

Lesson One: Cultural Trends

Christians have always faced 'cultural dilemmas': How can we influence the culture without being improperly influenced by it? Is our culture getting worse? What, if anything, should we, as Christians, do about it?

Christianity in the Culture

Despite the fact that this country was founded on Christian principles, Christians are rapidly becoming second-class citizens. Practically every portrayal of a Christian in the popular culture (for example, in movies or television) is that we are weak, hypocritical, even stupid! Yet, at the same time spirituality seems to remain popular; think of the influence of spiritualists like Shirley MacLaine and Depak Chopra. How is it that Christians have become marginalized, yet spiritualists can sell thousands of books proclaiming outlandish 'wisdom'?

Think for a moment how Christians are generally portrayed in the popular culture. What image does the general culture have when they think of Christians such as Tammy Faye Baker, Jerry Falwell, or even Ned Flanders?

Many of us grew up with a Christian background, even if we did not grow up in Christian homes. Most people knew why Easter and Christmas are important, and what words such as 'born again' and 'sin' meant. But now many of these words and concepts are like a foreign language to many. Or worse, they are misunderstood and despised. Apparently, the chasm between Christianity and the culture is getting wider.

How did we get to this position? One consideration is that we have let the culture advance without us, in the name of 'religion'. From about the 19th Century on, Christianity began to divorce the 'head' from the 'heart'. Technology arose, and the Church was usually the first to condemn it. We stayed home during the advances in movies, music, and academia. The culture evolved, and the Church stayed behind, resulting in a form of withdrawal (also known as Fundamentalism).

Thinking Points

Is Christianity a 'religion'?

Does the average non-Christian often meet a 'thinking Christian'?

But a complete and proper Christian maturity must balance the head and the heart. We live as a whole person; if we shut off either the head or the heart we are incomplete as designed. Therefore, the Church must minister to the whole person. Jesus provided for us the ultimate example, showing both compassion and intellect, and requiring it of us:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Matthew 22:40

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Cogito, Ergo Credo: I Think, Therefore I Believe!

Cultural Trends

Clearly, even though we all had a common cultural ‘baseline’, we can see more and more every day that we are separating into different worlds. Christians seem foreign to non-Christians, and vice-versa. But, we must learn how people think in order to understand what they are thinking, and how to talk their language so that we can help them understand Christian concepts.

Postmodernism: With the enlightenment, the culture dragged itself out of the confines of the Church. Instead of looking to history for wisdom, we started to look forward for our answers, and placed faith in ourselves to solve the world’s problems (modernism). We believed that if mankind was sincere and good and used gifts appropriately, we could all come to the same conclusions. But this clearly failed. The great disappointment of the enlightenment and of man’s “potential” was World War I. Faith in mankind to do the ‘right thing’ was destroyed.

Postmodernism

“I have my Truth, and you have yours.”

Postmodernism then emerged when we came to the conclusion that there is no ‘right thing’. It advances the claim that we may all come to different but equal conclusions. No one is ‘wrong’ because there is nothing that is ‘true’. Diversity turns into multiculturalism, and all outlooks are considered equally valid.

With this thinking, clearly those in the past who claimed to have the answers were ‘wrong’. Anathema to Postmodernism is ‘intolerance’. Its weapon is equivocation. Truth is relative. No one is right, or wrong.

Secularism: Postmodernism has enabled the establishment of institutionalized secularism – the belief that life can or should be lived without religion, or at least separated from religion. The most obvious example is the concept of a “Wall of separation between Church and State.” Where did this originate? The Bible? The Constitution of the United States? This belief causes people, even Christians, to compartmentalize their life—a ‘Christian’ part and a ‘secular’ part. However, for the Christian, there is no such thing as secular. For the Christian, EVERY thought is taken captive (2 Cor 10:5). There is no aspect of life that is not under the authority of Christ.

Secularism

Look in your Bible’s concordance for the word ‘Secular’. You will not find it!

Secular Humanism: Combine Secularism with Postmodernism and you get Secular Humanism. With Secular Humanism, there is no God to appeal to—we must solve all our problems ourselves. A person’s focus is inward, toward ourselves and our feelings and needs. A Secular Humanist places his trust in himself and his blame on others. Secular Humanism is a religion; it has a creed, and has ‘certified Humanist Counselors’ who enjoy the legal status of ordained priests and pastors. It has been recognized as a ‘religion’ by the Supreme Court ([Torcaso v. Watkins](#)) and as a reason for Conscientious Objector status ([Daniel Seeger](#)).

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Consumerism: But what does one have to look forward to if there is no belief in an afterlife, and that all hope relies on one's abilities? With this outlook on life, we resort to attempting to satisfy our animal cravings. We live to consume, and become a society of consumers who live for the day with reckless abandon.

John Stackhouse Jr. proposes the following salient results of this type of culture:

1. We are no longer identified by what we do. We are what we want. We cocoon in our houses, we leave others alone for fear of offending.
2. We become the judge of what is good and desirable. 'Choice' becomes the mantra of the consumer.
3. At the macro level, the market will drive what is acceptable for goods and law.
4. I am at the center of the universe, and I alone will determine value, for I am a market maker.
5. Religion is a choice, and I must choose from the plethora of 'religions' to find the one that fits me and my desires best.

Spirituality: Yet, we find ourselves consistently unsatisfied. A nice car leads to the desire for a nicer car. We never gain our dream job, or we get sick before we accumulate everything we think we 'need'. But whatever we gain eventually fades or dies. These great disappointments point us back to our spiritual needs – our needs to make sense of things in the world. Yet, if we have dissolved the existence of Truth via a tacit belief in Postmodernism, we must make up our own Truth. Hence the success of the 'human potential' spirituality movement, ala Shirley MacLaine and Deepak Chopra. At best, a seeker may go "Church shopping", looking for a Church that fulfills their personal needs.

The Effect on the Christian Church – and What We Must Do

People are looking for many means to escape—movies, hero worship, sex, money, power, etc. Interestingly, most people in America think they are Christians (70% in the last census). Yet, Christianity is popular to ridicule and limit. When we do attempt to witness, we are seen as a threat or as an object of ridicule. This results in very little discourse. We may lose confidence to speak the Truth in public, and resort to a strictly 'personal' Christianity. Some may tend to separate from the culture or attempt to force certain cultural behaviors via legislation (Fundamentalism). Some may tend to water down Orthodoxy in order to accommodate the culture's prevalent beliefs (Liberalism). Some look for ways to adapt a consistent and historical message to make it relevant to a changing culture (Evangelicalism).

We must be resolved! These issues we are seeing in the culture and its effect on the Church are NOT NEW! Our mission has always been, and still is, to bring the Kingdom of God to our hurting world. To do this we must influence (create) culture, custom, law, and the arts (affecting the 'whole' person.) The Truth does not change—the people do. Like Paul, we must learn to be 'all things to all people' in order to reach a few.

We must mature our gifts and allow them to be used. We must be mature in our Faith, the individual (personal) and corporate (Church) gifts must be accepted and developed. We cannot imitate the culture, we need to create it—individually. Christianity must not only provide a

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'spiritual experience' - this only leads to emotionally based decisions. We must also emphasize the mind and the intellectual needs of the whole person.

We can highlight the unreasonableness of non-Christian worldviews, while contrasting with the eminently reasonable and evidential Christian faith. We must be ready to discern when to assist the Holy Spirit in His work of redemption. We must be confident in our faith, and present the true loving, caring, and full experience of a life committed to Jesus.

Thinking Points

Should Christians be involved in 'secular' endeavors?

Should Christians place their faith in politics?

Have I retreated from the culture, caved to it, or do I want to help the seekers?

Am I confident in my Christian Faith?

What are MY gifts that I am expected to use? How can I mature them?

Lesson Summary

We must understand that non-believers 'think' differently than believers

We must learn to understand the culture, so that we can influence the culture

We must not accept the 'rules of engagement' placed upon us by the culture, but we must understand how the culture views us and our Christianity

We must learn to have a confident faith in Jesus

Next Lesson: How Apologetics Equips The Evangelistic Christian for Service In The Culture

Resources:

[A New Religious America: How A 'Christian Country' Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation](#); Diana L. Eck; Harper Press; 2001

[The Gospel and the American Dream](#); Bruce L. Shelley; Multnomah Press; 1989

[Distorted Truth – What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Battle for the Mind](#); Richard Mouw; Harper and Row; 1989

www.Wallbuilders.com History from the Christian perspective

www.Barna.org Christian pollster analyzing religious trends in America