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Transforming Culture: Christian Truth Confronts Post-Christian America

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Peggy Noonan is right. At some point, in some moment, all of us must admit that something remarkable has happened to American culture. Mrs. Noonan, a former presidential speechwriter, recalls that this moment came for her during a high school graduation in the early 1970s. A young girl walked across the stage to receive her diploma. The girl was obviously pregnant. Noonan recalls that her first impulse was admiration for the girl's grit and determination against social disapproval. "But," recognized Noonan, "society wasn't disapproving. It was applauding." As she reflected, "Applause is a right and generous response for a young girl with grit and heart. And yet, in the sound of that applause I heard a wall falling, a thousand-year wall, a wall of sanctions that said: We as a society do not approve of teenaged unwed motherhood because it is not good for the child, not good for the mother, not good for us."

To this the Christian Church would say far more, but the great danger today is that many Christians are seeing the same evidence, and saying far less. A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us. The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.

Reflecting on the changes experienced by America over just the last half-century, John Howard of the Rockford Institute described the end of World War II as "a half century and a whole civilization ago." We know how he feels. Looking back on the America of 1945, it does look like a whole civilization has passed.

The evidence is overwhelming. Moral relativism has so shaped the culture that the vast majority of Americans now see themselves as their own moral arbiter. Truth has been internalized, privatized, and subjectivized. Absolute or objective truth is denied outright. Research indicates that most Americans believe that truth is internal and relative. No one, the culture shouts, has a right to impose truth, morality, or cultural standards.

In the courts, revisionist legal theories and psycho-therapeutic issues have replaced concern for right and wrong. Justice has become a political argument, not a societal standard. Righteousness is rejected as a concept, a relic of an older age of a common morality, nuclear families, and Victorian dreams. The discourse of a revealed morality commanding right and forbidding wrong is as out of place in contemporary America as a log cabin on Wall Street.

The most influential sectors of society are allied in furthering the process of social disintegration. Television and mass culture have so shaped the American consciousness that many citizens are now intellectually unable to sustain a serious moral conversation. Those who attempt to engage the American people in a serious moral conversation are met with immediate dismissal or—more worrisome still—blank stares.

The arts are increasingly decadent, portraying violence, pornography, and banality as high culture. In the academy, deconstructionism and other purportedly post-modern theories have largely destroyed some disciplines and thrown others into incoherence. The search for truth has been abandoned in favor of political arguments over rights and privileges.

Looking within, Americans have adopted a therapeutic worldview which has transformed all issues of right and wrong into newly created categories of authenticity, self esteem, codependencies, and various psychological fads which basically tell us that we are victims, not responsible moral agents. A cult of self-worship has developed, substituting a search for the inner child in place of the worship of the transcendent God.

The Church has constantly been perplexed concerning its proper relation to culture. H. Richard Niebuhr traced five different patterns of cultural response in his famous work, *Christ and Culture*. The book over-simplified the issues and now looks awkwardly optimistic, but some of the patterns Niebuhr described are still evident. The Church has at times withdrawn from culture and sought refuge in attempted cultural isolation. At other times and in other contexts the Church has simply abdicated to the culture, thus reflecting the culture rather than proclaiming the cross. A myriad of patterns can be traced between these two extremes. The fact is that the Church has often exhibited several patterns at once, capitulating to culture on the one hand and seeking isolation on the other.

In candor, we must admit that the Church has been displaced. Once an authoritative voice in the culture, the Church is often dismissed, and even more often ignored. At one time, the influence of the Church was sufficient to restrain cultural rebellion against God's moral commandments, but no longer. The dynamic of the culture-shift marches onward. On the Protestant left, leaders have simply capitulated to the revisionist ideologies and surrendered revealed morality. On the evangelical wing, however, the greater temptation is to affirm biblical morality in principle, and wink at infractions as matters of merely individual interest.

The displacement of the Church is characteristic of the process of secularization, which has now so thoroughly altered the landscape of American culture. Though sociologists point to continuing high levels of religious activity and statements of belief—both of these in sharp contrast to other western nations—the truth is that very little of this activity translates into authentic discipleship, active church membership, and bold Christian witness.

The worldview of most Americans is now thoroughly secularized, revolving around the self and its concerns, and based on relativism as an axiom. We Americans have become our own best friend, our own therapist, our own priest, and our own lawgiver. The old order is shattered, the new order is upon us.

What, then, is the Church to do? At the onset, we must disallow both optimism and despair. We have no right to expect, as did a previous generation, that “every day in every way things are getting better and better.” The same culture that has developed the microwave oven, the CAT-scan, and the vaccine for polio has also produced social pathologies which threaten the very existence of the culture. The operating room and the abortionist's table are both symbols of our culture. Though claiming to be concerned with the quality of life, America is increasingly characterized by a culture of death. At the same time, though the direction of the culture may be dramatically downward, we have no right to assume that this slide cannot be corrected.

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 and reach out to the casualties. 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. Given the cultural context, this task is one of the most important tests of Christian faithfulness. To proclaim biblical truth to this culture is to risk social isolation, outright rejection, and, in some cases, potent attacks.

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.

To contend for Christian truth in the face of this culture is to discover what it means to be a member of a cognitive minority; that is, a minority which quite evidently thinks and lives differently than the larger culture. To confess the truths of God's Word in late twentieth-century America is to take on a counter-cultural posture; to stand against the stream and to press against the grain.

At the same time, we must reach out and minister to the casualties of our cultural rebellion. The Church of Jesus Christ is comprised of sinners saved by grace. With the message of grace, we must reach out to those whose lives have been ruined and warped in the course of our cultural decay. Only the Church has the honest and truthful answers concerning the most basic issues facing our society. Our challenge is to match truth to compassion, and mercy to confrontation.

This was true in the first century, it is true now, and it may well be true until the Lord returns. In our depravity, human beings naturally rebel against the truth of God's Word, but it reveals the only means of salvation. Our charge is to bear witness.

The truths of God's Word reveal the Gospel of spiritual transformation, and the proclamation of the truths of God's Word is the only means available to us of cultural transformation. From beginning to end, it is all in God's hands. We are called to faithful witness and compassionate ministry. In the context of post-Christian America, our task is to preach the Gospel and to proclaim the truths of God's Word. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, the Gospel is foolishness to those seeking wisdom and a scandal to those looking for power. To the redeemed, however, the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Here is found the only genuine transformation. Therein is found our charge.

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