The Pastor and Contemporary Culture

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Evangelical ministers and churches are beginning to feel themselves under considerable pressure to accommodate to modern culture in all its various expressions. What we are being asked to do is represented simply as a matter of progress and of moving with the times. We ought to be willing to be up-to-date in our attitudes, our thinking and our practices; otherwise we cannot hope to influence the modern man. Much of this pressure for change is coming from within the church. The word 'culture' is increasingly being mentioned in addresses and articles. In some circles one almost gets the impression that unless we purchase clothes from Next we shall be regarded as spiritually outmoded. But some of us have discovered that what is 'next' often turns out to be a 'has been' and we are back in fashion! Others would have us believe that unless we sing mindless little choruses, almost wholly taken up with little 'me', and therefore decidedly in tune with modern culture, we shall lose the younger generation. Incidentally, the real test of what effect we have upon the younger generation is how many of them have been retained as true believers when they become the older generation. However, the fact remains that the cultural *mores* of our present society are regarded by many in our churches as far more important than questions of truth and righteousness. Modern culture is seen as a friend, and we are expected to walk hand in hand with it as a means of obtaining a hearing for the gospel.

How ought we to respond to this pressure? Is this just a question of being up-to-date, as many would have us believe, or are there deeper issues involved? We need to consider why this crisis has arisen. Clearly, within the last twenty or thirty years considerable changes have taken place in our society. As a nation we are losing the past cultural character of our land, with its Christian assumptions, and what is taking its place is an expression of our pluralistic and multi-faith society with its amoral and secular bearing. Regrettably many of those who are urging us to accommodate ourselves to modern culture are doing it without much thought or sense of responsibility.

This is a vast subject, but I want to deal with it at a fairly popular level. Let me say at the outset that I believe no greater disservice can be rendered to the Christian faith than by giving the impression that the gospel is out of date. Some Christians are in danger of doing this by insisting upon religious traditions inherited from the past that are in no way essential to the faith. But let it be said that nothing is more relevant to the modern man than the Christian message. And it does not require modern culture to make it relevant. What we have to do is to demonstrate its relevance by striking a contemporary note; but we do not need to wear Bermuda shorts to do this.

I suppose Standard Strict Baptist churches could never be accused of trendiness; and yet one of their number received one of the warmest commendations from Ruth Gledhill, of *The Times,* of any of the many churches of all denominations she has evaluated. Some would accuse these churches, perhaps with some justification, of being stuck in a time warp; but the fact remains that the sermon, the people and the service of this particular church made a considerable impact upon that modern journalist, whereas

a representative of an organisation which exists to promote contemporary preaching left her singularly unimpressed. We shall be wise, therefore, not to respond too quickly to those who say that unless we adopt the quirks of modern culture we shall be in danger of dying out.

Definition

No real consensus seems to exist, even in dictionaries, as to the meaning of the word 'culture'. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as 'improvement by training (mental or physical); intellectual development'. Sounds like a southern bias! The words 'improvement' and 'development' are the giveaway. *Chambers Dictionary* is better: 'the result of cultivation', 'the state of being cultivated' – whether biologically or socially. Whether or not this leads to improvement is not a necessary qualification in my view; it might lead to the opposite. *Chambers* continues by referring to the 'attitudes and values which inform a society'. They are expressed in conventions of behaviour and in popular beliefs, and in the language, literature, drama and music of a people. Prevailing culture is also reflected in art, design and architecture, and in what is called 'life-style'. A nation's marriage customs, patterns of family life and sexual practices are also part of culture. Philosophy, religion, magic, superstition and irreligion are all factors which shape culture. The interaction of religion, superstition and magic in shaping the culture of a people is surveyed in Keith Thomas' magisterial work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. The spread of Reformation doctrines in this country led to a decline of occult practices and superstitions. The various strands of New Age mentality are having the opposite effect today upon our culture. Mystical and Eastern religions, frequently popularised by figures from the pop scene, are having their effect upon the reshaping of our culture. These and other influences of a philosophical nature are daily changing the face of our nation through the modern media.

We can say of culture, in the words of the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, that 'Because man is God's creature some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic' (para.10). (*New Dictionary of Theology*, p.183i). Nothing is more dangerous and misleading, therefore, than to speak of culture as though it were a neutral and benign condition.

Distinctions

I draw a distinction between culture and *civilisation*, though generally writers tend not to. The southerner may find the northerner a bit of a culture shock; but the northerner is not without culture. Refinement of speech and manners has more to do with civilisation than culture, though the southerner tends to confuse these things. The northerner, who eats his fish and chips in the street and bluntly tells you what he thinks of you, is not uncultured. He lacks refinement, maybe, but not culture. We can also draw a distinction between culture and *technology* which is really an aspect of civilisation. A new car at the Motor Show is the product of technology, part of civilisation. The styling of the car, to some extent, and the semi-naked woman lolling over its bonnet are expressions of modern culture, as is the value a person attaches to his car. The style may be a matter of moral indifference, but the use of a woman's sex appeal to stimulate interest and sales is not. Even cultural style can become an

expression of lewdness and wickedness as the ornamental artifacts of Pompeii – the fashionable holiday haunt of the Roman rich in the first century – vividly illustrate.

I regard central heating, washing machines, hi-fi centres and Jacuzzi baths as products of technology in our modern civilisation. But the styling of the clothes we wear, the variety of the food we eat and how it is cooked and when it is eaten, and the music we listen to and how often we take a bath are cultural expressions of our lives. Our love of luxury and comfort is cultural. A chair is a product of basic technology; its design is an aspect of culture. And if I were to ask you 'Are you sitting comfortably?' then I might be guilty of the modern obsession with comfort that makes it a standard by which the value of anything, including sermons and church services, is assessed. That is culture. And when people talk of 'user-friendly' services they are talking about culture.

I do not wish to make too much of these distinctions between culture and civilisation, since there is considerable overlapping of these things.

The Biblical Evaluation of Culture

1 **In the Old Testament** Though the Scriptures do not use the word 'culture', as such, yet they have much to say about it. The teaching in the Pentateuch concerning clean and unclean animals, foods permitted and forbidden, the cleansing of leprous conditions, the laws of marriage and divorce and the treatment of slaves, of the poor and of strangers is all of cultural significance. What the Lord required of Israel in its religion, customs and morality was in striking contrast to 'the nations'. Israel's principles of conduct regulating their personal, family and commercial life were to mark them out as a distinct and separate people of God. The religion of Israel was intended to shape their social and cultural life. Their way of life was designed to project the only alternative society to be found – a counter-culture to that of the heathen nations. The laws God gave them underlined their distinctiveness. The Ten Commandments were a declaration of absolutes in their religious and social life.

The Lord frequently reproved Israel for becoming culturally similar to the nations. In Ezekiel Chapter 5, for example, Israel 'set in the midst of the nations and the countries all around her' (v 5) to be a witness to them, is condemned for not only becoming like the nations in failing to observe God's laws and statutes, but for far exceeding them in wickedness. The detestable practices and abominations associated with idolatry, such as child sacrifice, prostitution and homosexuality, had entered the life of Israel. Ezra, on returning to Jerusalem from the Exile, is horrified to discover that the Jews had 'not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands' with respect to marriage and their abominations. They had assimilated themselves to the culture of the heathen peoples. That was their condemnation, just as it had been in the Northern Kingdom in the days of Ahab.

What the Old Testament teaches us about the culture of a people is that it is intrinsically tied up with their religion or irreligion. Some speakers urge us to distinguish between doctrine and culture as though these things can be held apart. It is, in fact, quite impossible; the culture of a people is the expression of their religion, their idolatry, their superstition and their irreligion.

2. **In the New Testament** The Old Testament theme of the uniqueness and the separateness of God's people is continued throughout the New Testament with respect

to the church and the world. Peter uses four phrases and designations, all taken from the Old Testament and there used of Israel, and applies them to the church as 'a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a special people' (1 Peter 2:9). They are all this so that they might proclaim to all around the praises of the living God who has called them 'out of darkness into his marvellous light'. And on account of this they are exhorted to 'abstain from fleshly lusts' that were characteristic of the world in their day and in ours. They were to be known among the Gentiles for honourable conduct and good works. As in the Old Testament, so in the New Testament the cultural life of God's people is expected to contrast with that of the world. Christians, as Jesus expressed it, are in the world, and yet not of the world (John 17); and the distinction is not merely that of spiritual nature and belief, but also of behaviour, and attitude and mind-set, and therefore, of culture.

But being 'in the world and not of it' gives rise to serious problems which are carefully dealt with in the New Testament. Such cultural problems as arose from the eating of meats offered to idols, and of living in a slave/master relationship, and of being part of a community subject to ungodly rulers. In the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2&3) the Lord specifically deals with the dangers threatening the life of the churches arising from the pagan culture and the heathen society of the cities in which believers lived. The problem in Pergamos (2:12-17) was occasioned by the idolatry of the city and the sexual permissiveness associated with it. The situation was not unlike that of our own society. Before we start talking loosely about taking on board the culture of our day we need to evaluate it. We have come across university Christian Unions that have become religious versions of the world: same interests, same appetites, same pleasures, but baptised with religion and using evangelical terminology.

The New Testament phrase 'the world', in the sense of human society alienated from God and living in unbelief and hostility to God, is often used in a cultural sense, e.g. 1 John 2:15-16 *'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world'*. Those phrases 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life' have a strong cultural reference. What is culture if it is not largely the spirit of the world and the way and fashion of the world? The call to believers in 2 Cor. 6:11-18 to avoid being unequally yoked together with unbelievers, and to be a separate people, is primarily an exhortation to reject those aspects of Corinthian culture in conflict with the mind and will of a holy God. Likewise in Romans 12:1-2 the exhortation to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, is accompanied by the instruction not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. What is the 'conforming to this world' that the Apostle has in mind, if it is not an adoption of its ethos and culture?

We need to be on our guard, therefore, against those evangelical trendies of our day, who rather unthinkingly urge us to accommodate ourselves to modern culture on the grounds that thereby we shall obtain a greater influence for the gospel within our modern society. Taken as a whole the biblical view of culture is not a favourable one; and if the church allows itself to be swamped by the ideals and ethos of modern culture, then we will discover that far from preserving the churches from dying out, this preoccupation with culture will have aided our extinction. David Wells comments, 'A

Christian faith that tries to adapt to this culture in order to win a 'hearing' is a Christian faith that will be left with nothing to say' (*Losing our Virtue*, p.191).

A number of aspects of modern culture are at strong variance with the Christian faith:

1. The rejection of any concept of absolute standards and the triumph of subjective relativism.
2. The supremacy of feeling as the measure of what is good and virtuous.

The sentimentalism of modern society, which has led to a total distortion of traditional values.

3. The elevation of eroticism within every part of our society. Sexual expression has been legitimized as an end in itself and sexual enjoyment is regarded as justification for infidelity and forms of unrestrained and self-indulgent behaviour frequently condemned in the New Testament.
4. The prevalence of nudity throughout the media, seductive dress, erotic music and craving for subjective experience are all characteristic of modern culture. Taken as a whole, modern culture is strongly hostile to holiness of life understood in the biblical sense. The task of the church in our generation is not to mimic its culture but to confront it with the Word of God. We are called upon to produce a counter-culture as a challenge to the way of the world. And the church should embody that counter-culture as it did in Corinth.

Necessary Accommodation to Cultural Patterns of Life in Things Indifferent

In the very epistles where Paul warns against the prevailing culture, he also favours accommodation when no essential truth or moral standard is compromised. He refers to his own practice in 1 Cor.9:19-23:

> For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; and to those who are under the law as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law towards God, but under law towards Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means win some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker of it with you.

A spiritual concern for others should obligate the believer to accommodate to the ways and customs of others, if possible, in order to avoid creating unnecessary offence or hindrance for the gospel. The phrase in verse 21, 'not being without law toward God but under law toward Christ' sets the limit to such accommodation. So we need to draw a distinction between those elements of modern culture which are hostile to God, and such elements as are spiritually and morally unobjectionable. It would be foolish today, for example, to object to using Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday etc. because they were named after heathen deities: Sun, Moon, Tusco, Woden etc. Even meat that had been offered to idols, Paul considered permissible food unless it stumbled a brother (1 Cor. 8). But we are not to allow the consciences of others to rule the church (Rom. 14).

Some Christians still strongly object to Christian women wearing trousers or slacks, claiming that this is condemned in the Old Testament. What is condemned is the confusion of genders, and no such confusion is created by Western women doing what

Eastern women have done for centuries. Other Christians are concerned about how people dress for services of worship. Apart from the fact that God looks upon the heart and not the outward appearance, it is surely a part of modern culture to dress more informally than in the past. Even the vice-chairman of the Bank of England was recently pictured in shirt sleeves at a formal occasion. To make an issue of this is surely wrong, and yet in some congregations one is expected to appear formally and in others informally – the latter are often formally informal! But differences in outward appearance have always tended to distinguish Christian denominations. It is not a new phenomenon.

In a general sense, we are all children of our generation and reflect much of its culture already. The pressure being put upon us to conform to the cultural patterns of our times springs from an over-sensitivity as to how the unbeliever sees the Christian. We need to be ourselves, rather than somewhat artificially adopting different cultural postures in an anxiety to impress the world. But we do find some real problems that need addressing:

1. **The problem of the 'post-Christian' era**. Whereas in the past most of the customs and cultural expressions of British society were shaped by the impact of the Christian message and the influence of the Bible upon our land, our modern society has cut loose from that tradition and this confronts the church with new challenges. The precepts of Christian morality were once taken for granted in our so-called Christian nation. The Scriptures were taught in our schools and Christian ethics were woven into the fabric of our society. Our laws and conventions of behaviour reflected our Protestant tradition. The Christian Church was part of the Establishment and still is to a certain extent. Many evangelicals have rejoiced in this and taken advantage of it. Personally I have regarded this patronage of the Christian faith as inimical to the interests of true religion in our land. We have expected the State and its institutions to support the Christian religion. As Christian ministers we have regarded our ability to enter schools, hospitals and even homes as something of a right. We have looked to Parliament to uphold Sunday as a day of rest and to magistrates to establish and honour Christian traditions. For too long we have rested on the unspoken acceptance of Christian principles within our nation, and have become over-dependent upon established custom and statue laws to uphold our Christian life and testimony. The multi-faith society has come as something of a shock to us, and modern secularism with its irreverent disregard of our historic past has shaken us.

Christians and churches have got to learn to adjust to this new situation and not be intimidated by it, and part of the adjustment will mean a willingness to come to terms with new cultural patterns in our society. To some extent, therefore, what is being said about the need for cultural adjustment is of real importance, though it requires critical evaluation. There is an increasing similarity between the cultural climate of the first century and our present day. This does not dismay me, but actually gives me encouragement when I think of what the early church achieved in the face of such cultural hostility.

However, instead of coming to terms with the new situation, some Christians and churches are responding negatively by looking back nostalgically to 'This England' of a bygone age. They treasure memories of quiet Sabbath days, when people attended worship in their Sunday best, and most children went to Sunday school. This was an

England in which the minister, the teacher, the doctor and the policeman were accorded universal respect. Christianity had become institutionalised and respectability was the order of any day. In 'This England' women and children could walk safely through the countryside, picking wild flowers and chasing butterflies, without fear of sexual assault. That England will never come again, not even in days of revival. The desire for it, though understandable, is not really spiritual. It is a longing for an amenable cultural context that has now almost gone. But the nostalgia prevents many of our churches moving into the modern age with vision and a sense of opportunity. Some have become so insular that their impact upon the world is virtually nil. They advertise their services as 'Reformed, A.V. only, non-charismatic, formal service,' and one suspects they would like to add 'anti EU'! They are not really contending for the faith, but for the *status quo* as they have known it. The loss of a 'Christian culture' has filled many believers with a spirit of fear, and this fear prevents them from accepting needful changes. It produces reactionaries; and reactionaries are as dangerous as revolutionaries.

2 **The problem of the 'post-modern' Christian** The pressure of modern culture is impinging upon churches through those professing Christians who seem more concerned to be 'with it' than with spirituality. They are the expertise men eager to run the churches as they would run a business or a secular organisation. They are managers, who provided an 'office' for their minister, a comfortable church lounge for the church members and visitors, and counselling rooms for all manner of distress.

For the post-modern Christian the past is of no account, only the present matters. Old hymns, i.e. anything written before 1960, are 'boring' because they require thought. If you quote the great men and women of the past you are made to feel dated. Even the Scriptures are treated with a measure of condescension, and in some Christian meetings and services they are not even read.

The post-modern Christian lives on feelings and impulses. He believes in 'doing his own thing' and allowing others to act likewise. He wants to re-interpret the Scriptures so as to promote feminism and political correctness. He resents any expressions of authority and often refuses to recognise the divine calling of ministers of God's word. Every opinion is to be accorded equal validity irrespective of whether it has biblical authority. If he imagines that he has some 'gift', then he thinks the church should provide some opportunity for it to be expressed whether or not the church officers deem it to be appropriate. Above all, post-modern Christianity does not believe in disturbing anyone. The gospel must be a comforting one, leaving men as it finds them. All who come to the services of the church should made to feel comfortable. For this reason preaching, or the declaration of the truth, is out; and a jokey, bland, chatty style is in. Churches are under increasing pressure to provide 'happy' services and to give way to the pressure for entertainment. This elevation of happiness, enjoyment or comfort as the great principles of well-being is a marked feature of modern culture, and is beginning to effect our evangelical churches.

Of course, we must recognise that new converts will bring with them into the churches some of the baggage of post-modern culture. Unfortunately, many of the people in our reactionary churches seem to expect of the converts all the stability and maturity of those brought up in Christian homes. What is required is patient instruction on matters such as submission, sexual morality, marriage bonds etc. – just as Paul gives in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Some Final Conclusions

1. We must not just adopt prevailing culture because it is modern. We ought to act on the basis of biblical principle and obedience to the truth. If I am not mistaken, most pro and anti attitudes to modern culture are adopted out of thoughtlessness on the one hand and prejudice on the other.
2. We need to be critical of most culture in the light of God's Word and resist those elements that are hostile to biblical revelation. As regards worship and the ordering or our church life, the regulative principle of Scripture must surely direct us. Our concern should be to please God and not man.
3. On matters indifferent we should be willing to accommodate ourselves to existing and changing cultural patterns of life, so as to remove unnecessary obstacles to the spread of the gospel. This will include such things as language, music, desire for group participation and the place of women.

The English of the Authorised Version of the Bible is both superb and dated. The archaism is a great hindrance to effective communication with the modern generation, particularly the young. No one can defend the use of 'hath' instead of 'has' or 'cometh' instead of 'comes'. Likewise a delicate revision of hymns can only be advantageous; but the political correctness of the new hymnbook *Praise!* is worse than that of the media, and the heavy-handed editing of the older hymns, in an over-anxiety to be modern, has produced some alarming doggerel. There are pitfalls in adopting new terminology for the presentation of the truth. Some preachers are very dated in their style; but unless we adhere to biblical language and concepts the truth will gradually become distorted. We can retain biblical language without being dated in our style. The idea that distinctive Christian terminology, e.g. the use of such words as atonement, justification, sanctification etc. should be abandoned is basically flawed. Every interest has its distinctive terminology. You do not write to Lords protesting that the use of such terms as 'a square leg', 'a fine leg' etc. will put people off cricket. If someone becomes interested then he must learn the language. It is so in every part of life. Why should the Christian faith be any different? We need to explain our terms, but not abandon them.

If we accept that the regulative principle of worship permits the use of music, how can it be argued that only the organ or piano is permissible? Other instruments harmonising with the purpose of worship can surely be used. I get the impression that those who opposed the introduction of the organ into Brunswick Methodist Chapel, in Leeds in 1827, and so precipitated a new denomination, would just as strenuously oppose its removal were they alive today. Many of our attitudes are purely traditional and have nothing to do with biblical principle.

In this connection, can we object to other able people sharing in the conduct of worship? It was a synagogue practice. And should not more opportunity be given in our churches for meetings where believers share spiritual experiences and discuss biblical issues together? This would be more in line with modern culture.

And though we need to guard against the feminist lobby, it surely needs to be said that the Puritan view of the woman was much closer to the Bible than the Victorian tradition. You can make of that what you will!

We must not be ashamed of maintaining a different culture from that of the world; indeed, we are obligated by God's Word to do this. We must place a renewed confidence in the power of God's Word and in the power of preaching. The great preachers of Wales in the eighteenth century shaped the culture of the Welsh nation for almost two hundred years, and where the Word of God prevails there culture is changed in a God-honouring way.

Suggested literature:

David F. Wells' trilogy: *No Place for Truth*, Eerdmans, 1993; *God in the Wasteland*, IVP, 1994; and *Losing our Virtue*, IVP, 1998.

Faking It: the Sentimentalism of Modern Society; Ed. by Digby Anderson and Peter Mullen; The Social Affairs Unit, 1998. The chapters on the sentimentalism of religion, 'All Feelings and no Doctrine' by Peter Mullen, and on the history and origins of sentimentality, 'The Corruption of Christianity' by Lucy Sullivan, are particularly relevant.

Religion and the Decline of Magic; Keith Thomas; London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.

The Calvinistic Concept of Culture, Henry R Van Til, Philadelphia, P & R, 1959.

The Evangelical Disaster, Francis Schaeffer.

[1] Delivered as an address to the East Midlands Evangelical Ministers' Fraternal on 17 May 1999. The spoken format has been retained.

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'soul-care'. Venning's book is particularly helpful in understanding how to apply the truth to believers at different stages of spiritual development.

Preaching is central to pastoral care. **John Chapman's** *Setting Hearts on Fire* (Matthias 1999) is a very useful guide to preparing sermons in a way that is both faithful to the Scriptures and connects with people today. The book is intended to help in the preparation evangelistic talks, but in fact it is helpful in all sermon preparation. Surely our aim must by in dependence on God to see the hearts of people set on fire by the Holy Spirit. In *Apologetic Preaching – proclaiming Christ to a Post-modern World* (IVP-USA 2000), **Craig Loscalzo** has some helpful things to say about preaching in contemporary culture. At some points he has bought into the notion of a 'post-rational theology' as promoted of Stanley Grenz among others, but all in all a thought-provoking and useful book for pastors.

One of the most encouraging things for a pastor to do is to read biographies. There are three that have recently come to my attention. **William Baker's** biography of his father Daniel Baker, *Making Many Glad* (Banner of Truth 1999) is one of those biographies that reminds one of what God can do through the faithful but winsome preaching of his word. Baker was a 19th century Southern Presbyterian minister and evangelist. To make many rejoice in their salvation would not be a bad ambition for us to have in preaching the gospel. In *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (IVP 2000), **John Piper** profiles three of the giants of church history – Augustine, Luther and Calvin – and seeks to uncover the wellsprings of their effective ministries. Each of the chapters on these men is richly rewarding both for study and meditation, but it is the introduction, 'Savouring