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Christ and Culture

Thomas K. Johnson

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JESUS' PRAYER FOR the Body of Christ:

They are not *of* the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them *into* the world (Jn. 17:14-18; emphasis added).

I World, Culture and Faith

The tragic murder in the Amish school in Pennsylvania¹ brought our attention to a Christian group that has been very

serious in trying authentically to relate their faith to modern secular culture: the Old Order Amish. This growing group of about 200,000 people is mostly made up of descendants of the Swiss and Alsatian Anabaptists of the 16th century. From the beginning of their movement, they have said that true believers must be very serious about holiness, and that holiness means being separate from the world; believers must withdraw from the world. This withdrawal especially relates to the use of modern technology and labour-saving devices.

They think that selfish, individual pride is the fundamental motivation for all modern technology; therefore, a serious believer must avoid modern technology. Instead, they say, we should practise true humility, which means a lot of hard physical work, using old fashioned hand tools. The biblical verses, which they often quote in this regard, are 2 Corinthians 6:17: 'Come out from among them and be separate' and Romans 12:2: 'Be not conformed to this world'. According to the Old Order Amish, Christian holiness requires withdrawal from the

¹ The reference is to the murder of four girls in the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, USA, on October 2, 2006.

Thomas K. Johnson, PhD, is Vice President for Research of Martin Bucer Seminary, Director of the Comenius Institute (Prague); Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy (International Institute for Christian Studies), and Doctoral Professor of Theology and Interdisciplinary Studies (Olivet University). He has taught theology and philosophy in several universities and theological schools in various countries and has served as a pastor and church planter. Email: johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com.

world into separated, humble communities of true believers. This is the model of relating to the culture we can call, '*Holy Withdrawal*'.²

If we are serious about our Christian faith, we have probably had moments when we have wanted to think this way. I know I have had times when I have wondered why we Christians do not set up separate communities so we would not have to endure the terrible godlessness of this world. Why not withdraw from much of the world, even if I might choose to take my high speed computer and mobile phone along? The reason why not is simply what Jesus said in our text: 'My prayer is *not* that you take them out of the world' (verse 15). Jesus has called us to holiness and to not be conformed to this world, but he wants us to be *in* the world. Probably Jesus recognized that the real problem with worldliness is not something 'out there in the world', but rather something deep inside ourselves—our own unbelief, pride and ingratitude toward God. All of this could easily come along with us, if we tried to withdraw from the world into holy communities. If this is true, then the Amish have probably misinterpreted the biblical text about 'coming out and being separate'.

Another mistaken move in relation to culture was that of the so-called 'German Christians' during the Nazi

period. These people were Christians who were very enthusiastic supporters of Adolph Hitler. In fact, many thought they should support Hitler because they were Christians. Their reasoning went something like this: God's law comes to us partly through the creation orders. Those creation orders include our people and our state; therefore, the laws of our people and our state are the laws of God. With this in mind, serious German Christians thought they should enthusiastically support the leader of the German people (Adolph Hitler) and the National Socialist state.

I remember vividly the first time I read a book by one of these German Christian writers. It was printed in the old Germanic alphabet, which was always difficult for me to understand. I read a few paragraphs and asked myself, 'Did he really say what I think he said'? I went back and read it again. When I realized that I understood the author correctly, I felt appalled and dismayed. I wondered, 'How could believers support something so obviously evil?'

Before we become too proud of ourselves for not doing something so evil, we need to think for a moment. What we see in the German Christians of the 1930s is what we can call *accommodation* to secular culture—in this case, Nazi culture. Or if you prefer, you might call it *compromise* with secular culture. The Christian faith was misinterpreted in such a manner that it supported an agenda only from a non-believing source. In Jesus' terms, these believers were 'of the world'. But we can easily do something similar, even if our cultural agenda is much more respectable.

My own cultural/political sympathies might be described as 'compas-

2 Some of the terminology used here comes from H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Building on Niebuhr's descriptions of major types of Christian social ethics, this essay attempts to move to prescriptions for major methods for evangelical missiology and ethics.

sionate conservatism'. But I have to be extremely careful that I do not say that God is, like me, a compassionate conservative; nor should I say that compassionate conservatism is God's will. Rather, compassionate conservatism is the part of the world which I prefer, but I still am to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. I have to bring the criticizing and reforming Word of God into that part of secular culture we call compassionate conservatism.

So what is it that Jesus wants in relation to 'the world'? In the prayer in John 17, Jesus prays that God would help us to be 'in the world' but not 'of the world'. Thereby he calls us to try to be 'in the world' but not 'of the world'. This means that we should live in real contact with the world, without having our identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings and values controlled by the world. Instead, our identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings and values should be continually sanctified by the truth—the living Word of God. And as such sanctified people, Jesus sends us into the world in a way that is similar to how the Father sent Jesus into the world. We can probably summarize the central thrust of this biblical text by saying: *Jesus wants us to be in the world but not of the world for a very specific purpose: He has sent us into the world as hearers and bearers of the Word.*

It may be helpful to try to define the important word *culture*. Many of my university students spend time studying abroad, and they all come back talking about culture shock. When I then ask them what culture means, they usually say culture is 'how we do things here', wherever 'here' is. So I then ask, 'Is that all culture is?' In the following discussion, it usually

becomes clear that culture is much more. Culture is also how we think about things, how we feel about things and how we talk about things. Culture is what we have made out of nature, or in theological terms, culture is the entire human sub-creation developed from the creation as it came from the Father's hand. Culture includes customs, theories, ideas, practices, habits, role models, slogans, proverbs and much more. It is all that we pass on from one generation to the next. Education is partly about passing a culture from one generation to another, and all of us who received any education were largely educated into a particular culture.

So how does culture relate to faith? Is there any connection? Many observers of culture, especially the cultural anthropologists and sociologists of religion, have pointed out that particular cultures tend to be shaped by a particular religion. Philosopher Paul Tillich has nicely formulated these observations into a slogan, 'Culture is the form of religion, and religion is the substance of culture'.³ What must be added to Tillich's observation is that most religion is idolatry. Whatever culture it is that we inhabit, it is partly formed and directed by idolatry and unbelief. The Old Order Amish are not all wrong when they say that modern

³ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 42. There is probably a bit of conscious exaggeration in this slogan, since some commonalities among all cultures flow from our common humanity, created in the image of God. These commonalities allow communication across cultures and world-views, though religious and cultural differences make communication more difficult.

technological culture is the organized expression of individualistic pride.

The apostle Peter reminded the first century believers of something very important in this regard (1 Pet. 1:18, 19). He said, 'You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ'. His term 'way of life' (*anastrophē* in Greek), is very close to our modern word 'culture'.

We were all redeemed out of a godless way of life into a new way of life. This means that becoming a Christian is itself the ultimate cross-cultural experience. We were redeemed out of a godless culture into a believing culture by the precious blood of Christ, and that all happened when we first began to hear the redeeming Word of the Gospel. But as Jesus emphasized, we were not only redeemed out of a godless culture; we are called to be 'in the world', that is, sent back into the world as people who are both hearers and bearers of God's Word. This makes the relation of the Word of God to culture very urgent.

The relation of the Word of God to culture is complex.⁴ I hope someone reading this paper will ask, 'What about....?', thereby helping me learn something more about the relation of the Word to culture. But I am sure the Word has at least four distinct rela-

tions to culture, each of which can be summarized with a 'c'. Those four are critic, correlation, construction (or creation) and contribution; in each of these four relations of the Word to culture, we are simultaneously both hearers and bearers of that Word. We are always members of a particular culture who need to hear the divine Word, while we are also, in word and action, bearers of that Word into the various cultures in which we live and work.

II The Word Critiques Culture

We probably all know what a social critic is, the person who tries to stand over against his society and say what is wrong with that society. The words of a good social critic often land on the editorial pages of newspapers. A good social critic has a valuable role in society; however, the ultimate social and cultural critic is the Word of God, which has always been fearless and profound in its confrontation with sin. So we must hear the Word's confrontation of our sin, while also communicating that confrontation with sin into our world and culture.⁵ And sin does not end at the level of actions; like culture, sin extends to actions, thoughts, feelings and speech.

1 The Word and Sinful Actions

The Word of God stands against sinful actions. The prophet Amos is a good

4 This complexity arises from the way in which we are addressed by God's revelations in creation and in scripture, the way in which the biblical message contains both law and gospel, as well as the multiple proper uses of God's moral law.

5 It should go without saying that believers should affirm and give thanks for all that is good, just, true, and beautiful in each of our cultures. We must be grateful for creation and God's sustaining grace.

example. He wrote, "This is what the Lord says: "For three sins of Gaza and for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom" (Amos 1:6). The sin mentioned is slave trading; the people of Gaza kidnapped whole communities to sell the people to the slave traders in Edom. Disgusting, but similar things still happen today. Some of the prostitutes in Prague (where I live) are slaves, kidnapped from their homelands.

We must hear the Word of God as it confronts sins that may even be acceptable within our cultures. God's Word has always condemned those matters mentioned in the Ten Commandments: idolatry, murder, stealing, lying, dishonouring parents, adultery and Sabbath breaking, and so on. We must hear and communicate God's displeasure at such acts and practices.

2 The Word and Values

Sin does not end with action but extends to the level of values. Some of our core values or basic values are all wrong. A generation ago Francis Schaeffer observed that in the West, 'the majority of people adopted two impoverished values: *personal peace* and *affluence*'.⁶ I think he was right, though we

might want to add that personal peace probably includes what we might want to call safety or security. These values quickly become our idols, our God-substitutes, which tend to shape our personal and cultural life. Listen sometime to the priorities one hears in the political campaigns. Prosperity, comfort and personal peace are what the various parties tend to promise, the differences being often only how we might pursue those values.

But the Word of God would challenge these basic values. The prophet Micah said, 'He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). Justice, mercy and humility before God should be our basic values. Surely the Old Order Amish are right, that God-fearing basic values will make us very different from today's secular, hedonistic culture. But we are not only to hear the Word of God about basic values; we are also to bear that Word into the secular world. Our entire lives, lived out in the world, should be a statement that there is a real alternative to the world's impoverished values.

Different social critics today have claimed that a central characteristic of the West today is outward prosperity joined with inward emptiness. We can

6 *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Vol. 5, *The Christian View of the West* (Crossway Books, 1982), 211. Schaeffer's definition is worth noting: 'Personal peace means just to be let alone, not to be troubled by the troubles of other people, whether across the world or across the city—to live one's life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed. Personal peace means wanting to have my personal life pattern undisturbed in my life-

time, regardless of what the result will be in the lifetimes of my children and grandchildren. Affluence means an overwhelming and ever-increasing level of prosperity—a life made up of things, things, and more things—a success judged by an ever-higher level of material abundance' (Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5:211).

call it 'The Western Paradox'.⁷ The pursuit of personal peace and affluence has left the lives and hearts of millions of people largely empty. In stark contrast, as believers, our whole way of living and talking should be a statement that prosperity or affluence is not the highest good, though we may not like poverty. The internal emptiness of the West must be criticized, but it can be filled with faith, hope, love and gratitude, which can be joined with justice, mercy, and walking humbly before God.

3 The Word and Sinful Ideas

Culture is the realm, partly, of ideas. And many of the most important ideas we hear in education and the media are totally abhorrent to the Word of God. Some of the ideas that are most important are those that say what a human being is. Though communism is mostly gone, old Marxist ideas are still very influential, and one of the most influential Marxist ideas is that human beings are fundamentally economic creatures. Marx thought that economic relations determine a person's and a

community's entire way of thinking and living.

Today this idea is often given a capitalist spin, but it is still mostly the same view of a person. And this view of a person may be the majority point of view among political scientists and sociologists in the US and in the EU; however, Jesus totally and directly rejected this idea when he said, 'Man does not live by bread alone'. If we have partly accepted this view of a person, Jesus would call us to repent of a sinful idea; and we, as bearers of the Word into the world, have to use every opportunity we have to say, 'Man does not live by bread alone.'

In theoretical ethics today, one of the questions that most concerns me is that of why human life is valuable. Among European and American philosophers, the majority point of view seems to be that human life is valuable because of the unique abilities and functions that human beings have. Functions like reason, speech and creativity are seen as the basis for human value; but, of course, a being without those functions does not have any value. There is an organic tie between the theories of the philosophers and the practices of abortion, active euthanasia and tolerance of infanticide. Ideas have consequences.

Against that sinful idea the Word of God would say that humans are valuable because each person is created in the image of God. This God-given value cannot be lost, even if a person might lose some or most of the normal human abilities or functions. As bearers of the Word into the world, we have to take every opportunity we have to say human life is valuable with a God-given value, even if a person has lost some or

⁷ An early social critic to talk in these terms was Abraham Kuyper. Describing modern secular culture under the code name 'Babylon' he wrote, 'The most glittering life on the outside joined with the death of the heart, that is Babylon'. (*De Gemeene Gratie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1902), Vol. 1, 456, my translation from the Dutch) A similar assessment of western life is found in the excellent book by David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (Yale University Press, 2000). Most of what Myers writes, as summarized in his subtitle, can also be said of European life.

most of those normal human abilities. This will mean criticizing other ideas about why human life is valuable, and some people will listen to what we have to say.

The Word of God stands over against culture as the ultimate critic, calling us and the world to repent of sinful actions, values and ideas. And as bearers of that Word into the world, we have to take every suitable opportunity to communicate, by word and deed, that ultimate criticism of sinful actions, values and ideas.

II The Word Correlates with Culture

The Word of God does relate negatively to culture as the ultimate critic; fortunately, however, our message, which we hear and communicate, also has a very positive relation to culture—the *Word correlates with the questions, needs and problems of culture*. This means that the Word provides solutions to the entire range of human needs. Let me explain that a bit further.

1 Honest Answers

First let's say, *The Word provides honest answers to honest questions*. This was something of a slogan of Francis Schaeffer, and it is important⁸ because many people today do have honest,

important questions. What is the meaning of life? Can we know that God really exists? Can we know if absolute truth exists? Can we really know right and wrong? Can we know if Jesus really was raised from the dead? Can we know if the Bible is reliable? Can I know for sure that my sins are forgiven? Can I know if I am justified and adopted by God? Can I know how God wants me to live? We could probably list more important and honest questions that people often raise, and these questions are, in principle, answered by the Word of God.⁹

This does not mean that there is one simple verse of scripture that we can use to simply answer complex questions, such as, 'How can we know for sure that God exists'? What I mean is that in the Word there are principles of understanding human life and the world which enable thoughtful and reflective believers to give substantial answers. This means that because we have the Word of God in our midst, there are, in the body of Christ, people who can give honest answers to the whole range of honest questions which arise in the world today. In this sense, the Word correlates with culture by means of giving answers to the questions which arise in the minds of men and women.

However, we should probably also notice why people ask serious questions: because God is a question-ask-

⁸ In Schaeffer's terms, 'Every honest question must be given an honest answer. It is unbiblical for anyone to say, "Just believe".' (*Complete Works*, Vol. 1, 189) He also said, 'Rightly understood, Christianity as a system has the answers to all the basic needs of modern man' (*Complete Works*, Vol. 1, 93).

⁹ For a good comparative study of how some of these universal questions occur to all people, see J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship between the Christian Faith and other Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

ing God. From the time of the Garden of Eden, when God came to Adam and Eve with the question, 'Where are you?', God has been asking questions of men and women.¹⁰ People do not always realize that God is pursuing them with anxious questions, but those honest questions are part of how God drives people to himself, so that they find their answers in the Word. This is why there is a correlation between the questions in our minds and the answers in the Word.

2 Anxieties

The Word not only correlates with our questions, but also *correlates with our deepest needs by means of speaking to the deepest human anxieties*. Since the time of Adam and Eve, people have been an anxious bunch. We worry all the time, not only because we are paranoid, but also because things really do go wrong. *Anxiety is the human sense of the fallen condition of our world*. We are anxious about what will happen to us, how will life turn out, what will be our calling and destiny? We are anxious about suffering and death. We are anxious about guilt and shame. We are plagued by a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. And these deep anxieties become not only the matters of sleepless nights, but also they are the themes of the important movies, novels and songs. Culture is filled with anxieties of the widest possible range. The human heart cries out in its deep spiritual need, and that cry of need echoes

across the various dimensions of culture today.¹¹

We can be very grateful that the Word correlates to human need by speaking to the deepest anxieties of our hearts. But this is not intended only for believers—this should be part of the cutting edge of our bringing the Word into the world. All around us there are people whose hearts are bleeding with spiritual need. And we have the solution to the cries of their hearts—cries that can be heard wherever we go. The promises of God's Word correspond with the deepest needs, hurts and anxieties of fallen men and women. Listen for guilt, shame, fear of fate and death or a sense of meaninglessness, and you will have opportunity to talk about the promises of God.

3 Alienation

Closely related to this, we should say that *the Word correlates with human need by addressing our comprehensive alienation*. From the time of Adam and Eve, people have been in a kind of living death, suffering under a state of comprehensive alienation, separation from God, separation from each other, separation from ourselves, even separation from creation. This is experienced by people and is articulated by many, so it is a widespread theme in culture. Many good novels and movies depict our alienation and the attempts to overcome it. As a young man Karl Marx offered a sensitive and moving analysis

¹⁰ For more on this topic see Thomas K. Johnson, 'Adam and Eve, Who are You?' (www.contra-mundum.org/essays.html).

¹¹ This paragraph is dependent on Paul Tillich's analysis of anxiety in *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952).

of human alienation, even while his own alienation from God came to expression in his atheism. The tragic effects of Marxism and Communism flow partly from setting the wrong message in correlation with human alienation.

It is important to see that the biblical Word is the right message to stand in correlation with our comprehensive alienation, and it does so by means of bringing reconciliation. First of all, the Word offers reconciliation with God. But in addition, the Word leads to reconciliation with each other, with ourselves, and maybe in some ways even to reconciliation with nature. In this life, reconciliation is never total, final and complete.

Reconciliation is always something that has to be worked out day to day because new conflicts always arise, and those new conflicts always bring the stench of living death back into our lives. Reconciliation is a reality made possible by the Word of God. In this way, the Word correlates with a deep need of the human heart and mind. For this reason it is important that the church becomes a community in which reconciliation is constantly occurring, so that the restored relationships within the Body of Christ stand in contrast to and correlation with the alienated condition of our world.

It is important that we hear the Word of God both as it is the critic of our sin and also as its promises correlate with our spiritual needs. It is extremely important that as we bear the Word into the world, we bring that Word in a balanced relation to culture. The Word is the ultimate critic of culture, but it is also the ultimate healer of the painful cries of our culture as it

speaks healing to anxious hearts and brings answers to tortured minds. We must be careful to hear and to communicate both in a balanced manner.

III The Word of God Creates New Christian Counter-culture

John Stott's excellent study of the Sermon on the Mount is entitled *The Christian Counter-Culture*, and there is good reason for this way of talking.¹² Jesus came to recreate us to be new people with new relationships, new ways of thinking, new ways of talking and new ways of doing things. In fact, this was part of the work of redemption from the earliest times in the Old Testament.

The people of Israel were supposed to be a redeemed nation, not just redeemed individuals. As a redeemed nation they had a complete cultural expression of their redeemed status. They had a tabernacle with an elaborate system of sacrifice and worship. They had music and visual art. They had a political structure and a system of laws. All this was created by the Word of God in ancient Israel to be the cultural expression of God's work of redemption.

After the death and resurrection of Christ, the Body of Christ became the new people of God who stood in conflict with both the Jewish culture and the Roman culture. At first the early believers were only a poor, frightened, socially marginalized and persecuted minority. Very soon, however, the basic Christian confession became,

¹² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (InterVarsity Press, 1978).

'Jesus is Lord'! This confession stood in contrast with the claim of the Roman emperors that, 'Caesar is Lord'. Of course, Caesar claimed to be lord of everything, so the claim that, 'Jesus is Lord' meant that Jesus is also Lord of everything—a truly revolutionary idea.

It was only about a century ago that Abraham Kuyper wrote the famous words, 'There is not a thumb-breath of the whole realm of human life of which Christ, the sovereign Lord of all does not cry out, "It is mine!"'.¹³ Although the slogan is new, the idea was already powerfully active in the early church. This meant that all of life had to be brought under the Lordship of Christ.

This is the starting point for the full cultural expression of our faith. In the time of the Old Testament, the people of God were set apart from the surrounding cultures by national and language barriers. But the new people of God, the Body of Christ, were dispersed across all of Greco-Roman culture. And like the people of Israel, their status as the redeemed people of God slowly started to come to complete cultural expression.

Firstly, I think there was something of an ordered progression of the cultural growth of the Christian counter-culture in the early centuries. It was something of an 'inside moving toward the outside' type of progression in the cultural expression of the faith. Firstly, we see that *the Word constructs or creates new people with new hearts and new relationships*. We see this in the New Testament. People were saved. Families were reconciled. Small communi-

ties of believers were gathered around the gospel. Love became the mark of the Christian and of the Christian community.

Secondly, in the following centuries there was an exciting period of growth, and this growth was not only in numbers, though the numbers of believers exploded for a period of a few centuries. *There was also real growth in new ways of thinking and talking*. The believers learned how to think and talk about matters like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the two natures of Christ. The believers learned new ways of thinking and talking about society, ethics and learning. This was, I think, an expression of the new hearts that had been given by the gospel.

Thirdly, in the history of the early church, *the Word, working through believers, began to create new cultural institutions*. What does this mean? Believers started all sorts of new things. Orphanages, programs to assist people in need, then later schools, cathedrals, all sorts of art, then universities, then great music like that of Bach or Handel, while there was also great literature. One can almost tell the history of the Body of Christ by looking at the continuing series of new cultural institutions produced by believers in response to the gospel of Christ.

This is an exciting story, but it would take many hours to tell, enough for a whole course of study in a university.¹⁴ All I can do now is to state that

¹³ Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring* (Amsterdam, 1930), 32.

¹⁴ A good resource for this history is Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 volumes (Harper & Row, 1953 & 1975).

the story exists and the story is worth hearing. Across the centuries, the gospel has indeed moved believers to create and construct all sorts of new cultural institutions and ways of life. Believers today should be courageous in following our believing ancestors in being willing to try to create new organizations, activities and movements for the glory of God. History is not finished. Believers should again become courageous in starting new cultural activities for the glory of God.

IV The Word Contributes to Culture

This contribution is very important for us who live in post-Christian Europe. What does this mean? Even though much of secular Europe denies or neglects the Christian heritage that shaped it, there are many elements in European culture that were produced or developed under the influence of the biblical message. These are activities, institutions or ways of thinking that hardly seem to be consistent with an unbelieving worldview, and which seem, historically, to be the result of the impact of the biblical message on European civilization. As believers, we can see this as one of the ways in which God has been at work to make our world a much nicer place in which to live. This is a long story to tell, so I will give just a few illustrations.

1 Practices

Notice that in Europe today, when an ambulance comes down the street with lights flashing and the siren screaming, everyone knows to get out of the way. We all know that someone is

injured or seriously ill and needs help quickly. But at many times and places in human history this would not have been true. It was not always obvious to all people that someone who is injured or seriously ill should be helped. At many times in human history, people thought the injured or ill should be left in their fate. I would suggest that Europeans all know to get out of the way of the ambulance because of the contribution of the biblical message to European civilization.¹⁵

It was under the influence of the biblical worldview that Europeans all know we should help people in need; and this principle, learned from the Bible, is the background for the European interest in humanitarian aid for people in need, while Europeans also work hard for political reconciliation. There is a whole set of important practices that make European life very humane and compassionate which arose partly because of the contribution of the Word to the world.

2 Ideas

Even in post-Christian Europe there are many key *ideas* which arose partly due to the contribution of the biblical Word. The idea of human rights is a good example. In western history, some of the first people to talk much about human rights were the Christian philosophers in Christian cathedral schools and universities. These were people like Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century.

¹⁵ For this illustration I am indebted to Wim Rietkerk, of L'Abri, having heard it from him in a lecture or personal conversation.

They thought humans have rights because they were created in the image of God.¹⁶

Today most Europeans will want to talk about and even protect human rights, though they may not have a good explanation of why people have rights or where those rights originate. In some cases, the protection of human rights seems inconsistent with modern secular worldviews, though this does not seem to prevent people from often becoming energetic protectors of at least some of those rights. I think we believers should rejoice that the Word has contributed a central idea to western culture—that of human rights.

Another key idea contributed by the Word to secular European society has to do with the possibility of natural science. History shows us that the early modern scientists, especially in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, were mostly rather serious Christians, and that they developed modern science because of their Christian beliefs. They thought that the world is God's good creation, which we can and should try to understand. Christian beliefs had a crucial role in the start of modern science.¹⁷

Today science, along with the technology and health care which depend on science, is one of the most important institutions of western culture. Of course, many scientists are not yet believers and many do not know the extent to which the biblical message contributed to the initial development of science. But we can rejoice and give thanks to God for the way the biblical Word has contributed ideas that helped start an institution and movement that is so important and valuable today.

3. Institutions

It has also contributed whole institutions. One of the true radicals in western history was Jan Amos Comenius, also known as Komensky. One of his most radical ideas was that girls should be allowed and encouraged to go to school to get an education. Comenius is known as the 'Father of modern education' because of his educational writings and practices. He was also an evangelical pastor and theologian. Allowing girls to go to school was directly a result of his evangelical faith.

Today every western nation encourages or even demands that girls get an education, often without even knowing that the education of girls started as a distinctly Christian institution. I would suggest that the education of girls is a whole institution contributed to western culture by the biblical Word, and for that we should be profoundly grateful.

There are other institutions in western culture that seem to be largely the result of culture-forming by believers. We could mention orphanages and humanitarian aid organizations as

16 A small part of this story is told in Thomas K. Johnson, 'Human Rights and Christian Ethics' (MBS Text 54, available at www.bucer.eu, then click 'international') and also in Thomas K. Johnson, *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, The WEA Global Issues Series, Vol. 1. (Culture and Science Publishing: Bonn, 2008), 112 pp.

17 This story is effectively told by Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton in *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Crossway Books, 1994).

good examples.

History is not finished. Maybe some of us will be used by God, used by the biblical Word to bring entirely new contributions into secular culture. Maybe someone reading this essay can be used to start something just as radical and new as education for girls, humanitarian aid or modern science. The Word continues to be active as a key force that contributes to culture.

VI Conclusion

The great European preacher of a century ago, J. Christian Blumhardt, had a fascinating saying, 'A man must be converted twice, from the natural life to the spiritual life, and after that from the spiritual life to the natural life'.¹⁸ We must be converted from the world, so that our identity, values, beliefs and priorities are not those of this world. We must be converted back to the world, knowing that God has called and sent us to serve the Word in the world. The Old Order Amish are, I think, once-converted people. They have been converted away from the world, and that is absolutely necessary

for each of us. But Jesus also wants to convert us back to the world, to live in the world, to be sent as his representatives into the world. That means bringing the Word to culture.

What I have presented is little more than a progress report on some things I have learned about how that Word relates to culture. I really hope some of you are thinking, 'Does not the Word relate to culture like this....'? I am sure that the Word is the ultimate critic of culture, laying bare before God the sinful acts, values and ideas of the unbelieving world; and that Word, especially the promises of the Word, correlates with the deepest needs expressed in culture, needs for honest answers, the need for comfort in our anxiety and the need for reconciliation in our alienation. The Word also creates or constructs entirely new cultural entities, ways of thinking, living and ordering our world, which bring glory to God. The Word has a long history of contributing key ideas, practices and institutions, even to those cultures that do not acknowledge the Word, and for that we should be profoundly grateful.

Our challenge today is to live as twice-converted people, called out of the world to a life of faith and then sent by God back into his world as hearers and bearers of the Word.

¹⁸ Quoted by Herman Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der Openbaring* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1908), 207. My translation.