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# Understanding Contemporary Culture

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Over twenty years ago I set sail for Nigeria, responding to the call of God to assist the African church in the training of pastors and teachers. I remember vividly the problems of communicating effectively with my students during that first period of service. It quickly became evident that many of the cultural assumptions which shaped my understanding of reality were not shared by African Christians. My biggest nightmare was the homiletics class; students just could not grasp the methods of sermon preparation and structure which I had assumed to be of universal validity and, worse still, when a particularly bright man did begin to produce the goods, the models of classical exposition which he delivered on Sunday mornings left his village audiences stone cold. Indeed, my own preaching rarely seemed to get through to the African heart, and this in a cultural situation where communication in day-to-day contexts brought audible and warm responses! What was it about my preaching that seemed to shut down the normal processes of communication and leave people so unmoved?

## Our assumptions

Subsequently I had to unlearn many of my *cultural* assumptions and listen with the humility of a child to those willing to teach me about the patterns of communication which were normal in traditional African societies. For example, I had to realize how culturally inappropriate long monologues are in face-to-face societies in which (as one of my students put it), an African “will not deem you wise if you fail to retort something after a communication”. The great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe confirmed this insight for me when he described an old non-Christian Igbo man who attended church once a year at harvest time as saying that his only criticism was that “the congregation was denied the right of reply to the sermon”.

Another lesson came as I listened in astonishment to a Nigerian colleague acting as mediator between estranged parties and helping them to see the issues through a skilful and liberal use of proverbs. I began to notice that proverbs were quoted all the time, that they remained part of the warp and woof of normal communication in this culture. However, my personal breakthrough came when I rediscovered the art of storytelling. My mother’s constant admonition throughout my childhood, “Don’t tell stories” (a phrase that equated “stories” with “untruths”) had prejudiced me against this method of teaching. This anti-narrative bias had been reinforced by an education which gave priority to “bare facts” and crowned reason and logic as undisputed monarchs in the realm of knowledge. Not surprisingly I still recall with joy the blazing African Sunday when I carried through a decision to abandon homiletical orthodoxy and instead just “told the story”. As I related the gospel account of the healing of the woman with the discharge of blood and tried to ground this in the realities of daily living in an African village setting the congregation came alive! The realisation dawned that Christ was not after all a distant saviour of somebody else’s world, demanding that Africans abandon their traditions and accept a form of cultural circumcision in order to benefit from his

grace. On the contrary, it was clear that he is Lord, redeemer and judge of *every* culture and that there are ways of ensuring that the Good News is communicated by means that resonate within the traditional African worldview. This is surely what it really means to preach Christ? The essence of missionary communication involves the struggle – often long, painful and dangerous – to ensure that the gospel reaches people through the channels of communication which are taken for granted in their cultural context.

## Our culture

What is the relevance of this to our contemporary culture? Over the last few years I have experienced a strong sense of *déjà vu* when encountering young people who have appeared listless and bored during services of worship on Sunday mornings. This has not been a sporadic experience but something that has happened frequently and in many different locations and over and over again I have been reminded of my homiletic disasters in the African bush! Local church leaders have been acutely and embarrassingly aware of the problem and have sometimes lamented to me the “rebellion” of the children of the church. Their response has been to redouble prayer for the conversion of the youth, thus analysing the problem entirely in spiritual terms. While I have no wish to deny the reality of sin and rebellion, nor do I for a moment undervalue the importance of prayer, my experience of struggling to communicate across a cultural barrier leads me to ask whether the issue here has something to do with a process of cultural transformation. Nearly thirty years ago Francis Schaeffer warned us that many Christian parents and ministers were so out of touch with the children of the church “as though they were speaking a foreign language”. Three decades later entirely new fault lines have appeared in Western culture creating fresh potential for misunderstanding and the breakdown of meaningful communication. Are we, then, employing means of communication which are no longer used in any other sphere of modern life and, so far as contemporary youth are concerned, simply don’t work? Are we as a result imposing on our children a pattern of obedience based on custom which utterly fails to communicate the real message of the gospel? To put it very bluntly: is the real cause of the crisis facing churches that cannot retain the allegiance of their own children (never mind those who have no prior connection with the religious sub-culture) not so much a sign of the rebellion of youth but an indication of the failure of the church to recognise the challenge of *mission* in a changed cultural situation?

Not so long ago I arrived to preach at a baptist church to discover a rusting metal notice attached to the external wall which declared “All sittings free in this church”. It was, of course, a historical and cultural relic left over from the Victorian era and I suppose few people passing by ever really paid attention to it. What was far more serious however was the later discovery that what went on *inside* the building had, like the notice outside, scarcely changed in a hundred years; every aspect of the service declared its origin in an era long since passed. Just across the road was a massive new leisure complex with ice rink, swimming pool and the usual features of the postmodern entertainment industry, identified in blazing neon signs as “The Time Capsule”. I could not help feeling that I was also entering a capsule, only here the journey was one that took us backward in time to a sub-cultural world beyond the comprehension of the hundreds of young people seeking recreation across the road.

The maintenance of long-established church structures and patterns of worship is

often justified by an appeal to *faithfulness*. If we make relevance the criterion of the shape and practice of the church, it is argued, we tread a path that leads to compromise and spiritual death. Such concern to ensure the purity and holiness of the church is justified. However, faithfulness without a willingness to take ground-breaking initiatives to ensure the transmission of the message of the gospel to ever new hearers is also a path to extinction. In fact, we are *not* faithful if we ignore Christ's call to mission and a retreat to the apparent security of a closed community repeats the failure in mission that has characterised the people of God with monotonous regularity from at least the time of Jonah onwards. Tragically, many churches have died (and are dying) even as members continually assure each other of their faithfulness.

How then can we be faithful to the missionary call of Christ in the specific culture of the Western world? Perhaps the first thing to say here is that it is extremely difficult to gain an objective and critical view of one's own culture. This is the culture to which we belong; through the processes of socialisation and education it has shaped our lives in the most profound ways so that we simply take for granted the practices, beliefs and values which structure the Western way of life. This culture determines for us what counts as "reality" and there are what one sociologist has called "reality policemen" (teachers, academics, TV newsreaders) who guard the reigning definitions of what may be treated as "real" and what must be dismissed as simply unbelievable.

## **Our understanding**

How then *can* we stand outside our own culture and view it from some other perspective? I suggest there are two ways of answering this question. *First*, we can listen to people who, because their cultures operate according to different values and assumptions, are able to offer us a critical view of the West. I remember standing with some students beside the Qua Iboe River in Nigeria as together we watched a complex piece of machinery operated by Dutch engineers rebuilding the river bank. I became aware that one of the students, a man for whom I had a particular regard, was repeating quietly to himself the phrase "Thank God ... Thank God ..." Curious as to why a rather grotesque sample of Western technology should elicit such a spiritual response, I enquired what he meant. "I was thanking God" he said, "that he could make men with such intelligence and skill that they could produce that". The comment, made so innocently and entirely naturally, was like a flash of revelation; it highlighted the yawning gap between the Western tendency to place ultimate trust in technology and a traditional African ability to retain, even in the face of a technological culture, a "sacred" view of human existence. Thus, a key resource in understanding modern, Western culture is the fellowship of the worldwide Body of Christ; in an era of global Christianity we must listen to sisters and brothers who have met Christ in other cultural settings and must have the humility and wisdom to see ourselves as they see us.

The *second* resource from which we may gain a critical perspective on our culture is to be found in the Bible. This may seem such an obvious statement as to appear rather ridiculous. However, what I wish to emphasise is the need to listen *afresh* to Scripture, to break through the crust of received traditions of interpretation that so often protect us from the real message of the Bible. A specific example may help. Throughout the early years of my Christian life I knew the book of Revelation only as a quarry for prophetic speculation and thus its true purpose was completely hidden from me. Only

recently have I begun to appreciate how revolutionary this great work is. As we, like John, are invited to enter the “door standing open in heaven” so we discover that the limited view of reality that dominates our surrounding culture can be broken apart and replaced by an understanding of human life and purpose that is utterly liberating. Once having passed through that door, everything changes; much that is esteemed and valued in a closed, secular world turns to dross and shafts of light are thrown onto the evils, corruption and idolatry of a world that, for all its absurd arrogance, is seen to be heading for collapse. Revelation chapter 18, with its terrifying vision of the destruction of Babylon, sends shivers down my spine and leaves me trembling for a culture built (like that of ancient Rome) on the foundation of human greed and the impossible assumption of ever-increasing economic and material growth.

*Why has this biblical perspective remained so long hidden from us?* I suggest that we have lived too long with the illusion that it is enough simply to *read* the Bible and have failed to appreciate the distorting influence of the cultural lenses with which that reading has taken place. The Peruvian theologian, Samuel Escobar observed that Western Christians seemed unable to acknowledge “how much of their faith was conditioned by their culture” and he argued that we need to learn to “question the position from which we read the Bible”.

## **Our engagement**

Two aspects of contemporary culture are especially important in relation to this discussion. *First*, we live at a time of transition and change when most of the assumptions that have long been taken for granted are widely challenged and rejected. This is the significance of the term *postmodern*; the worldview of the European Enlightenment is increasingly recognised as inadequate, if not fundamentally mistaken. Two centuries of confidence in human reason, during which people dreamed of a new world resulting from science and technology, is *behind* us. Increasing numbers of Western people have come to feel that the dream has turned into a nightmare and yesterday’s cultural heroes are now placed in the dock, charged with propagating a onesided ideology that has led to the rape of the earth. This is a fantastic turnaround with massive implications for Christians.

It would be easy to respond to this growing crisis in modern culture with an attitude characterised by the phrase “We told you so!” After all, Christians have always been aware of the deficiencies of secular thought and have often warned of the terrible dangers of a worldview which excludes the transcendent and divine from consideration. Long before the term “postmodern” appeared we find the Christian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev arguing that the loss of faith in God was bound to result in a loss of faith in mankind.

However, before we give way to the temptation to engage in self-congratulation there are some serious questions for Christians to face in this situation. Can we claim to have maintained a clear critical distance from the culture of modernity, or has Christianity (and I include Evangelicalism here) in fact been thoroughly assimilated within it? In Douglas Coupland’s book *Generation X* (a work widely recognised as providing peculiar insight into the spirit of our times) one of the characters complains that his parents, who grew up in the era of the depression, belong to a generation “neither able nor interested in understanding how marketers exploit them. *They take*

*shopping at face value*". Are Christians above such criticism or have they actually been able to live easily and comfortably within consumer society? Is there not clear evidence that even the gospel can be turned into a product, capable of being promoted and marketed like any other item designed to satisfy human needs? Does the history of Christianity in the modern era reveal a community that takes Jesus seriously and models an *alternative* way life to that offered within industrial society, or does it actually show a rather dismal record of conformity in which the cutting edge of the biblical message has been almost entirely blunted?

The era that has come to an end in the final decades of the twentieth century is one in which Christianity has been, to a greater or lesser degree, implicated. We are not only now post-modern but also post-Christendom and a particular phase in Christian history, during which the faith was linked to the expansion of Western culture, is over. Far from regretting this, or seeking to prolong an age now irrevocably past, we should confess the compromises that were part of this phase and receive with gratitude the new opportunities before us in the postmodern age. Perhaps this moment in time presents us with a unique opportunity to recover the fullness of the biblical gospel and to rediscover what it really means to be the pilgrim people of God in a hostile world.

The *second* aspect of contemporary culture to which attention should be drawn concerns the depth of alienation and loneliness to which people now bear witness. The very term post-modern indicates that our times are characterised by an awareness of *loss*, of having *abandoned* the hopes and dreams of our predecessors, so living *after* the possibility of believing that the world might be changed for the better and human life might be happy, purposeful and fulfilled. Tragically, nothing remains but a huge vacuum into which are sucked a bewildering variety of opinions. Thus, someone has described the experience of postmodern people as one in which "We see through a kaleidoscope darkly". In a word, we are *lost*; unable to replace the faded dream of the Enlightenment with a new vision of human destiny and purpose and increasingly realising that the moral and ethical capital of the past is practically exhausted. In a book bearing the significant title, *Life After God*, Coupland confesses, "My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving ... to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love".

Do we not hear the call of Christ in all of this: "See I have placed before you an open door ..."? The question is, do we have the courage, the apostolic boldness, to enter that door and seize the opportunity of this moment in history? Can we address the challenge of *this* culture with imagination and creativity, retaining our hold on the faith "once for all delivered to the saints" while yet finding new ways to tell the old story? Can we connect with this generation so that they may learn of Christ, who came that people of every era, including Generation X, might have life? I have ended this article where it began, with the challenge of cross-cultural mission and I suggest that the most fundamental issue before all of us is whether or not, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, we can provide channels of communication through which the waters of life can revive and irrigate a cultural wasteland facing death.

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