

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

January 3 2016: A Lasting Influence: Christendom and Enlightenment

In the past year, I have been attending a Reformed Baptist church and getting a Reformed (Calvinist) or "confessional" perspective on Christianity. At this point, I am more or less fine with Calvinism or Reformed theology and recognize that it is consistent, draws logically from Scripture, and is at the very least much more doctrinally sound and defensible than the soft Arminianism and Dispensationalism I have been steeped in at the traditional Southern Baptist Church. This is to say, I'm not convinced that Calvinism is "right" and other systems like Arminianism are therefore "wrong" (or even potentially heretical), but rather that, by the comparison, Calvinism is "better". At the same time, however, I object on a practical basis with the standard Reformed ecclesiology (structure and practice of the church). To be fair, there's very little in Reformed theory and practice of the church that isn't *exactly* the same as all the other traditional establishment institutional churches I'm familiar with (Southern Baptist, Nazarene, Assemblies of God, Brethren, and a variety of nondenominational churches including Calvary Chapels and derivatives, a number of "Bible" churches, and even a few emerging churches); however, the Reformed context, with their "Regulative Principle of Worship", takes it up a notch by finding Scriptural justifications for what they do and, by the absence of agreed-upon scriptural reference, for what they don't do.

Across the spectrum, there is the view that the Sunday meeting time is essential, that the sermon is essential, that some sort of musical performance is extremely important if not essential, that formalized age-segregated religious education is extremely important if not essential. I am also aware that there is a strong tendency to find Scriptural justification for a denomination's (or simply an individual church's) characteristic practices and positions:

- The Southern Baptist denomination split from the larger American Baptist movement over the question of slavery. It wasn't long before Southern Baptist theologians, eminent scholars and men of high moral character in all other regards, found a defense for the American practice of slavery in both Old and New Testaments.
- The Presbyterian churches practice infant baptism; it is amusing to

me to be studying Reformed theology written from a Presbyterian perspective and have the Baptist preacher point out how the Presbyterians *improperly* find support for infant baptism in Scripture.

- Southern Baptists (and a number of other Protestant denominations) hold that drinking alcohol is sinful, and even come up with obviously contrived and strained explanations for how the wine that Jesus Himself drank in a First Century Jewish context was non-alcoholic.
- Many or most evangelical denominations and churches teach that evangelism or "soul-winning" is imperative for all believers.
- The Brethren are known for their foot-washing, which of course is drawn from the event where Jesus washed His disciple's feet and then told them to do likewise.
- The Seventh-Day Adventist denomination and a few others are known for insisting that the "worship" service must be held on Saturday, a position with obvious Scriptural lineage.

All of these theological positions are rejected - on Scriptural grounds - by most churches and denominations who themselves do not hold them. This suggests that any controversial theological position, that is, one that does not enjoy universal subscription, is suspect and probably specific to that church's or denomination's culture. Churches and denominations, as human institutions, most certainly have their own cultures of values and practices; the problem comes when a value or practice is claimed as a universal by virtue of its Scriptural justification.

Now, can the same thing be said of a (mostly or entirely) universal value or practice, as listed above? How solid is their Scriptural support? Or are they just other aspects of culture that, like all these others, are being defended by creative interpretation of Scripture? Considering all the thought I've given the subject, obviously I'm thinking they aren't the God-expected mandates that so many traditional-minded believers and clergy think they are. So where did they come from, then, if not directly from Scripture?

Maybe they come from our ancient traditions of Christendom and the more recent broad-based Enlightenment-influenced modern culture.

Christendom



In Acts and the epistles, it is clear that, after Christ departed, there are groups of believers gathering at least on Sunday in homes, being instructed by pastors who are required to "preach", supervised by elders, and served in desperate physical need by deacons. In the surviving bits and pieces of history from the first few centuries, we understand that the Christians were singing songs

in their gatherings, meeting in secret or at least discretely, and that "bishops" met on rare ecumenical occasions to settle serious issues of heresy and orthodoxy. It wasn't until the Edict of Milan and [Constantine's \[1\]](#) subsequent establishment of Christianity as the "official" religion of the Empire that the other trappings of the institutional church appeared: ornate buildings, professional clergy and church offices, elaborate liturgical productions, and other such aspects. Maybe before Constantine, pastors delivered Sunday morning sermons, but certainly afterwards they did. Maybe before Constantine, churches had hymns and instruments and choirs (probably not... almost certainly not), but certainly afterwards they did. Over the next thousand years and the development particularly of the Western Roman Catholic Church, this extensive religious and cultural expression we now refer to as "Christendom" formed - Christ's kingdom on earth. Even after the Protestant Reformation, in spite of an examination of the things characteristic of the established church (and occasional destruction of them), most of these aspects were carried over. After another 500 years, the common Western "Christendom" concept was well-established. Even today, remarks about Europe and America's "Judeo-Christian" roots refer to the same thing.

The church aspect of Christendom perpetuates itself. Pastors from an earlier, even more Christendom era train the next generation of pastors in seminaries and pass on the cultural defaults. Pastors organize their churches and set the expectations for the church people, who raise their children in that cultural setting and pass on the cultural defaults. In addition to cultural expectations about church structure and practices, there are Christendom-reflective expectations about society. Of course homosexuality is wrong; everyone knows that. Of course marriage is between a man and a woman; everyone knows that. Of course your children will grow up with the same cultural values, get married, have a number of children, the father will get a job and the mother will stay at home and keep house and raise the children.

Everyone knows that. The church doesn't *have* to do anything about marriage, childrearing, and being responsible human beings, because those are the tacit values reinforced by everyone in Christendom.

Christendom is a paradigm. A paradigm is an all-encompassing perspective that colors everything a person looks at. Paradigms are very hard to escape; one has to be willing to recognize that one's perspectives are informed by a paradigm, and to be willing to step back, look at a particular issue objectively, and assess whether or not the operative paradigm is actually "true" or "successful" or if another might be more appropriate. I am suggesting that pastors and traditionally-minded church people (and maybe even a lot of emergers) are "stuck" in a Christendom paradigm; when the word "preach" is encountered in Scripture, the Christendom definition ("delivering a religious lecture during a Sunday morning church service") is immediately and unquestioningly applied. Same thing goes for seeing "liturgical religious service" for the Scriptural "church gathering". Same thing for music.

The Enlightenment



Starting in the 17th Century, driven by a host of Western philosophers including [David Hume](#) [2] and [Immanuel Kant](#) [3], a new paradigm centered on human reason began to assert itself. Science became the primary means of discovering truth, and eventually, "science" merged with "naturalism",

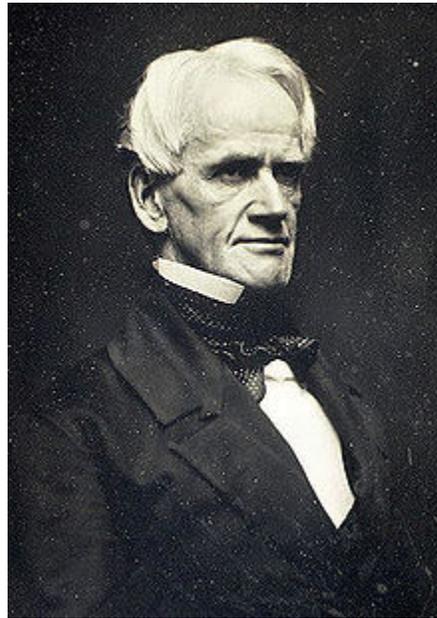


and so evolutionism was inevitable, which Darwin merely formalized and became a rallying point. Government structure was reconsidered, and old structures such as king and landed aristocracy were reevaluated - and in some cases, thrown off in bloody revolution. Religion came under scrutiny, and it became acceptable, even fashionable, to identify as deist, agnostic, and even atheist. Both Hume and Kant made considerable contributions to Enlightenment perspectives on religion, and of course Hume was an unabashed atheist. The Enlightenment was a counter paradigm to the Christendom paradigm - there was an uneasy coexistence at the beginning, but "progressive" Enlightenment concepts have aggressively gained ground over merely "traditional" Christendom concepts. At this point, it is reasonable to say that Christendom is gone in everything but the formal organization of Europe and the West, but The Enlightenment has

progressed to Modernism and the contemporary secular-humanist culture firmly in place today.

Of course, the American colonies formed during the Enlightenment period, and much of the rejection of English rule and the subsequent construction of the United States system of government was influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and political theory. It might even not be unreasonable to say that America is an Enlightenment nation more than part of Christendom, and that uneasy tension between the Enlightenment popular society and the Christendom-descended church culture is playing out even now.

Education was also reconsidered in view of Enlightenment ideas. In time, the Enlightenment produced the "Prussian Model" of industrialized education, in which children were separated into age groups in classes with professional teachers who teach from a standardized curriculum and assess success or failure via tests. [Horace Mann](#) [4] was successful in promoting the adoption of the "Prussian Model" in the United States to educate generations of future laborers in the necessary skills of life, citizenship, and productivity. This became the paradigm for government schools, and in a few generations, Americans had accepted this new paradigm as the way education of the young was supposed to be done. Parents hand their children over to structured age-graded schools and take little additional role in their education.





Enlightenment progressivism being what it is, the "scientific improvement" of education didn't stop there. In the early 20th Century, atheist [John Dewey](#) [5] produced more theories of education and arranged (with the mutual efforts of like-minded colleagues) to implement his secular and psychology-based techniques in public schools. Again, gradually, American parents have accepted all of this "progress" as the best way to educate their children. Now, since nearly all Americans, including church people, hold this default cultural view of education, it is no surprise that it has been carried into the church as the dominant model for religious education - at least the age-grading and "professional"

teacher parts, and the "progressive" techniques of Dewey and his ilk to some extent as well.

More Enlightenment influence than education practices have been carried into church culture by church people who are also permeated by the dominant secular culture. While not as uniform as age-graded Sunday School, evolutionism has moved into the church as "theistic evolution". "Church Growth" methods are informed by business development theories and advertising techniques. Theology has been infected by "higher criticism" and "social justice". Perhaps the dividing line between "liberal" and "conservative" churches is the extent to which Enlightenment or Christendom culture is dominant.

Teetotaling is another example of an idea that is held broadly by church cultures despite its reliance on Enlightenment pragmatism and appeal to government rather than on Scripture. Neither Scripture nor Christendom ever condemned the drinking of alcohol, but rather (very appropriately) drunkenness. However, starting in the late 18th Century and reaching its peak in the 19th Century, the teetotal or temperance movement grew from a pragmatic notion that many societal ills came from alcohol consumption, and the solution is to eradicate all use of



alcohol. [Frances Willard](#) [6] was a founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and its president for many years. It is significant that it claims to be "Christian" - at that time, Christendom culture was still strong in the public square, and alcohol consumption was condemned on *moral* (and thus, religious) grounds - but the movement included other moral principles, such as women's right to vote, that, in addition to the primary teetotaling doctrine, have no basis in Scripture. The WCTU was organized (as so many groups today) to accomplish its goals by influencing government policy. It was

ultimately successful with the Prohibition amendment - which proved to be a disaster. However, even though the temperance movement dissipated after Prohibition failed and was repealed, the teetotal cultural influence lives on in many churches and denominations - with Scriptural defense that didn't exist before the 18th Century.

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The thesis is: The church has been influenced by the cultural paradigms of Christendom and the Enlightenment (and maybe others) to establish values and practices and justify them from Scripture even though they are not clearly found in Scripture. The thesis of the influence from external cultural paradigms, if true, has significant ramifications on the church and the world to which it is supposed to be "salt and light". In response to last year's Supreme Court decision regarding homosexual marriage, this [World magazine editorial](#) [7] includes the following remark:

The virtues of chastity and lifelong marriage are enriching, but after 50 years, religious communities have still not devised a compelling response to the sexual revolution. The legal redefinition of marriage could take place when and where it did only because the majority of Americans lacked a sound understanding of the nature of man and the nature of marriage.

It is true that the church has not presented an integrated and appealing Scripture--based model for marriage, not in teaching and less in practice. According to my thesis, this is because the church, operating under Christendom assumptions, doesn't understand it *needs* to defend a cultural default. What the church doesn't understand is that **Christendom is over**, that the cultural defaults have changed, and the world needs to be engaged the way it *is* and not the way it *used to be*.

Our Christendom assumptions must be reexamined in the light of Scripture, and we must recognize our inclination to interpret Scripture to accommodate our cultural biases. In the same way, we must detect Enlightenment influences in the church, not limited to religious education practices and the presumed need to accommodating "science". We absolutely must not fall to the same condemnation Jesus made of the Pharisees, who "left the commandments of God and held to the traditions of men". It is true that Scripture clearly sets forth the structure of the family, and the need for the church to reinforce it, in a way that it does *not* clearly set forth the practice of the Sunday morning sermon.

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1. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine the Great and Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great_and_Christianity)
2. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Hume
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant
4. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace Mann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Mann)
5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dewey
6. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frances_Willard_\(suffragist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frances_Willard_(suffragist))
7. [www.worldmag.com/2015/11/the future for defenders of marriage](http://www.worldmag.com/2015/11/the_future_for_defenders_of_marriage)