

believer in countries that suffer centuries of injustice and damage to human dignity, or countries which are undergoing significant social and structural changes. Scripture must ultimately judge all social systems.

## EUROPEAN CHRISTIANS: THE TENSION BETWEEN BIBLE AND CULTURE

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### 1. *Problem and task*

a. *The situation* — At the present time Europe consists of thirty-three countries. The national frontiers on this continent have shifted rather frequently, and are not identical with linguistic, cultural, and national borders. Today there are even more languages than nations. There are, however, cultural areas with their own distinct characteristics.

Since the early days, Christianity has had an enormous impact on Europe — east, west, north and south. It has influenced through revival periods, through influential institutions, through varying forms of theologies, through spiritual and ecclesiastical life, through constantly changing creative knowledge and actions, as well as the preservation of already existing elements. This century has contributed a number of radical changes within European churches as no century before. Some of these widely varying factors, responsible for this development are as follows: technology, leisure time, political situations and ideologies, opulence, and persecutions.

Even though the mutual cultural influence of nations and churches in Europe was and still is strong, the problem we face can be tackled from various aspects such as the political, cultural, and religious development. We have to confine ourselves to one of the possibilities available.

b. *Problem and task* — In the midst of the rapid changes in our day, many Christians ask themselves how our generation will cope with the problems and yet remain faithful to Jesus Christ and his biblical commands, while at the same time avoiding unnecessary cultural isolation and thus missionary fruitlessness.

It is possible that the characteristic of our European situation with its long history of culture and Christianity, is that our consciousness of problems has become our major preoccupation. This results in a limited capacity to produce solutions. The problems of Europe and the world, of the church and humanity, encumber our minds. In some cases we are able to analyze them and avail ourselves of the latest theological, sociological, etc., helps. The solutions suggested, however, often are of theoretical ideas that were born around conference tables but lack the power and inspiration to become workable projects for the masses.

A number of participants of the Congress have asked beforehand that the tension between true Christianity from the biblical point of view and those cultures surrounding us should be discussed. This question is both comprehensive and old, and I am certain that every one of us will contribute some solutions. Before going on I would like to define the term "culture" to form the basis for a better understanding for

our working team.

The term "culture" conveys to us the "embodiment of all human efforts to conquer nature (agriculture, engineering) and to settle inter-human relations (in institutions, law and order, custom, folklore, etc.) as well as the somatic, intellectual and spiritual development of the human being (in language, art, science, philosophy and religion)."

The first diagram (see appendix) with its comparisons of the main terms in our working paper is not completely definitive. The second diagram should further clarify the terms. Even in this diagram the separation of parish and world still remains unsatisfactory. It is correct to say that they represent two different fields. The diagram illustrates both the ancient cultural concepts of God which still exist, and the act of new creation which takes place at conversion via Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the parish. It is of vital importance for us to note that the parish remains in the world, and that therefore its deeds will never be perfect like the deeds of their Lord.

Our question is much more concerned with the proper relation of congregation and world to one another. "Who has more power?" or "In what way should we live as Christians and co-workers of God to pass his Word on to humanity?"

## 2. False solutions

In order not to allow history to repeat itself and the mistakes that were made in the course of 1900 years of church history, I would first draw your attention to those attempted solutions that have to be avoided and also those that do not correspond to the biblical message and the spirit of Jesus Christ.

a. The problem cannot be solved by changing the radical eschatological call for repentance of Jesus Christ into practicable rules of wisdom to facilitate the Christian existence of believers to the protracted return of Christ; for repentance is necessary until the Lord's return. We remain in the tension, we remain imperfect between the Bible and our culture until the Lord himself will accomplish his work that he so wonderfully began in us.

b. The problem cannot be solved by changing the offer of love and sanctification into casuistic individual instructions in order to spare those living in a complicated cultural environment the necessity of deciding.

Although I agree with those advocating the idea of assisting young people in their decisions, I consider the opinion totally wrong that maintains that valid decisions can be made for another person. The results of such efforts may have an encouraging effect in their own cultural circle or they may evoke opposition. Christians of other cultural circles, however, might regard these efforts as amusing.

c. The problem cannot be solved by accepting the life-style of a parish or church without examining and propagating it as "the only right one." Although it is both necessary and desirable for a group of Christians to help its members by some form of group ethic, it is nevertheless wrong to allow those customs — which in many cases are copies of the life-styles of their founders — to become obligatory and unimpeachable rules for the following generations, nations, races, and

social groups.

d. The problem cannot be solved by some Christians withdrawing from the world and leading a holy life because they are dissatisfied with the liberal cultural openness of their parish. Conscience holds the individual responsible, but it is nevertheless wrong and even detrimental to religious welfare when people with spiritual open-mindedness and sensitive consciences let their ideas become the general attitude of the parish. In some cases they may even leave, if their intention does not bring forth immediate results. Withdrawal from the world into a holy life-style has to be an exception which ought to be carefully checked.

e. The problem cannot be solved by some Christians withdrawing from cultural life because they are dissatisfied with the prevailing cultural narrow-mindedness in their parish. Members of a given community come from different backgrounds and different outlooks. It is nevertheless wrong to assume that a Christian with greater intelligence, aesthetic gifts, and dynamic class-consciousness may lead his community to destruction. Denial of one's culture can be avoided in a normally operating parish through patient development of dissimilar forms of living and working under the one and only Lord. Every Christian is only a part of the body of Christ.

f. The problem cannot be solved by regarding the various fields of culture (e.g., natural science, pedagogics, psychology, social science, art) as autonomous and using them uncritically. A Christian may confess God as the creator of the universe, but he cannot ignore sin. He cannot hold that the more clever a thought, the more beautiful the creature, the more obvious it is that they are accepted as good or even "divine." As far as a community is concerned, culture must be seen from God's perspective and how best to serve all people according to his will.

g. The problem cannot be solved by calling every individual Christian to do what he likes in the name of personal freedom or in order to preserve peace. Although every Christian has his personal relationship with Jesus Christ — the one and only head of the body of Christ — this very Lord wants the whole congregation to belong together and to cooperate. Therefore there can neither be an uncontrolled "spiritual" individualism nor an unbalanced moral libertinism. Reason and feelings, determination and conscience, are to be subordinated to the rule of Jesus Christ — and this applies to everybody.

h. The problem cannot be solved when some theologians resign themselves to the immense tensions between the Bible and their culture, and state that "there 'are' no specifically Christian standards that are different from those ideas circulating in their society." Even though God has equipped each individual human being with culturally creative impulses, Jesus Christ has nevertheless come to begin a completely new creation. He does not merely bless the status quo. The relation between the Bible and culture cannot be determined without including sin, redemption, and Jesus Christ.

i. The problem cannot be solved by idealizing a community in the New Testament times and following its footsteps as the one way the biblical commission can be demonstrated. There was not even a perfect community in the first century. Therefore today's generation burdens

itself unnecessarily with the idea of trying to copy Jerusalem, Rome, or Corinth. A community of the first or the twentieth-century can only be a model if its members live "in Christ." In this respect we have to learn from one another across cultural boundaries even though 2000 years or whole continents might separate us.

### 3. Contributions to the right solution

I am of the opinion that it should be our task to develop some kind of systematic cultural theology, if the suggested solutions are to be of value to whole communities and not just to a limited number of experts. Therefore I would like to suggest that the term we are aiming to define should be "the Christian life-style." Then the question runs as follows: How can we reach a Christian life-style within our community and for the individual Christian in the light of the tension between Bible and culture?

First, I would make some basic suggestions. Later I will give some examples that will demonstrate the direction that we Europeans might choose.

a. A basic element in Christian life-style is to learn how to distinguish the essential from the unessential from God's point of view. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord and Redeemer of the world, is the actual point of reference for us. Commitment to Christ must never become a relative relationship of secondary importance. It must remain absolute in all the situations we face. Only then can we be assured of security in existence and certitude in action (See diagram 3).

Whenever another human being, a desire, a trend, etc., gains absolute value in our daily lives and determines our actions there is bound to be conflict, unrest, sin, and loss of spiritual strength. The answer to that can only be repentance.

b. For a Christian life-style it is indispensable to experience the power of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. Only then can we expect Jesus Christ to dwell in us as Savior, friend, and Lord. Without experiencing Jesus Christ as a reality in a work-day routine every answer to the tension between Bible and culture becomes a theory and more frequently an oppressive rule. Lives, however, that are in the hands of Christ will basically experience happiness and hope. This applies in any culture.

c. A Christian life-style can only be developed in practical situations. Although it may be influenced by supra-national cultural mores, by the so-called national characteristics of a country, by family and psychological traits, it will still never be possible to establish a uniform Christian life-style on these bases. For example, there is no such thing as uniform European Christian life-style any more than there is a Christian life-style for a phlegmatic person.

God grants man the opportunity of remaining a creative and spiritual individual within the congregation of his Son. He is concerned about people and has a never-ending love for the individual in Jesus Christ. Consequently there is not only one Christian life-style but many variants in the total commitment to Christ. God regards no variant in itself as better or worse than the others. In practical terms this means that a

tremendous number of individual tensions between Christ and culture, between the absolute and the relative, can be solved in many different ways. This is Christian freedom which saves us from pharisaism and fanaticism. Like our Lord, we show consideration for social and personal differences and level of spiritual maturity.

d. The individual Christian can only acquire a Christian life-style through careful self-control. This statement refers to a tension mentioned above which is, however, in accordance with the Gospel. I would like to illustrate the tensions mentioned with three related diagrams: cf. diagram 4 a-c, "Aids to self-control," cf. diagram 4 a, "Freedom and commitment." Under the term "freedom" we could put "culture" and on the other side under "conscience" the term "Bible."

First, this diagram is to show the necessity for the tension between two positive values, i.e., freedom and conscience. If this tension does not exist as illustrated on the upper horizontal line in the diagram, overemphasis of one part is bound to come about which will inevitably lead to the loss of harmony. The following diagram is to illustrate that the Christian conscience is mainly concerned with service to one's own neighbor (See diagram 4b).

No matter what the individual solutions with regard to life-style may be, each Christian has to live a life of entireness that exerts a positive influence on others, and influence that leads to God. Service is an essential element in the Christian life-style of any culture and in any generation. When we focus our attention on serving others (that they might have it more abundantly, John 10:10) we will soon discover that we are largely delivered from the search for increasing our personal rights and from the temptation to self-pity.

Nevertheless I would like to add a third partial diagram illustrating the fact that service is to be directed toward regeneration of individual lives (See diagram 4c).

This diagram proceeds from the premise that in this world man possesses a limited quantity of energy reserves to use for all phases of life. He needs recreation to be able to serve permanently. The danger has been indicated. On the other hand, there must not be any doubt that before God our neighbor is so important that one has to make sacrifices to serve — as Jesus Christ did.

A solution to the tensions illustrated in these diagrams can be found in the term good economical management in the context of the culture available to the individual or the congregation. We have to call for Christians to be faithful and good economical managers, and to find joy and satisfaction in their tasks both in view of our neighbor and eternity.

To sum up the picture, it is imperative to call for an active relationship to culture that is dealt with in the final chapter.

### 4. From cultural fear to cultural creation

In many cases Christians face some aspects of their culture in an insecure manner. It is understandable that in the early stages of revival a young Christian may not be able to experience the intellectual and spiritual strength to live alongside the boundaries of an ambivalent

world, from which he has just been delivered. Such Christians may have developed a critical attitude toward culture or even cultural hostility, and cultivated their own forms of living in a parish that had isolated itself. In doing so they forfeited their natural contacts — even here in Europe — and thus their natural ability to tell their neighbors about Christ in word and deed. Their missionary impulse, however, continued to exist, nurtured by their personal experience of salvation and the message of the Bible. This impulse led to the foreign missionary service. Especially in Europe, evangelization particularly under the aspect of one's own country has come to a disastrous standstill.

On the basis of these observations, the final chapter of this paper is to submit only one thesis and to demand it especially for Europe. This thesis runs as follows: The congregations must have the courage to create new forms of living that bear the character of Christ from a biblical point of view regarding God and man, so that everyone can benefit from this service and be won for Jesus Christ. This thesis is to underline the fact that Christians were far too often concerned with questions of consumption in a passive way and discussed in detail to what extent Christians were allowed to make use of them.

Our attitude toward apologetic and creative action and culture as well as our own personal influence on other people and cultural practices, however, have to be completely in harmony with each other. Europe does not have to repulse foreign cultures and then try laboriously to find itself in the position of resistance, i.e., partially accepting foreign cultures. Rather, it is concerned with becoming active with the triune God in its own living situation. This is to be the basic idea of diagram 5.

This creative exerting of influence on the world is also important for another reason. A bored congregation has lots of excess energy which finally is reflected in criticism, flight, opposition, or in the sad attempt of constant increase in consumption.

A congregation with an apologetic relationship to culture, only is a bad economical housekeeper of the gifts of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, the Holy Spirit.

The following may be regarded as examples for the Christian influence on culture today:

a. *Orbit: music* — If we ask for the proper relation between Bible and culture from the consumer's perspective, we would run into a lengthy debate which from the biblical point of view would not be very helpful. Individual trends of taste are bound to collide with each other tending to regard themselves as the yardstick for the whole congregation.

If we ask, however, how to express our joy towards the Father in heaven, our admiration for the great things he has done, our gratitude for Jesus Christ, and our message to today's generation by means of music, it would be possible to combine all different kinds of tastes and use them for his glory. It is unproductive to ask what instruments and rhythms can be used in a Christian congregation. It is, however, extremely productive to ask how best to arouse the interest of other people for Christ through words, melody, and rhythm so that the

Christian Gospel can be proclaimed convincingly. One group, for example, may give a Bach concert, another modern songs of their own country, the third may perform a Christian musical — and all of them will reach different groups of people. Moreover, it would be profitable for latent creative gifts of many Christians to be expressed through new words and new musical arrangements. It has, however, to be observed that the ethical demand does not crush the warm real expression of faith.

b. *Orbit: material goods and their use* — All over Europe, Christians are facing the problem of how to use or misuse in an adequate way the material possibilities that are available in almost unlimited quantities and to keep in mind that there are only few important ethical variants at hand. It is not so much our task to consider this problem in view of foreign missions or development aid, but rather to examine it more closely with regard to our living in our own continent and country.

All of us know of the critical attitude of the Bible towards external or material things. And yet the Bible tells us that material goods in themselves are not abominable, nor do they say something about the character of a person. The decisive factor involves the proper use of these goods.

The constructive question of a wealthy congregation would run as follows. What missionary and diaconal tasks of our generation could be solved by financial means? To be more concrete: how could we make use of our apartments, our cars, our money, our leisure time, and our whole standard of living to the effect that both love and justice can dwell among us?

As soon as the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to eternal dimensions, he wants our faith to be incarnated in a conspicuously new relation to the things of this world. The European sin, e.g., thoughtless, spoiled spending of money, possessions, and luxury can only be overcome through repentance and a new vision for our task. We would not gain anything if we started a discussion on the various standards of neighboring countries which are better off materially than we are, and therefore naturally obliged to greater asceticism and financial sharing. This is similar to the attitude of a reporter who likes to be regarded as modern and socially minded, calling upon the public for greater social justice but at the same time seeing to it that his own personal life remains unchanged. The use of material goods for the benefit of others has to become part of the Christian program to a greater extent than was evident in the generation of the last twenty-five years which was concerned primarily with the improvement of its standard of living. In our day we should be happy to be able to serve others. God cares for our material progress and an old-age pension through our own nations. It is our task to see to it that people learn about Jesus' opinion of men and that we spread his truth by every means available.

c. *Orbit: planning and future* — It may appear strange at first that in line with the examples of art and prosperity, future planning as part of cultural tension within the body of Christ should be discussed. I am, however, of the opinion that this subject does not only

deserve to be mentioned but it is absolutely imperative to be discussed in European churches. Why?

It is a fact that our organizational methods today are largely not missionary-oriented but adhere to present systems. Furthermore, we are too involved with the past and too little with the future. We are the richest continent in historical maturity, in people, and financial resources, but at the same time the only continent where the number of Christians is decreasing constantly.

When the early Church in Jerusalem discovered a detrimental development in their own ranks, they did not hesitate to analyze the situation honestly, and this immediately led to a division of duties and the nomination of new co-workers. They were open to admit the disgrace of wrong leadership and decisions made in the interest of people and man.

Europe's top priority seems to be that we once again discover our forgotten intellectual gifts of cybernetics in our congregations (I Cor. 12:18) and to use them with determination for God's plan, i.e., to reconcile our fellowmen to God and make them his co-workers (Eph. 4:11). Local congregations, church managements, and theological training centers finally have to summon up their courage to break away from their complacent, retrospective view of history and to return to a missionary existence with the risen Christ. In Europe we have lost a tremendous amount of credibility, and our willingness to serve is not taken for granted. Apart from our biblical slogans we have not had confidence in the Holy Spirit to act among the old and young members of the congregation. We have failed to give them at least some adequate training to enable them to face the world. People in key positions are to blame for these huge problems of mounting scepticism and lack of positive experience of the risen Lord, for they failed to plan creatively. In my opinion, most problems that exist can constantly be overcome if we approach our organizing task with confidence and good teamwork in the spirit and "style" of Jesus. It is not a question of more or less involvement with one's culture, but missionary service on our continent in the name of our Creator, the Reconciliator, and the Holy Spirit.

#### Questions

1. When and through which elements does a cultural advantage turn into sin? The tool of service?
2. Is there a possibility of "cultural practices" within the congregation such as good social relations, preaching, or songs degenerating and becoming sin? Please substantiate your answers briefly. How can a congregation escape such false development?
3. With regard to the term "cultural adaptation" name some biblical motives for cultural adaption and their individual situations.
4. *Main question:* In what way can we contribute to changing the

egocentric handling of the cultural question (abstention or participation) into a serving attitude (creative contribution)? Apart from some general guidelines you may name some examples on which we might report briefly.

Diagram 1. Bible and culture

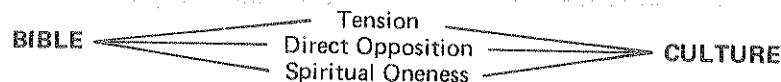


Diagram 2. The actual influences

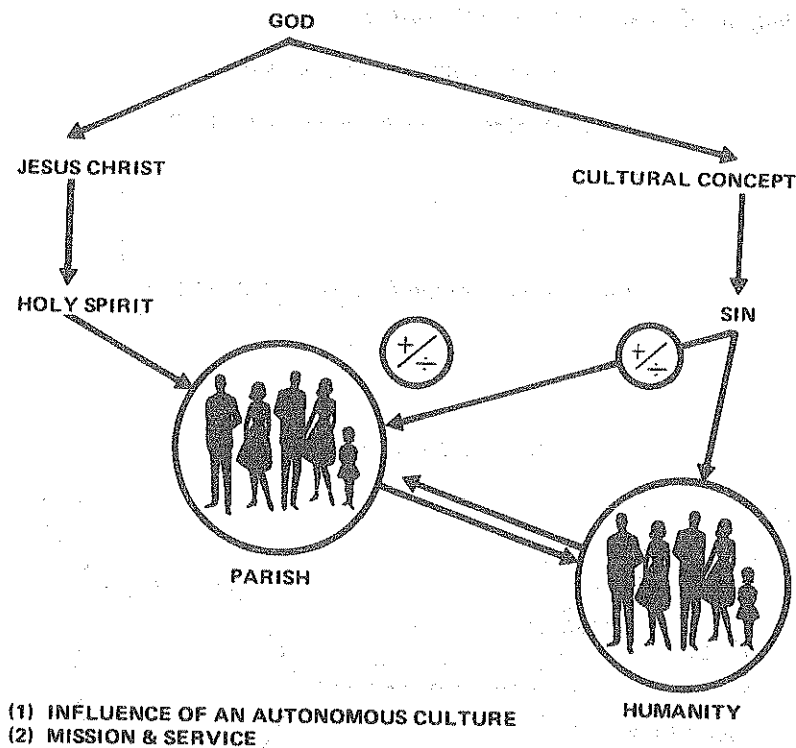


Diagram 3:

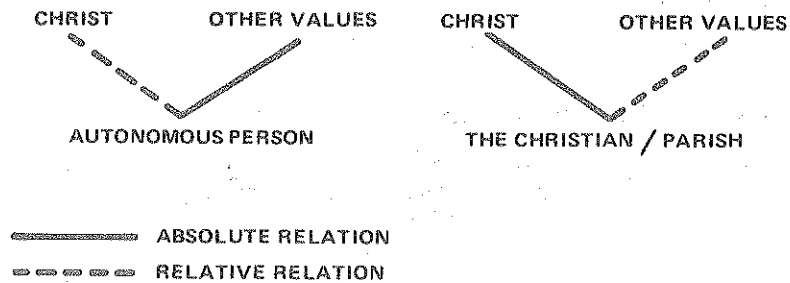
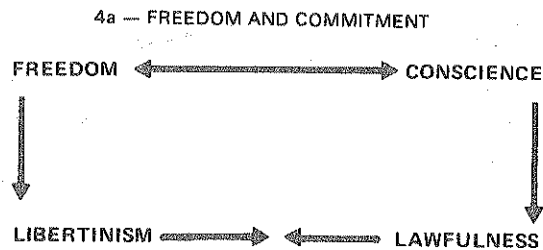


Diagram 4. a-c: Aids to self control



4b — THE OTHER PERSON AND I

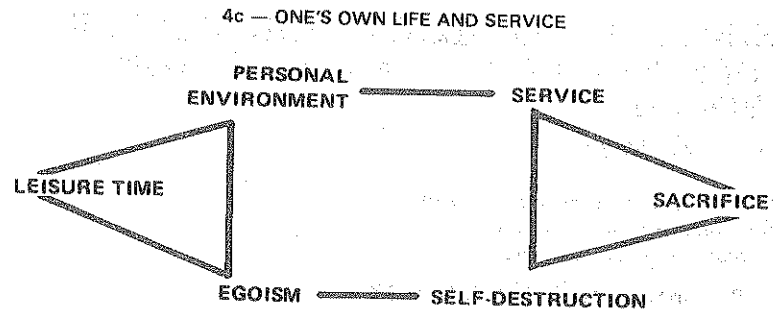
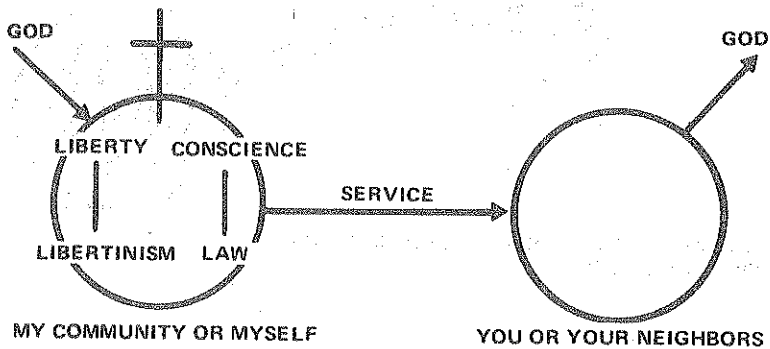


Diagram 5: A constructive relation to culture

