

The Church as Cultural Thermostat

A White Paper

Robert A. Pearle, DMin.

June 1, 2021

THE CHURCH AS CULTURAL THERMOSTAT

T. S. Elliot writing as a cultural critic stated, “The problem of leading a Christian life in a non-Christian society is now very present to us and it is a very different problem from that of the accommodation between an Established church and dissenters. . . . And as for the Christian who is not conscious of his dilemma – and he is in the majority – he is becoming more and more de-Christianized by all sorts of unconscious pressure: paganism holds all the most valuable advertising space.”¹ This is the postmodern dilemma for the present day Christian.

Many believers erroneously divide their worldview into the secular and the sacred, the spiritual and the worldly. What is the spiritual or sacred is more personal and private and really has no place in the public square. The secular or worldly view is open to all and is what should drive public policy in the culture. The two views are not to mix in their expression within the culture. This segregated worldview is the reason some preachers and church members feel it inappropriate for pastors to encroach that invisible, but clearly understood line, between that dichotomy of the sacred and secular.

This distorted reasoning created other dilemmas for committed believers serving in their churches and in particular the pastors of those churches. Where is the “invisible line” of separation to be drawn? Too many of these issues require meticulous discernment and calls for corrective actions otherwise subtle wrongs can become mainstream. This secular/sacred approach seems to blur the focus of the morality, or lack thereof, concerning some secular

1. T. S. Elliot, *Christianity & Culture* (San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1967), 17-18.

cultural issues. Does the pastor address the morality of these issues? If so, is he crossing that invisible line and encroaching into the secular or political?

The history of the Nazi regime and the German church point out this predicament historically. Many Germans, including Christians, chose to do nothing to resist Hitler and remain silent. The church and the state are separate many believed, therefore addressing the political situation was not the role of the church. The business of the church is spiritual. The function of government is political.

What role, if any, is faith to play in the political realm? Is the secular state totally off limits to be addressed by the church? There are two general reactions to this question. One is to escape from culture and withdraw into the safety of the church trying to avoid the darkness. The other is to ignore the issues altogether and simply focus on evangelism. Both fall far short from a biblically responsible position.

The heart of the Christian gospel is Christ came into the world to save sinners. Christ immersed Himself into the culture. The incarnation itself reveals a God who is active in this world. Christ knowing He was going to be betrayed, arrested, and crucified did not flee to the mountains to hide. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed for strength as He surrendered to the will of God. His life and death was a testimony engaging the culture and endeavoring to redeem it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and founding member of the Confessing Church came to realize the role faith played in relation to culture. Writing from Tegel prison on July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote, "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy

life, or something like it . . . I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith."²

Bonhoeffer realized Christianity's role in the secular world and organized resistance to the Nazi regime. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he coined the term "cheap grace" which described members of Protestant churches who viewed grace as an unlimited offer of forgiveness to cover their ethical permissiveness. (This is seen today under the guise of "once saved always saved." Even though eternal security is a valid biblical truth it is not a license to sin).

Bonhoeffer was involved in a plot to overthrow Hitler which led to his imprisonment and execution. He was hanged at Flossenburg on April 9, 1945, only days before the American liberation of the POW camp. It would be possible to summarize Bonhoeffer's theological view of culture thusly, "We are Christians, and we are Germans; therefore we are responsible for Germany."³

The reference to "culture" demands a definition for clear understanding. The word "culture" is derived from a French term, which in turn is derived from the Latin *colere* which means "to tend to the earth and grow." It is used absolutely as the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners; the intellectual side of civilization. "Cult" and "culture" are related only as having the same root stem. "Cult" came into English from the French *culte* which basically means "worship or reverential homage or respect." Its only

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 293-94.

3. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 176-188.

connection to culture is the cultivation of reverence.⁴ A general working definition for culture could be “culture is created when humans interact with each other and our participation helps to create it.”

Culture and society must not be confused although they are often used interchangeably. Society is where an association of individuals live and interact with each other.⁵ Culture is the way of life of these people, their values, customs, and traditions. Can the culture within a society be changed? Can Christians shape culture? Should it even be tried?

The early church eventually transformed the culture of Rome. In those times life was generally seen as cheap and expendable. Women and children had little or no rights. Women who did not want their babies sold them into slavery or tossed them on the dung heap and left them to die or be eaten by dogs. Christians were thrown into the Colosseum to feed the lions as entertainment for the masses. Christians were hated and unjustly blamed for many things but they overcame and transformed Rome.

Earnest Gordon’s gripping story of his life as a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp called Chungkai is a moving example of how Christians can shape a culture even in the most horrendous and unimaginable circumstances. Surrounded by inconceivable inhumane conditions, prisoners adapted a mindset of “each man for himself,” a survival of the fittest. Death meant nothing and life a little more. Gordon wrote: “Death called to us from every direction. It was in the air we breathed, the food we ate, the things we talked about. The

4. See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

5. *ibid*

rhythm of death obsessed us with its beat – a beat so regular, so pervasive, so inescapable that it made Chungkai a place of shadows in the dark valley.”⁶

Two events transformed the prison camp. The first was a Christian prisoner, who in the name of Christ, nursed his bunkmate from the brink of death by offering his food to the sick man and tending to him until recovery. However, the one helping did not survive. The second event was when a guard threatened to kill prisoners until one of them confessed to stealing a shovel. Unpredictably, a Christian stepped forward to confess he took the shovel to spare other men. The guard killed the Christian by clubbing him to death. The prisoners watch helplessly. Another recount of the shovels revealed no shovel was actually missing.

The conditions in the camp had not changed but the culture had changed. Gordon wrote:

Death was still with us – no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life and those that made for death. Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence, laziness, and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity, and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. There were the gifts of God to men.⁷

History has demonstrated that Christianity has had a positive influence on society and culture. Yet not everyone in this postmodern age agrees that the role of faith is still necessary to advance our culture. Postmodernists believe that the scientific advances mankind has made in medicine and technology (reason) has made faith (religion) outdated. Science has now emerged as the new faith leading a cultural shift in the West. The critical role the church has played in the development of Western culture has been abandoned. Can Western culture

6. Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars: A True Story about the Will to Survive and the Courage to Forgive* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 72.

7. Gordon, *To End All Wars*, 105-6.

survive when the role of faith has been discarded? Is the culture committing suicide by rejecting an element that made it great?

Samuel Huntington contends that Western civilization is in the “fight for its life.” He writes:

The overriding lesson of the history of civilizations, however, is that many things are probable but nothing is inevitable. Civilizations can and have reformed and renewed themselves. The central issue for the West is whether, quite apart from any external challenges, it is capable of stopping and reversing the internal processes of decay. Can the West renew itself or will sustained internal rot simply accelerate its end and/or subordination to other economically and demographically more dynamic civilizations?⁸

Even her fiercest critics will confess that Christianity has played a vital role in the development of Western culture. Christian involvement in social action has produced a culture of human flourishing and produced a well-ordered and safe society. Tragically, when Christian involvement in culture is abandoned and left to secular forces alone, the culture begins to denigrate and destroy itself. This truth can be clearly illustrated by comparing and contrasting the American Revolution and the French Revolution with their philosophical understandings that fueled each uprising.

Each generation must realize the importance of Christian engagement in culture. To forsake that divine responsibility is to surrender to secular forces that will undermine the human condition. Secularization strips away the spiritual aspects of life resulting in a loss of authentic meaning and purpose. How is the believer to respond when secular forces endeavor to squash faith? What actions should Christians take to contest secularization and advance the human condition?

8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 303.

Christians must first determine their mission. Is the mission of the church simply sharing the Gospel or should the whole council of God be made to bear on the totality of life? Are there sociological implications of the Gospel that would be relevant to the public square? The temptation is to play it safe and keep faith private whether that is in the home or church. The enemies of the faith would very much like that to happen.

Christians need to see their mission as “salt and light” in this world. When believers shelter their faith they are losing their saltiness and covering their light. Jesus used these two metaphors for a reason. Salt penetrates and light exposes. This is the biblical undertaking of believers. Not only are they to evangelize but they have a responsibility to actively live their faith in this world and make a difference. Too many Christians see their service to the Lord as only attending church services regularly, which some surveys reveal that is once a month.

The Word of God is relevant to all matters of faith and practice. This means that Christians need to develop a consistent biblical worldview. Many have a worldview but it is not biblical. Others have a worldview that is not consistent. Pollster George Barna released research that states, “that while 51% of American adults said they have a biblical worldview, only 6% of American adults actually hold this worldview.”⁹

Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, said, “Christians have a duty to stand against the prevailing cultural tides and proclaim God’s truth to a dark and wandering world. But before you stand you need solid ground.”¹⁰

9. Michael Gryboski, “Only 6% of Americans have a ‘biblical worldview,’ research from George Barna finds,” *The Christian Post* (May 26, 2021): <https://www.christianpost.com/news/only-6-of-americans-have-a-biblical-worldview-survey.html>.

10. *ibid*

J. Gresham Machen, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and a founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, said:

The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God.¹¹

The second action believers should take is to discover and discern the issues. Not all cultural issues are the same. Some issues carry greater moral weight than others. The issue of abortion does not carry the same weight as the issue of immigration. Can a male with an XY chromosome makeup really be a female and visa versa? Though genitalia may be altered or changed through surgery does that change the chromosomal mapping?

These and other cultural issues should be addressed by believers but they need to take them seriously. Christians cannot ignore these issues thinking they are passing fads. There are real life implications at the core of these matters that are destroying the foundations of society. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

To understand reality is not the same as to know about outward events. It is to perceive the essential nature of things. The best-informed man is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that precisely in the multiplicity of his knowledge he will lose sight of what is essential. But on the other hand, knowledge of an apparently trivial detail quite often makes it possible to see into the depth of things. And so the wise man will seek to acquire the best possible knowledge about events, but always without becoming dependent upon this knowledge. To recognize the significant in the factual is wisdom.¹²

11. Quoted in Jeff Myers, *Understanding the Culture: A Survey of Social Engagement* (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Ministries, 2017), 55-56.

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Goodreads*. Accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/119146-to-understand-reality-is-not-the-same-as-to-know>.

The third action Christians should take is to develop a biblical worldview and live it out consistently. Do not be deceived by the fallacy of the secular/sacred dichotomy. Everyone has a worldview whether it is realized or not. The secularists are propagating their destructive worldviews and through governmental policies or public intimidation cramming it down everyone's throat. This is a battle for the soul of the society. Developing a biblical worldview is not a new concept. Wallace B. Henley tells us:

Education in the early New England Colonies was usually a partnership between home and school. Worldview formation, while not recognized formally, was a major goal. The "Old Deluder Satan Act" aimed at teaching children to read and know the Bible so they would embrace the worldview described there, and sustain it, and moral boundaries, and not cross them. What was true then is still true. Old Testament Israel shows how spiritual-philosophical-social-cultural entropy pulls entire societies away from a healthy, transcendent understanding of themselves and the way they see the world with which they engage daily.¹³

"All truth is God's truth" is a statement attributed to St. Augustine although he did not say those exact words. In Book II, Chapter 18, of *On Christian Doctrine* he said, "Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master."¹⁴

Knowing God is a God of truth, the Christian should seek to live and apply that truth to the totality of life. All of life should be lived from a biblical perspective to honor the God of truth. Living out the will of God is the responsibility of all believers and will shape the

13. Wallace B. Henley, "The Battle of Worldview Education," *The Christian Post* (May 26, 2021): <https://www.christianpost.com/news/the-battle-of-worldview-education.html>.

14. Karl R. Heintz, "All Truth is God's Truth: Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book II," *Human Action and God*, Accessed May 26, 2021, <https://humanactionandgod.wordpress.com/2014/06/27>.

culture around them. This will give hope to the hopeless and will transform lives one by one thus collectively transforming culture.

Now is the time to stand up and speak up. Be courageous. Stand on truth. Resolve to bear witness to Christ, His gospel, and His kingdom. This will make a glorious impact on culture and ignite human flourishing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ascol, Tom and Longshore, Jared. *Strong and Courageous: Following Jesus Amid the Rise of America's New Religion*. Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2020.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Goodreads*, Accessed May 26, 2021. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/119146-to-understand-reality-is-not-the-same-as-to-know>.
- Buchanan, Patrick J. *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.
- De Gruchy, John., editor. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991.
- Eliot, T. S. *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. New York: Harcourt, 1976.
- Garber, Steven. *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*. Revised Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007.
- Gordon, Ernest. *To End All Wars: A True Story about the Will to Survive and the Courage to Forgive*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963.
- Gryboski, Michael. "Only 6% of Americans have a 'biblical worldview,' research from George Barna finds." *The Christian Post*, May 26, 2021. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/only-6-of-americans-have-a-biblical-worldview-survey.html>.
- Guinness, Os. *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012.
- Heintz, Karl R. "All Truth is God's Truth: Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book II." *Human Action and God*, June 27, 2014. <https://humanactionandgod.wordpress.com/2014/06/27>.
- Henley, Wallace B. "The Battle of Worldview Education." *The Christian Post*, May 26, 2021. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/the-battle-of-worldview-education.html>.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Lind, William S. and Marshner, William H. *Cultural Conservatism: Toward a New National Agenda*. Alexandria: Free Congress Research and Education Foundation, 1987.

- Lovin, Robin W. *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Mohler, Jr., R. Albert. *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking truth to a culture redefining sex, marriage, & the very meaning of right & wrong*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015.
- Mohler, Jr., R. Albert. *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2008.
- Myers, Jeff. *Understanding the Culture: A Survey of Social Engagement*. Manitou Springs: Summit Ministries, 2017.
- Schaeffer, Francis A. *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976.
- Shapiro, Ben. *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*. New York: Broadside Books, 2019.
- Stark, Rodney. *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006.
- Stonestreet, John and Kunkle, Brett. *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2017.
- Sutton, Jerry. *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008.