

Sermon follow-up

8/1/10

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1 Cor. 1:1-2; 3:9, 16; 5:12; 6:1-5

“Reading Paul Between the Lines: Church as nation, Culture, and Movement”

There is so much more to be said about the topics of last week’s sermon, that I probably need to write a book as follow-up. Unfortunately, time doesn’t allow for that, so let me give a few additional thoughts and then make some book recommendations in case you want to learn more.

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A lot more can be said about the boycott issue. I am sympathetic with the Baptists and other Christian groups who wanted to reign in Disney when they believed the corporation was veering away from its original vision of family-friendly entertainment. But it’s still a huge problem and does not represent the proper way for Christians to engage the culture. It fulfills too many negative stereotypes about “angry fundamentalists.” And even if it the boycott forced Disney to change it’s policies (which it didn’t!), it would have only done so for monetary reasons, which is not he kind of “transformation” the church is called to pursue.

Boycotts create an us-versus-them mentality. But that’s not the way the church is called to fight. We don’t use the weapons of the world for these kinds of ends. We must pursue an us-serving-them strategy. Otherwise, the true mission of the church will be severely compromised and misunderstood.

In the sermon I mentioned how in a “Christendom” situation, we might expect support from other cultural institutions. For example, for generations, Protestant saw no need for private, religious schools because the public schools were “our schools.” They used our Bible, taught our catechism, and gave instruction from the vantage point of our worldview. That is obviously no longer the case. In general, public schools are directly opposed to the work of Christian parents and churches. Parents who use the public school system must beware of what they’re up against. They can and should certainly get involved as much as possible in shaping public schools...but it’s not a battle we can expect to win right now. In fact, we’re mostly fighting an uphill battle, trying to keep from losing any more ground. More than actually winning

The same is true of politics. I would not tell Christians to give up political activism; just the opposite, in fact. But rhetoric like “we’re going to take America back” is simply counter-productive. I can understand where these conservative folks are coming from, but that kind of language does not square with the mission of the church. And besides, we will NOT succeed in “taking America back” apart from first and foremost reforming the church so that she is faithful in preaching, worship, discipline, mercy ministry, etc. Politics and political activism are noble pursuits for

Christians but we can make ourselves look like one more lobbying group. We should transcend the political messes of the day, even as we engage them. When we fight for truth, goodness, and beauty in the public square, we need to make it clear that we are acting out of love, with a desire to serve the common good, not just force our views onto people against their will (though I fully recognize that earthly politics is, in the end, a matter of coercion).

Many of the strategies evangelicals have adopted – political activism/lobbying, boycotts, media campaigns, etc. – make us look like we are seething with anger and bitterness rather than desiring to minister in the name of the Prince of Peace. These strategies make it look like we are more concerned with power than service, more dedicated to controlling the culture than blessing it. They will simply not succeed in the long run.

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Recently, a Christian group organized a “Quran burning” ([http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/07/29/florida.burn.quran.day/index.html?hpt=P1#fbid=ZY87fCO6\\_yx&wom=true](http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/07/29/florida.burn.quran.day/index.html?hpt=P1#fbid=ZY87fCO6_yx&wom=true)) Again, this is just not the right way to relate to a rival. It does not fit with the cross or the mission of the church. We do not witness to Muslims by burning their sacred book. We witness to them through preaching and service. We should befriend Muslims so we can demonstrate to them the love of Jesus. But burning the Quran is not going to open their eyes to the truth.

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Why do so many Christians have so little influence in the world today? We are so great in numbers and resources, but our influence is disproportionately small, especially when compared with radical liberals, gays, etc. There are a number of reasons for this (many helpfully explored in books like Andy Crouch’s *Making Culture* and James Hunter’s *To Change the Word*). Here are three quick reasons why we have so little pull:

1. Christians are not part of the ruling class elites. Now to be sure, the same could be said for the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26-31). But in our case, we are excluded from the elite, culture shaping circles of our society because we have settled mediocrity, because we have been anti-intellectual, because our preferred cultural forms are “low” and “pop” rather than “folk” and “high,” which is to say they are lacking in creativity and originality. Of course, in some cases Christians have been systematically excluded from elite circles as a kind of persecution, e.g., Christians who believe the biblical creation account rather than evolution are black-balled by the top academic science programs in country. But for the most part, I think our exclusion from the elite realm is either well deserved or self-imposed. Christians just aren’t known for excellence or brilliance, so we have little clout.
2. Christians have adopted cultural strategies destined to fail because we do not understand where culture comes from or how it is changed. Thus, all our

- efforts at shaping the mainstream, however sincere, miss the mark. This is at least part of the thesis of Hunter's *To Change the World*. Christians have not been active in cities, universities, and other culture shaping fields of influence. We think we can change the culture by capturing a grass-roots majority, but majorities do not determine the flow of culture except in rare (and usually extremely chaotic, revolutionary) situations. To change the culture, you have to actually penetrate the elite circles in politics, media/entertainment, and business that do the most to shape the culture.
3. Christians have been shaped more by the liturgies and rituals of the culture around us than by the gospel or the historic culture of the church. Thus, we do not have a well-developed counter-culture, out of which we can engage the mainstream culture with a viable alternative. In too many ways, we are just like the world, so we have no real chance of changing the world. We never "impact" the world because we live by basically the same system of values. An excellent examination of this reality is found in James Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*, particularly the way Smith shows the contrast between the secular liturgies of the mall, the market, and the stadium, and the church's weekly Lord's Day liturgy. Until we recover a biblical pattern of worship at the heart of things, we will continue to be shaped more by the world than the Word. As Smith demonstrates, ritual is at least as powerful as ideology. We will not shape the culture simply by engaging rival worldviews; we must challenge the rival liturgical and ritual systems that continually inscribe themselves on our hearts.

Why are we surprised when the world acts worldly? When prayer is excluded from government schools? When Disney props up ungodly ways of life, such as individualistic materialism? When current fashions step way over the line of modesty? Etc. Many Christians seem to think the homosexual agenda is the biggest threat we face today. From the standpoint of religious freedom, that may be right. But here's the problem: It seems that evangelical Christians are always looking for a "scapegoat" to blame our problems on. The trend now is to blame the gays. There is no question about morality of homosexual practice: In 1 Cor. 6, Paul says sodomites will not inherit the kingdom of God. It is an unnatural, immoral use of the body. That being said, let's just suppose evangelicals were able to stop the gay agenda...then what? We'd still have to face the fact of rampant fornication and adultery in our own communities (heterosexual forms of sexual sin that also exclude from the kingdom of God in 1 Cor. 6!). We'd still have to take responsibility for the astoundingly high divorce rate all around us (which denigrates marriage and makes things like 'gay marriage' plausible because the institution has been so trashed). We'd still have to come to grips with the fact that many church families are in shambles, children grow up and leave the faith in rebellion, numerous church leaders have been sexually unfaithful, etc. We really cannot blame the gay agenda for the biggest problems we face. They are of our own making.

All this to say: Cultural reformation will not happen until the church becomes a more faithful version of herself. The American evangelical church is culturally

impotent and not ready to exercise any kind of cultural dominion. More than a little dose of humility is in order, along with a heavy dash of repentance.

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There are a lot of good books that can help expand on the themes of the sermon. I think Peter Leithart's *Against Christianity* is probably the most succinct statement of what I was driving at in the sermon. I would also recommend his older, but larger, book *The Kingdom and the Power*. Here is a short taste:

It strikes many modern Christians as surpassingly odd that, with the Roman Empire collapsing about their ears and the barbarians invading from the north and east, Christian leaders of the first centuries were preoccupied with debates about whether the Son's eternal relation to the Father should be described as *homoousion*, *homoiousion*, or *homoion*. Unless we are Lutherans, we might think Luther a fanatic for his ferocious defense of his formulation of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament at the Marburg Colloquy. (In Luther's Small Catechism, the body and blood are said to be „in, with, and under“ the bread and wine.) While the church fathers and Reformers are hardly above criticism, the contention of this book is that *we* are the oddities, not they; *we* are the ones obsessed with trivialities. The church fathers and Reformers had a more biblical sense of priorities than we have. We have permitted the idolaters of power and mammon to set our priorities for us; we have let them convince us that the really big issues confronting the world are political, and that they can be solved through political means. Our forefathers knew better. They would tell us that the debates over *homoousion* are of vastly greater significance ~ ultimately, of vastly greater political significance ~ than the debates over Saddam Hussein. They would warn us that Arius remains a greater threat to our social well-being than acid rain. Reforming the welfare state is important, but our forefathers would have insisted that reforming worship is a more pressing need. Liturgy is closer to the heart of the church's concern than a hundred pieces of legislation. The next assembly for communion will have a more profound effect on the world than the next assembly of Congress. Baptism is a more crucial reality than the size of the federal budget. ~ (p. 21-22)

Authors like Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, Barry Harvey, Rodney Clapp, William Cavanaugh, and John Yoder have helpful things to say about the church as a culture and alternative polis. Willimon writes:

Christianity is a distinct culture with its own vocabulary, grammar, and practices. Too often, when we try to speak to our culture, we merely adopt the culture of the moment rather than present the gospel to the culture. Our time as preachers is better spent inculturating modern, late-twentieth-century Americans into that culture called church. When I walk into a class on introductory physics, I expect not to understand immediately most of the

vocabulary, terminology, and concepts. Why should it be any different for modern Americans walking into a church?

This is why the concept of “user-friendly churches” often leads to churches getting used. There is no way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can’t do that even with baseball! The other day, someone emerged from Duke Chapel after my sermon and said, “I have never heard anything like that before. Where on earth did you get that?” I replied, “Where on earth would you have heard this before? After all, this is a pagan, uninformed university environment. Where would you hear this? In the philosophy department? Watching Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood? No, to hear this, you’ve got to get dressed and come down here on a Sunday morning.” It is a strange assumption for Americans to feel they already have the equipment necessary to comprehend the gospel without any modification of lifestyle, without any struggle — in short, without being born again. The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it. God’s appointed means of producing change is called “church”; and God’s typical way of producing church is called “preaching”.

However, these authors do not really think cultural transformation is possible, so they end up with a sectarian, pessimistic outlook with regard to the church’s mission. For a more favorable view of Christendom, I recommend works by Oliver O’Donovan, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson, and especially Lesslie Newbigin, who seemed to do the best job giving a holistic vision to the church.

On culture, there are a handful of recent, pacesetting studies that are must reading. While Jamie Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom* is really about Christian education, his understanding of liturgy and ritual is vital to the church’s project of engaging the culture as a counter-culture. Smith’s book lacks balance; he tends to allow the pendulum swing too far in one direction, so emphasizing the importance of bodily and communal practice that he downplays the significance of doctrine. But his book is still remarkably useful. I also recommend Andy Crouch’s *Making Culture*, which gives a number of insights into ways in which Christians can engage the world in a mature and missional fashion. Crouch says we are too passive, only receiving and critiquing and accommodating culture, rather than actually creating culture ourselves. James Hunter’s *To Change the World* is a learned, helpful, and at times frustrating book. Hunter is extremely nuanced and sophisticated in his cultural analysis, but also comes off as altogether pessimistic about the church’s prospects of “changing the world” (which I think can be taken as synonymous with “discipling the nations” per Matthew 28). However, Hunter’s critique of evangelicalism’s “will to power” is very apropos. Hunter says we should stop talking about “changing the world” because culture is too complex and unwieldy for us to change on our own. Instead, we should focus on being a “faithful presence” in the places God’s has put us. Hunter shows that evangelicals are engaged in culture most strongly precisely where leverage to bring about change is weakest: In other words, for the most part, despite our most valiant efforts, we have been systematically excluded from “the

halls of power.” Hunter’s book is not without problems but has many helpful insights regarding how culture should be defined, how cultures actually work, why cultures are so hard to change, the impotence of grass-roots majorities and the power of the elite “ruling class,” the tensions and challenges built into Christian leadership, the problems with widespread politicization in our day, and the need for churches to recover catholicity, vocation, and mercy ministry if they are to be culturally influential. On p. 267ff, he includes some really remarkable anecdotes of Christians who managed to be a “faithful presence” and thus had a significant impact, though without making such an impact the explicit goal. They served the common good by seeking to bring about shalom in their spheres of influence, even if those spheres seemed tiny.