

# Culture And The Christian

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By Joe Crews

## Culture and the Christian

We hear a lot these days about vanishing species in the physical world of nature. Some creatures have almost become extinct as their breeding habitats have been invaded and destroyed by advancing “civilization.”

I would like to suggest that there is a similar problem in the spiritual world also. A certain kind of historic faith and lifestyle is being slowly choked out of existence by the inexorable advance of a voracious, alien culture. Paul warned of a time when the true church would be threatened by a spirit of conformity to worldly values. He said, “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). One translator has made it more urgent: “Don’t let the

world around you squeeze you into its own mold” (Phillips).

Is there reason to believe that the simple faith of our fathers has been eroded by a burgeoning hedonistic society? Jesus made some very clear statements about the spiritual threats that would confront His people just prior to His return. He said, “as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man” (Luke 17:26). Obviously there will be some dramatic parallels between this high-tech final generation and the antediluvians of 6,000 years ago. Certainly the Master was not talking about scientific similarities, but something would be the same. What was it? The answer is found in the book of beginnings: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

We could cite scores of texts to show how an obsessive self-indulgence would be rampant in the last days just as it was in the days of Noah. Love of pleasure, vanity, desire for the supremacy, and above everything else an inordinate pride, would characterize the doomed end-time civilization. Self lies at the root of almost every sin for which man will be held accountable. It was that spirit of egocentric pride that precipitated Lucifer into his original course of rebellion against God. He declared that he would be the greatest and sit in the sides of the north. He would even be “like the most high” and take God’s place in ruling the universe.

After being cast out of heaven, Satan sought to infect the human family with the same evil principles of self-aggrandizement that had turned him into a devil. He appealed to Eve’s unfallen mind to become more wise so that she could be like God. Since that encounter with our first parents, Satan has used exactly the same avenues of approach to all the descendants of Adam. His temptations are always aimed at the most vulnerable point of weakness in fallen human nature—and that weakness is pride; the desire to attract attention to self.

Has the prophecy of Jesus been fulfilled today? Have the minds of most modern sons of Adam been invaded by “evil continually”? No one who reads the newspaper can be in doubt on these questions. Murder, drugs, rape, terrorism, satanism and every conceivable related perversion, has turned this planet into a place of fear. And there is an evil basic principle behind every type of crime being committed today. The self-nature wants attention. It wants to rule; to be gratified; to have its own way. People are usually murdered because they stand in the way of someone who is determined to acquire money, power or attention. The twisted ego of fallen man demands to be the greatest, to have the most, and to stand at the top. The drug and sex problems are always related to self-gratification. Political corruption and spiritual compromise are equally rooted in greed, to gain either materially or in popularity. Whether we look at Wall Street, professional sports, politics or religion, we see extreme manifestations of the self-nature seeking to be recognized and exalted.

What does all this have to do with the loss of a spiritual lifestyle among God's people? Jesus put His finger on the pulse of the problem when He said, "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matthew 24:12). In other words, there would be a corresponding compromise in the church as the conditions of evil proliferated in the world. The deadening influence of a self-centered environment would gradually infect those who once had a genuine love relationship with God. That love would grow cold.

Are we suggesting that all those violent drug and crime scenes would be reenacted among the saints? No. Jesus did not say that those iniquities would come to characterize His church, but He did imply that they would create a carelessness within the body of Christ that could lead to a loss of faith and love. Note the significant question that Jesus asked, "when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). No one can deny that a lethargic lukewarmness has crept upon us, diluting many of the unique devotional practices that identified true worship for centuries of the past. Jesus indicated that an encroaching secular society would decimate the ranks of His own followers to such a degree that only a few would survive. "As it was in the days of Noah." How many were saved at that time? Only eight. Jesus said, "So shall it be in the days of the Son of man." He was talking about His return. A small remnant would recognize the contaminating process of gradual compromise which would endanger even the "very elect." Jesus said, "narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

I would like to suggest that any satanic plan capable of destroying the vast majority of believers would have to be very subtle, devious and almost undetectable. It is also quite apparent that such a program would be so well disguised that those deceived would not even be aware of losing their faith. Love grows cold by degrees. The world crowds in closer and closer. Conformity begins over issues that seem small and inconsequential.

Look once more at the analytical sentence of our Lord in describing the anatomy of compromise. He said, "Because iniquity shall abound," Christians would grow cold. Their love would wax cold. Paul prophesied that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). As evil slowly grows worse in the world, love slowly grows cold in the church.

Why did Jesus tie the loss of spiritual power to the rise of iniquity in the world around us? Simply because He understood how we can be affected by the sights and sounds of a carnal society. Repeatedly the Bible warns against relating to the world. Jesus said, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world ... therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). Paul wrote, "come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Corinthians 6:17). John declared, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15). James said, "whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).

In order to understand better what these inspired people were warning us about, read the illuminating words of our Lord in Luke 16:15. He said, "for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." There is the real crux of truth that we have been searching for. Jesus defined the enemy for us so clearly that no Christian needs to be confused. The "world hateth you" because you do not esteem the same things they do! "The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). The most highly esteemed things in the world today are utter abomination in God's sight, and true Christians should be aware of what they are.

A very important question is raised at this point in the minds of many. How can we know which things fit into this category of abomination? Obviously we are talking about social values and cultural practices. Almost everything we do is rooted in a pattern of current customs. Are they all wrong? What aspects of prevailing lifestyles are acceptable and which are unacceptable? Jesus has certainly shown us that abounding iniquity is out there in the world, increasing all the time, and that it will be responsible for the majority of Christians losing

their way. He has also said that some of the most popular cultural behavior in the world is an abomination to Him.

I believe the answer to these questions is found in the words of our Lord. He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Please notice that Jesus did not say "let him deny himself alcohol or drugs or illicit sex," He just said to "deny himself." Period. All one is really required to do is say no to the self-nature which is resident in every one of us. Since self is behind every sin, this victory will bring all other victories with it. Yielding to the demands of that egocentric nature is to participate in the same sin that actuated Lucifer and later led to the death of Jesus on the cross. It is the constant subduing of that lower, carnal nature which distinguishes the children of light from the children of darkness. Although conversion does not remove that selfish nature, it does bring a new spiritual authority into the life that overpowers the propensities of evil, bringing them under the sanctified control of a surrendered will.

It is important to note that a continual life-or-death warfare is being waged in every born-again Christian. The ever-present fallen nature will always be in conflict with the spiritual mind. We must choose which of the two shall rule our life. Jesus said, "Ye cannot serve two masters." It must be either self or the Saviour. But many overlook the fact that we are responsible for saying no to self. Jesus said, "Let him deny himself." Everyday we have to choose what we look at, listen to, smell, feel and taste. The five senses are the doors that give access to influences that either sanctify us or pollute us. The mind automatically conforms to whatever we allow to enter through the sensory perceptions.

This brings us back to the question of which cultural practices we can safely engage in. All of them are going to have an influence on the mind by appealing to one of our senses. By the grace of God, we can close the door on any cultural influence that will feed the self-nature. We need to learn which ones will weaken us and which ones will strengthen us. Cultural practices are neither good nor bad simply because they have become the behavioral norm for a contemporary society. They must be tested by something deeper than a passing fad or custom.

There are many Christians who believe that cultural practices cannot be judged as wrong because they represent only the application of a principle and not the principle itself. They contend that a practice can be right for one society but wrong for another depending on the cultural imperatives in operation at the time. Indeed there are examples that could be given to demonstrate that this is valid as a general principle. But there are also one or two notable exceptions to that rule. If we do not recognize those exceptions, we are subject to some grievous errors of biblical interpretation that could endanger our souls. I am alarmed to see theologians as well as laymen applying this cultural rule to the understanding of Scripture. They surmise that the Bible writers themselves were so influenced by prevailing cultural mores that they incorporated many current social dos and don'ts into their "inspired" writings. It is assumed that if the Scripture authors were writing today they would not take the same position. Thus many biblical teachings believed to be tied to a cultural influence are simply disqualified for being relevant to our own day.

Even though time and place may be appropriate to consider, those factors should never be allowed to override the authority of an inspired canonical instruction. It is a serious thing to assume the responsibility of choosing from the counsels of God what should be applied to this age and what should not be applied now. Eternal judgment is to be determined by the Word of God, and no man is to take away or add thereto. What an awesome account will be required of any who weakens one single requirement of the inspired record.

It is interesting to notice which biblical teachings are being modified by an appeal to culture. Almost invariably it proves to be subjects dealing with prohibitions or restrictions in popular lifestyle practices. Do you know why? Because many of those practices are rooted in the indulgence of the self-nature. No one objects to the

application of a biblical truth or principle as long as it does not make any demands involving self-denial. Anything that challenges the basic carnal drive of the self-nature is hard to accept. Is it any wonder that Christian standards are gradually being reinterpreted in order to accommodate more of the increasingly egocentric fashions of the world? High spiritual standards always demand a yielding up of self and all that glorifies the perverted pride of the fallen nature.

Jesus said it very succinctly when He declared, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." The spirit of pride has continually catered to attitudes, which focus on self-display. Our Lord said that self should be denied. Scores of Bible texts indicate that God was displeased with the outward adornment of the person. Divine disapproval of jewelry in the Bible is in direct conflict with the natural vain tendencies of the fallen nature. It is not surprising that efforts are being made to nullify the clear biblical counsel on this and other subjects by a new hermeneutic approach. They tell us that specifics don't apply to us today because the inspired writers were influenced by the prevailing social atmosphere in which they lived. The cultural practices that they found objectionable are no longer objectionable because the times have changed.

This same reasoning has been applied to the subject of ordaining women for the ministry, as well as other areas of pressing public interest. The Bible cannot speak authoritatively in these matters because the writers were simply expressing the current, popular viewpoint of their cultural system. So goes the argument of those who have crumbled under the pressure of majority opinion. I have observed a number of my friends reverse their positions on the subjects of jewelry and women's ordination. They agree that the Bible evidence is against the two practices, but they do not believe the prohibitions apply today. So they have shifted over to the position that they believe the inspired writers would assume if they were living under our cultural conditions.

Now I would like to explain the real inadequacy of the "culture" argument by a closer look at the jewelry question. Most people agree that there is an abundance of negative references to the wearing of ornaments in the Bible. In some places a list of the decorative items are actually given in the texts, and the Lord Himself gave instruction for them to be stripped away. In every case, the condemned articles were a part of the common cultural practices of the time. But was that the reason for their meeting with divine disapproval?

I submit that God clearly revealed that He was attacking a deeper problem than simply a social or cultural conformity. In Exodus 33:5 He said, "Ye are a stiff-necked people ... therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee." In Isaiah 3:16-18 the Lord addresses the women of Israel thus: "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks ... the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments." Paul admonished "that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls or costly array" (1 Timothy 2:9). Peter said, "let it not be that outward adorning ... but ... the adornment of a meek and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:3, 4).

None deny that God is addressing a principle here rather than just localized social custom. The women in all cases were afflicted with pride, the great basic sin of fallen humanity. The wearing of the jewelry was merely a symptom of the real problem, but it was playing havoc with the spiritual principle of modesty and humility. The texts show that the women were cited as an example of the violation of the principle. Thus God's disapproval was not rooted in a cultural practice, but in a basic flaw common to all the human family. Had it been tied only to culture, God's objections would have changed when and if the culture changed. But since God's prohibition rested upon an inherent condition of human nature, the prohibition would remain as long as the fallen nature remained. If a certain practice stirs up sin because it appeals to a weakness in every human being, then that practice is wrong on that basis alone! And it would be wrong whenever and wherever it appeared in fallen human nature. No one can point to a single period in history when the wearing of ornaments did not elicit from that carnal nature the same inordinate pride that the inspired writers saw and condemned in their day.

To be totally honest, we must concede that, culturally, the practices of adornment appear to be just about the same today as they were when the Bible was written. Since those practices were portrayed by the inspired prophets as being a violation of the spiritual principle at that time, we have absolutely no grounds for assuming they would not be equally wrong today.

If it could be demonstrated that the objectionable adornments stirred up sinful pride in one age but not in another, then the cultural argument might have some validity. But even then we would have to ask why God would include so many specific instructions in the eternal Scriptures that would be applicable at one time but not applicable at another time. It is very superficial to assume that by proving a cultural connection we are destroying the application of those prohibitions to later generations. Surely no one can honestly contend that pride is a less devious problem in its manifestation today than it was in the days of Isaiah, Peter, Paul or John.

It is truly a staggering thought that the great original sin by the author of all evil was the sin of pride of appearance. The Scripture declares of Lucifer: "Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness" (Ezekiel 28:17).

Think of it! Here was a holy creature, totally unlike the race of fallen Adam. He had no natural propensities toward sin, but yet he was overcome by yielding to the appeal of personal vanity. We have every reason to recognize this temptation as the most powerful that any free-choice being could ever face. Surely if inordinate pride of his "brightness" and "beauty" overwhelmed the most glorious of God's creatures, then we fallen mortal beings must be a thousand times more susceptible to the same appeal. Is this why God warned against the feeding of those fires of self-love by adorning the physical person? Was God trying to protect us from an innate perversity that was almost second nature to every descendant of fallen Adam?

This would certainly explain the inherent propensity of women to be so emotionally distressed by the removing of make-up and jewelry. For years I wondered why ladies would often react with tears and anger even when the subject was broached. I've observed the same visceral reaction of some men to the giving up of rings or chains. Now I understand why the offended self-nature leaps to a defense of those items. The very deepest springs of perverse pride are affronted by the stripping away of the outward objects. Few will admit that they really are attached to the glittering baubles, but none have been able to explain, if that is true, why they are so disturbed by taking them off. The truth is that pride is so subtle, being the root of most other sins, that it creeps into many cultural practices almost unrecognized. It not only tries to attract attention to self physically by wearing artificial adornment, but also intellectually by dominating conversations, and spiritually by calling attention to one's dutifully correct way of life. In reality, self-righteous spiritual pride could be more deadly than the pride of vain display.

Sometimes I have been asked why God would deny us the wearing of gold, jewels, pearls, etc., when the Holy City will actually be composed of such rare gems. Again we are reminded that the precious stones are not the problem; they are not evil. The problem is what the wearing of those things does to the carnal human nature. After this fallen nature is removed, and these purified characters are translated into glorious immortality, there will be no more lower self-nature to be appealed to. Golden crowns can be safely worn by all the redeemed, and not one heavenly being will be seeking to draw attention to anyone save the Lamb who will be in the midst of us.

Glittering earrings, chains, finger rings and colorful cosmetics will not be collected and worn by competing saints in order to appear more beautiful or more sophisticated. The beauty of the Lord our God will be upon every ransomed man, woman and child, and no one will give the slightest thought to being more than our God makes us by His own divine adornment. How wonderful it would be if all could now be satisfied to bear the same heavenly beauty of His righteousness without obscuring it by cheap, artificial tinsel.

It has been suggested by some that all specific applications of a principle must be left to individual conviction. These people contend, therefore, that no church should set up a standard that would proscribe certain articles of adornment. But if this is true, why did the Holy Spirit inspire Bible writers to make lists of then-current items of dress that were objectionable? It was God who identified such things as earrings, rings, and eye paint as being displeasing to Him. And it had nothing to do with culture! These things were condemned because they catered to the carnal appetite of a sinful nature. They violated a holy principle whose roots went far deeper than the shallow vagaries of contaminated culture.

The truth is that there are scores of modern manifestations of pride that were unimaginable in the days of Bible writers. Were they writing today, they would undoubtedly call them by name and warn against the indulgence of them. If there is uncertainty on the part of anyone as to which of the latest innovations of pride would be specifically named, let them have no uncertainty about the listing of those indulgences that called forth their strong condemnation when they wrote hundreds of years ago. They would surely look at the same symbols of pride—rings, earrings and painted eyes—and would write, “I will therefore ... that woman adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broided hair, or gold or pearls or costly array” (1 Timothy 2:9).

I view the problem of cultural interpretation as one of the most serious issues in the area of biblical research. What uninspired scholar or layman can claim the wisdom to separate between cultural issues and eternal principles—if indeed there are such things as cultural issues in the Bible? It boggles our minds that God would clutter the pages of His everlasting, living Word with remonstrances that would have meaning only for a certain few people in a certain brief span of time.

Through the appeal of this perverted hermeneutic, thousands have found a way to avoid unpleasant requirements of the Scriptures. It is not hard to be persuaded if one is already looking for the means of evading a difficult duty.

The confusion would be unimaginable if specific biblical standards were tailored to the social whims of any particular age. How would any of the Bible be trustworthy if any part of it could be attributed to a writer who was influenced more by his environment than by the Holy Spirit? Many times the inspired prophets had to take stands against extremely popular cultural activities. Some were put to death because they dared to defy the demands of a dissolute social order.

We need to study once again how men were moved by the Holy Ghost to translate God’s thought into human verbs and adjectives. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God;” not just the part which appears relevant to my age, my culture or my sex. The Bible is absolutely timeless in its universal application to every person, in every age, and under all circumstances.

But now let’s consider the fact that the jewelry question cannot really be properly placed in the “cultural issue” category. The basic argument in favor of doing so collapses when we discover that ornamentation practices of biblical times and the present are essentially the same. It is true that the inspired writers observed the majority of women in their day wearing almost every variety of decorative jewelry—just as we see it being done today. Yet, with those culturally acceptable practices before their eyes, they wrote against the wearing of them. If indeed they were being influenced by culture, they would have certainly bent toward a tolerance of the practice. How can we charge the writers with cultural bias when they wrote counter to the cultural demands? And on what basis could we believe they would write differently today? If those men were to come alive today, they would see many strange and bewildering things on this modern scene, but I submit that the earrings, bangles, chains and makeup would probably be the most familiar custom with which they could relate.

Do we dare contend that they were influenced to write against the most popular practice because everyone was wearing the ornaments? And if we took such a view on that issue, how would we correlate it with the parallel issue of ordaining women to preach? In New Testament times, women were culturally not permitted to be spiritual leaders, and Paul took a firm position against their public function as such. By doing so he has been charged with undue bias favorable to the cultural demands. Yet in the same chapter, Paul wrote against women wearing ornaments, even though his position, this time, was unfavorable to the cultural demands. So poor Paul has been charged with cultural bias regardless of what he wrote. Is it not obvious why he wrote against some practices that were popular, and supportive of other practices that were equally popular? Paul was writing what the Holy Spirit inspired him to write. Whether it agreed or disagreed with majority opinion was the least of the great apostle's concern. This man had faced every form of violent opposition without compromising his message. What an insult to even suggest that Paul might have allowed cultural circumstances to dictate his position on controversial issues whether popular or unpopular.

Surely it must now be clear why some people today are inconsistently charging Paul with bias on both of these issues. It is the only way to discredit the inspired words of Scripture that cut across their own preferred lifestyle. The truth is that Paul's modern-day accusers are the only ones being influenced by culture. It seems that they do not have the courage to stand against the overwhelming tide of popular practice in the area of personal adornment and women's ordination, and the only way to justify their compromise with a worldly culture is to somehow discount the clear Bible statements condemning those practices. But they cannot have it both ways. They must define how culture is supposed to affect inspired Bible authors. Does it pressure them to favor that which is culturally popular? Or does it pressure them to condemn current acceptable customs? Regardless of how they answer those questions, their real motive is exposed. The culture argument seems to provide a way to indulge the self-nature and to be popular with the crowd, even if it involves rejecting certain parts of the Bible to do so.

Because it tends to weaken credibility of the Scriptures, most advocates of the culture-interpretation view seek to dilute their humanistic approach with a variety of trite surface arguments against a literal application of the texts. For example, a great deal is made out of certain Greek and Hebrew words which, in their translation, can be made to describe either functional or decorative articles of clothing. And because the Bible cautions against ostentatious and extravagant display of otherwise acceptable dress, it is made to appear that if we approve any expensive type of clothing, then we must also approve the wearing of purely ornamental jewelry as well.

This same exaggerated ploy seeks to confuse the issue further by equating utilitarian objects such as watchbands, tie clasps and cuff links with decorative display jewelry. Even though it may be wise to avoid wearing certain functional items because of the way they are perceived by some, there is a clear distinction between the two classes of articles. For instance, no one would ever suggest that a pair of eyeglasses is in the category of ornaments. Yet if the frames were worn without any lenses held before the eyes, those frames would certainly qualify as a true ornament. Even a ring would not be counted in the jewelry class if it served to hold the finger on the hand! That would make it a functional object. Generally those who press these frail arguments are simply trying to create a rationale for indulging self. Unfortunately the predictable result is a loss of confidence in the integrity of Scripture.

Women's ordination is endorsed in the face of Paul's unilateral assertion that elders should be "the husband of one wife." The apostle's explanation of women's secondary role in spiritual matters, based upon the order of creation, has been totally rejected by the new culture revisionist. They fault Paul for allowing personal chauvinistic prejudice and/or local cultural mandates to influence his writing of the epistles. The strongest arguments they can offer in favor of female priestesses and ministers are built around the verses alluding to equality of salvation for every man, woman, Jew or Gentile. Those verses have nothing to do with assignment

of office or spiritual roles. They are referring to salvation and moral worth. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). Just as surely as slave/master relationships were physically unaffected by entrance into Christ, so were the male/female physical relationships unaltered. Spiritually, yes. But not in any other way. The physical roles were not changed, either legally or in practice.

By the way, it should be noted that there are some very important and specific roles for women to fulfill in the church today. Just because they have been excluded from spiritual leadership does not mean they have no responsibilities in sharing and teaching. Short of serving as priests or elders there are multiplied functions of ministry available to dedicated Christian women. Millions are serving in these supportive roles with no thought of public acclaim or ordination.

In both cases of jewelry and women's ordination, the Bible clearly reveals that the objection was not tied to the culture. It went deeper by far. The ornamentation violated the spiritual principle of modesty and humility while the ordination of women violated the spiritual order of creative roles. Paul pointed to these basic principles in dealing with the two issues, but that fact has been ignored by those who seek to make both of them a mere matter of cultural relativity.

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