

A PASSION FOR HIS KINGDOM CULTURE

4 September 2016

Over the last while Gordon and I have been touching on the theme of living out a Kingdom culture on earth as it is in heaven. Last time I spoke about how each one of us has, to some extent, been conditioned by the pattern of this world. In fact even as born-again believers we are somewhat of a mix of worldly culture and Kingdom culture. Hopefully we are intentionally becoming more and more patterned by the Kingdom culture and the worldly culture is having less and less influence in our lives.

I used a simplified model of how the human mind works to help us understand how, in a natural sense, we are patterned into a way of believing and thinking and consequently a way of behaving. So much of our behaviour, responses, reactions and cultural norms that we live by are driven by our subconscious conditioning.

There was a message I heard preached many years ago by Rigby Wallace and the only thing I can remember is the title “Convinced by Culture or Convicted by Theology”. I think I might have spoken about this before about 9 or 10 years ago and thought it would be good to explore this again as it relates to the theme we are dealing with.

In short culture is the way we do things around here and it includes our style of dress, our style of worship, our unspoken rules and rituals, in fact all of our norms of behaviour and all of the unspoken expectations that we try so hard to abide by in order to fit in to whatever group we find ourselves in. The problem with culture is that it makes sure that things stay pretty much the same all the time. So when a culture is the thing that we are working hard at maintaining we will resist change – we will resist anything that is different to that culture, and we don't even realise we are doing it. So, over time, a culture will determine what we believe and consequently how we behave and act. If this is so then I am sure you agree that being **convinced by culture** could be a dangerous thing if the culture doesn't line up with scripture. Unfortunately the culture or pattern of this world does not line up with scripture and is very powerful and it impacts even the Christian church.

Theology, in the broad sense, on the other hand is what we believe about God and His word and how we should behave and

act accordingly. This is what should be determining our culture regardless of what the prevailing norms and expectations of society are. Actually Christianity is a counter-culture in society, and it is an indictment against Christians when there is little or no difference between the culture of the world and the culture of the church. If we are not **convicted by theology** – good, solid biblical theology – we will simply succumb to the pattern of this world and be convinced by its culture.

We need to be a people who have our beliefs shaped by our theology, not by our society's culture. Our beliefs and actions must be determined by our theology!

Here is an example of what happens when so-called believers are convinced by culture rather than being convicted by theology:

“Eli Ministries International situated in Shiloh has been rocked by an internal scandal where the two junior pastors have been found out to be extorting money, favours, and goods from its members. It is also reported that they are involved in regular visits to the local prostitutes. To make matters worse they are both the sons of the senior pastor and despite him knowing about his sons' greed and immorality, he has not come out against them firmly. A mere rebuke is all they received and they simply laughed it off and continued with their immoral behaviour.

A prophetic statement has been issued by a highly respected and credible person regarding this situation and in it was a warning about the imminent death of these two pastors.”

It seems that this happens so often in our modern society and we read about it in our newspapers. It is so much a part of the western culture in which we live; a culture that even impacts heavily on the behaviour and actions of Christians if they are not convicted by theology.

Actually this story is not a modern day story but one that happened about three thousand years ago. The story is found in 1 Samuel and the setting is in the hill country of Israel where there is huge tension between the Israelites and the unbelieving Philistines. Eli is the High Priest of Israel and he has two sons who are priests, Hophni and Phinehas. The Ark of the Covenant, which symbolises the presence of God, had been placed in the temple at a place called Shiloh. An interesting fact about the name Shiloh is that it means “sent one, apostle, peace and abundance” and is therefore

a prophetic name pointing to Christ and the eternal presence of God among His people under the New Covenant.

Lets read some of the story in **1 Sam2:22-25**

(vs 22-25) Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. And he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death".

Then a prophet comes to Eli and prophesies the removal of God's blessing and presence from Eli's household and ends with the words of verse 34:

34 "And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day.

These two priests, Hophni and Phinehas, were not lovers of God. They thought only of their own comfort and convenience. As priests they, more than anyone else, should have been convicted by theology, but instead they were simply convinced by the culture of the world around them. They should have been servants of God and servants of the people. Instead they served only themselves and their greed and immorality.

We as believers are all priests before God and man. (1Pet 2:9 *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light".*)

Because we are a royal priesthood we would do well to be convicted by theology and not convinced by the culture of this world. When we are convicted by theology we will be more engaged in the things of God, we will take ownership of our part to play in His plan, we will accept accountability for doing it and we fruitful.

Old Eli made a huge mistake by not dealing with his sons' rebellion and disobedience very firmly. He gave them a gentle rebuke to which they responded with pride, arrogance and hardness of heart. Eli compromised on what he as high priest knew to be right and as we saw a prophet tells him that his sons will die for their rebellion. God also tells young Samuel the same prophecy (1Sam 3:1 – 21). We, as priests before God, cannot afford to compromise on what we know to be the truth of God's Word, as difficult as that may be. We run the risk of offending others with the truth, but as scripture tells us we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. What is it worth if a man gains the whole world but loses his soul because he compromised on speaking the truth in love.

By the way the name "Hophni" in Hebrew means "he that covers" and this speaks of deception. "Phinehas" means "a bold countenance" and the significance of this is that he has the appearance of something that he is not – the appearance of a priest but the heart of a rebel. It also speaks of his arrogance.

They both abused the privilege of being priests of God and allowed their own selfish desires and their culture to shape what they believed and how they behaved. They had rejected the theology of God.

When Christians begin to believe and do the things that serve their own selfish desires and comfort – things that serve their culture – and they subtly reject the full counsel of God, it is then that they move into rebellion against God.

Hophni and Phinehas acted as if God did not even exist. They had no passion for His presence, only a passion for self – their hearts were not in any way poised towards God. God was not at the centre of their worship nor was He the focus of their serving.

Ok, lets return to our story in **1 Sam 4:1-11**.

War had broken out and fear had gripped the hearts of the Israelites. They were desperate and decided that the Ark of the Covenant must be brought from Shiloh to protect them. Guess who is right there with the Ark when it is brought to Ebenezer? Yes, good old Hophni and Phinehas. Up to this point they had rejected the will of God and didn't have even the slightest passion for His presence. But now they are scared and so they superstitiously think that the physical Ark will protect them. This is religion. The truth is that the Ark is only symbolic of God's presence and the

physical Ark is useless to save them. It is the heart attitude of people with a passion for His presence that results in an experience of the presence of Almighty God.

So the Philistines captured the Ark and carried it off and killed both Hophni and Phinehas. Continuing with the symbolism then, we can say that those who serve self, who serve culture and ignore God are sure to have the presence of God depart from them and without His presence death results.

Now look at **1Sam 4: 12-22**. *"A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head. When he arrived, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man hurried and came and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. And the man said to Eli, "I am he who has come from the battle; I fled from the battle today." And he said, "How did it go, my son?" He who brought the news answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured." As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years. Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel!" because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured".*

The message is clear that seeds sown into culture, into serving self and into our own comfort and convenience produce a bitter crop and spiritual Ichabods are born. Those who are convinced by culture and not convicted by theology are most at risk of giving

birth to an IChabod – of having the presence of God depart from them.

To finish off lets quickly look in the New Testament at Luke 12.

I want to pick up on three concepts found in this portion of scripture that relate to living a Kingdom culture and then phrase each of them in terms of a question for us. The purpose of doing this is to challenge us to think about whether we are truly convicted by theology or simply convinced by culture.

Lets read **Luke 12:13-34**. *"Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the **inheritance** with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his **kingdom**, and these things will be added to you. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your*

*possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a **treasure** in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"*

The three concepts are:

- Inheritance (vs 13)
- Kingdom (vs 31-32)
- Treasure (vs 33-34)

1. When you know what you are going to inherit you can begin to plan your life in anticipation of that inheritance. The plans you make will be very different to the ones you made before you knew what the inheritance was going to be.

The first question I give you to consider carefully and prayerfully is:

What inheritance controls my plans? (vs 13)

2. We may know what our inheritance is but unless we are making our plans in such a way as to give ourselves to living a life worthy of that calling we could very well be producing an Ichabod. We are called to live our lives on earth for the Kingdom's sake as we reflect the character and culture of our King.

The second question then is:

What kingdom consumes my energy? (vs 31-32)

3. Finally, knowing what the inheritance is and focusing my energy on things of the Kingdom of God can actually turn out to be fruitless if my heart attitude is impure. If I am simply doing the performance thing and creating the right image but my motive is still for my own personal gain and I do not **treasure God above everything else** then I am just reflecting my culture and my heart does not belong to God. (~~Prov 23: 26 "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways".~~)

This then leads to my third and last question:

What treasure captures my heart? (vs 33-34)

These three questions cannot be answered superficially. They are serious questions and need to be taken before God and answered humbly and honestly as we dig deep into our own hearts.

Let us learn to live out a Kingdom culture on earth as it is in heaven as we grow in the conviction of our theology of who God is and what He requires of us!