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Sermon Transcript

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Countering the Culture

I have got a question for you this afternoon. One of the terms that we use very commonly in the English language that is maybe not that easy to define is the term culture. Years ago in a graduate level class that I was taking, the professor asked for a definition of the term culture. Not so easy to define. I pulled the dictionary off my shelf and took a look at the way the "Longman's Dictionary of American English" defines the term culture. And let me give you their definition. *The particular system of art, thought, and customs of a society. Example, ancient Greek culture. Tribal culture. 2. Artistic and other activity of the mind and the works produced by this. Example, New York is a good city for anyone who is interested in culture. You may or may not disagree. I don't know. 3. A state of high development in art and thought. A man of little culture.*

It's a difficult term to define, but perhaps a little easier is the other question that I want to ask you this afternoon. How would you characterize our culture? What do you think of the culture that you and I are a part of, for better or for worse in the United States of America in the year 2002? I would suggest to you brethren that the big indicator of the culture and where people want to be culturally is entertainment. I don't know how much TV you watch. I find I have less and less time for TV, and less and less inclination to watch TV. But if you check a lot of TV and you watch some of the programs, especially the comedies that are on the networks in the evenings, you get a very incisive indication of what kind of a culture we are a part of. I was thinking about this and came up with a number of adjectives. Maybe you've got more.

Our culture it seems to me is materialistic. There's a lot of talk of money, goods, sales pitch. Boy, there are so many sales pitches on every medium of communication, it's incredible. People have got to have things these days.

Our society is antiauthoritarian. TV pokes fun at authority figures, people who in earlier years would have been held in high respect.

Our society is hedonistic. The culture is a hedonistic culture. Many people pursuing pleasure. Pleasure is the goal of life for many people.

Our society is one that holds to a culture of libertinism. Libertine meaning anything goes. Everything is allowed. You're free to do whatever you choose.

I've got an interesting quotation. I am going to quote a number of sources this afternoon. This is from the Community Impact Seminar, Focus on the Family. "Two fifths of self-identified Christians say you may do anything you want. Just don't hurt anyone." Two fifths of self-identified Christians.

Our society I think we can safely say is tending to be values neutral. You see that in the educational system. To talk about values, to teach values as we do in the church and in our educational programs is something strange in our society. I've got a very interesting quote that I would like to read you. Senator Dan from the publication *Imprimis*, vol 20, no. 9, September 1991. "I recently saw the story of a high school values clarification class conducted by a teacher in Teaneck, New Jersey. A girl in the class had found a purse containing \$1000 and returned it to its owner. The teacher asked for the class's reaction. Every single one of her fellow students concluded the girl had been foolish. Most of the students contended that if someone is careless they should be punished. When the teacher was asked what he said to the students he responded, "Well, of course, I didn't say anything. If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong, then I am not their counselor. I can't impose my views." Sound familiar? It's no wonder that J. Allen Smith considered a father of many modern education reforms included in the end, "The trouble with us reformers is that we have made reform a crusade against all standards. Well, we have smashed them all, and now neither we nor anybody else has anything left." Values neutrality, the concept that there is no right and wrong, and certainly anybody who stands up in public has no right to talk about values.

Our society is violent. Many examples of violence are woven into our culture. Now I realize that the level of violence has apparently subsided somewhat during the decade of the nineties. There are reasons for that. An aging population, near full unemployment through the decade of the nineties. Examples of violence where young people take arms and begin shooting both teachers and fellow students in their high schools.

We have witnessed huge changes in our culture that have affected us. This is driven home for me by a book that I bought recently when I was on a trip to England. I notice that our minister from England, Mr. John Jewell, is in the front row. He may have read this book. It was written by a man by the name of Peter Hitchens. And the title of the book is "The Abolition of Britain" and Hitchens brings out some of the cultural changes that are taking place in Britain from the post war era up to the 1990s. Very, very interesting. Every time I go back to England it is very striking to me how the social changes on both sides of the Atlantic are very, very similar. We have witnessed enormous changes in our society.

I would like to give you a few illustrations of this. The downward spiral, Charles Swindall's book, "The Quest for Character", he quotes sociologist and historian Carl Zimmerman in his 1947 book, "Family and Civilization" where he records his keen observations as he compared the disintegration of various cultures with the parallel decline of family life in those cultures. Eight specific patterns of domestic behavior typified the downward spiral of each culture Zimmerman studied. Marriage loses its sacredness. It is frequently broken by divorce. Traditional meaning of the marriage ceremony is lost. Feminist movements abound. There is increased public disrespect for parents and authority in general and acceleration of juvenile delinquency, promiscuity and rebellion occurs. There is refusal of people with traditional marriages to accept family responsibilities. A growing desire for and acceptance of adultery is evident. There is increasing interest in and spread of sexual perversions and sex related crimes. Does that sound familiar? The changes that have taken place around us with many of us perhaps not fully realizing just how deep and how powerful those changes are. They impact all of society and they impact the people in the Church of God as well.

I wanted to give you another quick quote here. Here it is, this is the one I want. From anthropologist David , quoted by William Bennett. says, "We have now become the kind of society that in the 19th century almost every Christian denomination felt compelled to missionize." In other words if they had seen people who live the way people live typically in the 1990s and the 2000s in this country, they would have felt it incumbent on them to go out and teach them, missionize them, teach them about Christianity.

After I left Ambassador University I went to work in the state school system in Texas for a couple of years. And I learned a lot. At the time I wondered at times why I was there. As I look back on it now, I think I understand a little bit better why I was there for a couple of years. One of the things that really impacted itself on me in one year when I was working at R.L. Turner High School in the Dallas area was how conformist the teen culture is. And that is one of the features of the teenage society that our young people are part of. Highly conformist. The conformist desire is natural. People like to be liked. People like to be accepted, especially young people. People desire to be a part of the group. But I will never forget an incident that took place at R.L. Turner High School one day when I was wearing a particular pair of shoes. And these shoes were tennis shoes. We dressed fairly casually for the classroom. I liked to dress in my comfortable tennis shoes because I had to stand a lot of the time. And one of the students told me I was wearing the wrong kind of shoes. You weren't supposed to wear those shoes. There was a particular — I don't remember which brand it was — one particular brand that was the brand that had to be worn, and mine simply were not right.

A minor example of the fact that teen culture is very, very conformist. And it was an eye opener for me to see just how heavy a pressure there was on teenagers

to do what everybody else does. And of course this conformist streak gets exploited as well in the area of alcohol, drugs, and sex. I saw a program on TV recently. Some of you may have seen this program in which the business world looks for trend makers among the teens. They showed a bunch of young people on screen and they all looked rather, how should we put it, rather individualistic in their appearance. They all looked a little unconventional. They were filming these people and asking them what the next wave would be, what the trend would be. So the world of business targets teenagers, because of course teenagers have quite a lot of money in their pockets these days. And they target them on the base of their conformist culture.

So the title of this sermon is "Countering the Culture". And the question I have for you first of all then is, are Christians influenced by the culture? Now I think the answer to that is obvious. Are we as Christians influenced by the culture? And if we stop and consider what Paul had to write to the Corinthians, the answer becomes very obvious very quickly.

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians. And as we are turning there I want to pick out a few of the scriptures in 1 Corinthians to illustrate the answer to this question. I think we know a little bit about it, but some of the background to Corinthians, Corinth was a very unusual city in its time. Maybe not so unusual by our standards. Very wealthy. It was a trading center. It was apparently located on two rivers, which brought a lot of trade through. It was also a center of immorality. You are aware of the fact possibly that it became legendary, it gave its name in fact, to immoral behavior. The term "to corinthianize" in Greek and even in the English today began to mean to indulge in sexual immorality. Many of the Corinthians worshiped Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. And they involved themselves in the abuse of alcohol. All of this, of course, came over from their culture, and came over from their religion. Corinth was a philosophical center. Many different ideas were floating around. You could find just about anything that you wanted to listen to there in Corinth, any kind of ideas. And of course, all of this had its influence on the church. And when you read the Corinthian correspondence, you find out quite a lot about the church, don't you? You see that the church, because of its wealth, because of being in a wealthy society, had become laid back. That of course is the danger of being wealthy, a lack of zeal, a lack of commitment. Because of the immorality of the city, the church had tended to become tolerant of immorality. And here in 1 Corinthians 5 let's read a few verses. 1 Corinthians 5. Paul had to write to them and correct them. *It is actually recorded that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles.* Even the Greco-Roman culture was not willing to tolerate this. *That a man has his father's wife.* A man in the congregation apparently living together with his stepmother in all probability. Verse 2. *And you are puffed up, and you have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.* Now, did they not know the law of God? Did they not know it was prohibited? Probably they did. But

part of their culture, and part of their values is what we see around us today. Everything is okay. You know, you can't sit in judgment of anybody. You can't think in terms of right and wrong. And so they were tolerating it there right in the church.

Verse 3. For I indeed as absent in body but present in spirit have already judged him who has so done this deed. In the name of our lord Jesus Christ when you gather together, along with my spirit with the power of our lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

And I think just as it is for us today, so probably for the Corinthians the idea of discipline was also probably rather alien to their culture. They were tolerating it. Their penchant for philosophy created some of the division in the Corinthian church. People had different ideas. They were quick to indulge their different ideas. And this of course is probably the theme of 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13. Now I plead with you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you. That you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgments. And that wasn't their natural state. That wasn't the way the Corinthians tended to be. Quite possibly because their city was so philosophical and everybody had their own ideas. So they all had their own champions. *Verse 11. For it has been declared to me concerning you my brethren by those of Chloe's household that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that each of you says, I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?* And in fact, that sets the keynote for the entire book of Corinthians. All of the other subjects that come up in 1 Corinthians flow from this matter of division and unity. This is the SPS if you wish, or maybe the SPQ of the book of Corinthians.

Anyway, the point of course is that Christians are easily influenced by the culture. We are very easily influenced by the culture. And I am not going to take the time to go back into the Old Testament. I have got an Old Testament example in my notes. But you can check out for yourself the example of Lot's daughters in Genesis 19. It is a very striking example where they come out of Sodom and Gomorrah. And you know, you stop and you wonder, well how much of an influence did Sodom and Gomorrah have on Lot? A man who is referred to as righteous in the New Testament. Righteous Lot, he vexed his soul. And yet they find their way out of Sodom and Gomorrah by divine intervention. And what happens is in fact a terrible double act of incest by Lot's daughters. They think there is nobody else around. It is one of those very difficult to read stories of the Old Testament, Genesis 19.

I want to spend the rest of the time here asking a few questions. How do we go about countering the culture? How may we counter the culture? I have got four points for you that I think might be helpful. How do we counter the culture?

1. We have to recognize its influence. We don't stop very often and ask ourselves,

what would I have been if I had been born in a different time, in a different place? And again, I have to credit this book that I read recently with making me stop and think. Because the book, "The Abolition of Britain" highlights so colorfully the enormous cultural changes that have taken place in Britain. And what life was like decades ago. What would your life have been like if you had been born in another time and another place?

I want to read a little bit here from a Gallup poll. Here we are. Here's the one that I wanted. What was it like? How much has it changed? Gallup poll. There was a time when most Americans respected the Bible and could quote it with authority. In 1963 according to Gallup, 65% believed the Bible literally. Today the number is only 32% (in 1992, a decade ago). It is presumably significantly lower than that now. There was a time when most Americans were familiar with Biblical doctrine. One of the things we discussed at ABC at the beginning of the week was how people used to come into the church back in the 1950s and the 1960s, the parents of many of the students here. And of course, the method God used to call people into the church back then was based on the fact that society generally accepted the Bible. People had Bibles. They sometimes read them. And a man was on the radio and talked to them and said, look, you believe in the Bible, but there are certain things you should be doing according to the commandments of God. And the message was very clear. We don't live in a society like that any more. Yet you could say, believe in Jesus and at least they knew what you meant. But today most would be mystified. Newsweek tells of a child who saw a crucifix and asked, "Mommy, what's that man doing?" There was a time when most Americans accepted absolute standards. They might disagree on what those absolutes were, but they knew that some things are really right on wrong. Today 80% reject moral absolutes. What would your life had been life if you had been in a different time and a different place? We can't change that, but of course we have to recognize that we are heavily influenced by accidents of birth.

1 Corinthians 15:33. Here is a principle that Paul brings out. Paul has to remind the Corinthian church that they can delude themselves about the influence of the society they are a part of is going to have on them. *Don't be deceived.* And we shouldn't be deceived either. *Evil company corrupts good habits.* Recognize the influence.

2. Develop convictions. What do you believe? What things will you do? What things will you not do? Is there anything bigger than you? Is there a cause bigger than your life? Is there a cause worth giving your life for if necessary? These are fundamental questions that I think many of us have asked ourselves, and maybe some have not asked ourselves or have not reached closure on those questions. I want to take you to one of the very first scriptures that I learned at Ambassador College, in 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Paul wrote a very short couple of instructions for the Thessalonian church that I could remember being taught this scripture in first year Bible. And I remember sitting there and thinking to myself, yeah, that's what I'm going to have to do. I think this scripture probably was one of the more formative scriptures that I came across when I first came into the church. 1 Thessalonians 5:21. *Test all things. Hold fast what is good.* Check it out. Does it work? Commit to it. Develop convictions. The old saying is, if you don't stand up for something, you'll fall for anything. It's true, isn't it? We have all got friends who fall for just about anything.

3. Have the courage to stand up for what you believe. Dr. Don Ward is here in the congregation with us today. And I can remember, many of us remember the things that he taught us at Ambassador College. And the number of times he went through the three C's of leadership. I can't forget them. They're still with me. Conviction, commitment, and courage. You make your convictions, you commit to it, and then the third step, possibly in one sense the hardest step in leadership, courage, because sometimes it is hard to follow through on what you have committed to. Sometimes it takes courage. It is not always easy. Turn with me if you would to Ezekiel 14. Sometimes a Christian has to stand alone. Ezekiel 14:14,20. Ezekiel is uttering judgments against the people of Israel and Judah. Let's pick it up in verse 13. *Son of man, when the land sins against me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out my hand against it, I will cut off its supply of bread, send famine on it, and cut off man and beast from it. Even if these three men, Noah, , nd Job were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness.* Do you want to stop to analyze why those three names, Noah, , nd Job? All three of these individuals really had to stand up for what they believe and had to follow through with courage, that third step in leadership, in the midst of very unfavorable circumstances. Noah, of course, being thought a little bit off his rocker, right, as he began to construct the ark. , lone with a few friends in the captivity. And Job going through all those disasters. And you remember what his wife said to him. She was determined to be very encouraging to him, and she turned to him as he sat there on the pile of ashes and said, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die." And Job's response is not recorded in the scriptures. It does take courage. It is not always easy. Verse 20 says the same thing. *Even though Noah, , nd Job were in it, as I live says the Lord God, they would deliver neither son nor daughter. They would deliver only*

themselves by their righteousness. They had to stand up with courage against the tides that were there in their societies, and we have to do that as well, brethren. Even though for most of us life has not been the kind of life that our predecessors in the faith have had to go through in places like Europe.

Ezekiel 22:29,30. Another passage that we had quoted many times at Ambassador College. *The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy. And they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land that I should not destroy it. But I found no one.* Very sad verse in some ways. Because it says that God was looking for someone who would have the courage to do what was needed. And there wasn't anybody. So courage to stand up for what you believe is point number three.

4. Don't worry excessively about what people think. The bottom line for a Christian is very simple. What does Christ think? That doesn't mean that we pay no need to other people. That doesn't mean we are not concerned with people who are in leadership in the church. That's not what I am saying. That is not the point. But the bottom line when you really strip it down to the basics, what does Christ think? And every member of the church should have that number one in his or her mind? We can't be too concerned with what anybody else thinks. Not society, not peers, not friends. Let's turn to a passage that we probably read when we were baptized. Luke 14:26. What does Christ think, not what do you friends think? Not even, what does your family think? What does Christ think? Luke 14:26. *If anyone comes to me, Jesus says, and does not hate* (now this is a turn of phrase here — this is a literary device meaning love less, placed on a lower level by comparison) *and does not hate his father, or mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.* Do you remember having that read to you when you were counseling for baptism? I remember reading that and thinking about it, and chewing on it, and it's hard, isn't it? It is something that is hard all the way through the Christian life. Verses 34, 35 of the same chapter, Jesus warns us: *Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor for the dung hill. But men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.* This is what happens to people who are overwhelmed by the culture, who are washed out by the culture, and they allow the society they live in to overwhelm them and to overwhelm their commitment to Jesus Christ.

You know, as we look back on the history that many of us have gone through over the last 15 or so years, brethren, maybe a little less than that, the church in the 1990s, as we reflect on the experiences that we have

had, I think many of us have looked back on some of those experiences and found the things that we went through lonely. Decisions that had to be made were lonely individual decisions. Probably every person in this room at some point over the last several years has had to make certain decisions for which no other human being could be responsible. There have been times in your life, very likely, when you couldn't turn to someone else and say, what should I do? The only answer was, you must do what you feel to be right in God's sight. You know, I think that's a good thing. And I wonder whether God gave us that as a learning experience to prepare us. Because of course the Bible talks about a time when we are going to have to stand up to forces much more powerful even than the cultural forces in our society today. And they are powerful enough. There is going to come a time when there will be cultural, political, economic forces around us, and God's people will be enveloped by those things. The Bible talks of the time when a system called Babylon is going to be resurrected. And it will be noted for its godless wealth and depravity. And standing up to the culture now possibly prepares us for what we read at the end of the book in Revelation 18:4. The culture of the United States of America is ultimately going to be swallowed up by cultural forces that will be much more powerful, and God then encourages us to do something that we should be doing now. *And I heard another voice from heaven saying, come out of her my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.* Talking of that last system.

And so brethren as we work on recognizing those forces that are around us today, identifying them, filtering them out, and countering the culture, that helps prepare us for some of the things that God's people will face in the future.