

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

JULY 2008

CHRIST, THE CHURCH AND CULTURE

Christ inaugurated his ministry in the Synagogue at Nazareth by quoting Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18, 19). By these words he announced his confrontation with a culture which was in conflict with God and had kept mankind enslaved since the beginning. In order to understand this conflict we should have a definition of what "culture" is. A noted twentieth century theologian, the late Richard Niebuhr, president of Elmhurst College and later professor of Yale Divinity School, in *Christ and Culture* wrote: "culture is the total process of human activity, that is, our total way of life." Webster defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterizes an institution or organization, a way of life shared by people in a place or time." Kenneth A Myers in his book *All God's Children And Blue Suede Shoes, Christians & Popular Culture* writes: "Any adequate definition of culture seems so encompassing as to include everything in human experience. Defining culture is not at all an easy task. We can easily come up with a dictionary definition, but such a definition tells us how to recognize the thing defined, but it doesn't tell us much about how it behaves." To understand how the culture of the world (inspired and ruled by Satan) behaves we have only to read about how it began in Genesis and see how it operated throughout the history of God's people in the Old Testament. It is in his ministry and in the life of the early church that we see how Jesus confronted the culture of the world and how the church dealt with it. To quote Niebuhr again: "Some have argued that Jesus ignored culture. Joseph Klausner writes, 'He did not come to enlarge his nation's knowledge, art, and culture, but to abolish even such culture as it possessed, bound up with religion.'"

Jesus confronted the culture of his day, not by attacking the systems of the world, but by destroying Satan's grip on culture. He did this not by a ministry of condemnation of a corrupt Roman system that held the people in political bondage, rather he directed his attention to the corrupt religious system that had long ago left the teachings and concepts of God's revealed law. Douglas D. Webster states in *Christian Living In A Pagan Culture*: "The Pharisees knew full well that the leeway extended to them under Roman policy could easily be curtailed if they no longer commanded the respect and authority of the general populace (John 11:47,48). What really disturbed them was Christ's power and authority, his revolutionary approach to the ceremonial law, and his constant association with the despised people of society". Jesus knew that if the world were to be changed it would be changed by the people of God, not by the people who were a part of the worldly system. Thus he taught that the people of God are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13,14), and he admonished them to "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:16).

This is echoed to the early church in the words of the Apostle Paul: "prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (culture, Ed.) among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Philippians 2:14-16). The answer to the corruptness and decaying of society was and still is to be found in the faithfulness of the church.

In his remarkable book *Idols for Destruction* Herbert Schlossberg asserted: "When a civilization turns idolatrous, its people are profoundly changed by that experience. In a kind of reverse sanctification, the idolater is transformed into the likeness of the object of his worship." Or as the Psalmist said: "Those who make idols will become like them, everyone who trusts in them" (Psalm 115:8). This in effect says that human conduct is ultimately governed by what society worships. This perhaps explains the decay and corruption we see all about us. Modern man has made money, power, leisure, sex and fashion his gods. These gods control his actions and lifestyle. Nancy Brewka Clark in *Faith In The Flesh, Secular Society's Preoccupation With Life* shows how true Schlossberg's words are. She says: "The contemporary interest in physical exercise is not simply a way of achieving or retaining health, but is a kind of secular religion. As churches empty, health clubs flourish, as traditional fervor wanes, attention to the body waxes. In other words, as the baby boomers approach middle age, a yearning toward perpetual youth flares up and denial of the biological takes the form of aerobics. Fitness is the new path to immortality. The pain of the workout is the new penance; the monk's hair shirt has been replaced by the modern's sweatshirt." The Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 3:18 states the reverse side of this coin in these words: "But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

The late Walt Kelley, creator and author of the comic strip "Pogo" had the little possum saying "We have met the enemy and he is us." Since Satan appears "as an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14), it is hard sometimes to recognize the enemy, especially since the wall between the modern church and modern culture is slowly disappearing. Satan, being a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44) operates in the realm of denial of the truth or in the realm of a lie. This being true, his operation must take place where the truth is found. Since Jesus is the truth (John. 14:6) then the truth is found in his body, the church. The most dangerous operation of Satan, then, is found in the church. After all he controls the culture of the world (I John 5:10), so the thrust of his activity is toward the church. What more effective way to do this than to infiltrate the church with the culture of the world and use it against itself thus making it its own worst enemy?

The church is called to be at peace with God and at war with the culture. Too often we are at war with God and at peace with the culture. This is nothing new. James, in one of the earliest writings of the early church speaks poignantly on this subject: (James 4:1-4): "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is it not the source of your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have, so you commit

murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

How many “contemporary, relationship above doctrine and obedience, let’s not offend our worldly but sincere seekers” preachers would lay such a message upon their “feeling-orientated, self-seeking, make me feel good about myself” church during the Sunday morning “let’s make sure we are being contemporary” worship service? (If you didn’t get all this, back up and read it again...slowly).

Note the source of quarrels and conflicts: “among you”. If we spent as much time and energy fighting “the good fight of faith” as we did fighting to make our church culturally accepted, the world would see a difference in the culture. James mentions their lusts, pleasures, friendship with the world and wrong motives. On top of this he points out their envious attitudes which had led to committing murder. It seems that all these things were “among them” which leads me to think this was a description of the church to which James wrote. It is also a good description of much we are seeing in the religious world today. The modern church is constantly surrendering, inch by inch, to the culture of modern secularism, resulting in deviant religion and worldly standards. This means it is guilty not only of spiritual adultery, but, as James points out, murder. Spiritual murder by killing both the spirit and witness the church should have before the culture of the world. Perhaps the saddest note in James’ writing is that they had made themselves enemies of God (ver.4). If the church becomes the enemy of God it becomes its own worst enemy. Pogo was right. We have met the enemy and he is us.

As believers the modern church has tended to measure success by the same standard as the culture of the world. Rather than living out the gospel before the world most Christians have patterned their lives after the world’s culture. We have forgotten the words of Paul to the church in Corinth: “God has chosen the foolish things of the world and the despised that He might nullify the things that are” (I Cor. 1:27,28). We see ourselves as more sophisticated than they, representatives of both the wisdom of our age and the wisdom of God. Far from being despised by our culture, we expect and often receive the praise of the culture. Paul’s instruction to them was to uphold the truth of God in every domain of life; marriage, money, the spiritual gifts, attitude toward unbelievers, harmony between believers, worship and discipline. David W Bercot in *Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up* notes that “early Christianity was a revolution that swept through the ancient world like fire through dry timber. It was a countercultural movement that challenged the pivotal institutions of Roman society. As Tertullian wrote: ‘Our contest lies against the institutions of our ancestors, against the authority of tradition, against man-made laws, against the reasonings of the worldly wise, against antiquity, and against customs.’ But the relationship of the early Christians to their culture is not simply a matter of history. It is something that should deeply concern the church today. For most of the cultural issues facing twentieth-century Christians are the very same issues that faced the early church. However, our response to these issues has generally

been quite different than theirs.” After dealing with the issues the early church faced, such as abortion, divorce, pornography, high fashion and low modesty and entertainment, he then asks “Why did they succeed where we often fail?” He gives three primary reasons: “1. the supportive role of the church; 2. the message of the cross; (I would add the message of the resurrection and ascension to this point) and 3. the belief that obedience was a joint venture between man and God.” I want to elaborate on these three points. 1. The supportive role of the church: It is the responsibility of the church to give sound teaching and encouragement to its members in the struggle to become a pure community. The passages dealing with the Elders and their responsibilities point out the fact that they were to shepherd the flock and provide correct teaching and spiritual counseling to the members. Their concern was the spiritual well being of the congregation. The church was to “each regard one another as more important than himself” and to “not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others” (Phil. 2:3,4). This is quite a contrast with the attitude today with so much emphasis on entertainment and relevancy to the neglect of the teaching of the word of God. 2. The message of the cross, the resurrection and ascension: The crucified Christ means God has dealt with our sin, but sin is a foreign word in many religious circles today, and repentance is seldom the subject of today’s sermons. The message of the cross meant suffering. Jesus told his disciples “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:38,39). Very few Christians in America today have any concept of what it means to suffer as a Christian. (I Pet. 4:16). The resurrection and ascension, usually mentioned once a year at Easter, mean little to the average Christian. Few Christians know that “we have a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle” (Heb. 8:1,2), which means Christ’s real ministry began when he ascended. His earthly ministry was simply preparatory to his heavenly ministry. This says the church is to carry on the work Christ “began to do and teach until the day he was taken up” (Acts 1:1,2). 3. The belief that obedience was a joint venture between man and God: The church is admonished to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (Eph. 6:10). We cannot in any way even serve God much less accomplish His task as a church without His help. There is an infinite supply of power available from God. He has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph 1:3), and has “in His divine power granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (II Pet. 1:3). With all this going for us why do so many churches depend so much upon the culture of the world as their method of operation?

Instead of exposing and standing against the sins of our culture, we promote and serve their idols and try to use them to appeal to those who need most to be set free from them. A quote from Isaiah 30:9-11 is as apt today as it ever was: “For this is a rebellious people, false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord. Who say to the seers, ‘you must not see visions’ and to the prophets, ‘you must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.’”

