

THIS CULTURE IS OVERRATED

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I fear we may have fallen in*

When I recently asked a group of pastors what areas they wanted help with in their preaching, most replied, "To preach sermons that really hit my people where they live."

At one time I would have agreed this was one of the primary purposes of Christian preaching—to relate the gospel to contemporary culture. Now I believe it is our weakness.

In leaning over to speak to the modern world, I fear we may have fallen in. Most of the preaching in my own denomination struggles to relate the gospel to the modern world. We sought to use our sermons to build a bridge from the old world of the Bible to the modern world; the traffic was always one way, with the modern world rummaging about in Scripture, saying

things like, "This relates to me," or, "I'm sorry, this is really impractical." It was always the modern world telling the Bible what's what.

This way of preaching fails to do justice to the rather imperialistic claims of Scripture. The Bible doesn't want to *speak* to the modern world; the Bible wants to *convert* the modern world.

We who may have lived through the most violent century in the history of the world—based on body counts alone—ought not to give too

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counts alone—ought not to give too much credence to the modern world. The modern world is not only the realm of the telephone and allegedly “critical thinking” but also the habitat of Auschwitz, two of the bloodiest wars of history, and assorted totalitarian schemes. Why would our preaching want to be comprehensible to *that* world?

The modern world must be made to understand that it is nothing more than that—just a world. By that I mean the modern world is an ideological construct, an intellectual fabrication, a way of construing reality that has lasted for about 200 years, mainly in Northern Europe and in some of its colonies. It is now losing its grip.

Modernity has arrogance built into itself. Beginning as a search for certain and irrefutable knowledge, a quest for the “facts,” it likes to think of itself not as a point of view but simply as the facts. Therefore, all other ways of construing the world must converse with modernity on modernity’s terms—or be labeled “primitive,” “narrow,” or “tribal.”

While humanity has received many gifts from modern, scientific, technological ways of thinking, we are now realizing that modernity was not without its losses.

Unfortunately, too often Christians have treated the modern world as if it were a fact, a reality to which we were obligated to adjust, rather than a point of view with which we might argue.

When we speak of reaching out to our culture through the gospel, we must remember that *the gospel is also a culture*. In the attempt to “translate” the gospel into the language of the culture, something is lost. We are learning that you have not said “salvation” when you say “self-esteem.” “The American Way” is not equivalent to “the kingdom of God.”

You cannot learn to speak French by reading a French novel in an English translation—you must sit for the grammar, the syntax, and the vocabulary and learn it. So you cannot know Christianity by having it translated into some other medium like Marxism, feminism, or the language of self-esteem. Christianity is

a distinct culture with its own vocabulary, grammar, and practices. Too often, when we try to speak to our culture, we merely adopt the culture of the moment rather than present the gospel to the culture.

Our time as preachers is better spent inculcating modern, late-20th-century Americans into that culture called *church*. When I walk into a class on introductory physics, I expect not to understand immediately most of the vocabulary, terminology, and concepts. Why should it be any different for modern Americans walking into a church?

This is why the concept of “user-friendly churches” often leads to churches getting used. There is no way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can’t do that even with baseball!

The other day, someone emerged

from Duke Chapel after my sermon and said, “I have never heard anything like that before. Where on *earth* did you get that?”

I replied, “Where on earth *would* you have heard this before? After all, this is a pagan, uninformed university environment. Where would you hear this? In the philosophy department? Watching *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*? No, to hear this, you’ve got to get dressed and come down here on a Sunday morning.”

It is a strange assumption for Americans to feel they already have the equipment necessary to comprehend the gospel without modification of lifestyle, without any struggle—in short, without being born again.

The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it. God’s appointed means of producing change is called “church”; and God’s typical way of producing church is called “preaching.” □

DOES RELIGION PAY?

Paul said so in his letter to Timothy. “Religion does yield high dividends” (1 Tim. 6:6, NEB). But Paul was not talking about just any old religion. The Greek word translated “religion” (*eusebeia*) means “devotion or reverence toward God.” It is this authentic godly devotion that “holds promise of the life now and that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8).