

Fulfilling Our Cultural Mandate

By Richard Land

Richard Niebuhr, the renowned Christian ethicist of the middle of the 20th Century, identified five types of Christian ethics. These types are Christ against culture, Christ above culture, Christ of culture, Christ transforming culture, and Christ and culture in paradox. Obviously, each of these types begins with a different presupposition about the way in which Christ relates to the culture. While it is possible to marshal biblical support for each type, the preponderance of biblical evidence supports the view that Christ desires to transform culture and that He calls the Church to engage the culture to achieve this end.

I. THE BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The Bible offers many examples of God's desire to transform human culture. One can look at the Old Testament prophets and see many examples. A casual glance may miss some of these examples, but a closer reading causes them to jump out of the pages of Scripture. Consider Jonah, a Hebrew prophet from Gath-Hepher, a small village about two miles north of modern-day Nazareth. Jonah had a very orthodox faith. He believed deeply in the sovereignty of God over all creation, the centrality of the Temple, and the righteousness and mercy of God.

It is obvious from reading the account of his ministry in the book of Jonah that Jonah was very comfortable living out his life in the secure environment of his own people. Yet God had something else for Jonah. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the godless, heathen, cruel Assyrians. These people were infamous for their cruelty toward conquered peoples. If anyone deserved God's wrath and His judgment, it was the Assyrians.

God called Jonah to "go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it" (Jon. 1:2). On the surface it appears that God was sending Jonah to Nineveh to tell the Assyrians that they were about to get what they deserved. But Jonah understood that God was offering the people of Nineveh an opportunity to avert this judgment. Jonah admits as much in his complaint to God in Jonah 4:2.

Fortunately for the people of Nineveh, everyone, including the king, took Jonah's message seriously. They repented of their sin, determined to change their ways, and called on God to relent (Jon. 3:5-10). Being a God of mercy, He did just that (Jon. 3:10).

Jonah's experience teaches us that God is concerned about how all people live, not just those who have professed faith in Him. Other evidence of God's concern for popular culture can be found as well. For example, John the Baptist confronted Herod at great personal risk. Herod had married the wife of his half-brother Philip, making him guilty of adultery. John's witness to the truth eventually cost him his life (Matt. 14:1-12). But for John, speaking the truth to the leadership of his day was more important than his own life.

II. THE BELIEVER'S ROLE IN CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Christians are the key to the transformation of the culture. As He prepared His disciples for their worldwide ministry, Jesus told them, “You are the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-16). This pronouncement includes a strong cultural mandate. Salt has two significant functions. It serves to prevent decay and it adds flavor.

Few substances work better than salt in preventing decay. Even today, a little warm salt water can heal many skin infections faster than antibacterial salves. However, salt can only perform this preservative function if it comes in contact with the decay. As long as it remains in the saltshaker, it will not disinfect or preserve anything. Jesus sent His disciples into the world to come in contact with the world so that their lives would serve as a witness to God’s saving and transforming grace. True to the nature of salt, their involvement in their culture could influence it and keep it from decay. And where they encountered decay, the salt of their witness and lives could penetrate and eliminate the decay. This is where the other function of salt comes in. Salt adds flavor to those things it touches. Without salt, many foods are almost too bland to enjoy. The analogy is obvious. The Christian brings a saltiness to the world that makes life more enjoyable. The Christian life and lifestyle leads to happier, healthier, more content people. It brings the blessing of God on any people (Prov. 14:34).

The other metaphor Jesus used in this passage was that of light. The Bible often characterizes the difference between evil and good with the symbolism of darkness and light. Paul instructed, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them (Eph. 5:11). If they are living faithfully, Christians carry this light with them wherever they go; it is evident to everyone around them. At some time, every faithful Christian hears someone say, “I’ve noticed something different about you.” These people are recognizing the light of the Christian life, which stands out in stark relief to the many destructive lifestyles and behaviors in the culture. And as Christians move out into the culture, they bring that light with them, exposing the decay of the ungodly culture.

God has not left Christians to their own devices in this culture-transforming ministry of being salt and light. He has provided us with many aids. Two indispensable aids are the Holy Spirit and the Bible. These equip and assist the Christian in his ministry of being salt and light.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would guide the Christian into all truth (John 16:13). We are not left to decide what pleases God; God Himself teaches us. Furthermore, we can count on the Holy Spirit to prepare the way and to confirm the witness of our lives to the world. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). This convicting work of the Spirit is undoubtedly principally evangelistic in intent, but there is no doubt, either, that the Spirit’s convicting work will illuminate lifestyle and cultural issues. After all, the clearest evidence of sin is found in one’s lifestyle and culture.

This brings us to another aid that God has provided for cultural engagement—the Bible. The Bible is God’s revealed will. One of its many crucial contributions to humanity is that it tells us exactly what kinds of lifestyle choices honor and dishonor God. Because of the Bible’s clear instructions on cultural issues, both by way of direct comment and by way of guiding principles, the Christian can engage the culture with truth, not merely with personal opinion. But the Bible isn’t only for Christians. All people will be held accountable to its standards. The Bible is a

public book; it is not kept behind sealed doors, for only the initiated to read and ponder. While the meaning of many of its deeper spiritual truths are beyond the understanding of those who have not experienced spiritual rebirth (1 Cor. 2:14), the Bible's clear enunciation of such concrete things as lifestyle, behavior, and thought-life are intelligible to anyone. For example, anyone who reads, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt. 7:19) knows that God does not condone greed.

Given these aids, it is obvious that Christians are in a unique position to understand the will of God for society and to live in a way that exemplifies godly living. However, there is more to being salt and light than living out the truth for people to see. We have seen that salt ends decay and light dispels darkness. Since Jesus called His disciples salt and light, He must have intended for us to do something about cultural decay and sin.

Of course, the most important thing we can do is evangelize. People converted by the Holy Spirit have an internal guide to direct them. If all people became Christians, the culture would certainly benefit. But there are two problems with this remedy for the culture. First, even converted people still sin, and no matter how hard the church works to make them disciples, some of them will still live self-willed lives. Second, all people are not going to accept Christ as Savior, and some of them are going to choose lifestyles and support a culture that does not honor God. That's the way of the sinful nature.

As salt and light, we must accept these realities and deal with them in the way that God has provided. Part of this involves political engagement. Some societies provide few means to address their nation's need for God-honoring laws, but in this country, Christians have an incredibly effective tool at their disposal. We have the right to vote. We live in a country that actually provides for the will of the people in the selection of the nation's leaders.

What we see in the examples of Jonah and John the Baptist is that God did not condemn government as an institution although His people spoke out against bad government. Paul tells us that God ordained government (Rom.13:1-2) for He knew that humanity would need to establish laws to guide life in a fallen world. Government is intended by God to promote good and punish evil (Rom.13:3-5). A government that promotes evil rather than good will contribute to the demise of the culture by issuing culture-destroying laws and a negative example. While it is certainly true that government cannot change the culture by itself, it is also true that it can encourage and assist cultural transformation by promoting good behavior and thought and by providing an atmosphere that encourages positive cultural engagement.

When government fails to fulfill its commission, God holds it accountable, and He calls on His people to engage with it. A society where people are given the responsibility to choose their leaders is accountable to God for the leadership they have. In the same way that a parent is responsible for the behavior of his children, so citizens in a democracy are responsible before God for the behavior of their leaders and the culture that results from that leadership, whether good or bad.

III. THE BENEFITS GAINED FROM CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Without Christian engagement in culture, our world would be a much more dismal place.

Whatever true Christian faith has touched in its 2000-year history, it has made better. It was Christians who were responsible for the rise of hospitals for the general public. Even today, the majority of the hospitals in the United States have a direct relationship to a Christian faith or can trace their beginnings to Christian concern for human well-being.

It was Christians who led the way to end the slave trade in the West. While we lament the terrible practice of the enslavement of other humans beings that took place in earlier centuries, and still exists in some parts of the world today, it is likely that we would still be living with slavery on a wide scale if it had not been for the tireless work of Christians. One of the most prominent of those Christians was William Wilberforce, a member of the British Parliament, who dedicated his life to the eradication of the slave trade in the British Empire . Imagine our own culture if Abraham Lincoln had not won the election as our nation's 16th President.

The Christian commitment to the sanctity of all human life has kept the debate regarding abortion alive through 30 years of legalized abortion in this country. Recent successes like the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act can be traced directly to the determination of Christians to engage the culture and the political process in order to protect the sanctity of every human life. This burden can be traced all the way back to the days of the Roman Empire, when Christians finally brought an end to the barbaric practice of casting unwanted babies onto festering trash heaps, where they either died from exposure, were carried off by wild animals, or enslaved.

CONCLUSION

Christian cultural engagement is a regular, normal part of Christian discipleship. It is part of what it means to be salt and light. It was the principled engagement of Christians in days gone by that laid the foundation for our nation's rich cultural heritage. It remains for Christians of this generation and every coming generation to continue to bring the whole gospel of Jesus Christ into the culture and to set forth the truth of God so that all of God's creation may bring glory to Him. In our land, this challenge includes the absolute imperative of Christian political engagement. God will hold us accountable if our failure to be involved directly in the selection of our leaders results in a culture that does not reflect God's values. This is part of what it means to be salt and light.