

Christian Culture

TOWARDS AUTHENTICITY

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Imagine you're a pagan. Well... not a fire walking, chicken sacrificing, drum-beating pagan, but a car driving, sports-on-Saturday and barbecue with the mates type pagan. Now imagine you've been invited to church this Sunday. The question I would ask you is this: What in is different in the church from the world you live in every day? My assertion is this: There is a distinctive Christian culture which radically effects the way we, as believers, live and relate to the world. But this should not surprise us - all groups have their own culture.

Cultures have three distinct elements:

- 1) *The way we say the things we do* [language]
- 2) *The way we do the things we do* [customs] and,
- 3) *The symbols we use* [cultural icons].

We Christians have our own language. Some people have nicknamed the Christian jargon 'Christianese'. An example of this genre is the 'brother and sister' greeting (which is wonderfully diminishing). Another would be 'praise the Lord' - a phrase which is often mindlessly used

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to replace exclamation marks. Another is 'Amen' - and is sometimes used where a simple 'Yes' would suffice. The irony is that a separate culture can develop - a 'Christian' culture - without having much legitimate biblical basis. We may have the forms and go through the motions of Christian life without fully understanding the depth and meaning of being authentically Christian.

Customs

Within Christian culture the central emphasis is *holy conduct*. We have different ethics and morality and this means we act differently from mainstream culture. This holiness is not about rigid and legalistic applications of law, but about the presence of Jesus - the one who makes us holy. Where Jesus is present, holiness is the result. Personal purity is definitely part of God's plan but there is a further, and often neglected, characteristic of holiness which presents itself: Holiness could be defined as 'living to show what God is like'. In other words, holiness carries with it a highly practical element which finds its expression in lifestyle. Mother Theresa, for example, is not considered holy because of her purity, but because of her pragmatism. This broader definition means that holiness is about more than personal purity - it has an outward missionary component. Holiness becomes attractive to mainstream culture only when we demonstrate incarnational models of care and concern. Jesus defined it this way: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:16.

There is another aspect of Christian culture that effects the way we act 'Christianly'. How do we as Christians interact with secular culture? One tendency is towards *syncretism*. I.e.: We become *absorbed* by that culture in

the way we *think* and in the way we *act*. We can become absorbed on two fronts: The Cultural mindsets: the way we think and see the world ie: Our values and belief systems. Secondly, material culture effects us: By this I mean the people, places technologies and material things in culture.

I would suggest that cultural mindsets are more powerful than material culture. Our belief systems and our ideologies effect our responses to the icons in our culture. We are more likely to be syncretised by cultural mindsets than the material things in our society. It's not so much the *things* of culture but our *thoughts* about them

Syncretism

Whilst in Brazil on a missions trip I was amazed at how Catholicism had merged with animism and local folk religions. This is cultural phenomenon is called *syncretism*. On reflection I realized that the Western Church has been syncretised by materialism and covetousness. Syncretism occurs more subtly than we realize. We are just as syncretised and pagan as those Brazilians. We have become absorbed in and seduced by western cultural mindsets. This cultural absorption has carried over into the *Contemporary Christianity* movement of the 80's and 90's. Under the guise of being 'relevant' we have possibly been syncretised.

I'm not proposing any solutions to this, just observing it and thinking it through. Jaque Ellul maintains that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world do not overlap, but they do touch through human lives submitted to God. Working out this point of contact is the art of being a Christian today. We are all living in a goldfish bowl of cultural influences - being *authentically Christian* takes a lot of thoughtful prayer when surrounded by

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Customs & Traditions

Christian culture on one side and secular mainstream culture on the other. In an attempt to avoid syncretism and worldliness, the Church often moves in the direction of *separation* from the secular world. We retreat to places where our own music, culture and language results in the isolation and privatization of the faith. This is contrary to Christ's way. The consequence of this imbalance is that the church often becomes obscure and irrelevant. Being separate has alienated us from the very ones we are trying to reach and undermines attempts to communicate the truth to the world.

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On the other hand we may never get it right – we will always struggle to maintain a distinctively Christian stance in a wayward world. We will always be forced back to prayer and the word and to fellowship to find solutions together. This is always a good place to be – a life of dependence on God is what we have been called to live. A life of independent living ie: a life which says "I can work it out without God" is a the same mindset which got Adam into trouble, and one which will do the same to us .

One helpful way to overcome an unhealthy kind of separation from the world is to ask the question: Where would Christ be if he were physically on the Earth today? An interesting idea then emerges: If he is already here [through the power of his Spirit in the Church] why are we not there as well? If we can identify where Christ is working today our challenge is this: How do we get to where Christ is? What would his [and correspondingly our] *modus operandi* be? The Church must go beyond merely claiming to be the 'bastion and holder of the truth'. We must go to the places where Christ is work-

ing. Incidentally I don't look for the crowds or slick approaches to ministry either to validate where Christ is at work. Right now Jesus would be listening to someone over a cup of coffee somewhere. Maybe he is walking with someone or sitting by the bedside of a sick person or cooking for someone. Either way wherever Jesus at work a human being must be his functioning hands and feet. Jesus' method for changing the world has not changed throughout the ages. He is still changing the world one-person-at-a-time through lives open and surrendered to him.

The great truth of the Gospel is that God entered a human culture to communicate himself to those whom he loved. Jesus came to show what God is like. He was, and is, the Son of God. He also came to show what it means to be truly human. The title *Son of man* loosely means 'the truly human one'. The Church's main function is not to promote a lofty idea of 'purity' *per se* but show the world *what God is like!* Jesus went around doing good, what then is good? Micah 6:8 tells us:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

This 'goodness' is a triad of justice, mercy and humility. Historically Christians have been good on the humility and justice part, but mercy [the ability to walk in the shoes of another person] is an area we struggle with. Jesus consistently modelled mercy and compassion. ie: putting *people* first - not cultural or traditional purity. A lot of what Christians today understand to be holiness is just, in fact, separation from worldly culture. A more Biblical definition of holiness is *separation from worldly cultural thinking*. A definition of Holiness which focuses on a shallow cultural definition of purity alone is unbalanced. Jesus consistency violated these cultural norms and challenged those things which kept people from a flourishing relationship with God

Some examples:

- He healed on the Sabbath
- He spoke of the cross [culturally a no-no]
- He ate on the Sabbath.
- He touched lepers
- He touched dead people
- He ate and drank with people of ill repute
- He associated with outcasts
- He heard the cry of the blind and the deaf in a crowd
- He was called a friend of tax collectors and sinners
- He spat on people
- He radically challenged our concepts of how we do the 'God Stuff'

Jesus was radical in the true sense of the word. i.e. He brought people *back to the roots* of what is meant to be holy. Jesus consistently placed people first. I believe the true mark of Christianity is not how pure we are but how we treat people. True spirituality is acknowledging that all people are made in the image of God. People flocked to Jesus because he treated people with love, compassion and dignity. Like Jesus, we must get back to a 'people-first' attitude if we are to fulfil the church's function in the world. People must come before programs, people before personal purity, people before matters of doctrinal, people before power structures, people before agendas.

The question is this: Have we embraced Christian culture in ways which have hindered the true mission of the Church? What forms would we be better to jettison? In what ways can we be more authentically Christian? Do we need to analyse our structures and make changes to enhance community? Are there areas where syncretism has effected our faith?

These are hard thoughts and ones not meant to be answered alone. Answers to these issues aren't determined mechanistically but require prayerful exploration of God's word and dialogue in the community of faith. Try asking a few non-believers in on the discussion. It may be eye opening!