

THE CHURCH AND THE CULTURE

At the 2004 General Assembly an overture concerning the federal marriage amendment came to the floor of the Assembly for consideration. The overture basically consisted of encouraging the government to pass a marriage amendment defining marriage as between one man and one woman. I was somewhat perplexed by some of the negative responses to this overture. Men were arguing from the floor of the Assembly that we shouldn't be telling the government what the laws of the land should be. Generally speaking, the underlying argument for these men was that the church is a "spiritual" institution that should remain focused on changing the lives of men and women, leaving the government to do its own thing. But is this the correct approach? Are we to leave these large cultural institutions alone while focusing almost exclusively on individuals and families? Really the question is larger than this: Are we to be about culture building? If not, what is our relationship to the culture around us? And if so, what is this supposed to look like? (By the way, the overture passed overwhelmingly.)

Sometimes in debate people will create what is called a false dilemma. That is, you are made to choose between two things that aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. One party tries to force the other party to make a choice between two things that really don't need to be separated. This is a false either/or. In this case, some pose the dilemma like this: **EITHER** we are concerned about individuals and families **OR** we are concerned about culture building. The first is sometimes classified as what "real evangelism" is all about while the latter is basically in the category of the "social gospel." While I know that the debate has many nuances and has been bandied about for centuries, I believe that this is a false dilemma. I also believe this because of God's creation of man in his own image and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To begin this quest we must first dig down to the foundations to understand how our understanding of cultural mission is to be built (or, indeed, whether it ought to be built). So we begin with ...

THE FOUNDATIONS FOR CULTURAL MISSION

For there to be a proper understanding of this subject, we must go back to original creation and discover what God created man to be and to do. This original creation account gives us foundations for understanding of God's purpose for his creation and, consequently, what he has done, is doing and will do in redemption through Christ.

The first thing that we need to understand is what it means for man to be created *in the image of God*. Man created in God's image has a three-fold relationship: with God, with other humans and with the non-human creation. Concerning his relationship with God, man is to be a worshiper. He is to love God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. But the second relationship is like unto the first: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Man created in God's image is a community, reflecting the plurality and oneness, the unity and diversity within the Godhead itself. Reciprocal, self-giving love is to characterize community relationships. The third relationship is the relationship with non-human creation. Man is to be a servant-king over nature, developing it for God's glory. As he is transformed in the presence of God in worship and works in concert with his community, nature is brought under dominion and developed for the glory of God. It becomes fruitful. Many theologians have seen in these original statements concerning man what they have called "the cultural mandate." That is, man had the responsibility of developing an entire culture with all that this entails. Being created in God's image is not a "static" reflection of God. Being created in God's image is a vocation. It is what we are called to

be and to do before God and for the world.

So in order to answer the question about the Christian the culture we must ask the question: Does man in the image of God have anything to do with culture? If the image of God is a purely individualistic thing, then there would not necessarily be a cultural mandate. The image of God then would simply demand personal piety in the way that it is normally thought of today; e.g., prayer closet, Bible reading, witnessing (if that), etc. BUT if the image of God has anything to do with community, then a culture is involved. Why is this? Because culture is essentially what you believe and how you live as a community. (I give a more detailed definition in a moment.) Culture involves how the community relates to God, to one another and the non-human creation around them. Culture is inevitable. It is unavoidable.

So what does it mean to “take dominion”? Is this a purely “spiritual” (i.e., invisible) dominion? If so, why does God say birds and fish, etc.? Are these mere symbols of an invisible kingdom? Are we only to be concerned about ideas that men have floating around in their heads (i.e., things we cannot see), or are we to be concerned about how men relate to God, one another and the non-human creation? Well, all deductions from man being created in God’s image, the original mandate as well as a great wealth of Scriptural evidence following, all point to the case that the culture is inextricably involved in bearing God’s image. To bear God’s image is to have a culture.

The question at this point is, “Is God really concerned about restoring and bringing to completion his original purpose of man as image-bearer?” I believe the answer to that is a resounding, “Yes!” through the Scriptures. This project of creating a new humanity begins in earnest with the birth of Seth, the son of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 4.25-26). It will be through his line that God will create a new man. This re-creation of man will involve the re-creation of the culture. Man as God’s image-bearer will develop the world and bring it to its intended end as God commissioned him to do.

We don’t have to proceed too far in the Scriptures to see this happening. God destroys the world through a flood and raises up Noah to be the new head of the human race. He takes up the original mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. He is to create a God-honoring culture (Gen 9.1ff.). As with the line of Cain in Gen 4, so man continues to try to make a name for himself by building a culture that is opposed to God. The Tower of Babel is the city of man. It is the culture that is contrary to God’s purposes. But God raises up Abraham. God’s promise to Abraham involved re-creating humanity through his seed. Through him, God promises, all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12.1-3). These families are later termed “nations” in the repetition of the promise (Ge 18.18; 22.18; 26.4). Communities *as communities*—whether families or nations—will be given new life through the seed of Abraham (blessed = new life; cf. Gen 1:26-28; and also Gal 3). Of course, this makes sense in light of the image of God reflecting the community culture of the Divine Society.

As the family of Abraham grows, goes down into Egypt and then is redeemed from Egyptian bondage, God makes this family into a nation at Sinai. They will be, in the words of God, a “holy nation” (Ex 19.6). The law given at Sinai was not given to individuals as individuals for their personal piety—although individuals as individuals must abide by it—but it was given to the divinely constituted society to live as the people of God, God’s image-bearing community, in the world. The laws that flow from the Ten Words in Exodus 20 are made to create and maintain a particular culture. Individuals within the community were bound to keep those laws, and as they did this the community would function as it should. If individuals broke these laws, the community had to respond to that individual in a particular way so as to maintain the culture that God had ordained.

For example, God told the nation of Israel that he alone is God. They were to have no other gods before his face. Each individual and the community as a whole were to abide by this law. They were to be a nation that served YHWH. And if one of the individuals in the community tries to entice others to serve other Gods, the community is to respond by stoning the person to death (e.g., Deut 13.1-9). What was true of the individual is also true of entire cities that give themselves over to serve other gods. These cities were to be destroyed because they apostatized (Deut 13.12-18). In doing this a culture is created and maintained. This is how Israel, as a nation, was to relate to God and to one another.

This, of course, goes for many other laws that the community had. God gave them laws concerning how they are to handle matters of dispute, stealing, sexual deviancy, etc. All of these are cultural matters. There is a certain way God expects his people to live as a community. But this is not something that is to be confined to an isolationist group. Israel was to be a prototype, as it were, of how all the nations were to live and relate. By living this way as a community, they were to be a light to the nations. The nations would look at Israel and admire her and her God. This is what Moses tells the people in Deut 4.5-8:\

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as YHWH my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

As Israel was appointed to be God's new humanity, she was to be an image for the nations. In the fulfillment of Israel's purpose that would be revealed in Jesus the Messiah, the law would go forth from Zion and the nations would stream in according to Micah 4.2. The nations as nations would be new cultures, cultures reflecting the divine culture. In Daniel this is spoken of as a kingdom that will grow and cover the entire earth (Dan 2.35, 44-45). This kingdom will be seen on the earth. This will be a certain type of culture.

All of these prophecies and types are fulfilled in Jesus and his re-created people. He is the image of God. He is the new *Adam*, the new man. He and his wife are the new Adam. And in this re-creation of humanity he is fulfilling the original intentions of God for Adam. In Jesus the Abrahamic promises are fulfilled in which all the nations of the world are brought back to life. The communities of people large and small, families as well as nations, are called to repentance and faith so that they may live like God intended them to be. In Jesus the prophecy in Daniel is fulfilled. He is the Rock cut out of the mountain that rolls down and topples the kingdoms of this world and grows into a great mountain that covers the whole earth.

Jesus is the world-transformer. We should be attuned to this not only from the whole fabric of Scripture but particularly from the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for cultural mission and transformation in this new age. In the death and resurrection of Jesus as God's appointed representative, the last Adam, the old creation dies and the new creation is born. It is important to note that Jesus' resurrection is physical. It is not invisible. He is not raised "in spirit" only while his body remains in the tomb. God does not abandon his creation. This is demonstrated in the resurrection of the human body of Jesus. We are informed by this that God is *transforming* the creation.

As concerns cultural matters, this means that we are concerned about visible, tangible creation. We are concerned about the way people relate to one another or what the culture is like. We are, after all, as Peter says to his readers, a “holy nation” now (1Pt 2.9). We are God’s new culture in this world and for the world. Now Jesus is the great city builder. He is the builder of the New Jerusalem that will indeed be the new culture for the world (Rev 21-22). This leads us to consider ...

THE UNBIBLICAL SPLIT BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE

Not all people—not even all Christians—see things this way. Many have bought into the lie that we can separate “religion” from “culture.” This is just not possible. On every hand nowadays we hear “separation” language. People are to separate religion from politics, religion from the work-place, religion from this or that. Religion is supposed to be a private spiritual experience that is kept to oneself. This is at best a naïve position and at worst a hostile position toward God. People who make these statements have not thought much about what they are saying or they have thought much about what they are saying and don’t want anything to do with God. Culture and religion, though, are inseparable. Culture necessarily involves what a group of people believe about God or no God, about morality, about how people should relate to one another, etc. Henry Van Til gives a good summary definition of culture. “Culture is religion externalized and made explicit” (Steve Schlissel, *Christian Culture in a Multicultural Age*, 95). In other words, culture is the expression of what we as a society believe. Our culture is defined by our religion, whether theistic or atheistic. (Yes, atheism is a “religious belief” and thus a “religion” to some extent).

Culture involves the ideas, skills, arts, philosophies, etc. of a group of people that are transferred, communicated or passed along to subsequent generations (Ibid.). Culture is the shared belief system of a group of people which determines their mores, laws, philosophies, the shape of their art, etc. Generally how they determine what is good and right from what is bad and wrong. Societies take shape from the shared beliefs of a group of people. Even if there is a belief that there should be no shared beliefs (i.e., anarchy), that shared belief of no shared belief creates a culture (*kapish?*). Even when a group of people say, “Nobody is right and nobody is wrong,” that common belief shapes and forms a culture. Cultures may separate themselves from certain religions or religious beliefs, but they cannot separate themselves wholly from “religion.” It is simply not possible.

Human culture is inevitable. As long as you have two people existing on the earth there will be some type of culture. Man created in the image of the divine culture will have some relationship with one another. Therefore some belief system will determine how they relate to one another. So then, the question is not, Will there be a culture? The question is, Who or what determines what type of culture we will have? Try as we might, we cannot live in some type of privatized spiritual experience or some invisible kingdom. We live with real flesh-and-blood people. And there will be some determinative religion that will create and maintain the culture. The choice that faces the Church and her mission is this: Will the culture be one in which Jesus is acknowledged as Lord? Or will the culture be one that acknowledges another lord?

The clamor in our society today is that we are *multicultural*. For many, this is as benign as saying that we have number of different ethnic groups living in the same place. But multiculturalism translates out into being what is known as a pluralistic society. That is, we do not recognize one culture as superior to another. All cultures are created equal. This cashes out into the belief that we hold as a society that all religions are equal. Many Christians have bought

into this in one way or another. We have taken the attitude that (1) there should be no such thing as a “Christian culture” (because we are a wholly invisible/”spiritual”/private religion); and, consequently (2) that we should just play our part as one of the sub-sets of the multicultural set of beliefs (i.e., we need to vie for equal place at the table). If you accept these premises, then you have basically rendered the Christian faith impotent.

How can that be said? There are two interrelated reasons. a) You have said that the Christian faith is on the same plane as all other religions. There is no superior culture, no superior religion. The claims of Jesus as being exclusively the way to the Father, the one true God, are rendered false. I mean, if all religions are equally valid, then no one religion can claim exclusivity to the truth and, thus superiority over the others. If you refuse to say that Jesus is Lord over the culture, then you have submitted to another lord to some degree or another. It may be the lord of multiculturalism which says that what unites is *not* the Christian faith but something else.

Something—some set of beliefs—will unite us as people, as communities. As one of their own has said, “Nature abhors a vacuum.” Something, someone, some philosophy, some religion will unite communities. Communities will have a religion. In our day-and-age this is where the good ol’ State comes in to fill the void. Our multiculturalism is sustained by the fact that we have a religion of the State. You will hear it like this, “What unites us all as Christians, Muslims, Jews, etc. is that we are all Americans.” “Christian conservative” talk-show hosts have been promoting this for quite some time. In fact, it has become the “Christian” thing to do to be a nationalist; i.e., to find our unity with one another in our common citizenship in America. This forces us into the view that our religion is a private set of abstract beliefs that have no bearing on real life; i.e., the culture. Because of this, we cannot press our private beliefs upon the culture. And so we crawl back into our holes and fight for a place at their table. But try as we might (and Christians have tried to live in this worldview for quite some time) the message we proclaim simply cannot be bounded like this. As much as Christians try to live here, the gospel keeps getting in the way. Why? Because the gospel is about Jesus being the exclusive and unconquerable Lord of the world. That is intolerant in our culture. And the only thing that a tolerant, multicultural society cannot accept is the intolerance that comes from exclusivity.

There is a second reason why this cultural philosophy renders the Christian faith impotent: (b) It denies that the gospel of Jesus Christ is about re-creating humanity holistically. The gospel of Jesus is Lord is a call to Christian culture. There is no way around this. It cannot be otherwise because it is all about restoring man as God’s image bearer. This means community (in part). That means *culture*. But since the Church has accepted the split between religion and culture, our mission in the world has been hamstrung. Our individual-centered, privatized mission has no long-term plans.

Let me explain by an illustration. Okay, you believe that Christians are not to worry about culture, only about “saving souls.” Let’s just say, for argument’s sake, that a mission like this has great success in a nation. There is a mighty movement of God in the nation of Turkey and 95% of the families are converted to the Christian faith. What then? What do you do with all these people? Are you supposed to load them all up with trucks, have them vacate their land and go somewhere else? The arguments for staying in their country and working are not merely pragmatic (i.e., “Somebody has got to stay behind and make the money to support the *real* God-honoring work”). The arguments for a developed Christian culture—which will overflow its banks—are rooted in what God has called man to be and do. Present day missions, evangelism and discipleship have taken on the great split and have taught people how to be individually pietistic, but generally they have not had the biblical worldview tools to tell people what it means

to make widgets, play music, build buildings or make laws for God's glory. "Our mission is to see people get right with God," you might hear it said. This is good. But again, if you don't love your brother you don't love God (1Jo 4.20). Love takes on a particular shape—it looks like something—which means that it promotes a particular culture.

MOVING TOWARD A CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Should Christians think about culture building? Well, the fact that cultures will be built and the fact that they are part of what God mandated in creation and redemption means that we should have a worldview that encompasses what it means to build Christian culture. Our mission should involve it. Indeed it does involve it whether we acknowledge it or not; we either do it well or do it poorly, but we do it nonetheless. If the Church in America continues to do missions and evangelism the way we are doing it, we will have a bunch of people who have "tried Christianity" but found it irrelevant for day-to-day living. Church attendance becomes too much of a burden. Other things are more pressing. Leave the Christian faith in the world of mere private experience, and people may like the good feeling, but their private religion will not have much of an effect on wider relationships. They will tend to be self-serving, thinking that the Christian faith is all about how they feel rather than living for others. (Wait a minute ... that's what we have right now! That's why the church has had to reinvent herself into the country clubs and dog and pony shows that she has become in America.) Our mission as the Church of Jesus Christ must deal with man as God created him to be: a whole person and a part of a larger community. Therefore, we must have a philosophy of missions and evangelism that is culture-building.

Why should we think this way? If I haven't made it plain enough already, we should think this way *because Jesus is raised from the dead and the Lord of the world*. He has no equal. He has no rivals. He was declared to be the world's true Lord, not by some human authority, but by the Creator-God who declared him such through his resurrection. And things are what God declares them to be. He ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father as the world's true Lord until all enemies are put under his feet (Ps 110.1; Act 2.34-35; 1Cor 15.25; Heb 10.12-13). As Lord of the world Jesus calls for submission from every individual, every family and every institution. He expects there to be a particular culture in the world. He taught his followers to pray for this culture when he taught us to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The culture of heaven is to be pressed upon the world through the agency of the church by the power of the Spirit that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. Therefore, "Jesus is Lord" is not a statement that can be parsed out as a religious statement over against a political statement. "Jesus is Lord" is a challenge and call to every leader in the world to acknowledge his lordship and exercise his righteous rule in the earth.

Another reason that we should think of culture building as Christian mission is *because Jesus commissioned us with this task*. Again, we have taken the Great Commission and neutered it by reducing it to a commission *solely* to individuals. Jesus literally says, though, *disciple the nations*. Why would he say something like this? Because he is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that all the *nations* would be blessed in him. Now it is time to bring them in and disciple the nations to live as God intends for them to live.

Also, we should think this way *because Jesus promised us that the church would prevail in her mission*. Jesus told Peter that he was the rock upon whom he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Mt 16.18). The gates refer to the place of authority in a city. Established gates are places in which a particular city-culture has set its claim.

Everywhere the gates of hell are established is the place where the church is to be engaged in the war, trampling the gates of hell. Everywhere men, families and institutions are in the chains of the evil one is the point at which we engage the enemy.

We are not nearly here in the present-day church situation. So, what should we be doing to move that way. In short, we are to be God's image-bearers in the world. This means at least three things. First, we are to be true worshipers. Our primary image-bearing responsibility is that of worship, the place where we receive the life of God, being transformed as representatives of all of creation (and thus culture) and taking that transformation (i.e., light) to the world. This is the place where we pray as the gathered new humanity, "Our Father ... thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." As we pray God hears our prayers and fights our battles. We go out fighting from victory unto victory.

Second, we witness. Our witness is to start by being faithful within our own families to hand-down the Christian culture. We proclaim the gospel message that Jesus is Lord and he has called all men everywhere to repent and believe. We engage in works of mercy, meeting the needs of the whole person. We work for change in the political arena, not as our salvation, but because the crown rights of King Jesus are to be reflected there as well. We reflect in our community, the Church, the divine culture that is permeated and dominated by mutual self-giving love. This is not just within our little group, but with the church of Jesus Christ wherever she is found in our area and around the world.

Third, we work. We are to be faithful in whatever part of creation in which God has placed us to claim it for the cause of Christ. We plant his flag as it were in that place. That may be in sales, arts, computers, factory lines, etc. We go there and through the daily grind, by the power of the Spirit we see these areas transformed for God's glory.

Inevitably when Christians begin to think in these terms, there are those who want to go to the extremes. There are ditches that should be avoided. One ditch to avoid is *political messiahism*. Political messiahism is the belief that the government is the answer to everything. If things are going to change then what we need is Christians in government power and make new laws. While laws are good for restraining evil, they will not be ultimately effective outside of a culture that does not recognize good and evil properly. In order for the culture to change for the good, its religion must change.

A second ditch that must be avoided is *isolationism*. Isolationists will say that the answer is to retreat and not be involved in the culture. We eventually change the culture by developing isolated cultures. Jesus' incarnation, I believe, speaks against this. We are not saved from a distance, as it were. He came and climbed into our situation and transformed it. We are to be "the body of Christ" in this sense also.

We have a mandate from God as God's new humanity to be about creating and maintaining culture that is honoring to God. We cannot think that this is somehow separate from or ancillary to our Christian mission. This *is* our Christian mission. May God help us to live as the culture God intends us to be.