

# **SOME CULTURAL ASPECTS OF AMERICAN CHURCHES OF CHRIST**

Although we want to “speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent,” there are many things that characterize us that are a product of our culture. These tend to be in the areas of liberty where expedients are used as aids to the carrying out of Biblical teaching. Others may come from cultural factors which may differ from place to place. However, we should always remember that they are not doctrinal points and can be changed when that proves to be expedient. The following is a listing of some of the more obvious culturally derived expedients that characterize us as a movement:

**THE HOUR AND FREQUENCY OF ASSEMBLY (EXCEPT FOR MEETING ON THE LORD’S DAY).** The evidence in the New Testament of a regular meeting on Sunday is found in 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Acts 20:7, Rev. 1:10. In his comprehensive survey of the history of the Sunday worship of the early church, Willy Rordorf, professor of Patristics and Early Church History at the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland states: In the early church there was “no Lord’s supper without Sunday, (and) no Sunday without the Lord’s Supper” (Sunday, p. 303 his book was dedicated to his professor, Oscar Cullmann). How often we meet during the week and the hour will tend to vary from congregation to congregation, but all should meet on the Lord’s Day (Heb. 10:23-25).

**2. CHURCH BUILDINGS INCLUDING ARCHITECTURAL STYLE.** Some Christians live in countries where it would not be safe to be identified by meeting in a church building. I heard of a church that met under a large tree. I preached for a church in Italy that met in an abandoned chicken coop.

**3. INTERNAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE BUILDING.** Included would be placement of the pulpit, a baptistery, seating arrangement, and the including of such things as kitchens, toilet facilities, plants and flowers, etc.

**4. TRADITIONAL CEREMONIES.** As in the case of funerals, and weddings.

**5. THE ORDERING OF THE WORSHIP.** We know from the Bible that the early church sang, prayed, read scripture and preached, took communion, and gave of their means, a fact that is universally admitted, given the fact that these are practiced by virtually all churches. However, how these are arranged is a matter of local decision.

**6. IDEAS ABOUT APPROPRIATE DRESS.** What is modest, and what shows respect.

**7. AMERICAN CULTURALLY DICTATED IDEAS ABOUT THE FAMILY.** Included would be appropriate male/female roles and behavior (honoring of course those designated Biblical roles related to the church and home governance (Eph. 5:22-25, 1 Tim. 2:1-15, 3:1-13, 1 Cor. 14:34-38).

**8. MANNER OF PREACHER SUPPORT.** How much is paid, insurance, vacations, retirement, housing, and similar things are left to the judgment of the church.

**9. CULTURALLY DETERMINED PROCESSES WHICH SURFACE IN MANY WAYS.** Included would be culturally determined methods of reasoning and thinking, the Protestant work ethic, processes by which decisions are made, and who has the power to make decisions,

**10. WHAT IS VALUED (IN ADDITION TO CLEARLY BIBLICAL THINGS).** Some things that come to mind would be how we value time, attitudes toward the past, present, and the future, punctuality, and the relative importance of material things.

**11. PERSONAL THINGS.** Included would be attitudes toward our own body, ideas about what is private and what is public, divisions of the day and the meaning of those divisions, habits of eating and drinking, who may communicate with whom and in what manner, whatever limits there may be as to what is appropriate for private discussion versus public discussion, and volume and speaking distance.

**12. CULTURALLY MANDATED CONDITIONS THAT MAY MAKE SOMETHING ACCEPTABLE IN ONE CULTURE, AND NOT IN ANOTHER.** Sunday School as an orderly arrangement for dividing people into small groups in order to give appropriate levels of instruction according to age and gender, is generally credited to Robert Raikes and had its beginning in England in 1831. There are cultures, however, that do not permit parents to be separated from their children for such purposes. Churches in Italy practice the “holy kiss” as a means of greeting, something which would usually not be acceptable in the U.S.

**13. EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES.** These would include local philosophies of education, subject matter, modes of education, and who should be educated,

**14. STYLES OF WRITING AND ORATORY.** Once more, local customs and culture have a lot to say about these areas.

**15. HIDDEN MEANINGS INVOLVED IN OUR OWN PARTICULAR IDIOM.** Embarrassed visitors who hear us say, “You can say that again,” and promptly repeat what they have just said, may find out the hard way that we mean “That is right on!”

**16. FOLKLORE.** As for example what popular wisdom/ideas say about health and what brings it. For instance, we tell people to not drink milk when you have a fever, while in Italy they tell people to drink milk when they have a fever.

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