



# How Can the Church Influence Culture<sup>1</sup>

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Ted Ward

Before we ask the question of how the church can influence culture, we have to first ask, “What church are we talking about? What ‘church’ is influencing culture?” People’s perceptions of church are often so culturally laden that the scriptural meaning of church doesn’t come through. One of our first big tasks is to identify and put into action God’s value system for his church. How do we do that? We seek his intentions for the church from Scripture. Then we practice them—it’s not enough to know them. And third, we have a distinct obligation within our community to nurture God’s people in understanding and practicing those values.

There are some costs involved. Because once you begin to search out that which is to be characteristic of the value system of the community of God, the church, you will recognize some pretty heavy stuff! For example, scriptural propositions such as seek first the kingdom of heaven, lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, do unto others as you would have them do to you, bear one another’s burdens, and more. All these qualities of life and behavior have their costs. Implementing the value system of the church, however, is the place where you have to begin, because otherwise the church will continue to influence culture in cultural ways, reflecting back to the general society the image of church that the general society already holds. By the way, one of the most common words given even among Christians in response to the stimulus word *church* is the word *steeple*.

We need to have a clearer awareness of the culture around us. I’m afraid Christians have a fuzzy image of America, a warm and cuddly image of America. We overlook the essential evil which is in our society in order to preserve this warm, cuddly retrospective feeling about how good it is to be an American. I am glad to be an American, but I must speak against the evil in my society. I think somehow the second task upon us as Christians is to become objective critics of the secular society and in order to do that we’ve got to know our own ground better and we’ve got to spend more time in reference to the understanding of the society around us.

Some naïvely trust that what’s good for America is good for the church. I suspect that there are many things in our secular society that are good for America, but aren’t necessarily good for the church. Satisfaction about past influences of Christianity on Western society in general cause us to be unaware and insensitive to the growing gulf between the value system of the church on the one hand, and the value system of the secular society on the other. We talk about a pluralistic society and we’re glad that our nation is strong enough to accommodate that; but on the other hand, do we really know where we stand in relation to pluralism and cultural difference in America—and how the church ought to respond? see a kind of a silly putty view of what’s going on today. You’ve played with silly putty, I’m sure. It’s marvelous stuff. If you gently pull a piece apart, it will tend to string out until the string

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finally snaps and you finally realize that you have two separate pieces. I think we are at that silly putty breaking moment. I think there are several issues. Let me mention what I think they are.

First, as I indicated in the second talk, the family is becoming a crucial issue. At some point, we will see the silly putty break and we will realize that the value system secular society uses to conceptualize family and the value system that the Christian community uses to conceptualize family have suddenly broken apart.

Second, is the issue of individualism. We live in a highly individualistic society that is trying at all costs to maintain and promote individualism in the face of a world that needs much more sense of interdependence; a world that is crying, bleeding, starving because of the inability of people across lines to build meaningful bridges between those who have and those who do not have.

The third area rears its head from time to time, but I suspect it could become an important breaking point if it rears its head just one more time—the issue of national isolationism. The Christian is a community citizen of the world. Christians next time around are going to have to be much more keenly aware of their world citizenship. We need to become objective critics of secular society in America. We need to be clear about what we see about us, and we need to speak prophetically to issues of injustice within the society.

In order to answer the question, ‘How Can the Church Influence Culture?’ we have to raise the question about what we mean by influence. I’m somewhat negative about communication schemes that are designed to impress the secular society. Some of them are so shallow that they are counter-productive. Others tend to reflect so badly on the church that I’m embarrassed to be part of them. Read that creative prophetic parable of our time: Joe Bailey’s, *The Gospel Blimp*. It’s so easy to set the goal of influencing society at a high level of intent and forget that God is concerned about the legitimacy of the ways and means that we use to go about it. That parable is worth retelling. We must be careful that we don’t take things that are perfectly worthy as outcomes and assume that they would automatically be appropriate workable goals. While setting goals and designing plans, keep in mind that there’s a difference between a workable worthy goal and a desirable, worthy outcome. These are not one in the same thing. Specifically, set goals, but trust God for the outcomes.

I remind you of one of the passages that speak to the matter of church growth, perhaps more distinctly than most of the proof texts on church growth. Paul planted the seed, Apollos watered. You know the next line? But God made it grow, or in other texts, gave the increase. This is really a burden on my heart with reference to the influence we may have on society. We have to work toward appropriate goals and trust God for desirable outcomes. Let me give you some illustrations. If we discriminate between worthy goals and desirable outcomes as our first task, then nurturing the whole Christian, including the transformed nature, becomes a responsibility of the Christian community.

And the nurturance of that transformed nature necessitates our involvement with the needs of people—without drawing lines. Our God is involved in redemption with the whole of the groaning, travailing, universe. Mobilizing the church, then, is involvement with the needs of the whole world.

I look for the day when large sectors of the evangelical church of Jesus Christ in North America takes strong stands, makes clear statements and exerts political pressure in terms of such mundane but crucial things as reductions of demands on our precious energy supply. I look forward to the day when the Christian community will be at the forefront of what each day brings us closer to an

ultimate calamity for millions of people in starvation. We are so close to seeing massive starvation in this world and the granaries have not been laid aside, though God has given us the same sort of awareness that he gave to Joseph. Joseph saw fit to go to Pharaoh to get the resources to show God's omnipotence through providing for need during famine. Where is American initiative, and more particularly, where is the American evangelical voice toward that kind of initiative?

The influence of the church on society depends on what we are as God is *developing in us what he has planted within us*. To me, this is what the new era in missions is all about. I'm excited about it and I hope you are too. I hope you believe as I do that it is appropriate for us to want to be salt that is salty, light that is dazzling bright.