

Christ, Culture, Truth and the Battle for a New Normal

By Bruce Smith, Author of Soul Storm
www.soulstormsite.com

Have you ever thought about what is “normal”? What does that mean, after all? Does your life look and feel “normal” to you? Is what we see on television soap operas, situation comedies, and dramas “normal”? Are the supermodels on the cover of magazines “normal”? Are celebrities like Howard Stern, Paris Hilton, George Clooney, and Justin Timberlake “normal”? Is it “normal” to jump into bed with everyone you have a love affair with? Is it “normal” to snort a little of this, pop a little of that, chase a swallow of this, and have another hit of that? Is it “normal” to jump from one marriage to another in our quest to be loved? Is it “normal” to allow our ethics to vary from situation to situation as we seek our own good? What is normal? Who defines normal?

These questions are important and without giving such questions some thought we are prone to define “normal” according to current fads and the interests of the populace. Likewise, our ideas of truth, integrity, honor, and decency are up for grabs without some sure foundation by which we judge normalcy.

I have pondered this question for many years now. As a single, thirty-eight year old man, moderately decent looking by the world’s standards, in good physical condition, athletic, and able to complete most sentences I start, I seem to be “normal” to most people. Yet, if you consider the polls of Americans at large, I don’t fall into the categories which most would consider normal. I will explain.

Somehow, by God’s grace, a product of divorce when I was only two years old, I have lived my life without the statistically typical broken home baggage which seems to be associated with this reality. I grew up knowing I was loved, and did not experience Freud’s “longing for a father” which would leave me empty, sad, and dysfunctional. Additionally, aside from a cigarette or two when I was ten or eleven, I have never even tried a drug of any sort. I don’t ever recall telling my mother “I hate you”, nor did I ever tell my prodigal father that I hated him, nor do I recall every wanting to run away from home. Demographically speaking, it seems I am less than “normal” when it comes to the sexuality deal also. I have made love to only one woman in my life, and that was my wife, and it was during our fifteen years of marriage. Now as a single man, by God’s grace, I remain committed to biblical sexual fidelity, that is to say, I remain abstinent until I marry again. I am also a father raising three children full time. I am told this is not statistically “normal” either. I enjoy being with my kids, and I am generally a very “happy” person. What the heck is wrong with me? Why am I not normal? I ask these questions in jest, obviously.

The reality is that we live in a world that offers us a view of normalcy which is in stark contrast with the intentions of God. What God intended for us, and what He intended for the world at large, has gone awry. In truth, what is now considered normal does not remotely reflect what God declares as normative living. Our culture views, our entertainment, our relational patterns, our goals and desires have been grossly malformed and do not resemble normalcy as revealed in the person of Christ who came as The pure person, The perfect resemblance of humanity, ecce homo (from the Latin for “Behold, the man”). Humanity, and our cultural identity and human interaction is defined in the person of Jesus.

Recently, this wrestling with and thinking about normalcy came into sharp focus amidst a number of circumstances. As I have watched the lives of many people around me lately, the desire to write on this issue resurfaced. Just a few days ago someone called me after reading my book, *Soul Storm: finding God Amidst Disaster*, and asked for some counsel regarding struggles they were facing. Essentially, the questions were about this person finding their way back to normalcy, biblical normalcy. Others around me that I cherish have suffered so much pain and heartache, to much of it as a result of choices which so clearly resemble the modus operandi of our culture. In seeking cultural normalcy and the cultural view of life and love they have wound up devastated, broken, emotionally empty, and spiritually desperate.

On Mother's Day, I spent the afternoon with a Christian family that absolutely inspired me. Spending time with this family, far from "normal" statistically speaking, left me craving the kind of biblical normalcy they had attained in great measure. This family presented a glimpse of what life in God was intended to be and look like. The family consisted of a mother and father who had been married for nearly thirty years and have seven children. Not only were all of the children there that day, but they were all evidently well-adjusted, happy, loving, and interesting people who adored their mother! Isn't that freaky? More than that, clearly these parents were in love with each other and flat out loved their kids. There was no hint of physical or emotional exhaustion in either parent. Further, the kids apparently loved and enjoyed each other! Still further, the nurturing love that existed in that family extended beyond the parents and kids as they were caring for a great aunt who had just turned 100 years old! She was actually living in the house with them. Amazingly, everyone, even the kids, loved and interacted with this elderly woman. And it wasn't like they just had to. They were loving and living it up. Ask any member of this family what the secret to such abnormal living is and they would all tell you it's their devotion to Christ. That is the kind of normal God offers all of us. The problem is we want the same result with a different approach, a culturally normal approach.

It has been stated that insanity defined is the desire for a different result in life while going after it the same way one always has. We all want to know the thrills of a loving family, yet how many of us date and marry the kind of people that would contribute to that goal? Further, how many of us act like the kind of person that could build that kind of reality?

If we pursue the soap opera version of reality which our culture so admires and is so entertained by, how can we possibly be part of the kind of family I spent time with on Mother's Day? We all want to know the joys of sex. Yet, how many in our society can really say that sex is joyful and fulfilling in the biblical sense? How can we expect to know the bliss of biblical sex without a commitment to the biblical imperatives for such an achievement? It is insanity—wanting a different result all the while pursuing it the same way our culture advertises it. It won't work. And this was Jesus' message to us. It remains His message for us. If we want to know life as it should be lived, we must abandon the "normal" cultural perspective, and find our way back to the real normal. If we are to get there we must understand how Christ views culture and how we are to view it and interact with it as well. For in the end, the transformation of our view of reality and a cultural transformation are what God has in mind.

All this being so, my goal in the pages that follow is to help us gain some perspective. In order to get back to the real "normal" as human beings we must ask ourselves what normal should look like in ourselves and in society as a whole. In an attempt to arrive at some conclusions I would like to begin by assessing our view of Christ and Culture. That is to say, my attempt here is to help us answer the following questions, "What is Jesus' perspective concerning the prevailing cultural worldview?" "How does He view culture?" And, "What is His response to culture?" The answers to these questions should lead us to strive for the same approach and perspective.

This following is a multiple choice question-- you must pick the one phrase that is most indicative of Christ's posture toward the world. Be careful, because your answer could very well foretell how you view truth and ultimately how you live in, navigate, and impact your world. Here are the options:

- a. Christ and culture
- b. Christ of culture
- c. Christ against culture
- d. Christ over culture
- e. Christ, transformer of culture

These are tough choice unless you have really thought this one through. Matthew 5:13--16 gives us some help here, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Clearly, as revealed in this passage, it is understood that there is a different quality at work in the lives of those being instructed in this brief quote. One group has some to offer another group. One group has the "light" (the biblically normative view of reality), while the other is lacking and in need of this "light" (proper awareness of reality). One group is seemingly called to acknowledge their difference and to live accordingly while being aware of the darkness which surrounds the other group. Jesus is instructing His followers to be aware that their view of truth, life, and God is the view that others must embrace if they are to see their way clearly and find the life God has called them to. The words of Jesus here reveal His approach to and care for those lost in the cultural sea of relativism.

In light of this passage, let's break down the test, option by option.

- a. Christ and Culture

This option asserts that there is no problem having both Christ *and* Culture. We can have both. Essentially, proponents of this choice adhere to the idea that our lives can be categorized. There are God moments, and then there are "secular" moments. Church is for Sunday, the rest of the time is mine! There are moral spheres and then there are arenas where we operate according to the setting we are in. As long as we claim some belief in Christ, that sort of covers all of our actions. The fad of the day is o.k. as long as we continue to have our Christian belief and ceremony to boot. As long as I perform my religious duties at church and in the community, my other actions are off the moral radar. The church expects certain things from me and the business world expects others. The difficulty here is that, clearly, there are moments when God's view of reality differs dramatically from the prevailing cultural view. In these moments, logically, we cannot be true to both Christ and Culture.

- b. Christ of Culture

The idea here is that the culture actually is a demonstration of who Christ is. That is to say, because we are all inherently good, anything we do, or say, or believe, or participate in as a people is a representation of who Christ is. Surely our activities, proponents of this view suggest, regardless of what sociologists, psychologists, and/or theologians say are all a reflection of who we are supposed to be. After all, deep down inside we are all good-hearted people.

In this view there are no moral imperatives that should call our various appetites into question. Our entertainment industries are under no calling to present products or works or artistic expression which are subject to any moral review. Desperate Housewives, The Sopranos, Sex and the City, nor any other runaway hit show can be judged by anything other than the dollars brought in and the size of the audience. The very success of these and other shows demonstrate, in fact, that this is who we are, right? And because we are such "good" people, it's all good. Surely Paris Hilton deserves a break from her jail sentence. She is such a "good" girl, and she is clearly a reflection of what is good in all of us. After all, a "loving" god would not expect us to be anything other than who we are right now. A "good" god would not judge us. God must be a god "of" the people. One difficulty with this option that should be more than a bit obvious is that such a view essentially allows people to define who God is and isn't, rather than God being the definer of who we ought to be. Further, the idea that we are all inherently good, and culture is inherently good has some very difficult theological and practical problems. We only need to watch the news, read the paper, look at history, and read courtroom transcripts to know we are not such good people.

c. Christ against Culture

"Look at all these sinners!" This would be the motto for those that espouse this view. "God is mad, angry, ticked-off at this pathetic world, and I'm mad too". Basically, this view asserts that Christ wants and has nothing to do with culture other than to bash it and call it to "repent for the day is at hand". Because we are all inherently sinful creatures, there is nothing redeeming about the culture. Christians, from this perspective, tend to pull out of society and sort of huddle amongst themselves. This is the "Come out from among them" approach to life. One cannot afford to be corrupted or stained by the enemy. Historically, this would have been the view of early fundamentalists. The glaring weakness in this approach to the culture is that we cannot expect to have any hope in bringing about change in the world. Further, scripture reminds us that it is the love of God which draws others to repentance. In order for love to draw others, it must be applied up close and personal.

d. Christ over Culture

This view suggests that while culture is good, with perhaps some weaknesses, Christ is clearly the better choice, but a choice that is unattainable, unrealistic. The bottom line for those who select this option is that we cannot and should not ever be expected to live up to Christ's standard for life. That being so, we ought to realize that this culture is all we have, and in the end, if we are more good than bad then it will all pan out and we will be o.k. This is the "it could be worse" view of morality. "I will live a pretty good life, try not to kill or steal too much, love my wife *most* of the time, take my kids on vacation...and that's enough". God will make up the difference.

Because the spiritual life is far too unrealistic to attain, in the eyes of those who embrace this view, and because Christ's way is so far from earthly reality, we just have to accept ourselves as we are, not put too much pressure on ourselves, and trust that this unreachable God will look past our weaknesses in the end. Scripturally, this option is not a possibility for a number of reasons. First, we are told to be pursuers of righteousness, and we are strongly admonished to pursue perfection. We are called to be "Holy". Jesus actually suggested that adherence to the Ten Commandments (even if we could keep them all) would not be enough to attain this kind of perfection. Jesus suggested that His standard went beyond the actual actions represented by the commandments and extended to the motives, the mind, and the heart. We are also told in scripture that the eternal punishment for our sins, our falling short of the standard, is eternal separation from God.

A total surrender to and pursuit of Jesus is our only "out". As Paul writes, "Should we sin all the more so that grace may abound all the more? By no means!" Romans 6:1,2

e. Christ, Transformer of Culture

And so, we come to the last choice on our little test. As I am sure you have guessed by now, this is the option that best reflects Jesus' posture toward our world. What is interesting about this choice is its ability to address all the other inadequate approaches listed above. Unlike the other approaches listed here, this option clearly shows us who and what we are, and how Christ is different from us, while it affirms Jesus' intention to love us, and it demonstrates His desire to impact and direct every area of our lives. This view offers us a holistic worldview which calls and enables us to be who we were created to be, and not what we choose to be. It presents us with a proper view of the pursuit of normal. Further, this view offers us a compass which enables us to navigate all the moral dilemmas we face in life.

In the recent movie, *Lucky You*, Drew Barrymore plays the role of a young woman, with some sense of a moral compass still intact. She meets a fast-moving, emotionally and relationally dysfunctional card player who lives a risky and unprincipled life. At one crucial juncture in the movie, when Huck has lost all options for raise \$10,000.00 to enter the World Series of Poker, he accepts a bet from another high-roller who offers him the entry fee if Huck can run five miles and play 18 holes of golf, shooting a strong score, all under three hours. As the scene unfolds, Huck, assisted by his girlfriend who holds the stopwatch, and ridiculed all along the way by the man holding the money, makes it to the final hole with just minutes to spare. Finally, with one stroke to spare, and less than a minute left on the timer, he measures up a 30 foot putt, stands over the ball, lets the putter fly, and the ball find the cup. Game over, Huck wins the cash! Not so quick. Just as he is celebrating and his dejected opponent is sulking, Drew Barrymore looks up from the stop watch and lets them both know that Huck missed the three hour deadline by two seconds. Ouch. With friends like that...

"Why could you not have helped me out?" Huck asks. "Help you out? You mean cheat, right?" replied his girlfriend. "Anyone would have done it. It's just two seconds", Huck asserts. Barrymore's reply, "I don't cheat for anyone".

Why is this scene relevant to the discussion at hand? Because we live in a world that wants desperately to assert moral relativism, the idea that truth is relative, and no absolute truth exists. Unfortunately, later in the movie, Drew's character, in contrast to the principled approach on the links, seems to move away from the principled approach to life, if but for a moment, when she finds herself in bed with this new friend. The movie, in good ways and not so good ways, highlights the dilemma of our cultural embrace of moral relativism. Apart from the obvious logical inconsistency in suggesting *absolutely* that no absolute truth exists, the reality is that if no truth exist then all form of communication, legislation, moral instruction, education, and all human interaction is entirely meaningless. If no truth exists, then nothing we say amounts to anything more than a stammering waste of breath and time. Further, we should not be dismayed, depressed, or disturbed in any way when and if certain choices we make, without any regard to a moral compass, result in consequences we are not happy with. They are just decision and the aftermath is just what it is. Good is bad and bad is good. Sad is happy and happy is sad in a world without truth. Violence is kindness and kindness is violence is a relationship without moral boundaries. In a world without truth there is good sex or bad sex or given sex or stolen sex. Without a boundary giver, it is just sex.

The Christ as Transformer of culture approach, the "cheating" scene from *Lucky You*, and the eventual aftermath of this interaction between the characters (Huck is eventually convinced of the merits of this kind of moral courage) demonstrate the transformative power of our pursuing a truth based approach to life. As we do life with a view toward a standard beyond ourselves we find a source for the transformation of our souls and the souls of others.

How different would our world look if all of us operated according to Jesus' ethic all the time? Wow. What a different place we would have, and what a different people we would be. The extent to which we strive for this kind of life determines our level of peace, stability, and purpose, individually, in our families, and as a culture. As we make choices which reflect Jesus' standard for life we are increasingly made more into His image. Likewise, as we direct, encourage, and lead our families to do the same, our families are transformed. As we teach our children the value of standards for entertainment, friends, choices, and behavior, not only do they become what God has called them to be, but they also affect those around them. We ought to teach our kids early on what it means to know God and we ought to demonstrate our level of excitement and enthusiasm regarding our view of God's transforming power. In our families and in all of our actions as individuals we are compelled by Jesus to embrace His view of normal and to share that view with others.

The question now arises, "If Jesus' goal is to transform me and to transform society, what is my part?"

Becoming Transformers

If we are not to pull away from society and hide ourselves away from all the ungodliness in the world, and if we are not to accept and embrace all that goes on in the world, how do we proceed? How can we serve a holy (perfect, pure, with no hint of sin) God, in an unholy world? How can we attain some form of "godliness" while not becoming useless, pious, self-consumed do-gooders?

Again, Jesus' interaction with others offers us a good example as to how we proceed. We are told in scripture that Matthew threw a big bash upon making his decision to follow Christ. The scriptures tell us that Jesus "reclined" with a bunch of sinners, tax collectors and the like at the party. He spent time with others who worldview was not yet like His own.

On another occasion, we are told of Jesus' first miracle which took place at a party-it was Jesus' coming out party as a miracle worker! He turned water into wine. Yes, wine. Jesus enjoyed being with others, and He enjoyed seeing others have a good time. He was aware, of course, of boundaries.

So what's the point? Is fun, adventurous living acceptable to God? Are we to live life to the full as Christians? Is it o.k. to throw a Super Bowl party, attend a parade, go to a big wedding feast (the place where Jesus chose to begin his miracle working), be in the presence of those who might not believe as we believe? Well, if we want to be like Jesus, we had better spend some time rubbing salt where it is meant to be rubbed. If we will not hang out with those for whom Christ died how will we impact the world? If we are not close enough to "do life" with real people in the real world outside the safety of our cathedrals and "worship centers", how can we claim to be embracing the example and aim of the Christ we claim to follow? Jesus' life testifies to the reality that to be transformative we must live up close with those who need His

love. As we become more normal in the biblical sense of the word, we are called to share this new normal with others.

The Christian life is not about a dull, rule obeying, boring, and rigid lifestyle. On the contrary, normal life, with all of its' God ordained joy, peace, and fulfillment is opened up to us in full as we embrace Jesus standard for living. We can enjoy a good jazz club, a ball game, the symphony, an art museum, travel, a good movie, Broadway, and so much more as we live with a heightened sense of what reality is and is not. Life opens up to us in 3-D when we view it from the eyes of Christ. There has never been a figure with a larger view of life and all it was meant to be than that of Jesus. To the extent we embrace His view of truth, culture, and living we can have what was intended for us; life and that abundantly.

Yes we need worship, yes we need fellowship with believers, yes we need regular biblical teaching, yes we need prayer (and to be "praying without ceasing" as the scriptures tell us), and yes we need time away from this antics of this crazy world. But, we must also, and we need to do this intentionally, make time to be with folks who have not yet seen and embraced the beauty of the gospel and the abundantly joyous life found in God alone. Sociologists and researchers who study the church tell us that within 6 months of becoming Christians most believers lose all contact with un-churched people. How do we defend this in light of the life Christ lived? We do need to change our patterns of living and we do need to create a space that is conducive for our spiritual growth as new and growing Christians. Yet, we must not forget those who are just as lost in this world as we were. Throughout the gospel accounts we see Christ talking with those people that the church leaders found to be unworthy of their time and effort. We find Him over and over again in places the religious "leaders" would never go. And time and time again, over and over, He brings life transformation in those situations. Jesus wanted to see everyone embrace the "new normal" He offered.

The Church is the hope of the world. There is no other organization, club, team, agency, therapy clinic or institution that offers the possibility of a soul transformation. As Billy Graham said many years ago, the vast majority of those who are in mental institutions could in all likelihood be released from their misery if only they would come to Christ for forgiveness. It is there we find our way back to normal.

The Church, and that means the body of believers called by God to Himself, is to be the extension of Christ to the world. Christ is not against the world, he is not created by culture, he is not so far removed from the people of our culture that He cannot reach them, and He is not equal to the other choices of our culture. Jesus is the transformer of culture. This work of transformation takes place as His sons and daughters live and move, touch, relate and interact with those around them in such a way that the on-lookers see a transformed life, are held in awe, and are themselves brought to a point of change. A full soul makeover is what God intends for each of us and for culture as a whole. This is His plan in the world.

How did Jesus do this while he walked the earth? If you read the accounts as revealed in the gospels you will find that Jesus enjoyed the company of others, even hookers, tax collectors, the self-consumed, and the adulterers. We are told in scripture that the image of God is in each of us. We are indeed sinful creatures in desperate need of God's salvation, yet, the mark of the creator is still evident. This is why, even in the darkest of people, we can see that "spark" which is there by divine placement. Jesus, God in the flesh, was continually aware of that which He placed in us, and longed to redeem what the enemy, sinful nature, poor choices, and the cruelty of a broken world had stolen from the hearts of those He encountered. Jesus literally wept over those whom He was calling to Himself, but refused to come. Jesus was more aware than we ever could be of the destructive and truly pitiful consequences of sin working its way into our thinking.

In enjoying the company of others Jesus was always aware of the boundaries which were created for their good. And in His engagement with those people, while affirming their dignity, spark, and humanity, He pointedly thrust them toward God's best. While affirming the place of male/female relationships He showed the clear life-giving boundaries of God. While affirming the attractions between the sexes He pointed out the boundaries which were designed to keep individuals and cultures from the destructive addictions associated with the breaking of those boundaries. While affirming the pain and hurt caused by injustice He directed onlookers and hearers to abandon revenge and called them to pursue the way of forgiveness instead. While affirming the need for spiritual leadership He rejected the practices of religious manipulation and oppression. While affirming the character of the "party deity" (all of heaven rejoices, throws a party, when each person comes to faith) He always made clear that in breaking the boundaries and pursuing excess trouble would ensue. Jesus was always enabling others to navigate the waters of life with precision and life giving force. Love, love of God and love of others, was the true north to which Jesus pointed everyone in every situation. It was never about the "me" nor was it about "consenting" adults or cultures. Many people, cultures, and nations consent and bring horror to the lives of untold numbers. Hitler and his "consenting" cast are a case in point as are the moral relativists of our day who lead many into a spiritually deadly bankruptcy of soul and spirit.

Let's remember that our light is to be seen, and our seasoning is to be applied. As we know here in New Orleans, the Zatarans has to go in the water if the crawfish are going to have any spice! There are enormous questions in the hearts and minds of the people around us and our culture is wrestling with issues that only God can bring any adequate answers to. If the Church withdraws from the public arena how will our culture be transformed? The Church is the light which God uses to bring in the New Normal our world so needs.

The church is the hope of the world. If you are a part of the church, you are charged with bringing that hope to those around you. If you do not consider yourself part of God's family, or if you have come to a new realization that though you thought you were part of His Church and you really are not, NOW IS YOUR TIME. If you crave life beyond what this world has to offer and you want to embrace Jesus view of the normal life, it is time to offer yourself to him. Do it today. Just ask God to make you like THE M AN, Jesus, who defines what normal is and enables us to pursue it.

Bruce Smith

www.soulstormsite.com