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mizes the Soviet threat, while at the same time draining us of the vital moral energy necessary to work for both peace and freedom." If we remain conscious of these obstacles and pursue certain goals outlined in this book, Weigel believes we can move much closer to true international peace. Weigel also has a little booklet on the Bishops' Letter entitled *The Peace Bishops and the Arms Race.*

Wohlstetter, Albert. "Bishops, Statesmen, and Other Strategists on the Bombing of Innocents," *Commentary,* Vol. 75, No. 6 (June 1983), 15-35. Written by a mathematical logician, fomerly of RAND, the article challenges some basic components of the Bishops' Letter. This is the kind of essay that challenges one to know the facts and reason carefully. The Keeny and Panofsky article (above) as well as various *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* articles challenge some of Wohlstetter's claims.

*Yoder, John Howard. *The Christian Witness to the State.* Faith and Life Press, 1977, 3rd ed., 90 pp., $3.95. Gives a theological and ethical rationale for why Christians engage in politics in a partisan manner. Incidentally this book belies the notion that pacifists have no right to be, or rationale for being, involved in politics.

Yoder, John Howard. *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism.* 2nd ed., Herald Press, 1976, 143 pp., $2.50. This small book helps correct the stereotypes of pacifism that continue to exist in the minds of many. It also offers a powerful apologetic on behalf of pacifism.

*Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus.* Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972, 260 pp., $4.95. This very influential book argues for the relevance of the New Testament to social ethical thought.

Yoder, John Howard. *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics As Gospel.* Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 222 pp., $8.95. An important collection of essays that illustrate several dimensions of Yoder's understanding of Christian social ethics. James Childress says that this book ". . . should be read by all Christians interested in the meaning of their faith and its ethical implications."

*Yoder, John Howard. *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking.* Augsburg Pub. House, 1984, 95 pp., $5.95. This book raises a lot of good questions for Christians (and others) intent on taking the just-war tradition seriously. As Charles P. Lutz, a jwt proponent, says in the introduction, "[Yoder] asks us, for the sake of the world, to demonstrate the credibility of our ethic, to put it to the test, to be honest about where it leads us."

The Church: A Social Institution?

by Dennis P. Hollinger

Scrutinizing the church as a social institution has never been popular among evangelicals. Sociological inquiry, it is feared, will inevitably lead to a reductionist view of the church, systematically stripping away all supernatural explanation of the church's origins, forms, and message, until all that remains is another human institution. Evangelicals have chosen instead to affirm the church as a Body of Christ, a royal priesthood, a holy Temple, the *ecclesia*—a divine body that transcends socio-cultural explanations and owes its very existence to Christ, its founder, Savior, and Lord.

Certainly sociology has not always been kind to the church or to religion in general. To acknowledge that "the Christian Church is a natural community. . .," says James Gustafson, "appears to reduce a special creation of God's gracious work to the dismal and uninspiring realm of natural man with his physical, social, and psychological needs."[1] Durkheim, Marx, Freud, and a host of other modern behavioral scientists have joined the ranks of those opting for monolithic explanations of the church's existence based solely on social, economic, and psychological factors.

But one need not be a reductionist to utilize sociological categories. Indeed one need not assume a skeptical stance to view the church from a socio-cultural perspective. It is both possible and desirable to analyze the church using theological categories which affirm its unique origins, message, and purposes, in conjunction with sociological categories which reckon with the socio-cultural milieu out of which it emerged.

The sociological perspective is important for several reasons. First, it helps us distinguish those dimensions of the church which emanate from the culture and those which come from God. Too often throughout history well-meaning Christians have argued that particular forms, polities, ideas, and styles within the church were divine in origin. A century or so later when those aspects of ecclesiastical life had changed, one was almost left to conclude that God was fickle, since he had presumably ordained them. Sociological study can be a valuable tool in helping us discern how and why certain trends emerge within the church. To attribute all human forms and practices to divine initiation is akin to idolatry, even when those forms and practices are good and beneficial. God has indeed ordained certain things for the church, but in many areas there is also freedom in order that the church may adapt its God-given mandates to the needs of particular socio-cultural contexts. But to do this effectively one must distinguish that which is cultural from that which is supracultural.[2]

A further rationale for sociological inquiry is the insidious inclination to succumb to cultural Christianity. Cultural Christianity involves a syncretism of biblical ideals and practices with those cultural ideals and practices which are antithetical to Christian principles. The use of cultural motifs serves a vital function in contextualizing the gospel, as many missiologists have recently contended.[3] To do so requires careful socio-cultural analysis in order to identify modes of thought, organizational methods, and stylistic forms which can be adapted to church life. However, there are limits. When aspects of the socio-cultural context which conflict with the gospel are utilized, or when relative cultural motifs are baptized as absolute Christian principles, cultural religion results. Sociological analysis can be used to help illuminate the distinction between legitimate contextualization and illegitimate cultural captivity by clarifying relevant social processes, norms, and role expectations.

A final reason for sociological analysis of the church is to understand the ways in which the church helps shape its culture and related social insitutions. Many social scientists have studied religion primarily as a dependent variable in which religion is acted upon by society. Karl Marx, for example, saw religion and the church as mere reflections of the economic institution in that the owners of production utilized religious ideas to placate their workers. In such analysis religion has no dynamic of its own to impact upon society.

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Other sociologists, while acknowledging religion as a dependent variable, would argue for its concurrent role as an independent variable, dynamically acting upon the society and other social institutions. One of the classic works setting forth this thesis is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In it Weber observes that the modern capitalistic ethos, not capitalism per se, rose to prominence in Protestant countries where Calvinism prevailed. From this observation he argued that "the principle explanation. . .must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs, and not only in their temporary external historico-political situation."[4] Weber's primary contention was that religion generates a powerful, though often unintended, socio-cultural impact of its own—a fact that can be sociologically documented.

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Having noted the importance of sociological study for the church, let us move on to selected manifestations of the church as a social institution. Three ecclesiastical dimensions will be examined to show the interaction of divine elements with socio-cultural elements—theology, polity and structure, and style of expression. My objective is to demonstrate how the church functions as a social institution, though at the same time acknowledging it is more than just that. In the following discussion I am using "church" to mean concrete embodiments of the Body of Christ, both local and world-wide. At this point some might be prone to make a sharp distinction between the visible church, which exists in a cultural milieu, and the invisible church, which transcends cultural frames of reference. The problem with such dichotomizing is that the invisible church is always visibly manifest within the world. It cannot remain invisible and acultural. Therefore, appealing to the invisible church as a pure ideal untainted by cultural and social elements is simply a platonic myth. The Church of Jesus Christ, composed of all true believers and followers of their Lord, is always manifest as a human community in concrete historical situations. It is those concrete embodiments which we now turn.

The Church's Theology

To suggest that the church's theology reflects its nature as a social institution may be initially unsettling for some. Many evangelicals have tended to argue that theology is absolute, unchanging, transcendent, and beyond cultural influence. Charles Hodge, for example, seemingly viewed theology as beyond historical and socio-cultural mediation in his comparison of the discipline to the natural sciences:

> The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adapts to ascertain what nature teaches.[5]

For Hodge the theological enterprise is a collection of facts revealed in Scripture and a systematization of those facts according to their internal consistency, thereby ascertaining "God's System."[6]

In similar fashion Augustus Strong contended that "the aim of theology is the ascertainment of the facts respecting God and the relations between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth." For Strong there appears to be little human or cultural dimension to theology for even the "arrangement of facts is not optional, but is determined by the nature of the material with which is deals. A true theology thinks over again God's thoughts and brings them into God's order."[7]

In such perceptions theology is wrested from its cultural context in that the Bible and our perceptions and systematizing of it are at no point filtered through a socio-altered grid. As David Wells so aptly put it, for many evangelicals "theology is seen to yield a kind of universal transcendent knowledge that encompasses all cultures but is localized in none in particular."[8]

In contrast to this static understanding of theology, there is an alternative evangelical view which is faithful to God's infallible rule of faith, Scripture, while acknowledging a legitimate social and cultural impact upon theological reflection. In this perspective theology may be defined as the human attempt to systematize and apply what revelation teaches about given themes. Such a task is no mere human enterprise, for the primary content and test of all theology is rooted in authoritative objective revelation. This endeavor is further aided by guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, the human theologian cannot avoid expressing these divine truths in categories which reflect in part the social setting.

Theology in its essence is language about God and the realities of the Christian faith. Language is a tool of culture and as such employs culturally agreed-upon symbols to express particular realities. Language will always reflect its socio-cultural setting, for no set of linguistic symbols can exist in a vacuum. God did not choose to reveal His written Word in a divine language but rather in the common language of a social group. This understanding need not relativize the Word of God, for "men spoke from God [in their own language, style, and thought categories] as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). What must be acknowledged, however, is that the divine reality is not synonymous with the words used in Scripture, but rather the biblical words, as cultural symbols, point to the divine reality. To do theology requires a commitment to God's Word (written and incarnate) as the primary content and test of all theology, but the God-breathed words of the original text are also tools of a culture.

There are two socio-cultural processes through which we must pass to construct a theology. The first is interpretation. The interpreter is aided by Spirit-filled illumination, but this in no way insures interpretive infallibility. One need only examine the history of exegesis to realize that varying interpretations of Scripture have existed from the early church on. Why is this so? One explanatory factor, and there are many, is the socio-cultural context of the interpreter. This context affects what is seen and not seen in Scripture, how meaning is transferred across ages and cultures to a new context with a new language, and how Scripture is specifically applied to a given issue in the church or the world that may be quite different from analogous issues addressed in the biblical text. Such interpretive variation need not result in hermeneutical chaos. There is always the objective Word to which we go again and again, and there is the ever-deepening insight from extra-biblical sources of the original setting. Historical theol-

ogy is also a tool which informs our biblical interpretation. True, applications to new contexts may vary, but that does not nullify the possibility of an ultimate criterion against which we judge our theology. Yet, the interpreter is never totally free from his/her social setting, and this limitation must always humbly be acknowledged.

The second socio-cultural process through which we must pass in doing theology is a systematization of the interpreted Word. Theology involves organizing into human categories of thought what we understand Scripture to say. Some may not feel the urgency to move beyond biblical theology—that is, clarifying what John or Paul or Peter say about particular themes in their own language. But if we believe that Scripture is unified and that the parts are not ultimately inconsistent, then we must press on with the task of systematizing revealed knowledge about God, Christ, salvation, the church, ethics, etc. This may require language categories beyond those available in the biblical language for two reasons. First, the biblical writers themselves don't always use the same categories to describe particular divine realities; and at other times the same linguistic categories may be used but with varying shades of meaning.[9] In order to reconcile these differences, the theologian may search for categories which harmonize the varieties in biblical language. Second, the systematization must be integrated with the particular issues and questions arising from within or without the church. To do so requires language that is relevant to those concerns.

The whole of historical theology illustrates the fact that theology reflects its social setting. This is exemplified in both the issues that are raised and the ways they are handled. Specific theological issues addressed by the church in a given place and time reflect to some degree what is happening in the surrounding culture. As the socio-historical situation exerts pressure on the church to grapple with these issues, it responds by hammering out particular tenets in more systematic form. Until that time the church may only have general teachings on the subject which emerges during the course of Bible study. But a full-blown systematic doctrinal statement normally develops in response to cultural impingement.

For example, when the early church worked out the theology of Christ's relationship to God, it did so in terms which reflected the philosophical questions of its socio-historical setting. The debate centered over whether Christ was *homoousion* (of the same essence or substance as the Father), *homoiousion* (of a similar essence or substance) or *heteroousion* (of a different essence or substance). Nowhere in Scripture is the issue of *ousia* or essence discussed, at least in those terms. However, finding itself in the midst of a culture that asked questions of essence and substance, the church was forced to formulate a theology of Christ's essence, and chose to do so in the thought categories of contemporary philosophy. The church's strategy was to begin with the Word, but once that Word was interpreted (in a socio-cultural framework), the interpretations were then systematized into the language and thought patterns of its culture.

A further illustration of how the socio-cultural context influences theology is evidenced in the rise of eschatological concerns in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout the first eighteen centuries of the church there were certainly teachings on the "last things." However, a more full-orbed eschatology has emerged in the last two centuries. Why? Primarily, I believe, because Western culture has been raising questions about history which have in turn caused the church to ask, "Where is history going?" Nineteenth-century notions of evolution, dialectic, and optimism were reflected in a popular post-millennial eschatology that saw history's progress culminating in the return of Christ. This does not imply a reductionism in which the cultural milieu was the sole source of post-millennialism, for the Puritans two centuries earlier had already begun to construct such an eschatology.[10] But as Stanley Gundry has noted:

> Time and again there seems to be a connection between eschatology and the church's perception of itself in its historical situation. Eschatologies have been a reflection of the current mood or *Zeitgeist* or response to historical conditions. In other words, in many cases eschatologies appear to have been sociologically conditioned.[11]

When the horrors of urban industrialism, war, and international conflict began to play havoc with nineteenth-century optimism, the post-millennial bubble burst and a form of premillennialism began to flourish. There is no question that the doomsday prophecies of dispensational premillennialism was a reading not only of the Bible but also of the times, fueled by the rude awakening of socio-cultural experience.

Is one left to conclude that theology merely blows with the winds of its times? That it is forever doomed to cultural relativism, having little or no transcendent message? Not at all. Because there is an objective Word we are not lost in a maze of cultural relativities. There is ultimate truth and final authority against which all human thought can and must be judged. But our theology must not be confused with eternal truth. Theology is, rather, the systematic reflection and human categorization of that divine truth, as recorded in Scripture, and in dialogue with contextually relevant questions. As John Jefferson Davis puts it:

> The calls for the contextualization of the gospel (in actuality, a recontextualization) are simply based on the recognition of the need to communicate the faith in a context-specific fashion, and to make a critical assessment of the ways in which the church's or theologian's own social situation may be distorting the understanding of the message.[12]

All of this means that theology can never be done once and for all. It represents the on-going attempt of the church in a culturally-specific locale to address the biblical issues in a way that is understandable to that culture. This approach to theology will mean that to some extent the issues addressed and the packaging of those issues will differ from place to place and in different periods of history. For example, in the West, systematic theologies often begin sections on God with the classical arguments for the existence of God. In Africa where few doubt the supernatural realm and where Aristotelian philosophy has little significance, such arguments are almost nonsensical. Conversely, an area of theology with great

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significance to the African mind, but one never highly developed in the West, is that of power encounter—the encounter of God with the spirit world and demons. Therefore, it seems reasonable that the theologies of the secularist West will address the existence of God in language relevant to its skeptical minds, while African theologies will emphasize more the relationship of God's power to the animated world.

The problem with believing that theology is absolute, unchanging, and given once-for-all is well illustrated by R.H.S. Boyd's *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church.* Boyd analyzes the Westminster Confession through Indian eyes and shows the confusion that arises when context is not considered. The section on the Trinity includes these words, "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance. . . .The Son is eternally begotten of the Father." Boyd notes:

> The word 'person' cannot be translated directly from English into say, Gujarati, for in common parlance 'person' means 'individual,' and that is precisely what it does not mean in this context. 'Substance' is also a difficult word, implying something solid and material. . .then the word 'begotten.' . . . Any translation into Gujarati would imply a sexual relationship, and would cause misunderstanding to a Hindu and scandal to a Muslim.[13]

selves ill at ease among their partly Americanized kindred and feel compelled to organize new denominations which will be truer to the Old World customs."[14] Thus, denominationalism is born of social sources as well as conquests for theological purity. Niebuhr may overstate his case, but careful, honest scrutiny of church history leads to the conclusion that some church wars heralded in the name of theology are in actuality confrontations of culture.

The theological enterprise, then, is one of the dimensions in which the church reflects that it is a social institution. Theology, as the on-going attempt to systematize and apply revealed truth as interpreted by a particular people, reflects socio-cultural knowledge and needs. Such an agenda is inherently fraught with syncretistic temptations. But the great solace of the Christian church is that God has clearly spoken in the incarnate Word and the written Word, both of which serve as the ultimate content and test of the church's thought in every age and in every culture. It is the possession of this revealed truth that makes the church different from all other social institutions.

The Church's Policy and Structure

No human organization can exist without structure and polity. A church may be highly anti-institutional and informal,

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When the Westminster Confession was composed in 1646 the words were carefully chosen in light of that social situation—namely a context in which the church felt the need to distinguish its doctrine and church government from that of Roman Catholicism. But to impose that same type of theological language on another culture may be a travesty.

Evangelicals, who strongly affirm the authority of Scripture, must be quick to point out that not every socio-cultural expression of theology is acceptable. There are heterodox theologies which, though they may be culturally relevant, are not biblically faithful. Each rendition of theology must find its ultimate origins in the Word and must be continually tested by that Word. Though the issues, language, categorization, and specific applications of a theology will be reflective of a socio-cultural milieu, the meaning must be analogous to the meaning of Scripture's own language, categories, and applications.

While the church must always guard against theologies that do not reflect revealed truth, it must also take care not to judge a theology as heresy simply because it employs different language and categories of thought. Many church splits and denominational schisms have been championed under the guise of wrong versus right theology. But as H. Richard Niebuhr has documented in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism,* the multiplicity of Christian groups has emerged not so much over theological differences as underlying social differences. Niebuhr attempts to show that economic status, nationalism, sectionalism, ethnic differences, and race have all been contributing factors leading to schism and new denominations. As an example, Niebuhr notes that language change (from native to English) was the covert cause of divisiveness in the Dutch Reformed, German Lutheran, and German Reformed Churches, even though the issues were touted as theological in nature. The inclination of some immigrants toward conformity to new cultural customs caused others to "find themselves ill at ease among their partly Americanized kindred and feel compelled to organize new denominations which will be truer to the Old World customs."[14] Thus, denominationalism is born of social sources as well as conquests for theological purity. Niebuhr may overstate his case, but careful, honest scrutiny of church history leads to the conclusion that some church wars heralded in the name of theology are in actuality confrontations of culture.

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Throughout Western church history three main types of church polity have existed—episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. The pivotal issue in distinguishing these three types is their locus of power or authority. In the past, adherents of each type have declared their polity to be the biblical or God-given one.[16] Close scrutiny of Scripture, however, reveals that while there may be elements of each type in the Bible, no clear-cut form of church government is set forth. As Gordon Fee notes in his analysis of church order in The Pastoral Epistles,

> One must ruefully admit that we are left with far more questions about church order than answers. (Surely this whole perspective should have been questioned long ago simply on the existential grounds that such diverse groups as Roman Catholics, Plymouth Brethren and Presbyterians all use the PE [Pastoral Epistles] to support their ecclesiastical structures.[17]

Moreover, analysis of church history reveals that each type came to prominence in a particular socio-historical context. More specifically, each polity type bears striking resemblance to a construction of civil government and emerged in the context of that type of state rule. Therefore, the explanation for church structures is far more sociological in nature than theological.

In episcopalian polity the primary power and authority re-

sides with the bishops (the *episkopoi*), who are regarded in some traditions as successors in the line of apostolic authority. This is an hierarchical approach in which power moves from the top down by means of graduation or rank among church officials. Episcopalian polity has found variable expression within Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and to some degree Methodist churches. While its adherents have appealed to a New Testament order of apostles, bishops, pastors and deacons to support this approach, it is sociologically significant that episcopalian polity corresponds to a monarchical form of statehood. It is likely that the episcopacy development during the late Roman Empire reflected in part the familiar hierarchical patterns of civil government. When episcopalian polity gained new momentum during the sixteenth century English Reformation, it was clearly embedded in a strong political monarchy deemed to be legitimized and ordained by God.

Rather than defending one polity as more biblical in its origins than another, it may be more honest to acknowledge the socio-cultural roots of each type. In turn, the appropriate use of a given structure is probably best determined by the cultural context. In a tribal society where elders make community decisions, church structure should then be roughly analogous to existing community and political power, an adequate polity will likely include some features of congregationalism.

Utilizing cultural motifs does not preclude a search for biblical guidelines relative to church government. New Testament leadership qualifications and the revolutionary servanthood model for those leaders are among the divine principles that should permeate all church polities. The use of power and authority in the Christian community must differ radically from the power ploys of society, for as Jesus put it, "The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves" (Luke 22:26). But it is quite conceivable that Jesus' approach to power and authority can be applied to all three polity types.

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Presbyterian polity is a representative form of government with power residing in both representative hierarchies and local congregations. Finding expression in the Reformed tradition, presbyterian structure incorporates concepts of representation, delegation, and systems of checks and balances. Normally a session or consistory is elected by the congregation to govern the major affairs of the local church. A presbytery, composed of all pastors and one ruling elder from each congregation in a local area, functions to both legitimize and limit the powers of any local congregation. This ecclesiastical structure is roughly equivalent to a republic or parliamentary form of civil government. Although adherents may wish to believe that presbyterianism is the biblical pattern, it is significant that the polity emerged in those areas where ideas of political representation were gaining popularity. For example, in Geneva and throughout Switzerland dimensions of representation and parliamentarianism were emerging just as the Swiss Reformation began. The Reformed church adopted these ideas and gave them further impetus in society, so that Presbyterian polity then helped extend notions of Republicanism in some Western countries.

In congregational polity authority and power rests with the members of a local congregation. The only designated authority other than the congregation is Christ Himself. As Eric Jay puts it:

> Authority resides in the congregation itself which receives it immediately from Christ and may exercise it immediately . . . . The ministers, however, possess their power through the congregation, and cannot, therefore, be said to exercise their power "immediately." As the congregation has power to call, test, and ordain its officers, so it has power to depose them if they prove unworthy.[18]

These self-governing churches usually own their own property, often write their own by-laws and constitutions, and associate with the larger church (such as a denomination) in terms of a loose fellowship. Although congregationalists often argue that local church autonomy is the New Testament way, it is important to note that these churches emerged in the context of political democracy and bear the hallmarks of all democratic, voluntary institutions.

Sociological factors not only account for the emergence of given polity types, but generate continual change and adaptation within those types. This is clearly seen in the North American context. Due to a national ethos accentuating democratization and individuality, episcopal structures have been modified in the direction of more diffuse power and thus greater congregational participation in decision making. Because of increased bureaucratization and specialization within the culture, congregationalism has experienced greater hierarchical and structural solidification. Paul Harrison in *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* examines the effects of implementing specialized tasks within congregational church settings. In studying the American Baptist Convention, Harrison notes that pure congregationalism is often compromised for the sake of efficiency. When a decision is pressing and authorized directives from the congregation or delegation are not available, an individual or small group of leaders is forced to assume authority and make the decision.[19] In this way bureaucracy begins to emerge and appropriate some of the power that constitutionally resides with the congregation or delegated bodies. This ecclesiastical process is most evident within cultures that eulogize efficiency and specialization.

Socio-cultural influences upon church structure can be good, bad or neutral from a normative perspective. To make a value judgment about society's impact requires knowledge of both Scripture and sociological processes. Ministers and church leaders need some sociological understanding in order to assimilate acceptable patterns and structures and to reject those patterns and structures which are incompatible with the nature of the church.

The church must corporately demonstrate that it is more than just another social institution. Its structural patterns and uses of power should reveal its call as a new society in the midst of an old and fallen one. But the church cannot escape bearing the marks of its social context, some of which will be manifest in its ecclesiastical polity and structure. One of the enduring challenges facing the church is to fill those familiar social patterns and structures with new meaning and Christ-

like behavior.

Style of Expression

Worship, fellowship, evangelism, instruction, and service are all God-ordained purposes of the church. Precisely how these tasks are to be accomplished, however, is not divinely mandated. Every church develops its own style which in part reflects the culture and personalities of its people.

Paradoxically, the style of expression adopted to carry out these basic ecclesiastical tasks functions simultaneously to unify and divide people. Particular styles of worship or evangelism serve as vehicles to engender a sense of kinship among people. Parishioners grow familiar with the words, demeanor, and spirit of these activities and therefore feel akin to others who identify with them as well. But modes of expression can also be divisive in that some Christians inevitably feel alienated from certain language, hymns, liturgies, and forms. Such persons may not be rejecting the church's message but rather the cultural expression selected to convey that message.

Because there is an objective Word we are not lost in a maze of cultural relativities. There is ultimate truth and final authority against which all human thought can and must be judged. But our theology must not be confused with eternal truth.

It is vitally important to recognize the socio-cultural forces which help shape styles of expression within the church. This in no way minimizes the God-centered orientation of each expression but rather acknowledges that God uses diverse cultural forms. Two specific expressions will serve to illustrate this point—conversion experience and worship.

Conversion involves a turning from one oath to another. Theologically it represents the human turning from sin to righteousness, from self to Christ, from idolatry to the living God, or from an old way of life to Christ's new way of life. Conversion portrays the human side of the salvation process, whereas terms like justification and redemption portray more the divine side. By referring to the human side of salvation I do not mean to minimize God's work but rather to emphasize that throughout Scripture the word conversion focuses on the changes within the individual involved in the salvific process. The profile of the conversion experience varies from person to person, depending on his/her psychological makeup and cultural background.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James notes two kinds of conversion experience, volitional and self-surrender. In volitional conversion "the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits."[20] In this type there is no specific known time of conversion. By contrast self-surrender conversion is an instantaneous experience marked by a dramatic change from the old to the new.

Biblical descriptions do not conform to one exclusive style of conversion. The divine elements of forgiveness, justification, and regeneration are universal but the sequential profile of human turning is particularistic, depending on individual and cultural factors. Western revivalistic traditions have often accentuated a "sawdust trail" or highly emotional, instantaneous conversion. But in reality many committed Christians have no such analogous experience, nor can they point to a time of conversion. Missiologists have noted that in some cultures a whole tribe or village may undergo corporate conversion. From our individualistic vantage point this may seem problematic, but for a people with strong corporate and community world views it is the only imaginable route. In such settings individuals would rarely "turn" alone, but rather in the context of family and community to which they are organically connected.

Human conversion experiences should never be forced into a monolithic mold, for God works with each person in light of their own socio-cultural context and psychological disposition. As missiologist Hans Kasdorf puts it, "God wants to touch and change persons within their own cultural and sociological milieu. Conversion thus becomes the critical point at which the supracultural God meets with culture-bound humanity."[21]

Worship is a second evidence that styles of expression are largely dependent on culture and personality types. The goal of worship is universal, but the precise means by which the worshipper is led to meaningful praise and adoration should reflect familiar socio-cultural patterns of expression.

Styles of worship can be analyzed along a continuum from highly structured/formal to unstructured/informal.[22] It is possible, of course, to be informal and highly structured but generally speaking the preceding categories represent the prevailing polar types. There has been a tendency for those in pietistic traditions to accentuate the unstructured/informal pole, for it is regarded as symbolic of real, "heart-felt" faith in which the Spirit of God moves freely and spontaneously. Highly structured/formal services are judged to be spiritually dead. On the other hand Christians from more liturgical traditions have viewed their style as conducive to true worship that avoids the "superficial emotionalism" of pietism.

Rather than rendering theological judgments on divergent styles of expression, it is better to view each type as reflective of its socio-cultural context. For example, there seems to be a relationship between what one does during the week and how one worships God on Sunday. Generally speaking, many blue collars who experience regimentation, sameness, and clockwork during the week crave a more spontaneous and emotional worship experience. They seek release from regimentation and predictable order. Conversely, white collar workers who must cope with irregular schedules and unpredictable changes of events during the week tend to take refuge in predictable ecclesiastical form, order and structure at the end of their week. Moreover, blue collar culture finds folk-type music (broadly defined) more akin to its aesthetic tastes, while an educated white collar culture is more at home with the classics. These culturally linked worship style differences are well illustrated in Liston Pope's classical work, *Millhands and Preachers*—a study of churches and economics in the mill town of Gastonia, North Carolina. In contrasting blue collar mill churches with the white collar uptown churches Pope states:

> Religious services in a mill church are, correspondingly, more intense in mood than those found elsewhere. Lack of social security is compensated for by fervor of congregational response. . . .Music is more concrete and rhythmic; it conjures up pictures rather than describes attitudes or ideas, and it appeals to the hands and feet more than to the head. The entire service in mill churches has an enthusiasm lacking in the more restrained worship of the "respectable people" uptown.[23]

Certainly there are potential forms and styles inconducive to the worship of God. Not every available means is compatible with our understanding of the nature of God and worship. But the human activity of worship is not accomplished through supracultural means. Worship styles which approximate patterns found in the socio-cultural milieu are most effective in ushering worshippers into the presence of God. As in all styles of Spiritual expression, worship will and must use appropriate, available forms relevant to the social setting.

Conclusion

The church is the Body of Christ, a holy nation, and a royal priesthood. It is indeed God's new society in the midst of an old and fallen one. The church of Christ must unabashedly verbalize that claim and give concrete evidence to such in its pilgrimage within the world. But the church can never be acultural or asocial. It always exists within a society and intentionally or otherwise reflects cultural motifs in its theology, polity and styles of expression.

The aim of the church is not to purge itself of all identifying features of its culture. Rather it is to wisely encorporate those cultural themes and patterns which give flesh and blood to God's transcendent message. It is to prudently reject those cultural aspects that are incongruent with the faith and distort the essence of God's message and work.

The church is a social institution. Sociologists can analyze its descriptive features in much the same manner as any other social grouping such as family, state, or community. It is incumbent upon the church to demonstrate that in its earthly manifestation it is more than a social institution—that it is indeed the Body of Jesus Christ.

[1] James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 14.
[2] For an analysis of these concepts see G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and the Cultural," in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, edited by R. Pierce Beaver (South Pasadena: William Carey, 1973), pp. 48-55.
[3] For a good survey of the possibilities and limitations of contextualization see John Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980).
[4] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1958), p. 40.
[5] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. (New York: Scribners, 1899), 1:10.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[7] Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 2.
[8] David F. Wells, "An Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from *Theoria* to *Praxis*" in George Marsden (ed.), *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), p. 85.
[9] Note, for example, the difference between James' treatment of the term "justification" and Paul's. The two are not contradictory, but because language is symbol two writers may mean different things by the same word.
[10] See Peter Toon (ed.), *Puritan Eschatology* (London: James Clarkes, 1970).
[11] Stanley Gundry, "Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist* as the Determining Factor in the History of Eschatologies," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* (May, 1977), p. 50.
[12] John Jefferson Davis, *The Necessity of Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 172.
[13] R.H.S. Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 36.
[14] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1929), pp. 213-214.
[15] Gustafson, p. 31.
[16] A good example is the Puritan "Cambridge Platform" of 1648 which claimed, "The parties of Church-Government are all of them exactly described in the Word of God. . .and therefore to continue one and the same, unto the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), p. 203.
[17] Gordon Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June, 1985), p. 142.
[18] Eric C. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 214.
[19] Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 98 ff.
[20] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), p. 169. It should be noted that James' typology is drawn from E.O. Starbuck's *The Psychology of Religion.*
[21] Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), p. 29.
[22] A different but related analysis is set forth by Andrew Greeley with his notions of Apollonian and Dionysian orientations in religious ritual. The Apollonian orientation stresses logical understanding and reason in worship, while the Dionysian is emotively orientated. See Greeley's *The Denominational Society* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972).
[23] Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 86.

Normativity, Relevance and Relativism

by Harvie M. Conn

Can one believe in the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice and, at the same time, affirm its culturally-oriented particularity? Must the evangelical tremble in fear every time he hears scholars ask, "How does our understanding of the cultural setting of the Corinthian church affect the way we understand Paul's appeal to women to be silent in the church?" Will our current sensitivity to the New Testament as a word addressed to our century relativize our parallel commitment to it as a word addressed also to the first century?

These are the questions addressed in this article. We do not intend to lay out particular hermeneutical rules to help us in this inquiry. We will touch on them but only as they aid us in our larger research. Nor will we cover the whole sweep of scholarship. Our consideration will be on discussions within the evangelical community.

Many of our case studies will come from those texts central to a study of the place of women in culture. Much current evangelical thinking on the Bible's particularity has revolved around these texts. It is not, however, the issue of the Bible's approach to women that we seek to resolve. Our attention is directed to the larger question of the Bible and its culturally-related character. We examine these texts (and others) only to the degree they relate to this larger agenda.

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The Evangelical Agenda of the Past

Evangelicals, in a sense, have wrestled with the problems associated with cultural relativity in earlier decades. Linked more with terms like relevance and applicability, the questions seemed easier then. Is foot washing a continuing ceremony? Must women wear hats or veils in church? Are there times in the official ministry of the church when a woman can teach adult males? What about the use of tobacco and the drinking of alcoholic beverages in moderation?

Then, as now, answers have not always been the same. Evangelicals, in seeking to uphold the infallible authority of Scripture, sought a variety of ways to account for the diversity of opinion. Some noted that mistakes can occur in applying a scriptural injunction to conditions other than those to which it was truly applicable. Cultural distance between dusty roads and concrete sidewalks translates foot washing into humble Christian service for others. The passage of time transforms the hat from a symbol of modesty to one of fashion.

It was also noted that "there are injustices which are simultaneously appropriate to certain undertakings and circumstances and not to others."[1] The same Jesus who told his disciples at the Last Supper to buy a sword (Luke 22:36) a few hours later warned the same group, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:32). Biblical texts, it was argued, cannot be applied as a universal plaster for any