

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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Christian Cultural Literacy

I recently had a chance to discuss the topic of Supreme Court nominations with a young woman who was studying for a career in law. Some of the terms we used included *confirmation hearings*, *Senate committee*, *Federal Appeals Panel*, *separation of powers*, *checks and balances*, and *Chappaquiddick*. In order to carry on our conversation, we both had to know what these terms meant. We also had to know that the other person knew what the terms meant. To complicate matters, these are not the sort of expressions that can be found in just any reference tool (try to find a dictionary that will give you the connotation of *Chappaquiddick*).

This conversation illustrates an important point: for communication to occur, both parties need to know more than definitions of words and rules of syntax. They must also share a certain amount of information, and share it in such an easy way that they may call upon it without having consciously to reference it. This shared information puts much of the color into their conversation. It provides the powerful images and the delicate nuances without which communication shades toward tedium and, eventually, incoherence.

This kind of shared information is what E. D. Hirsch calls *cultural literacy*. He has written an entire book by that title (*Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* [Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1987]). The burden of his book is that cultural literacy is breaking down in America; that as children grow into adulthood they are not being taught enough of the shared information of American culture to permit them to engage in meaningful discussion about serious subjects. He suggests that by aiming for content-neutral education, American schools have deprived their graduates of the kind of shared knowledge which they must have if they are to understand and make themselves understood beyond the level of “Me Tarzan, You Jane.”

If Hirsch is right—and on this point I think he is—then his generalizations about cultural literacy hold true for Christian culture as well. Take the letter to the Hebrews as an obvious example. The very first verse links this epistle to the cultural milieu of Old Testament Judaism. The writer to the Hebrews builds his argument upon categories taken out of the Law. A reader simply cannot understand Hebrews unless he knows the Torah. The original recipients of the epistle grew up with that knowledge—but what of today's Christian?

What has been said of Hebrews holds true across the New Testament. The New Testament documents were written for readers who possessed an easy acquaintance with hundreds of cultural cues. Every reference to sacrifice, to propitiation, to redemption or to dozens of other concepts presumes something in the reader. If we lack the information and categories which the writers presume, then we will not understand what they say.

Biblical literacy is only part of the problem. The culture of Christianity includes information not only from the Old and New Testaments, but also from the development of Christian tradition after apostolic times. When we use words like *Trinity* or *Baptist* or *Dispensationalism* we are presuming an understanding that goes beyond the text of Scripture. In fact, our theology and practice are founded on categories which were developed by the church fathers, the schoolmen, the mystics, the Reformers, and by generations of believers who lived between them and us. Unless we have some awareness of this process, unless we are able to hang our ideas upon certain cultural hooks, we literally do not know what we are talking about.

In previous generations, a large part of the business of the church was to transmit its culture to the average believer. This is one of the valid functions of a tradition: a healthy tradition brings out the meaning in virtually every activity of the church. By means of tradition, culture may be caught as well as taught. Where Christian tradition is strong, significance is seen not only in the catechesis of the church but also in its forms, architecture, music, art, and liturgy (whether formal or informal). Indeed, virtually nothing is without significance.

Secular culture did not exist before the Enlightenment. Rather, the dominant influence of Christian ideas shaped Western civilization. Consequently, the church could rely upon the surrounding culture to reinforce Christian thought forms. Given the subsequent secularization of the West, however, the church was left more and more to its own devices. Churches responded to this challenge in two ways. One response was for churches to maintain themselves as islands of traditional culture in a sea of secularism. The other response (especially represented in the American evangelical movement after the Second Great Awakening) was to import the dominant secular culture and to attempt to fill it with Christian content. Both of these approaches created a tension between secular culture and traditional Christian culture. In the first case, the tension was felt by believers in the world, where traditional Christian culture seemed increasingly irrelevant. In the second case, it was felt by believers in the church, which now resembled the world.

It might be asked why it mattered what culture a church chose, as long as it communicated Christian truth. The answer to this question hinges upon the degree to which the forms provided by culture affect the actual content of what is communicated. Could the writer to the Hebrews have communicated the same truth using the forms of Australian aboriginal culture? Would the sacrifice motif in the New Testament have the same meaning had it been

based upon the practices of the Aztecs or the Mayans?

Here is one point at which I disagree with Hirsch. He argues that the content of any particular culture is relatively unimportant; that no culture is significantly better than another; that what is important is to be literate in one's own culture. But this seems inconsistent with the observation (which Hirsch himself acknowledges) that culture provides a pre-understanding, an intellectual grid into which subsequent knowledge is fitted. The conclusion that different cultures enable better or worse understandings of specific (and in this case, Christian) concepts is inescapable.

If we really believe that Christianity is superior to animism, is it unthinkable for us to argue that culture shaped by Christian ideals is superior to culture shaped by animistic ideals? Might we even argue that Christianity is incompatible with animistic culture in significant ways? Ought we to hesitate (at least) before introducing animistic cultural forms into the church upon the supposition that they are suitable for expressing Christian truth?

The same questions might be asked of contemporary secular culture. To the degree that contemporary Western culture has broken with its past, we must face the issue of its value to and compatibility with Christianity. These issues will take on special relevance as more and more aspects of Western culture are imported from frankly anti-Christian sources.

More than bare cultural literacy, then, our concern must be for Christian literacy. On the one hand, this involves finding ways to help believers grasp truths that were revealed in the context of a biblical culture and articulated in the context of a Christian culture, both of which are now foreign to the majority of people. On the other hand, it means asking critical questions of Christian leaders who want to import forms from a surrounding culture that is thoroughly secular and increasingly pagan. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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