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## **The Paradox of Culture**

### **Romans 3: 9-18**

Someone wrote a letter to the editor in the *Charlotte Observer* a few weeks ago complaining about a pastor who had suggested that the church was not a haven for saints, but a hospital for sinners. The man wrote, "That is the problem with church leaders today. They don't understand that if I want to hang out with sinners, I'll go down to the strip club and drink whisky and watch the women. If I'm going to hang out with sinners, I might as well hang out with sinners who know how to have a good time." I thought, God bless you, sir. I don't agree with your sentiments, but your letter just provided the perfect introduction to the paradoxical nature of Christ and culture!

Now exactly how the letter-writer accomplished that feat I'll explain in a moment.

First, I want us to turn our vision to a cold January day in 1636, when several of colonial New England's leading citizens knocked on the door of a small cabin and demanded that it be opened. A young woman with two small children complied. "We have come to deport your husband," they announced. She said simply, "He is not here. He's been gone three days." "Where has he gone?" they inquired. "I do not know," she answered. In truth, the man for whom the authorities were searching didn't even know where he was. All he knew was that amidst frigid, snowy conditions he had trekked into the wilderness, beyond the boundaries of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, beyond the Plymouth Colony, beyond Massachusetts altogether. Why was this man on the run? Because his fellow colonists thought he had lost his mind! He had upset them greatly with a number of his expressed opinions. He had said to them, 'You think you own your land because the King of England has given it to you? You're wrong! The land you are on belongs to the Native Americans. You must buy it from them.' He had said to the Puritan authorities: 'You have demanded that everyone take an oath of loyalty to the government, and have asked everyone to seal that oath with the words, *So help me God*. How can you ask an unbeliever to take that oath? That violates his conscience. That's a sacrilege!' He had said to the Puritans, 'Your idea that you can purify the Church of England is completely false. The church is too corrupt to purify. You must separate from it and form a new entity.' He had said to his fellow citizens, 'We are using the civil authorities to enforce sacred principles, and employing secular authority to advance the aims of the sacred church. That is wrong.' A hundred years before Thomas Jefferson lived, this troublesome gadfly argued that there needed to be a "Wall of separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world." Such views so disturbed his fellow citizens that he was considered a threat to public health. The authorities had determined to ship him back to England, where he would surely be killed by the king for his heterodox views. But friends, and even enemies, warned him in advance of this plot and told him to get out of town quickly. So he had. Take a good look at this controversial man desperately struggling to survive in the snow amidst a harsh New England winter. You are looking at the first Baptist preacher in the New World.

His name was Roger Williams. He had but one factor in his favor.

While he had lived in Plymouth he had established good relations with the Narraganset

Native American tribe, and it was upon the mercy of these Narraganset Indians that he threw himself. In time he bought a sizable plot of land from these Native Americans and founded a small village, inviting his wife and a few friends to come join him. He named his new town, "Providence." Soon, Williams and these few friends would found the first Baptist church in America.

Williams' founding of the first Baptist church in America is not the focus of my message this morning. But it is not unrelated to it.

The early Baptists saw a tremendous paradox in the relationship between Christ and culture.

Yes, God had called civil government into being and given it a purpose, given it a function and authority.

But no matter how high the ideals of any civil government, no matter how lofty its intentions, every civil government's activities are imperfect. Its execution of even its highest purposes is flawed.

No Christian is ever to equate God's will with the will of a civil government, because civil government always stands under God's judgment.

Indeed, as Paul says so starkly, "No one is righteous. No, not one. Everyone has fallen short of God's glory."

Each individual believer is marked by a measure of rebellion against God, too,

and this is true, not only of individual believers but of the collective body of Christ, the church, as well.

The church, no less than the civil government, falls short of God's intention.

The church, no less than the civil government, lives under God's judgment.

The church does good, but it also does harm; it does right, but also wrong.

The church receives God's commendation, but it also receives God's condemnation.

As individual Christians and as the church, even when we are trying to do our best

in a flawed and fallen world, our good intentions and highest ideals often have tragic consequences.

We all live in this state of paradox.

Think back to Roger Williams for a moment. He had said to the Puritans,

'You are wrong in trying to use the civil government as an instrument of the church.

When you link the government and the church together, both suffer.

Secular authority has no business trying to advance sacred authority in matters of conscience.'

On the other hand, Roger Williams was equally incensed by the attitude of the Quakers,

who saw themselves as a religious community that tried to withdraw from meaningful contact with the world,

who wouldn't obey civil laws or even acknowledge their authority, who wouldn't pay taxes to the civil

government, who wouldn't defend the civil government or participate in it.

Williams said, 'That behavior is just as wrong.

We should not link the civil and sacred realms together, but those involved in the community of the sacred also cannot withdraw completely from the civil realm.'

The true perspective, in Williams' eyes, lay between the two approaches.

The truth lay hidden within a paradox.

Let me approach this issue of the paradoxical relationship of Christ to culture in contemporary terms.

Do you remember a few years ago that small group of Californians who dressed in identical black costumes and tennis shoes, and drank poisoned Kool-Aid in hopes of meeting up with a spaceship and becoming gods?

The Christian church could have become like that – in fact a group of early Christians did become like that!

Gnostic Christians separated from the world and became a closed clan centered around the notion

that they held a secret knowledge, a secret gnosis that would allow them to escape the material world.

But most Christians said, though the world is not our ultimate home,

God made this world and we must participate in it.

Christians could have said, 'Since we are of the Spirit and not the flesh, earthly rules do not apply to us,

we can do anything we want: no earthly laws apply to us.’ A group of pseudo-Christians took that view, too! But the majority of Christians said, no, to be in the world is to engage in its society and to abide by the laws of society, as long as these laws do not conflict with the demands of God. But the early Christians struggled to answer this question of how to answer the paradox posed by Christ and culture.

Think about your individual spiritual life for a moment. All of us know that our good deeds do not win us redemption. We know that we do not save ourselves. We are saved by God’s grace. We are saved by God’s initiative. We are saved by God’s action, not our own. But that doesn’t mean that we can live anyway we want. We still do acts of love, mercy, generosity, forgiveness and compassion to show that our lives are rooted in the Spirit of God and that our fruit is good. But even as we do such good deeds, we know that our actions have tragic consequences. Our best deeds are often flawed and can spur negative ramifications. We stand always, even at our best, under God’s judgment.

The early church really struggled with this paradox. The apostle Paul, when he first became a Christian, really believed that the world might be coming to an end immediately. Even so, when young Christians started quitting their jobs because they were waiting for the imminent Second Coming, Paul wrote them saying, “Hey, if you don’t work, you don’t eat.” Paul told the young Christians that as long as we are on this earth, our faith should shape the way we approach our marriages, parent our children, invest our possessions, and transform our society. Our faith is to make an improving difference in our world. Paul said in Galatians, “The works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. . . . Those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.” [Galatians 5: 19-21] But just because we *don’t* do these things doesn’t mean that we automatically inherit the Kingdom, either. True spirituality is not a matter of observing the prohibitions or fulfilling the prescriptions. True spirituality is a matter of working out one’s salvation with fear and trembling in a dynamic relationship with the divine. And even at our best we stand under God’s judgment.

That brings me to that editorial writer who objects to churches because they are a gathering place for sinners. He thinks the church ought to be a gathering place for saints. In truth, he is right. In truth, the church *is* a gathering place for saints. But here’s the paradox: *these saints are also sinners*. These saints are also sinners, and the more saintly the saint, the more aware the saint is of his or her sinfulness. Now I have a confession to make: I have never been to a strip club, so what I am about to say is pure conjecture on my part. But if I had to be sentenced each weekend to go to a strip club or attend a church, I would choose the church – because it is more fun in the long run. Going to a strip club might be fun once – okay, maybe twice. But to go to a gathering week after week that is drawn together by lust and booze would soon grow boring. How much more interesting to go to a fellowship that gathers because it is drawn together by the ideal of the love of God! Going to a strip club week after week might sound fun,

but over time that writer's idea of fun would grow unbearably dull.  
I would say to that man, 'You want fun, come gather among the sinners at St. John's Baptist Church. I can promise you, here things are never boring! We are always doing something interesting! There is always something new going on, and you never know where the Spirit of God might lead us.' Yes, we are a gathering of sinners.  
But in my experience, many of our sinners have turned out also to be saints.  
For by your lives, by your words, by your loves, some of you sinners have embodied for me and others the very reality of the will of God. And that is what saints do.  
Just because we are a gathering of sinners does not mean that we are a less saintly place.  
It only means that we become saints to others as we work out our faith with fear and trembling.  
And in so doing, we have fun.

Paul saw the paradoxical nature of faith so clearly.  
He said, "Hey, it doesn't matter if I speak in the tongues of men and angels, that action is paradoxical, in that if I have not loved, that action means nothing. I don't care if I give away everything I have to the poor. I don't care if I summon the courage to have my body burned at the stake. I don't care if I have faith so as to remove mountains. I don't care if I have the power to understand every mystery on earth. If I don't have love, I gain nothing."  
Every external spiritual action is paradoxical.  
We can do wonderful acts of generosity, wonderful acts of creativity, wonderful acts of charity, wonderful feats of courage and martyrdom,  
but unless all of those external actions are tinged with the invisible quality of love, they do not truly contribute to the Kingdom of God or benefit us.  
The truth is, said Paul, everything we do on this earth is imperfect.  
Everything we know is imperfect. Everything *we think we know* is imperfect.  
We see life through the dark glass of our own perspective.  
But there will come a day when we will know and be known perfectly.  
There will be come a day – not on this earth, but in God's realm -- when we will see all things clearly.  
But until that day comes, all of our lives are lived in paradox,  
and only in God's eternal fellowship will that element of paradox fade away.  
In the meantime, said Paul, do faith, do hope, do love.  
We won't do even these things right.  
But we will serve God best if we commit our lives to divine service and worship through such actions.  
Such is the paradox in which we live.

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Third In a Series