COUNTERCULTURE

By

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Jesus likened the entrance into his kingdom to a birth, to being "born from above," or "born of God." He insisted that his followers were to take on a completely new spirit with a new basis, new loyalties and a new attitude toward others. The new wine was to be put into new wine-skins (Matt. 9:17).

The Christian faith and life was not something that "evolved" from Judaism, as some mistakenly think. It was a new and different way of approaching God, and this was the one thing that so infuriated the Pharisees.

A complete break was to be made with the old covenant and its forms, so that the Christian might "enter into the Holy place by the blood of Jesus, by … a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (Heb. 10:19-20). This did away with the use of the Temple and the Holy of Holies, for Jesus is our High Priest who has entered into the real Holy of Holies in heaven, and believers take the place of the Levitical priesthood, and are encouraged to boldly enter into the holy place (God's presence) as "a holy priesthood" (Heb. 10:19-22, 1 Pet. 2:5).

No longer was Jerusalem to be the center of worship (John 4:21-24), nor was worship to be under the direction of a special clergy. Jesus promised, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). His disciples worship by presenting themselves "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service (worship)" (Rom. 12:1). This is worship that takes place in the course of one's daily activities which are conducted in keeping with the commands and example of Jesus.

Baptism is not only a burial into Christ's death, but a resurrection "so we might also walk in newness of life: (Rom. 6:4). "So we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6). The newness demanded by Jesus requires two things as set forth by Paul: the denial of worldly standards and a new way of thinking. "And be not fashioned according to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Aligning oneself with the "perfect will of God" changes a person's whole aim in life. The standards of the world, its appeal to social status, its offer of pleasure and comfort, its greed for material accumulations, no longer have a place in one's agenda. There is now a divine standard of a new creature. "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). He is unimpressed by "social status." He seeks the stature of Christ, who is his example and pattern. The world moves in one direction, the Christian in another. Whatever motivates the doomed and hopeless person following the fashion of the world fails altogether to move the new creature. He is motivated by the Creator's will. He doesn't covet temporal power or wealth; he has his heart set on God.

This newness is to stand out in contrast to the world. “This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk, in the vanity of their mind … that you put away, as concerning your former manner of life, the old man, that waxes corrupt after the lusts of deceit; and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, that after God has been created in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:17, 22-24, Cf. Col. 3:10, Gal. 6:15).

This means that the Christian is countercultural. The Christian purpose and style of life must run counter to the popular culture of the day, a culture in which every pagan concept is welcomed and the most depraved sins are tolerated.

It was precisely this countercultural attitude that was championed by Jesus, when he warned the disciples that they would by hated and persecuted by the world. “If you were of the world, the world would love its own: but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you … if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:19-20).

The question is: What has happened to the countercultural message and witness of Christians today?

For one thing, the churches, in general, make it a point to conform to the compulsions of current culture. Churches, instead of seeking to demonstrate the difference between the newness of life in Jesus and the fashion of the world, choose professional leaders (clergymen) who seek the world’s approval, and whose methods of promotion are as worldly as those they seek to convert.

David Wilkerson, noted author of The Cross and The Switchblade and minister of Times Square Church in Manhattan, writes that “too many young ministers today are relying on fleshly methods.” He says, “They are bringing into God’s house the very music that first incited rebellion and sensuality in this nation. They are polling a sin-saturated society to learn how they can lure non-believers into a church building … they are attempting to entertain the youth rather than confront their sins and emptiness with the simple, pure gospel” (Pulpit Series, 1/17/2000, Box 260, Lindale, TX).

This same thought was presented by Dr. Daniel Zager, formerly associate professor of Church Music at Concordia University, as reported in Christian News, 1/10/2000. He wrote, “Church music ought properly to be counter-cultural, by which I mean counter to the prevailing popular culture of our day.” Speaking at a symposium in Fort Wayne, Indiana, he said that books on how to reorganize churches for “growth” teach that you must “match you music” to the kind of people your church wants to reach. As stated by one pastor, “The music used should reflect the styles of music (rock, country, etc.) heard on the radio today.” This is to conform the church to the world, rather than to challenge the world to be transformed to the likeness of Jesus.
The church will never win men form the sickened and perishing world by imitating it. Christians mistakenly try to impress unbelievers by living like the unbeliever, but they only succeed in gaining their contempt.

Life is of value only as it fulfills the Creator's purpose: to have man in His own image. Modern believers have lost sight of this goal, with the church more concerned with numerical growth, material security and social acceptance than with faith and righteousness. We need to return to the faith that says, "I count all (the human and worldly things and attainments) as refuse … that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). The kind of faith that rejoices in suffering and persecution, that makes one stand firm with Christ when everyone else takes another course, the faith that looks only to the Lord and not to any system or ecclesiastical body.

The very core and object of the gospel has been compromised with the pagan world culture. The hope which Jesus offers to dying humanity is an ultimate resurrection from the dead at which time faithful believers will be made immortal after the example of Jesus. But this goal has been shoved to the background, and in its place the pagan concept of an immortal soul has become the prominent doctrine. The church speaks of people as having "gone to their reward," of there already enjoying the bliss of heaven, whereas the Scripture everywhere teaches that mankind is mortal and that immortality will be gained only after a resurrection and judgment, and then only by faithful believers. The core of Christian doctrine is not the future life of spirit, but rather the resurrection of the person, so that the whole person becomes immortal, in an ideal creation. This goal furnishes the incentive to abandon the deformed and dying culture and dare to be different. "We shall be like him … and every one that has this hope set on him purifies himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

Belief in an immortal soul was the popular theology in the first century, but Jesus refuted it by holding the resurrection as the means to life after death. At Athens, the heart of the Platonic dogma of immortal soul, Paul challenged the scholars with the countercultural Christian teaching of the resurrection.

If Christians are to hold forth a message to the spiritually blind and morally insane world, we must first demonstrate that we do not conform to its culture. As more people conform to "political correctness" and cowardly tolerate abominable conduct, the more we are called on to make a countercultural stand.

It remains true that "the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25).

May God strengthen and bless all of you who have "put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, that is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of Him that created him" (Col. 3:9-10).

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