

Summarnar One: What is Going On with Christians and American Culture?

Scriptures: 1 Chronicles 12:32; Colossians 4:5-6

I. The problem: a gap in the way we look at the world

Definitions

- Culture—“what human beings make of the world,”¹ both the things we make and the meanings we make, also “a soup that we swim in every day”²
- World view (belief system, cultural narrative)—assumptions that we hold (whether we know it or not) about the world and the way it works: things such as ultimate reality, what it means to be human, what happens at death, the basis of morality, and the meaning of history³

Insight: The official secularism of American culture is not the absence of a belief system but an alternative belief system.⁴

Tasks

- To understand our own world view and the view of others
- To be able to lovingly critique from within another’s world view
- To show how Christ is the real answer for what people seek

II. World Views⁵

Christian Theism

- God is the ultimate reality. He is holy and personal, transcendent and immanent, one God in three persons. God created all things out of nothing by his word. The universe is ordered, but God is able to intervene in his creation.
- Humankind is created in the image of God, marred by the fall, but offered redemption in Christ Jesus. The redeemed will be glorified at the end of the age.
- At death a person will either be with God and his people forever or be separated from him through sinful rejection of God and his salvation.
- God reveals himself to us, and his revelation is the basis of ethics and morals.
- God is sovereign over all history, and things are working according to his plan.

Departures from Theism in the Western World

- Deism—God started everything, but it now runs on its own.
- Naturalism—Matter is all that there is, and this life is all that we’ve got.
- Nihilism—Life is meaningless and has no purpose.
- Existentialism—Meaning in life is what I make or discover for myself.
- Newer developments—New Age spiritualities, Postmodernism, and radical Islam

III. Contemporary American Culture⁶

Five shifts from ancient paganism (impersonal universe) to Christianity (communion with God)

1. From considering the body and material world to less important than the realm of ideas to the goodness of the material world
2. From a cyclical view of history to history making progress
3. From individuals as unimportant to the dignity of individuals
4. From fate to the significance of human choices
5. From stifling feelings to the value of the emotions

Problem with later modernity: It has cut these five factors off from transcendent roots and now uses them in an impersonal universe.

Five “late-modern baseline cultural narratives”

1. The rationality narrative—the material world is the only reality (hopes in technology, medicine, and psychology)
2. The history narrative—progressive without any divine control (newer is always better)
3. The society narrative—from the worth of the individual to individualism, free to live as one chooses
4. The morality or justice narrative—seeks justice without God’s norms, “morally self-authorizing”
5. Identity narrative—personal identity defined by one’s own desires and dreams

Some consequences: keep your views private, cannot judge, free to do what I want, etc.

Final thoughts

- “The church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.”⁷
- 1 Peter 1:24-25 (citing Isaiah 40:6, 8)

¹ Attributed to Ken Myers by Andy Crouch in a presentation at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary on March 24, 2010.

² Walt Meuller, president of Center for Parent-Youth Understanding, in a workshop on narcissism in today’s youth culture at Grace Baptist Church in Hudson, MA on April 25, 2015.

³ Adapted from James K. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1979), p. 18. This excellent book is updated and still in print.

⁴ Timothy Keller, acknowledging philosopher Charles Taylor, in *Preaching* (New York: Penguin Random House, Viking, 2015), pp. 124-125.

⁵ See Sire, especially pp. 21-42.

⁶ See Keller, pp. 127-132.

⁷ Theodore Beza (1519-1605). Protestant reformer.