

Cultural Christianity Or Biblical Christianity?

Cultural differences can cause us to be misinformed about the information we are being given.

We all have a culture, and we bring into the church examples of our culture, for it is very hard to shake off our culture.

We are going to consider in this article cultural Christianity and we will in the end, I hope, come to see that often the Christianity we express is cultural.

The faith that we have is often cultural.

I hope this article will be a challenge to all of us to begin to re-examine our faith and ask the question: *'Have I forgotten the Biblical faith and Christianity?'*

In this article I am going to use the words faith and Christianity interchangeably.

Faith is something we develop as we live life, it is more than a set of beliefs.

Faith is a composite collection of things we have experienced in life.

What God do we worship?

What do we think of when we think of God?

Our belief of what God is like will be the result of any previous religious experience and teaching, in other words the culture we first lived in.

As a child we most likely were introduced to God as a father, so our experience of our own physical father shaped our idea of God.

God was like our physical father who was very strict, punishing us for every mistake and at times very unfair in his judgement.

Or God was like our physical father who was weak and at most times not present in our lives.

If we attended a church the attitude and actions of the minister who was *"a man of God"* influenced our idea of what God was like.

I ask the question, *'Do we really know Who God is?'*

Sometimes our concept of God is very culturally shaped.

Sometimes that concept is **not** Biblically shaped.

We all have sung in church services the song about the *"God of our fathers."*

Often we look at the *"fathers"* in God's Word and consider them as the people who worshipped God in the most pure way.

We think, when reading of their life history, that this is the way things ought to be.

One of the great “fathers” in the Old Testament is Abraham, and if we examine it closely we will find that Abraham’s faith was often very cultural.

Abraham often acted in cultural ways in his life.

Genesis 20:1-3 [NIV] *“Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there **Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.”** Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.”*

Why did Abraham introduce Sarah as his sister?

Why was Abimelech so fearful when he found out that Sarah was also the wife of Abraham?

Genesis 20:11 [NIV] *“Abraham replied, “I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’”*

Abraham was fearful for his own life, that the king would kill him to take Sarah into his harem, if he introduced Sarah as his wife.

What Abraham did was to use the culture of that time to protect himself and Sarah.

Local culture dictated that the marriage of a man to a woman who was also his half sister was a special sacred union and that anyone who broke that union would be under a curse.

God intervened in a dream to make this known to the king to protect the royal line from Adam to Christ.

Abraham had acted in a cultural way.

Genesis 16:1-4 [NIV] *“Now **Sarai**, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “**The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.**” Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.”*

Where did this idea of Sarah’s come from?

Sarah was responding to one of the laws that existed at this time in the culture of those in the area where Abraham was dwelling.

Archaeology has found this written cultural law stating that if the wife was barren the wife may offer her handmaid to her husband to bear him children.

Abraham and Sarah were acting in faith according to the culture of their day.

Genesis 15:1-3 [NIV] *“After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “**O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?**” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*

Where did the idea of a servant in Abraham’s house becoming his heir come from?

Again it was the custom and culture of those among whom Abraham was living.

Genesis 22:1-2 [NIV] *“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”*

The word translated “God” here is the Hebrew “*Ēlôhîym*”, literally “*Gods*” **and can also be used in conjunction with angels, judges or magistrates not always the one true God.**

Abraham was being tested but the one testing him may not have been the One True Creator God!

Archaeology reveals that at this time in history it was the custom to offer the firstborn as a sacrifice to the gods worshipped by those in whose culture Abraham was living.

Thousands of small pots have been unearthed containing the ashes of small children, and tablets of stone recording this child sacrifice to the local gods.

Was Abraham following the culture of this area, offering Isaac as a sacrifice?

Isaac was his first born!

Genesis 22:3-14 [NIV] *“Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” **Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.** So Abraham called that place *The LORD Will Provide*. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”*

God stopped this sacrifice of the firstborn and directed Abraham’s gaze to a “ram caught in a thicket.”

Archaeology has revealed that “*a ram caught in a thicket*” was one of the household gods that was worshipped as part of the culture of the day. Example of this can be seen in the British Museum in London.

What God was telling Abraham was to sacrifice the culture that has shaped his idea of what God was like, and seek to know Him by what He personally revealed to Abraham in their relationship.

In the account of Abraham’s life after this event there is no record of him acting according to the culture of his day.

Every church denomination has a culture that has influenced their image of God, some for decades.

We need to examine our faith to see if this past culture is shaping the way we see the Creator God we worship.

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 [NIV] *“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse, the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.”*

As a result of this we judge each other by the blessings or curses in their lives.

Is this the Biblical God revealed by Jesus Christ His Only Son?

Matthew 7:1-2 [NIV] *“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

A warning against judging others.

John 3:17 [NIV] *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

This is why Christ came and died. Not at this time to judge but to save humanity.

Why was the law given?

Romans 7:7 [NIV] *“What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”*

To reveal sin and its evil effects.

How are we to fulfil the aim of the law?

Romans 13:8-10 [NIV] *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbour. **Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.**”*

Such love is **not** merely an outward behaviour but is the expression of the inward life we live.

In order to love people and thus spontaneously fulfil the law, we need to be transformed in our lives by a new source of life power, the Holy Spirit.

We need the God who is love in us to transform our life to one of spontaneous love for all other humans.

Romans 12:1-2 [NIV] *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

This is how our mind is re-educated by our Creator God.

The Old Testament Covenant was a culture, created by God, but with a vastly different goal in mind to that of the New Covenant era in which you and I live.

The Old Covenant and its culture was to prove two things.

a) How under our own strength it was impossible to keep the Laws of God and be free from sin against that Holy Creator God.

b) To show the desperate need that humanity has for a Saviour. A perfect being who could be a substitute for our deserved death, [**Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23**].

New Covenant Christianity is not a religion based on Old Covenant rituals but has the basis of a sacrificial loving relationship with our Creator God and our fellow human beings.

John 13:34-35 [NIV] *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

This is how people will know that we are disciples of Christ [Christians].

This love is a sacrificial type of love.

John 15:12-14 [NIV] *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

To lay down our lives, our time and talents, for others and make them our friends.

This is exactly what Jesus Christ did for us.

He now counts us as His friends.

Let each of us on our knees before God re-visit our faith to see if it is based on our culture or on Holy Scripture pertaining to the New Covenant, introduced to us by Jesus Christ our Saviour and Master.