

# LESSON 8

## THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE UPON WORSHIP

### Introduction

"Curiosity killed the cat." That which is curious or fitted to excite attention may have killed the cat, but this old saying also hits closer to home. Is it possible that the curious entanglement of the Church with culture can have a negative impact on Christian worship? This inquiry will provide us with a transition in our journey before tackling the specific worship practices of a local congregation.

Christian truth has been closely connected to cultural forces throughout history. In fact, Eugene Nida states:

The necessity of disengaging Christian truth from cultural forces in which it has been embedded throughout history is one of the essential difficulties in determining a theological basis for communication.<sup>1</sup>

The whole movement of the Church has been intrinsically bound together with secular culture. This means that the way individuals and churches worship is significantly influenced by their cultural background.

The manner in which culture is perceived depends upon the type of discipline involved. For example, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists would consider culture from the perspective of their own individual fields of research. Culture is another way of viewing society. While culture identifies patterns of behaviour, society designates the particular aggregate of those participating in the culture. One may ask: What cultural influences come to bear on the way people relate and react to one another in the worship setting? Or, what cultural influences may be seen in the art forms, architecture and cultic practices used in the Church?

The churches in Asia Minor faced problems very distinct from the churches in Palestine. Many of these difficulties were due to the multi-cultural make-up of church membership. Roman, Hellenist and Hebrew cultures combined to make the churches eclectic institutions.

In a sense, culture is learned behaviour socially acquired. Therefore churches today are strongly influenced by the material and non-material traits that have been passed on from previous generations. A church's willingness to adapt to change or to accept new ideas is often tempered by thinking coloured by culture.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1960), p. 206.

Christian truth has been closely connected to \_\_\_\_\_ forces throughout \_\_\_\_\_.

*(cultural, history)*

The \_\_\_\_\_ movement of the Church has been intrinsically bound together with \_\_\_\_\_.

*(whole, secular, culture)*

State two questions we need to consider concerning cultural influences on worship.

*(Compare your answers with the text.)*

In a sense, culture is \_\_\_\_\_ behaviour socially \_\_\_\_\_.

*(learned, acquired)*

Having caught your attention or perhaps your curiosity concerning the way in which your life has been influenced by culture, let me invite you to join me in a closer look at this addictive and sometimes imperceptible phenomenon. This side trip will consist of three parts: the definition and meaning of culture, cultural difficulties of the developing Christian Church, and culture in today's worship.

### The Definition and Meaning of Culture

What is the definition of the word "culture?" The root of the word comes from the Latin *colo*, meaning "I devote, or apply myself to." The word for "cult" as well as the agricultural term "cultivate" comes from the same root as culture. Culture may be thought of as the cultivation of civilization. Thus one speaks of the Spanish, West Indian or British cultures. Culture is described as the intellectual side of civilization. It is concerned with peoples' attempt to understand themselves in relation to their environment. Patterns of culture emerge: language, ritual, art forms, building, artifacts and structures of time. Essentially, culture involves the formation of people in relationship primarily with persons, but beyond this with their total environment.

Unfortunately, culture has been mistakenly limited to the behaviour of the elite. In other words, cultured persons listen to classical music, attend the opera, select their clothes according to the latest fashion guides and conform to certain prescribed social customs. This is a very narrow and incomplete concept of culture.

R.G. Tannehill says: "A culture is a patterning of human experience, an interpretation of what it means to be a man and a people."<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists would refer to culture as an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns, ideas, artifacts and other products. F.W. Dillistone raises the perplexing question:

Supposing that we can use the word culture to denote an integrated system of behavior patterns, what does this imply for the communication of the Gospel of Christ?<sup>3</sup>

With the great influx of population to the metropolitan areas of the world following World War II, it is increasingly more difficult to think in terms of one culture, but rather multi-cultures.

<sup>2</sup> See F.W. Dillistone, "Some Thoughts on Religion and Culture" in *The Theological Educator*, Vol. X, Number 2 (New Orleans: published by the faculty of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Spring, 1980.)

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.

Define culture.

*(Compare your answer with the text.)*

Modern churches need to think in terms of

*(multi, cultures)*

## Cultural Difficulties of the Developing Christian Church

The early Christian Church is a very simple community that bases its beliefs in the apostles' experiences with Christ and the conviction that the Holy Spirit is in the Church, empowering and unifying the believers. The Church is scattered in cells and congregations throughout the Mediterranean area. Culturally the Church has its strongest impact in multi-cultural areas where there has been a breakdown of cultural barriers rather than the rigid adherence to either integrated Judaism or some mixture of Hellenism. But culturally the early Church has to deal with the heritage of Judaism and the contemporary Hellenistic cultures surrounding it. For the Jew, Judaism is synonymous with culture—it is culture!

Tension has always existed between the Christian Church and secular culture. This tension exists because Christians are "in" the world and not "of" it. The concept of separation from the world is demonstrated in the Epistle to Diogenetus, written possibly in the second century:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country or speech or customs. For they do not live somewhere in cities of their own or use some distinctive language or practice a peculiar manner of life. They have no learning discovered by the thought and reflection of inquisitive men, nor are they the authors of any human doctrine, like some men. Though they live in Greek and barbarian cities, as each man's lot is cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and the rest of their living, their own way of life which they display is wonderful and admittedly strange. They live in their native lands, but like foreigners. They take part in everything like citizens and endure everything like aliens. Every foreign country is their native land and every native land a foreign country.<sup>4</sup>

While Christians are involved in numerous activities related to society or to their environment, they always face cultural conflict and possible persecution. This is because their value system is different from that of the world.

Early Christians, looking forward to the imminent return of Christ, do not identify with the cultural evils of their age. Rather, they are obe-

The early Church had its greatest impact in \_\_\_\_\_ areas.

*(multi, cultural)*

Tension has always existed between the Christian church and \_\_\_\_\_.

*(secular, culture)*

Why do Christians often face conflict with culture?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
*(Compare your answer with the text.)*

<sup>4</sup> See *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), Quoted by Eugene A. Nida in *Message and Mission*, p. 207.

dient to the teachings of the beloved apostle John:

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world (1 John 2:15,16).

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

The concept of the world as morally evil is found in Paul's Epistles. It is even more prevalent in John's writings, with probably as many as twenty-seven references with moral implications in John 14-19 and sixteen references in 1 John.<sup>5</sup>

As Christianity moves into the Greek world, it finds the Greeks with little sense of congregational worship, except for those who had been influenced by the Jewish synagogue in their midst. On the one hand, Jewish cultural characteristics persist to a large extent. But on the other hand, little by little the metrical hymns of the Greeks and Romans take the place of the ametrical psalms of the Jews. The considerable participation of the worshippers as in the synagogues gives way in most churches to a hierarchical form in which the minister or priest represents the people, just as the emperor and his representatives did "for" the people instead of "with" them. By this time much of the Church's opposition to the world had greatly diminished. Niebuhr, writing concerning "The Christ of Culture," points out some of the problems the Church faced in adjusting to culture:

It is inevitable that in all these attempts to solve the problem of the church and culture, there has been a commingling of behavior, motivations, and beliefs, for man is not so easily compartmentalized that he can act out his life by playing two roles on the same stage and during the same scene. Inwardly, at least, he is not "of this world," but outwardly he must be "in this world," if he is to communicate effectively to it and with it. The church has therefore always reflected the cultural context in which it has had its life. The pious, strict attitudes of the early church in Jerusalem were vastly different from the sophisticated worldliness that characterized the church in Corinth. Members of the

<sup>5</sup> Walter Hobhouse, *The Church and the World in Idea and in History* (London: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 352-53. Quoted in T.B. Maston, *Christianity and World Issues* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 4.

List ways the Greeks and Romans influenced the young Christian Church.

---

---

---

*(Compare your answers with the text.)*

Jerusalem church, who were narrow in their cultural outlook, and who insisted on keeping many aspects of the law with a zealous provincial suspicion of the spread of their faith, would have been utterly shocked to have visited the Corinthian church, which indulged in gluttonous feasts to celebrate the *agape*, and whose loose morals shocked not only the much-travelled Paul, but evidently had even caused embarrassing gossip in the pagan community.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Christians in Corinth might have felt that the church in Jerusalem was formal and cold spiritually.

Richard Niebuhr makes an important analysis of the tensions which have characterized the Church in its various periods throughout history. He distinguishes three major positions of the Church: (1) "Christ against culture," (2) "Christ of culture," and (3) "Christ above culture." This last category is divided into three subdivisions: (a) the synthesists who look upon Christianity as the fulfilment and restorer of human values, (b) the dualists who contend that man is subject to two moralities and must live in tension, and (c) the conversionists who believe that God comes to man within his culture in order to transform man and through him the culture.<sup>7</sup> Whether coping with Judaism or Hellenistic philosophies, the early Christian Church always had to reckon with culture.

Three positions of the Church regarding culture have been identified by R \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_.

(Richard, Niebuhr)

### Culture in Today's Worship

The Church cannot carry out the commission of our Lord unless it ministers to people where they are, regardless of their cultural orientation or spiritual condition. Worship must be redemptive by providing the spiritual environment whereby the sinner meets the Saviour and finds forgiveness through the confession of sin and repentance.

There are at least five ways in which culture makes its impact on worship in the Church today. Note how many of these influences are true of your experience.

There are at least \_\_\_\_\_ ways in which \_\_\_\_\_ makes an impact upon \_\_\_\_\_.

(five, culture, worship)

<sup>6</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), quoted in Nida, *Message and Mission*, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

## Language

One of the most obvious cultural influences upon worship is in the *communication of ideas by means of language*.

Speech is a common vehicle of communication. People living in a given area may not only speak the same language, but often with foreign accents, vocabulary and meaning indicating subcultural (or mixed) relationships. Such is the case with Anglos living in a Spanish or West Indian country. Ideas are expressed through language, and people's thought patterns are often the result of their culture. The challenge to worship leaders is to use concepts that communicate to the congregation the meaning the leaders intend. To be successful at this, worship leaders must understand fully the cultural-mix of the congregation. Obviously, a people's historical, sociological, economic and educational background influences greatly their thought and speech patterns.

## Habits and customs

What has been said concerning language and ideas may also be true regarding *habits and customs*.

The environment will have tremendous influence. For example, people living on high, isolated, mountain plains or in predominantly agricultural surroundings will have likely a different life-style and outlook from those who live in bustling industrialized centres or in seaports abounding with international commerce. Naturally, in a mobile society where cultures intermingle the basic culture changes. Sometimes this change happens on its own without any special effort or intentionally because people and groups (like churches) make it happen. Certainly, location conditions the way people think and act. This poses a problem sometimes for church leaders and pastors who grew up under the influence of one culture to adjust and minister effectively to those of another culture. Even though they speak the same language, there are subtle differences and meanings in the way people think and react to which church leaders must be sensitive.

Because of the culture out of which people come, the churches may need to plan special services and activities to combat negative cultural influences, such as unchristian festivals, carnivals and other pagan events. These are times when the churches have a dynamic opportunity for Christian witness. Young people especially need the church's support in providing positive activities to off-set these unchristian cultural influences.

Worship is obviously affected by \_\_\_\_\_.

(language)

Worship leaders need to use \_\_\_\_\_ that help the congregation to get the \_\_\_\_\_ the leaders \_\_\_\_\_.

(concepts, meaning, intend)

Environment has tremendous \_\_\_\_\_.

(influence)

The predominant religion and the amount of religious freedom, along with the influence of evangelical Christianity, are other factors influencing worship. There are at least two ways in which worship is influenced by these circumstances: (1) The gospel of Christ must be presented simply to enable the congregation to differentiate between the traditional religion and life in Christ; and (2) the outreach programme of evangelism from the pulpit to the pew may be affected by governmental regulations. Where evangelicals are numerically strong, there is usually more freedom for evangelistic efforts.

The social and economic standing of the congregation may affect the aesthetics of worship. People who have to struggle for their daily existence may not be as concerned with art forms or sensitive regarding the appearance and equipment of the church building as those who are more affluent.

The question of social acceptance of active believers into the upper social strata of society or of job promotion poses a cultural and spiritual problem. This assimilation process may be especially true concerning second and third generation Christians. Through a genuine encounter with Christ in the worship experience, these believers may recognize their worth as persons and be helped to evaluate and off-set the influence of secular culture on their lives in the light of gospel truth.

### **Architecture**

To some degree *architectural design* may be affected by religious culture. For example, in countries where evangelical work was begun by British missionaries, church buildings often reflect a strong Anglican influence. There may be the divided chancel with the cross in the centre. Theological differences concerning church design may not be fully understood, accepted, or make significant difference to church members. The principal worship services usually will be more formal and objective; that is, God-centred, with a strong emphasis on the transcendence of God.

Churches built under the influence of American mission boards usually reflect the architecture of the Free Church tradition in the United States. Hymnals donated by American churches are frequently used. These hymn books are usually one or two generations out of date by American standards. Worship is generally less formal and more subjective; that is, person-centred in nature. The number in attendance at the services is considered extremely important due to a prevailing emphasis on evangelism. The

Worship will also be influenced by the \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ of the area.

(predominant, religion)

Another factor that influences worship is the  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ standing of the  
people.

(social, economic)

Is the following statement true or false?

The change in social status within society may pose special  
problems for the individual and his church.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(true)

Worship can also be affected by a \_\_\_\_\_.

(architecture)

element of self-expression is manifested through verbal testimonies from the congregation. Song services are often jubilant as members of the congregation, as well as the person leading the singing, clap their hands or play loudly on tambourines during the singing. This participation possibly adds to the ingredient of joy to the service, but unfortunately what is being sung would be unintelligible to a non-believer. It is very easy for primitive feelings and emotions to get out of hand and become a hindrance to singing with spirit and understanding. Churches should remember Paul's admonition to do everything decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).

The observation should be made that even in the most formal churches, the evening services are more relaxed and informal. Gospel "choruses" replace stately hymns as emphasis seems to be placed on the joy of the Lord and Christian fellowship. Youth choirs or ensembles accompanied by a variety of musical instruments play compositions relevant to their generation. The experience of joy is reflected corporally by the clapping of hands and the playing of instruments normally not included in the main worship services.

### **Seasonal programmes**

Culture is also reflected in *the way seasonal programmes are carried out*. This influence can be seen especially during Christmas, Easter and Harvest celebrations as well as during evangelistic crusades. Even Baptism and the Lord's Supper reflect cultural influences as well as weddings and funerals.

### **Pastoral leadership**

*The concept of pastoral leadership* also has cultural as well as theological overtones. In churches emphasizing the Priesthood of the Believer, ministers recognize the valuable contribution members can make during worship as well as in the other ministries of the congregation.

Have you begun to sense by now how much you are indebted to cultural conditioning in terms of the way in which you have learned to worship and continue to lead others in worship experiences? Culture provides us with many positive traits which contribute significantly to our uniqueness. It also has the potential of negative influence which can weaken or destroy our ability to worship effectively. A review of the highlights of this lesson may be useful in helping you discern the difference.

Culture can be observed in the church through its emphasis of \_\_\_\_\_ programmes.

(seasonal)

The concept of pastoral leadership also has \_\_\_\_\_ as well as \_\_\_\_\_ overtones.

(cultural, theological)

## Summary

Since culture is learned behaviour socially acquired, people come to worship with a cultural orientation. The Church cannot escape the influences of culture. Since the Christian Church is "in" the world but not "of" the world, worship leaders must become knowledgeable and sensitive in meeting the congregation's worship needs. The Church must take the best from local culture and use it for God's glory rather than allowing the negative aspects of culture to influence the Church.

The early Christian Church was born in a cultural setting. For a brief time Judaism and Christianity existed side by side until they were no longer compatible. The Church faced problems of a multi-cultural nature as it expanded into other lands. Mature Christian growth was hindered by the mixing of Hebrew, Hellenist and Roman cultures. Paul shows great concern because of freedoms taken in worship as well as false doctrines that grow out of unchristian cultures.

The Church of today exists in the midst of an ocean of cultures. This cultural mix presents both a challenge and an opportunity for worship leaders to identify with their people. Many of the Church's cultic practices will be determined by the cultural mix of the congregation. Civil as well as religious holidays should be taken into account in planning the church's Calendar of Activities in order to plan Christian activities that will off-set events of an unchristian nature.

Church buildings often reflect historical and cultural influences. Missionary work started by British missionaries will often reflect an Anglican influence in church design. Meanwhile, churches begun from American influence usually will take on the appearance of church buildings in the United States.

Culture is also reflected in the observance of seasonal activities. Although Christmas and Easter fall on the same Sunday in many nations around the world, methods of celebration will vary according to local culture. Other events such as weddings, funerals, Harvest celebrations also reflect cultural influences.

Now you can breathe a sigh of relief. The more conceptual part of our journey has come to an end. Against this theoretical framework it is possible to turn unapologetically towards the more practical aspects of planning and implementing worship experiences in a local congregation. Your own leadership style becomes crucial in how you choose to relate to this task as well as how you allow the leadership of the Holy

People come to worship with a \_\_\_\_\_ orientation.

*(cultural)*

The early Christian Church was born in a \_\_\_\_\_ setting.

*(cultural)*

The Church today exists in an ocean of \_\_\_\_\_

*(cultures)*

Spirit to work through you. You have had "meat and potatoes." How about some "bread and butter" to sustain you on the final part of our journey as we arrive at the doorstep of your congregation?

## Home Study Exercise

**Basic activity** (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. What influences significantly the way individuals and churches worship?

---

---

2. What is culture?

---

---

---

3. Why must we think in terms of multi-cultures?

---

---

4. Where did the early Church have its strongest impact?

---

---

5. Why is there tension between the Church and secular culture?

---

---

---

6. How did the world of the Greeks and Romans influence the young Christian Church?

---

---

---

7. According to Niebuhr, what three positions has the Church taken regarding culture?

---

---

---

8. How does language influence worship?

---

---

---

9. List three ways that habits and customs affect worship.

---

---

---

10. How may the rise in social status of Christians affect worship?

---

---

---

11. How can church architecture influence worship?

---

---

---

**Supplementary activity** (*Levels 2 and 3*). The activities in this lesson are taken from the study guide.

1. What is a multi-culture? What bearing does this have on worship?
2. Explain Niebuhr's statement that the Church has taken three positions towards culture.
3. List things in your culture that influence worship in your congregation.
4. Give examples as to how church architecture influences worship.

**Advanced activity** (*Level 3*).

1. Write a paper entitled: "Culture and Worship."
2. Examine your church building to see what influence it has on your congregation's worship. Write out any things you would suggest to change to improve worship in your church.

### **Seminar Discussion**

1. Discuss the meaning of culture and its effect upon Christian worship.
2. What is the importance of multi-cultures?
3. Ask advanced students to present papers they wrote entitled: "Culture and Worship." Discuss the content and ideas presented in the papers.
4. Examine the influence of culture upon how you worship. What changes could be made?