

Countercultural Sexual Ethics

It is generally agreed that we no longer live in what has been known as Christendom. It has been suggested that a better biblical motif to describe the current time is that of exile. And in exile the voice of the faithful people of God is often at odds with the surrounding culture (cf. the book of Daniel as a template for exilic living).

This immediately raises two questions for evangelicals:

- Are we called to offer a counter-sexual ethic to our culture which is contrary to the prevailing narrative?
- Can a countercultural sexual ethic be good news for society?

Substantial parts of the Old Testament describe how the prophets brought the word of the Lord to God's covenant people. What we must note, but is uncomfortable to read, is that the countercultural voices of the prophets were more often rejected than received. The two consequences of this were that, firstly, God's covenant people were not the means of worldwide blessing he had intended them to be, and, secondly, the nations were not able to see the 'light' that God had planned would be offered through Israel (Isaiah 49:6).

Under the New Covenant, it is still God's intention that his people will speak his word into the cultures of their time. Peter writes: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' Jesus said: 'You are the light of the world' (Matthew 5:14), suggesting that his followers would bring a word that would penetrate darkness, bringing the goodness and grace of God into cultures the world over.

Returning to our original questions, it therefore appears that the challenge to God's people is always to be primarily listening to his voice rather than that of culture (this of course must not be understood to mean that we are somehow disconnected from the world God has given us to live in), even if – like the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles – we find that voice unwelcome and at odds with prevailing narratives.

And a voice that speaks this 'word' (God's perspective/narrative) into the lives and affairs of men and women is always good news even if it is at odds with contemporary culture.

None of the above tells us what God is actually saying to us at this time; rather it is offered simply to highlight the very real biblical calling that the Church may have at this time to live to a different 'drum beat' – one which challenges the cultural norms and the prevailing philosophies and values, even at the expense of its status/position in society.

It needs to be said – in case it is misunderstood – that the prophetic voice of the Church is not limited to the issue of sexual ethics. Jesus, Paul and Scripture as a whole speak prophetically to humanity about a whole range of life issues – and we would be doing Scripture an injustice if we focused only on sexual ethics. However, the prophetic voice of Scripture does speak into issues of sexual ethics and we will be doing an equal injustice to ignore that voice at this time.

RESOURCES:

Chris Wright, *Jeremiah* (Bible Speaks Today) IVP, 2014.

Patrick Whitworth, *Prepare for Exile: A New Spirituality and Mission for the Church* SPCK, 2008 (see also introduction in Books)