

## CHRISTIANITY & CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

### What is contemporary culture?

This is the world where we live, our circumstances, our lives and the events going on around us. It is macro culture – ‘The structure or canvas of society’s values, world-views and perceptions on and in which popular culture, art, fashion etc. operate’. It is micro culture – ‘Those aspects of fashion, taste, artistic expression and popular culture which are transitory. Changes within the micro-cultural framework are arbitrary’.

We also live in the postmodern culture – ‘That which follows the breakdown of the rationale and order of modernism; characterised by fragmentation, networking and non-institutional cultural forms.’ This is the pick’n’mix generation. The generation that doesn’t feel obliged to buy into things which don’t feel good. It takes a bit of this, bit of that, it is local and international, moral and hedonistic etc. A challenge for us as Christians as we present people with the one and only truth – Jesus.

There was no ‘visible’ youth culture until the 1950s. The word ‘teenager’ was first used in 1941.

### Culture today among young people – even into 30s

Some of the many, many factors – add your own ones in!

- Throwaway culture, with an increasing ‘green’ awareness at the same time
- The gay, lesbian, bi-sexual culture has increased its hold on society, mainstream media
- The increase of self-help groups, support groups to combat increasing mental health problems and loneliness.
- Increased environmental awareness and direct action among young people especially but also against pollution and environmental damage
- The rise of ‘identity politics’ where people identify strongly as something, almost to the exclusion of other things.
- Increasing number of embedded cultures previously seen as trends
- The increase in a culture of ‘offence’ and ‘safe spaces’ and freedom from speech replacing freedom of speech in Universities etc
- Young people doing ‘legal’ drugs and getting ‘legal’ highs. Increased use of cocaine among general population
- Lots of ‘alternative’ therapies, medicines, increasing interest in new age, spiritual, self-help, Paganism is growing. Spiritual seeking is growing.

- Organised religion losing its influence in Western society except in the black church
- Marketed to very heavily at every opportunity. Branded society. Consumer fed and driven society. Teens spend \$100bn p/a on things for themselves (\$60bn of that by girls). In the average American home, the TV is on 6 hours and 47 minutes every day. By the time they are 65, Americans will have seen over 2 million TV commercials.
- Increased obsession with body image, increasing use of plastic surgery and cosmetics, by men and increasingly younger teens and children.
- Sexually active but not within committed relationships. Rise of "Friends With Benefits" and NCMOs – "non-committal make-out sessions". This is where young people 'make out' or have different types of sex with 'friends'.
- 'Sexting' and increased sexual awareness. Increase of use of pornography as standard with all its negative consequences.
- Increase of sexually transmitted diseases / infections. If there's a pill for it, why not do it as you can sort the consequences after.
- Nihilism – I don't care if it's bad for me, I'll do it if it feels good or if I want to – stuff the consequences
- Alienation from learning and education. School not working for many.
- Want it now 'on demand' – 'pay TV' – always on broadband internet connection. Streaming of music and movies above normal TV.
- Global communities online where people expect to be able to have their say. A shared wisdom is emerging via the internet, rather than from just so called 'experts' (wikipedia etc)
- Polarisation between haves and have-nots.
- Materialism and hedonism (do what you like if it feels good)
- Very practical related generation – they see through hypocrisy – 'prove it to me' – 'show me the evidence' – 'you show me you're living it before I believe you'
- Longing for acceptance and love though can be hard to break through to this
- Get bored more easily, tend to exercise less – school playing fields and sports facilities have been cut. Even some green spaces are being removed due to need for increased housing
- Increase in obesity except where there's an active strategy against it. At the same time, schools have adopted increased healthy eating strategies.
- Comfortable with and expect, demand technology
- Rise in use of social media, the dark web and online gaming.
- Community is now built across virtual and global communities, not necessarily physical communities, although there is a push to restore the local community

- Increasing number of musical styles within music genres, lots of 'crossover' music collaborations
- Generally less respect for authority. You have to earn trust and respect – it doesn't come simply because you have a rank, title or uniform
- Increased amount of young people involvement in life – schools – churches etc. Young people often at the hub of making things happen. Greater empowering
- Much more angry and at a younger age. Excessive violence common with an increase in gang culture and knife crime (especially England & Wales)
- More bullying (to do with lack of self respect) – bullying by text and/or email is now common
- Heroes of the culture often from TV, sport, media, entertainment industry
- Future is uncertain. Many aspire to very little or have little hope of achieving much.

This is a tiny overview – not at all complete – and only very general!

## Culture in the life of the Christian

We are all in the contemporary culture of our day. We live in a town, city, village, in British society, in European culture and in world culture to a greater or lesser degree. This is the macro culture – Western culture. We also live in our own micro culture. We all have our own music tastes, fashion styles and beliefs. We live in a world where we are both more global and more local. We have 24/7 news from across the globe and yet we buy more local food products. It is a contrast.

## The Bible and culture.

Let's start with basics. Mt 28:19-20. Jesus commanded his disciples to go out everywhere and make disciples of people, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to do everything that Jesus had taught. That is our job. Our Christian lives don't end in conversion, they start. Jesus started this – 'come with me and catch men instead of fish' he said to Peter and Andrew. (MT 4:18-20).

In Acts 4:20, Peter and John answer the Jewish Council saying they cannot stop talking about Jesus. Look at the life and ministry of Paul. Christianity is evangelism. Christianity means like Christ. This is our life's aim. In Luke 14:25-33, Jesus points out the cost. In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus reminds us to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth.

Look at Acts 2. The apostles started to speak in different tongues so they could preach the Kingdom of God in people's own language. Take a look at Paul's speech in Jerusalem (Acts 13:16-48) and compare it to his speech in Acts 17:21-34 when he is in Athens. In the first one he goes through the history of the Old Testament (as they are Jews), in the other he does not. Why? Because as Paul says in 1 Cor 9 he is targeting what he says to relate to his audience.

Let's look at Paul writing to the Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (p.214). What is Paul saying? He's saying that he will do whatever he has to do to win people for Christ. He

is clear that his focus is Christ Jesus and the message of his good news. He is also clear that he doesn't become the same as other people but that he enters into their world, lives with them and looks at things from their perspective in order to reach out to them. The Message (p.352). What else does Paul talk about? He talks about being the servant to these people.

Finally in John 15:16 Jesus tells his disciples that he chose them and sent them out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last for ever. Then in verses 26 & 27, he tells his disciples that he will give them his Spirit so they will tell other about him.

Why so much on this? Because as Paul says and did, we are called to live in the world but not as part of it.

## What about Jesus?

Jesus was a radical. He was radical about the Kingdom of God. He was radical in the society he lived in. He is radical compared to the values in today's society. Let's take a look at Jesus – via The Message. Let's look at a few interesting incidents that we have recorded in the life and times of Jesus.

Luke 4:40-41, Jesus healed many people from diseases and possessions. Luke 5:12-14, Jesus touches and heals a leper. (Lepers lived separately from other people). In Matthew 9:9-13 we find Jesus staying with Matthew the tax collector – the most hated kind of people. Luke 5:31-32, 'Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to invite good people to turn to God. I came to invite sinners.' He ate when he was hungry, ignoring the rules of the Pharisees (Mark 2:23-28). He talked of loving your enemies (Luke 6:27-36). He wasn't afraid of getting stuck in – see Mark 11:15-19. He hated hypocrisy and pious, religious people – Matt 23:1-36). He allowed a prostitute to pour expensive perfume over his feet (Luke 7:36-50) and so on... He turned things upside down.

But Jesus did more than that. He was from Nazareth, he was a carpenter by trade and he was not the figure portrayed in certain films. When he went back to Nazareth, people were amazed this was the same Jesus, the son of Joseph (Matt 13:53-58). And as Eugene Peterson writes in the introduction to The Message (p.7 – go check it out).

## What about practically?

How far do we involve ourselves in popular culture? In short I believe the answer is between you and God. There are undoubtedly Biblical guidelines, however. The best Biblical guideline as we've seen in Jesus. However, we can look at Paul's teachings too. In all things we can ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and believe (6-8). However, we can look at our lives and look to see whether we are living as we should as Christians.

Take a look at Galatians 5:22-23 and see if the fruits of the Spirit are in your life.- 'God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled... And because we belong to Christ Jesus, we have killed our selfish feelings and desires. God's Spirit has given us new life and so we should follow the Spirit.'

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul asserts the primary importance of love as a guide to our lives. Read 1 Corinthians again and instead of reading 'love' insert the word Jesus. Now insert your own name. Is it true of you? Do the situations you put yourself in help you in your

Christian life? Do you act as you should? Do you witness as you should? Look at Romans 12:2, 'Do not act like people of this world.' (see NIV). But look to see whether what you do is more important than your relationship with Jesus. If it is, change it. What you do & who you are in private is as important as in public.

Some other general guidelines. Should you drink a lot? Not if you want to be a church leader (see 1 Tim 3:1-13 / Eph 5:18 & Rom 13:13). Love everyone (Matt 5:43-48 & 1 Cor 13). Always set a good example for others (Titus 1:7). Always make good use of your time (Eph 15-16). Always use your time with unbelievers constructively and try to hold their attention (Col 4:5-6 & 1 Pet 3:15). Keep a clear conscience (1 Pet 3:16). Don't worry too much about what you wear (Matt 6:25-34).

Jesus had no barriers between him and 'sinners'. (Romans 3:23). Jesus, Paul and we should relate to people in their terms – Revelation. We are in the culture but our priorities are Kingdom priorities. But ultimately what you do is between you and God.

Jesus was radical and we need to be prepared to do radical things for him. Go for it!