

A CRY FOR DIFFERENCE FROM THE CULTURALLY WEARY

by W. Tullian Tchividjian

In recent years many books and articles have appeared concerning the appropriate role of the church in our present cultural milieu. This, of course, has included an analysis of contemporary cultural trends and how we as the church, God's "alternative society", are supposed to respond to the challenges and opportunities these trends present. The proposed solutions to these challenges and opportunities vary widely, but as yet no consensus has emerged. And while I do not claim to have the final answer, I would like to offer a perspective that, I hope, might stir us to think about this subject, which we, as disciples in the 21st century, cannot afford to ignore.

I was blessed to grow up in a solid Christian home. The middle of seven children (4 brothers and 2 sisters), I was raised in an environment where authentic faith was lived out before my very eyes. I have always known who God is and I have always known that He sent His Son to die on a cross for sinners like me. As far back as I can trace, strong Christian conviction and devotion to Jesus Christ have been defining marks of my family heritage. My dad, who was born and reared in Switzerland, is a well-known and respected psychologist who has always put his family before anybody or anything. My mom, the eldest daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, is an award-winning author and speaker whose commitment to discipling her children surpassed any other competing ambition. They have been married for 38 years and counting. Growing up, my other brothers and sisters walked the straight and narrow, for the most part, rarely giving my parents any real trouble. Then there was me... different story!

It's certainly not an excuse, but I found it difficult growing up as a middle child. At times I was bunched with the "older ones", and at other times I was bunched with the "younger ones". I ended up, it seemed, bearing the responsibilities of both and enjoying the privileges of neither. I wasn't sure where I fit in (still don't at times), and I wanted to be heard, to be distinct. But instead of "casting all of my anxiety on Him", I turned to the world. At sixteen I dropped out of high school, was kicked out of my house (actually escorted off of our property by the police), and began living in a manner I thought would satisfy. I craved freedom more than anything. So, committing myself to a lifestyle with "no boundaries", I became a promiscuous, drug-using, club-hopper living in South Florida, who pursued pleasure harder than most. It wasn't, however, until after I had lived this way for six years that I began to realize my so-called freedom had made me a slave to desires and habits that were quickly destroying me. I had been seeking satisfaction so vigorously that I was unconscious of just how unsatisfied I had become. I was hungrier for meaning at 21 than I had been at

16. I found the Enlightenment promise that all things, including satisfaction and contentment, could be found “this side of the ceiling”, was a lie. The world had not satisfied me the way it had promised, the way I had anticipated. The world’s message *and* the world’s methods had hung me out to dry. I hungered desperately for something, Someone, “out of this world”. Broken and longing for something transcendent, I began going back to church with my parents.

I was very thankful that I walked into a church that was *different*: A church where the otherness of God was sensed immediately. In the music, in the message, and in the mingling afterward, it was clear that God was the guest of honor there, not I. I had suffered the consequences of the modern world’s emphasis on the individual, and I was unbelievably refreshed to discover a place that took the focus off me and put it on Him. He was the one being “lifted up for all men to see”, not the pastor or the “praise team”. He was the difference I longed for, not some carefully orchestrated performance that, believe me, I would have been able to see right through. And I am glad He was not communicated in the distasteful ways, whether musically or otherwise, that I had grown weary of. Whether or not I understood everything the preacher said that morning didn’t matter. I was the recipient of something more powerful than a “user-friendly” service with its “seeker-sensitive” sermon. I was observing the people of God honoring God as God, and I was drawn in by the glorious mystery of it all. I was being evangelized, not by a *man-centered show*, but by a *God-centered atmosphere*. I was experiencing what Dr. Ed Clowney calls “Doxological Evangelism”. It was, quite literally, out of this world!

The people like me, whom the church is trying to reach in the modern world, live their lives in a “world without windows”.¹ Traditionally, according to sociologist Peter Berger, human life was lived with “windows to other worlds”. In other words, *ordinary reality* was not the *only reality*. People acknowledged that there was much more to reality than the world in which they lived. They recognized that there was Someone bigger than their capabilities, Someone to appeal to beyond themselves, a larger purpose to life reaching beyond the immediate, beyond this world. Prior to the age of Enlightenment, all cultures and societies recognized the “superior power of some kind of supernatural.”² “The deepest experiences of all”, says Os Guinness, “were held to be ‘religious’, ‘sacred’, ‘other’, or ‘transcendent’, however these terms were defined”.³ But modernity has been shutting the windows and closing the blinds. “The Enlightenment’s development of science and reason”, says Marva Dawn, “turned

¹ Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus, eds., *Against the World for the World* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

² Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999) pg.41

³ Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1983) pg. 56

the center of societies from the supernatural to the natural”⁴, creating a “world without windows”. In a world without windows, God, transcendence, and mystery become less and less imaginable and, as a result, all of life becomes, as Max Weber put it, “rationalized”. Everything becomes a matter of human classification, calculation, and control. “What counts in a rationalized world”, says Guinness, “is efficiency, predictability, quantifiability, productivity, the substitution of technology for the human, and—from first to last—control over uncertainty”.⁵ Everything is produced, managed, and solved “this side of the ceiling”, which explains why so many people are restless and yearning, as I was, for meaning which transcends *this world*.

Many who live in this world know what the church is trying to do when we “accommodate” them, and they are disappointed. Because, they are, as I was, hungry for something and someone *different*. There is a reason why television shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Touched by an Angel*, and *X-Files* return season after season to a waiting audience, why the song “Higher” by the rock band *Creed* stayed at the top of the charts all of last year, and why *Ecstasy* is the dominant drug of choice, not only in the Rave culture, but in youth culture as a whole. The increasing fascination with Eastern religions, angels, aliens, psychics, the afterlife, metaphysical healing, etc., indicates that our culture is crying out for something different, something higher, something out of this world. They long for mystery, transcendence, and a deep sense of wonder, awe, and belonging: elements that the modern world disallows.

Because the modern world is in a constant state of flux, always changing and never staying the same, people are craving constancy and depth, as well as something “higher” and out of this world. The modern “virtues” of choice and change have become for many people, burdens to carry, not privileges to cherish. And this painful impermanence makes people in the modern world open to, and desirous for, things traditional and historical, ancient and proven. “From the historic preservation movement to the nostalgia of popular culture with its TV reruns, historical fiction, and ‘retro’ fashions, “ says cultural critic Gene Veith, “contemporary people are fascinated and attracted to the past”.⁶ They are desperately reaching not just *upwards*, but *backwards*. They yearn for a day gone by when things seemed more constant and less shallow. They want to tap into the treasures of the past as they search for staying power that seems unattainable in the present. They are weary of the pressure to *become*, while they long for the privilege to *be*. Therefore, they want different music (not just

⁴ Dawn, pg.41

⁵ Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993) pg.48

⁶ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994) pg. 227

words but style) and different people with their sights set on a different world. They long for someone to speak to them with authority about Someone other than themselves and about a time other than their own. They are not as interested in what they can become as in who they are and where they came from, historically speaking.

To be sure, “there are none who seek God, no not one”, according to the Bible, but it seems apparent that our world is becoming weary with the message *and* the methods of modern culture. If you stop and listen to the cry of our culture, you will hear people crying out for an *otherworldly dynamism*, not a *this-worldly solution*. They are up to their necks in “up-to-date” structures and “cutting-edge” methodologies. They are beginning to understand that life’s meaning extends beyond the “bottom line”, and that modern capabilities are neither able to make us better, more satisfied people, nor able to make this world a better, more satisfying place. I have talked to many people who are becoming increasingly wary of the latest “techno-trend” and complain of how impersonal and disenchanting modern life has become. The influx of secularization has left many yearning for an *otherworldliness and* a historical connection that modernity cannot provide. They seem desperate to recover a world that once was, a world that allows for mystery, miracle, and wonder, a world with “windows to other worlds”. Their cry is for something completely unique to this world, something otherworldly, something only the Church can truly offer.

“The world”, says Richard John Neuhaus, “desperately needs the Church to *be* the Church”, not to *do* church differently.⁷ The difference that people are longing for, in other words, is a difference in *being*, not *doing*. So while many church “strategists” are locating reformation and revival in structural renovation, we must remember that the deepest needs of the Church today are *spiritual*, not *structural*. And yet, “church-growth” advocates are constantly telling us that the Church’s cultural relevance depends *ultimately* on its ability to keep up with the changing structures, on its ability to *do* church differently.

I have good news for all of us who are becoming weary of this type of pressure: We don’t have to keep up the way we think we do; the world doesn’t want us to! So how do we compete? We don’t! We must come to see that God has established His Church as an “alternative society”, not to compete with this world, but rather to offer a home to those who realize the homelessness of life in this world without Him. It is the calling and the privilege of the Church to be “*against* the world *for* the world”. We should be encouraged and challenged by the historical reminder that the Church has always served the world best when it has been most counter cultural, most distinctively different from the world. My fear, however, is that the modern church’s emphasis on “structural renovation”

⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, "The Christian and the Church" in James M. Boice, ed. *Transforming Our World: A Call to Action* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1988), p. 120.

and “doing church”, has inadvertently communicated to our culture that we have nothing unique to offer them, nothing that is deeply spiritual and profoundly *otherworldly*. And as a result, they have looked elsewhere. We have so emphasized the modern notion of *doing* (techniques, methods, programs, marketing strategies, etc.), that we have missed the opportunity to *be* who we are called to *be*. “Bigger is better and newer is truer” seems to be the banner under which church-growth conferences all over the country are organized and advertised. We have mastered the program, while eclipsing altogether the Master Himself. Our focus on *doing church* has certainly overshadowed the biblical focus of *being church*, and this comes at a time when our culture is growing weary of slick production, while growing hungry for authentic presence. They do not want *entertainment from* the Church; they want *engagement by* the Church: engagement with historical and cultural solidity that facilitates meaningful interaction with transcendent reality. It is ironic that just when our culture is getting vertical, the Church is spending most of its time and energy getting horizontal. Just when our culture is yearning for difference *from the world*, the Church is looking for creative ways to develop similarities *to the world*. Just when our culture is looking *to* the past, the Church is pronouncing the “irrelevance” of the past.

In order for the Church to establish its voice in our postmodern culture we must remember who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. We must avoid the modern tendency towards “chronological snobbery”, believing that *our time* is the most important time while expressing little regard for history, tradition, and all those who have gone before us. We must *remember* that we are the people of the future, formed by the past, and living in the present. We must *remember* that our citizenship lies in “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God”, not man. We must *remember* in our worship that while contemporists operate with their heads fixed frontwards, never looking over their shoulder at the stock from which they have come, and traditionalists operate with their heads on backwards, romanticizing about the past and always wanting to go back, the Church, in contrast from both extremes, is called upon to be a people with swiveling heads: learning from the past, living in the present, and looking to the future. We must *remember* that it is our unique privilege and responsibility to remind our culture that this world is not all there is, and that they are not left to the resources of *this world* to satisfy their *otherworldly* longings. For, as Lauren Winner notes, “[People today] are not so much wary of institutions as they are wary of institutions that don’t do what they’re supposed to do.”⁸ As the Church, we are *supposed* to provide this world with that transcendent difference they long for because only the Christian Gospel offers a true spirituality, an *otherworldliness*, that is grounded in reality and history. It is only *our story*, the Christian story, that fuses past, present, and future with meaning from above and beyond, and we are *supposed* to tell it.

⁸ Lauren Winner, “Gen X Revisited: A Return to Tradition?”, *Christian Century* (November 8, 2000): pg. 1147

The old saying that we should “not be so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good” is true, as far as it goes. But it seems that in the modern world our earthly good *depends* on our heavenly-mindedness. In our present cultural climate, it becomes necessary for the Church to remember the words of C.S. Lewis who maintained that Christians who “did the most for the present world were precisely those who thought the most of the next”⁹. The late Henri Nouwen, too, points us in the right direction saying, “I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely ‘irrelevant’...That is the way Jesus came to reveal God’s love”¹⁰. And speaking of “relevance” in the same way that Nouwen spoke of “irrelevance”, John Seel has said, “The *timeless* is finally that which is most relevant, and we dare not forget this fact in our pursuit of relevance”.¹¹ All good and wise reminders that we have been entrusted with a timeless truth that can transform any weary culture and open their eyes to a world beyond their own: the story of a simple Jew who made a difference *because* He was different.

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⁹ Quoted in Don E. Eberly, *Restoring the Good Society: A New Vision for Politics and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994) pg. 80

¹⁰ Quoted in Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, pg. 64

¹¹ John Seel, “A Cultural Literacy Primer: Ten Resources Christians Need for Understanding Today’s World”, *Books and Culture* (April 1997)