

Editorial: Which influences Christians the most—gospel or culture?

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What force exerts the greatest influence on your congregation and the Christians you know? Are they shaped more by the gospel of Jesus Christ or by the culture around them?

Of course, the “Sunday school answer” always is Jesus. Christians pattern our lives after the teaching and example of Jesus. But is that the true answer? To what degree are our thoughts and actions formed by Jesus? And to what degree are they dictated by customs, actions and philosophies that have nothing to do with Jesus?

Two answers

Two answers quickly come to mind—“some of both” and “yeah, but”

“Some of both” is an accurate response, isn’t it? We try to follow the Golden Rule, the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, as well as all Jesus’ teachings about ministering to “the least of these.” But we acknowledge we’re influenced by modernity—from air conditioning, to musical instruments, to organizational charts, mission statements and goal-setting.

But the question is: What force exerts the *greatest influence*? It means only one answer will do. And it implies a deeper level of influence than the contemporary trappings of church facilities or management principles.

That’s where the “yeah, but ...” answer comes into play. If we take the

question seriously, and we start thinking about more than cosmetic influences, we're tempted to respond, "Yeah, but we're not influenced by culture as much as the church down the street." And thus begins the finger-pointing.

Split arguments

Typically, at this point, the argument splits along—what else?—cultural divisions. Easy answers come to mind: "Yeah, but liberals are even more shaped by culture; just look at how they've responded to sexual issues." "Yeah, but conservatives are even more shaped by culture; just look at how they've cozied up to the right-wing politicians."

The "yeah, but ..." response isn't helpful, because it ignores the advice your parents gave you when you started learning to make excuses: Don't worry about the other person. Pay attention to yourself. Decide for yourself to do the right thing.

In this case, that advice means taking a long, hard, honest look at yourself and your church in light of the gospels and culture. Then, give your loyalty to Jesus and the Gospels.

This decision can influence many areas of personal and congregational activity, but here are a few to get us thinking about it:

Finances

This may come as a shock, but Jesus didn't found the church on capitalism. The church in the West exists in a capitalistic society, so we can't escape the gears and mechanisms of our economic structure. But we ought to be able to think beyond the cultural materialism that surrounds us and sometimes suffocates us.

Confronting this truth shapes our churches—how we make decisions about

buildings and staff and programming and other ways we spend our tithes and offerings. A seminary professor once said, “Show me your church’s budget, and I’ll show you your priorities.” He was right.

The same thing goes for us as individuals and families. Are we more influenced by the lifestyle of our neighbors or by what Jesus said about helping the poor? What do we need, and what do we simply want? How much more effectively could we advance Jesus’ agenda if we back down from consumerist culture?

Worship

Holding the line on worship influenced by Christ or culture is a huge congregational challenge. If you love hymns and pipe organs, don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back. That, too, is cultural influence—broad cultural influence of a bygone era that still resonates with a strong church subculture. And if you love praise bands and contemporary choruses, don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back, either. We all know praise music tracks popular music culture.

The broader truth is this: Fighting about worship is cultural influence. It’s the influence of wanting to please ourselves and have our own way.

We’ll never worship exactly as the early church worshipped, and we shouldn’t. It would be so foreign to us that we’d be distracted away from worship. But we make too much of the style of worship. The purpose of the style is to facilitate turning hearts toward God. I first typed that sentence, “... turning *our* hearts toward God,” but it’s not about us. It’s about everybody within the reach of our congregation.

A composer friend observed a church could offer “polka worship,” and it could be wonderful if it were designed to help people worship the Lord and if it were done with excellence as an offering to the Lord.

We can worship in a variety of styles. We effectively fend off culture, not in the style of worship we choose, but in the attitude of our hearts as we choose to worship.

Relationships

How do our relationships reflect culture? We tend to gravitate toward people whose lifestyle, race and ethnicity, attitudes and interests, and even politics make us comfortable.

But we counter culture when we befriend people vastly different than ourselves. We'll never reach most of our communities unless we take the counter-cultural approach, unless we befriend the "others" who are different.

Our church's mission statement is "inviting diverse and disconnected people to passionately follow Jesus together." It's a challenging, frightening, invigorating, stimulating statement. Our community is home to people from many backgrounds, nationalities, languages, societies and faiths. We know we'll never reach them if we don't invite them into our circles of friendship and care. So, to reach the culture that sets the context for our church, we must transcend our white, middle-class WASPy comfortable culture to influence them—and ourselves—with the gospel.

How about you and your church? Which influences you the most—gospel or culture?

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