

# Can The Church Change Culture?

*By Dr. R. Lamar Vest*

We are at a moment in this nation where common sense seems to be gasping for its last breath.

- A major USA news network announces that parents are raising “theybies” to let kids decide their gender.
- In states where notifications are not enforced, minors are able to obtain an abortion without parental consent.
- People can destroy businesses and burn down city blocks and be called “peaceful protesters.”
- A leading “evangelical” church ordains its first transgender person.
- A recent government document refers to mothers as “birthing people.”
- The Bible is considered by a growing number of Americans as a book of ancient stories and myths, and without divine inspiration.
- And the list goes on. . . .

You and I are eyewitnesses to perhaps the greatest cultural shift in our nation’s history. In times past, those things listed above would be seen as patterns of the twilight of a civilization. Today, they are applauded. It has become fashionable for the “sophisticated” to turn against values that once were considered foundational to our civilization.

The idea that our civilization could be on life-support would be impossible to imagine if we did not know the history of how previous great civilizations have declined. The Roman Empire was one of the greatest and most influential civilizations the world has ever known, but social decline, arrogance, and overconfidence in man-made structures and systems brought it down. In A.D. 383, Rome was sacked by the so-called barbarians who simply had enough of Roman arrogance and domination.

The question is, what can we as Christians do about our current situation? Can we really change culture? Yes, we can, but not by mere protest or debating the strong voices engaging in culture-sensitive arguments. We need once again to understand that the essential cultural power of the Gospel has the advantage because it is true! Cultures are formed by individuals, and no force on earth has changed as many individual lives as has the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christianity began as a small, primarily unorganized movement in the land of Abraham. Few people thought this new movement had a chance to survive. But it spread to places such as Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq in the first and second centuries. It moved into India and beyond by the third century. These were areas steeped in false religions. They were certainly not easy places to introduce a newly established religious faith, but Christianly succeeded, one life at a time.

## **First Missionary Movement (to Rome)**

Early Christians debated whether they should only preach to Jews, or if non-Jews could become Christians as well. (Could it be that many churches today have decided to only preach to Christians?) Primarily because of the ministry of the Apostle Paul, Christianity eventually gained

followers not only from Jewish communities, but throughout the Roman world, eventually gaining recognition by Constantine, the emperor of Rome. Do you imagine the Corinthians or the Galatians ever thought they could convert the Roman Empire when they really wanted to overthrow it?

### **Second Missionary Movement (to Western Europe)**

The second missionary movement was to Western Europe, where the “barbarians” who sacked Rome lived. Much of northwestern Europe consisted of a mixed variety of beliefs and cultic practices, and was made up of several tribal groups known by the Romans as barbarians. These tribes were not formally educated and were constantly fighting for territorial rights and possession. There were various languages and many religions. Pagan temples and places of worship were scattered across the countryside.

The infamous Viking Age witnessed the plundering of places of Christian worship in Europe, but ended with Viking kings becoming champions of the church in Scandinavia. Converted barbarians make great witnesses.

For almost 2,000 years, Christianity flourished and Europe became the great missionary force of the world until new influences, especially from within, slowly caused a decline. Today Western Europe, where Protestant Christianity originated and the great missionary movement of modern times had its origin, has become one of the world’s most secular regions.

### **The Grand Task of the Church**

The grand task of the Church has not changed since 12 men united for a single purpose 2,000 years ago and changed their world. We must first of all follow the Biblical commands given to us if we are ever to see revival:

“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14 NKJV).

And He [Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15 NKJV).

There are also some serious questions we need to address if we expect to effect change in our culture.

#### **1. Are we being held captive by nostalgia or defeatism?**

A church or a nation can never survive with either nostalgia or defeatism. While the church has a rich heritage of revival and reform, the ashes of yesterday’s revival and reformation have grown cold. The United States—which for two centuries was viewed as the bastion of God-honoring citizenry—is now seen as a nation of division and violence.

We cannot live in the past, but neither can we live in defeatism. The church is assured of ultimate victory (Matthew 16:18). God will bless the nations that honor Him, but judgment is pronounced on nations that forget Him (Psalm 9:17).

## **2. Are we addressing the issues facing today's youth?**

If we are serious about changing culture, we must have open and frank discussions with our young people about the issues they are facing and what they really believe about Christianity. The 20-year-olds who are today struggling with their Christian faith will make the policies that determine the future of our church and our nations. I believe this generation of young people is hungry for and open to sincere dialogue about faith.

## **3. Are we willing to join with others in facing today's challenges?**

Denominations and church movements do not all agree doctrinally. However, there are some things we do agree on, and we are certainly closer to other Christians than we are to the world's agenda. We need to understand that greater changes in our culture will be made by networking with others more than through individuals or single organizations.

Among our common challenges are:

- the rise of Islam
- the cultural chaos of the Western world
- disregard of Biblical inspiration
- “progressive” thinking.

The goal of these agendas is to stamp out the foundation of a Judeo-Christian faith that propagates human dignity, the right to life, freedom, and responsibility. The disregard for God is not new to Western civilization, but it has moved from the “cultural elite” into our classrooms and into the mainstream of society.

## **4. Are we willing to accept our global challenge?**

The very mention of globalism generates immediate debate. It is not my intention to debate the issue of economic or governmental globalism, but it is difficult for me to believe any Christian does not embrace the global challenge of our Lord, who said, “Go into all the world.”

It is critical that we support the growing missionary efforts of the Church. In an age when diversity is being stressed, we need to celebrate the fact that the Church is the most diverse movement on earth with a universal message. The Bible is the most translated and most translatable book on earth. There are other global religions, but Jesus of Nazareth has more followers than any other religion in the world.

Revival and Church expansion has seriously shifted over the centuries. The Spirit of God is moving in places we once thought unlikely, but the Spirit moves where He wills. Revival is occurring in Africa, South America, and the Middle and Far East. It is essential that we help disciple believers in those distant places who are becoming the modern-day missionaries of Christianity.

## **5. Do we rely on our own strategies and creativity more than on the Holy Spirit?**

In my travels to those faraway places, I always noticed a great difference between those believers and many believers in the Western world. While we in the West are seemingly obsessed with statistics and innovation, our sisters and brothers in those parts of the world are having dreams,

visions, and miracles. In our global travels, my wife, Vickie, and I met Muslims who had come to faith in Jesus Christ because of a miraculous intervention, even though professing Christianity could mean execution for them.

May God help us to always be open to the surprising voice of the Holy Spirit, who calls us to be more than we can be on our own.

As history has shown us, no matter how barbaric a culture may appear, it is radically changed when Jesus Christ is given preeminence. The Roman emperor Julian, who is known as the last pagan emperor of Rome, was a nephew of Constantine the Great, who recognized Christianity. Julian, who sought to revive the pre-Christian Rome, was killed in battle. The historian Theodoret recorded that Julian's last words were, "You have won, O Galilean."

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