
GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN CHURCH

The church has almost always had diversity within its congregations because salvation in Jesus Christ is for people of every age group and ethnicity (Mt 28:19; Rev 5:9). The major divisions of first-century society – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female – were gloriously irrelevant to the gospel (Gal 3:28). Similar diversity exists today in western society and while we are aware of the need to respect the differing perspectives of ethnicity, gender and class, we often overlook the cultural diversity in our congregations between different generations. The differences in outlook between older and younger generations cannot be simply put down to age: the generations have a different culture. Failure to recognise this can lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding, caricature and marginalisation. Similarly, we are nowadays aware of the need for missionaries not to export western culture into other contexts, but we are less aware of the dangers of one age group imposing its culture on another within our local churches.

Differences of outlook between generations can create tension in churches. This can manifest itself in disagreements over Bible versions, how we observe the ‘sabbath,’ the style of our worship and, above all, the music we employ in our meetings. Sometimes, people leave churches over these issues; sometimes they cause church splits. Although biblical and theological questions may arise in these controversies, the differences are largely cultural. To recognise this, we need to understand the cultural shift in Western society over the past 50 years. We must then consider biblical attitudes to culture, and apply the Bible’s specific teaching on handling cultural differences in the church. Doing so should help us avoid futile, acrimonious and damaging arguments in which we try to argue biblically and theologically for what are essentially cultural preferences.

What is Culture?

We use the word ‘culture’ in different ways. If we speak of a ‘city of culture,’ or to someone as being ‘cultured’ we are referring to intellectual or artistic pursuits. Sometimes we term this ‘high’ culture, in contrast to ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture which is often regarded as naïve, uneducated and of low merit, although this hierarchical view of ‘highbrow vs lowbrow’ has been challenged in recent decades. To regard something as ‘high’ culture is never solely an

aesthetic evaluation, but also political: 'high' culture is usually that sponsored by the ruling class or educated élite. We will return to the question of 'high' and 'low' culture later, in the context of church music, but for the most part, this article is concerned with the other main meaning of culture.

'Culture' also means 'the customs, ideas, and social behaviour of a particular people or group' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 11th edn., 2004). This use of the term lacks the value judgment that some forms of 'culture' are intrinsically superior to others, although it is almost impossible not to be judgmental about cultures other than our own, even when we use the term 'culture' in this more general sense. A Western anthropologist may study a remote people group, gathering empirical data on language and customs, analysing these with proper scientific rigour, but still not be able to avoid passing judgment precisely because s/he also has a culture, from which it is impossible to escape. Even the term 'remote' in the sentence above betrays a view centred on the western world. The question whether representatives of different cultures can actually have a meaningful dialogue is one of the anxieties thrown up by postmodern thinking. In the context of church life, we may find the attitudes, values and lifestyle of Christians of a different generation strange and uncomfortable, but we must try to avoid the assumption that the culture we have grown up with is superior.

Culture exists because we are social beings. It is the means by which we function socially, by which we demonstrate our belonging (or non-belonging) and endorse the values of the group to which we belong. It can be seen in material things: the style of our architecture and décor; the objects we aspire to possess; the way we dress and adorn our bodies. It can be discerned in the way we use language, from accents and dialects to idioms and which words are considered acceptable and unacceptable. Culture can also determine our emotional life: the degree to which we are demonstrative and effusive; how we express our pleasure or grief; even what things we find funny.

The manifestations of one culture may appear alien and bizarre to another. To us it seems absurd of John Owen and George Whitefield to wear periwigs. It would be weird for us to ratify a legal transaction by the removal of footwear (Ru 4:7), or to eat our dinner lying down (Lk 7:49 – so weird, in fact, that the NKJV uses 'sat' instead of 'reclined'). These customs were not absurd or weird to people of those cultures. And those people would find many absurdities in our culture. Customs are incomprehensible across cultural boundaries often because they are arbitrary and only have meaning in the context of social interaction. What we wear indicates status and position within society, without our being conscious of it. Outside of our culture, those same clothes mean nothing at all. They are just costumes.

Questions of clothing and customs seem innocuous. But many other aspects of culture do not. Some of Luther's apparently anti-semitic statements, or Dabney's acceptance of slavery seem incredible to us. Surely these were not cultural matters, but moral ones. The problem is that the lines between culture and morality, or culture and aesthetics (what is deemed beautiful)

cannot be drawn so neatly. We are apt to view the infringement of our own cultural norms as a moral failing, and to regard our own aesthetic values as objective standards of beauty. We also tend to use moral arguments to reinforce what are merely cultural norms, and idealistic terms to justify passing notions of taste, decorum and probity. This does not mean that there are no objective standards of morality, but that we need to recognise that our 'instincts' on moral matters are conditioned by our culture.

The Western Cultural Shift

There is a fault-line in Western culture indicating a seismic disruption in the way people think and behave. The fault-line separates the generation which grew up during the War and embarked on adult life during the austere years of the 1950s and the generation which grew up in the 1960s and 70s, years of burgeoning prosperity and anti-establishment popular culture. Subsequent generations have inherited the post-1960 worldview, but with the added influence of computer and information technology. The different generations have been educated differently, and have grown up with different expectations and aspirations in life.

Western culture before the 1960s was deferential: people in positions of authority were given respect because of their position. A doctor or lawyer or schoolmaster had a status that extended beyond the workplace: he (they were usually men) was 'somebody' in society or the local community (a vestige of this is in the list of people who can endorse your passport application). What went with this, of course, was 'knowing your place' in society and a lack of social mobility. This deference to authority was challenged in many ways in the 1960s: hadn't it resulted in the inhuman madness of two world wars and now Vietnam? How are people in certain jobs, or who have had certain advantages of upbringing and education 'better' than me? Why should adult males count for more than women and young adults? Whereas people had dressed to fit in with society, they now began to dress to stand out and get noticed.

People of the older generation are used to formality in their social interactions. From the 1960s onwards, people began to value informality, to speak their minds and express their feelings publicly rather than bottling them up. 'Mr' and 'Mrs' were replaced with first names in many contexts.

The post-war generation, having lived through years of fear and austerity, aspired to a better life in a secure home, a well-paid job, and good 'prospects.' Their children, more able to take these things for granted, started looking for feelings of happiness and fulfilment beyond them. Now, how we earn our money no longer defines us ("I am a teacher", "I am a builder") so much as how we spend it: a job is the means to finance the rest of our life. Whereas the generation of the 1950s had treated life as a serious undertaking, the next generation wanted (and could get) excitement, entertainment and amusement. The older generation tend to value permanence, stability and tradition. Younger generations tend to like the stimulation of frequent change, whether it makes things better or just different.

Often we hear that Western society has been in moral decline since the 1960s. This is too simplistic. In terms of personal sexual morality, there has been a dramatic rejection of the teaching of the church. In other areas, however, we are an increasingly moral society: we now care about the exploitation and squandering of natural resources; we are far more concerned about the rights of the underprivileged in the world and in society; we do not tolerate the devaluing of women or people who aren't white; we are constantly vigilant against corruption in positions of power.

In the 1950s, church and Sunday School attendance reached their peak in the UK. Church-going was part of British life and if you weren't particularly religious, you were 'C of E'. This collapsed suddenly and dramatically in the 1960s. This means, of course, that the generation who were parents in the 1960s (and had therefore grown up during the war) stopped going to church and sending their children to Sunday School. By the 1970s, to be a Christian was counter-cultural and, for some, that was its attraction: the church was seen as part of the 'establishment' but newly emerging house churches and youth meetings were exciting, dynamic, informal and, above all, 'real.' Others rejected 'mainstream, western' religion altogether and sought enlightenment in Eastern religions and 'new age' ideas. As a result, religion is now seen as a matter of personal preference, not a community activity.

In very general terms, we can tabulate the shift in our culture as follows:

Cultural emphases prior to the 1960s	Cultural emphases after the 1960s
conformity	individualism
stability	change
social immobility	social mobility
deference	questioning authority
formality	informality
reserve	emotional expression
seriousness	humour
personal morality	social morality
church-going	personal belief systems

This analysis is obviously done with a broad brush. I am not suggesting that there is no longer anything of the left-hand column in our society, or that the shift happened overnight and equally across the whole of society. It is a generalisation about the trend in our society over the last 50 years.

Before we consider how this impacts on church life and how we should take account of it in practice, I must make a further, absolutely crucial point. Neither side of the table above is inherently more biblical or righteous. There may be certain particular changes in our society

which we deplore, and others we welcome, but the cultural shift as I have defined it is morally neutral. Any one of the terms, in either column, can have a good or bad side and can be defended or criticised biblically. For example, it is good to show respect to those in authority, but there are times when authority must be questioned (the prophets were not overly deferential to some of Israel's kings). It is good to have some form and structure in how we express ourselves socially, but we must also be genuine and open. Neither emotional repression nor abandon are helpful. It is important to be serious about life, but laughter and enjoyment are God-given gifts: taking ourselves too seriously and not being able to laugh at ourselves are dangerous traits. The Bible is just as concerned about social morality (or 'social justice') as about personal morality. Even widespread church-going has its dangers when people imagine that it makes them Christians. The emphasis on the importance of personal belief is utterly Christian. On a positive note, therefore, this means that both generational perspectives have something to contribute to the life of the church and ought to complement one another.

How are the western cultural changes apparent in church life?

Older Christians are likely to value a certain formality in our approach to God. They like a proper distance to be maintained between a holy and sovereign God, and sinful people. Younger Christians are likely to put more emphasis on God's Fatherhood and the freedom of access we have to him in Christ. Both these emphases can be expressed in valid biblical terms. In practical terms, this means that older Christians will instinctively feel that God ought to be addressed with a certain formality of language whereas the younger generation will perhaps 'dare' to address God with the freedom warranted by the doctrine of adoption. Again, both motives are right. But neither deferential nor familiar language is, of itself, inherently appropriate. What matters is the motivation behind it.

In many controversies in contemporary church life, whether forms of music, style of church service, use of language, sabbath observance, or choice of Bible version, the question of 'reverence' is raised. F. F. Bruce wisely remarked, "I will not charge anything with irreverence if it is not irreverently intended." Reverence is an attitude of heart and cannot reside objectively in a mere form of worship, language or prescribed behaviour; intent is key. Another Christian may use a form of words, a style of music or a choice of expression which, culturally, I would or could not use to express reverence towards God, but that does not signify irreverence on his or her part. This rule holds true whether the other Christian in question is more radical or more conservative than me. Usually, it is an older Christian who charges a younger one with irreverence. Younger Christians are more likely to charge the older generation with an empty formalism lacking spiritual vitality. This is also a cultural value-judgment which evaluates a person's inner attitudes according to how demonstrative he or she is.

The balance between deference and familiarity also manifests itself in attitudes towards church leaders. The older generation often call the minister 'pastor' and regard him as

somehow set apart by his office. The younger generation will prefer to be on first name terms and value the fact that the minister has the same struggles as them; he is not a breed apart. There are dangerous extremes to be avoided – church leaders who are beyond contradiction, and members who treat the leader as a lackey – but again, there is biblical warrant both for the Christian leader’s being a servant, and worthy of respect and having authority.

The older generation were brought up to dress formally to go to church. As Sunday has changed in society from a day for church-going to a part of ‘leisure time,’ the younger generations tend to dress casually for church. This shift in attitudes also conditions what people expect from attending church: people of younger generations are likely to think that if church is not enjoyable, it cannot be right; it must be beneficial, not just a duty.

There has also been a shift in the way people interact with ideas. Before the shift to postmodern ways of thinking, truth was the issue; now it is hope. In other words, arguments about Christianity used to be at the level of ‘Is it true?’ Now, the question people have is ‘Will it work for me?’ People are not much taken with ideologies or ideals anymore: they are more pragmatic. This is a factor not only in our presentation of the gospel to unbelievers, but in the way we expound the Bible in church. The ‘Google age’ is awash with information – more than we can properly cope with or analyse – and it remains at the level of the ‘interesting.’ We must demonstrate the practical relevance and benefit of what we are teaching (why it matters) otherwise people will subconsciously label it ‘interesting but irrelevant.’

There has been an obvious shift in sexual morality. The older generation was not only taught from the Bible, but also grew up with a cultural revulsion to all forms of sex outside of marriage. These are no longer culturally unacceptable (at least officially). The current generation therefore may have the same biblical teaching on these issues as formerly, but that teaching is not reinforced by the attitudes of society around them in the way it used to be. Similarly, it was relatively easy to teach Sunday as a day of rest when there were no trading or sports fixtures on Sundays. The changes in law that have gone hand in hand with cultural changes have not only made it harder to maintain sabbath observance, but have also led to a theological re-evaluation of Sunday as a Christian ‘sabbath.’ While some may deplore this, we must question whether ‘sabbath-observance’ that is merely cultural and has no exegetical or theological basis is really honouring God. Challenges to our ways of doing things may be uncomfortable, but they do make us think why we teach what we do and behave the way we do. If we find ourselves thinking, “In my day, we would never have ...,” this does not mean that we used to be better people, but that culture made it easy to follow certain moral norms without having to think them through biblically.

Complications in Church Culture

Certain factors in church life mean that the cultural shift in society does not transfer straightforwardly to the church. Churches of different theological positions or denominational allegiances approach culture differently. Many churches which would label themselves

'reformed' are culturally reminiscent of the era before the 1960s. In those churches, a certain formality and respectful distance towards God is valued as reverence. They demonstrate a certain deference to authority. From their pulpits, a common theme is the decline in morality as a result of the 'permissive society.' There is sometimes a lack of humour and warmth in the services and an emphasis on attendance at meetings. There are also, however, a good many churches which would be 'reformed' (i.e. Calvinistic) in theology which have a very different culture. Similarly, charismatic churches often embrace contemporary culture, with a stress on informality and lively, multi-media services intended to appeal to an unchurched generation. But again, this cultural position does not inevitably follow from their theological position on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some in 'old-style Pentecostalism' are uncomfortable in charismatic churches and there are churches with a music group and relatively unstructured services which do not practise the charismatic gifts. It is very important that we recognise that our church 'culture' (the way we do things and the way we view things) is not necessarily an inevitable corollary of our theological position.

There are other issues relating to culture in our churches. First, churches, in common with all religious groups, tend to be conservative. This is inevitable given that we trace our roots back at least 2000 years. It is our instinct to preserve our culture when it is under attack, as Christianity has been increasingly in the Western world. In particular, the attacks on the Bible coming out of nineteenth-century critical scholarship, characteristic of 'liberalism,' have made us deeply (and understandably) suspicious of change.

At the same time, church culture is – and should be – counter-cultural. There should be a difference between Christians and the unbelieving 'world' around. We must be careful to ensure, however, that the differences are biblical, and not just cultural. We can stand out because we use peculiar words and phrases, or because we dress in an old-fashioned way and, in fact, because of the many things that we don't do. In its most extreme manifestation, we see the way Amish people in the USA have preserved their culture almost without change for several hundred years. In the case of individual believers, conformity to church culture can stem from a genuine desire to please God. The onus is on church leaders to ensure that the culture of the church is biblically-determined without being quirky or anachronistic.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that our culture is not monolithic. There are cultural differences between the working, middle and upper classes, between urban and rural society, and between different ethnic groups. The culture of an individual church should reflect its social and ethnic composition. This will affect things like the choice of Bible version, the choice of hymns and songs, the length of services and the style of preaching. Again, we are apt to think that these are questions which must be settled theologically, but the Bible does not legislate on them. They are culturally determined, and we should expect churches to exhibit diversity on many secondary matters.

The Bible and Culture

It will be apparent by now that the issues raised by culture are complex and cannot be resolved simplistically. Scripture itself has a complex and sophisticated approach to culture, which I will define under the three headings of enculturation, cultural critique and cultural toleration

Enculturation

The Bible is, to a large degree, enculturated: it speaks in the language and cultural idioms of its human authors and original recipients. Even a timeless prohibition such as the commandment not to covet is expressed in culturally-specific terms: few of us are likely to covet someone else's servants, ox or donkey (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21). In this case, we are able to distinguish the principle from the culturally-specific terms in which it is phrased. It is not always so easy to do this, but it is essential to differentiate the culturally-specific application of principles from the timeless principles themselves.

Cultural Critique

The Bible is not simply a product of ancient cultures. It does not sanctify or accept uncritically the values and customs of the cultures within which it was written. Even what seem to us innocuous aspects of Canaanite culture such as the making of mixed-fabric garments or trimming of beards are prohibited in the Holiness Code (Lev 19:19, 27) because of what they meant in that culture. These are not timeless moral absolutes, but a critique of culturally-specific ways in which moral absolutes were contravened.

Cultural Toleration

There are other cases in which the Bible seems to tolerate aspects of contemporary culture which ultimately it would proscribe, such as divorce (Dt 24:1-4, cf. Mt 19:1-10), polygamy, and slavery (1 Cor 7:21-24; 1 Tim 6:1-2). In this, there is a tacit acknowledgement that no human society between the Fall and the Age to Come will ever be culturally perfect, because of human sinfulness. The Bible's agenda is eschatological: only after the return of Christ will God's kingdom fully come and human society exhibit perfect culture.

We can observe these three approaches to culture in the person of the Lord Jesus. On the one hand, he became a first-century Jewish man, in many respects adhering to the norms and customs of that culture, communicating in its language and idioms, and employing culturally-specific and relevant illustrations. On the other, he was not slow to criticise the values and notions of that culture in his public ministry, even when deep-seated. He challenged the division of society into 'sinners' and 'righteous' (e.g. Mk 2:16-17; Lk 15:1-7), and asserted a woman's right to be a disciple (Lk 10:38-42). He overturned Jewish attitudes towards the Gentiles (e.g. Jn 4; Lk 7:9) and towards temple religion (Mk 11:15-19, etc). At the same time, Jesus did not attempt a full-scale overhaul of first-century Jewish culture and society; he was no liberation theologian. He acquiesced in what must have been an unjust system of taxation (Mt 17:24-27; Mk 2:13-17), did nothing directly to undermine Roman imperialism, or promote

democracy. Undoubtedly, social justice and egalitarianism came as a result of individuals' coming to faith in him and living by his teaching, but Jesus also implied that the 'world' at enmity with God cannot be 'christianised' (Jn 15:18-16:4).

The three approaches to culture that we observe in Scripture and in the person of the Lord Jesus provide a template for our attitude to culture. First, we need to accept that we are inescapably enculturated. We are products of our own culture and our values, judgments and preferences are determined by the culture in which we grew up, whether the culture of our society alone or in combination with the sub-culture of the church. And it is in culturally appropriate ways that we must live out the Christian life and communicate the Christian message. Secondly, we need to be critical of our own culture, constantly questioning whether the ways of thinking and acting that we are familiar and comfortable with actually conform to biblical standards. Too often in debates over generational differences, we maintain unthinkingly the validity of our own culture and deprecate the culture of others that we have perhaps not adequately understood. In a fallen world, to assume that our own particular culture is the most 'biblical' is complacent. Thirdly, we must accept a degree of imperfection in any human culture and not dissipate our energies in denouncing all the ills of society. Our mandate is to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to fallen people in flawed societies. This is not to argue against the involvement of Christians in political, social and cultural affairs, but to caution against trying to create a perfect society on earth.

Biblical Silence on Areas of Controversy

A second way in which the Bible helps us in our church controversies is in its silence upon certain questions. The New Testament says almost nothing about what building a church should meet in, the number, duration and character of meetings it should hold, the length or style of a sermon, or even how often the Lord's Supper should be celebrated. It says so little about music, that we cannot be sure that the early church even sang congregationally in its meetings (1 Cor 14:15, 26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16 may refer to solo singing at the agape-meal, as we know happened in the Second and Third Centuries). If scripture does not legislate on such questions, we should be wary about doing so. We should develop culturally appropriate and relevant practices, whilst recognising that these are only how we seek to apply more fundamental biblical principles such as worship in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23), the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:4-10), and everything being done in an orderly and edifying way (1 Cor 14:26, 40).

Biblical Examples of Culturally-Related Controversies

Happily, the New Testament also provides some helpful examples of how the early church dealt with controversies over culturally sensitive issues. First, there is the question of head-covering in prayer, in 1 Corinthians 11. Significantly, Paul appeals to a cultural sense of propriety: 'judge among yourselves,' he says. His appeal is not to an absolute ethical standard from God's law, but the customs of their own culture. When he brings 'nature itself' (v. 14, Gk. phusis: here 'the natural order of things') into the argument, he does not mean that

shortness of male hair is a 'natural' creation ordinance, but that the differentiation between the sexes is. Hair length was merely the way the sexes were differentiated in Graeco-Roman society. In other words, the biblical principle of differentiation between genders is to be upheld in a culturally appropriate and relevant way.

The cultural mismatch between Jews and Gentiles provides further instructive examples of how to handle sensitive issues. Paul was happy to enculturate himself when proclaiming the gospel to Jewish or Gentile unbelievers (1 Cor 9:19-23). After heated discussion, the predominantly Jewish church was careful not to impose aspects of Judaism on Gentile converts, whilst also asking them to avoid giving offence to Jewish Christians by eating strangled meat and blood (Ac 15:19-20). Paul strenuously opposed the imposition of circumcision on Gentile Christians, seeing it as a threat to the gospel itself, and yet had Timothy circumcised so as to avoid offence to the Jewish people he intended to reach with the gospel (Ac 16:3). He also carried out vows in accordance with Jewish custom (Ac 21:23-25), whilst regarding his Jewish heritage as 'loss' with respect to what he had gained through faith in Christ (Phil 3:4-11).

What this demonstrates is a wisdom on the part of the apostles that although some cultural scruples are ultimately irrelevant, they matter if they matter to people. In dealing with the meat-offered-to-idols controversy (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8, 10), Paul did not pronounce which side of the argument was correct and tell people to stop being so stupid. Instead he took their scruples seriously and urged them to do the same towards one another. Both sides had good biblical reasons for their position: on the one hand, remaining pure from the taint of pagan religion and the dark spiritual forces behind it; on the other hand, exercising the liberty we have in Christ. Paul apparently inclined to the latter position (meat is, after all, just meat, 1 Cor 10:25). But he argued that what matters was not whether this meat was eaten or not, but the motivation of Christians in both camps, their attitudes towards one another, and the effect of their behaviour on one another. A judgmental attitude or encouraging other Christians to act against conscience are far more serious matters than dietary scruples. This does not make everything relative to our own consciences, but some things are.

Contemporary Controversies

The eating of meat which had been offered to idols is a safe, 'dead' issue which we can look at dispassionately, because it is no longer an issue in our culture. It takes considerable mental and spiritual effort to apply biblical principles dispassionately and objectively to contemporary controversies.

Style of Worship and Music

There is probably no issue more controversial than 'contemporary' versus traditional worship style, which often centres on style of music and choice of instruments. To a large degree, this is a cultural issue. Between about 1960 and 1980, the western world's musical tastes were transformed by the dissemination of popular music through radio stations and affordable

recordings. So pervasive has popular music become that classical, jazz and folk music are now minority tastes and rock and pop musicians are now regarded as cultural icons and ambassadors of British culture. Popular music is the music that many – probably the majority – of British people listen to and identify with. Therefore, some would argue that this is the culturally relevant and appropriate musical style for music in church. From a biblical standpoint, no musical style or idiom is better or more appropriate for worship. At the same time, styles of music have cultural associations which are not neutral. We need to take account of the image we project by our choice of music in church.

It is sometimes argued that ‘popular’ music is inferior in quality, with its relatively simple harmonies, prominent rhythms and obvious melodies. This is also true of the majority of traditional hymns, however. Even hymns with tunes written by great classical composers are often arrangements of existing hymns or folk tunes. Congregational music is not great music, nor should it be, because people of little musical ability must be able to sing it. Otherwise, we contradict the great principle of the priesthood of all believers by putting music into the hands of experts. The idea that music (or architecture) of superior quality is more honouring to God has no biblical basis. It reflects a notion of ‘high’ versus ‘low’ culture which is foreign to the Bible.

Why do people prefer traditional hymns? It may be they find the words more theologically rich and meaningful. But there is no reason why rich theological words cannot be sung to pop tunes and to the accompaniment of a music group. It may be because there are more good old hymns than new ones. This merely highlights the need for people to write good, contemporary songs. The best of these will stand the test of time. Ultimately, people like old hymns for cultural reasons: they have cherished, personal history in churches where these hymns have been sung. The same is true for people who favour ‘contemporary worship’: it is a cultural preference.

Applying the biblical approach to culture to musical issues produces the following observations:

First, our musical preferences do not derive from biblical principles, but are culturally determined. What we like or dislike is to some extent culturally-conditioned. Secondly, we must look biblically and critically at what we like before we criticise what other Christians like. Does the music I like to sing in church focus my attention on God or distract from him? Can most (if not all) the people in my church join in? Does it have a clear structure and order so all people know what they are supposed to be singing and when to stop? Do other Christians find it helpful and appropriate? Thirdly, we must accept that we can’t make everything perfect. In a multi-cultural church, we will find ourselves singing tunes we don’t like at speeds we don’t like. We can’t all have what we want all the time.

Then, from the example of how the early church dealt with culturally-sensitive controversies, we must recognise that people are more important than music. We must not sit in judgment on other Christians because their musical tastes differ from ours and we must respect their culture, even if it is a bit foreign to us. In my experience, ideologues, whatever form of church music they advocate, are not interested in balance or compromise. They are also more concerned about their notion of 'correct' style of worship than about other Christian people. It is sad that the immoderate terms in which the few have expressed their opinions about music in church have robbed the majority of the simple enjoyment of congregational singing. When those leading services are judged according to the number of traditional or modern songs they choose, they begin to wonder why we are singing at all!

Some Other Issues

Bible Versions

There are complex issues involved in this question. For some, there is an argument about which texts are the proper foundation for a Bible translation. There is also the question of 'literal' versus 'dynamic' approach. We should not allow these questions to obscure the fact that there is also a cultural dimension to our preference for Bible versions. The language in which we like the Bible to speak to us will reflect our educational background, class and generation. We need to bear this in mind in debate. When choosing a church or 'pew' version, we need to give due consideration to who is going to be using it: the cultural demographic of the congregation and the people we are trying to reach.

Image

The generational-cultural issue is not quite like other cultural questions, precisely because all generations are mortal and their ways of approaching life will pass away with them. We need to be careful not to make older Christians feel that we are impatient to see them go whilst also being careful not to become anachronistic. The church cannot afford to appear irrelevant either through being hopelessly old-fashioned or adopting superficial trendiness. In other words, it must not reflect the culture of any one generation if it is to reach out to all.

Participation

Another danger is of marginalising younger Christians by never giving responsibility in church to them for fear that they will not do things 'properly.' We need to be careful that our definition of what is proper is biblically and not culturally-determined. We must expect people younger than we are to do things differently than we would. At the same time, younger people need to resist the temptation merely to show how differently things can be done.

People are much more active than passive nowadays. Younger people, particularly, want to participate in order to feel something is relevant. They will not simply sit in the congregation while older people talk to them (or past them). They will leave and go somewhere else where they are listened to, their culture is respected, and they have opportunity to participate. Birds

of a feather flock together, and young people are attracted most by the presence of other young people – far more than by style of worship or music. Other generations are no different. Parents with young children want to go to a church where there are other parents with small children. The elderly feel comfortable with people of their own generation, too. This means that no church will have a full spectrum of ages throughout its history. These things go in cycles. All the same, it is a good thing to strive to achieve this. Apart from family gatherings, there are very few contexts in our society in which people of all generations meet together and interact. This makes the church feel like a family and that is what the Bible says it is.

David Green, January 2013

David Green is Vice-Principal of London Theological Seminary where he is also a faculty member for Old Testament theology & exegesis, Hebrew and Contemporary Studies.

He studied Fine Art before completing a doctorate in the History of Art, concerned with aspects of art, music and popular religion in fifteenth-century Italy. He taught the history and theory of art and design in further and higher education before training for the ministry at LTS, and was the minister of Bishopdown Baptist Church in Salisbury for ten years before his appointment as vice-principal of the seminary. He has spoken widely on aspects of contemporary culture, postmodernism and consumerism.

Table Talk is a series of occasional papers published on line by the Affinity Theological Team. Its purpose is to stimulate theological thinking on significant issues. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

Foundations is an online journal published twice a year by the Affinity Theological Team. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, including in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics and indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.