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The Gospel, the Pastor, and "Culture"

WARREN RUBEL

Dunyasha, a young maid in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a play capturing poignant cultural transitions in later 19th-century Russia, flatters Yasha, a young valet, with words still carrying an edge in the last third of the 20th century. "Yasha," she passionately compliments him, "you are a man of culture—you can give your opinion about anything." Appropriately, Yasha yawns, agrees, draws contentedly on his cheap cigar, and offers an opinion about women in love. We may smile at Dunyasha's "overbelief," at Yasha's pretensions, and at Chekhov's quiet capacity for exposing the weaknesses of a dying elite by caricaturing its frailties in the servant classes. But their reactions and ours to the completeness or wholeness of the cultured man recall that words like "cleric" for the one who reads and writes, "clerisy" for intellectuals, and "parson" for *the person*, the representative man of the medieval community, still hover around the idea of the pastor as a man of culture.

Actually the word "culture" continues to evoke an unmanageable number of responses from most of us. So much so that we need to distinguish quickly among a number of ideas clustering around the term in order to place the understandably complex relationships among the Christian gospel, the pastor, and culture in a meaningful if limited perspective. Here, after offering a quick sketch of some of the main currents and crosscurrents surround-

ing culture today, we attempt to suggest a rough plot for personal action. Our assumption is that the pastor as perpetual "student and literary worker"¹ will fill in the details with his own cultural life-style as a contemporary man in mission.

I

Within the last century and a half our knowledge of the human past, of our perpetually changing physical environment, and of our own interior life has exploded into the realm of the exponential. As Raymond Williams pointed out in *Culture and Society*, a broadening understanding of the term "culture" has accompanied this ex-

¹ I place quotes around "student and literary worker" to suggest that the present topic is an addendum to a kind of "Christian humanist" emphasis within our own church's tradition. One remembers C. F. W. Walther's concerns for *Kunst* and *Wissenschaft* in his dedicatory address at the cornerstone laying of the "Collegium und Seminar-Gebäude" in November 1849. Subsequently the work of John Phillip Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917), and Theodore Graebner, *The Pastor as Student and Literary Worker* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1925), provided the transitions to Richard R. Caemmerer's *The Church in the World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949), the development of *Able Ministers of the New Testament* (1958) by the Curriculum Commission of the Board for Higher Education, and Arthur Carl Piepkorn's "Christ and Culture: A Lutheran Approach," *Response*, II (Pentecost 1960), 3—16. More recently such studies as Martin E. Marty's *Varieties of Unbelief* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) and Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Christian Intellectual* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) reflect the widening circle of interest in church and culture relationships.

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pansion.² Such knowledge in the form of information gives us culture with a small "c." The cultural historian, the social anthropologist, the archaeologist, the philologist, and sometimes the specialties combined in a Johann Huizinga or a Walter Ong have made us highly self-conscious of the intricacies of human social systems. We have learned, for example, a great deal about the movements of peoples from oral-aural cultures, through alphabetic, manuscript, and print-oriented societies to the electronic communications systems we know about but do not fully understand in our own mass and multimedia cultures. In this sense culture is primarily a neutral word describing the information we are rapidly acquiring about the totality of a people's expression of its life-style, its language structure, group habits, religious beliefs, literature and artifacts, social customs and organizations, technical processes and values. That in the last 50 years the physical and the anthropological sciences have interacted to extend our reach and to tighten our grasp of human culture is a truism. More recently, in addition to the terrific branching and proliferation of knowledge there has emerged what Daniel Bell calls the new "intellectual technology," including game theories, decision theories, linear programming, cybernetics, and operations research.³

Such knowledge *about* a culture, however, may have little to do with our sensitivity to the significance of that culture. And this distinction between knowledge

² *Culture and Society: 1780—1950* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. xiv—xvi, 130—58.

³ *The Reforming of Higher Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 77.

and sensitivity alerts us to a narrower understanding of culture. If culture means emotional intelligence, cultivation of modes of feeling and patterns of taste, then culture becomes something more than information.⁴ We may assent to the need for knowing *about* East Asian cultures or *about* black culture in America, but our knowledge and our values quickly come into conflict precisely because broader knowledge, a value in itself but not by itself, leads us to discriminate, select, and evaluate as well as to assimilate. Consequently our knowledge of culture with a small "c" rubs against the grain of culture with a capital "C."

II

Culture in this sense is normative rather than descriptive. In this normative sense it is quite naturally related to our understanding of the cultured man, an idea itself paralleling the broad understanding of culture in the past century and a half. For most of us the cultured man has been the educated man who freely and responsibly exercised the human privilege of learning the true, the good, and the beautiful of the past so that this knowledge and sensitivity could be imaginatively used in living in the present and preparing for the future. Tied to Hebrew, Greek, and Roman civilizations, the cultured West European or Continental American man was a man of languages, accomplished in spoken and literary discourse, a *gentleman* in the older sense of the word's harmonizing charity and virility, and, as an active decision maker in civic life, a man who embodied the classical and Christian virtues. Though empha-

⁴ See Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 48—49.

ses have changed from time to time, this essential narrowing of the term has come into repeated conflict with the values of our urban, industrial, democratic, and technological world.⁵

During this same century and a half the Christian scholar has become increasingly knowledgeable about the continuities and discontinuities of the church's relationship to culture. F. E. Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) and H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951), where Schleiermacher's position was placed in perspective with four other historical positions, place a neat frame around the Christian's self-conscious awareness of his precarious but promising relationship to the world. Following Joseph Sittler's subsequent call for a theology "of the earth" rather than "from the earth," a spate of articles and books have appeared on the subject.⁶ If not always successful, these attempts to bridge gaps between "theology and culture" have brought the church and general culture and the church and the arts into fresh if uncertain alignments. This renewal, crossing denominational and confessional lines, has been marked so far by a number of unresolved tensions.

These tensions appear largely unresolved because of a peculiar paradox we are passing through. At a time when we know

⁵ Lionel Trilling's "The Two Environments," pp. 209—33, in *Beyond Culture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968) reflects the pressures in higher education and in American cultural life generally.

⁶ Sittler's "A Theology for Earth," *The Christian Scholar*, XXVII (September 1954), 367—74, while it may not have been a cause of an interest that had already been brewing, certainly served as a manifesto for much of the work that was to follow.

more about our own history, that knowledge means less and less to us as we see the present and the future take shape before us in the postmodern world.

As C. P. Snow has alerted our time to the conflicts between the scientific and literary culture, so the Christian feels in his bones the threat of the "modern" as a judgment on the importance of the past. In fact, the modern has itself become part of the "new tradition."⁷

We know that though the word "modern" suggests the recent and the contemporary, it has taken on a special meaning by pointing to a distinctive situation and feeling. The older generation senses the discomfiting experience of the modern when it claims that present conflicts in morality and taste and even theological fashion are more than old and disagreeable but repeated skirmishes between the generations. Rather the conflicts are signs of severe dislocations, symptoms of breaks in attitude toward past cultural and moral values. To one man the modern means fearful breakdown. To another it means necessary breakup. The modern may suggest William Blake's statement, "The inexplicit arouses the mind to act." To Jacques Barzun, who sees human culture as a "house of intellect" and thus a product of human achievement often built up through suffering, the contemporary obsession with the inexplicit suggests a perverse love of confusion, an abandonment of intellect for worship of the "torturing indefinite."⁸ To some the modern means pri-

⁷ See Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson Jr., *The Modern Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁸ *The House of Intellect* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 18.

marily the "now thing," absorption in the quotidian and fulfillment in the sensory.⁹

The modern has meant the experience of extremities, vast social and political upheavals, cleavages between the academic and the popular. It has meant confusion in distinguishing the genuine from the spurious, the significant from the topical. Above all the modern has meant a particular break with the past. That break has been variously described at length in many monographs. But the break has meant especially the felt experience of disconnection from the meaning and significance of the past values, which have so often been regarded as the mainstay of Western civilization.

It has meant first of all the loss of a particular kind of order descriptive of our Western Christian tradition and our understanding of one meaning of culture. The force of the old order we still feel, if primarily as something we have lost, when we remember Christmas-Epiphany pictures familiar from our childhood. Consider the first kind of adoration-nativity scene, one extant from about the 14th century in Christian art. The Christ Child lies on straw near a manger, illuminating with His light the dark world of the khan or shed or stable. A sitting or kneeling Mary and usually a standing Joseph form a circle around the Christ Child. Shepherds kneel in the foreground. In the near background the ox and ass, already present in fourth-century nativity portrayals, stand attentive. Sometimes, in the far background of the picture, one catches the radiance of the departing angels. In Epiph-

⁹ See Sam Keen, "Manifesto for a Dionysian Theology," to be published in the *Journal of Existentialism*.

any representations of the adoration-nativity the angels may be guiding the star that leads the Magi to Bethlehem. The Magi, sometimes together with shepherds and in our customary Western Christian iconography three in number, offer their precious gifts to the sitting Christ Child.

What is significant about the adoration-nativity scenes is their portrayal of what the incarnation means: order and harmony in the cosmos. In fact one sees in these relatively simple and warm representations what has been called in a more complex setting the "great chain of being." Order and purpose permeate all creation: the star beautifully represents the inanimate mineral world, the hay of the manger the vegetable world, the Magi the wealthy and wise, Mary and Joseph the human family. The Christ Child Himself is the God-man who in the mystery of His birth unites the visible creation to the majesty of the invisible world. The angels, beings of intellect and will but not of corporeality, take form and accommodate themselves to men's senses in the form of the purest of elements — air. The angels and their archangels reach up the ladder of being to God. In Jesus Christ God holds all things together, keeps His covenant with His people, and speaks His word. The dark is always present, but the light shines in the darkness and conquers both it and the all-engulfing chaos that the darkness threatens.

We inherit as characteristically modern in our cultural experience the gradual erosion of this ideal order. In our time the pace has quickened, however. The resulting configuration is one of disconnected fragments. To many of modern sensibility, God has become an exile, man an estranged symbol maker in a mute natural world,

and civilized, urban, industrial man both attracted to and repelled by the threat and promise of technology. If this is the case, then we can better understand the sometimes violent upheavals within individuals and between generations. Already in the last century Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of the knives in the brains of the restless younger generation of his time. The distance between the generations in our time reflects the divided consciousness of many young men and women in the modern period. For each of the disconnections we can isolate — those of man from God, man from nature, and man from technology — feeds the essential disconnection man feels within himself. And it is this internal disconnection within man that gives us the experience of alienation in contemporary cultural life. What makes the alienation modern rests on two things: first, the overwhelming sense that the disconnections are real; second, the corresponding certainty that however meaningful the past was, it no longer seems usable for solving present issues.

The severity of the modern sense of alienation and cultural upheaval is directly traceable to the inwardness of the struggle. In a disconnected universe the alienated man is unable to establish contact with a meaningful reality beyond himself. The lives of those touching his often appear remote or unauthentic. When he searches within himself, he finds no center upon which the passions, desires, and intent of his life may converge in a meaningful way. In this kind of world the traditional man of culture threatens to become an anomaly. Residual values remain, but they are tied largely to intrapersonal rather than institutional loyalties.

III

This conflict in the modern tradition touches rather significantly on the tensions between the cultural elitist and the popular cultural enthusiast. Both argue within the context of the relationship between aesthetic values and culture, but proponents at either end of the spectrum bristle about the emphases placed on the past or the present, on societal or personal concerns, on imitative or expressive aesthetic theories. The informed "pop" culture enthusiast is sure that the cultural elitist lacks common humanity and pertinence to the "everyday."¹⁰ Supporters of popular arts are also quite certain that the elitist's ties to classical culture smack of an outmoded aristocracy, that in his focus on the past the elitist neglects the wonder of what it means to be, of the joys of immediate sensory delight, of life as mysteriously unfolding process. The pop enthusiast, raging at "culture" as the status symbol of the privileged classes, is pleased to hear Ezra Pound's epithets on "kulchur" or to know that Herbert Read dismissed arid and anti-septic culture as so much bric-a-brac.¹¹

The informed elitist, ordinarily of academic persuasion, is usually just as certain that the popular culture enthusiast lacks rudimentary discrimination, that he as

¹⁰ Although they cannot be called "popular enthusiasts," Julian Hartt in *A Christian Critique of American Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) and Amos Wilder in *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) have argued in terms of the insights of men like Erich Auerbach and Martin Jarret-Kerr for the plain or "low-style" for the Christian, that is, for the pertinence of culture in the everyday life of the Christian.

¹¹ See *To Hell with Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963)

minister, for example, cannot distinguish between the "kitsch" and the genuine in the artistic realm; that what the pop enthusiast considers so true and new is neither as new or true as he thinks; that although immersion and immediacy in the sensory may intensify human delight, reflection and deliberation and evaluation enhance human dignity, a dignity residing in the intellect and necessary detachment from the sensory.

Both poles of the argument show a common concern for man in his humanity. In their diagnosis of the weaknesses of each emphasis, the pop enthusiast or the elitist, the generalist or the specialist give us a cue to a meaning of the gospel and culture for the Christian today. For each points us to the completeness that every human being lacks. The question of culture, as Karl Barth put it, is one of the destiny of human character.¹² What are we meant to be as men? Because each of us inherits and acquires a culture, because culture represents human achievement, because it conserves and supports a system of values, because its achievements are meant for human good, because cultures are pluralistic, and because cultural values, annealed as they seem to be to human freedom, spontaneity, and play, are relative to time and place, we are caught in interchanging conflict and accommodation to the question of culture. Because God in Jesus Christ has acted for men, it is Christ's humanity that frees us to become involved in the questions and conflicts of culture with humility and assurance. The free Christian man,

¹² "Church and Culture" in *Theology and Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 339.

Luther's willing servant of all, both suggests the paradox of the Christian life in the large terms that H. Richard Niebuhr isolated in *Christ and Culture* and points us to a way of life vis-à-vis human culture for the Christian as theological student or pastor.

The theological student or the pastor as a man of culture lives a style of life that puts the persons he encounters in his ministry at ease. In this sense the idea of culture is operational, personal, and pragmatic: operational because to be a Christian man is to be in process, personal because culture is no timeless abstraction, pragmatic because culture as a system of signs and values relates those signs and values to an audience. In this sense the idea of culture is primarily person and community related. Its basic metaphor is not the eye, not even the pleasing picture of ideal order we see in the vision or *schauen* of the Christmas-Epiphany painter. Rather, without denying the testimony of the eye, the informing metaphor is the ear. The essentially visual and static image of the order of the "great chain of being" may be discarded, as other and earlier essentially visual images of order in the cosmos have been discarded or modified by the physicist or painter. But the word of salvation with its sense of personal presence, its disclosure of interiority, its probing below surface realities, its calling specifically for personal response, for trust, and for action in the present, suggests that if there is tension between our human ideas of what the cosmos or culture ought to be like and God's redemptive word for us in Jesus Christ, our Christian disposition leads us again and again to the spoken and heard word of

forgiveness and promise.¹³ This Word of God, without abrogating human culture, places church and culture in hope upon God.

Because he is usually seeking to put people at ease, the pastor may never really be highly self-conscious of himself as a man of culture. But because he makes responsible judgments in the modern period as a human being about the best, the better, the good, the fair, and the bad, he remains conscious of himself as an incomplete man on this side of the grave. Consequently he may never be at ease with himself. Conscious of the people all cultural endeavor serves, he learns how to serve them as a truly informed member of his culture. At the same time he may not always please other human beings by what he is or says or does because he must be forthright in making responsible judgments about the weaknesses and corrosion in that culture. In fact, his preaching of the law may well lead to traumatic discernment, to the shock of recognition of sin in his own heart as well as in his hearers.

But, nevertheless, he can seek to put other human beings at ease because, having been reconciled to God, he hopes to be an instrument of that reconciliation to God through all the levels and interstices of common Christian life. His dreadful certainty that he and this world will be judged does not dull his commitment to the world—to its need for justice or mercy nor to the humble and mighty works of men that proclaim that they live in creation for the delight of God and man.

¹³ Walter Ong, S. J., *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), presents a detailed argument on the significance of the word for Christian and human culture generally.

IV

Both Scripture and tradition give us insights into the dynamic center of the Christian faith as it both shapes and is shaped by human culture. Quite obviously each Christian responds with his own lifestyle to the question of the Christian evangel's relationship to each person's given cultural setting. But Martin Luther developed one basic pattern of response that remains a significant model for a good number of Christians. He once wrote to the poet Eoban Hess—apparently because Hess was worried about "barbarous" tendencies in Reformation Christianity:

I am persuaded that without knowledge of letters pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. At the very least I would wish the young to pursue poetry and rhetoric. Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that . . . you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.¹⁴

¹⁴ The letter to Eoban Hess is found in *Luther's Correspondence*, trans. Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, II (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publications House, 1918), 176—77. The quote was first used by Roland Mushat Frye, *Perspective on Man* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 13. Martin E. Marty also uses the quote in *Varieties of Unbelief*, pp. 198—99.

Luther of course wrote before the rise of the modern. He also wrote for Christendom in the process of division. Yet it was a Christendom, a vast culture informed by major Christian ideas. He wrote too when the educated Christian assumed the central dominance of Christian doctrine. Consequently, the trained Christian was tolerantly sympathetic of the pagan and classical literature available at the time in the schools. Yet Luther suggested principles in his letter closely associated with the Christian's possible reaction to culture at any given historical point.

For one thing, Luther depicted the inevitable tension under which the attentive Christian lives. And by emphasizing the interdependent relationships between culture and sacred truth, Luther gave clean direction to a tradition which escapes two distortions of the Christian's response to his cultural milieu.

The first distortion falls into simple but hazardous sacred-profane, secular-religious, church-world dualities. Richard Digby is the fictional stereotype. "His plan of salvation was so narrow," wrote Hawthorne, "that, like a plank in a tempestuous sea, it could avail no sinner but himself." In his isolated cave, away from the light of the sun and the world of men, Digby's fate became his judgment. He could neither read his Scripture without misreading, nor could he help from turning into a gross misrepresentation of the human, a "man of adamant." His Christianity was a private theological fortress that kept the world from breaking in. Also his prison, it kept him from breaking out. He embodies Paul Tillich's observation that a certain sign of man's estrangement from what he should be is his perpetually separating of the sec-

ular from the religious and giving an "unconditional character to each."¹⁵

On the other hand, by emphasizing the centrality of sacred truth and scriptural authority, Luther also set a pattern for avoiding the threat of a sentimental secularism. If Luther occasionally complained that he did not have the time to read as much in letters as he had hoped, contemporary literati regret too often that they have lost disciplined contact with Holy Scripture. Luther's world seemed obsessed with the pull toward death and in bondage to an authoritarian past. Our cameras, our "happenings," our obsession with the timely and the relevant, with the grasp and gasp of the instant moment, all point to a sickness as well as health in modern secularism. In our focus on the present and the topical we lose our sense of continuity with the past. Our slick magazines, so Bernard de Voto once observed, are models of our interests. The front-page ads are aimed at youth and romance and beauty. The middle pages take up life's conflicts. The back pages pick us up in old age with the skin problems and digestive problems and the host of maladies pointing to human death and decay. Too often we prefer not to move beyond those early full-page ads. Excited "to be alive," we do not see life whole or steadily enough to know what it means to be alive. About the time that the human race seems doomed to "gnaw the crust of this old earth," as Henry David Thoreau observed over a century ago, we seek to make the world a home. In a peculiarly perverse way we try to make creation eternal.

The Lutheran's sense of paradoxical

¹⁵ *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 46-47.

ension, however, keeps the Christian life salty by keeping it close to the exposed edges of the world. In fact the lively Christian remains exposed to the non-Christian environment, learning from it by being open to it. If the Christian does not remain open to culture, Luther seems to suggest, the sacred truths have no St. John the Baptists to prepare the way in God's ongoing disclosure of Himself in historical events. Culture, in the form of literature, for example, is a propaedeutic to the meaning of the Christian faith for our own times.¹⁶

The power of this paradox resides in the Christian's being possessed by Jesus Christ, in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:16-17), and in the Christian's remaining open to the world. The openness of St. Paul's words to the Philipians is typical: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8). The Christian's faith in the righteousness of Christ supports him in this openness. But from this vulnerable trust follow several responsible risks the Christian assumes in his stance toward culture in the modern period.

V

One difficult risk is to develop openness to the criticism that may come to us and

¹⁶ See Nathan Scott's "Introduction: Theology and the Literary Imagination," *Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature*, ed. Nathan Scott Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), for the most recent arguments for the propaedeutic function of literature for the Christian.

to our Christian institutions from the outside. In this sense those outside the Christian communion serve a prophetic purpose. As iconoclasts they smash the complacency and smugness of the Christian or Christian institution. Chaldeans in modern dress, they become God's instrument in history to remind the Christian that he truly lives by the grace of God. This kind of writer or artist speaks truth, not comfort. His cultural values often confront us in the voice of the minority groups, a rising group in American letters of increasingly sustained power. Saul Bellow or C. Wright Mills or Bernard Malamud, Richard Wright or James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison or Langston Hughes, Jack Kerouac or Kenneth Rexroth—whether Jew or Negro or Mexican or free-lance poet or scholar or Southern regional writer—all speak to us of the undercurrents in the mainstream of American life where we as Christians do our Christianity. Anyone remote from the inner-city ghetto and from the large and small injustices of urban life needs to experience, even vicariously, the outrage and disenchantment of what it means to be human at this moment in the web of history. Sometimes this kind of bearer and breaker of cultural values confronts us by cutting through the surface fuzz of suburban respectability, as *The Graduate* and John Updike's *The Couples* have done. No one feels comfortable under this critical fire. Yet we all understand how necessary it is that such forth-telling reach us human beings. To the iconoclastic writer who stands outside the Christian tradition we can present our teachableness in the form of a highly receptive ear. John W. Dixon, Jr., bemoans

the church's having remained largely unaffected by "cubism" in painting.¹⁷

But we can give assent to culture not only when it takes the form of hostile but just criticism. We can give strong assent to the humanist, conspiring with the humanist and sharing the created world with him. Some Christians dismiss much of the world of culture in the contemporary period as "mere culture." There has always been, of course, a type of cultural humanism that discredits the human precisely where the Christian finds the human most fully realized—in creaturely and creative dependence on the Father. Often the humanist in his love of language and letters has become one-sided, ending up in the grubbing aesthetic pedantry and the intellectual fastidiousness that Voltaire satirized when he had Candide react in wonder and amazement to Pococurante's perpetual disdain: "What a great genius this Pococurante is. Nothing can please him." There is too a kind of humanism which lacks spiritual resonance, which is as closed in its unbelief system as the doctrinaire Christian could hope to be closed in his belief system. There is a humanism, however, which seeks to be truly human in its compassion and regard for justice and goodness and truth and beauty in this world. In his regard for truth and respect for harmony and order and purpose the Christian sees his own continuity with the created world and his alliance with the humanist. While he sees the world for what it is, he works with the world for what it can be. "Faith grows bright," ob-

¹⁷ *Nature and Grace in Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 189.

serves Amos Wilder, "as it is fed by the fuel of generic mortal experience."¹⁸

Perhaps that explains why Scripture records Israel's carrying gold figures from Egypt, why St. Paul could quote on Mars' Hill from a Greek poet (Acts 17), why St. Augustine's training in rhetoric would become significant for him as sermonizer, why Erasmus's work with the New Testament Greek text would have eventual powerful impacts in Europe in the Reformation period, why Karl Barth can be a lover of Mozart, and Thomas Merton can die studying Buddhism. Through his contact with human culture the Christian renews his own humanity. He can remain aware of his humanity by staying close to human beings, of course, but the special reflective vision of cultural values embodied in the art, literature, music, movies, and architecture of our time refreshes his perspective on the human in a different way.

Particularly would this renewal of the human be important for the earnestly religious man. The Greek myth of Atreus points up this earthy truth. Atreus, whose mother was the earth, fought savagely with Heracles, who was himself one of the gods. In typical wrestler fashion Heracles kept throwing Atreus to the ground. Because Atreus drew his strength from mother earth, every time Heracles threw him down, Atreus rose to renew the struggle. Finally Heracles held Atreus above his head until Atreus' strength was gone. Culture, because it deals with man in this world, keeps reminding us that we are human. It is difficult, remarked Blaise Pascal, for man to harmonize in himself opposite virtues and to occupy all the space

¹⁸ *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric*, p. 105.

between. Caught between the bestial and the angelic, man hovers in the peculiarly human world. Tempted to be less than man on the instinctual side of his being, he is tempted to be more than man on the spiritual side of his being. Who has not known the Christian who has given the answers without knowing the anguish of the doubts? In our modern culture we confront doubting and hoping man, man waiting for grace.

For the Christian, moreover, there arises through close familiarity with the modern in his culture a deepening appreciation of his own historic faith. Luther's explanation to the first article of the Apostle's Creed—that God has given eyes, ears, reason, and all senses to Christian and non-Christian alike—becomes important to the contemporary Christian. While we may not fully realize our brotherhood with man, we share a common creation with common equipment. Aside from learning about other peoples and other cultures, we can respond enthusiastically as well as critically to our own. We can rejoice in the common doxology of creation. We can say yes to the secular, to whatever gives us the feel of the world.

Because in our world, with its nearly insanely frenetic pace, life comes at us so fast that we hardly have time to think about it; because so much of life seems unintelligible, mysterious, enigmatic, opaque, one hint of light, one glimpse of order, one pleasant sound deepens our regard for created life in this world. The Holy Spirit, who hovered over the chaos at the beginning, still is, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, the Lord and Giver of life. And that life and that light and that flame

are more than vestigial remnants in the modern world.

A groaning creation standing under the judgment of death as a fallen order leads us to Christ in His humanity. In Christ all the little and great possibilities we human beings scratch and scramble for become meaningful possibilities. Hallowed work, words that promise honest correspondence between what is said and what is meant, human relationships that heal rather than wound, joyful family life, worshipful communal life, incisive use of the intellect, free exposure to the surge of human feeling, the power of forgiveness—all these we find in Christ, the "most man of men," as Luther called Him. Christ's assuming of human nature, "of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting," His use of the dramatic parable to instruct His listeners, His humble obedience and His openness to His Father's will in the events of His life, His loyalty to friends and family, the austere and moving simplicity of His Passion and death—all this about our Lord keeps us as Christians mindful of our need for exposure to the human in the modern world and thus to culture. In one sense, then, the Christian responds to his culture with the eye of Christ. This eye of Christ does not mean that the Christian perpetually reads into every form of culture his particular Christian set of values. But it does mean that if Christ is at the center of our lives, He is also at its margins, at its tattered edges and liquid rims. But we can respond with the eye of Christ because we see in the humanity of Christ a model of what it means to be human even in our modern world. We can respond with the

THE GOSPEL, THE PASTOR, AND "CULTURE"

523

eye of Christ, moreover, because Christ in His resurrection gives us another kind of vision.

With this vision the Christian sees and participates in his world with hope. This hope is aware of man's need for truth and comfort in the modern period. The truth about man need not lead him to despair. The comfort for man need not be a lie. Truth and comfort come to man in for-

giveness. And this culture cannot give. Only the lively witnessing Christian community can do that in the fear and trembling that dares to speak words of truth and comfort for a renewal of our understanding of God, of nature, of technology, of man in modern culture, for pointing the human community to what is beyond culture, the fulfillment of human expectation in the kingdom of Christ.