

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN
Mission

June 2015 | Vol. 2 | No. 3

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Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.

Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

This journal may also be found at www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.



THE CULTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

by Scott Murray

Christianity is a distinct culture. It reflects in the behavior of the Church the spirituality of the God who gives it divine worship. Learn how the culture of the Church includes a strong boundary between belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood, wisdom and foolishness.

Day one remarks

LIKE THE CHINESE PROVERB NOTES, we live in exciting times. Who knows what the future will bring as we carry out the mission our Lord has given us? In the future that our God will bring to us, let's keep the worship of Christ as our culture, so we have something to share with our brothers in the foreign fields and the struggling lost in our own communities.

Christianity is a distinct culture. Usually, we think of Christianity fitting into a given culture, such as Western culture, not as a separate and distinct culture. Culture comes from the Latin word *cultus* that means, among other things, "worship." Usually culture is defined as "the way of life for an entire society" and includes worship, spirituality, structure, ethics and behavior. Culture is about everything."

Christianity is a distinct culture in so far as it reflects in the behavior of the Church the spirituality of the God who gives it divine worship. The culture of the Church includes a strong boundary between belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood, wisdom and foolishness. That boundary also implies a decisive break with the world and its ways. The cult of the Western world, although arising in the cradle of the Church, is no longer directed by its original mother. Western culture has become a self-willed Nietzschean bastard, coming of age cut off from God its Father and its mother, the Church. This coming of age has a profound effect on the Church. She is now forced to distinguish herself from her bastard child. She can no longer expect support from the cult of the West based as it is on self-willed and self-cen-

tered knowledge, knowledge always critical of both Father and mother, as though an ill-mannered teen.

For example, the Western university and its open enquiry into truth and the nature of reality arise out of the Christian insistence that all of truth is God's. And though the Western university tradition was fraught with many battles over the validity of certain kinds of knowledge, still there was over the long haul an openness about the modes and methods of enquiry into the world and the nature of God. That openness is now being closed off in the dying of the light. Matters of spirit, life, truth, beauty, ultimacy

and God are routinely ruled out of bounds in the so-called secular universities. They have forgotten that even the saeculum, "the age," remains God's. Finally, the cultus of the West has become the cult of the self, drowning in the solipsistic sea of foolishness and rabid and intentional ignorance of the cross of Christ. How tragically this narrowing of thought impoverishes the Western world. But this fool-

In the mission field, the LCMS stands for something. However, we will not be able to support these faithful Lutherans if we fail to proclaim our historic and well-known Lutheran positions. That something is precisely what our brothers are seeking.

ish narrowness is not new to Christianity. It has its roots in Eden's invention of the cult of self. Paul the apostle speaks of it as the foolishness of unbelief. The foolishness of the cross despite all this still looms as the wisdom of God. This is the Church's cultus. How do we continue to share our Lord's cultus?

Modern ecumenists chide orthodox Lutherans for avoiding the ecumenical mosh pit at the mainline church dance. We are told by our ecumenical friends that if we would only get with the times and ordain women we would have plenty of dates for the dance. We might even

find an ecumenical mate, or two or three. According to this thinking, virginal Lutherans are missing the fun world of couplings going on in the mainline church scene. This language, soaked as it is in sexual imagery, is used intentionally, because church status and sexual identity are intimately tied together these days.

However, Christian ecumenicity is exactly not what the LCMS is missing. Radical Western ecumenists have missed or ignored the faithful confession of our Christian brethren in Africa and Asia, including the global south, where the majority of Christians live today. Non-western Christians vastly outnumber western Christians. Over the years, meta-church organizations, such as the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches, have attempted to draw non-Western churches and church leaders into their orbits. They have had some success in this endeavor.

However, our non-Western brethren are increasingly uneasy with the Westernized brand of ecumenism that consists in the latest politically-correct enthusiasms papered over with churchy cant. Organizations like the LWF and Western mission societies dangle large sums of money in front of the emerging churches on the condition that they ordain women so that the money can keep flowing. The LWF found out that these courageous confessing Lutherans weren't likely to bow to such blackmail. The emerging churches are teaching their fathers. And this has caused some anxiety and even embarrassment to these Western churches and church organizations.

Our African brothers are increasingly discovering that biblical Christianity bears little resemblance to the politically-correct brand being peddled by the Western churches. The Lutheran churches of Africa and Asia are seeking two things from Western churches. First, they are seeking a source of theological instruction that is recognizably confessional and consciously Lutheran. Second, they are seeking such fellowship ties as can be forged. The LCMS is receiving an accelerating number of requests for help, especially from churches disenchanted with the morally and theologically bankrupt policies (doctrines?) of the LWF.

In the mission field, the LCMS stands for something.

However, we will not be able to support these faithful Lutherans if we fail to proclaim our historic and well-known Lutheran positions. That something is precisely what our brothers are seeking. This puts to shame our Western-style ecumenism with its narrow church political and organizational horizons.

Now is not the time to give up our Lutheran distinctives, though they be much maligned by our Western neighbors. The world is flocking to our doors to have our theology taught to them, a theology our non-Western brothers want specifically in distinction from the theology represented by the LWF.

Now is not the time to give up our Lutheran distinctives, though they be much maligned by our Western neighbors. The world is flocking to our doors to have our theology taught to them, a theology our non-Western brothers want specifically.

If by God's grace we can remain theologically Lutheran, this flock of Lutheran churches beating a path to our door presents the LCMS with at least two challenges. First, how do we actually provide the theological education they are requesting? Second, how can we discuss fellowship issues with churches that do not have a solidly settled theological position from which to discuss?

The first question leads us to state categorically that we need to

leave Western-style impositions at home. While modern church bodies are infected with technique-driven nonsense like "Leadership Effectiveness Training" (how did St. Boniface ever manage without this?), let us not foist this on our Lutheran brothers yearning for Lutheran teaching and practice. This mania for technique fails in other societies because they do not share our decidedly Western, triumphalistic and bureaucratic mindset. What we need to carry out the mission of the Church is to bring the message of the Gospel into all the world, preparing the indigenous clergy to carry the Word where they are needed. The Word of God can build the Church even without our being present. This is what the LCMS does.

The LCMS can bring its theological capacity into the international field among churches, often founded by the European churches in the nineteenth century, that have suffered, in some cases, a century of theological neglect and where pastors have no access to the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. They eagerly seek this teaching and witness to the Gospel of Christ. They eagerly pour over the confessions of the Lutheran Church,

especially when that is shared with them in their native language. They want to be Lutheran pastors and teachers. The LCMS carries out its mission best by giving them what they both need and want.

Are there cultural hiccups along the way? Yes, of course. But let's let trusted partners sort those issues out as full partners, rather than as poor cousins, incapable of such higher order thinking and strategizing. Judging by external success alone, they seem to be doing just fine as growth in Ethiopia and Madagascar give evidence.

Today and tomorrow, we will be talking about how culture impacts and intersects with our work. In the midst of those discussions, I am hoping we do not forget about the fact that Christianity is a cult of its own, building a culture of its own.

Day two remarks: Ut Unum Sint

Yesterday, we were confronted by the intersection of culture and Christ. Today, we face the more difficult issue of how to bring Christ to another culture. We struggle to bring Christ without the unnecessary baggage of our own culture. While in Tanzania, I was taken on a tour of the original Lutheran mission churches up in the hills of Pare Diocese. What an idyllic context! There as we came over the crest of the hill was a little sanctuary dropped out of rural Germany with the features of carved woodwork characteristic of a Tyrollean village. I felt it as much out of place as the Africans themselves might have once. We saw the list of pastors in that village carved in a commemorative stone. The first was a German; after that they were all Tanzanian names. European mission work included the importation of incidental artifacts of Europeanization, but the dioceses of the Tanzanian churches are now well-ordered church organizations. It seemed all very churchly to me. The Africans commemorated with fondness those first missionaries, but were not captive to them, because they recognized the church's culture and could distinguish it from German, as well as Tanzanian culture.

The Church's preaching and teaching begins and ends with Christ the Savior, and in every generation the task

is to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified. The Church will always be lived in sight of God under the Lord who forgives sinners and conveys that forgiveness by located means: preaching and Sacraments. This will

always be the struggle and challenge of the effort to plant the Church of Christ; it will always be about the shocking condescension of God to come among poor sinners and giving Himself to them by the gifts of the pulpit, table and font.

Fear of cultural contamination should not cause us to worry, for the missionary comes to contaminate the hearer with a far more extreme contamination: the saving blood of Christ and His offensive cross. Mere Western habits may be seen by our partners for what they are: cultural quirks unique to Westerners. To

presume that our partners do not have the capacity to see these things for what they are is offensively to ignore our brothers' capacity for discernment of a relatively simple sort. Far more difficult is the challenge that the cross and the blood of Christ lays upon a community.

One seldom, if ever, reads the apostle Paul agonizing about imposing his culture on his hearers, because he has bigger fish to fry. He wants to give Christ with all the cultic distinction that that absolutely requires. Since those of faith are sons of Abraham, the Gospel preaching transcends birth and culture and knits a new humanity together. Where the Gospel is at the center, and not the Law, human culture with its "Don't taste, touch, handle" are simply not powerful enough to intrude. Here there is no more Jew nor Greek. Christ is King for all who trust the crucified Messiah.

Let me illustrate this from my experience as a pastor in a U.S. congregation. My congregation includes a large contingent of Tanzanian members. About five years ago, I approached the leaders of the group and asked if they would like me to teach a Tanzanian Bible study for them. They looked mournful at this suggestion and said very quietly, "Oh, Pastor, we are members of Memorial Lutheran Church. We will go to the Bible studies of Memorial Lutheran Church." I told them that this was

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music to my ears. But I don't mind admitting to you that I was ashamed of my church culture insensitivity, because I should have known better, for our Lord has prayed to the Father for us, "That they may be one." Perhaps we should act like we believe He is correct in His prayer.

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