

'Culture in the Church: A problem and a Big Solution' led by **David Brown**

INTRODUCTION

I want to start with two important points. This workshop is about truth, and although truth can be a little painful, it is not about blame. And secondly, I confess that for most of my life I haven't wondered about how culture affects me and my lifestyle. Yet I now see it's a very big issue. We notice culture out there, but hardly consider culture in here. Humans are like this. When I visit somewhere for the first time I quickly notice different culture. But I rarely consider how my culture is shaping me when I'm at home.

This workshop has three parts:

1. What is culture, and why should we look at it?
2. The power of Kingdom culture.
3. How can the power of Kingdom culture be given more opportunity in our local church's life?

After each section we'll have time to discuss or question it. I'm eager to hear your insights: culture is such a vast and complex, yet hidden thing. If I'm unclear when speaking, please interrupt me.

1. WHAT IS CULTURE, AND WHY SHOULD WE LOOK AT IT?

Jesus cautioned his disciples, saying "Watch out, beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees and the Leaven of Herod." Mark 8.15

Jesus made a dramatic impact upon the thousands who travelled far to see him, and upon the religious leaders. His character and lifestyle were unlike anything they'd known, as though a visitor from a distant country. Many saw his glory, his grace and truth when they got near; but he unsettled many religious leaders. They feared his purpose and responded with hatred. Jesus was displaying the culture of Heaven – the Kingdom.

Why then should we look at culture? Because Jesus did! He focused with penetrating gaze on the two main cultural sources in our planet: the harsh worldly culture of Herod, the Sadducees and Pharisees – and the culture of Heaven.

Culture is primarily about the way communities work and how people live – common attitudes, ways of relating with each other, ways of organising communities and our own lives – our lifestyle patterns. Its hidden power affects the way we see, think and live; it affects the way we understand ourselves, our sense of identity. It runs deep.

I think everyone needs to recognise the extent to which our inherited cultures shape us – national, church and social. But as Christians we must not allow culture to define who we are. Before Count von Moltke was murdered by Hitler in 1945, he said that he was standing before the court, "not as a Protestant, not as a great landowner, not as an aristocrat, not as a Prussian, not as a German ... but as a Christian and nothing else."

Jesus called each culture 'Leaven'. His work was, and is, always launched by the searching out and destruction of Old Leaven. During his three year ministry Jesus persistently searched out and denounced the wrong culture whilst teaching and demonstrating the culture of Heaven. He denounced and he announced. Whenever the Pharisees and Sadducees provoked him, his answers always exposed the opposing cultures.

Each culture has power, and is able to silently draw people in. Kingdom culture is surely powered by love, whilst it seems to me that worldly culture is biased to lovelessness and, indeed, powered by fear.

Jesus said to his disciples: "whoever believes in me will also do the works I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I'm going to the Father" (John 14.12). Are we willing to face the challenge of these words? I think we need to, because the Church in the west is going through such difficult times. But there's a problem because my, and maybe your, experience is not of 'greater works' at all. A recent University study found, from a large British sample group, that 93 out of 100 Anglicans will have been brought up as such, five will have transferred from another denomination, and only two would have belonged to no religion. This suggests only 2% of our church are actual converts. So maybe we should examine our Church's culture, as well as our personal culture. One of our bishops recently warned: "if we are known only for our historic buildings or our annual fetes, then there is something seriously wrong." It's what people see that counts.

Nothing is immune, not even our valued liturgies. An eminent retired Anglican Bishop, John Austin Baker, wrote these words after he'd retired:

"We have lost the plot. What is the Eucharist now? A ritual in which we take a sip of wine and a tiny morsel or wafer of bread! It is in every way unlike an ordinary meal, and so it does not carry the spirit of fellowship which marks normal eating together. Instead of the meaning coming naturally we have to keep telling ourselves what it is all supposed to be about. The Sacrament needs to come back into the world of daily bread. It needs to be reinstated as simply something that a family or friends do when they eat and drink together, to be a domestic celebration like those of Judaism from which it originally came."

FOR DISCUSSION:

How are you reacting to what I've said so far?

Can you think of any examples of 'worldly leaven' – the kinds of things that Jesus saw in the scribes, Pharisees and in Herod – in your own Churches and congregations?

What examples do you see of harm or distortions in Church practice, indicating some non-Kingdom influences on any aspect of Church life: in custom, in organisation, in worship, in the ways we relate to one another? Not a matter for blame: what leaven-strains have been innocently inherited from the past?

2. THE POWER OF KINGDOM CULTURE

Jesus said, "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened". Luke 13.20,21

When Jesus repeatedly said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, or near," I think he was announcing that he was himself living in the Kingdom, in front of their eyes; a Kingdom lifestyle with an indwelling Kingdom power. It was something they could enter. Yet, he himself had absorbed nothing of secular power or lifestyle.

His lifestyle and his power—so different from Herod's, the Sadducees' and Pharisees'—troubled some people; but those with eyes to see were astonished.

- He reflected God's glory because of his intimacy with his Father and the Spirit; evidenced by his prayer life and obedience, and his wholeness and integrity.
- His absence of planning, as we know it; he never seemed to plan to meet individuals – they just came to him, or he to them.
- His habit of never blaming individuals, whilst repeatedly condemning the culture that engulfed everyone.
- His love for the loveless, that they might become lovely.
- His power: the power of the Spirit, and therefore the power of Love

Paul described how this Kingdom culture was to be carried forward. His readers were part of Christ's Body, where every part was essential, each working together under the one Head. A body is of course a biological organism, standing in sharp contrast to an organisation. Here are some of the differences:

Organism	Organisation
God designed and God-birthed	Human design and construction
To do what the Head wants	To achieve results
Dependent upon intact relationships	Dependent upon law, regulation, planning, statistics, targets, staffs and committees, coercive pressure, fund-raising
Enabled by love's power	Achieved by fear's power
Durable, eternal	Fragile, temporal
Attractive to the needy & under-privileged	Unattractive to the needy and under-privileged

Love's power is the greatest power in the cosmos. It is God's Big Solution.

God so loved that he gave that all who believe shall receive eternal life

All power is given unto me, therefore go...

...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

..God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power

..I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him.

Then, when the Corinthian church developed big problems, Paul wrote:

I will come to you very soon, and then I will find out whether these arrogant people really have God's power. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power.

If St Paul came to my local church what, I wonder, would he find? I would be nervous. I guess I, and maybe many others too, have tried to rationalise this issue for too long rather than face its deep challenge. Scripture seems plain: love's leaven is the only basis for God's work in the world. Its power expands like leaven, and is very great.

I guess all our churches are an uncomfortable mixture of organism and organisation. If so, the challenge is: how can we move more substantially to being more of an organism?

FOR DISCUSSION:

'How might we help our church leaders and congregations to examine the cultures that shape their organisation'

Organisation,

Tradition,

Meetings and planning,

Outreach,

Finances,

Publicity.

3. HOW CAN THE POWER OF KINGDOM CULTURE BE GIVEN MORE OPPORTUNITY IN OUR LOCAL CHURCH'S LIFE?

"The Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power." 1 Cor 4.20

If we wish for God's immense power to enter our everyday church life more freely, I think more is needed than adjusting some individual aspects of our Church – our Body life-style – important though this may be.

Let's notice how Jesus prepared his disciples for their coming—forming his Body—within an unstable, hostile world, oppressed by a terrible culture. After three years of preparation, he gave them a concentration of deep teaching in John 14 to 17 - his Final Discourse.

We know that his power was going to be pivotal to the Body's life, yet in preparing my book, I was surprised power is not named in this Final Discourse, although it's implicit. It seems to say that although power is essential, it's not a goal to strive for. Power comes from following his teaching; it's not an aim.

I was then struck by Jesus's High Priestly prayer in John 17. With the disciples about to be heading into a dangerous world, we might expect Jesus to pray for their safety or for their fruitfulness; but he didn't. He just prayed for protection from the evil one. At this very significant moment, with Calvary only hours away, we see his greatest desires emerge, first for his disciples, and then for you and me (those of us who would come to believe through the apostles' word; including Lutherans and Anglicans). He prayed for our unity, that God's glory should rest on us, and his love be found within us. Unity, glory and love. We need to hold these words together.

I puzzled over the word glory, then next morning read words by Eugene Petersen in his commentary on Samuel. In effect he describes 'glory' as giving solid, visible, unmistakable evidence of God's reality:

"[Glory] is evidence of God's substantial, though invisible, presence—the weight and glow of God in contrast to the flimsiness of jerry-built structures that we throw together when trying to construct something satisfactory without going to all the trouble of dealing with God. It conveys a sense of God's foundational solidity as an alternative to a culture built on sand." (First and Second Samuel p.43 Westminster John Knox Press)

Then the next day, I discovered that Lesslie Newbigin, in his John's Gospel commentary, says much the same about 'unity' – it gives solid, visible, unmistakable evidence of God's reality.

"It is a unity which not merely reflects but actually participates in the unity of God—the unity of love and obedience which binds the Son to the Father. The unity of believers thus has its invisible source in the work of the Spirit, but it is a visible reality which challenges "the world" to recognize that Jesus is not what "flesh and blood" supposes (Mt 16. 17). Moreover, this unity will enable the world to know the love of God not just as an idea or a doctrine but as a palpable reality experienced in the supernatural love which holds believers together in spite of their human diversities." (The Light Has Come p.234,5 Handsel Press 1982)

And of course, Jesus himself said:

*"By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
Jn 13.35.*

So glory, unity and love—not words, talk or any of the churchy stuff we do—is decisive evidence. It will be seen by people’s eyes. It demonstrates unmistakably that God is present; that he’s real and active. Obvious really, because we can’t manufacture these things ourselves, or pretend we have them. It’s because we can’t, and God can, that God makes his presence known. His enormous Leaven power can be released.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What might it be like to be part of a congregation that was more *organism* than *organisation*? How different might the congregation be from how it is now?

The Psalmist wrote: “Open up, ancient gates! Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of glory enter.” Psalm 24.7

Paraphrased by Eugene Petersen in The Message:

*“Wake up, you sleepyhead city! Wake up you sleepyhead people!
King-Glory is ready to enter.”*

How do we open up our ancient gates and doors?

As I mentioned, Paul told the Corinthian church he was going to come and check their power level. What would he find in my local church, or yours?