

**ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**  
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As we begin 2009, as Americans and as evangelicals, we will face, no doubt, huge challenges. The economy. Foreign policy challenges—Iran, a resurgent Russia and the behemoth China. But, perhaps most importantly as evangelicals, we will face a national administration hostile to some of our core values. What should we do? How should we position ourselves for a troubling year? What exactly should be our relationship to our culture? Therefore, to answer these questions, or to at least create a framework for answering them, the entire program of *Issues in Perspective* this week is devoted to this question:

***CULTURE AND THE CHRISTIAN: SEPARATE, IDENTIFY OR TRANSFORM?***

The Bible warns against “worldliness” and the devastating consequences of following the world and not Christ (see James 4). From the Old Testament we see that the children of Israel got into big trouble when they imitated their pagan neighbors and brought their altars and images into the Temple. Yet, somehow Christians are to be “in the world, but not of the world” (John 17:13-19). Christians have been removed from the world’s power at conversion (Galatians 6:14) and, because the cross established a judicial separation between believers and the world, Christians are citizens of a new kingdom (Philippians 3:20). The Bible both discourages absolute physical separation from the people of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9,10), yet instructs believers to witness to this world (John 17:15), all the while keeping from the influence of the world (James 1:27; 1 Corinthians 7:31; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15). How does one resolve this tension?

This is a profoundly important question for those who hold to ethical absolutes. In a culture that is increasingly pagan and increasingly relativistic, how one “speaks” Christianity to the culture is critical. Should Christians separate from the culture and live in isolation? Should Christians seek to accommodate completely to the culture and seek to influence its institutions and values from the inside? Or should Christians seek to transform the culture by seeking to control its institutions and claim each for Christ? Historical models for each are readily available from church history and are present today in our world. The goal of this program is to examine each model and then biblically evaluate each one.

**THE SEPARATIONAL MODEL**

The Separational Model of relating to culture argues that Christians must withdraw from any involvement in the world. There is an antithesis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world and the choice is clear--withdraw. Clear biblical examples of this choice are Noah (whom God called out of the culture before He destroyed it), Abram (called to separate from pagan Mesopotamia) and Moses (called to separate from idolatrous Egypt). The New Testament buttresses this conviction with verses like Matthew 6:24 (“You cannot serve two masters . . .”), 1 Peter 2:11 and 1 John 2:15. For this model, the church of Jesus Christ is a counterculture which lives by kingdom principles. It is to have nothing to do with this world.

One historical example of this model centers on the church before Constantine's critical decree in A.D. 313. During this time, the church refused to serve in the Roman army, refused to participate in the pagan entertainment and refused to bow to Caesar as lord. It was antagonistic to the culture, separated from it, and yet sought to win it to Christ. Another historical example is Anabaptism, exemplified in the various Mennonite and Amish groups of the sixteenth century, many of whom continue today. For them there is an absolute antithesis between the Kingdom of God and this world. This necessitates a rejection of the church-state concept--the revolutionary center of their worldview. The church, in their view, is a free association of believers; there is no "established" state church. Religious liberty, non-resistance, often pacifism, and refusal to take vows and oaths separate these communities from the world. Isolated and separate, social service, they believe, establishes and furthers Christ's kingdom on earth. A final historical example is the Christian community movement, growing out of the 1960s, when Christian communes dotted the American and European religious landscape. Clearly countercultural, these groups believed that the church had become hopelessly secularized. Therefore, Christianity needed to get back to the book of Acts where resources were shared, lifestyles were simple and believers were clearly separate from the hostile culture. This alternative way, rooted in a radical separation, would lead the church back to its roots and to revival.

How should we think about the Separational model? In a culture that is increasingly pagan and antagonistic to Christianity, there is much that is appealing. This model stresses the "other-worldly" character of genuine biblical Christianity. It further calls people to recognize that "this world is not my home," as we often sing. After all, Jesus radically rejected the status quo of His culture and died because of it. Yet, this model has serious dangers that necessitate rejection of it as a viable option. There are three dangers to this model. First, separatism can quickly lead to asceticism, a lifestyle of self-denial that ends up denying the goodness of God's creation. From God's declaration in Genesis 1 that all of His creation is "good," to Paul's powerful affirmation that everything is created by God and nothing is to be rejected (1 Timothy 4:4), the Bible condemns all tendencies toward an asceticism that denies creation's innate goodness. Second, this model easily produces a dangerous sacred/secular dichotomy. For the believer, the Bible clearly rejects the compartmentalization of life into things that are sacred and those that are secular. For the Christian, everything is sacred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that the believer is to "do all to the glory of God." Finally, this model can lead to a complete withdrawal from the culture, something clearly condemned in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 Paul chastises the Corinthians for misunderstanding his admonition about disciplining the wayward brother. He says that they processed incorrectly his teaching about not "associating" with sinners. The only way to do that was to die, and that is not what he wanted them to do. So, the Separational model is inadequate for the believer.

## **THE IDENTIFICATIONAL MODEL**

Accommodation to the culture is the key word for this model; to live both in the kingdom of God and in the world. God works in the world both through the state and through the church. The believer, therefore, has a dual commitment to both the church and the state. Identifying with, participating in and working within all cultural institutions (e.g., business, government, law) is part of the mandate for the Christian. Christians are, therefore, to live both in the kingdom of

God and the kingdom of this world. Biblical examples of this model abound. Joseph rose to the top of ancient Egypt, serving as prime minister (Genesis 41:41-43). Similarly, Daniel played key political and advisory roles in the empires of both Babylon and Persia (Daniel 6:1-4). Jesus identified with the world, eating and drinking with tax collectors and assorted sinners. He clearly did not separate from the world, for he was a friend of Nicodemus and associated with key officials of the Roman army (e.g., the centurion). Finally, the book of Acts demonstrates apostles associating with the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, another Roman official. Paul, in Romans 13:1-7 illustrates the role of the state as a clear sphere of God's work.

Historical examples are likewise numerous. After Constantine's 313 decree, the church-state dynamic changed. He restored church property; bishops were now equal with Roman officials. Over time the church became wealthy and powerful. Christianity became popular, the "in-thing" for the empire. Complacency resulted. Its power became political and through the medieval period (A.D. 500-1500) it gained immense prestige and dominance. In fact, during the papacy of Innocent III (early 1200s), the church in effect ruled Western Europe. Another example is modern civil religion, which sees the nation-state as ordained by God for a special redemptive mission. For American religious leaders like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney and Lyman Beecher, God chose America to be the savior of the world, a chosen people to accomplish redemptive purposes for all humanity. God's kingdom, they argued, would come first to America and then would spread through the rest of the world. Manifest Destiny, which defined American foreign policy in the pre-Civil War period, saw America's institutions as perfect and believed that God had destined that those institutions would spread through North America. Such thinking had its origins in civil religion and partially explains the Mexican American War (1846-1848) and other forms of expansionism. Similar arguments could be made about expansionism in the late nineteenth century, specifically the Spanish-American War of 1898.

As we evaluate the identificational model, its strengths are clear. It emphasizes the "this worldly" character of the Christian life. There is much in this world that can and should be affirmed because it is ultimately good. This model calls people to recognize that there is importance and good in this world now. It likewise affirms that God is at work in and through the cultural institutions like the state, business and even the arts. A Christian can identify and find benefit in each of these institutions. However, its weaknesses are glaring. Its principal danger is that the identificational model can lull the Christian into complacency, into a blindness toward the influence of evil in the culture's institutions. Anyone involved in politics knows that it is the greatest test of one's faith to work in politics. Evil is always present and the pressure to compromise one's convictions is ever present. This model can also lead to an uncritical acceptance of prevailing cultural practices and attitudes. Particularly in democracies where majority rule is so prevalent, pressures to go with polling data as the basis for decision-making is often tempting. The more Christians identify with the institutions, the more the institutions influence the Christian. Contemporary society is more permissive than that of the past, and the evangelical community is being affected by that permissiveness. Finally, this model can lead to a loss of the church's prophetic stance. The church can almost become "married to the culture." One disastrous example is the church in Nazi Germany. It was crying, "better Hitler than Stalin," and uncritically embraced Hitler's state as a matter of expediency. The same happened in American culture, especially to justify the Mexican-American and aspects of the Spanish

American war. This model has the danger, then, of producing a complacent and soft Christianity.

## **THE TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL**

This model takes the transforming power of Christ and applies it to culture. Despite the fallen nature of humanity and the subsequent curse of creation, Jesus' death, burial and resurrection reversed the curse for both humans and culture. There is now hope of human release from the bondage to sin and for creation as well. This is the center of ancient Israel's hope that the world would be restored (see Isaiah 65 for example) and of the New Testament's focus on Christ's redemptive work (see Romans 5:12-21). Romans 8:19-22 also emphasizes the complete re-making of creation from sin's curse. This hope is easily translated into an optimism about culture's transformation.

Historical examples of this model center on the transforming work of the gospel in a geographical area. During the Reformation, John Calvin's Geneva reflected this transforming power. Calvin taught the total Lordship of Christ, that it extended to the state and to economics. Therefore, the government of Geneva experienced radical reform and pursued righteousness in making and enforcing its laws. Work to Calvin and Geneva was a God-ordained vocation, whatever its specific nature. The city, therefore, experienced remarkable economic transformation as well. A similar transformation characterized the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay in the 1600s. All aspects of the Puritan culture were brought into conformity with God's revelation. It was complete cultural transformation.

There is much to affirm in this model. It recognizes the gospel's power to change both individuals and their culture. It is common sense to expect that when a person trusts Christ that his or her lifestyle and, therefore, culture will change. Ultimately, nothing is immune in culture from the gospel's impact. Likewise, this model calls on Christians to recognize their responsibility to work toward the day when God's kingdom will come to earth and justice will rule (see Amos 5:15,24). There are, however, several serious shortcomings with this model. The transformationist can neglect the radical nature of sin's devastation. Humans remain enslaved to sin and even believers daily struggle with its power. The Scripture abounds with warnings about how subtle and powerful the enemies of the world, the flesh and the devil really are. In addition, the transformational model can promote an unbiblical optimism, a near utopianism. The Bible rejects such optimism apart from the return of Jesus Christ. Humans, even those regenerated by faith, always struggle with sin and it will only be when Jesus returns that the victory over evil will be complete. The transformational model must therefore also be rejected.

## **THE INCARNATIONAL MODEL**

Robert Webber, in his book, *Saints and Sinners*, proposes a synthesis of all three models as the proper one for the believer. His proposal, he argues, is modeled after Jesus, for He separated from the evils of His culture, identified with its institutions and people, yet sought to transform it from the inside out. By adding to His deity humanity, Jesus identified with the world and its social order (e.g., its people and its customs). Similarly, the church is to do the same. At bottom, this is the heart of Christ's admonition that we are "to be in the world but not of the

world.” Yet Christ separated Himself from the evil distortions of the created order. He had nothing to do with the distorted use of wealth, social position or political power. Finally, through His death, burial and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and Satan and guarantees the world’s transformation when He returns in glory and power. Similarly, the church is to move culture’s institutions toward genuine, biblical righteousness, all the while anticipating His final transforming work when He returns.

How does the believer live out Webber’s incarnational model? First, the Christian always lives with tension, the tension between that which is transformable and that from which he or she must separate. For example, there are many good structures in the culture--art, economics, sports, vocations--yet there are always the evil distortions of those good structures--pornography, greed, workaholism, idolatry. The Christian should identify with the good structures and seek their transformation but always separate from those evil distortions. Second, there is no simple formula for living with or resolving this tension. Looking for *the* biblical answer to each practical question is rarely possible. Applying the principles of Scripture to each person’s situation may well produce considerably different judgments. The believer’s responsibility is to know God’s Word, to know the mind of Christ, and then choose a course of action that each believes most faithfully represents God’s revealed will.

What are some examples of this tension? In seeking to identify with the cultural structures, while separating from their evil distortions, should a Christian own a TV? Listen to non-Christian music? Darn socks or throw them away? Obviously, believers will answer these questions differently but how each is answered represents the variety of expressions within the Christian church. How Christians personally resolve this tension should produce a healthy biblical tolerance, a thankfulness for the multiplicity of expressions of Christianity. It is not easy to resolve the tension between identifying with the culture’s institutions and structures and seeking to separate from the distortions of each. Some Christians will choose not to own a TV, not to listen to secular music and to discard old socks rather than darn them. Agreeing to disagree on such matters guards against unhealthy legalism and promotes a healthy dialogue about living within a non-Christian culture.

In summary, then, what is our assignment? What does it mean to be in the world (of 2009), but not of the world (of 2009)? We identify with the culture in which God places us, separating from its evils, yet seeking to be the agents of God’s transforming grace in and to that culture. Christians will always live with the tension of balancing these three. But how we live with this tension is a mark of our spiritual maturity.

See James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 19-26.