

**THE PREACHER AS CULTURAL ARCHITECT: BUILDING
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGH BIBLICAL
PROCLAMATION**

O PREGADOR COMO ARQUITETO CULTURAL: CONSTRUINDO COMUNIDADES
ALTERNATIVAS ATRAVÉS DA PROCLAMAÇÃO BÍBLICA

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ABSTRACT

The church exists as an alternative community, gathered around a message that challenges and contradicts prevailing world views. In this context, preachers must exegete and engage the surrounding culture, as well as define and cultivate the alternative culture. This paper taps insights from missiology, Christian ethics, the early church, and NT Wright's outline for world view analysis, to propose an interpretive matrix and a creative process for shaping a community's culture through biblical preaching.

Keywords: Preaching. Bible. Culture. Mission. Ethics.

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RESUMO

A igreja existe como uma comunidade alternativa, unida em torno de uma mensagem que desafia e contradiz cosmovisões predominantes. Neste contexto, os pregadores devem interpretar e envolver a cultura circundante, bem como definir e cultivar a cultura alternativa. Este artigo explora ideias de missiologia, de ética cristã, da igreja primitiva e de esboços escritos por N. T. Wright para análise de uma cosmovisão, propondo uma matriz interpretativa e um processo criativo para desenvolver a cultura de uma comunidade através da pregação bíblica.

Palavras-chaves: Pregação. Bíblia. Cultura. Missão. Ética.

INTRODUCTION

A handful of choices define every preacher. From where will the message come? Will it offer answers gleaned from the social sciences, public opinion polls, celebrity talk show hosts, or political dogma? Or will it flow from the acts and words of God discovered and experienced in the Scriptures? What will the preacher's sermons do? Will they instruct, leading to better informed hearers? Will they offer perspective, encouragement and comfort, leading to better adjusted hearers? Will they admonish and exhort, leading to better behaved hearers? Or will they seek transformation, leading to simply better, reborn, hearers?

These and other key issues fill the pages of every good Homiletics textbook. One question, however, which can, in subtle but powerful ways, define and drive a preaching ministry, is often overlooked: What is the preacher's, and the sermon's, relationship to culture? The answer to this question represents a fundamental choice in the direction a preacher's ministry will take.

Some preachers see themselves as cultural warriors. Like the prophets of old, they measure the values and practices of the surrounding society against the standards of God's Word, and find them wanting. Their sermons are characterized by indictment and judgment. They sometimes lead their congregations on crusades for cultural and social holiness, engaging the enemy on the battlefields of picket lines, political campaigns and protest marches. They wage a desperate battle between good and evil, which consumes their entire preaching ministry, and which also becomes the defining characteristic of their congregations.

At the other end of the spectrum is the cultural pacifist. Turned off by the activism of the "warrior", this preacher develops a conviction that the church's responsibility is simply to "go deep into the Word," to "make disciples" within the confines of its four

walls, to focus on the personal holiness of believers, rather than the corporate holiness (or lack thereof) of society. Sermons rarely mention, much less address, issues from surrounding culture. Only biblical knowledge, theological correctness and personal piety merit the pulpit's attention. This preacher assumes that hearers either will manage to create a bubble in which to live, isolated from the culture at large, or they will draw on their biblical depth, theological understanding and spiritual maturity, to figure out how to respond to the culture's challenges when they come.

Somewhere between these two poles, preachers as cultural diplomats engage culture in peace talks. Their strategy is to identify that which is good in surrounding culture, as a starting point for a constructive dialogue. Points at which the prevailing world view shows some affinity with Christianity become bridges across which a biblical witness may pass. The cultural diplomat could take several shapes. The preacher as "cultural guru", for example, insightfully analyses current cultural products and artifacts, giving up-to-the-moment Christian commentary on the prevailing messages of society. Another variation is the "cultural insider," who adopts the look and the lingo of a particular culture or subculture to gain a hearing with its members, wrapping the Christian message in a package that is attractive to them. Yet another diplomatic strategy is the preacher as "cultural answer man". In this case, the preaching ministry is built around offering biblical answers to the questions of the day. The strength of diplomatic approaches is that they provide space for positive engagement of culture. Their weakness is that they may often allow culture to set the agenda for the conversation. If we engage culture only on its own terms, we are always in the position of responding to its interests, leaving us with a sense of being adrift and at the mercy of cultural currents. In the process, we may miss the fact that the biblical world view has an agenda of its own. The danger, historically, is what has often been called the "cultural captivity of the church".

The issue of preaching's relationship to culture is a critical one. At stake is the very nature of the community that is to gather around the proclaimed word. Neither an isolationist community nor a merely activist community would seem to measure up to the ideal of the church that Jesus builds. Nor are we satisfied with a church that is culturally relevant but captive. The people of God we long to see gathered by our preaching is both engaging and intentional in its relationship to culture. We want our sermons to nurture a missional community. If this is to be, we must think seriously about the cultural strategy of our preaching.

The above categories are, of course, simplified in the extreme, and most of us

would not identify ourselves exclusively with any of them. We seek balance in our preaching ministries, so we are sometimes warriors, sometimes pacifists, and sometimes diplomats. Even our attempts at balance, however, point to the need for a coherent cultural rationale for our preaching. To offer such a rationale is the goal of this paper. This will involve shifting our metaphor from the language of war, peace and diplomacy, to the language of architecture. I will suggest in these pages an approach to preaching and culture that focuses less on engaging culture, and more on building a culture within an alternative community that lives with purpose and mission among the cultures of the world. We will walk this path with the benefit of light shed from the fields of Christian Ethics, Contemporary Missiology, and Biblical Studies, and it is to their contributions that we now turn.

EXPLORING THE QUESTION

I. ETHICS: CHRIST AND CULTURE

In 1951, ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr published a book so influential that its categories and terminology have continued to routinely appear in virtually any conversation about Christianity and culture (particularly in relation to public ethics) for over a half-century. *Christ and Culture*² attempted to offer a typology of historic responses to what Niebuhr called Christendom's "enduring problem": how to reconcile loyalty to Christ with loyalty to culture. One reason for the lasting influence of the work was the significance of this problem for 20th-Century Christian thinkers. In the preface of a collection of articles published on the 100th anniversary of Niebuhr's birth, the authors emphasized this significance:

It is fundamental for every ethical issue, for theology, for hermeneutics, for missions, and for Christian philosophy. It is about how the assumptions, values perceptions, and understandings of society (culture) penetrate us and influence our understanding of who Christ is, what it means to follow him, and what the mission of the church is. Conversely, it is about how Christians are called to withdraw from, or compromise with, or selectively affirm and reject, or transform, society and culture.³

The other reason for the enduring success of *Christ and Culture* is Niebuhr's clear and satisfying formula for categorizing responses to the question. "Christ against

² NIEBUHR, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951.

³ STASSEN, Glen H.; YEAGER, D. M.; YODER, John Howard. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 10.

culture” represents the rejection of culture in favor of Christ’s radical demands, leading to withdrawal from culture. “Christ of Culture” is the opposite position, held by those who “interpret the Culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person”, but who also “understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action ... such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization”.⁴ This position, of necessity, would have to ignore the more radical qualities and commands of Jesus’ ministry. The third and fourth positions are situated between the two extremes, attempting “both-and” solutions. “Christ above Culture” and “Christ and Culture in Paradox” both acknowledge to some degree the limited nature of culture, marred by sin. Each attempts to take seriously both the radical demands of Christ and the necessary demands of culture, and each seeks to resolve this fundamental duality of the Christian life through a kind of synthesis. The “Christ above culture” position, holding a positive but realistic attitude toward culture, recognizes that culture may lead us towards Christ, but that the ultimate “stage of existence” to which Christ calls us is beyond a merely “moral respectable life”. This life is hoped for in this world, but realized only by Christ himself, who “is not against culture, but uses its best products as instruments in his work of bestowing on men what they cannot achieve by their own efforts”.⁵ The “Christ and culture in paradox” answer, similar to the “Christ against culture” position, sees the culture as utterly corrupt, but acknowledges that culture is the necessary context of our lives. The solution for this type of dualist is to speak and live in paradox: “He is under law, yet not under law but grace; he is sinner, and yet righteous; he believes, as a doubter; he has assurance ... yet walks along the knife-edge of insecurity”.⁶ Niebuhr’s final type is favored not only in order of presentation and in its nature as the synthesis of syntheses, but it is also the only of the five types for which he offers no critique. “Christ the transformer of culture”, or the “conversionist” position, combines the pessimism towards culture of the “paradox” position, with the optimism towards God’s work through culture of the “above culture” position, to arrive at a positive attitude towards culture based on God’s work of transformation. Its adherents believe that “culture is under God’s sovereign rule, and that the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord”.⁷

⁴ NIEBUHR, 1951, p. 83.

⁵ NIEBUHR, 1951, p. 127.

⁶ Ibid, 157.

⁷ Ibid, 191.

While Niebuhr's categories have indeed provided satisfying and convenient terms for discussing the relationship between Christ and culture in the decades since his writing, it is the critique of his reasoning that proves most helpful for our current conversation. One chief critic, John Howard Yoder, has pointed out that Niebuhr's failure to offer any substantial critique of the "Christ Transforming Culture" model not only gives away this position as his preference, making his work as much an argument as a typology, it leaves the model itself with little specific definition. The chapter on transformation proceeds on a "higher level of abstraction" than the others, offering no criteria for recognizing or evaluating the cultural transformation in question.⁸ This ambiguity, together with the structure of the book, leads every reader to identify most with the fifth option. It is likely that all three of our imaginary preachers - the warrior, the pacifist and the diplomat - would see themselves as engaging in cultural transformation.

Yoder also notes that, while the last position is the only one without critique, only the first position ("Christ against culture") is seriously challenged. This is ironic since, by Niebuhr's own description, this position is the closest to Christ himself:

Niebuhr is saying with careful refinement and pluralistic respect, 'Jesus would have us turn away from all culture, but we prefer not to do this because of our more balanced vision of the values of nature and history. Yet in our affirmative attitude to 'culture' we do want to continue to show some respect for the criticism (or 'transformation') which flows from Christ's critical attitude toward it'.⁹

Yoder observes that Niebuhr positioned Jesus as one of the poles of a dualism, leaving us with the task of determining to what extent we will live in allegiance to him, and to what extent we will allow our allegiance to be tempered by other values within the culture. The conclusion is evident: "Jesus is very important; Lord he is not, if 'Lord' denotes an ultimate claim".¹⁰

This slanted framing of the argument/typology is also based on faulty understandings of the key terms. Yoder maintains, first, that when understood in light of the entire argument, Niebuhr's concept of "culture" is *monolithic*. He treats it as a "bloc" which must be dealt with consistently, whether by withdrawal,

⁸ YODER, John Howard. How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*. In: STASSEN, Glen H.; YEAGER, D. M.; YODER, John Howard. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 40.

⁹ YODER, 1996, p. 42-43.

¹⁰ YODER, 1996, p. 43.

accommodation, transformation or paradox. Yoder argues that this assumption is inappropriate, since “every morally accountable affirmation of culture discriminates”.¹¹ Furthermore, Niebuhr sees culture as *autonomous*. Christ may critique or convert the values of culture, but their rightness or wrongness stands independently of him.¹²

Yoder also contends that the meaning of “Christ” in Niebuhr’s argument has hardly any resemblance to the classic Christian understanding of who Christ is, or to the Jesus of the New Testament. He sets up his argument in such a way that

Jesus must be *by definition* inadequate. To do this, he has excised from his picture of Jesus precisely those dimensions, clearly present in the biblical witness and in classical theology, which would have made impossible the interpretation of Jesus as ‘pointing away’ from the realm of culture, and thereby as needing the corrective of a ‘more balanced’ position. That the ‘Christ’ who is ‘against culture’ has been defined as a straw man, and not as a serious historical possibility for real living people, is evident in the way this position is arbitrarily distilled out of the New Testament.¹³

Andy Crouch, in a more recent critique, wonders what kind of book Niebuhr might have written if he had chosen the title *Jesus and the Cultures*. While “Christ” is a Greek translation of a Hebrew concept, fraught with theological meaning, “Jesus” is the Hebrew name of a man who lived on the earth and redefined that meaning in his ministry of serving and teaching. In the process, he did not engage “culture”, but many “cultures”, with a variety of distinctives, to which he responded in a variety of ways.¹⁴

Herein lies the significance of Niebuhr’s work for our current discussion. As Crouch states it, “Niebuhr’s motifs have worn grooves in Christian thinking, steering us toward the assumption that there must be one right answer: that ‘Christ’ would always be ‘against’ or ‘in paradox with’ or ‘transforming’ culture wherever and however it was expressed”.¹⁵ All three of the preachers of our own typology - the warrior, the pacifist, and the diplomat - would see their engagement of the world in similar terms, even though their strategies might differ. “Culture” is a monolithic, autonomous entity. “Christ” is a distillation of religious beliefs and practices. Each

¹¹ YODER, 1996, p. 55.

¹² YODER, 1996, p. 55.

¹³ YODER, 1996, p. 60.

¹⁴ CROUCH, Andy. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008. p. 180.

¹⁵ CROUCH, 2008, p. 181.

preacher, believing strongly in a particular approach to bringing the two together, envisions a transformation of culture, in the name of Christ, on a grand scale. In the process, each misses the simple truth that Jesus is not an abstraction, but a person. That culture is not a monolithic bloc, but a myriad of social expressions, with varying qualities and values. That transformation takes place, not on a grand scale, but in small, concrete ways through common and creative encounters.

2. MISSIOLOGY: CULTURE, CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND COMMUNITY

These are truisms for missionaries, who have long struggled with issues of culture and communication. As preachers face ever more culturally diverse and secular hearers, we will find the insights of missiology to be ever more relevant to our task. James Nieman and Thomas Rogers, two homiletics professors who apply principles of missiology and cultural anthropology to a quest to equip preachers to address multicultural audiences, offer three key insights gleaned from their studies. First, culture is a *process*. Far from a stable force binding societies together, it is in constant flux. Second, culture is *plural*. Even people groups that we might assume to be homogeneous are actually made up of multiple cultural systems that influence and borrow from one another in a global cultural network. Third, culture is *paradox*, a place of struggle. While it may sometimes refer to the consensus people reach, it is currently more often a realm in which a variety of meanings compete with one another for predominance, as in American debates about “family values”.¹⁶ Culture as process, plural and paradox precludes a single, one-size-fits-all posture of engagement. Like cross-cultural missionaries, who spend years studying the language, customs, and worldview of a people group in order to craft an appropriate presentation of the gospel, and to cultivate a relevant church, preachers in the North American context must see the field with missiological eyes. We must exegete our culture as well as our text, and preach with cultural intentionality, envisioning the church that must be gathered if the Gospel is to have a transforming impact in our setting.

The world of missions has provided two provocative challenges in recent decades that have stimulated the conversation about the church and culture. The first is a missiological observation; the second is a theological reorientation. The missiological observation came from an Anglican bishop, Lesslie Newbigin, who returned to

¹⁶ NIEMAN, James R.; ROGERS, Thomas G. *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001. p. 15.

England from a 38-year missionary career in India, to find that the home culture to which he returned was as resistant to the gospel as any he had encountered elsewhere. In the mid-1980's, he posed a question, launching a discussion that continues two decades later: "What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call 'modern Western culture'?"¹⁷ He observed that most thinking and writing about Christianity and culture in the western context had, to that point, been done by theologians, such as Niebuhr and Tillich, who, though profound in their insights, did not have the experience of having attempted the communication of the Gospel from one cultural background to a radically different one. He contended that the time had come to begin applying the insights of missionaries who, in their struggles in the trenches of cross-cultural communication, had wrestled with the fact that much of what they had perceived as "gospel" was actually their own culturally conditioned perception of the gospel. He called for thinkers and practitioners to develop a missiology for western culture.

This provocation, termed by some the "Newbigin Gauntlet",¹⁸ has yielded a plethora of writing on both sides of the Atlantic, treating western culture as a cross-cultural mission field. In North America, a significant body of work has been produced by a community of researchers called "The Gospel in Our Culture Network".¹⁹ These writers, stimulated and led by Newbigin himself, have focused largely on the consequences that two major shifts in current western culture have had for contemporary mission in the West. First, the shift from a modern to a post-modern epistemology has left us with the need for new approaches to communication and apologetics. Second, the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom has left the church in need of a new rationale for its life and work - or perhaps more accurately, a rediscovery of its pre-Christendom way of being in the world. One of the dominant

¹⁷ NEWBIGIN, Lesslie. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986. p. 1. See also, NEWBIGIN, Lesslie. *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983.

¹⁸ HUNSBERGER, George R. *The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America*. In: HUNSBERGER, George R.; GELDER, Craig Van (Edit.). *Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996. p. 3-25.

¹⁹ HUNSBERGER, George R.; GELDER, Craig Van (Edit.). *Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996; GRUDER, Darrell L. (Edit.). *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998; GELDER, Craig Van (Edit.). *Confident Witness - Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999; GRUDER, Darrell L. *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000; BARRETT, Lois Y. (Edit.). *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

themes of this movement is the relationship between church and mission.

This leads us to the “theological reorientation” that contemporary missiology contributes to our discussion: that the church is, by nature, missionary. A key voice at this point was South African missiologist David Bosch. Having traced the historic development of the theology of mission and church, Bosch gave expression to a fresh ecclesiology he saw emerging in the 20th Century:

The church is not the sender but the one sent. Its mission ... is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its mission. ... Ecclesiology therefore does not precede missiology. Mission is not ‘a fringe activity of a strongly established Church, a pious cause that [may] be attended to when the home fires {are} first brightly burning ... Missionary activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work’. It is a duty ‘which pertains to the *whole* Church’. Since God is a missionary God ... God’s people are a missionary people.²⁰

The fleshing out the meaning of the church’s missionary identity has become a key task in the efforts to articulate a missiology for the contemporary West. Newbigin himself, even before the publication of Bosch’s work, conceived of the missionary process as a three-way conversation between the gospel, the church, and a particular culture. Each partner in the conversation encounters each of the others, forming three axes, each of which is essential for the dynamic and integrity of the mission.²¹

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Triangular model of culture-gospel relationships

²⁰ BOSCH, David. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991. p. 372.

²¹ NEWBIGIN, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. p. 165-172, cited and discussed in HUNSBERGER, 1996, p. 8-10.

The “Conversion Encounter Axis” represents the dialogue between the culture and the gospel, in which the gospel encounters the culture as a “challenging relevance”. It is relevant insofar as it is embodied (contextualized) in a way that makes sense to the people of the culture, and challenging in that it calls the culture to a completely new direction, a “radical discontinuity” with its past ways. Hunsberger notes that “embodiment without challenge would lead to syncretism; challenge without embodiment would be irrelevant”.²² The “Reciprocal Relationship Axis” represents the dialogue between the church, as community of the redeemed, and the gospel. The church, in a process of active discipleship, engages in a “hermeneutical circle” with the Scriptures. The reading and re-reading of the gospel continually shapes the church’s self-understanding, even as its daily living of the gospel shapes its understanding of its book. This circle itself becomes a hermeneutic for the world, an embodiment of the gospel. The “Missionary Dialogue Axis” is the conversation between the church and a local culture. Here, the church’s way of living in the world, its fleshing out of the self-understanding derived from its conversation with the gospel, becomes the substance of its dialogue with the culture.

This diagram, presented in the first chapter of the first book of the “Gospel in Our Culture” series, offers a general, clear and balanced blueprint of what the network’s members mean by a “missional church”. This term, presumably coined by leaders of this movement, seems to have become a buzzword so widely used among Evangelicals as to become subject to the law of diminishing significance. Any outreach or service activity of the church, from door to door evangelism to cooking soup for the homeless is likely to be called “missional” these days, yet, while these activities may well be a part of a missional church, they are not the parcel. The early literature as well, as the most recent literature, of those whose quest is to nurture a missionary church would indicate that they aim for something more than increased evangelistic and service activities; they want to nurture a radically renewed church *culture*.²³

If preaching has a role in cultivating such a community - if we would be “missional”

²² HUNSBERGER, 1996, p. 9.

²³ In the 2004 installment of the “Gospel in Our Culture Series”, the network offered a dozen indicators of a “missional church”. It is a church ... 1. That proclaims the gospel; 2. Where all members are learning to become disciples of Jesus; 3. Where the Bible is normative; 4. That understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord.; 5. That seeks to discern God’s specific vocation for the entire community and for all its members; 6. Is indicated by how Christians behave towards one another; 7. That practices reconciliation; 8. Where people hold themselves accountable to one another in love; 9. That practices hospitality; 10. Where worship is central; 11. That has a vital public witness; 12. That recognizes that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God (BARRETT, 2004, p. 160-161).

in our preaching - we should likewise seek a considered and balanced understanding of what this means. Such preaching might include the conversation to be expected along the “Conversion Encounter Axis”, embodying a challenging gospel in relevant ways before a secular culture. It might also include sermons that urge Christians to talk about Jesus, to engage in community service, or to see their secular workplace as a place of ministry and witness. Missional preaching, however, in the sense of nurturing a truly missionary church must be much more than any of these, and more even than their sum. It must be preaching that gathers a community with a missional culture.

3. “WHY WE CAN’T CHANGE THE WORLD”

Before we move on to a model for understanding and building culture, we should tap the insight of another recent author on the subject. Andy Crouch has offered his own typology of Christian responses to culture, or strategies for engaging culture, based primarily on the record of Evangelicals in the past century. We might, first, *condemn* culture, as Fundamentalists of the early 20th Century, withdrawing from cultural institutions ranging from the entertainment industry to politics. This strategy, while perhaps temporarily protecting ourselves and our children from the influence of culture, will likely have no effect on culture, since people do not give up cultural goods simply because someone condemns them. Another strategy might be to *critique* culture, engaging the culture in a conversation akin to that of Francis Schaeffer and others in the middle of the 20th Century. Crouch contends that this strategy, while perhaps valuable for understanding and conversing with culture, also has no effect, since it falls into the erroneous academic assumption that once you have analyzed a thing, you have changed it. A third strategy is *copying* culture, imitating it by taking its forms and replacing its offensive content with content of our own, as seen in the practice of Contemporary Christian Music. This strategy, however, tends only to feed a Christian subculture, with little or no real effect on the culture at large. The fourth strategy is to *consume* culture, even strategically, in an effort to influence cultural markets in positive ways. This strategy also proves ineffective in the contemporary global marketplace.²⁴

Crouch’s analysis rings true, but his best contributions to our discussion are two insights for moving forward. First, he calls us to distinguish between “gestures” and

²⁴ CROUCH, 2008, p. 80-93.

“postures” toward culture. A “gesture” is an appropriate response to a particular cultural artifact. Some artifacts should be condemned and others should be critiqued. Copying and consuming some aspects of culture is likewise appropriate. These responses only become inappropriate when they become habits, or “postures” toward all of culture.²⁵

The second insight is that the only way to change culture is to create culture. Each cultural artifact affects the world around it, changes the horizon of that which is possible. This change may be minute, but it is change nevertheless, and it is the only way that culture changes. The appropriate “postures” for Christians who would influence culture, then, are cultivation and creativity - cultivation of that which is good in our culture, and creation of new cultural artifacts to lend a Christian presence to the larger culture.²⁶

Crouch concludes that it is impossible to “change the world”, because, first, culture is only changed by the creation of new cultural goods, and, second, no single cultural artifact has changed the world on a global scale. All we can change is the culture right around us. We can only change our world when “Change the world’ becomes shorthand for ‘change the culture at a particular time and place’”.²⁷

4. THE CULTURAL TASK OF PREACHING

What, then, would we say to the warrior, the pacifist, and the diplomat? What is the preacher’s best cultural strategy? The cultural warrior must recognize that we cannot change (transform) the world (culture) with our sermons, because culture is not a monolith, but a plural, a paradox, a process. The pacifist must realize that we cannot hide from the world, because the church before which we stand to preach is by its very nature mission. The diplomat must see that we cannot allow the world to set the agenda because, when we do, we can only respond with condemnation, critique, imitation, or consumption - mere gestures with no missional effect.

We preachers must become cultural creatives, producing cultural goods (sermons/ministry) that expand the contours of our small corner of the world (a local church) so as to create a space for God’s people to engage in a vital conversation with the gospel and with the world. Our strategy must be to nurture a community of cultural creatives, indeed to create a culture that compels them daily to produce their own

²⁵ CROUCH, 2008, p. 93-96.

²⁶ CROUCH, 2008, p. 96-98.

²⁷ CROUCH, 2008, p. 191.

cultural contributions, and change the world, one small corner at a time.

For this we need a map, a blueprint, to guide our architecture. For such a map, we turn to the one who, in a three-year ministry, constructed a culture among a small, rag-tag community of peasants that would ultimately turn the world upside down.

5. JESUS THE CULTURE-MAKER

Jesus of Nazareth, like every other man, was born into a culture. Throughout his life, he continued to observe the customs, and to consume the culture, that he received from his cultural tradition. Most of those who gathered around him and his message shared the same heritage, and participated in the same traditions. To all the world, they seemed like a normal band of Palestinian Jews. Even his disciples assumed, throughout his public ministry, that he would simply fulfill the prevailing messianic expectations of their society. But even as Jesus observed the traditions and habits of his received culture, he subverted it. In subtle ways, he planted an adjusted world view in the minds and hearts of his followers, and undermined many of the cherished assumptions, as well as the political powers, of his society. This subversion, though subtle, was significant and apparent enough that it led to his death. It was also effective enough that the result was a distinct culture, a new community, that over the course of a few hundred years, in the face of persecution and poverty, proceeded to permeate and transform the collection of cultures known as the Roman Empire.

Was this an accident? NT Wright believes it was not. He demonstrates in two significant volumes that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing; that his culture-creating work was not only effective, but intentional.²⁸ He builds his analysis primarily around four things which he says a worldview typically does. These categories will provide us not only with an understanding of Jesus' work as a culture maker, but also with the blueprint we need for our own work of cultural architecture.

At this point, we must pause for an overdue task: a definition of "culture" itself. Each of the authors we have considered would define it in a different way. For Niebuhr, culture is "the artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural", consisting of "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social

²⁸ WRIGHT, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992; WRIGHT, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values”.²⁹ Newbigin defines it as “the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation”.³⁰ He likewise includes language, arts, technologies, law, social and political organization in the realm of culture. Andy Crouch, emphasizing the tangible aspects of culture, defines it as “what we make of the world”. Though he emphasizes the “product” aspect of culture, and specifically distinguishes it from “worldview”, he does acknowledge that it is “making sense” of the world as well as “making something” of it, concluding that culture “is the activity of making meaning”.³¹ For the purposes of our study, I would propose the definition of Nieman and Rogers: “Culture is a human construct that includes both our *patterns of meaning* and our *strategies for action*”.³² All of these authors, defining culture with their various emphases, include elements of both meaning and action, significance and product. This corresponds generally to what Wright calls “worldview”. Though he emphasizes that worldviews have to do with the “presuppositional, pre-cognitive stage of a culture or society”,³³ his description of worldview includes tangible aspects of culture, such as customs and artifacts. The distinctions are significant on a theoretical level, but for the purposes of our discussion, we will use the terms “culture” and “worldview” almost interchangeably, recognizing that “culture” is nuanced more toward tangible products, including language and social structures, while “worldview” is nuanced more toward meaning. The two cannot easily be separated, and they both figure significantly and jointly into our discussion of “cultural architecture”.

The four tasks of a worldview, in Wright’s analysis, include both meaning and practice. First, the worldview provides the *stories* through which we see reality”. Second, it provides answers to four basic worldview questions: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution? Third, the worldview defines the symbols of a society - artifacts and/or events that represent cultural “boundary markers”. Observance or non-observance of these symbols would define whether or not a person is an insider or an outsider. Finally, a worldview includes praxis, or a people’s way of being in the world.³⁴

²⁹ NIEBUHR, 1951, p. 32.

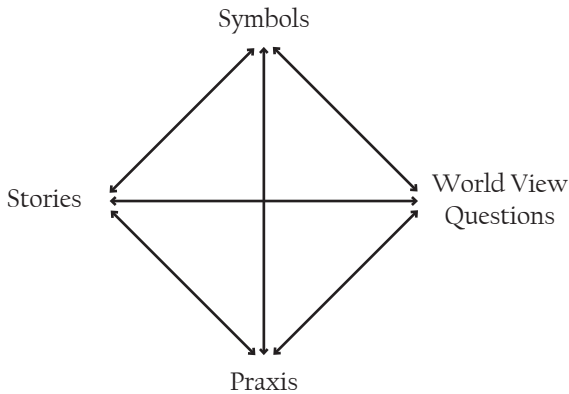
³⁰ NEWBIGIN, 1986, p. 3.

³¹ CROUCH, 2008, p. 23-24.

³² NIEMAN; ROGERS, 2001, p. 15.

³³ WRIGHT, 1992, p. 122.

³⁴ WRIGHT, 1992, p. 122-125.



Every task of the worldview relates to every other. The horizontal line between “Stories” and “Questions” is the basic axis of meaning, while the vertical line between “Praxis” and “Symbols” defines the realm of practice, or action. But the Symbols derive their meaning from the Stories and the answers to the Worldview Questions. And Praxis is the living out of these in the life of the community.

Wright analyzes the culture in which Jesus taught in light of these four tasks. The stories that defined Israel’s view of the world told of a God who had rescued his people from slavery, and had placed them in the promised land, giving them the Torah as a definitive guide for living. The symbols that marked the boundaries of their society were the Temple, the Torah, the Land itself, and their racial identity as the people of God. These stories and symbols were fleshed out in a praxis that included Sabbath worship and festivals, study of the Torah, and obedience to the Law. If asked the four worldview questions, 1st-Century Jews would have answered that they were Israel, the chosen people of God, that they were in the Holy Land, physically out of exile, yet in exile still, because they were ruled by pagans, compromised Jews, and half-breeds. The solution they expected to this problem was a true sort of ruler, given by God, who would reestablish the true rule of God.³⁵

Jesus and his followers shared this cultural heritage, but within a few years of Jesus’ ministry, a clear culture had emerged which was radically different. In Praxis, they celebrated none of the Jewish festivals, worshipped on a Sunday instead of Saturday, practiced Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in stead of animal sacrifices, adhered to a

³⁵ WRIGHT, 1992, p. 215-243.

code of conduct that was not a distinctive mark of a chosen race, but the way of life of the people of God of all races. In stead of striving and looking for revolution or the establishment of an earthly rule, they launched on a mission of proclamation of a new Kingdom. Their symbolic world revolved around the cross, with Christ himself seen as the locus of God's presence, completely substituting the Temple. Racial identity was supplanted symbolically by the church itself, as the people of God. The Torah was replaced by a new body of belief, a message to be proclaimed about the nature and activity of the true God. Who were they? A new group, yet not new, because they were the people for whom the God of Israel had always been preparing. Where were they? In the world God had created, but which does not yet acknowledge him. What was wrong? Paganism, persecution, heresy, and lust, which all need to be subjected to the rule of God. What was the solution? Israel's hope had been realized in Christ, victory had been initiated, and would be completed when the King returned to judge the world. The story they told was the same story, with a different ending. God had acted finally and climactically in Jesus to fulfill his promises to Israel.³⁶

How did such a radical transformation take place? Jesus appeared on the cultural scene as a Jewish apocalyptic prophet, telling a story of God's kingdom that seemed familiar, yet which subverted the prevailing telling of it, by redefining its terms and its expectations. He introduced, in the Sermon on the Mount, a praxis of the kingdom reflective of this new story. He undermined the symbolic world of 1st-Century Judaism in a way that provoked such controversy that it ultimately led to his death, and the creation of the most powerful symbol of the new community. He offered new answers to the Worldview Questions. Who are we? We are the true Israel, finally in the process of being redeemed by God. Where are we? We are in a kingdom that is not limited to the Holy Land, but which embraces all of creation. What is wrong? The ultimate enemy of God's kingdom is not Rome, but Satan, and enemy who must be defeated. What is the solution? Jesus proclaimed that in his own life and ministry, the kingdom was being fulfilled.³⁷

This brief summary of hundreds of pages of analysis of the texts and background of the New Testament hardly does justice to Wright's remarkable work. My purpose here, however, is to offer a broad picture of Jesus' ministry, as a possible paradigm for our approach as preachers to the cultural architecture of our communities. The framework of Wright's analysis not only gives us a retro-engineered schematic of

³⁶ WRIGHT, 1992, p. 359-370, 402-403.

³⁷ WRIGHT, 1996, p. 147-461.

the cultural transformation that Jesus' ministry achieved, it offers us categories for thinking about our own preaching ministries, as we seek to nurture alternative communities that would assume creative, transformational postures toward the cultures in which they live.

Story, World View Answers, Symbols and Praxis make up the essential structure of any culture, including the culture of a local church. While the preaching ministry of a church is not the only tool for cultural construction, it is the first and most visible, and a church's culture is not likely to develop independently of the message it proclaims. From the earliest days of the church, the "ekklesia" of God's people gathered around the proclamation of a culture-defining message. If we would, in our preaching, build a church culture that offers a distinct and viable alternative to the cultures of the world around us, we would do well to give careful and balanced attention to each of these four categories, both for our exegesis of prevailing culture, and for the definition of the culture we wish to build.

6. STORY: REDEMPTION AND REIGN

Story composes the foundation of any culture. The story of God and his people that we have received in the Scriptures is, without question, the narrative upon which the culture of the church must stand. This story encompasses all human existence, from our pre-history to our final destiny. It offers a comprehensive and absolute way of understanding ourselves, the world, and ourselves in the world.

We might consider such an all-encompassing story to be a liability in the face of a postmodern culture which, by definition, consists of "incredulity towards metanarratives".³⁸ Standard apologetics for postmodernity calls us to make a case for the "antitotalizing" nature of the Christian metanarrative,³⁹ or for its nature as a revealed faith narrative,⁴⁰ or for its tendency to critique and challenge even those who tell it,⁴¹ as opposed to the oppressive, rationalistically-contrived, self-legitimizing metanarratives of modernity. While these emphases might bolster an apologetic

³⁸ LYOTARD, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. p. xxiv.

³⁹ MIDDLETON, J. Richard; WALSH, Brian J. Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction? In: PHILLIPS, Timothy R.; OKHOLM, Dennis (Edit.). *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995. p. 141-154.

⁴⁰ SMITH, James K. A. A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited. *Faith and Philosophy*. Vol. 18, n. 2, April 2001, p. 353-368.

⁴¹ WESTFAL, Merold. Blind Spots: Christianity and Postmodern Philosophy. *Christian Century*. June 14, 2003, p. 32-35.

dialogue with culture, for our purposes of cultural architecture, our best strategy is simply to tell the story. We aim, after all, to create an *alternative* culture. We would not, then, attempt to tell our story in such a way that would accommodate the culture's preferences, or diffuse its objections, making our story more palatable, less offensive. On the contrary, we will emphasize that which is distinct, which defines us as a community that is unlike any other in the world. Many aspects of the biblical story could serve this purpose, but I would suggest two which should be at the core of the story and the culture of a Christian community.

First, the Christian metanarrative is a story of redemption. Were we to divide the biblical story into three acts, they might be titled "Fall, Quest, and Redemption". In the inciting incident, man's sin upsets the beauty of God's good creation, plunging him into a state of separation from his creator, with destructive implications in the spiritual, social, and material realms. In the story's quest, God initiates a long, painful and often frustrating process for bringing his creation back into right relationship with himself. The climax and resolution of the story reveal God's ultimate answer to the problem: he graciously offers redemption in his crucified and risen son. The theme of redemption and grace, evident in the metanarrative of the Bible, also comes to life in the smaller stories that make up the larger story, from the faltering yet redeemed lives of Old Testament patriarchs, kings and prophets, to the encounters and parables of Jesus. It is also the story of each member of the Christian community. Sin brings brokenness. Grace redeems and restores. Whatever the unique characteristics of any church, the story of redemption provides the fundamental underpinnings that make it a Christian community.

The Christian story is also, at its core, the story of the reign of God. At no time in our narrative does God lose control of his creation. He speaks the world into being. He defines the parameters of life. He pronounces and executes judgment. He causes kingdoms to rise and fall. He delivers his people in his time and in his way. He rules over history to bring about his purposes. Only his plans come to fulfillment. In the end, only his will is done, and only he receives glory. The church, built on the underlying story of God's reign over history past, present and future, lives in the world with a unique combination of humility and confidence.

In a culture driven by the stories of self-help solutions and individual autonomy, the story of God's redemption and reign stands in striking contrast. To the extent that this story lies at the foundation of the church's culture, this contrast will also be evident in its life. The metanarrative of redemption and kingdom may and should

weave its way into many facets of the community's life, but no aspect bears more of the responsibility than the pulpit. If the church is to present an alternative culture to the world, preachers must clearly tell an alternative story.

7. WORLD VIEW QUESTIONS: IDENTITY, LOCATION, SIN, SOLUTION

While a culture's narrative is fundamental to its understanding of the world, cultures do not exist on story alone; they also require clear answers to significant questions. We must abandon notions of a dichotomy between story and precept if we would seriously engage the task of cultural architecture. The story must be told, and it must lead to precept. Precepts must be clear, and they must flow from the story. The key questions that every world view must answer, according to Wright and others, have to do with identity (Who are we?), location (Where are we?), sin (What is wrong?), and redemption (What is the solution?).

In the broadest sense, the answers a Christian community must offer to these questions have not changed significantly since the earliest days of the church. Our answers must be restated and renewed with each generation, but we would do well to begin at the beginning, and to take our cue from the church that lived a radically new culture in the first century. As noted above, Wright's analysis portrays a community which saw itself as a new-but-not-new people, heir to the heritage of God's work among the people of Israel, yet composed of the redeemed of all the nations. They saw their location as the world God had created, marred by sin. The problem they saw was rampant paganism and disbelief, a world that had yet to be subject to the reign of God. The solution to the problem was the kingdom of Christ, initiated and realized in Jesus' death and resurrection, awaiting final completion at his return.

Our contemporary version if these answers will reflect our engagement with our times, and the heritage of the early church as well as twenty centuries of church history. Who are we? We are the people of God, living between the times, redeemed, called, indwelt by God's Spirit, sent on mission in the world. Where are we? We submit to the reign of God, yet we live in a world that does not acknowledge that reign. Our current context might lead us to emphasize that our location is more "diaspora" than "Christendom", that, like the earliest Christians, we are once again cultural outsiders, representatives of a radically new kingdom among the kingdoms of the world. What is the problem? Individuals, families, and society are broken by sin, separated from God, spiritually crippled and destined for a lost eternity. What is

the solution? Christ has provided redemption, and we can proclaim it freely, offering it to a lost world, in anticipation of his final return.

These answers flow naturally from the Christian metanarrative. They are neither new nor innovative. Yet we must build them into our proclamation as essential materials in our cultural architecture. To continue our metaphor, if story is the foundation of our culture, these world view answers are the supporting structure. Every practical element we might work into our culture-building must be shaped by these fundamental structural understandings.

Many years ago, at the age of thirty, I assumed the pastorate of a thriving suburban church. In those days, a high percentage of the latest books about pastoral leadership and church growth had the word “vision” in the title, and almost all of them, drawing from the best thinking and practice in the business world at the time, called for a well-crafted “vision statement” as a guiding principle for the church’s life. This statement should clearly and memorably state the church’s unique contribution, and serve as the chief criterion for the decisions and the direction the church might take. Ideally, it would be posted prominently throughout the church’s facilities. Every member could, if asked, state it from memory. If the preacher was doing his job as a visionary leader, the vision statement would make its way into every sermon.

Since I wanted to be such a visionary leader, I got right to work defining my new church’s vision statement. We discussed it at length with the staff and key leaders of the church. It made the agenda of the meetings of the church council, the deacons, and other important committees. We ran surveys and focus groups to get the widest possible input. Finally, we unveiled our vision: “We at HBC are called to excellence in ministry to growing families”.

Our vision statement did, indeed, help us to focus our attention and energies. It became a rallying point for the church, and helped us make wise and intentional decisions about how we would use our resources. I sometimes struggled, however, with a nagging sense that the vision was too small, that defining a “niche” for our church and calling it our “vision”, was not worthy of the church of Jesus Christ. Some of my friends in the ministry opted for broader visions, like “We Exist to Worship God and Disciple the World”. At the time, though I admired the greater grandeur of their visions, I found them too generic. What’s the point of having a vision statement, I thought, if it could be the vision of any church?

Now, nearly two decades later, I recognize a more basic flaw in the entire exercise: we were attempting to answer the cultural questions of our churches

without reference to the metanarrative of the Gospel. We defined our identity by that which we believed we could do best. We defined our location by the felt needs in our community. We defined the problem as whatever barriers existed to getting people into our church. We defined the solution as that which we were capable of doing to meet the needs of people, to overcome the barriers, and to attract people to our church.

I include this rather humbling confession because I have a sense that I am not the only one, and because it points to a crucial decision point in the path to culture-building. A community understanding of identity, location, sin and solution are essential for the culture of a church. The answers to the world view questions should be as internalized and readily discussed as the most well-crafted vision statement. But they must also be theologically and biblically grounded, flowing from God's story. We are God's people, subjects of his kingdom, living on mission in a land in rebellion against him. Sin cripples, destroys, divides, alienates. Redemption comes only in Christ. These truths will fill the minds of every member of a truly missional community. When they do, it will likely be because a preacher has effectively and intentionally planted them there.

Glenn Watson

8. SYMBOLS: BRIDGES BETWEEN MEANING AND PRACTICE

If story and world view questions make up the “patters of meaning” axis of our culture, symbols and praxis define the “strategies for action”. We address symbols first, because they provide the logical transition from meaning to action. David Scotchmer sees the understanding and analysis of symbols as essential for an evangelical encounter with culture, because they “embody the meaning of culture and serve as vehicles and repositories of meaning”.⁴² He draws on the work of Clifford Gertz, an anthropologist who, he claims, delivered the field of anthropology from both mentalism and materialism by conceiving of them as having been brought together in symbols. He maintains that “symbols express a worldview and join it to an ethos in ways that make it both meaningful and coherent, given the vagaries and humdrum of human existence”.⁴³

Symbols, then, embody the meaning of story and world view in a tangible way, making them visible in the life of a community. There is no culture without

⁴² SCOTCHMER, David. Symbols Become Us: Toward a Missional Encounter with Our Culture through Symbolic Analysis. In: HUNSBERGER; GELDER, 1996, p. 163.

⁴³ SCOTCHMER, 1996, p. 163.

symbols, and preachers who would take on the task of cultural architecture must also explore and define the symbolic world of the culture they wish to create. Our Christian tradition, beginning with the New Testament, has already provided us with the foundation. The Lord's Supper portrays the essence and the meaning of the story of redemption. Baptism embodies the identity of the believer as a creature reborn, regenerated, redeemed, and sent forth into a new life. These provide the cornerstones of the symbolic boundaries of Christian culture, and merit the pulpit's attention. Every observance is an opportunity to clarify meaning, and to portray practice. But even on days when these ordinances are not observed, they stand as an embodiment of our world view which we can tap in our preaching.

The cross is an example of a symbol that requires ongoing definition. In the early days of Christianity, the church gave new meaning to this instrument of execution, making it a central embodiment of Jesus' work of redemption, as well as his call to sacrifice and discipleship. Today, we must do a similar job of definition, reclaiming a symbol that has become to many a fashion statement, a cultural icon. However, even in the process of reclaiming this symbol, we have opportunity to speak to both meaning and practice in our preaching.

Such traditional symbols are an undeniable part of our symbolic world, but are not limited to these. We may still appropriate objects and practices in the world around us, or in our community life to join meaning and practice. A Portuguese friend of mine has taken the image of the *Caravela*, the small wooden ship invented by his people in the Thirteenth Century to explore the world, as a symbol of the church, or the network of churches he seeks to plant within his country and around the world. Resistant, light, rapid and versatile, this little ship could reach its destination even in contrary winds, could change course on a moment's notice, and carried in its bow the best and bravest of its country's culture.⁴⁴ My friend Paulo has spoken of the *Caravela* so often in sermon and conversation that, for the community whose culture he is creating, every mention of it now embodies in their minds the meaning of the kind of church God intends for them to be, and the inspires their hearts toward the mission to which he has called them. When meaning and practice are thus joined, a symbol has emerged as a powerful element within the cultural architecture of a community.

⁴⁴ PASCOAL, Paulo. *Movimento Caravela: Missão Evangélica Intercultural*. Unpublished Paper, 2009.

9. PRAXIS: OUR WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD

While praxis may come last in our thought process and discussion of cultural architecture, it comes first in the perception of those who will observe and experience our culture. We have painstakingly worked through the significance of our story, our world view answers and our symbols, to ensure that our praxis stands on firm, coherent and consistent footing. We do this because the world that watches us reads the entire process in reverse, from practice to meaning.

As is usually the case with the application sections of a sermon, the praxis quadrant of culture offers the most latitude for creativity and adaptation. This is the point at which we might undergo a kind of “vision statement” exercise, as described above, beginning with the foundation of meaning established in story and world view, and embodied in symbol, to define the unique ways of a given community, living out the meaning of the Gospel in a given context.

Certain general categories of praxis will be essential. We will need to define how we will live in community with one another. Since the very beginning, the church’s impact on the world around it often came as a result of observing the body life of its members. Related to this, we must address the ethical and moral conduct of those who make up the people of God. What consequences do our identity, our redemption, and our mission have on the choices we make in daily life? We will also need to define our way of living in relationship to the world. How do we relate to the cultures around us? What does it mean for us to be on mission in their midst? Last, but not least, we must address our praxis before God. How do we define and practice our life of worship, corporately and individually? What does it mean in practice to be a disciple, a follower of Christ?

In light of Andy Crouch’s insight that we can only change culture by creating it, I would suggest here that any culture that seeks to influence the world must include a praxis of cultural engagement and productivity. A community with a truly missional ethos will nurture the creativity of every member, encouraging and equipping them to see the secular settings in which they live and move as fields of mission, and the everyday products of their lives as acts of witness. The most significant praxis of a missional culture is lived out not in the confines of the church, but in the marketplace of the world.

10. PREACHING TO CREATE CULTURE

I have attempted to explore an alternative to “warfare” as the paradigm for cultural engagement in preaching. My premise is that the church can have its most powerful impact on culture not by fighting it, ignoring it, or even merely conversing with it,

but by presenting it with an alternative - a culture that embodies God's truth in consistent practice. I contend that a key player in this process must be the preacher who intentionally and carefully constructs a culture that reflects truth both in its patterns of meaning and its strategies for action.

Neglecting either axis in our preaching would result in a less viable and effective culture. The preacher who emphasizes the axis of meaning to the neglect of praxis may have hearers who have a good grasp of a biblical world view, but an alternative culture will not have emerged. A preacher who presents a strategy for action without providing the foundations of meaning may have, for a time, an active and well-behaved congregation, but signs of decay and deterioration will inevitably appear. A viable alternative culture will be marked by right belief as well as right action.

For the sake of practical application and possible discussion, I would offer two examples of how this rationale might work itself out in our engagement of culture in two very different areas: environmental conservation and human sexuality.

Secular environmentalists have a culture that includes all of the elements we have discussed. This culture has a story: The earth has developed over millions of years through a process of evolution and chance to a fortuitous yet delicate balance of systems that sustains life as we know it. It offers answers to the world view questions: Who are we? We are human beings, highly evolved organisms, who have appeared at just the right place and the right time for our existence to be possible. Where are we? We are on mother earth, a planet of exquisite beauty and delicate balance. What is wrong? Human beings have ravaged our planet, throwing it out of balance and threatening the existence of life as we know it. What is the solution? We must change our ways, and treat our planet with care, so that she may recover and sustain our children and grandchildren as she has our ancestors and ourselves. The key symbols for secular environmental culture are the earth itself, and possibly the scientists who study it. The proposed praxis is an aggressive program of conservation that includes recycling, limitation or elimination of fossil fuels, promotion of alternative and sustainable sources of energy, political activism, observance of earth day, and any number of other initiatives.

How should the Christian community respond to this growing and influential culture? While we may see nothing wrong with recycling our paper goods or buying a more efficient automobile, the axis of meaning is incompatible with our own world view. One solution is simply to adopt the praxis of environmentalism, since we may actually agree that the earth is in danger, and it seems right to do so. We might even

be motivated by the desire to give a good witness to our environmentalist friends, and not to offend them. However, if we stop here, we have not provided a coherent alternative to which they can respond. We have only responded with a gesture of “copying” the culture. We have created nothing.

A more consistent response would be to begin with our story: God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it. Seeing that it was good, he entrusted it to the stewardship of human beings, whom he had created in his own image. We will also offer different answers to the world view questions: Who are we? We are the creatures of God, created in His image. Where are we? We are in the world that He also created and entrusted to us. What is wrong? The world is marked in every way by our own sin - spiritually, socially, materially. Our wasteful and abusive lifestyle has scarred God's creation as well as our own lives. What is the solution? Jesus has redeemed us, transformed us, cleansed us. He has recreated us and given us the ability no longer to live selfishly, but to become the stewards of his creation that he intended for us to be, in anticipation of yet another creative act of God: a new heaven and a new earth. The symbols of a Christian environmentalist will include the symbols of redemption discussed above, with perhaps the added symbol of God's creation as an alternative to the evolutionary planet Earth. Much of the praxis, however, may be almost identical to that of secular environmental culture. However, the meaning to which the praxis points is entirely different, presenting a genuine cultural alternative.

Our response to prevailing culture surrounding issues of human sexuality, however, will involve both a different system of meaning and a different praxis. The temptation of the “warrior” preacher in the face of contemporary sexual mores and all the societal evils they create might be to focus primarily on the praxis - to condemn sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, and abortion. This gesture, “condemning” culture, would, in fact, be appropriate. However, if we fail to offer a cultural foundation for a different praxis, we have not offered a cultural alternative. Far from creating culture, we have succeeded in portraying ourselves as condemning moralizers who simply hold to outdated standards of behavior. Our message must include story and world view answers: God created us for authentic intimacy with Him and with others; that we are his children, living in a world where true intimacy is possible when we live according to God's purposes. However, many people live alienated lives, even as they seek fulfillment through merely physical pleasure, because they are abusing others and being abused by them as they search in the wrong ways for that which God intended. The solution is that Christ can make us new and restore us to

intimacy with God, opening the way to righteous intimacy with others. This pattern of meaning will lead to and sustain a strategy of action that is a distinct and viable alternative to the self-indulgent sexual culture of the world.

The warrior, the pacifist and the diplomat all Shifting epistemologies and the end of Christendom have called the people of God to a missional posture - to see our culture with missionary eyes, and to engage it with missionary intent.

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