

Transformation of Culture and a Nation

Written by Calvin Fox

Wednesday, 13 January 2010 08:56 - Last Updated Wednesday, 03 March 2010 15:55

Introduction

Excerpts from a message entitle, "Transforming Culture" by Dr Al Mohler, President of Southern Seminary-

"We must understand that, in the Christian worldview, culture is important, but never ultimate. Beyond this, we acknowledge that God is sovereign, and His providence rules over all.

The mission of the Church in the midst of this cultural crisis is to proclaim the truth ... In the face of rampant relativisms, the believing Church must proclaim the truth of God's Word, the permanence of His commands, and the reality of His judgment."

"The Church which proclaims that adultery, premarital sex, and homosexuality are inherently and unquestionably sinful will quickly discover what it means to be cut off from the cultural mainstream. The preacher who takes on the divorce culture and takes his stand for the enduring covenant of marriage will run into direct confrontation with society's attraction to "open marriage" and what some now describe as "serial monogamy." The Christian who stands in defense of the unborn will be told that her voice is unwanted, unheeded, and unwelcome--and in no uncertain terms.

God's Word ... reveals the only means of salvation. Our charge is to bear witness. The proclamation of the truths of God's Word is the only means available to us of cultural transformation. In the context of post-Christian America, our task is to preach the Gospel and to proclaim the truths of God's Word."
[my emphasis]

<http://www.albertmohler.com/?cat=Blog&cid=1107>

We notice that Dr Mohler does not define "Culture". He lists matters that he believes describes American culture: they are matters of morality or social behavior, e.g.- divorce rate, adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, divorce rate and abortion. He also mentions moral relativism and the rejection of absolutes by many younger people.

Dr. Mohler declares that the church's answer to changing these moral matters and the culture

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characterized by them is preaching the Gospel and the moral commands of the Bible. This, he says, "is the only means available to us of cultural transformation". This point of view is both seriously inadequate and unscriptural.

Dr Mohler is a Calvinist and many other Calvinists agree emphatically with what he has said. Here is another Calvinist who takes a different view. I

From the website of Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois

"The mission of Trinity Christian College is to provide Biblically informed liberal arts education in the Reformed tradition. Our heritage is the historic Christian faith as it was reshaped in the Reformation, and our fundamental basis of governance and instruction is the infallible Word of God as interpreted by the Reformed standards. [Our] Motto: Trinity Christian College is a community of Christian scholarship committed to shaping lives and transforming culture."

The following is from a speech by the College President, Dr Steve Timmermans

"How do we, current students and alumni, faculty and staff of Trinity, engage in God's work in God's world? In short, how do we transform culture? First, before answering the question, let's be clear about the jargon. While it may be familiar to some of you, for others, the idea of transforming culture is still a little fuzzy.

Let's look first at culture. By using the word culture, do we mean just the elements of society that embody artistic expression? Not at all. By culture, do we mean the specific beliefs and behaviors typical of a particular social, economic, or ethnic group? No; actually, we mean humankind and humankind's varied practices, structures, and traditions.

Then, when we place the word transforming in front of culture, we're actually talking about being part of God's promise to restore this earth and its people-and the whole cosmos-into that wonderful place He originally intended for us. You know, when we read in Genesis about what God intended, it's a garden filled with every good thing. And it was good. But if we turn from the first book of the Bible to Revelation, the last book of the Bible, then we read that God's new creation is described not as a garden but as a city-the new Jerusalem. [Its walls] made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass; the great street of the city was of pure gold. [This] city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

How do we go about transforming culture? Maybe you come from another town or city. Perhaps you could tell me about your mayor who understands she's part of a higher calling, working to restore your city in ways so that the glory of God gives it light. Perhaps you could point to how Christians have banded together in your hometown to address the problem of homeless individuals, or how believers have restored dilapidated homes to make them fit once again for families, or how followers of Christ with great integrity and

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ethical concern have

restored financial stability to your city's commercial center

. Yes, when Christians put their minds to it and the Holy Spirit blesses their work, the picture of a city of pure gold gleams a bit brighter."

For emphasis, I have underlined key points. "Culture" is defined here, but in vague generality as "humankind and humankind's varied practices, structures, and traditions". This is virtually meaningless. How are the students to go about transforming "humankind's varied practices, structures, and traditions". All of them?! The answer is by helping to "restore this earth and its people-and the whole cosmos-into that wonderful place He originally intended" Really? Transforming today's world means restoring what was in the Garden of Eden? I doubt if he meant it as such, but this is "Primitivism" at its extreme. ("A belief that the acquisitions of civilization are evil or that the earliest period of human history was the best."- American Heritage Dictionary). That is not God's plan. What the speaker meant in practical terms was for his students was for them to become involved in community activism and pursue social justice, e.g.- "restore your city, address the problem of homeless individuals, restore dilapidated homes to make them fit and restore financial stability to your city's commercial center". No, this is not God's Plan nor is it what should be meant by "transformation of culture". The debate over whether Christians are to intentionally seek to transform "Culture" is often wrong headed, mostly because of a failure to define "Culture" and "Transform".

What is Culture?

"Culture" as a word is not found in the Bible, but culture itself is everywhere and the concept we want to grasp is spelled out in the beginning, i.e.- in Genesis 1: 28 and 2:5-8, 15, 18. It is known as the "Cultural Mandate". Human beings are commanded and expected by God to subdue, master or bring the earth under their control for their advantage. They are expected to labor and work the land. They are to maintain, watch over, preserve and protect it. (see the NET Bible exegetical notes) All of this is behind the words cultivate and culture. To work to transform Culture and the world has been mandated by God from the beginning.

Etymology of the word "Culture" is mid-15c., "the tilling of land," from L. cultura, from pp. stem of colere "tend, guard, cultivate, till" (see cult). The figurative sense of "cultivation through education" is first attested c.1500. Meaning "the intellectual side of civilization" is from 1805; that of "collective customs and achievements of a people" is from 1867.

Cf Etymology of "Cult"- 1617, "worship," also "a particular form of worship," from Fr. culte, from L. cultus "care, cultivation, worship," originally "tended, cultivated," pp. of colere "to till" (see

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colony) www.etymonline.com/

According to a Wikipedia article on Culture Change, there have been dozens of definitions of "Culture" However, the word "culture" is most commonly used in three basic senses:

- * Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture
- * An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning
- * The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group

Which of these meanings is involved in a Christian attempt to transform "Culture"?

What is Culture Change?

The Wikipedia article gives a good introduction. "Transformation of culture, or cultural change, refers to the dynamic process whereby the living cultures of the world are changing and adapting to external or internal forces. This process is occurring within Western culture as well as non-Western and indigenous cultures and cultures of the world. Forces which contribute to the cultural change described in this article include: colonization, globalization, advances in communication, transport and infrastructure improvements, and military expansion."

"When the concept first emerged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, it connoted a process of cultivation or improvement, as in agriculture or horticulture. In the nineteenth century, it came to refer first to the betterment or refinement of the individual, especially through education, and then to the fulfillment of national aspirations or ideals. In the mid-nineteenth century, some scientists used the term "culture" to refer to a universal human capacity. In the twentieth century, "culture" emerged as a concept central to anthropology, encompassing all human phenomena that are not purely results of human genetics. Specifically, the term "culture" in American anthropology had two meanings: (1) the evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences with symbols, and to act imaginatively and creatively; and (2) the distinct ways that people living in different parts of the world classified and represented their experiences, and acted creatively. Following World War II, the term became important, albeit with different meanings, in other disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, organizational psychology and management studies."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultures>

This is far more than either Dr Mohler or Dr. Timmermans had in mind. They were both simplistic in their speeches, but very representative of views that are popular. All Culture is

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constantly being transformed in the sense of changing. Where has Christianity or the Gospel fit in to this process? Here is my own simplified outline.

What is Christian Culture?

Popular Culture has to do with preferences and tastes in manners, food, clothing, music, decorative arts, customs and traditions such as Rites of Passage (coming of age rituals, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays). There is, and should be, a lot of diversity in all of these matters. Although they can be very important to people, all such matters are actually peripheral to Culture. Much of the debate over transforming culture is about transforming such peripherals. This is the wrong focus.

Essential Culture consists of those core beliefs, morals and values that are shared by any particular group of people and bind them together as an identifiable body. These are not peripheral matters. These are the things that Christians should mean when they focus on cultural transformation.

Christians as individuals may enjoy and value a diversity of peripheral or popular cultural matters (influenced by language, ethnicity, social and economic circumstances) but we are joined together (whatever our background) as a recognizable social group by core beliefs, morals and values which are Biblical. These together are our core Christian Culture wherever we may live around the world.

They include being *pro-life, *pro-marriage (traditional) and *pro-extended family. Core Christian values also include *individual responsibility for one's life within a family and community, the *necessity of work, *welfare that is the responsibility of family, church and local community (welfare must be personal and involve com-*passion*) and *Religion, i.e.- orthodox or Creedal Christianity.

Transformation of Culture

These seven values are the essential or core marks of Christian Culture, no matter what our ethnic origin, first language or nationality may be. In this time when Multiculturalism is so highly valued by many, it is very important that Christians understand what an essential Biblical Culture is and unashamedly commit to develop and maintain it. And transformation of cultural by Christians must begin here, with how we order and live our lives according to these core cultural values.

Preaching the Gospel and Evangelism (primarily by Preachers) and Social Justice Projects (often by youth groups on short term "mission" trips) do not come even close to what is really necessary to transform culture.

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Cultural Change involves 3 areas according to those who work in this Field. These areas define “Transformation” and “Transformation of Culture” must begin with Christians themselves working through these following processes.

1. Value conversion – the replacement of existing non-Biblical cultural values with new ones
2. Value creation – the development of new ideas to apply to new situations

Discovering and applying the core Biblical values (above) may require a radical change for many Christians in how they live

3. Value connection – the development of a conceptual link between phenomena previously thought unconnected or connected in a different way

Christians who have been dualists, living by the Bible in some areas and by the world in other areas, need to see the connection of their Faith with all of their daily life, e.g. with their money, how they earn it and spend it

All of this is transformation of culture on a mostly individual and personal level. As radical as it is, it is only the beginning of what needs to be done.

Transformation of a Nation

The serious debate about “transforming Culture” (where most of the controversy is found) is really about the validity of seeking to transform public life and policies on a national level. One of the major reasons for this is a negative or minimizing view of Mosaic Law and the teaching of Scripture about government, economics and justice. Is there such a thing as a Christian Civilization? Is that possible in our times, short of the Second Coming? What does the Lord’s prayer for God’s will being done on earth involve (does it involve Congress?) Another reason is a blindness to the reality of systemic evil in Society and the world. Evangelicals seem to be convinced that all the issues with culture are personal and that Salvation is personal. The Biblical teaching that evil powers can and do inhabit and use social, political and economic institutions to achieve Satan’s work against Christ seems to be lost on many Christians. The cause and the solution to almost every problem is individualistic. Redemption is personal. Many Evangelicals do not seem to be able to get their mind around the idea that redemption can also be institutional. Christ came to undo the work of Satan in sinners; He also came to undo the work of Satan in Government and the Economy- in the Halls of Justice as well as in the work place and even in churches.

Again, definitions are crucial to the debate. Culture and Civilization are not the same, but they are interconnected. Both are essential. Core Culture requires an organized Society or Nation with government, laws and an economic system. No core culture of a group of people can be sustained over time without such a structure or framework. The combination of Culture and the legal, economic structure in which it operates is “Civilization”. Each component requires the

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other.

To believe that the Sovereign has nothing to do with any of this until the Second Coming is not only unscriptural, but ludicrous (Psalm 2) To believe that He has no Word to speak to our Government and Economy as such is incredible. He does!

All Nations require Government; Laws; an educated and/or skilled and co-operative people; a productive economic system and all these parts require to work together

All good Nations must have a Government that functions under Laws that are Just. Its citizens must have a Bill of Rights, such as Americans have, and enjoy personal democratic freedoms, but they also must be committed to the common good. Citizens of a good Nation must be educated and moral (not only skilled). And they must share in a productive, equitable and free economic system.

If you take the Law of God seriously, you know these are all Biblical principles and values and even non-Christians can agree on them

A good Nation would be a Christian Nation, if its government and at least a majority of its citizens share in, and officially support the essential Christian Culture as outlined above. That includes being *pro-life, *pro-marriage (traditional) and *pro-extended family (extended), *individual responsibility for one's life within a community, the *necessity of work and *welfare that is the responsibility of family, church and local community. (It would be personal and involve com-compassion (the givers and receivers being in direct relationship) and finally, it would officially support *Religion, i.e.- orthodox, Catholic Christianity.

In addition to these core Biblical Values, The Civil Government of a Christian Nation would function in harmony with the basic Norms and Principles of God's Law for government itself. This means it would see that its major responsibility would be law and order. It would practice far less intervention, regulation and control over its Citizens lives than our present Government does. The Nation's Economic System would be a compassionate, market-based Capitalism with Laws that would regulate and control greed or corruption. The Educational System (schools) of a Christian Nation would be based on Christian Epistemology (Bible Based) and Pedagogy (Order and Discipline)

Given the pluralistic, multicultural Nation that is the United States today, is it possible for America to be a Christian Nation? Not entirely. Whatever the original vision and purpose of our Founders may have been, we can hope and work together with our non-Christian neighbors to build a good Nation, which would incorporate Biblical values. This has been and can be a very good Nation, but the specifically Christian aspects are not possible, i.e.- official public support of Christianity and Christian Schools. However, we would expect the Government to guard freedom for all people, including Christians, to practice their Religion according to their beliefs and consciences.

If our marriages and families and personal lives are Biblical and if the way we work and make our money is Biblical and if we vote for candidates that will support Biblical principles in all areas

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of public and world affairs (not only the areas of personal morality like Abortion or Gay Marriage) and practice Christian citizenship by being proactive, supporting Biblical legislation and causes, we can and will make a real difference for God in our communities and Nation. Success is not the goal, faithfulness is. That will glorify God. The “transformation of culture” will go on and finally, when Christ does come, He will find that God’s will has been done on earth.

One thing is certain. It is unthinkable and unacceptable for Christians to separate from the world, i.e.- from public life and civic duties, especially in politics and economics and all kinds of legislation and public policies that promote and protect Biblical Justice. For Evangelicals and Reformed Christians to say that such involvement is unspiritual and retreat into their “Gospel only” message or “Church only” activities or to teach that the only Hope for our Nation (or any other) is the Second Coming and we must just suffer and patiently wait for that (2000 years have gone by now) is both unscriptural and the dereliction of their duty as Christians to serve the Lord.

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