

**Response to “The Doctrine of Humanity” by Charles
Sherlock**

by

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Our culture affects the way we live our lives. It is like the air we breathe. When we breathe, we do not think about breathing. Instead, breathing is largely taken for granted. So it is with culture, we do not think about culture or how it influences us. Instead, we take it for granted. Culture “is a term incapable of precise definition, since any definition will itself be affected by cultural assumptions.” (129) Culture touches every aspect of our lives. Culture however is affected by sin and raises questions that Christians need to respond to. Sherlock’s two major themes in his discussion of culture is how culture is affected by sin and how the Christian is to respond to cultural plurality.

Culture is affected by sin. There is no culture which is free from the effects of pride, selfishness, and the desire to be in control. Due to the effects of sin culture needs to be renewed and cleansed. Some “aspects of culture reflect sinful distortions of human living, and particular cultures can become so depraved that they merit divine condemnation.” (p. 132) Sodom and Gomorrah is one example of such a culture. Some customs which reflect the distortion of sin and are against God’s will includes: human sacrifice, prostitution, slavery, and torture. Other cultural customs also reflect the affects of sin but are less clearly wrong such as: consumerism, greed, lust, and selfishness. Even good God given gifts are affected by sin. For example, a child may only be seen as evidence of a parent’s achievement, a new home may be an occasion for pride and boasting, and “even grace at the table can be a means of controlling behavior.” (p. 138)

Language is also affected by sin. It is the instrument of communication to the word of God, yet distorted by sin. Humor is one example of how sin affects language. We find it hard sometimes not to laugh at a joke even though it may compromise our moral values or be demeaning to others. Cartoonist sometimes use humor to point out a person’s hypocrisy or undermine their humanity publicly. Humor demonstrates the affects of sin, which is, distorting relationships and perceptions. Can humor exist apart from sin? Sherlock answers this by saying, “Humour is thus by no means absent from the Scriptures, but the reality of sin is taken seriously; the general view of laughter in the Scriptures is thus best described as worldly wise.” (p. 151)

Sherlock also deals with the issue of cultural pluralism and relativism. Many societies are made up of several cultural groups within them. Some people see this plurality as “an impossibly romantic and even dangerous ideal, because it could be taken to imply not only a relativism of cultures, but also of truth...” (p. 134) This relativistic idea is taken to the extreme of saying that not even a conviction that something is true can be held. The question is often asked, “If something is good enough for one cultural or subcultural group, why is there not acceptance for every custom? (p. 135)” When certain values are seen to be as valid and effective as our own beliefs, then central Christian beliefs can be called into question. This can make it hard to distinguish between cultural relativism and theological relativism.

There are different ways in which the Christian is to respond to pluralism. First, the Christian should do away with any idea that any one culture embodies Christianity. Here, Sherlock quotes Walter who explains the danger of this kind of attitude. He says, “Theologically, our ‘security is not to be found in this world or in ourselves but in an all-loving, almighty God. (p. 135)” Second, the better approach to take is to reflect on one’s own cultural outlook. One way to do this is by experiencing other cultures. Experiencing another culture opens a person up to seeing their cultural prejudices as well as a chance to learn to do things differently. This experience comes from interacting with people from different cultures. Plurality then can help us avoid ethnocentrism and making particulars universal.

Sherlock discusses how to respond to cultural issues when he discusses Christ and culture. He discusses the five ways which Christians relate to culture which Richard Niebur discussed. The five ways are: (1) fundamental opposition, (2) fundamental agreement, (3) synthesis, (4) tension, and (5) conversion. He mentions how Niebur rejected the idea that any one of these is *the* Christian answer. Instead there are times when each of these need to be applied. For example, *opposition* is needed in rejecting some cultural elements such as the belief in white supremacy. *Fundamental agreement* could be needed when it comes to affirming the diversity of cultures that exists in the world.

That fact that culture is affected by sin has implications for ministry. We must consider what the Bible affirms about culture and what it does not. For example, the Bible affirms the goodness of loving one's self and taking care of one's own interest, while certain aspects of individualism is rejected. Since, we are influenced by our culture, the tendency can be to follow one's own culture even if it leads to something that Scripture forbids. What we must do then is to bring the elements of our culture which are at odds with the Bible into conformity to it. What this means for ministry is that the minister is responsible for being sensitive where culture is at odds with the Bible, informing his congregation about it, and calling them to obey the Word. It also means that the minister must consider cultural influences when doing evangelism. The minister must beware of areas where the person is likely to have unbiblical ideas due to the influence of culture. In many cases these ideas may be barriers to the gospel and if they are, they must be confronted.

How sin affects culture applies to our personal lives. We should consider how culture influences our lives and discern whether there is any area that needs to be addressed. For example, our culture influences us through the media. Cultural particulars of the American dream, individualism, and consumerism are all portrayed and encouraged in different forms of media. We must take care then to guard ourselves against these influences when they lead or encourage us to do or believe something contrary to God's word. We need to conform our lives to what the Bible teaches rather than culture by putting away our cultural prejudices and sins that go against Scripture. Care should be given to our speech. We should not use jokes or any other form of humor which demeans or dehumanizes someone else. Care must be given not to let our moral value be comprised in the jokes we tell or listen to.

Sherlock's discussion of cultural plurality applies to our ministries and lives. We need to make God our security and not ourselves. We should examine hearts or what the Bible says if we think that any one culture embodies Christianity. The kind of cultural prejudice that tries to absolutize one's culture as the one from God must be put away. We should reflect on reflect on our culture. By making efforts to experience other cultures we may put away our ethnocentrism and learn

different ways of doing things. By making an effort to put away our ethnocentrism we will be able to affirm the God given diversity of cultures in the world.

There are also applications about cultural plurality to make to our ministries. Ministers must be sensitive to the cultural prejudices of their congregation. The minister is responsible to see that his congregation recognizes that there is no one culture that embodies the Christian faith and exhort them to put their security in God alone and not ourselves. The minister should teach why ethnocentrism is wrong from the Bible and apply it to the congregations lives. The minister may also provide experiences for the congregation to get involved and experience different cultures by organizing missions trips and other cultural events.

What we learn from Sherlock applies both to our ministry and personal lives. We need to be attuned to our cultural influences and bring them into line with God's word. We must recognize how culture is affected by sin and respond to cultural plurality. Care must be given to how we live our lives so that we will not be affected by the wrong influences of the world. With God's help let us do this.