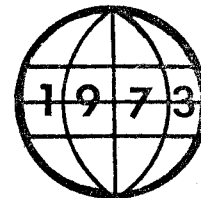


Contemporary Issues: by Richard J. Foster

The Cultural Captivity of the Church



Dear Martin,

Your letter came in the mail today, and I want to answer you right away. As always, your questions are most penetrating.

Yes, you are correct in saying that it is God's great purpose to form a divine community of loving and forgiving persons from every class and strata of society. A homogeneous church is *not* God's plan. You have hit it right on the head in concluding that the real basis of our unity is Christ alone and not such matters as life style, interests, age, race or political persuasion. A great amount of hurt has come in the church because of a failure to understand this. Church splits have occurred — both emotionally and in reality — over things so petty as differences in dress or worship styles.

You have come to the heart of the matter when you ask why there is so little demonstration of a heterogeneous Christian community. The answer is that, in the main, the Church is trapped in the gross sin of cultural captivity.

In the book of Acts we see the story of how the Church struggled to break free of a Jewish Captivity.

The Apostle Paul was at the forefront of this battle and saw the issue far more clearly than did the other Apostles. That is why he opposed Peter's racial and cultural exclusiveness in the strongest possible terms (Galatians 2:11-21). Paul also saw the opposite danger of a Gentile Captivity of the Church, and he sought to avoid it, though history shows that he failed. The high-water mark in Paul's teaching on this matter is Galatians 6:15: "...for neither circumcision (a Jewish Captivity) counts for anything, nor uncircumcision (a Gentile Captivity) but a new creation." **The new creation in Jesus Christ is essential, the cultural mold incidental**

Nationalism

In every culture there are points at which the Gospel is continuous with that culture and points at which it is discontinuous. Wherever the culture is a reflection of true Biblical concerns, it should be supported and applauded; wherever the culture is discontinuous with the Gospel, we are called to wage the Lamb's War to bring about its transformation. One of the points at which the Gospel is *always* discontinuous with the culture is at the point of Nationalism; that is, the exclusion of others on ethnic and cultural grounds. Ethnic and cultural

superiority is always the claim of Nationalism; and this is the antithesis of the Gospel. One of the key messages of the Tower of Babel story in the Old Testament is that Nationalism is part of the fallen nature. This is what is so dangerous about civil religion, for civil religion always ends up as the promulgator of Nationalism. Perhaps the most startling example of this was under the Third Reich where Nazi altars and baptisms became common, and the Church had become the virtual peon of the State. But this has also occurred in other countries; and in America under the influence of Jefferson and Lincoln, a form of civil religion was established. A specific example of how this has worked out today is the fact that the chaplaincy is a part of the military structure, with the result that there are some moral issues that chaplains simply cannot talk about. (The way to solve this difficulty is not to abolish the chaplaincy but to establish a civilian chaplaincy.) To the extent that the Church of Jesus Christ capitulates to civil religion and its incipient Nationalism, it is no longer prophetic nor Christian and has fallen into a cultural captivity. Civil religion and Biblical faith are never agreeable bedfellows.

American Subcultures

The cultural captivity of the Church becomes glaringly evident when confronted with the various subcultures of our society. In the first century it was matters such as circumcision and sabbath keeping; today it is such things as length of hair, style of dress or mode of speech — all essentially trivial. Further, it should be noted that usually the subculture is just as dogmatic and rigid as the dominate culture. The truth of the matter is that neither are important; to translate Paul into a modern idiom, "neither short hair counts for anything nor long hair, but a new creation." One of the enduring tasks of the Church is to learn to distinguish between what is trivial and what is essential.

Never forget, Martin, that it is God's eternal purpose to gather together a divine community of forgiven and forgiving persons from every class and race and culture on earth. We are called to love one another with all our differences and demonstrate to the watching world the power of God. May we so live that the world may say of us as they did the early Church: "Behold how they love one another."

Sincerely, Robert J. Catalyst

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