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Should Christians Love Culture?

John 1: 1-5; John 3:16

Think about the problem faced by John the Evangelist.

He wanted to convey to the world that Jesus Christ was with God from the beginning of creation, that Christ was the perfect expression of God, and in one sense exactly one with God, yet distinct from God. He wanted to say that Christ expressed God's creative intent and redemptive will and was different from God, yet very God.

He wanted to say that God would not be God without the reality of the Christ. That is a lot to say! Every one of those assertions was abstract and notoriously difficult to express.

So John the Evangelist did a wise thing: he looked around his culture for a word that expressed everything he was trying to say. He found his word.

It was not a sacred word, but he took it, and he baptized it, and he used it.

He appropriated a word from the philosophy of his day, the word, "Logos."

So John wrote to his culture:

"In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God.

All things were made through the Logos and without him was not anything made that was made.

In the Logos was life, and the life was the light of men

and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

John plucked a word from secular culture and employed it with such power and purpose that now only scholars of antiquity know it was ever a secular word, because it has fulfilled its sacred purpose so well. John made extraordinary use of his culture.

When I think of John's great feat, I am reminded of a story that I ran across in a college sociology class.

There was a Catholic priest assigned to a remote island in the Pacific whose initial efforts to convert the native inhabitants to the Christian faith were completely unsuccessful.

This prompted him to undertake an extensive study of their culture. Two salient facts came to light.

This culture practiced infanticide and polygamy.

The native families did not place near as much value on their female babies as on their males, so many families would place infant girls out in the bush to die.

Moreover, the tribal leaders recruited the most attractive young women for their harems.

This meant there were a dearth of eligible young women for young men seeking mates.

The priest saw an opening. He began retrieving those female infants from the bush and taking any unwanted females from homes that wanted to dispose of them.

He created an extensive orphanage and school for those young girls.

In time, the young girls inevitably grew into adolescents.

Then he let it be known that he would offer any young woman's hand in marriage to any young man who was willing to marry only one wife and was willing to be baptized into the Christian church.

Slowly but surely, using the culture, this priest managed to convert the bulk of the island to the Christian faith.

I think of the fifteenth chapter of Acts, which, next to the New Testament chapters that testify

to the resurrection of our Lord, stands as the most important chapter in the Biblical history of the church.

We must remember, the early Christians were all Jews. The first Christian church was completely Jewish.

But along came this crazy liberal named Paul, Jewish by background, but raised in a Gentile culture,

and he and Barnabas started preaching the Gospel to Gentiles and, lo and behold, they began to accept it! Everyone in First Baptist Church of Jerusalem was still going to synagogue, still keeping a kosher table. Along came Paul and Barnabas, who were asking them to accept these Gentiles as full and equal believers in the Christian church solely on the basis of these Gentiles' profession of faith in Christ. From the Jewish Christians' perspective, these Gentiles were in every sense of the word "unclean." On this issue, the Christian movement nearly foundered. But the key leaders gathered in Jerusalem and hammered out an agreement. They said, "The Gentiles do not need to become good Jews to become good Christians. They can practice their faith in accordance with their culture." All the Jewish believers asked was that the Gentiles not eat food sacrificed to idols, because that action was so offensive. That was a deal breaker. From that moment, when the Jewish Christian leaders freed Christianity from the culture in which it originated, the movement of Jesus Christ became a world religion, capable of rooting itself in any culture, in any land.

Last week I raised an interesting question: Should Christians hate their culture? Historically, some have. A host of Christians individually and communally have tried to separate from the church entirely. But most Christians have found that option impractical, impossible, and in fact a dereliction of Christ's command. After all, our Lord's instructions were to go *into* the world and make disciples of all nations. The early church realized very quickly that if it was going to fulfill those instructions – if it was going to make disciples of all nations – it must learn to adapt their faith to the cultures of all nations.

Now Christianity faces another cultural crisis.

A survey published this week says that the fastest-growing religious designation in our country is "None." 15% of our nation's population claims no religious affiliation. 34% of the people in the state of Vermont claim to have no religious denomination. 34%! As one young man said, "I don't know any religious people. I hardly know anybody who is even spiritual." Most people see these statistics and moan. I see them as a great opportunity. Why? People are by nature spiritual beings. We are products of God's creative intent. We are spiritual in our essence, and people can only ignore their spirituality for so long. There will come a time when they turn back to a quest for God, acknowledging their spiritual hunger. The question will be, what kind of church will answer the quest of these spiritually hungry people? It will be those churches that make the best use of the culture and know how to speak its language. That is the challenge that stands before us.

I look with some pride and comfort in the fact that St. John's has met this kind of challenge in the past. I look out upon this congregation and see a lot of gray-headed people. I see a lot of older people who did not grow up in a church like St. John's. You grew up in a rural setting; you grew up poor; you grew up isolated. You grew up in churches that were very evangelical, very rigid, and very conservative. Then along came this phenomenon known as World War II, which threw you in a world much larger and more complex than you had imagined it. Suddenly, you realized your faith was not as large as your world. You needed a larger faith. You came home to Charlotte after the war and found a pastor like Dr. Broach and a church like St. John's who said such liberating things as, "It's okay to be a Baptist and dance," and "It's okay to be a Baptist and have a glass of wine," and "It's okay to be a Baptist and vote for a Roman Catholic for president," and "It's okay to be a Baptist and escape the segregationist teaching that was a part of your upbringing." St. John's opened your eyes to a faith that was broader, more tolerant and more complex than the faith of your youth. Your worship became more sophisticated and more restrained than that of your upbringing.

Indeed, your worship took on trappings of affluence, reflecting the rising affluence of your lives. That was okay.

My point is, when the world changed your culture, St. John's changed with the culture to meet your needs. Your lives have been the richer for that change.

Again, I must commend you as a church for your willingness to continue to wrestle with culture. When other Baptist churches were closing their doors, barring people of color from entering their sanctuaries, St. John's said, "We are open to all people, regardless of their race."

That change did not come quickly or easily, but it came.

When other churches were treating women as second-class citizens, this church ordained them for deacon leadership and ministerial positions. There are no second-class citizens in this family of God!

Even now, as some Christians try to treat homosexuals as the Biblical equivalent of lepers, our congregation has said, "All people are welcome here, regardless of their sexual orientation."

Those churches and those Christians that are trying to oppress homosexual people are falling short of standards of decency and justice demanded by the culture, much less by the ideals of Jesus Christ.

We are all God's children here!

We have met many challenges posed to us by our culture – but we must go further.

I think back a few months to that glorious Sunday morning in May when the bagpipe player came down the aisle, and the organ answered him, and I looked into the choir loft at my old buddy Tex Sluder, with whom I've chased many a golf ball down many a fairway. He had tears of joy brimming in his eyes.

I thought, 'This is a wonderful moment.' I looked out upon this magnificent sanctuary wrought by the hand of Selina Swofford, and looked out to see Larry Hewitt and Ashley Hogewood, who had worked so hard to bring this moment to fruition, and I thought, 'They were keeping faith not only with their God, but with their mamas, who had performed this same task for St. John's a generation ago.'

I thought, 'This is an extraordinary moment.'

Even so, I had to remember a conversation I had with a church growth specialist just a month before.

I was bemoaning to him the fact that we were struggling to reach younger generations for Christ, and he asked me, "What are your two major initiatives as a church?"

I said to him, "We are renovating our new sanctuary and we are buying a new organ." He laughed and said, "I trust you know, these are not the instruments with which you will win the next generation for Christ."

I do know that. These features do make us more attractive to older people, and even some younger people are attracted to these beautiful things, but the bulk of young people worshipping today, even those who grew up in this church, are worshipping in darkened theaters and school auditoriums five minutes away from us, because those worship experiences are speaking God's Good News in a language younger people can understand and appreciate. That is just a fact.

In truth, I've known we had to change for a long time.

Five years ago I tried to introduce gentle change into our services through so-called "Casual Sundays." These services were successful, but there were those of you who were not ready for them, so I stepped back and bided my time.

Two years ago I begged the church for the freedom to create an alternative service that would incorporate multi-cultural and multi-ethnic worship styles into its character.

Many of you were not ready for this idea either.

So, other churches have taken this idea and run with it, and now they are flourishing.

Now I stand before you one last time to say, "We must become bi-lingual if we are going to survive."

We must continue to speak the Gospel in our traditional worship language – and that is all worship-style is, just a language – because it is the style we are known for. We are accustomed to it.

But we must also create an alternative service that speaks God's Gospel in a different language to a younger generation.

If you think I'm not telling the truth, come back next week and hear the testimony of our Finance Chairman on Baptist's Men Day.

Indeed, there is only one silver lining I can see in our delaying our movement toward an alternative service. When I tried to implement worship change five years ago, I may have stood more or less alone.

Now the Alternative Worship Committee has seen what I have seen, and I think they stand with me.

The Vision Team has seen what I have seen, and I think they stand with me.

A host of young people in and around this church have seen what I have seen, and I hope to God that they stand with me.

I hope you all stand with me, because we must create a new worship language that reaches the next generation in order to thrive as a congregation.

What will this alternative service look like? I'm not sure. But I do believe this:

It will be designed by young people and enacted by young people. I will take my cue from them.

I said to a young woman this week who was bemoaning the status of the church:

“The time will come when you will have the opportunity to make a difference.

The time is coming when it will not be enough to love the church enough to grieve for it.

You must love it enough to change it. You must love it enough to be an instrument in its transformation.

You must love it enough to say ‘I belong to that!’ ”

I would also say that the tone of the alternative worship will be “chiller.” What's “chiller” mean?

Some time ago, my family visited a couple of households together, and after we left the second household, my son Mark said, “I liked that second family best. They were chiller.”

Chiller? Did that mean their thermostat was set lower? Was their air conditioning on?

No. He meant that household was “chill,” as in relaxed, low key, causal in tone, not uptight.

Whatever form our alternative worship will take,

I think it will be “chiller” than what we do in our traditional worship.

Are we to love our culture? Yes, to the extent that we are to use whatever tools we can within that culture to articulate God's eternal truth.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever should believe in him would not perish but enjoy everlasting life.

Our God sent the Word into the world to bring about winds of change,

and in so doing he unleashed a new kind of peace and a new kind of sword.

This Spirit of God is still loose in the world. This Spirit of God is still moving, my friends.

And we must lift the sails in our ship of faith and catch the wind and let God's Spirit take us where it will.

That is the challenge of the church in every generation.

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Second in a Series