

# KINGDOM AND CULTURE

*The translation of a talk given in Spanish by Felicity Bentley-Taylor on June 6, 2001 to those attending the Latin American Forum of Global Connections held at Christ Church, Barnet, Herts. UK.*

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks for the privilege of taking part in this forum. I am grateful too for the opportunity it gives me of renewing my friendship with some of you, and above all for the fellowship we all share with one another through our Lord Jesus Christ.

'As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another' says the book of Proverbs (27.17). I trust that through interacting and reflecting together today we shall gain a clearer understanding of our subject that will enrich our practice of the Christian life.

**Kingdom and culture** is a complex and broad subject, difficult to get hold of and impossible to cover in the space of an hour. But in outline we want to consider the ways in which living under the lordship of Jesus Christ affects our relationship to our culture, causing us on the one hand to appreciate it, to make good use of it and to put it to the service of the kingdom of God, and on the other hand to question it and resist it in so far as its values and customs are contrary to those of the kingdom of God. Then we shall seek to see what this means for our task of making disciples of Jesus Christ, and ask how, as his disciples, we may help each other to express our supreme loyalty to Christ as Lord within our culture.

## The kingdom

The kingdom of which we are speaking is the kingdom of God that has come among us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near": this was what both John the Baptist and Jesus himself proclaimed at the outset of their respective ministries (Mt.3.2; 4.17). Their call consists of a command: *Repent*, and a statement: *the kingdom of heaven is near*, and the link between them, *for*, makes it clear that no one may enter this kingdom of heaven which has come near, except those who repent. To belong to the Jewish culture was not sufficient for entrance into the kingdom of God, as the apostle Paul would discover years later. Instead, the condition for entry was one and the same for everybody, whatever their culture might be: it was the way of repentance and faith.. "*I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus*" (Acts 20.21).

The Willowbank report on **Gospel and Culture**, published in 1978 as the fruit of a consultation sponsored by the Congress for World Evangelization held in Lausanne in 1974, states the following: *The governing principle of the converted life is that it is lived under the lordship of Christ or (for it comes to the same thing) in the Kingdom of God. His authority over us is total. So this new and liberating allegiance leads inevitably to a reappraisal of every aspect of our lives and in particular of our world-view, our behaviour, and our relationships.*

## Culture

Human culture is an expression of the fundamental distinction, which God who created both us and all things has put between human beings and animals. Let us think what this means: both men and animals eat, but only human beings cook; both

men and birds sing, but only a person sings music composed by another person; both humans beings and animals run, but only the former play football.

As an expression therefore of this fundamental distinction which gives man the mastery over the animal world, we thank God for culture, for the creativity inherent in every human being, for the enormous cultural diversity there has been in the world since its creation, and for the ability which every culture has to evolve.

The characteristic feature of a cultural trait is that it is the way in which the majority of people living in one place and at the same time think, live and do things. Two examples may serve to illustrate this: shopping in a supermarket may be common for the inhabitants of a great Latin American city, but not so in small towns or rural areas. The rites of burial of the dead vary from one culture to another.

Culture lays down norms for behaviour which no one questions; they are learnt in the home, at school, on the street or at work, and now, since several decades ago all over the world, they are picked up through the media, in the majority of cases through television.

Behind such customs and ways of behaviour lie implicit moral and spiritual presuppositions about God or the gods, the nature of the universe, the meaning of life and death and of what comes after death, human nature, the nature of men and women, the family, authority, money, happiness, love, truth, beauty, society, education, health, the future of the world, time, knowledge, peace, development, success, and so on. All these attitudes put together make up the worldview of the individual, the group and of society.

The fact that these norms are subconscious and unquestioned confers on them an appearance of authority. This may be the authority of tradition as revealed in the phrase 'We've always done it like this', or the authority of popularity or of the pressure of the majority that says: 'Everybody does it'.

Nevertheless, change is an unavoidable factor in human life. Culture, like fashion, is subject to change. A new subculture may exist alongside the traditional one and in time may come to replace it.

The question that we're asking now is: What does it mean for the Christian church to confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord within the culture that surrounds and sustains it?

(I say 'sustains' because we are not simply observers of a culture but are part of it and receive its benefits.)

Now when we speak of culture we are using a term that is neither biblical nor theological. By contrast, the term *world* is both biblical and theological. One of its meanings in the New Testament is **mankind in action, independently of God**. This means that the term 'world' describes the collective activity and thought of human beings who, being created by God and for him, nevertheless live and act as if they neither depended on him nor had to render an account to him for all their actions. The great lie of the *world*, in this sense, is precisely its claim to be autonomous as far as God is concerned, to be able to offer man total satisfaction and to go on for ever.

Let's not get it wrong: culture and world are not synonymous. If they were, Jesus would not have been able to become incarnate and to share fully in Jewish culture without betraying his loyalty to the Father by compromising with the world. But just as our Lord, being immersed in a human culture, did not blindly submit himself to the

cultural values of the Jewish people but to the Father, thus making every other loyalty relative, so we too as his followers must learn to make everything that is cultural serve the interests of the kingdom of God.

This cannot happen unless God saves us from the death in which by nature we live, enslaved by our transgressions and sins and bound by 'the ways of this world, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, and the cravings of our sinful nature' (see Eph. 2.1,2). For it is our resurrection to new life in Christ Jesus that makes it possible for us to escape from a mentality and lifestyle shaped by the world, and to become transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom.12.1,2). According to Psalm 1 we all live conditioned by the world, unless we choose to be conditioned by the word of the Lord day by day. There is no such thing as a no man's land in which the human mind may wander without being conditioned in any way.

From this point on I want to direct our thoughts to concentrate on Jesus and his relationship with his culture. Then I want to look at the apostles Peter and Paul, called by their Master to make disciples of people both within the Jewish culture and outside it. In the light of this we shall return to the subject of the Christian's relationship to his culture, and from there go on to the process of discipleship, that is, the training of followers of Christ who know how to distinguish between loyalty to him and cultural values opposed to such loyalty.

### **Jesus and his relationship with his culture**

Jesus was born a Jew. He spent his early infancy in Bethlehem in Judea; then Joseph and Mary took him with them when they fled to Egypt for refuge, and finally the family returned from there to Nazareth, a village in the northern province of Galilee. It is significant that this province, known as 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Mt.4.15), had a mixed population of Gentiles and Jews, so that Jesus would be familiar with both cultures. In his incarnation he not only took human form in a general way but specifically he took the form of a Jew, a Galilean, and a carpenter, resident in a village that did not enjoy the best of reputations (Jn.1.46). His dress, food, education, housing, and work as well as his family relationships were proper to his culture. Of his own will he took on and accepted all these conditions.

The country of the Jews was not an independent nation. In the year 63 B.C. it had been annexed by the Roman general, Pompey, as part of the Roman Empire. So Jesus lived in a small country occupied by the only world power of the time and subject to oppression and violence. In political and religious affairs, instability held sway. When Jesus' fellow countrymen rejected him and the Roman authorities crucified him at their request, less than 40 years were to pass before the holy city, Jerusalem, would be totally destroyed at the hands of the Imperial troops as a result of the armed resistance put up by the Jews.

Jesus was no stranger to this unrest. On the contrary, he foretold the fall of Jerusalem as a judgment that would inevitably come. But his mission was not political. The target at which his criticism was directed was not the imperialistic regime but Jewish religious tradition: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!... Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mk.7.9,13). His clash with the culture – the only monotheistic one in the world at that time – demonstrated not only his zeal for God and his Word as a higher authority than all human tradition, but also revealed his claim to be the very Son of God. Speaking of the use of the day of rest, he declared: "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk.2.28). He did not kowtow to cultural norms in the sphere of human relations when he struck

up a conversation with a Samaritan woman who had had six men in her life, and when he warmly welcomed 'sinners' and ate with them (Jn.4.6-18; Lk.15.1-7). Surrounded by hostility on account of his behaviour, instead of retreating he spoke out more boldly: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (Jn.8.28,29).

Jesus' teaching, in the same way as his behaviour, also clashed with the assumptions and ethical standards of his contemporaries. For example, we may recall the parables of the prodigal son and of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk.15.11-32; 18. 9-14); certain sections of the Sermon on the Mount (e.g. Mt.5.43-48 and 6.1-4) as well as the spirit which inspires Matthew 5-7 in its entirety, and Jesus' public discourse in the temple in the course of which he accused the scribes and Pharisees of being hypocrites and blind guides, snakes and a brood of vipers (Mt.23.13, 16, 33)

Why did they kill him? Because although he was one of them he did not make it his goal to fulfil their aspirations but to do the will of his Father; and though he was one of them, he made it clear that he was greater than Moses, that all the prophets had spoken about him and that only through him was access to God possible.

### **Some conclusions we may draw from the example of Jesus**

Like Jesus, we too are the product of our own culture. The circumstances of our birth, upbringing, education and development fulfil the designs of the providence of God for our lives. We both can and should see in our culture many evidences of the divine goodness and wisdom of the One who made us men and women in his image, and gave us the ability to be creative and adaptable, as well as to give shape to new situations. We see this in the use and development of natural resources in every nation and human group, in the transformation of the environment for the wellbeing of mankind, in the social institutions that sustain the life of society and in education, art, medicine, science and technology, all of which bear witness to the vast creativity of human beings. For all these things we give thanks to God, the fountain of all that is good and beautiful.

But at the same time we recognise that our citizenship is in heaven and that the living God who gives us all things for our enjoyment, commands us to seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and that above all we should seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Phil.3. 20; 1 Tim.6. 17; Col.3. 1; Mt.6. 33). For "the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever" (1 Jn.2.17).

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are bound to be in conflict with the values and presuppositions, the customs and fashions that are typical of our cultures, in so far as they demand our submission to them, spiritually, morally and psychologically. And though this conflict means danger and suffering for us, the danger makes us run to the Lord for refuge, and the suffering calls for our perseverance and leads to life.

### **The apostles and the two cultures**

Before ascending to the right hand of the Father, Jesus commanded the eleven disciples to go to the nations and make disciples of people in all of them

(Mt.28. 16-20). For these eleven, to be a disciple of Jesus would mean obeying his call to make disciples of people whose cultures were foreign to theirs, since they themselves were Jews. They were to go to pagan cultures that were without the revelation of God, which had been received within the circle of the Jewish people through the Scriptures of the Old Testament. These pagan nations were people created by God, and therefore the object of his mercy and care, and they needed the gospel.

The book of Acts does not furnish us with an account of the missionary activities of every one of the first apostles, but it does in the case of Peter and then of Paul, the latter being just as truly an apostle as the twelve, although he was born, as he put it, out of due time (1 Cor.15.8).

We have already observed that the population of the country of the Jews, known today as Israel, was a mixed one. The majority indeed were Jews, but there were Gentiles among them (for example, the two centurions who at different times in the life of Jesus recognised his power, Lk. 7.1-10 and 23.47) and of course there were Samaritans inhabiting the province of Samaria between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south. On two occasions Jesus had significant encounters with Samaritans (Lk. 17.11-19; Jn 4.7-9, 39-42).

Whereas the inhabitants of Israel were mainly, though not exclusively, members of the Jewish race, the reverse was true in the other regions of the Roman Empire where the 'diaspora' lived. This Greek term means *dispersion* and refers to the Jews who were dispersed in the Gentile world. From the book of Acts we know of Jewish communities, with their synagogues, in the cities of Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth and Ephesus, at least. Obviously an apostle who was a Jew and brought up in his own land would need to overcome his cultural prejudices in order to be able to enter a Gentile home and eat with Gentiles, whereas a Jew from the diaspora who had become a follower of Jesus the Messiah would be more open to contact with Gentiles due to having born and brought up in a largely non-Jewish environment. But in either case, to be a disciple meant abandoning the rejection of a crucified Messiah, common to all Jews, and also overcoming the barrier of centuries between 'the chosen people' and 'the pagan nations'. This barrier was removed by believing that the blessing God had given to Abraham belonged to all the nations as well as to the chosen people, through Jesus Christ and by faith in him (Gal.3.14).

We are familiar with the story of Peter when he was invited – and sent by the Lord – to the house of Cornelius the centurion, in the port of Caesarea. Had he been faithful to his culture, he would have been disobedient to God and a traitor to the gospel. But with great patience the Lord revealed to him how mistaken he was to resist going to the home of Cornelius the Roman, and convinced him not to hesitate to go along with the three men sent by the officer to fetch him, 'for I have sent them' (Acts 10.20).

We also know about the call of Saul of Tarsus, born a Roman citizen and a Hebrew of Hebrews, educated in Jerusalem at the feet of the rabbi Gamaliel, and how he was sent to people of both cultures: 'This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel'; 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles'; 'I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes...' (Acts 9.15; 22.21; 26.17,18)

Undoubtedly the Lord Jesus, having himself become man and a Jew, required of his disciples a radical cultural adaptation. In Peter's case, entering the house of a Gentile, eating and lodging there, was the necessary step prior to being able to

proclaim the gospel to them. His obedience was costly but very fruitful. In the case of Paul it would seem that such adaptation was not so difficult. He was guided by the principle that he himself stated in writing to the Corinthians: 'Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible' (1 Cor.9.19).

On one occasion Paul confronted Peter when he saw that he was behaving hypocritically by separating himself from the Gentiles under pressure from Jews who belonged to the circumcision party (Gal.2.11-14). It was more important for him to be faithful to the essence of the gospel than to keep up the appearance of fellowship with his brother, Peter. Indeed later on this same attitude would cost him the total rejection of unbelieving Jews from the province of Asia who were then in Jerusalem (Acts 21.27-31).

### **Some conclusions we may draw from the example of the apostles**

There is no such thing as a person who does not belong to some culture or other. God our Creator gave all of us the ability to do things in a rational, intelligent, orderly and profitable way, and it is from this ability that human culture in all its diversity springs.

It therefore follows that the gospel does not demand of anyone that they should abandon their culture as a matter of course, since the gospel is essentially above culture as the revelation which God himself has made by his Son Jesus Christ. But as every person who receives the grace of God is, without exception, a cultural being, he or she has to learn to live the Christian life both in relation to their own culture and also in a way that enables them to sit loose to it for the sake of people of another culture and to adapt themselves to their way of doing things.

The gospel, which demands supreme loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ from every one who believes in him fundamentally, weakens the authority that the Christian's own culture wields over him or her. It also unites them spiritually to their brothers and sisters in Christ with ties that are stronger than those which link them to people who belong to their own culture.

### **The Christian's relationship to his or her culture**

In every matter of a moral nature, obedience to Jesus Christ and to his Word must take priority over cultural norms. For this reason, however widely accepted and practised in our culture lying and dishonesty may be, as also stealing, coveting (in connection with our sexuality), greed (in connection with how we acquire and use money), we who are disciples of Jesus Christ have the duty to fight against these things, and to resist the constant temptation to be and do the same as everyone else.

The apostle Paul tackles these matters in a masterly way in chapters 4 and 5 of his letter to the Ephesians because paganism, whether ancient or modern, produces no other lifestyle than the one which Paul calls 'darkness'. The commands of the gospel that Paul preaches in this letter cannot be compromised with. We used to be darkness and so we did these things without thinking, but now we are light in the Lord and are bound to live according to what we are (Eph.5.8).

On the other hand, our life covers many aspects that are not essentially moral in character but belong naturally to human existence and life in community, such as customs in connection with food and dress. Even so, such customs may reflect attitudes towards the human body, which agree either with a Christian view of it or a

pagan view. If our bodies are our own, then drugs, obesity, and alcoholism are lifestyles for which we shall not have to give an account to God. If, however, our body belongs to God, then modesty and good taste on the part of a woman in the way she dresses give evidence of a Christian awareness of what is wholesome and pleasing to the Lord.

Another factor that both Scripture and human experience recognise is our personal responsibility to make decisions according to our conscience concerning matters about which Christians hold different points of view. In one way or another, these things spring from our cultural background. One example the New Testament gives us is the questions of eating or abstaining from eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul deals with this in chapters 8 and 10 of his first letter to the Corinthians. (The problem among the Christians in Rome seems to be a little different, for no mention is made of idols in the chapter in which the apostle deals with the issue, Romans 14.) Paul does not lay down rules but rather teaches the principles on the basis of which Christians may know how to act. They are summed up in 1 Cor.10. 31-33 and 11.1: the glory of God is to be the aim of all our actions; we are to avoid causing another to stumble over things which our own conscience allows us to do, whether the other person is of a different culture, or of our own, or a member of the church of God. Rather, we are to seek not our good but the good of many, that they may be saved.

In Latin America it is common to find one or other of two positions concerning alcoholic drinks: one is that of total abstinence, and the other is to enjoy them in moderation. Another controversial issue is that of divorce and whether a divorced person may remarry.

The fact that there is a diversity of opinion among Christian people compels us to consider the humility that the Lord requires of us in reacting to the personal decisions of others when their decisions prove to be questionable as far as we are concerned. If each of us must answer to our own master, the Lord, (Rom.14.4,5) we must seek the humility that refrains from judging our neighbour and our fellow Christian.

But we also need a courageous humility to correct one another in situations in which we are not able to perceive our own mistakes or in which our behaviour proves to be inconsistent with the gospel without our realising it. Whether our cultural upbringing inclines us to keep quiet about problems that arise or to confront one another outspokenly, we are not to be slaves of our upbringing but of Christ who will give us the wisdom that comes from above. Paul himself, who as we have seen, confronted Peter, says later in the letter to the Galatians that if someone is caught in a sin those who are spiritual should restore this person gently, bearing in mind that they themselves may be tempted in the same way (Gal.6.1).

Speaking of humility leads us to consider our attitude towards the culture of our own nation in relation to that of another group or nation. We find it hard to detect our own sense of cultural superiority, though others may be aware of it very quickly. We need the Spirit of Christ to enable us to recognise it and to teach us how we may cultivate in its place an attitude of acceptance towards what we find different, of patience and understanding, good humour and willingness to get along with what at first we find displeasing.

## **Discipleship**

The fact of our Lord's returning to heaven was in no sense seen as an obstacle for the eleven who were to go and make disciples of every nation (Mt.28.16-20). It was not essential to have seen him on earth in order to follow the risen Christ as his

disciple. But there were things that were essential and among them was the teaching of the apostles, which would ensure that the future followers of Jesus would be able to obey him as Lord. 'Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Mt.28.20 GNB). His words invite us to ask how had Jesus taught the twelve while he was with them. Clearly it was by what he said and what he did, by his word and by the example of his life, which was always before them since he lived with them the whole time.

Paul taught in the same way, by the spoken and written word, and by the example he gave, for like Jesus he lived openly before the eyes of the believers. Jesus loved his own and Paul, imitating his Master, also loved his spiritual children (Jn.13.1.34; 1 Cor.4.14,15; 2 Cor.12.14,15). Writing to the Thessalonians he states that he had treated them like a mother who nurtures and cares for her own children, and had encouraged and comforted them like a father (1 Thess.2.7,11).

The person who disciples another must imitate this example, knowing that Christian love and genuine friendship are of first importance because they faithfully reflect the love that God has given us in Christ Jesus. Christian discipleship is not brainwashing, but a relationship between one Christian and another in which the more mature teaches the less mature to think discerningly about life and its multiple aspects, taking the Word of God as guide. The more mature Christian will help the other to perceive the need to go against the current of culture when this is an expression of human rebellion against God, and to take delight in all that is good and beautiful in a culture because it is inspired by our Creator.

Sins that are embedded in one's culture must be condemned and turned away from, such as laziness (2 Thess.3.6-14), lying (Tit.1.12,13), licentiousness (1 Pet.4.1-5) and irresponsibility (1 Tim.5.7,8), while work and generosity (Eph.4.28), truth and sincerity (Eph.4.25; Rom.12.9), respect and discipline (1 Pet.1.17; Gal.5.22,23) and responsibility towards God and towards others (Lk. 12.41-48) need to be inculcated by example and teaching.

Jesus made both his opponents and his disciples think by asking them questions (see, for example, Lk. 6: 3,4,9,33,39,41,42,46). Paul did the same with the church in Corinth (1 Cor.12 and 14). Our ability to think and reason must be harnessed to the service of the truth, so to be asked questions or to be challenged may be useful to us.

### **A final note**

The church, which is the body of Christ, is universal. Its mission requires it to cross cultural barriers. This means that many times in the history of the church as also in our own times, the foreigner finds himself involved in the responsibility of making disciples of Jesus Christ among people who belong to a culture other than his own. It is worth giving thought to the advantages and disadvantages of this situation in order to help us to appreciate the importance of our dependence on the Lord for everything and of our interdependence as servants of the same