

## Living in a Changing Culture • Acts 10

Want to catch a glimpse of what is happening in our American culture? Then spend an hour at a newsstand just paging through magazines. Or, surf through cable TV any night of the week. Or, read the Sunday newspaper.

One thing is for sure: there are plenty of changes. Some of the changes are thrilling and some are frightening, but the fact is that we are part of a rapidly changing culture. Some people say that there have been more significant changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than at any comparable time period in recorded human history.

There has been a significant cultural shift at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans were very optimistic about the future. We assumed that everything was getting better. World peace was a possibility. Science would solve all of our problems. Medicine would cure all our diseases. Retirement would be easy. The future was a bright and happy place. When Disneyland and Disneyworld opened, a major attraction was Tomorrowland where everything would be better than ever before.

Now more Americans are pessimistic about the future. Wars come one after another around the world. Natural disasters are everyday news. Old diseases like polio and tuberculosis are showing up again. Pandemics are threatening. Social security is at risk. Disney has remodeled and downgraded Tomorrowland. More of us are yearning for yesterday. Retro is “in” from clothing styles to auto design.

In the midst of all the changes in our culture, what are we to think and how are we to act as Christians? Some Christians want to aggressively change the culture. Some want to escape and hide. Some choose to complain and criticize. And some of us have no idea what to do.

So let’s have some quick lessons on culture. A definition of culture is the patterned ways in which

persons relate to one another. God created human culture, so culture in and of itself is good, but sin has marred human culture. We sometimes say that we love the sinner and hate the sin, and so we can equally say that we love the culture but hate the sin that is in the culture. One translation of John 3:16 is that “*God so loved the culture that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”

Let’s take a look at Acts 10 in the New Testament to see what St. Peter did when the culture around him had a big shift. Peter was raised as a devout Jew. He was religiously and politically conservative. He lived all of his life by the kosher regulations of Old Testament law. He, like other devout Jews of his time, kept his distance from Gentiles and hated the Romans for their occupation of the Promised Land.

Acts 10 intercepts Peter’s biography with the story of a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter didn’t know Cornelius but it’s not hard

to guess Peter’s cultural prejudice against him. Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian Regiment that occupied the land of Israel. Although he was a very good man who sought God, he was not a Jew or a Christian. The story begins in Acts 10:1-6:

*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”*

*Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.*

*The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”*

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It's hard to translate the emotions of this story into modern feelings. For Peter and those like him this story was pretty far-fetched. How could anyone be a Roman soldier and be described as "devout and God-fearing"? Why would an angel show up to a pagan? And, the theology here seems messed up. Cornelius is calling an angel "Lord." And God is responding to good works!

I have heard Republicans say that a person cannot be a Democrat and a Christian. And I have heard Democrats say that no one can be a true Republican and a true Christian at the same time. For people like Peter it was unimaginable that a Roman officer could fear God and win a visit from a real angel. But, that was only the beginning. Acts 10:9-16 continues:

*About noon the following day . . . Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."*

*"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."*

*The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."*

*This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.*

This was more than a culture shift for Peter. This was more like an earthquake. An angel appeared to him and basically told him to eat a pork-on-a-stick with some snake soup and relish made of minced crow. That would be just like most of us being offered a meal of horsemeat with spider sauce. Just the thought was enough to make Peter throw up.

When God himself speaks from heaven you would think it would be enough for anyone. But it took three times before Peter could stomach what was happening.

When we keep reading Acts 10 we learn that Peter was told to travel to Caesarea and visit the home of Cornelius. Devout Jews rarely entered the homes of Gentiles and especially a Roman

officer. That would be tantamount to collaborating with the enemy.

But Peter did what he was told. He went to Caesarea, went into the home of Cornelius, shared the gospel of Jesus Christ and Cornelius became a Christian and was baptized. He went directly from pagan Gentile to Christian without going through becoming a Jew. And, he stayed a Gentile! Cornelius continued as a Roman officer and continued in his non-Jewish culture. He didn't change his culture when he became a believer! For Peter this was way beyond Old Testament teachings. He stepped way out of his comfort zone.

I'm impressed with Peter. I've always liked him but this story raises my respect. Change is hard. It is hard to reach out to people you don't much like. Yet Peter was so committed to Jesus and so obedient to him that he did what Jesus told him to do whether it was comfortable or not.

Our culture shifts are a bit like what Peter faced. We deal with materialism, technology, sexual orientation, globalization, postmodernism, stress, busyness and a thousand other 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural changes. The specifics are different but the challenges are the same: how to be Christians in a changing culture. So, let's make a list of ideas about how to act like a Christian when the world around us is shifting.

Let's start the list with loving like God. God so loved our world that he sent his Son. As Christians we are to love our world and the cultures in it just as God does. This doesn't mean we approve of them. God knows the sin of the world better than any of us but he loves our world nonetheless. As Christians we want to love our culture like God loves our culture.

Next we must trust God. As Christians we believe that God is in charge of history. He is never surprised. Nothing is out of control. God can and will handle anything that happens. God always does a good job. As Christians we put our hope in Jesus Christ—not in political parties, election outcomes, Supreme Court decisions, stock market fluctuations, scientific discoveries, constitutional amendments, military power or medical research. We believe in Jesus. We trust Jesus. As Christians, let's not rush to judgment on cultural changes.

In the 1980s some people panicked over predictions of HIV-AIDS. In 1999 the Y2K predic-

tions sent some Christians hiding in the mountains. Some churches were actually divided over the stance that Christians should take. When scary cultural predictions come our way we may listen, but don't act like there's no God. Don't rush to judgment. Trust God. Romans 8:28, 31-32 and 37-39 say:

*... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

*... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Third on the list is to know biblical values. When culture is shifting we need a reference point for both stability and discernment. That reference point is the Bible. The better we know the Bible the better prepared we are to think and act like Christians when our culture changes.

Our list of biblical values can be long. There are the unchanging divine standards by which we seek to live. Examples are: God is sovereign; life is sacred; truth is essential; love is primary; the gospel must be advanced.

It's important that we distinguish between biblical values and personal preferences. We may have very strong opinions about hairstyles, immigration quotas, political parties, style of music, the legal language of America and more but these should not be equated with biblical values; they are personal preferences.

Certainly the Bible should influence all our opinions. And, all our opinions should reflect well

on Jesus Christ. But, let's distinguish between biblical values and personal preferences. Let the Holy Spirit be our teacher. When it comes to cultural changes don't let the primary source of influence be your favorite news show, website, blog, political newsletter or radio commentator.

Let me be candid. Television networks use stories to increase ratings. Political parties interpret culture to get votes. And, some Christian radio programs rile up listeners to raise money. I have talked to upset Christians who have been so manipulated by secular and Christian media that I would like to go to their homes and unplug their radios and cut their TV cables. Listen to what Jesus said in John 14:26-27: *"... the counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."* And the result of that in the midst of cultural change will be, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

In addition we should affirm what is good and confront what is wrong. We should confront sin in our culture. Christians are like Old Testament prophets who were the voice of God to speak against the sins of society. We can write letters, make phone

calls, cast ballots, contribute or withhold money, attend public meetings and speak for righteousness.

However, let us always speak the truth in love. No one likes an angry mean-spirited critic. Our greater influence may be in affirming what is good. When you see a movie that promotes Christian values, tell your friends. When a news story supports social justice, call the station and say thank you. When a politician takes a stand for morality, write a letter of gratitude. When a neighbor hosts a party where no one gets drunk, stop by and help clean up. When a rich benefactor gives to the poor, send an e-mail of support. When a judge presides fairly over a difficult trial, communicate your favor.

Too many people criticize what's wrong but are silent about what is right. Imagine the influence of 10,000 Christians affirming what is good

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in our culture and thereby swaying our culture in the right direction.

One of my favorite books is *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. Stark is a secular writer who traces the influence of Christianity on the Roman Empire from the time of Jesus until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. He describes the Roman Empire as a place where there was wonderful good—the Roman peace, the Roman roads, the Roman economy. But he also describes the abysmal state of the culture with rampant abortions, widespread divorce, infanticide of girl babies as a means of birth control, the devaluing of women, brutal pandemics that often took a third or more of the population of major cities, mass migrations, forced repopulations, injustices, corruption and poverty. It was an unhappy place.

Most Christians were poor, slaves, unable to vote and politically powerless. What they did was they behaved Christianly. They didn't abort their babies; they valued women; they stuck with their marriages; they rescued and raised abandoned babies. When pandemics struck they didn't flee the city; they sometimes stayed behind at the risk of their own lives in order to care for those who were sick. They helped the poor; they worked hard; they were honest; and they changed the empire. It took 300 years but paganism died and Christianity triumphed.

How we live is important to God; it is beneficial to us; and it transforms others. So let us neither be frightened of nor shaped by the changes in our culture. Let us not try to escape the culture but let us be the representatives of Christ to transform our culture. Let us live good and godly lives full of faith in Jesus Christ and trust in God so that we will do for our country and our culture what our earlier Christian brothers and sisters did for their country and their culture.

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