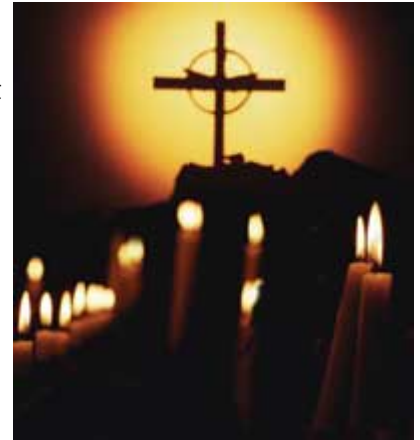


A NEW TREND EMERGING IN THE CHURCH: CULTURE-DRIVEN CHURCHES

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Like so many other church growth books that I've read, the jacket of a recently published book promised to help the attentive reader understand what the church must become to survive in today's world. It called for an emerging church that recognizes the transition in worldviews taking place in our culture. According to the contributing authors, the transition demands that the church rethink its approach. Without recognizing the changes in worldviews, the church will increasingly close itself off to ministry influence.



We need an awareness of the world in which we live. However, I have a problem with the premise of many of these church growth books. They propose models of ministry that place considerable weight on culture as a determining authority for the church's agenda and approaches. I have two observations to make about these ministry models.

A culture-focused church will repeatedly need to redefine itself. The need for the redefinition is obvious: culture is continuously changing. That is why there is a constant turnover in church ministry approaches. According to this new church growth book, the seeker-sensitive model that has been promoted for the last several years will not work with younger generations. The book states that the previously revered technology for worship services requiring the use of lighting, sound, PowerPoint, and video to capture the attention of the TV/computer generation is no longer desired. The newer generations are looking for a mystical experience—preferring stained glass, a darker atmosphere, candles, and icons. Platforms that had the appearance of an entertainment venue for the MTV generation are now to be designed with crosses and other symbols to promote spiritual reverence.

Did God really intend for His church to change with the frequency of styles in the fashion industry? Did He want His church to be the pawn of culture's fickle tastes?

A culture-driven church puts itself at risk. The emerging church emphasizes the recognition of pluralism and multiculturalism in society. In an attempt to relate to this cultural diversity, many are encouraging dialogue with different religious traditions for better understanding among groups. To make unbelievers or new believers more comfortable, they are invited to continue practicing their former religious rituals. I read of a Native American who believed the ritual of the Indian sweat house for tribal men had been a helpful way for him to connect with the Great Spirit, so he continued that practice after his "conversion." One idea suggests creating worship stations, with burning incense, to help people connect with God while in church.

The recognition of pluralism can even lead to evangelical churches' working with non-evangelical churches. Recently I received a brochure from a large church in our area of Chicago that was hosting Purpose-Driven Life and Church Seminars. The seminars were led by a staff member of Saddleback Church, the parent church of the Purpose-Driven movement. To my dismay, the church that was hosting the seminars was a Roman Catholic church.

God spent considerable time in His law warning the Children of Israel not to absorb the religious and lifestyle culture of the Canaanite nations that surrounded them. If they absorbed the local culture, disaster was sure to follow. It has always amazed me that the people of Israel could shift from allegiance to the one true God to embrace the religions of their neighbors in the space of only a generation or two. Is it possible we could witness a similar shift in the church in our generation, all in the name of cultural relevance?

While we do want to be culturally aware, we must determine to always look to God's Word as the final authority for church faith and practice, not to the world around us.