

MAKING
A
DIFFERENCE

IMPACTING CULTURE AND
SOCIETY AS A CHRISTIAN

R. C. SPROUL



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To Dr. Thomas Gregory
Teacher, Counselor, Friend

Contents

PART I **World Views**

1. The Importance of Cultural Awareness 11
2. Secularism: *Ignoring the Eternal* 23
3. Pessimistic Existentialism 39
4. Sentimental Humanism 59
5. Pragmatism: “*Made in USA*” 77
6. Positivism: “*Seeing Is Believing*” 99
7. Pluralism and Relativism: “*It’s All Relative*” 117
8. Hedonism: “*Grabbing for All the Gusto!*” 135

PART II **The Christian’s Role in Society**

9. The Christian and World Economics: *A Look at the Law and the Profits* 149
10. The Christian and Science: *How to Fuse Faith and the Atom* 165

Contents

11. The Christian and Art: *Painting by the Numbers* 179
 12. The Christian and Literature: *Faith and Fiction* 189
 13. The Christian and Government: *What to Do When Uncle Sam Wants You* 203
- Index 219

PART I

WORLD VIEWS

The Importance of Cultural Awareness

Every Christian is a missionary. If we carefully read the book of Acts, we will see that when persecution arose in Jerusalem, all the Christians were scattered except the apostles. Those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Gospel (Acts 8). That was the way the Christian church multiplied. It was not by an ordained clergy, by the apostles, or even by the deacons. It was the rank and file of Christians who took the Gospel wherever they went in the ancient world. In other words, they were missionaries.

In the modern church we make a distinction between the “professional missionary” and the “layperson.” The distinction is between paid missionaries and volunteers, between “full-time” hired employees and rank-and-file church members. Sadly, it has come to mean that the paid professionals are responsible to do the missions task. The layperson’s job

is to pray for the missionary, give tithes to the missionary, and in other ways encourage the missionary. The missionaries are the players; the rest of us are cheerleaders.

God teaches us otherwise. Of course there is a special place for the paid professional. However, the biblical definition of a missionary has nothing to do with salary. A missionary is not simply “one who is paid.” In biblical terms a missionary is “one who is *sent*.” Here is the crux of the matter. We are all sent. It is our calling to be witnesses. Every Christian must get in the game. There are no cheerleaders—only players.

Some missionaries go to Africa—others travel to Asia or to Europe. Every missionary goes somewhere. We all have a mission field, if only our own neighborhood or office building. Every corner of the world is a mission field. There are no boundaries in this world beyond which Christian witness is out of bounds.

Suppose for a moment that you had the opportunity to meet Jesus face to face. If in that meeting you had the chance to ask Jesus one question, what would you ask Him? The disciples had the opportunity to ask Jesus questions every day. They asked Him how to pray, how to heal the sick, and questions about theology. There came a moment, however, when they were down to their last question. They stood with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, the mountain of ascension. Jesus was about to depart from them. The cloud of Shekinah glory was ready to envelop Christ and lift Him to heaven. Jesus was leaving this planet.

There was time for one more question. What was it? The disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6 NIV). I wonder why they

asked that question. Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus had answered, "Yes. The work is finished. I am going to the right hand of the Father. As soon as I arrive and am enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, you can all enjoy a vacation. I'll take care of everything. I'll make sure that every element of the world recognizes My reign. We will make an official announcement by writing it in the sky. Then I will send angels to every remote part of the globe to make absolutely certain that everybody knows that I am now the King of the universe. You fellows take a rest. Go back up in the stands and enjoy the game."

We know that is not what Jesus said. Rather He answered their question something like this: "Look, it's none of your business *when* the kingdom is going to be restored to Israel. My Father has a timetable for that. What *is* your business is *Be My witnesses.*"

The kingdom of God is real. At this very moment Jesus sits in the seat of cosmic authority. He is now the supreme ruler of the world. He stands over the governments of this world. He is King. The president of Russia must answer to Him. The Dalai Lama of Tibet must answer to Him. The prince of Morocco must answer to Him. The president of the United States must answer to Him. But there is one big problem. His kingdom is *invisible*. Not everyone knows about it. All over the world people are living as if Jesus were not King.

Some people believe that there is no God. Others say that there are many gods. Some folks believe that man is supreme. Others believe that man is worthless. Many people believe there is a God, but they live as if there were no God. Still others ask, "What difference does it make?"

Where Christ is invisible, people perish. Where His reign is unknown or ignored, people are exploited. They are demeaned. They are enslaved. They are butchered. They are aborted. They are raped. They are casualties of war. They are robbed. They are slandered. They are oppressed. They are cheated in marriage. They are cheated in their wages. They are left to go hungry, naked, and unsheltered. They are consigned to loneliness. They are ridiculed. They are frightened—that and a whole lot more, is what difference it makes.

We Are All Missionaries

In all of life's situations we are to be His witnesses. Our job is to *make the invisible reign of Jesus visible*. The world is shrouded in darkness. Nothing is visible in the dark. No wonder then that we are called to be the light of the world. Every single one of us has a mission. We have all been sent to bear witness to Christ. That means simply that we are all missionaries.

Imagine being sent to a foreign country as a missionary without any prior training. Imagine receiving no instructions about who the people are, what language they speak, or how they think. Before a missionary can go to a foreign field, that person must study the country in depth. He must learn the language and the customs and gain some insight into how the people think. A tribe in the jungle has a vastly different outlook contrasted to middle-class suburbanites or inner-city apartment dwellers.

Let's assume that we are missionaries to the United States. What is needed for our preparation? It's not enough simply

to know the content of the Gospel. It is also important that we understand the society in which we are acting out our role as missionaries. Helping you to understand our culture is the purpose of this book. It is an attempt to describe the culture of the United States as it now exists, to show how this culture affects Christians, and to suggest how we can respond biblically to that culture as Christian witnesses.

It would be a dreadful mistake for us to assume that our culture is a predominantly Christian one. Yet our country doesn't deserve the term "pagan" either. Our country has been strongly influenced by Christianity and by Christian values. Some have suggested that we have been influenced in the same way people are "influenced" when they receive an inoculation to prevent a disease. They are given a small dose of the disease, just enough of it to be immune to the real thing. Perhaps that is what has happened in our American culture: just enough Christianity has penetrated our society to make us "immune" to the Gospel.

Our nation is not pagan, because paganism is a pre-Christian condition that exists where the Gospel has never been preached. That is not the case in the United States. Ours is what I call a secular environment, a secular society. The secularization of the American society is a *post-Christian* phenomenon, not a pre-Christian one. Pre-Christian is pagan. Post-Christian is secularized.

It is also important to understand that our culture is a melting pot. We do not live in a culture that is uniform, where only a single definable world view or value system is operating. In North Korea, for example, we find a uniform system of thought that everyone is required to embrace. It is taught in the schools and advertised on posters. The

uniformity can even show itself in terms of the clothes that the people wear.

Such uniformity has not been the American experience. We have been a melting pot of people and, therefore, of ideas. The result has been that many different beliefs and philosophies compete for acceptance within our society. We are not uniform but pluralistic. The melting pot metaphor is perhaps misleading because we have a pot where everything goes in but everything doesn't mix. There is an overarching national culture with many distinctive subcultures, in New York City, in Hollywood, in the Midwest, and so on. There are also socioeconomic classes and many of them have distinctive values. One categorization shows nine such classes: lower-lower, middle-lower, upper-lower, lower-middle, middle-middle, upper-middle, lower-upper, middle-upper, and upper-upper. If we as Christian missionaries are to be able to communicate to this diverse society, we need to be aware of the dominant systems of thought that are at work within our society.

To understand a melting pot culture is not easy. Things get mixed up in a melting pot. When conflicting ideas are stirred up it tends to get confusing. We may be able to identify the particular subculture we live in or the socioeconomic group to which we belong, but that is not enough to identify our values. We are all thrown in the pot. We are exposed to or influenced by a wide diversity of ideas. We get one set of ideas in church. Another in school. We learn one set of values watching soap operas and another watching family-friendly dramas. We observe one philosophy at the Democratic National Convention and another at the Republican National Convention. We watch two different movies and get two

different views of life. One song will present a world view that is entirely different from the world view found in another.

All these perspectives bombard our brains and shape our thinking. The diversity and confusion are so great that for most of us it seems that the melting pot is found not so much in the culture but in our own hands and that the asparagus is getting stuck to the pasta. The result is a basic inconsistency in our lives, an inconsistency we are often unaware of. We respond. We react. We feel. But we are not always sure why we respond the way we do.

The confusion of ideas and viewpoints became a national crisis when the Supreme Court ruled on the volatile issue of prayer in the public schools. The basic principle in view was that a religious view of life should not be imposed on the people by the state in a public schoolroom. The problem was that the only option to a religious viewpoint was a non-religious viewpoint. If the state propagates a religious viewpoint, the nonreligious people feel discriminated against. If the state propagates a nonreligious viewpoint then the religious people feel discriminated against.

The solution to the crisis was formulated in the concept of a “neutral” education. A neutral education is one that is neither proreligion or antireligion. It is neither pro-God nor anti-God. It seeks to keep God out of educational issues. The only problem with the solution is that the ideal is impossible. There is no such thing as a neutral education. Every education, every curriculum has a viewpoint. That viewpoint either considers God in it or it does not. To teach children about life and the world in which they live without reference to God is to make a statement about God. It screams a statement. The message is either that there is no

God or that God is irrelevant. Either way the message is the same—there is no God. An irrelevant God is the same as no God at all. If God is, then He must be relevant—to His entire creation.

The pastor of a local congregation announced good news to his people. The church was experiencing rapid growth and the church building was now too small to accommodate them. The church was located in an area where property was selling at premium prices, costing about \$100,000 an acre. The building committee had tried desperately to find acreage at an affordable price, but there was no land available near the church. Time after time they had approached landowners but none was willing to sell. The pastor told the story:

I have good news. As you know, we have prayed that God would open doors for us. We decided to approach a particular landowner one last time who has repeatedly turned us down. When we went to him he had just experienced an unexpected turn of events with a parcel of ground. He agreed to sell it to us *and* to donate four hundred thousand dollars of the purchase price!

The pastor said it was an answer to prayer. Was it? He said that God had opened the door for the property. Had He? What happened here? Was this a case of divine providence at work or was it merely the mortal machinations of a business deal? If there is no God then the answer is easy—it was a sheer human deal and any appeal to Providence is a delusion. If there is a God who answers prayers then the pastor was correct in calling his congregation to a spirit of gratitude before God.

How we understand the incident depends on how we view the world we live in. It depends on whether we think God is sovereign over life or if we think nobody is home in heaven.

Christians or Pragmatists?

Most of us are inconsistent about such matters. Our viewpoint comes from the melting pot. We get mixed up. Our pot has a dash of faith and a dash of skepticism. We are at once religious and secular. We believe in God sometimes. Our religion has elements of superstition at some times and is tempered by sober science at other times. We are at the same time Christians and card-carrying pragmatists. On Sunday we say the creed. On Monday we are fatalists. We try to separate our religious life from the rest of our life. We live by holding contradictory beliefs. Living in contradictions can be exciting. Life is surely more than logic. But the contradictory life is a confusing life, a life of inconsistency and incoherence. It's bottom line is chaos.

We are inconsistent and confused because we fail to understand where Christianity ends and paganism begins. We do not know where the boundary lines are. Consequently we traffic back and forth across the lines, making forays between darkness and light. We are lost in our own culture, swirling around in the melting pot while somebody else has his hand on the spoon. We're not sure whether we are the witnesses or the ones being witnessed to. We don't know if we are the missionaries or the mission field.

It was Socrates who said that the unexamined life is not worth living. To examine one's life is to think about it. It

is to *evaluate*. To evaluate requires examining values and value systems. We all have values. We all have some viewpoint about what life is all about. We all have some perspective on the world we live in. We are not all philosophers, but we all have a philosophy. Perhaps we haven't thought much about that philosophy, but one thing is certain—we live it out. How we live reveals our deepest convictions about life. Our lives say much more about how we think than our books do. The theories we preach are not always the ones we actually believe. The theories we live are the ones we really believe.

I once heard a sermon entitled “Christians, Think!” The exhortation contained the repeated refrain, “Christians, Think!” The comma is crucial. The preacher was not telling us that Christians are people who think. He was summoning us to be Christians who do think. The purpose of this book is to help us think about prevailing viewpoints in our culture.

We will be examining perspectives on life in the chapters that follow. These perspectives are existentialism, humanism, pragmatism, positivism, pluralism (and its corollary, relativism), and hedonism. All are, to varying degrees, affecting the way Americans think and act today. As Christians we are being bombarded daily by the influences of these philosophies. I doubt if there has been a period in all of Christian history when *so many Christians* are *so ineffectual* in shaping the culture in which they live as it is true right now in the United States. Perhaps it is because we are intimidated and overwhelmed by the onslaught of these different philosophical systems. Combating this onslaught is a major challenge facing Christians today.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Where can you function as a missionary?
2. How many subcultural groups do you belong to?
3. Who is doing the outreach ministry in your church?
4. Why is the kingdom of God invisible?
5. How much authority does Jesus have right now?
6. What does it mean to be a “witness” to Christ?
7. What is the difference between paganism and secularism?
8. Who influences your values?
9. How did your education deal with the relationship of God to the world?
10. How relevant is God to the nightly news?