

Church and Culture

Every organisation of every kind has its own culture, whether for good or bad. The “rules” of the culture might never be written down, and they might be difficult to list. This does not at all affect their reality or their power over the members of that culture. Some of these rules may be immediately obvious to any outsider, even when the insiders have become so familiar with them that have stopped noticing them. On the other hand, there may be aspects which remain hidden to the newcomer for a long time, and only become clear to the deeply initiated, such that there are subtle and invisible lines which a newcomer will blunder across whereas the insider would not come close.

Every family, for example, has its own set of assumptions, boundaries and rituals. There are things which are always done, though they are not explained. There are habits and customs that make up the family life, and are completely familiar to the insiders without being talked about. There are unwritten rules which cannot be transgressed, and unspoken taboos which everyone knows not to break. These can vary a great deal from one family to the next. Normally they are mostly reflections of the personalities and preferences of mum and dad, and the influences which were upon them from their own births onwards. The family culture tells you a great deal about the founders of the family, without a word being said to explain it.

This is true in nations too. Patterns are set and handed down, and knowingly to go against them marks you out as either a renegade, a rebel, or a reformer, depending upon how you go against them and which ones you choose to go against. As a very simple example, if in England you do not begin a conversation by shaking somebody's hand, then few people will mind. However in Kenya, you will be thought rude – even though such a rule may neither be written nor spoken. The same action in two different countries is interpreted very differently. The culture shapes it.

Christians and culture

As Christians, culture is not automatically neutral to us. We cannot simply treat it as something that is there, and not to be changed. We are building a different kingdom, which comes from above (John 18:36). The values of Christ's kingdom often radically conflict with culture (for example, polygamy, wife-beating, religious rituals invoking the spirits of ancestors). At other times, something in culture may be largely neutral as far as the claims of Jesus are concerned (e.g. dress styles within the limits of modesty or shaking hands or not shaking hands).

What is clear, however, is that the church will have its own culture, and that it must be constantly analysing itself to see that this culture reflects the gospel, challenges the world where necessary and remains generally neutral to the surrounding culture when that is necessary. This paper is not about culture or Kenyan culture in general. It is about church culture, and our own church culture in particular, especially as it helps or hinders us in reaching the lost.

The Reformed Baptist movement in Kenya, like every other kind of recognisable group in existence, necessarily has its own culture. To pretend it does not would be foolish. That culture needs to be described and analysed, and compared to Scripture, and evaluated for its usefulness in reaching the people of Kenya who are being targeted. John Calvin wrote that the knowledge of God teaches us to know ourselves. Do we know ourselves?

In making these statements openly (in as far as these papers are “open”), I may be breaking new ground. I perceive that they may even be considered as controversial statements. Certainly as conversations with different individuals have touched on these areas, I have been given the sense that this is an area that has to be talked about quietly, and discreetly. My impression is that many of us at least implicitly realise that this is a painful and difficult area for us. There is a tacit realisation that reformation might be needed. Long-standing assumptions might need to be challenged, and we might see some hard truths that demand troublesome changes. So it could possibly be “safer” not to

have the conversation at all – if, that is, “safety” lies in avoiding problems, rather than in following God as closely as we can. In England people talk about “opening a can of worms”. Once you get the lid off, they could wriggle anywhere – best to keep them all under control. Or they say, “let sleeping dogs lie”. Once you wake them up, who knows what will be unleashed? These sayings are often wise words in their season, in many situations. I cannot however believe that this is such a season. If we are serious about reaching across a country with a vibrant, living Christianity, then this is actually one of the first conversations we need to have, even if awkward, because it touches on so many important issues. Looking in the mirror is difficult, but we need to see what outsiders will see, if we really want to reach them.

Identifying our own culture

We cannot find out our own culture by reading our Bibles or confession of faith. These describe our outward and official position. Those will influence our culture, but not reveal it. Culture is more revealed by *how* we carry out our position, than by *what* our position is. Culture is that which operates (in its apparent authority over people) as if it were something like the 67th book of the Bible, or the unwritten appendix to the Confession. We might be getting closer to home when we read our Constitutions, as these define more closely *how* our doctrines are put into practice. Our Confession says nothing about several matters which come together to define church culture: styles of meeting, unofficial dress codes, manners of procedure, formality and informality, language, symbols, kinds of music, assumptions in relationships between pastors and people, the kinds of hierarchies that exist and the ways to climb them, the rigidity with which some laws are honoured, or the lack of rigidity when others are not. These are some of the matters which reveal a culture. So what is ours? I am not going to even try to be exhaustive, but to deliberately pick out a few issues which come close together and I think are most relevant as we try to reach and draw in outsiders. So, this is a self-consciously *selective* list of items.

The remainder of this paper is not available via the public Internet, but is available on request at the discretion of the author.