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Christ and American Culture- Some Biblical Reflections

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Dr. Paul Raabe is a professor emeritus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He retired in 2018 after 35 years of distinguished service as professor of Exegetical Theology. He also served as the chairman of the Department of Exegetical Theology.

His areas of interest and expertise at the Seminary include the Hebrew Prophets and poetry, Old Testament theology and biblical theology.

Raabe also served as an instructor at Concordia College in Ann Arbor, Mich. (1979-83); and as a guest instructor at Lutheran Seminary in Baguio, Philippines (1996); Lutheran Seminary in Gothemberg, Sweden (1998); and Seminario Concordia in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil (2012). He served on The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations for nine years and frequently speaks at pastoral conferences. He also has participated in archaeological excavations in southern Israel and northern Syria.

He has published two books, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains* (Sheffield Academic Press), and *The Anchor Yale Bible: Obadiah* (Yale University Press). He also contributed to *Listen into the Word of God: Exegetical Approaches* (Seiten). He co-edited *Fortunate the Eyes That See* (Eerdmans) and *The Press of the Text* (Concordia Publishing House), a Festschrift in honor of Concordia Seminary Professor Dr. James W. Voelz. He has authored about 40 articles and presented more than a dozen scholarly papers, and is currently writing for the Concordia Commentary series on Isaiah.

He received his Master of Divinity (M.Div.) from Concordia Seminary (1979). He also holds a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) from Concordia University, Nebraska in Seward (1975); a Master of Arts (M.A.) from Washington University in St. Louis (1979); and a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (1989).

Raabe and his wife, Dolliene, have one daughter, Sarah.

Christ and American Culture
Some Biblical Reflections

Paul Raabe

My assignment is to present a biblical approach to the theme of the Symposium, "Christ and Culture." That is something like being asked to state everything the Bible says about God, and without going over the time limit. Obviously one can paint only with broad strokes. The presentation has two parts: the first part delineates the overall perspective of the biblical writers toward the relationship between Christianity and culture, and the second part offers some biblical reflections upon four strong winds currently blowing in our American Zeitgeist. The presentation is an exercise in biblical theology. I believe that all the voices of the scriptural choir should participate in the examination, because each voice has its own distinctive sound and contribution. Yet they all sing one song, the song centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

First, some definitions. By the term "Christ" I mean Christianity, the faith, and Christians, both clergy and lay. The term "Culture" is not so easy to define. I am reminded of a scene in an old Bob Hope movie. While on a safari Bob Hope was captured by some headhunters. As they were about to put him to death, the chief said to him, "Nothing personal you understand. It's just our culture." For our purposes here, the term "culture" denotes everything human that is not biological, both human activity and its resultant products. Thus "culture" refers to art, architecture, music, science, philosophy, history, and literature; to the mass media and Hollywood; to politics and economics; to society, societal institutions, community groups and the government; and to ideals, values, aspirations, and goals. Naturally one can subdivide American culture into a myriad of subcultures, and one can further subdivide each of those. The biblical words closest to our word "culture" are terms like "the nations," "the kingdoms of the earth," and "the world."

In 1949, H. Richard Niebuhr gave his famous lectures on "Christ and Culture." He set up five basic models: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. The overall biblical perspective seems to come closest to his "Christ and culture in paradox" model, although that model needs to be transformed a bit. According to the view of the biblical writers, Christ and culture do not simply stand side by side in static paradox so much (although paradox is involved) as they actively interact with each other in *dynamic tension*. If we picture

Editor's note

Paul Raabe first presented this essay at Concordia Seminary's 1994 Theological Symposium, which carried the theme "Christ and Culture: The Church in a Post-Christian(?) America." More than twenty-five years later, its relevance to our current moment in American culture and society has only intensified.

this model of dynamic tension as the framework of a house, within the house are four rooms: (1) Christianity affirms culture in some respects; (2) Christianity opposes culture in some respects; (3) Christianity leavens culture in some ways; and (4) Christianity uses cultural forms to communicate its message. Each of the four rooms needs to be lived in for maintaining the upkeep of the house.

A Biblical Perspective on Christ and Culture

The Framework of the Biblical "House:" Dynamic Tension

> To Yahweh belongs the earth and its fullness, the world and its inhabitants (Ps 24:1).

By virtue of creation God owns everything. God has claims on all people, and all people in turn are under his authority and are accountable to their Creator. The whole world belongs to God and God continues to preserve it. But all people have fallen into rebellion against their own Creator. Immediately we can see that there will be no easy harmony between God and the world. Yet God in his rich love seeks to reclaim his rebellious creatures. As we follow the story of salvation, we see a story abounding in paradox and dynamic tension.

We begin the story with Israel in Egypt. When God called the Patriarchs, he had promised that through them and their seed he would bring blessing to all nations. But now their seed find themselves oppressed under Egyptian bondage. The nations whom God promised to bless now oppose his agent. Yet God has compassion on his people and delivers them with an outstretched arm. The Israelites were helplessly in bondage and could not have saved themselves. God alone works his mighty salvation (Ex 14:13–14). Yet the God of Israel acts in order to reveal his name and glory not only to Israel but also to the nations, for the whole world belongs to him (Ex 14:18; 15:14–15).

In the next scene we find ourselves at Mt. Sinai. The exodus entailed not only a deliverance out of Egypt but also a deliverance unto God. God says in Exodus 19:

> You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and *brought you to myself*. (v. 4)

God brought Israel out from the other peoples and at Sinai confirms his gracious covenant with Israel; God sets Israel apart from the nations to be his holy people, and all of this by virtue of God's undeserved favor (Dt 7:6–8).

Furthermore, God calls Israel to live as his covenant people, a life of faithfulness and of hearkening to the voice of Yahweh, a life on a higher plane than the life of the other nations. The legal materials of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy repeatedly emphasize that Israel is to conduct itself in a righteous and holy manner quite unlike the wicked practices of the surrounding nations. Thereby Israel will be a light to the nations as a witness to Yahweh. God calls Israel *out of* the nations to live *among* the nations as a light *to* the nations.

The next scene takes us to the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. The dynamic tension develops. Here we see God's holy wars against the Canaanites and the other inhabitants of the land. Through these wars God executes his righteous judgment upon the local inhabitants. Why? Deuteronomy makes it clear that Yahweh drives out the other nations

because of their wickedness (Dt 9:4–5). In the words of Leviticus, the land "vomited" them out because they had so defiled the land by their abominations (18:24–30). God actively opposes the wickedness of the surrounding culture.

During the period of the judges we see another feature that heightens the tension even more. For now Israel itself desires to be like the nations. As we follow the story to the Babylonian exile, we see how Israel's history to a great extent can be characterized as "Israel becomes like the nations." In fact, the prophets say as much. Amos, for example, demotes Israel to the same level as the other nations; because Israel acts like the nations, Israel will experience God's judgment like the nations (Amos 1–2). But God through the prophets also gives the Israelites and the nations a hope after judgment. God promises through Amos:

> In that day I will raise up the booth of David about to fall, and I will wall up their breaches and raise up his ruins and build it as in the days of old in order that they might possess the remnant of Edom and of all the nations upon whom my name has been called—oracle of Yahweh who will do this. (9:11–12)

God began to realize his promise by bringing the people back from the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles.

Yet we do not read of the complete fulfillment until we turn to the New Testament. In the beginning of Matthew, for example, we read that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised son of David, whose name is "Jesus (*yĕshüaʿ*) for he will save (*yäshaʿ*) his people from their sins" (1:21).

Now the tension gains renewed momentum. No sooner is the Messiah born in Bethlehem, according to prophecy, when he must flee from Herod. The Messiah, the Savior, has come and experiences opposition. Also the devil opposes him:

> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (Mt 4:8–9)

But Jesus remains faithful to God and does not succumb to the temptation of worldly power and glory. That is not the kind of king he is.

Instead Jesus came to save sinners. He heals the sick, drives out demons, preaches the kingdom of God, and forgives sinners. Thereby he inaugurates the eschatological rule of God in the world. He calls and many receive him.

The tension grows. Jesus encounters increasing opposition during his ministry, which reaches its climax on the cross. "The kingdoms of the world," with which the devil earlier tempted Jesus, the world's authorities as represented by Pilate and the Jewish leaders, now put Jesus to death. Yet it is precisely on the cross that Jesus is King and Savior. The cross reveals most clearly the tension between Christ and culture.

Finally, we see the tension continuing in the story of the early church. The book of Acts shows how the apostles took the Gospel to the ends of the earth and finally to Rome itself. In the process they suffered persecution, but even the persecution itself furthered the spread of the saving Word of the Lord.

Admittedly this has been a rather quick trip through the biblical narratives regarding Israel, Jesus, and the early church. Yet we can derive from it the overarching perspective and framework for thinking about the relationship between Christ and culture. There is no happy synthesis of the two; the two do not come together into a harmonious unity. Rather, Christianity and culture, God's people and the world, interact with each other in a dynamic tension that does not reach its resolution until the *Parousia* of Christ.

Consider the book of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends are taken into exile to Babylon. While there they rise up in the government—and later in the Persian government—where they act as a leaven. For example, Daniel advises King Nebuchadnezzar:

> Therefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable to you; break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquility. (4:27)

Daniel demonstrates his commitment to the welfare of Babylon and addresses the king with respect. Nevertheless, it is a penultimate commitment; his ultimate commitment is toward God. When forced to an "either-or" choice, Daniel and his friends remain faithful to God even though that means a fiery furnace and a lions' den.

On the one hand, God's people can freely serve in the kingdoms of the earth for the benefit of those kingdoms. On the other hand, the kingdoms of the world can become "beastly." Daniel's visions in the second half of the book especially emphasize their "beastly" character. His visions portray the earthly kingdoms as vicious animals that devour and oppress even the saints of the Most High. Yet the earthly kingdoms are still under God's rule. God causes them to rise and fall and to follow each other in succession until the end. Then in the end God sets up his eternal, eschatological kingdom through the "one like a son of man" coming on the clouds.

The book of Daniel reveals a clear distinction between the kingdoms of the earth and the Kingdom of God. The former are temporary and often oppressive, but the latter is eternal and gives life to God's people. The kingdoms of the earth are not the Kingdom of God nor do they merge into it. Nevertheless God's people can serve in them and foster a more just and well-ordered society. For a just, moral, and well-ordered society is certainly better than an unjust, immoral, and chaotic society because such a society permits God's people to witness and worship.

Perhaps no book expresses the biblical perspective more clearly and succinctly than the Gospel of John. God through the divine Logos created the world. Although the world is God's world, the world opposes God and dwells in darkness under its prince, the devil. Nevertheless, God in love sent his only Son into the world for the world's salvation. Yet the world in darkness prefers its darkness and therefore hates Jesus.

On the other hand, many come to the Light. Why? Because Jesus chose them out of the world (15:19) and the Father gave them to Jesus out of the world (17:6). They are no longer *of* the world but now *of* God. And they have been given gifts that the world cannot give: peace (14:27),

Christ and culture do not stand simply side by side in static paradox.

the kingdom of God (3:3–5), and eternal life (3:16–18).

God calls Israel out of the nations to live among the nations as a light to the nations.

Having chosen them out of the world, Jesus then sends them into the world to testify of him as "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (14:6; 17:18). They are sent into the world for the world, yet the world hates them as it hated Jesus (15:18–19). Therefore they suffer in the world. But they live sustained by the comfort that Jesus has already overcome the world and its prince, by the assurance that the Father protects them and the Spirit remains with them, and by the hope that Jesus will return for them. In short, they live in the world for the world but not of the world.

If we picture the overall model of dynamic tension as a house, then within the house are four rooms. Each of the following subthemes needs emphasis in order to maintain a balanced perspective. Because they are well-known biblical themes, I will only briefly summarize them.

The First "Room:" Christianity Affirms Culture

By virtue of God's act of creation, the biblical writers do not disparage a person's creatureliness, a person's humanness and location in a specific time and place. The Bible's "down-to-earth-ness" and especially the incarnation and the sacraments prevent us from following a platonic-gnostic move of "spiritualizing" everything, of trying to climb out of our human skin and float up to God. We live fully in the world.

The biblical writers affirm the value of human institutions, such as family, village, government, the workplace, and even the division of humanity into distinct nations. They acknowledge the positive contributions to the enjoyment of human life made by art, music, writing, technology, and customs. Solomon, you recall, employed the skills of the Phoenicians in building the temple. They affirm the value of human wisdom when it attends to matters of the world. To an extent, the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes has parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature. Also some of Israel's laws have parallels in Mesopotamian law codes.

St. Paul in Philippians 4:8 sums up this dimension:

> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

The Second "Room:" Christianity Opposes Culture

Because all people have been thoroughly corrupted by sin, all human culture bears the mark of sin. In the words of John, the world dwells in darkness and opposes the Light. But those who have been born of God are no longer of the world. Therefore they suffer persecution from the world.

The antithesis between God and culture runs throughout the story of Israel, Jesus, and the early church. The prophets announce God's judgment not only against Israel but also against the nations. The biblical writers condemn all human hubris and every human effort

to establish and maintain a right relationship with God, for justification is apart from works. According to 1 Corinthians, the wisdom of God and the power of God, revealed in the foolishness and the weakness of the cross, show the foolishness of human wisdom and the weakness of human strength. Finally, it remains a strong biblical theme that God's people fight in a no-compromise "holy war," whether one thinks of the wars of Joshua, the reference in Ephesians to "the principalities and powers," or the eschatological "wars" symbolically depicted in John's Apocalypse.

The Third "Room:" Christianity Leavens Culture

It is a common biblical theme that God's people serve as a leaven in society. One thinks of the narratives about, for example, Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon and Persia, and Esther in Persia. Israel was called to a righteous conduct that would be a light to the nations. In Deuteronomy 4 Israel hears the exhortation to keep the Torah:

> for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." ... And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this Torah which I set before you this day. (vv. 6, 8)

In the New Testament the Sermon on the Mount comes to mind, where Jesus exhorts, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16).

A good example of the leavening effect that God's people have in culture appears in the way that the biblical writers treat the cultural institution of slavery. Although they do not directly overthrow the institution, they do urge a transformation of the slave-master relationship among the faithful, one that differs from the rather oppressive kinds of relationship found in the surrounding culture. Finally, note how John the Baptist in Luke 3 exhorts people to ethical behavior in their stations in life. He says to tax collectors, "Collect no more than is appointed you," and to soldiers, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (vv. 12–14).

The Fourth "Room:" Christianity Employs Cultural Forms

To deny that the biblical writers employed cultural forms to communicate would be to deny the obvious. They thoroughly lived in the cultures of the ancient world. The Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek they used did not fall from heaven but were common languages of the day. Their terminology, idioms, and genres reflect their cultural context. Jesus' parables speak of the Kingdom of God in terms of the people's everyday life experiences. Paul used the common epistolary form. The Sinaitic covenant appears to have used a form attested in ancient Near Eastern covenants. With respect to architecture, archaeology reveals that Solomon's temple resembled the style of temples in Syria. One could easily multiply the examples. God's people have no choice but to use and "baptize" cultural forms in communicating the Faith. After all, we live in specific cultural contexts. In fact, the incarnation and the crucifixion—the cross was a common Roman method of execution—reveal God's blessing upon the effort.

Biblical Reflections on the American Zeitgeist

So far, we have seen the general biblical perspective toward the relationship between Christ and culture. The next section offers from a biblical theology point of view some theological-homiletical reflections upon four strong winds currently blowing in the American Zeitgeist. Because the cultural Zeitgeist influences us all, including the people in the pews, preachers need to interact with today's winds, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Obviously much more could be said about each topic, and other topics could be added. The following comments are intended to be merely suggestive and illustrative.

A Culture of Individual Autonomy

The ideal of radical individual autonomy sounds something like the following.

> "I as an American value individual autonomy. I prize highly my freedom to make choices, choices in the marketplace, choices in politics, choices in education, choices in where to live and what to do, choices in what to believe. The worst evil imaginable for me would be to live under the oppressive authority of others who dictate my life and make me follow the others to the beat of the same drummer. I as an American esteem the freedom to tailor-make everything to my tastes. I have an aversion to historical tradition and instead dream of the way things could be. I extol my independence and loathe the prospect of dependence. Nothing could be worse than having to depend upon others. When I join an organization, I as a free individual voluntarily join; when I am dissatisfied, I quit. No organization is anything other than a voluntary association of like-minded individuals, individuals who of their own free will assemble together.
>
> "Individual autonomy also applies to the areas of morality and Christianity. I determine for myself my own moral standards. Nothing offends me more than when other people try to impose their morality on me. My Christianity is a very private matter, only between God and me. I like to church shop and to church hop. In short, I am an unencumbered self."

Although the value of individual autonomy has deep roots in the American experience, it is unique in history. For pre-Enlightenment cultures, and certainly for the cultures of the biblical writers, community was much more important. The biblical writers did recognize individuality. The decalog, for example, uses second person singular verb forms. But individuals understood themselves and defined themselves as members of Israel. Moses, speaking for God, did not say "Let my individuals go" but "Let my people go."

Nevertheless, in our American context we must deal with the desire for individual autonomy. If the biblical writers were to live in our culture, they might stress some of the following points from our pulpits.

Consider the relationship between Creator and creature established "in the beginning." On the one hand, the Creator creates, provides, and sustains, while on the other hand, human beings depend on the Creator. God gives and humans receive. That is the basic

structure and design of creation, a relationship of dependence upon God. No absolute autonomy or total independence here. Not isolated solitude but fellowship with their Creator constitutes the Creator's design for his creatures.

The horizontal dimension becomes crucial for this topic. According to Genesis 2, after God created the man he said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (2:18). A rabbi once quipped, "I wonder if the man agreed." The rabbi perceptively went on to answer, "yes." For the creator structured the man's very nature with an incompleteness; God built into the human an ontological need for others, for community. Therefore God created from the man a "helper corresponding to him" (2:18). The Hebrew expresses the man's delight, "At last, this time! This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:18). In marriage, man and woman become "one flesh" (2:24); they complement and complete each other. Marriage leads into the family.

In the order established by the Creator, not solitary individuals but families are the primary units of human society. The quest for total individual autonomy results in a denial of the created structure of humanity. People who seek total individual autonomy seek an illusion and deny what is a given, their mutual interdependence.

In fact, it is Genesis 3 that reveals the nature of the desire for absolute autonomy. The Creator had determined what was good and what was evil, eating of all the trees was good except eating of the tree of knowing good and evil. But through the serpent's temptation God's human creatures felt their freedom hindered and constrained. The woman wanted to be "like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5–6). She desired moral autonomy and moral self-determination. Why should the Creator be the only one who determines good and evil? So she ate, gave to her husband and he ate. The quest to be autonomous is a quest to be a law to oneself—*auto* + *nomos*—and that means rebellion against the Creator. Furthermore, to live in total individual independence is to live under a curse, to live like Cain in Genesis 4. The Scriptures consider it a sinful and cursed existence, an existence doomed to result in misery, when one seeks total independence and autonomy, when one determines for oneself what is good and evil.

So creation and the fall begin to give us a biblical perspective toward the notion of individual autonomy. God created individuals for communion with God and community with each other, for dependence upon God and mutual interdependence with each other. Yet through the fall "all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way" (Is 53:6). Dead in sin all people have freedom only to oppose God, freedom only to choose evil.

But thanks be to God that the story does not end there. The Creator acted in Jesus Christ to bring into fellowship with himself his creatures even though they desire to be left alone as autonomous individuals. Jesus Christ experienced our isolation. He was forsaken by all and even by God so that each of us might never be isolated and alone. Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ we have been brought into communion with our Maker and into his community, the Church.

Ecclesiology has a key place in this discussion. Read 1 Corinthians, for example, with a view toward the notion of individual autonomy. Notice how St. Paul brings to bear upon the Corinthians' self-seeking individualism and factionalism the one Gospel, the one Baptism, and the one Lord's Supper.

> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12–13)

We did not choose to join the Church; we "were baptized" into the Church, a passive verb. St. Paul further stresses the corporate dimension of the Lord's Supper. The Lord gives each one of us individually his gifts. We are individuals. Yet *koinonia* in the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament also strengthens the horizontal *koinonia* of the Church.

> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:16–17)

In chapter 11, St. Paul goes on to apply the words of institution to the Corinthians. By their self-serving individualism the Corinthians were despising the sacramental body and blood of the Lord and the Church of the Lord.

The one God through the one Gospel unites disparate individuals in the one true faith, the one doctrine of God. And the Gospel turns the individual away from a self-seeking autonomy toward the neighbor, "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (1 Cor 10:24).

Individuals do not decide to come together and create the Church. The Church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals. Jesus Christ founded his Church—"Upon this Rock I will build my Church" (Mt 16:18)—and He sustains it. Individuals do not join the Church; the Lord incorporates them into His Church. It seems to me that in our American context we need to reclaim a strong sense of biblical and therefore, I would argue, Lutheran ecclesiology. It is an ecclesiology that results from and points to the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, an ecclesiology that recognizes the curse of a life in autonomous solitude, an *ecclesia* in which lonely individualists find the joy of communion with God and community with others, a community in Christ that hears the pronoun "we" more than the pronoun "I," where we bear one another's burdens instead of leaving when things get tough.

Finally, the notion of moral self-determination deserves a comment. When people say, "Don't impose your morality upon me," they probably think of God's Law as an oppressive imposition from a killjoy god. Even many Christians, perhaps especially Lutherans, can hear God's Law only in a negative way. To be sure, Pauline theology does emphasize that the Law accuses, condemns, increases transgression, functions as an ally of sin, and brings God's wrath. To be under the Law is to be under a curse.

However, the Scriptures also speak of the Law in a positive way, and we need to hold up to our people this side of the coin as well. St. Paul in Romans 7 says that he agrees with the Law and even delights in it according to his inner self. He wants to do what is right. Yes, when he measures his own conduct according to the Law he sees only failure. It still accuses the Christian Paul because he remains a sinner. But at the same time he delights in the Law and does not hate it. Why? Because the Law is God's Law, and therefore it is "holy and just and good" (7:12). The psalmist of Psalm 119 likewise delights in the good instructions of

Yahweh's commandments. And Deuteronomy, for example, stresses that God's good Law is given for Israel's good.

God's will for human conduct is good and wise. It does not consist of a series of ad hoc and arbitrary rules and regulations imposed by a cruel deity. Rather, God's good Law sets forth the way to go in conformity with the Creator's design. A life without coveting, for example, is a life of joy, whereas coveting produces a life of misery. Because our antinomian culture, which hates God's Law, influences the people sitting in our pews, we need to stress the Law's goodness and wisdom. Of course, the Law still accuses us as sinners. Yet we who have been set free by Christ from the curse of the Law are free to hear it anew as our God's good Word that shows us the path of a joyful life. We do not return to an existence under the Law, but moved by the Spirit we do seek to live in the Law. As Romans 13 says, *agape*—love toward the neighbor does not replace the Law or render the Law superfluous, but it "fulfills" God's Law. Nevertheless, the final word still remains that of forgiveness.

"What shall we make of a Disneyland culture that so single-mindedly pursues happiness?" Photo credit: Tuxyso/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0")

A Therapeutic Culture

What shall we make of a Disneyland culture that so single-mindedly pursues happiness? A great many of us Americans seek as our number one goal self-fulfillment, self-esteem, a sense of personal well-being. Schoolchildren might not know where Canada is, but they have self-esteem. We want to feel good about ourselves; we just want to have fun. Consequently, we buy pop-psychology books and self-help magazines; we attend self-improvement seminars; we visit our therapists. What shall we make of our culture's overwhelming turn toward the therapeutic?

While we Americans seek *self*-acceptance, the biblical writers desired above all *God's* acceptance. Consider the psalmists of ancient Israel. They pray and praise; they give to God their laments of sorrow and their songs of joy. Throughout the Psalter the psalmists' central interest lies in God and fellowship with God. They desire nothing more than to stand in the courts of the Temple and to join the community of God's covenant people in praising the God of Israel. The psalmists express the language of faith, which is decidedly not the language of self-esteem.

Or consider the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus summons people to follow him by denying themselves and taking up the cross for his sake. Taking up the cross in first-century Palestine, you recall, was a one-way trip. Jesus calls not for self-esteem but for self-denial. Only when people lose their life for Jesus' sake will they find their life. Only then will they discover a sense of well-being and holy purpose.

Discipleship carries a cost, the cost of forsaking all else, the cost of being hated by others, the cost of suffering and even martyrdom, all for the sake of following Jesus. How strange this all sounds in our culture of superficial happiness and instant gratification.

Yet the surprise of Christ's call to discipleship is this: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30). Far heavier is the oppressive weight of self-idolatry. The surprise of the Gospel is this:

> Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Mt 5:11–12)

To those who renounce their own self-seeking selves and who live for him Christ gives great joy, not a superficial happiness that avoids pain ("Don't worry, be happy") but the deep, profound joy that remains in the midst of suffering. In short, it is a joy given by and grounded in God. Any other kind of happiness is ephemeral and can only disappoint.

Our therapeutic culture tends to reduce everything human to the level of psychology and medicine. Unacceptable conditions and behaviors receive the label "disorders" or "dysfunctional personalities." With the right kind of therapy and medicine we can correct any disorder and rehabilitate people. The problem here is obvious: "Whatever became of sin?" For the biblical writers, the fallen human condition and the behaviors that follow constitute rebellion against the Creator. "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight" (Ps 51:4). Fellowship with God has been objectively broken and needs an objective restoration. In our "no-fault-I'm-a-victim" culture, people might not

feel guilty—although perhaps they do more than they care to admit—but they *are* guilty. "I'm guilty, you're guilty," and only God can treat that "illness."

Rebellion against God manifests itself in how we deal with one another. The more the psychotherapeutic culture teaches us about what makes people tick, the more we experience the temptation to use and manipulate others. Advertisers learn how to create a consumer need out of nothing; people in sales learn how to close the deal; bureaucrats learn how to get the most efficiency and productivity out of employees. Of course, companies need people to advertise, sell, and administrate. The problem lies in the temptation to use other people as instruments and means to another end, whether that end is company profits or personal happiness.

And clergy certainly are not exempt from the desire to manipulate. Do not misunderstand me. I believe that serious psychology (as distinct from pop psychology) can serve a positive ministerial role in the life of the church. The psyche and emotions comprise part of the God-created makeup of human nature.

But any attempt to use other people depersonalizes both the used and the user. The book of Revelation speaks of those who worship the beast as bearing the *number* 666. They have become an impersonal statistic, branded like animals. But the redeemed bear a *name* on their foreheads, God's name (14:1; 22:4). The Gospel of Jesus Christ restores to people their God-created, human personhood. And the same Gospel transforms them from self-seeking narcissists to persons who love their neighbor. In the place of shallow relationships that result from using other people as instruments, the Gospel creates genuine relationships in which people bear one another's burdens.

A Tolerant Culture

We Americans value that great concept of the Enlightenment, tolerance. As a nation we have struggled to achieve an equal opportunity and nondiscriminatory society. Organizations should not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, or creed, and of late we debate whether sexual preference belongs to the list. We admire Senators who can vehemently disagree and then play golf together. "Agree to disagree; disagree but don't become disagreeable."

Now, the maintenance of civil order requires a degree of tolerance. The freedoms given by the First Amendment, the freedom of religion, of speech, and of assembly necessitate tolerance. Tolerance prevents our society from emulating the religious and ethnic wars that we see elsewhere. Tolerance is one of America's strengths and we should affirm it.

But within this strength lies a weakness. Tolerance of a wide variety of beliefs and lifestyles has led to an indifference that tends to level everything. This indifference has been fueled by our egalitarian society, which gives equal legitimacy to all beliefs and practices and which privatizes and marginalizes religion from the public square. And it has been further fueled by our culture's post-modern perspectivism, which cannot speak of truth but only of social constructions of reality. "That is only your community's perspective; my community's perspective is different." All of this produces the net result of a tolerant apathy toward competing religious and moral truth-claims.

The wind of tolerant indifference certainly blows on the people sitting in our churches' pews. The culture affects us all. So in a culture where the worst offense is to be judgmental, where people think, "I have a right not to be offended," how can we preach God's Law? Yet

God's Law must be heard for the ultimate purpose of the sinner's salvation.

Beliefs and life-styles matter; they matter to God. They can even damn a person. Consider Paul's words to the Galatians.

> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different Good News, not that there is another Good News. (1:6–7)

> The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19–21)

What is false and evil in God's sight provokes God to wrath. Yet the mere mention of God's wrath sounds so strange to American ears. "You mean God is not tolerant like a good American?" Decidedly not! God not only can disagree, he can become quite disagreeable. See the Egyptian army drown in the sea. See Ananias and Sapphira fall down dead. The wrath of God is a theological constant throughout both Testaments. It is not that God is by nature an angry deity. But idolatry and sin provoke the holy and righteous God to holy and righteous anger.

Does God still manifest his wrath today? Yes, he does, according to Romans 1:

> The wrath of God is being revealed [present tense] from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. (1:18)

God gives the wicked up to their wickedness. He gives them up to a base mind and to improper conduct, which includes not only homosexuality but also all manner of wickedness, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, and so forth (1:24–32). Precisely in their stubborn persistence in evil we see God's wrath at work.

Hardening people in their unbelief and sin might not appear to be the kind of dramatic manifestation of God's wrath that we see in the exodus from Egypt, but it is the same wrath. Those dramatic manifestations were recorded in the Scriptures to warn us, to show us the nature of divine wrath (1 Cor 10). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). Yes, it is possible for sinners to find themselves "in the hands of an angry God," even though sinners would prefer to place God in their own angry hands.

Along with God's wrath, our culture of indifference needs to hear the biblical portrait of God's zeal. We disparage religious zeal by labeling such people as "zealots" or "fanatics." You may be religious but do not bring your religious beliefs into the public square. No one should take religion that seriously. But the biblical God displays passionate zeal. Ezekiel proclaims God's zeal for his holy name. Hosea and Colossians reveal God's active opposition to syncretism. Galatians discloses God's passion for the truth of the Gospel.

Throughout the Scriptures the biblical God displays his passionate zeal, and it's a good thing too! For the alternative would be indifference, and that would be bad news for us all.

Nothing could be worse for the psalmists than divine apathy to their plight: "Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord?" (Ps.44:23). Nothing could be worse for the prophets than divine indifference toward evil.

God zealously guards the truth of the Gospel because only the pure Gospel sets sinners free. God zealously seeks the lost. In fact, in the fullness of time God definitively demonstrated his passionate zeal by sending his only Son to die for sinners. God's earnest fervor is Good News for us all.

Speaking of God's wrath and zeal presupposes a hierarchical structure in theology. Although egalitarian ideology opposes any talk of hierarchy, biblical theology clearly reveals a hierarchical relationship between God and humanity. The Creator is over; his creatures are under. The Creator by virtue of his creating has claims on his creatures, and they in turn must give account to their Creator.

The non-reversibility of key biblical verbs reveals this "over-under" structure. God's actions toward humans include verbs such as "create," "command," "save," and "lead," whereas human actions toward God include verbs such as "fear," "trust," "obey," "worship," and "follow." The verbs cannot be reversed; Israel does not create, command, or save God nor does God fear, trust, or worship Israel. To make this point seems to belabor the obvious, but sometimes the obvious needs to be belabored.

The point deserves emphasis because only within this hierarchical divine-human framework can the Good News remain Good News. Only when sinners confess that they deserve condemnation from their own Maker and Lord can they hear God's grace in Christ as "amazing grace." Otherwise it is heard as simply tolerance. Without the wrath of God there can be no confession of sin, and without the confession of sin there can be no faith in the amazing gift of Christ's forgiveness.

In our culture of tolerance we need carefully to distinguish between patience and indifference, between forgiving sin and condoning sin. The distinction is crucial. God is patient, "slow to anger," but not indifferent; he forgives but does not condone. The cross makes that clear.

Jesus commissioned his disciples in Luke 24 to preach "in his name repentance unto the forgiveness of sins to all nations" (v. 47). The word "repentance" contradicts any notion of a tolerant indifference in the life of the church. It entails confession of sin along with the Holy Absolution, and church discipline, yet all for the sake of the person's salvation. The proclamation in Christ's name of "repentance unto forgiveness" does not confirm sinners in sin but delivers them from sin. And the phrase "to all nations" leads into missions as we reflect Christ's passionate zeal for the salvation of all people.

A Culture of Interpretation

We live in a culture of interpretation. Public figures attempt to project a good image. "Spin doctors" compete with each other over the kind of spin to put on a public speech. Appearances count more than the truth of the matter. And we the viewers realize this. Consequently, we do not attend to the truth of the matter either. Rather, we focus on the person of the speaker in an *ad hominem* sort of way. We seek to discern the hidden agenda that are at work in the culture wars. We become suspicious, cynical, skeptical, and

disillusioned. We have lost confidence in the ability of language to reveal truth. Instead we see language as a pragmatic tool to be used for marketing and for imposing one's will on others. We think of the language we use as *creating* the reality. There is a joke about three baseball umpires. The pre-modern umpire says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call them the way they are." The modern umpire says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call them the way I see them." And the post-modern umpire says: "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call them."

It is a culture characterized by an anthropocentric skepticism. It tends to reduce all of reality, every belief and truth claim, all language to the level of human self-interest and struggles for power. It considers politics, economics, social class, gender, and race to be the ultimate realities driving any given movement or belief. Therefore, in order to interpret said movement or belief one must disclose and name the hidden agenda being masked by the speakers. No statement can be taken at face value. One must always practice a hermeneutic of suspicion by asking: Whose interests does a given speech serve and what agenda does it cloak? The individual or communal identities and biases of both speakers and interpreters become more important than the explicit statements made. The politics, race, or gender of a nominee to the Supreme Court is what counts. And certainly theological and moral claims are not exempt. They too must be decoded and unmasked in an anthropocentric way. "Of course so-and-so would say that. He is a white male, or even worse, a dead, white, Eurocentric male." When our culture of suspicious interpreters hears the words "Thus saith the Lord," it replies, "No, that's not what God said; that's what you say God said;" or "That's not what God said; that's what Jeremiah said God said, and furthermore, that's what you say Jeremiah said that God said."

The prime example of an anthropocentric skeptic is the portrayal of Satan given in the book of Job. In the opening scene of the book we overhear a conversation between God and Satan—or more technically "the adversary." God asks Satan:

> Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? (1:8)

Satan responds by also asking a question—manifesting a will-to-power equal to God (?)—although it is a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer: "Does Job fear God for nought?" (1:9).

This opening scene sets forth a conflict of two worldviews that the rest of the book develops. On the one side is God, who operates with a theocentric faith construction of reality. God contends that Job is "my servant," one whose sole goal and desire is to serve God, fear God, be in fellowship with God simply because of the worthiness and goodness of God. According to this view, God is the ultimate end and good for Job. On the other side is Satan, the adversary of both God and Job. He construes reality in accordance with an anthropocentric skepticism. He is in fact the ultimate practitioner of a hermeneutic of suspicion. For him Job simply uses God as a means to a self-interested end. Of course, Satan admits, Job fears God, but that is only because of his desire for economic prosperity and security from enemies. Take these away "and he will curse thee to thy face" (1:11).

So the test begins. It surprises the reader somewhat that God accedes to Satan's challenge. But there is a lot at stake in the debate both for God and for all those who fear God. For if Job, a person like whom "there is none on earth," turns out to have faith commitments that serve a prior and more foundational set of self-interests, then all of reality including theology reduces to an anthropocentric base. Then even if God exists, his existence proves to be strictly secondary to what really drives human beings.

Job's prosperity is removed and yet Job responds:

> The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (1:21)

Satan remains unconvinced; if not wealth maybe health motivates Job. But even a second test does not falsify Job's faith.

The Job of the speeches is not quite as serene as the Job of the prologue. Yet despite the *Angst* and troubled soul that the emotional language of Job's speeches reveals, Job's response still confirms God's viewpoint against Satan's. Job's ultimate concern is not that he regain his economic prosperity, physical health, and social status in the community. His ultimate concern remains his relationship and fellowship with God.

After the debates come to an end, God out of the whirlwind appears to Job. The very fact that God appeared to Job was enough to strengthen Job's faith. Fellowship with God was, after all, Job's ultimate concern. The story ends with the restoration of Job's fortunes, although Job neither requested nor desired it. The restoration comes solely as a gracious gift from God. The conclusion is clear if not for Satan (!) at least for the reader: a theocentric reality and a non-self-serving faith are definite possibilities; not everyone fits the mold of anthropocentric skeptics.

What makes Satan's skepticism so challenging is that it has some validity. We all know of instances where people attempt to use God for their own self-interests, where theology gets co-opted to further ideological causes. In fact, all Christians experience the temptation toward anthropocentrism because it characterizes not only Satan but also our own sinful flesh. This is what we confess of the sinful self, that it is curved in toward itself, that it refers everything back toward itself and its own desires, in short, that it is *self*-centered.

Such a self-referencing turn manifests itself in a variety of overt and subtle ways. One of the more subtle manifestations is the way in which hearers can filter even the Gospel itself. The "God for us" emphasis becomes construed as the God who is there to meet our every need with the "we" determining the need. God is seen as a kind of waiter whose job consists of waiting on our table when we snap our fingers. The need might be health and happiness or personal growth, but it is always *our* need that runs the show; God exists to *serve us*.

Such a subtle self-referencing temptation makes it vital to proclaim Job's God, the God in Christ whom we fear, love, and trust above all else, first and foremost because of the worthiness and goodness of God himself and not simply because of what God can do for us. Therefore in the Lord's Prayer the "thy" petitions precede the "our" petitions.

Of course, God does graciously meet our needs as he defines them. As Jesus says:

> Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Mt 6:33)

But lest "all these things" become the primary engine driving faith, lest the tail wags the dog, the faith of St. Paul needs equal emphasis:

> Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil 3:8)

That message has the salutary effect of turning us away from ourselves and our own needs toward the God outside of us. Not everything reduces itself to base, human self-interest. Faith finds its ground solely in God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Having chosen us out of the world for God, Jesus Christ sends us into the world to testify to God's truth and to serve our neighbor within our cultural context. We live *in* the world *for* the world but not *of* the world. It calls for serious reflection on the part of every Christian, every pastor, every congregation, and every church body. To what extent have we become *of* the world? Have we knowingly or unknowingly adopted the world's agenda and its Zeitgeist? And to what extent do we fail to live fully *in* the world? Have we become indifferent to our cultural context, too comfortable in a parochial and obscurantist isolation, too negligent of the church's mission in the world? There is no way to avoid or mitigate the tension. Yet as our holy unease grows in this increasingly tense situation we eagerly await the day when we will hear the heavenly voices say,

> The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. (Rv 11:15)

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