

# **COMBATING THE CULTURE**

**by Robert C. Walton**



# COMBATING THE CULTURE I

## Introduction - What is Modern Western Culture?

Everyone is to some extent a child of his age, and our immersion in the spirit of the times makes discernment both a matter of great difficulty and a matter of enormous importance for the Christian. Christianity is supra-cultural by its very nature, challenging the prevailing ideas of sinful men. To the extent that we become uncritically absorbed in the values of our culture, we are unfaithful to Christ. If we are to separate ourselves from the prevailing culture in which we live, however, we must first learn to identify it. Our task this week, then, is to delineate the distinguishing marks of modern Western culture and seek to understand some of what has brought about the conditions in which we find ourselves. We will divide our search into two parts, looking first at the philosophical roots of modern culture, then at its sociological roots.

### PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF MODERN WESTERN CULTURE

Scholars differ widely on the sources of modern thought, but there is at least one sense in which the roots of modern Western culture may be traced to the beginnings of that culture, in ancient Greece. Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle delineated a way of looking at reality that was rooted in human reason. When Christianity arrived on the scene several centuries later, it produced a worldview that was comprehensively supernatural, rooted in God rather than in man. Within a period of three hundred years, that worldview became the dominant one in the Western world and succeeded in retaining that position of dominance for over a millennium.

Christianity maintained its dominant position only as a result of continual struggles, however. The Greek glorification of reason continued to rear its head to challenge the prevailing Christian worldview, whether through the universalism of Origen, the pantheism of John Scotus Erigena, or the rationalism of Thomas Aquinas. It was the great Scholastic theologian Aquinas who paved the way for the emergence of modern thought by his view of the relationship of nature and grace. By insisting that unaided human reason could lead a man to “the vestibule of faith,” Aquinas accomplished something that Francis Schaeffer described as “dividing the field of knowledge” - distinguishing between the sacred and the secular in a way that gave independent validity to each realm.

By undermining the authority of the Church in the realm of secular knowledge and establishing the validity of human reason in its own sphere, the Schoolmen paved the way for the humanism of the Renaissance, which looked back to the ancient Greeks and Romans as models of human achievement. While the Renaissance was essentially reactionary in that it looked to the past for the ideal, it was also essentially secular in rejecting the authority of the Church and glorifying man and nature for their own sakes. The Reformation grew out of the Renaissance in the sense that it rejected the authority of the Catholic Church in favor of the priesthood of all believers and the sole authority of Scripture, but rejected the Renaissance in its insistence that all truth was unitary and all society must be brought into submission to the authority of Christ and the Scriptures.

While the Renaissance had insisted that humanist concerns had validity in their own right, thinkers in the Enlightenment went a step further, maintaining that humanist concerns were the only valid concerns of human beings (“The proper study of mankind is man” - Alexander Pope), and

rejecting the validity of a Christian worldview, turning instead to reason and experience as the only sources of truth. The scientism of the modern era is simply the outworking of this approach. As Enlightenment thought has progressed to its logical conclusions, we find that the philosophical roots of modern Western culture have produced a worldview with four prominent characteristics - secularism, materialism, epistemological relativism, and moral relativism.

Both secularism and materialism are the consequences of the divided field of knowledge initiated by Aquinas. Man desires consistency and unity in his life and thought, and compartmentalization is fundamentally uncomfortable. While the theologians of the Reformation sought to resolve the dichotomy by unifying all knowledge under the Lordship of Christ, secular thinkers today have eliminated the discomfort of compartmentalization by denying the supernatural and restricting their understanding of the world to what man is able to see, touch, and control. Thus God is dead, man is an animal, and this life is all there is.

After several centuries of seeking a basis for knowledge in man himself, scholars realized that such a quest was impossible and pronounced the impossibility of truth in any absolute sense. If all we know must be drawn from human reason and experience, our knowledge can never be more than tentative, temporary, malleable, and rooted in statistical probabilities. What is the case with knowledge must also be the case with morality, of course. Right and wrong are reduced to psychological notions of personal fulfillment, sociological notions of functionality or dysfunctionality, or political notions of majority rule. Toleration is the only absolute value in a relativistic society.

## SOCIOLOGICAL ROOTS OF MODERN WESTERN CULTURE

In David Wells' book *No Place for Truth*, he traces some of the basic sociological changes that have occurred in American life in the last century. Each of these changes has had major impact in its own right, but should not be separated from their philosophical underpinnings. As Francis Schaeffer rightly noted, while most people know little of philosophy, their lives are greatly influenced by the gradual filtering down of philosophical thought, from the works of thinkers who are only read by other scholars, through the artists who convey the ideas of the philosophers in symbolic ways, to popular culture and the daily lives of ordinary people. This filtering down may take several generations, but what we are living now is the consequence of the thought of philosophers of generations past. Wells notes several sociological influences that have played a major role in shaping the modern consciousness.

The first of these is *urbanization*. While urbanization in itself may be the consequence of industrialization, and thus an inevitable result of the scientific revolution, we should also note that the peculiar shape and consequences of urbanization are far from inevitable. Because scientism has cut man off from God, it has also cut labor off from both inherent dignity and community values, reducing it to a means to an end, and a material end at that - the obtaining of material goods. Work is thus distinguished from life, both in terms of purpose and in terms of place. Man thus has become alienated from his labors and from his community because he does not work where he lives, nor does his work have direct relevance to the meaning of his life. Life is fragmented; we do not work with our neighbors or live with our co-workers. It is worth noting that the same fragmentation has affected the family (we do not live with our relatives - sometimes we hardly ever see them; this is

sadly true of the nuclear as well as the extended family) and the church (we neither work with nor live near those with whom we worship, greatly diluting the sense of community that should characterize the church).

The second of these is *pluralism*. This is the inevitable consequence of epistemological and moral relativism. If there is no truth, all ideas, lifestyles, and values must have equal validity. In the words of William Butler Yeats, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . . The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” When life is cut off from a point of integration that holds a people together, society falls apart, as we have seen all too clearly in our own day. When nothing is right, nothing is wrong either, and society falls into the hands of those who clamor the loudest for attention.

The third sociological influence noted by Wells is *communication*. Mass communication, as embodied by the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, the television, and most recently by the personal computer with its ubiquitous Internet, has sought to compensate for the loss of integration caused by the fragmentations of urbanization and pluralism by a sort of synthetic sense of “belonging” - a mass culture that brings people together through instantaneous knowledge of world events and instantaneous exposure to popular trends. It is inevitable, of course, that such mass culture, because of pluralism, must seek the lowest common denominator in order to avoid offense, and thus institutionalize in our society both shallowness and relativism. Needless to say, such mass culture is also constantly in a state of flux, removing all foundations of certainty and stability.

These philosophical and sociological influences affect Christians every day, of course. We are not immune to the world in which we live. In the weeks to come, we will attempt to trace some of these influences as they affect us as individuals, as families, as a church, and as a society at large. By seeing how they affect us, we will be better able to recognize ways in which we are falling into the same traps as the world around us and combat those ideas and trends that are contrary to Scripture.



## COMBATING THE CULTURE II

### The Need for Discernment

Discernment is not a trait much admired in twenty-first-century America. Instead, a society enamored of political correctness insists that all things are equally true, equally valid, and equally valuable. When tolerance is the leading virtue of the age, discrimination is somehow viewed as boorish. If the Christian is to combat the spirit of the age effectively in his own life, however, he must practice discernment.

#### THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Paul concludes his summary of the downfall of the human race through sin in Romans 1:32 by saying that, “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” Gender identity is a personal choice (Genesis 1:27), homosexuality is an “alternative sexual preference,” while those who call it immoral are bigots and “homophobes” (I Corinthians 6:9-10; I Timothy 1:9-10). Only a male chauvinist pig would suggest that wives should submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18), and anyone who demands obedience of children (Ephesians 6:1), especially to the extent of using corporal punishment (Proverbs 13:24), is probably guilty of child abuse. In such an environment, discernment is both unpopular and essential.

#### SCRIPTURE REQUIRES DISCERNMENT

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, they were very confused because they had heard that the resurrection of the dead had already occurred. On Paul’s first visit to the city, many had been converted, but had quickly been swayed by mob pressure, and Paul found it necessary to leave the city (Acts 17:1-9). When he traveled to Berea, the discerning attitude of the Bereans, who checked everything Paul said against Scripture before accepting it, is contrasted with that of the easily-influenced Thessalonians (Acts 17:11). Only a few months after his visit, Paul had to write to the Thessalonian Christians because they had fallen prey to false teaching. After spending time clearing up their confusion about the Second Coming, he warned them of the importance of discernment (I Thessalonians 5:21-22). Apparently they failed to take his warning seriously, because a few months later he had to write to them again on the same issue!

#### WHAT DISCERNMENT IS NOT

When advocating the need to discriminate between true and false, good and evil, Christians frequently are faced with the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:1 - “Do not judge lest you be judged.” Few words of Scripture are so often taken out of context as are these. Far from saying that Christians have no right to pass judgment on the rightness or wrongness of another person’s behavior or beliefs, the context *requires* just such judgment (verses 15-20). What, then, is Jesus prohibiting? As the verses that follow indicate, the judgment Jesus speaks against is that of applying to others stricter standards of behavior than one is willing to apply to one’s own life. In fact, Jesus then goes on to say that one who has applied a right standard of judgment to his own life is *qualified* to do so to the lives of others (verse 5).

Scripture also indicates that we are not qualified to judge the thoughts and motives of others (I Corinthians 4:5). Only God can do that (Hebrews 4:12; I Samuel 16:7; Psalm 44:21; Proverbs 16:2; Romans 2:16).

## WHAT DISCERNMENT IS

While we may not be able to discern what is in men's hearts, we are instructed to judge the rightness of their *words* and *actions*. Christians in the New Testament were told to be discerning about what they heard preached from the pulpit (Matthew 7:15-20; Acts 17:11; I Corinthians 14:29). This was necessary because the Church was filled with false teachers of all kinds - a trend that certainly has not gotten any better as time has passed (see the *Didache's* warnings against false teachers and tests for discerning their presence). We need to realize that Satan, masquerading as an angel of light, is much more eager to infiltrate the Church than to oppose it openly. It should not surprise us that many of those whose voices are speaking out against godly discernment are within the professing Church.

Scripture also requires that we pass judgment on the actions of others. While our society recoils in horror at the thought of such behavior, it is essential, both for the security of the believer and for the purity of the Church. In II Thessalonians 3:6, Paul tells the Christians to whom he writes to avoid any *brother* who leads an unruly life (defined according to Scripture). This means that we are required to judge the behavior of any who profess to be Christians, warn those who are in danger (Jude 22-23), and refuse to identify with those who will not repent. This, after all, is the fundamental idea behind church discipline, which is essential for any healthy church. Shunning all that is evil (I Thessalonians 5:22) is a necessary consequence of biblical discernment.

## HOW TO CULTIVATE DISCERNMENT

While discernment is listed among the gifts of the Spirit, like the other gifts it is to be found in some form in all Christians. The words of Proverbs concerning cultivating wisdom have much to say about the path to discernment. Wisdom and discernment are learned by study and prayer. Like the Treasury agent who studies real money for hours in order to be able to pick out counterfeits easily, the discerning Christian will know the Word so well that anything contrary to its teachings will be immediately recognizable. Notice that it is far more important to study what is good than to study what is evil (Romans 16:19). Our unavoidable contacts with the world usually qualify us to understand its pleadings. While study for apologetic purposes has its value, discernment comes most easily from the study of God's Word.

Secondly, discernment is the product of a pure life. While we like to think that our intellects drive our desires, far too often it is the other way around. It is all too simple for most of us to rationalize intellectually the things we want to do. Consequently, we tend to weaken our consciences in order to excuse our desires. This always undermines our ability to discern between truth and error and right and wrong.

Thirdly, discernment is the product of maturity. The Christian who is growing will know the truth, or will follow mature and godly leaders who are able to guide him in the right path.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE III

### Moral Absolutes

In our modern American culture, the greatest virtue is tolerance and the only absolute is that there are no absolutes. It doesn't take a scholar to recognize the disastrous impact this kind of thinking has had upon the moral standards of American society. Christians, unfortunately, have shown themselves to be as susceptible as the culture at large.

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL RELATIVISM PRODUCES MORAL RELATIVISM

When there is no truth, there is no standard for judging right and wrong. Thus, when Western philosophy gave up on the search for absolute truth with the work of Immanuel Kant, moral relativism followed soon after, though Kant himself, recognizing the consequences but refusing to accept them, sought a basis for moral absolutes within man (the Categorical Imperative). Since Kant, philosophers have tried to base morals in man's inner self or his outward circumstances, but have always arrived at some form of relativism.

#### SOCIOLOGICAL RELATIVISM PRODUCES MORAL RELATIVISM

The early sociologists, fascinated with what Europeans were discovering about exotic cultures in foreign lands, quickly determined that all standards grew out of the cultures in which they were found (e.g., William Graham Sumner). Thus, there is no legitimate moral distinction to be made between loving one's neighbors and eating them - each approach developed because it was at one time functional within a given society. Modern pluralism thus assumes the relativity of moral standards, and it is for this reason that "political correctness" is so antithetical to Christianity. Missionaries are accused of cultural imperialism for trying to end practices such as cannibalism and suttee, and Third World countries insist that Western cultural beliefs (such as those opposed to torture and genocide) not be imposed on their societies.

#### POPULAR CULTURE DISSEMINATES MORAL RELATIVISM

From editorial columns to talk shows to advertising to sitcoms and movies, media outlets preach the gospel of moral relativism. Whether communicating the delights of extramarital sex, the acceptability of homosexuality and lesbianism, the appropriateness of lying under the right circumstances, or the need to reject authority of any kind, popular culture tells us that Christians are fools who hold to an outmoded and obsolete standard of morality that is not only passé, but positively harmful, both to themselves and to society at large.

A 1994 movie, *It Could Happen to You*, would at first glance seem to be an exception to the rampant moral relativism expounded and exploited by the media, but, given a closer look, it illustrates the point admirably. In the story, a policeman, finding himself with no change in his pocket for a tip, offers to split his lottery winnings with a waitress, or return the next day with a double tip. When his lottery ticket wins the \$4,000,000 jackpot, he determines to keep his promise and split it with the waitress, much to the consternation of his wife. The movie goes on to show the cop and the waitress using their winnings to help the poor and needy, while their respective significant others give full vent to their greed and materialism. Eventually, the policeman's wife

divorces him, taking all the money in the process and leaving the generous pair penniless. When a mysterious newspaperman reports on their plight, the two are flooded with anonymous donations from people all over the city and are able to continue their charitable practices.

On the surface, the movie would seem to be a model of Christian morality - anti-materialistic, anti-greed, emphasizing reaching out to the poor, keeping one's promises even when it hurts, etc. Under such an avalanche of positive values, it is easy to overlook the tacit acceptance of gambling and sexual immorality in the story. In fact, the story is structured in such a way as to encourage the viewer to *root for* such behavior! Note that the same might be said about some popular Disney animated features.

## SCRIPTURE TEACHES MORAL ABSOLUTISM

There can be no question that the Bible teaches moral absolutism. Right and wrong are not products of culture, but rest upon the unchanging character of God. When the Bible says "thou shalt not," it intends it for all people in all times and all places. If morality has its roots outside man, it applies whether people acknowledge it or not. According to many of the Old Testament prophets, God held the pagan rulers to His standards of behavior despite the fact that they refused to recognize Him or His authority. It is the same with people today.

## DISTINGUISHING BLACK AND WHITE FROM SHADES OF GRAY

What makes the issue difficult, of course, is that not all moral issues are black and white (though Christians are often accused of thinking that it is so). Several points need to be made here. First of all, every decision is a moral decision. If what we do honors God, it is right. If it doesn't, it is wrong. It is quite possible within this context for a number of choices to be equally right, of course. Should I wear a blue shirt today, or a green one? This is not likely to be a decision of great moral import.

Secondly, Scripture distinguishes between laws that are eternally binding and those that are culturally relative (e.g., adultery versus eating meat offered to idols). While not all Christians are able to agree about what laws fit into which category, Scripture makes it clear that the two categories exist. We are not free to put all moral questions into one category or the other. Many Christians have found the distinctions among moral, civil, and ceremonial laws helpful in dealing with these matters.

Thirdly, the Bible gives us principles to apply to culturally relative issues (Romans 14, I Corinthians 8). These principles emphasize keeping one's conscience pure before God and showing love to those who differ. Trouble arises when people who are steeped in the moral relativism of the modern age attempt to apply these principles to issues on which Scripture is absolutely clear. Paul demonstrates the difference between the two approaches in I Corinthians 5, where he deals with the case of open immorality in the Corinthian church and rebukes the Corinthians for their unwillingness to take a firm stand against what is clearly sinful.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE IV

### Gender Roles

One of the most important battlegrounds for Christians today in combating the culture is within our families. Modern culture attacks both the foundations and the daily routines of Christian family life. In the next four weeks, we will be looking at some of the key points of conflict. Today, we deal with one of the most foundational ones - the concept of gender roles.

#### THE ATTACK ON THE INSTITUTION OF THE FAMILY

The family is an institution ordained and established by God (Genesis 2:24), not a mere product of social evolution, subject to change or even disposal if it becomes dysfunctional in a changing world. The family is to take on a specific form - one man, one woman, and their children. Even in biblical times, departure from this pattern (into polygamy, for example) had tragic consequences. Today, the family is under attack, and that assault can be traced to two fundamental causes - sexual libertinism and radical feminism. The former attacks the family in order to advance the causes of sexual promiscuity and homosexual and lesbian relationships. The latter vilifies the Christian family as the tool of the oppressive patriarchy. The former affirms that sexual perversions are normal, the latter that biblical standards of sexual behavior are unhealthy and abnormal. Our concern today is with the issue of gender roles - the great bugaboo of the feminist movement.

#### THE LARGER CONTEXT OF THE ISSUE OF GENDER

Genesis 3:16 indicates that part of the curse that fell upon the human race as a result of the Fall is that the intended harmonious relationship between men and women would become one of conflict - a never-ending power struggle. Because men have abused their headship, feminists never seem short of ammunition when they speak of male oppression. Yet in the same way that the Israelite rejection of Moses' authority was really a rejection of God, so women's rejection of the authority of men is really a rejection of God's order. But in order to do this, they must overcome not only "tradition" (which they enthusiastically reject), but also biology (it is incredible the lengths to which feminists will go to minimize biological differences) and emotional makeup (since feminists are almost always materialists, they would explain this away in terms of societal conditioning, though some, either from the standpoint of mysticism or that of biology, would affirm difference in order to maintain female superiority). In the end, God's reality speaks louder than rebellious mankind's *theory-du-jour*.

In recent years, the issue of gender has become even more contentious with the rise of the claim that gender is malleable, on the one hand stemming from genetic causes that necessitate complete acceptance of all variations, and on the other hand subject to personal choice, so that one may legitimately claim for oneself any gender identity without being open to challenge by bigots who would deny the reality of such choices. The tragic consequences of this kind of thinking in the lives of so many today, especially young people, gives clear evidence of the truth, not only of biology as a determinant of gender, but also of Genesis 1:27, which clearly states that God made man male and female; these identities are immutable, and no other alternatives exist.

## ESSENTIAL EQUALITY AND ROLE DIFFERENTIATION

With regard to the relationships of men and women, the distinction between essence and role is a vital one in terms of understanding biblical teaching on the subject of gender, but is also one that modern society steadfastly refuses to make. Prior to the teachings on gender roles in Genesis 2 and 3, Genesis 1:26-28 tells us that men and women are equal in the most fundamental areas of human nature - the image of God and dominion over the created universe. Despite *Brown v. Board of Education*, different does not necessarily imply unequal. The refusal to recognize this distinction allows feminists to attack biblical teachings concerning gender roles by claiming that they are remnants of chauvinism and bigotry. The notion that difference must imply superiority or inferiority is both illogical and unbiblical, yet lies at the heart of feminist rejection of the Christian family.

### WHAT DEFINES THE ROLE OF THE MAN?

Key passages here are Genesis 3:17-19 and Ephesians 5:25-33. The role of the man is defined in relationship to his wife and his work. His love for his wife is to be sacrificial, illustrating the relationship of Christ to the Church, while his relationship to his work is to exercise dominion to the glory of God while fighting against the consequences of the curse.

### WHAT DEFINES THE ROLE OF THE WOMAN?

Key passages here are Genesis 2:20-23, Genesis 3:16, Proverbs 31:10-31, and Ephesians 5:22-24. The role of the woman is defined in relationship to her family and to her work. She is to be her husband's "suitable helper," and under his authority bear and raise children and do her work in the home and in the world. Such submission produces harmony rather than the conflict that inevitably arises when all seek to dominate.

### WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE?

The consequences of failure to maintain distinctive biblical teachings in these areas will be seen, both in our marriages and in our children. In our marriages, conflict will reign if God's way is ignored. What the world advocates as a source of freedom becomes bondage to constant battling, loneliness, and alienation. When we fail to resist the world's model for what a marriage ought to be, we wind up miserable.

Even more dreadful are the consequences for our children. Young people today see nothing around them but bad role models for what men and women ought to be. Those held out as examples today display anything but biblical values. In order for our children to lead happy and successful lives as adults, they must see proper models of male and female behavior as they are growing up. These models should exist primarily in the family, but should also be seen in the Church. Such models must be both strong and explicit in order to overcome the loud voices of peers and media. We cannot allow our children to grow up thinking that "politically correct" sensibilities are normal, because the inevitable consequence is that biblical values will be viewed as abnormal and finally rejected.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE V

### Discipline

Years ago in Toronto, Canada, a Michigan man faced trial on charges of child abuse. He had been reported to police by a woman who had seen him pull his seven-year-old daughter from the car in a parking lot, pull down her pants, and whack her posterior soundly several times. As it turned out, she had brought the punishment on herself by deliberately slamming the car door on the fingers of her five-year-old brother. The judge dismissed the charges, but the fact that the incident came to trial at all is an indication of how strongly opposed our society is to biblical standards of child discipline.

#### THE NATURE OF THE CHILD

The root of the conflict between Christianity and modern culture on the question of child discipline stems from the respective views of the nature of the child. The Bible, of course, teaches that the child is sinful and in need of correction. Society, with its irrational belief in the essential goodness of man, believes that the child is fundamentally in need of freedom and, at most, guidance. If the child is sinful, however, it is freedom that is cruel, since allowing a child to follow his own way will inevitably lead to disaster, not fulfillment (Proverbs 22:6). Only by correction, which seeks to counteract the tendencies of the sinful nature, does the parent fulfill his responsibilities before God. It is worth noting that this difference also plays a key role in the matter of education - our topic for next week.

#### THE REASONS FOR CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Scripture advocates corporal punishment, not only for children (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15), but for miscreants of other types as well (Proverbs 10:13; 26:3). Why does the Bible give such a prominent role to the corrective value of physical pain? For one thing, the development of a child renders it valuable. Children at a young age do not have the capacity to reason, particularly concerning abstract matters. They are quite capable, however, of understanding that certain behaviors lead to painful consequences. Developmentally, therefore, it is foolish to replace corporal punishment with approaches that place the burden of adult responses on a child who is incapable of adult reasoning.

As the references to corporal punishment for those who are not children indicate, it has another value as well. Unlike the means of punishment most frequently used in our society, it has the virtue of immediate feedback and rapid termination. When I gave a test in school, I always graded it and gave it back to the students the next day so we could go over it in class. If a test is going to be a learning experience, immediate feedback is essential. The same is true for punishment of wrong behavior. When the consequences for sinful behavior occur years after the event (and sometimes not at all), the instructive value of the punishment is minimized. This also applies to children, who with their undeveloped sense of time, cannot benefit from long-term consequences, but need immediate feedback in order to learn from an experience.

## VIOLENCE VERSUS DISCIPLINE

What of the charge that violence begets violence, and that those who use corporal punishment simply teach their children that violence is an acceptable response to behavior on the part of others of which they disapprove? The very question indicates the inability of our society to distinguish between discipline and violence. Indeed, the issue has arisen in the first place largely because some parents have been unable to make the same distinction.

First of all, discipline is the result of love, while violence is the result of anger. If the right lessons are to be communicated to our children, they must see this, or else, they *will* learn that they may lash out at others physically when they are enraged by them. Because of this, it is really the *failure* to administer appropriate punishment to children that is a mark of child abuse, along with inappropriately violent responses.

Secondly, violence is rooted in a desire to vent one's own frustrations, while discipline is rooted in a desire to help the child. "I love you too much to allow you to continue behaving in this way" is a far better approach than, "If you don't stop pestering me I'm going to *kill* you!"

Society is incapable of making these basic distinctions because they are incapable of accepting the fact that *natural* behavior is *wrong* behavior, and will only stop if the child is forced to change his pattern of response. Discipline and violence are only indistinguishable to those who believe that the child is not in need of fundamental change, but only minor course corrections.

## THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF CHILD DISCIPLINE

Ephesians 6:4 points out the positive aspect of child discipline - the responsibility of parents to raise children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Correcting wrong behavior is of no value unless it is accompanied by instruction in right behavior. Parents must recognize that this is true whether their children are Christians or not, since orderly and good behavior is a blessing even to those who do not know God, though it has no saving or eternal value.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF SUCCUMBING TO SOCIETAL PRESSURES

The consequences of following society's lead in the matter of child discipline can be seen all around us, in children and young people who are irresponsible, disrespectful, rude, self-centered, violent, and unable to function in a "civilized" world. Unfortunately, they also despise their parents. Lenience does not buy love, only scorn. Children who have not been raised under the authority of their parents are ill-equipped to deal with authorities of other kinds, and are thus crippled in school, on the job, and in society at large. Thus it is true that "he who spares the rod hates his son," condemning him to a lifetime of conflict and sorrow. If we love our children, we will not follow the empty and foolish sentiments of the society around us, but will equip them to live as responsible, respectful adults in a culture that produces far too few of them.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE VI

### Communication of Values; Education

At one time in American culture, children were raised in a society that, for the most part, communicated with one voice. The values taught at home were reinforced by the extended family, friends and neighbors, and both church and school. This clearly is no longer the case. Thus another important area in which Christians today must combat the culture is in the communication of values to their children.

#### PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF VALUES

One of the key passages in Scripture dealing with the communication of values within the family structure is Deuteronomy 6:6-9. In this passage, we find, first of all, that the communication of values is a responsibility given to parents by God. While delegation of this responsibility is at times necessary, abdication of it cannot be permitted.

Secondly, we should note the variety of means that are to be used for the communication of values. Parents are to deal formally with their children (“impress upon them”), while also taking advantage of the variety of opportunities offered by everyday life. They are to teach them by example (“[they] are to be upon your hearts”), and symbolically as well as verbally (*not* by phylacteries and mezuzahs).

What is required in order to accomplish this? Formal instruction takes planning, life examples grow from personal godliness and maturity, and spontaneous instruction implies shared time and activities. What about symbolic instruction? What does that mean in modern culture? While choice of home decor may be a part of such instruction, lifestyle choices speak much more loudly.

It is also worth noting, in connection with last week’s discussion, that discipline is an important means of communicating values to children. What parents encourage, what they tolerate, and what they punish in their children goes a long way in teaching those children values that they will carry with them into adulthood.

#### DELEGATING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is always necessary for parents to delegate their responsibility to communicate values to some extent. Such responsibility is delegated, not only by the choice of a church and a school, but also by what children are permitted to be exposed to in the media.

The major question that must be asked in delegating responsibility for education is whether those to whom responsibility is delegated will present reinforcing or competing values to the child. There is, of course, no other possibility - value-free education does not exist, nor can it, though it is certainly possible for an institution to reinforce some values and contradict others. While both kinds of choices carry their baggage of strengths and weaknesses, the choices made should be *deliberate* rather than by *default*.

The greatest danger in choosing a source of supporting values, such as a Christian school, is that the parent will then abdicate his own responsibility to oversee the education of the child. Even godly teachers need oversight. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a child educated in a godly environment will adopt for himself the values he is taught; the Word of God has the power to harden as well as soften the unregenerate heart.

The greatest danger in choosing a competing source of values, of course, is that the parent will lose the competition. Younger children tend to hold their teachers in very high esteem, readily believing whatever they say, while older children, normally tending to seek their own direction away from parental influence, will conduct their search among the available resources, whether educational or peer-generated. A parent who chooses to immerse his children in a world where all the competing influences are ungodly runs a serious risk of seeing his children turn to the values of the world in which they are immersed.

### PREPARING CHILDREN TO DEAL WITH COMPETING VALUES

Children cannot be sheltered from the world forever. It is the parent's responsibility to prepare his children to deal with the world in a godly way. The key to accomplishing this is through *planned, gradual exposure in a controlled environment*. Television, movie, and music choices should be monitored, controlled, and discussed, so that children learn to evaluate the legitimacy of what they see and hear. Interaction with and evaluation of media input should become an automatic reflex for parent and child alike. Such a practice will prepare the child to make wise choices when the parent is no longer present to monitor or even advise.

What is true of interaction with media outlets is even more true with educational alternatives. Some parents teach their children to swim by throwing them into the deep end, while others use more gradual methods. At whatever age parents may choose to expose their children to negative educational influences, they must be sure their children are prepared to handle what they will encounter. When children are younger, this requires parental knowledge of what is going on at school. At any age, it requires regular interaction with children. Considerations of this type arise even when making college choices, where the spiritual maturity of the student becomes a major factor.

The principle of planned, gradual exposure is also true in connection with the peer group with which a child becomes involved. Because peers play such an important role in the development of children, parents must be involved in choosing those with whom their children associate, so that later their children will be equipped to choose their own friends wisely. One who is in a position to be influenced should avoid the ungodly, while one who is in a position to exert influence should seek to do so. The same principle applies to dating relationships when children reach adolescence, as well.

Finally, communication of values means seeing the truths of God's Word written on the hearts of our children. This we cannot accomplish, but we can be faithful in carrying out our responsibilities, and trust God to honor our obedience in the lives of those He has entrusted to our care.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE VII

### Time Management

In a sense, time has not changed. We still have 24 hours in every day - not a second more or a second less than people had in Bible times. Yet modern culture makes more demands on our time than ever before. Not all of the demands are avoidable, of course, but some need to be scrutinized by the Christian who desires to pattern his life according to Scripture rather than the world. There are at least three areas in which the culture makes it difficult for the Christian to implement biblical principles of time management and in which the Christian must stand against the pull of society's tide.

#### THE ROLES OF WORK AND LEISURE

The world's messages about the respective roles of work and leisure in a person's life are both contradictory and unhealthy. On the one hand, we are told that the true purpose of life is pleasure, and that work is merely a means to an end. We endure the week in order to reach the weekend, when we can do what we really like. After all, we deserve a break today. Work receives minimal attention and little commitment. We get things done as quickly as possible, with as little effort as possible, caring nothing for quality and taking little pride in the effort. After all, what really counts is getting away from such drudgery and enjoying ourselves.

On the other hand, corporate downsizing puts more and more pressure on workers to work harder, put in longer hours, and handle more stress in order to keep their jobs. "Workaholic" is a term of approbation, and those who give too much priority to family commitments are viewed with suspicion. It is said that never in their history have Americans worked more or enjoyed it less.

These seemingly contradictory pulls exerted by the society around us are not really contradictory, of course. Both are products of the same underlying premise - materialism. The world assumes that happiness is to be found in activities and things, in wealth and possessions. They're confused about whether they should work more in order to accumulate more (though they never have time to enjoy it), or work less in order to grab their pleasures now (though the pleasures turn out to be surprisingly empty). Scripture, however, makes it clear that the goal of life is neither things nor pleasure, but the glory of God. Both work and leisure are to serve that end. The Fourth Commandment provides a perfect balance, and only by structuring our lives according to God's pattern can we find fulfillment.

#### CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

The proliferation of entertainment choices poses real problems for Christian parents in today's culture. The first problem, of course, comes in making choices for ourselves. Many unsavory forms of entertainment are readily available, but even if those are eliminated, good means of entertainment can crowd out superior uses of our time and resources if we allow them to do so. We need to apply the standards of Philippians 4:8 to our entertainment decisions.

Matters get much more complicated when dealing with our children, however. At one time, the trickiest decision parents faced was whether or not to let their children play with toy guns. Now, we have video games of all descriptions, from the educational to the merely addictive to the type where players rip out one another's spleens in living color. Most families have access to R-rated movies in their homes through cable TV or the Internet, with its plethora of uses, including some that are blatantly pornographic. Restraining one's own lusts is difficult enough, but how are we to guide our children, especially when all their friends seem to talk about are things we would rather they not experience?

We must realize that, in these matters, children must be both protected and trained. It is perfectly legitimate for parents to set limits on what children may watch and do and how much time they may spend doing it. But real training requires several important things that go beyond mere restrictions. First of all, it involves deliberate exposure to what is good. By experience, children should be taught to appreciate good literature and wholesome entertainment. Secondly, they must be taught to evaluate what they see. You will know you have done your job well if their response to their first exposure to sleaze is revulsion rather than fascination.

#### TIME CONFLICTS AND PRIORITIZATION

Can anyone remember when Sunday baseball games had a 6:00 curfew to keep them from interfering with church services? When community leagues or school teams would never dream of scheduling a practice or a game on Sunday? When people viewed the church as playing an important role in society, they avoided scheduling things that would conflict with it. Today, of course, that is no longer the case. While a person cannot be required to violate his religious convictions in order to hold a job, children are constantly put into positions where participation in school or community activities conflicts with their involvement at church. This poses a major dilemma for parents. How important is it to communicate to our children that church should be a priority in their lives (assuming, of course, that it is in ours)? The fact of the matter is that it is *very* important. Values are communicated to our children by what we do ourselves and by what we allow them to do. If we permit them to participate in an activity that regularly conflicts with church, we should not be surprised if they see nothing wrong, in later years, with getting a job that requires them to work on Sunday. After all, they've been taught that church is low on the priority scale - even below entertainment, so it certainly takes a back seat to the need to earn a living.

Another issue of time management, of course, is the matter of punctuality. Lateness is not tolerated at school or work, yet we think little of being late to church on a regular basis. Again, in doing this we are communicating something to our children about the relative importance of different aspects of our lives. Children need to see by our example that the things of God take priority in our use of time - not only in what we do, but also by our approach to the things in our lives that consume the bulk of our time. Children must see that we are mastering our time to the glory of God, not rushing around trying to meet the expectations of society, or trying to fill our days with as much temporal pleasure as our sated bodies and minds can endure.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE VIII

### The Death of Doctrine; The Search for Experience

Throughout its history, the Church has always struggled to maintain a balance between doctrine and experience. Though unquestionably difficult to do, something as simple as the structure of Paul's epistles shows the necessity of relating doctrine to experience and grounding experience in doctrine. The Church, however, has tended to vacillate between two extremes. The pendulum has swung back and forth repeatedly between a doctrinal emphasis that leads to sterile formalism and an experiential emphasis that leads to doctrinal aberration.

#### FIVE CENTURIES OF BACK AND FORTH

The Protestant Reformation was unquestionably a time of doctrinal emphasis. Luther, Calvin, and the rest attempted to bring the Church back to the Scriptures by focusing on the teachings of the Word of God in contrast to the traditions of men. The doctrinal emphasis of the Reformation generated two undesirable results, however - the religious warfare associated with the period, and the "Protestant Scholasticism" of the next generation, who argued interminably over issues of such consequence as infralapsarianism versus supralapsarianism, while the church calcified into little more than cultural formalism.

The pendulum swing produced a number of reactions, including the rise of denominationalism (as opposed to the notion of Christendom, which had generated much of the warfare of the Reformation), the Natural Law morality of the Enlightenment (men can be moral apart from the divisive dictates of the Church), and, most importantly, the experience-centered Christianity of the Pietists. All contributed in their own way to the rise of liberalism in the Church, where the validity of doctrine was denied and the Church sought to focus on issues of public and private morality and service.

Though it contained strong elements of Pietism, fundamentalism, especially in its original form, was a reaction against these extremes of experiential emphasis. The early fundamentalists stressed the fundamental teachings of Scripture and sought a return to those teachings in the churches. Unfortunately, fundamentalism quickly became schismatic, legalistic, and isolationist as it majored on the minors in its doctrinal discourse, added unbiblical strictures in order to set itself apart from the world, and became increasingly irrelevant as it concerned itself almost exclusively with evangelism and battles against worldliness. As we will see later, much of what we see in the Church today is at least partially a reaction against fundamentalism.

#### BEHIND THE WORLD BY ONE GENERATION

Another trend, in addition to the so-called "Pendulum Effect," observable in the modern rejection of doctrine is the persistent tendency of the church to deplore whatever trends are popular in the world as they arise, but then adopt them within a generation or so. Such a tendency has only been observable since the secularization of society, of course - before that, cutting-edge thought emerged from *within* the church. Modern examples of this trend are the gradual espousal by the Church of the feminist and gay agendas years after the issues were raised by the larger society.

It is also worth noting that the time lag is becoming shorter as the Information Age becomes more dominant. For instance, evangelical toleration (or even advocacy) of homosexual rights has only taken about a decade, as opposed to the generation time lapse observable in the past.

#### WHAT IS THE MODERN CHURCH REACTING AGAINST?

As already noted, the pendulum swing in today's Church is largely a reaction against fundamentalism. While the movement away from legalism is undoubtedly a good thing, Christians today seem all too willing to tolerate all varieties of behavior, including many that are clearly condemned in Scripture. In your own experience, how many things that you used to think were wrong do you now accept without question? Can you really affirm that all of these changes are for the better?

The trend away from isolationism is also good, as the evangelical church has shown itself far more willing to become involved in society's problems than it was throughout much of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the pendulum has again swung in the other direction, as Christians become preoccupied with social issues such as abortion and almost convey the notion that the only proper focus for the Christian is that of changing the world through the political process.

We can also see today a reaction against the schismatic tendencies of fundamentalism. Those who care passionately about truth have always had a tendency to tolerate no deviation in the slightest particular, and thus generate schism after schism as they reject brothers and sisters over insignificant theological trivia. Today, however, the tendency is more toward toleration. Unfortunately, that toleration often includes those whose teachings are far from scriptural, whether they be liberals, Roman Catholics, or cultists with bizarre and unbiblical views.

#### WHAT TRENDS IS THE MODERN CHURCH ADOPTING?

The reaction against fundamentalism dovetails nicely with the tolerance that characterizes our age. The dismissal of truth, which over a century ago became the foundation of theological liberalism, has crept into the heart of evangelicalism through the back door. While the tenets of liberal theology were soundly and rightly rejected by evangelical Christians, the modern penchant for tolerance of all differences, combined with the experiential emphasis that has led people away from a concern with doctrine, has brought people to the same place by a different route. What is that place?

The place, essentially, is neo-orthodoxy. While no evangelical deserving of the name would deny the objective *inspiration* of Scripture, we have increasingly fallen prey to a *de facto* denial of its objective *interpretation*. Like the Pietists of old, we are much more concerned with what the Bible means *to me*, than we are with what it means in any objective sense of the word. After all, there are so many different interpretations among Christians, how can we (or anyone else) insist that our interpretation is normative? Such a view is identical to that expressed by the liberals early in the twentieth century (see, for instance, Harry Emerson Fosdick's famous sermon, *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*). One of the obvious consequences of this is the unwillingness of many Christians to discipline or even criticize some whose teachings have exceeded the boundaries of biblical Christianity by a wide margin.

More recently, evangelical Christians are reinterpreting the Bible by means of an emphasis on the cultural context in which it was written. While knowledge of such a context is important if we are to understand the Word of God rightly, too many today are defining the essential context of the biblical writings by looking at the pagan literary works of the Ancient Near East. One of the most damaging ways in which this is being done is by reinterpreting the early chapters of Genesis in the light of Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation myths and concluding that these foundational chapters tell us nothing factual about how God created the world or the human race, thus opening the door wide for the acceptance of evolution as an explanation for the origin of both the universe and mankind. Sadly, when the clear teachings of the first three chapters of the Bible are set aside, much of what follows in the rest of the Scriptures is brought into question as well.

## THE NEED FOR BALANCE

The fact of the matter is, of course, that doctrine and experience cannot be separated. Doctrine that is not put into practice is not true doctrine, and experience that is not grounded in Scripture is not valid experience. For the Christian, the teachings of Scripture must be known, reflected upon, and applied to the specific issues of life. In our own age, we are seeing breakdowns in all three of these areas. Doctrinal ignorance is rife, while charismatics and New Age mystics would tell us that experience is self-authenticating. Anyone who would dare to challenge the validity of another's experience on doctrinal grounds is guilty of lack of charity at best and arrogance and divisiveness at worst.

Reflection, too, is divorced from biblical roots. Interpretation is free-wheeling, unfettered by sound principles of scriptural exegesis. Texts become pretexts for personal opinions or "relevant" harangues, with little concern for objective truth. Instead of exercising the discernment we talked about in Lesson 2, people are willing to accept as at least potentially valid what anyone else has to say, even if contradictions result.

Such problems have dire consequences for the Church. Not only are we finding ourselves increasingly indistinguishable in practice from the liberals (and we know what has been the long-term fate of liberal churches), but the notion that experience is self-validating has produced an entire generation of Christians whose criterion for church involvement is that of finding a gratifying experience. Since experiences tend to get old rather quickly, and since objective criteria for evaluation are rejected, the consequence is a generation of spiritual gypsies, moving from church to church in search of the most fulfilling of experiences. Furthermore, since repeated experience hardens, more extreme experiences are required to excite; thus we see increasingly bizarre practices commonly undertaken in the name of evangelical Christianity.

The dangers thus noted should drive us continually back to our doctrinal roots. If the Bible alone is true, whatever is contrary to it is false. We must always check ourselves and others against what is unchanging - the Word and will of our immutable God.



## COMBATING THE CULTURE IX

### The User-Friendly Church; Leadership by Opinion Poll

Perhaps no phenomenon in the evangelical Church is so indicative of the influence of modern culture as the growing prominence of the so-called seekers' ministries. After all, in a democracy, what could be more appropriate than for the people to establish the agenda through their own desires and preferences?

#### THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

American democracy is rooted in a deep mistrust of anything elite. Not only have we come to scorn the idea of aristocracy, but we also doubt the validity of an intellectual or spiritual elite. Each person's opinion is as good as anyone else's; all thoughts have equal validity and deserve equal respect. Anyone who displays intellectual superiority is suspect, as is anyone who claims unique legitimacy for his interpretation of Scripture. In such a climate, the Church becomes a mirror of society rather than its shaper.

#### COMPETING IN THE MARKETPLACE

In modern society, there are plenty of competitors for our time and attention. It becomes very easy to seek out those that make us feel good and that "meet our needs." Such self-centered, individualistic thinking is characteristic of our culture, but is contrary to the Word of God. After all, from a biblical standpoint, the "return" on our investment is not to be expected until this life is over.

What are some of the symptoms of this marketplace environment? First of all, we see all around us people who move easily from church to church as their perceived needs change. In their twenties, they seek a church with an active singles ministry or young couples' fellowship. Later, they may move on to one with a strong Sunday School program, and later still to one with an active youth ministry. The general attitude seems to be, "If you don't give me what I think I need, I'll find another place that does."

Secondly, we find an increasing emphasis on worship styles that create the right feeling in the members of the congregation. The concern is not so much the question of how best to praise God, but rather of how to generate the proper emotions in the people. Without question, the charismatic movement has been a major contributor to this trend, but certainly does not stand alone among the increasingly contentless, repetitive worship services that are in vogue today.

Thirdly, the TV generation has developed a spectator mentality and a short attention span. They want to be entertained, but they also want to do their religious duty and get out as quickly as possible. Churches are judged by the quality of their musicians and by the styles of music they utilize. Any sermon over thirty minutes is intolerable; twenty minutes is passable, and the ten-minute "devotional" is best of all, preferably loaded with entertaining stories. Seeker services abound, creating an environment intended to make the unbeliever comfortable. The church has become increasingly like the mall, the center of American community life.

Fourthly, the task of the preacher is to affirm the people in their daily lives and facilitate deeper relationships, not challenge concerning duty or anything else that could possibly engender guilt. Doctrine is boring and divisive, and people lack the concentration for expository preaching. They would much rather be told how much Jesus loves them just as they are.

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND THE DEMANDS OF THE AUDIENCE

Today, the biblical concept of servant leadership has been sadly perverted to the point where the task of the leader is viewed as giving people what they want. Of course, when Jesus came to serve others, He most assuredly did *not* give them what they wanted, especially judging by the responses of most people to His ministry! A leader who serves gives people what is good for them, whether they want to hear it or not. But in today's climate, such a leader could quickly find himself out of a job, or at best leading a significantly reduced congregation.

In such an environment, it is natural for leaders to question themselves. If people don't respond to my ministry, if they want something other than what I am giving them, how can I be sure I am right? Only leaders with supreme confidence in their calling from God and the authority of God's Word can withstand such pressures. For most, it is far too easy to succumb to the pressure of leadership by opinion poll, where the congregation knows best and the job of the leader is to find out what they want and give it to them.

## DECLINING INFLUENCE AND THE NEED FOR STATUS

Another factor driving pastors toward leadership by opinion poll is the declining status of the clergy in society. Centuries ago, the pastor was the center of community life, more highly respected than anyone else. Pastorates averaged twenty years or more, with many for all practical purposes becoming lifetime tenures. Today, pastors average less than three years per church. They are valued as managers and facilitators rather than as experts in the truth of God's Word. They are little more than replaceable parts with little standing in the community. Believers may see them as fulfilling a necessary function, but the unbelieving world considers them an anachronism, accomplishing nothing of real value.

A small symptom of this lowered esteem is the fact that pastors today are often called by their first names - unthinkable in generations past. While I am not suggesting that this is a change for the worse, it is certainly indicative of the altered role of the clergy in society. Respect is gained, not by virtue of position and calling, but by virtue of results. Only the strongest can withstand the pressure to give people what they want in such an environment.

What is the solution? On one level, it is very simple - Bible-centered preaching, the church as a community of believers committed to and ministering to one another, leaders of the church fulfilling their God-given responsibility to direct the church according to Scripture. Of course, this is harder than it sounds, given the pressures of which we have spoken. In order to follow God's pattern for church life, a group of people must be willing to be viewed as anachronistic and to risk losing the transients who fill the evangelical world of today. In the long run, however, a ministry that is grounded in God's Word will endure and bear fruit.

## **COMBATING THE CULTURE X**

### The Search for Authority, Beauty, and Unity

When we think of the modern emphasis on experience in evangelical Christianity, our thoughts tend to turn most readily to manifestations of the modern spirit like the charismatic movement and the “seeker-sensitive” churches. But not all who crave religious experience move in these directions. This week, we want to look at what would seem to be the opposite end of the spectrum - the growing inclination of evangelicals toward ancient, high-church forms of worship - Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism. The return to formalism is also a cry for a certain type of experience, which we will examine under three headings - authority, beauty, and unity.

#### THE SEARCH FOR AUTHORITY

The Protestant Reformation, with its rejection of the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession and the authority of the Magisterium in favor of the priesthood of all believers, was in a profound sense anti-authoritarian. The Reformers, however, never intended to leave Scripture open to any and all interpretations; this is why they devoted such attention to the writing of creeds. Modernity is anti-authoritarian in a much deeper way, of course, since it rejects all absolute standards in favor of an *ad hoc* approach that scorns the lessons of the past and lives only in the present.

The combined forces of Reformation individualism and modern anti-authoritarianism have produced an increasingly chaotic picture in today’s Church. Not only do we have ever-multiplying denominations and independent churches of all sorts, but we have the exaltation of private interpretation of Scripture to the exclusion of any standard of belief. Such a situation is intolerable for some sensitive souls. There is something inside us that, despite our protestations to the contrary, wants to be told what to do. Like misbehaving children, we crave authority. Our chaotic Church scene has thus driven many to seek just that, in a variety of forms.

Some seek authority in cults, or, more commonly, independent churches that exercise an almost-cultic degree of authoritarian leadership. One need not join the Moonies in order to find a pastor more than willing to dictate the details of one’s life. The success of authoritarian churches, both in fundamentalist and charismatic circles, indicates something of the deep-seated panic generated by the chaotic absence of standards in modern society and the modern evangelical Church.

Others, seeing denominationalism itself as the root of all evil, seek answers to the uncertainty of personal interpretation of Scripture through a return to Catholicism. In these cases, apostolic succession is often the door through which people enter the world of Catholicism. It is somehow comforting to be able to add to the infallible Scriptures the infallible interpretation of the Church. Once apostolic succession is accepted, however, all the other unbiblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church fall neatly into place - everything from the seven sacraments to purgatory to the papacy to the veneration of Mary and the saints. Far too many evangelicals have taken this route in recent years, seeking authoritative answers.

## THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY

The Protestant Reformation, in turning against the unbiblical excesses of Catholicism, removed the traditions added to worship over many centuries (images, candles, vestments, rituals) in favor of simplicity derived from Scripture alone. At the time, many were appalled at the loss of so much beauty and could think of the plain churches and simple worship services of Protestantism as ugly at best. Modernity has not helped. Today, biblical simplicity has been adorned, not by ancient traditions, but by slick, media-driven tackiness. Emotional manipulation in all its forms, whether charismatic or seeker-sensitive, gets old rather quickly.

Because of this, some people seeking a deeper experience of worship have returned to the ancient liturgical churches - Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholic. Mystery conveys the beauty and holiness of God far more effectively than praise choruses or speaking in tongues, they feel - and, of course, the feeling is what counts. Like the search for authority, however, this is simply another way of sublimating doctrinal concerns to the needs of present experience.

## THE SEARCH FOR UNITY

In the struggle against modern culture, evangelical Christians often find themselves working with strange bedfellows. They stand shoulder to shoulder with Catholics and Mormons in the struggle against the horrors of abortion. Adventists join in advocating Creationism, while Catholics and many others oppose pornography and homosexuality. Evangelicals and Catholics make common cause in the fight for private religious education. In the light of all these important issues on which we agree, how can we let our differences come between us? Do not the pressing battles of the day require that we put aside our petty distinctives and join as Christians to fight the real enemy?

In 1910, a group of Protestant mission representatives met in Edinburgh, Scotland to discuss the task of world missions. They firmly believed that the importance of the task required that they work together and sublimate denominational differences. One sign of the trouble to come came when the Anglican representatives insisted that there was no need to discuss missions in Latin America, since that region had already been evangelized - by the Catholic Church! The resulting International Missionary Council ultimately became one of the three organizational building blocks in the foundation of the World Council of Churches, whose disregard of Christian doctrine in favor of a radical political agenda is well-known.

In 1994, a group of evangelicals and Roman Catholics compiled and signed a document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, which was an affirmation of common goals and common faith between the two groups, while not ignoring their significant differences. The common goals included missionary efforts directed toward the unsaved and social activism on behalf of a conservative moral agenda. Disturbingly, the signers appeared quite willing to relegate the differences that gave birth to the Reformation to the realm of trivia, noting not only that such differences should not keep us from working together toward common goals, but also that they should not keep us from acknowledging one another as Christians. Furthermore, the document spoke out against any attempts to lure active members of one group into the other - i.e., the document labeled as sin and “sheep stealing” any attempt by evangelicals to evangelize active Catholics. In short, matters such as *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* were treated as matters not essential, either to the

possession or the propagation of the faith. That such things were done in the service of a conservative moral agenda rather than a liberal political one is no excuse. The document compromises the essence of the Gospel by acknowledging as legitimate what Paul in Galatians called “another Gospel.” Again, the siren song of present experience drowns out the voice of sound teaching, and the evangelical church goes down the same road to ruin traveled by its liberal predecessors three-quarters of a century ago.

As noted before, fidelity to the teachings of Scripture is the only solution for such deviations by seekers after present experience. The task of the Church is not to make people comfortable by dictating every detail of their lives, exalting their emotions in worship, or changing society through moral activism. Authority, beauty, and unity are legitimate biblical goals, but not when sought at the expense of scriptural truth. *Sola scriptura* must continue to be the basis for the Church today if it is to avoid the mistakes of the past and those made by so many in the present.



## COMBATING THE CULTURE XI

### The Decline of Missions

As the thought of the Church affects its practice, so the thought of the Church affects its mission. It should come as no surprise, then, that the impact of modernity on the Church should influence the missionary endeavor as well.

#### LIBERALISM AND MISSIONS

We have seen several times already how the impact of modernity on the evangelical Church echoes the effects of the liberalism against which evangelicals have fought for so long. It would be helpful, then, for us to look at the effects of liberalism on missions, since we seem to be headed in the same direction, though by a different path.

We talked last week about the 1910 Edinburgh meeting that led to the formation of the International Missionary Council, one of the parent bodies of the World Council of Churches. The initial reluctance to pursue missionary endeavors in Catholic Latin America was followed by a redefinition of the work of missions, largely in terms of social and later political action. The theological weakening of the WCC was epitomized by the universalism that entered through the influence of neo-orthodoxy in the thirties. Universalism removed the afterlife as a motivation for missions, leaving only the concerns of this life. Drives for world peace soon gave way to a radical leftist political agenda. Ironically, a part of this agenda involved the relegation of true missionary work to the status of a positive evil. After all, if everyone is covered by the love of God, to attempt to change the religious beliefs of another person is not only unnecessary, but a vicious act of cultural imperialism (e.g., the call for a missionary moratorium in the seventies). It is at this very point that the impact of modern culture intersects with the impact of liberalism on the Church half a century ago.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

The characteristic relativism of modern culture undermines the sense of value in all areas of life, not only moral, but religious and cultural as well. If nothing is ultimately true (except the truth that nothing is ultimately true), then one religion is as good as another (though all are to one degree or another superstitious and unscientific, thus pernicious). If Christianity is not in any ultimate sense true, then to attempt to spread its teachings is intolerant - the unpardonable sin of our age.

What does this do to the missionary endeavor of the Church? For one thing, it lowers the status of missionaries, who at one time were heroes who sacrificed their homes and comforts for the noble purpose of spreading the Gospel. Now, they are deluded fools attempting to impose their benighted superstitions on the noble cultures of others. Thus missionaries, like pastors, have suffered an enormous decline in social esteem in our age.

The desire to cooperate in order to achieve worthy social goals has also contributed to the decline of missions. As noted last week, cooperation with Catholics in pursuit of a conservative political and social agenda has brought into question the legitimacy of evangelistic and church-

planting efforts in primarily Catholic countries. The prominence of the social agenda has also caused evangelism to be put on the back burner on the priority list of many churches and missionary groups.

## THE UNREASONABLENESS OF COMMITMENT

Ours is not a culture of commitment. The extreme individualism of the age produces lives that are driven by self-gratification and the search for the fulfillment of felt needs. The impact of such thinking on missions has been drastic, of course. People who think more of their own needs than the needs of others are unlikely to tolerate the sacrifice required of missionaries for very long. Add to this the inherent instability and short attention spans of modern Americans, and the result is a serious decline in the number and quality of career missionaries. Instead, short-term missions has become the recent fad. Thousands of teenagers raise huge amounts of money in order to spend a week or two building latrines in some Third World country. While the service in itself may be valuable and the kids may learn some important lessons, it all too often serves as a vaccination. In the same way that a vaccination prevents disease by introducing a small and harmless amount of the infection into the body, so often short-term missions trips, rather than whetting the students' appetites for service, instead convince them that they have done their missionary duty and need consider the matter no further.

On a higher level, mission boards are finding it increasingly hard to recruit career missionaries. Instead, they find that people are willing to sign on for a year or two, but will not commit themselves for the long term. Missionaries like those we support are becoming increasingly rare, and few from the younger generation are stepping forward to replace them.

It is only fair to note that one factor in the changes that have occurred in the area of missions is the success that the missionary endeavor has had over the years. To a large extent, the Word of God has penetrated to the four corners of the world. Some of the fastest-growing churches in the world today are to be found in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, though one may legitimately question the theological soundness of many such churches; the spread of Islam, of course, has at the same time made many parts of the world for all practical purposes inaccessible to missionaries. At the same time, Europe has become a mission field where few attend church and even fewer really know the Gospel, though they are sure they know enough about it to conclude that they have no interest in it. America, of course, is rapidly moving in the same direction, despite church attendance figures that are far higher than most. But to suggest that because the Gospel has penetrated almost every country of the world means that each nation may now deal with its own evangelistic concerns ignores the universal nature of the Church. While evangelical churches throughout the world should deal with one another as partners in the Gospel, political boundaries do not mean that we should confine ourselves to the needs of people in our own culture.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE XII

### Pluralism

It is a self-evident truth that evangelical Christians in America live in a pluralistic society, yet that fact tends to be a matter of ongoing discomfort to many. What changes has modernity wrought in making society more pluralistic? What consequences does this have for Christians and their churches? How should we best operate within a pluralistic context?

#### THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA

One often hears people long for the good old days when America was founded as a Christian nation. The reality was quite different from the picture that is often painted, however. Though most of the early leaders of our country came from a nominally Christian background (i.e., they were not Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or even Catholics, though many were Deists and Unitarians), they very deliberately constructed a pluralistic society, at least in the sense that it was to have no state church like the nations of Europe (it is worth noting that a national church was the *only* thing of a religious nature the First Amendment was designed to prohibit). Churches were thus intended to function without governmental support or interference, while the government would operate without official religious involvement, though *with* the involvement of religious people.

#### THE REALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN CONSENSUS

In a sense, the Founding Fathers were operating on borrowed capital. Christianity provided the basis for the concept of the worth of the individual that undergirded democracy. The Founding Fathers understood this, but assumed that basis rather than explicating it specifically. The truths that today are widely questioned in society, such as the reality of God as Creator and the reality of sin in man, were then considered common knowledge that no intelligent man would dispute. In addition, the basic moral code promulgated by Scripture was assumed and agreed to be necessary for the order of society. The Christian consensus came, then, not from the fact that all the early leaders were Christians, but from the fact that the truths of Christianity served as the foundation for American society and were widely accepted, even by those who were not believers.

#### THE BREAKDOWN OF THE CHRISTIAN CONSENSUS

How did this general agreement rooted in the teachings of Christianity disappear? There were several factors involved in the loss of the foundation without which a democratic society cannot function. Among these, of course, were the growing emphases on secularism and relativism that we have already discussed often in this course. Both denied, first the importance, then the truth, of the building blocks of the Christian consensus. The result was that what was once believed by all has come to be denied by most, though few understand the necessity of biblical truth for the functioning of democracy.

The very success of the American experiment also contributed to the destruction of its foundations. People flocked to America from all over the world, seeking freedom, wealth, and opportunity. For many years, immigrants recognized that the fastest road to success was assimilation, and so many became part of the Christian consensus rather than diluting it. It helped,

of course, that many of the early immigrants were at least nominally Christian, though the fear generated by waves of Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Eastern Europe fell little short of hysteria in some sectors of the population. These people, while practicing a very different form of Christianity, shared its basic beliefs and values. Asian immigrants, while in many cases retaining their own practices and beliefs, did not aggressively attempt to undermine the accepted culture, but sought to operate within it. Jews have been somewhat more aggressive, and in recent years Muslims have been the most aggressive of all in demanding recognition for their practices. Yet it is not primarily from the outside that the foundations of our society have been undermined, but from within.

Perhaps the most important single factor in the collapse of the Christian consensus, however, was the advent and triumph of the theory of evolution. Nothing has done more in the last century and a half to undermine the basis for human dignity and the general acceptance of the basic biblical truths enumerated above. After all, if man is no more than an animal, there can be no such thing as human dignity or intrinsic worth; if there is no God who created the universe and ourselves, then there are no standards upon which a society may be built and subsequently stand. As a result, we have arrived at a position in which the old standards have been rejected, no one can agree about what the new ones should be, and the variety of opinions has convinced most that no such universally acknowledged standard can or should exist.

#### CHRISTIAN LIVING IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

All the moaning and groaning over the loss of the Christian consensus misses a fundamental truth, however, and that is that Christianity has always been most successful in a pluralistic society rather than a monistic one. A Christian consensus, whether in Rome, Geneva, or Massachusetts Bay, has tended to foster nominalism, because people take for granted what everyone believes. Worse yet, human nature often prefers to *question* what everyone believes. The result is that Christian societies tend to be self-defeating and self-destructive.

On the other hand, the greatest triumphs of the Church have occurred in pluralistic societies, such as the Roman Empire of the first century. In order for Christianity to triumph, it must be recognized as *different*. The truth of God's Word and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit tend to be marginalized when everyone assumes them, but they stand out in bold relief in contrast to the foolishness of paganism, whether ancient or modern. Consequently, Christians today should not be discouraged by the fact that all around them deny the truth. It is often better to have the truth denied overtly rather than covertly. We merely need to remain faithful and wait for what God is going to do next to glorify Himself in the darkness of this present generation.

## COMBATING THE CULTURE XIII

### The Naked Public Square

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the foolish ruler is duped by a clever tailor into parading before his people without a stitch of clothing on his body. He believes that what he is wearing is visible only to the wise, and is embarrassed to admit that he sees nothing at all when looking at the "suit" the tailor has fashioned for him. His people, of course, are equally reticent to admit their inability to see the clothes until a small boy cries out the truth that all have been afraid to speak.

Modern culture, like the emperor in the tale, is naked in public - stripped of all values and standards that make culture meaningful and worthwhile. The irony is that, while the emperor was embarrassed to admit his condition for fear of being thought a fool, modern man boasts of his nakedness as if it were a virtue and scorns those who foolishly insist on wearing clothing. What are the consequences for Christians of living in such a society?

### ESTABLISHMENT AND DISESTABLISHMENT

As we noted in passing last week, the United States was founded on a radical new proposition - that there would be no state church, thus allowing all churches to function without aid or interference from the federal government. As long as the Christian consensus held, however, biblical principles of morality continued to be generally acknowledged and Christian practices were widely recognized as the norm for social behavior.

Jefferson's "wall of separation" between church and state (a phrase, by the way, which is *not* found in the Constitution) has become today, however, a barrier used to exclude from public life all forms of religious and moral discourse. The authors of the Bill of Rights surely never envisioned a day when the First Amendment would be used to proscribe the advocacy of religion over irreligion or morality over immorality. Yet this is precisely what is happening today. Public schools may not include prayers in the daily routine lest an atheist or two be offended at the mention of deity. Towns may not display creches in the public square if so much as a single citizen protests and enlists the support of the ACLU (the same approach was behind the famous Scopes Trial in 1925). Opponents of abortion are silenced on the ground that their views are based upon religious teachings, as are those who dare to suggest that homosexuality and sex outside marriage are actually immoral.

Disestablishment has thus led, not to religious toleration (its putative goal), but to intolerance of religion. Those who have convictions and seek to act upon them are systematically excluded from public life, either by ridicule or by statute. The public square from which the creche has been removed is naked indeed, since no values are put forth to replace those that have been rejected. All that remains are materialism, hedonism, and pragmatism - live for the moment, do what feels good, whatever works for you . . . .

### A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

All of this puts the Church in an unusual position, at least with respect to Western culture - on the outside looking in. Under such circumstances, the Church has three alternatives. The first

is accommodation - giving in to the prevailing culture and adapting Christian belief and practice accordingly. As we have seen throughout this course, far too many today, even in the evangelical world, are following this route. The inevitable result is not only the demise of such churches as agents of God's Kingdom, but the irrelevancy of the Church in modern society.

The second possible alternative is isolationism - the path taken by many fundamentalists in the years after the rise of liberalism and the victory of secularism. The "lifeboat mentality" may help perpetuate Christian values in the churches and families of those involved, but tends to produce legalism and eccentricity. We should also note that such an approach renders the Church almost as irrelevant to the society at large as does the route of accommodation. While it remains an alternative, unlike those who accommodate, it is a quiet alternative, existing on the fringes of society while having little impact, except on the occasional individual who is dragged into the lifeboat.

The third, and certainly most biblical, alternative is for the Church to serve in the role of prophet to the ungodly kings of modernity. Elijah held no official position in Ahab's court, but he made his voice heard nonetheless. He was hated and pursued by those in power who wished to silence him, but he had an impact, even on those who despised everything he stood for. This is the proper role of the Church in a secular society. It should not seek to seize the reins of power, nor should it assimilate itself so it is indistinguishable from the world, nor should it hide itself away in some corner, hoping to be left alone while saving as many as possible within its reach. Instead, the Church must speak with a clear voice the truth of God without apologizing for its message or its source. God's Word is true and it is powerful. Prevailing values, or lack thereof, cannot change those simple facts. We should note, of course, that the task of an Elijah can be a discouraging one. The prophets knew what it was like to speak and have no one listen. But the fact remains that God is doing His work, and will not be foiled by the forces of modernity any more than He was by the powers of the ancient world. Furthermore, He will use those who are faithful to His Word in accomplishing His work.

## FULFILLING THE CULTURAL MANDATE

The other important response required of Christians in this modern secular age is to continue to subdue the Creation for the glory of God. This means that, in whatever realm of society a Christian may find himself, he must live in that environment in a way that displays and implements the teachings of Scripture and the values of righteousness. Professions like politics, law, and entertainment and the media may be dirty businesses, but they will only get dirtier without Christian influence. Wherever the Christian is - in his neighborhood, on the job, in public forums of all kinds - he must be a Christian, visibly and audibly, so that the work of God in the world may advance in the face of the forces of evil that surround us on all sides.