it mean? We need to understand that the word *secular* is not the same as *secularism*. All of us, whether Christian or non-Christian, live, work, and play within the secular sphere. There is no threat here for the evangelical. As Blamires says, “Engaging in secular activities . . . does not make anyone a `secularist’, an exponent or adherent of `secularism’.”(18) Secularism as a philosophy, a world view, is a different matter. Blamires continues: “While `secular’ is a purely neutral term, `secularism’ represents a view of life which challenges Christianity head on, for it excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state.”(19)

Secularism elevates things that are not to be elevated to such a high status, such as the autonomy of man. Donald Bloesch states that “a culture closed to the transcendent will find the locus of the sacred in its own creations.”(20) This should be a sobering thought for the evangelical.

We must understand that secularism is influential and can be found throughout the culture. In addition, we must realize that the secularist’s belief in independence makes

Christianity appear useless and the Christian seem woefully ignorant. As far as the secularist is concerned, Christianity is no longer vital. As Emil Brunner says, “The roots of culture that lie in the transcendent sphere are cut off; culture and civilisation must have their law and meaning in themselves.”(21) As liberating as this may sound to a secularist, it stimulates grave concern in the mind of an alert evangelical whose view of culture is founded upon God’s precepts. There is a clear dividing line.

How is this reflected in our culture? Wolfhart Pannenberg presents what he believes are three aspects of the long-term effects of secularism. “First of these is the loss of legitimation in the institutional ordering of society.”(22) That is, without a belief in the divine origin of the world there is no foundation for order. Political rule becomes “merely the exercising of power, and citizens would then inevitably feel that they were delivered over to the whim of those who had power.”(23)

“The collapse of the universal validity of traditional morality and consciousness of law is the second aspect of the long-term effects of secularization.”(24) Much of this can be attributed to the influence of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, who taught that moral norms were binding even without religion.(25)

Third, “the individual in his or her struggle towards orientation and identity is hardest hit by the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment.”(26) This leads to a sense of “homelessness and alienation” and “neurotic deviations.” The loss of the “sacred and ultimate” has left its mark. As Pannenberg writes: “The increasingly evident long-term effects of the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment have led to a state of fragile equilibrium in the system of secular society.”(27)

Since evangelicals are a part of that society, we should

realize this “fragile equilibrium” is not just a problem reserved for the unbelieving secularist; it is also our problem.

Whether the challenge is secularism, pluralism, or a myriad of other issues, the Christian is called to practice discernment while actively transforming culture.

Notes

1. Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West be Converted?” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 11 (October 1987).

2. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 100.

3. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 62.

4. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 54.

5. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 5.

6. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 10.

7. Bloesch, *Freedom,* 227.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 324.

11. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* s.v. “discernment.”

12. John Baille, *What is Christian Civilization?* (London: Oxford, 1945), 59.

13. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1941), 22.

14. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 38.

15. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

16. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1963), 37-38.

17. Newbigin, “West,” 359.

18. Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 58.

19. Ibid.

20. Bloesch, *Freedom*, 228.

21. Brunner, *Christianity*, 2.

22. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 33.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 35.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 37.

27. Ibid., 38.

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