Is Your Church a Culture Club?

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By Brian Upshaw (www.brianupshaw.com)

Culture is something that Christians spend a lot of time fighting about. We use martial terms and speak of the “culture wars.” Believers are told to be “counter-cultural.” Typically, though, when Christians talk culture we are talking about “them.” We talk about “their” culture—meaning those outside the faith. Let’s think for a few minutes about “us” and “our” culture. That is, Christian culture.

Your church is a culture club. To some extent, all churches are.

• It’s why you wear what you wear on Sunday, whether it’s a suit or skinny jeans.
• It’s why you sing what you sing on Sunday, whether hymns with piano and organ or choruses with guitars and drums.
• It’s why you go to church on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night (or don’t).
• It’s why when you or your leaders try to change any of the above it doesn’t usually go over very well or feels artificial to newcomers or guests.

The way most churches and Christ-followers operate is more cultural than theological. But we can have a culture driven by our theology.

In his thoughtful book, Culture Making (IVP, 2008), Andy Crouch exposes some of the tendencies that Christians have in responding to culture. Crouch suggests that Christians generally choose one of these options in trying to change the culture:

• Condemn culture. Christians are notorious for talking amongst ourselves at how bad things are becoming. But does this have any impact on the culture?
• Critique culture. Sophisticated Christians may actually analyze the culture providing commentary on why things are the way they are and what they like or don’t like about it. Critics, while often entertaining, have little real bearing on moving the culture, though.
• Copy culture. Some Christians simply imitate less palatable culture with a parallel “baptized” expression of mainstream culture such as Christian TV or contemporary Christian music.
• Consume culture. Christians may choose to use their power as consumers to shape what is produced through boycotts of products or services or the consumption of other goods and services instead of the ones that are culturally suspect. (Baptists, think Disney). While some victories may be noted, rarely do such efforts lead to lasting positive impact on the culture.

Instead, Crouch asserts that the only real way that we can change culture is actually to create a new culture and cultivate that which is good in the existing culture. Thus, if we are to take seriously Christ’s command to be about making disciples, we must create a culture in which disciple-making is valued and the behavior of making disciples is natural and normal. Being
disciples who make disciples should be natural and normal in our homes, churches, and communities.

God made us to be creative. We are creative because He is creative and we are made in His image (Genesis 1:27). God even instructed His people to create a culture founded on His promises and His truth. Deuteronomy 6 is a bedrock text in the grand narrative of Scripture. In that chapter, God asserts that He, the LORD God, is one and that His people are to love Him with all their heart, soul, and strength. That He is one God and that His people are to love Him with singular devotion are certainly theological statements, but they were also counter to the cultural norms of the day. God was creating (or reinstituting) the true culture of monotheism (one God) where the cultural lie of polytheism (many gods) was pervasive. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 continues with instruction to parents that they were to be teaching God’s commands and statutes to their children, “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (ESV). Verses 8-9 continue that these words from God should be displayed on the bodies and homes of His people. What is this all about? It is about creating a God-centered culture.

Jesus gave us the new fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6 in the passage known as the Great Commandment, adding not only to love God, but love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). The Great Commandment is the cultural norm for a disciple-making culture. A disciple-making culture is one where we center on the Gospel of Jesus Christ by loving Him as LORD with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and, being compelled by that love, we love our neighbors as we have been loved by God.

Christians should indeed be counter-cultural. But what should be counter-cultural is not the things that make church a culture club, but a Christ-centered theology that moves us to love God and others fully.

So, take a look at your church’s newsletter or bulletin this week. What items do you see that indicate your culture? Are you content to be a culture clubber or do you want to be a culture maker? What is one step you could take to start creating a disciple-making culture in your church? In your home? In your workplace? How could you make the Great Commandment to love God and others the bedrock of your culture?

Start with prayer. Ask God to give you a heart to love Him and love others. Ask Him to spark in you His creativity in order to see how you could be making disciples.

Share a comment telling me what you are already doing to create a disciple-making culture in your context.