Calvin Seminary Forum

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ARE YOU READY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

Schaller introduces this thesis by listing in the opening of his book four dozen changes over the past four decades which have reshaped ministry. These changes range across society and include:

- shifting from multi-story to one-story buildings making scores of churches partially obsolete;
- the emergence of thousands of new independent congregations and scores of large semi-autonomous denominational congregations;
- competence, commitment, and character replacing credentials as the primary criteria for choosing new church leaders;
- an increase of modern-linked electronic bulletin boards from 20,000 in 1991 to over 80,000 in 1993.

The specifics, however, are not his primary point. Instead, he emphasizes the cumulative effect of these changes. He holds that the 21st century will be a "radically different context" and that we need to understand this context if we hope to be effective in ministry. The four themes he uses to develop his thesis will be...

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FEATURED ARTICLES

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"Schaller's Worldly Wisdom" - Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. ..................................................................... p. 4
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Is there still a role for denominations and their agencies?

Unprecedented change... will reshape the way the church ministers.

- Van Gelder

served a congregation of 350-500 members. Today's congregations locate on properties twenty to one hundred acres. This shift stems from the increased number of automobiles; increased space required to deliver programs; and churches being built horizontally rather than vertically, with more space devoted to fellowship areas, nurseries, and hallways. Many built prior to the 1960's have severe limits in meeting this new set of ministry expectations.

Theme 3: Changing Pattern of Denominational Role - A third shift in which Schaller discusses concerns the changing role of denominations and their agencies. These organizational structures were developed in the 19th century. Their prominence lasted until the 1960's. At that time, massive social changes worked to undermine the loyalty of churches and members to these structures. The changing role of denominations and their agencies is illustrated most directly in the recruitment and training of new pastors. Credentials as the most essentially

Theme 2: Changing Pattern within Congregational Life - The second significant shift Schaller notes relates to how congregations carry out their ministries. High commitment congregations take an approach that has both personal and organizational implications. On the personal level, the shift is from "rules" to "relationships." A general erosion of rules has occurred in withholding permission to "permission-granting." The operative words for ministry are now "relationships, grace, acceptance, choices, and service," which are replacing words concentrating on "rules, the law, permission-withholding and judgment.

On the organizational level, one change is the increased number of income streams beyond the offering plate. Another is the amount of space required for ministry. Gone are the days when three-to-five acres

Theme 1: Changing Pattern in Classifying Congregations - The most significant shift the past several decades is in how we think about local churches. The emerging distinction among local congregations, according to Schaller, is between "voluntary organizations" and what he calls the "high commitment church." Historically various schemes have been used to make distinctions between local churches. Coming out of the 19th century, denominational affiliation and nationality were the defining criteria. Theological controversies after 1900 introduced the categories of liberal, moderate and fundamentalist. And the geographic distinctions of rural, suburban and urban became significant with the dramatic population shifts after World War II.

These categories of denominational, theological, and geographic identities are now being replaced by the distinction of "expectations" placed on members. One's level of religious commitment now marks the most important dividing line determining local church affiliation. Church members no longer are just constituents of an institution, but rather disciples in a relational community. It is the emerging "high commitment church" which is most successfully attracting the post-World War II generations. These generations look for program quality, pastoral competence, ministry opportunities, and a conservative theology. Many churches rooted in denominational, theological, and geographic identities find it difficult to attract these persons and face a continued retrenchment in membership.

Lyle Schaller is a church consultant who has written extensively for several decades (over 80 books) as an observer of church life in North America. He is somewhat difficult to classify. While using some church growth perspectives, he presents a much broader analysis in stating his views. While incorporating statistics and sociological insights, he is not a social scientist. While offering some biblical perspectives, he does not present any specific theological positions.

He is primarily descriptive in his approach, observing current trends with great agility while offering his insights. His writing approach is to cluster his ideas into lists and craft representative stories of local churches. Usually, one has to sort through the details to get his basic message, and there is often redundancy in the content of several books. But in the final analysis, Schaller stands without equal in offering the reader a penetrating glimpse into the life of local churches in 20th century North America.

The Importance of Lyle E. Schaller

While Schaller develops his thesis on change in sixteen chapters, he offers the reader a method for understanding this material. He suggests four themes cut across these chapters, each of which is discussed below:

Theme 1: Changing Pattern in Classifying Congregations - The most significant shift the past several decades is in how we think about local churches. The

Theme 4: 21 Bridges

While Schaller develops his thesis on change in sixteen chapters, he offers the reader a method for understanding this material. He suggests four themes cut across these chapters, each of which is discussed below:

Theme 1: Changing Pattern in Classifying Congregations - The most significant shift the past several decades is in how we think about local churches. The
Is the approach of a new century important? Today the
dawning of the 21st century is
treated by many as a harbinger of
significant change. Must we
teach to be ready for it? Lyle Schaller says we must. Using his
book as a catalyst, the authors in this Forum respond to that
question.

TIME AND CHANGE

The mere passing of time
cannot change the basic human
realities. God's markers in history
are not the changing of the
centuries, but the life-death-
redemption of Jesus Christ and His
coming again. Between these
times and apart from these
events, the changing centuries
produce no genuine salvation
and provide no hope for
fundamental change. The next century
will be as this one and both not
different from the first.

The church is shaped by
God's milestones, not in any
fundamental sense by the changing
centuries. The church is
shaped by tradition, by the past,
by what God has said and done.
Yet the church lives in the pre-
Can the church change? May
the church change? It depends
on what one has in view.
Tradition in the church is a com-
plex reality.

TRADITION AND CHANGE

The Christian tradition is
rooted, on the one hand, in 'the
faith which was once for all
delivered to the saints' (Jude 3).
This faith embraces the gospel,
its proper interpretation, and the
manner of life which flows from
it. This apostolic tradition is the
foundation on which the church is
built, a foundation that may not
be altered no matter what
changes are occurring in our society.

On the other hand, this apostolic
tradition is interpreted and
expressed throughout the history of
the church in styles of
language, reasoning, and worship
influenced by the cultures through
which it passes. Even the official
doctrine of the Trinity, for example,
was expressed in terms borrowed from Greek
philosophy. While we are bound to
the doctrine of the Trinity, we are not
bound forever to the precise
terms used by the
Early Church. We
are free to express
doe the
a new,
even
and temporarily attempts
to find a different
set of terms have
proven to be
the
This complexity
of the unchanging
being intertwined
with that which changes makes
some change in the Christian tra-
dition inevitable. The church
must appropriate and express the
unchanging apostolic tradition in
language and forms intelligible to
its particular culture.

In addition, there is another
significant aspect to the Christian
tradition. Within the church
there are various traditions:
Roman Catholic, Eastern
Orthodox, Lutheran and
Reformed. While each agrees
with the others on central aposto-
colic teachings, each has appro-
priated the apostolic tradition
in distinctive ways. Practices of
worship and the shaping of the
Christian life differ in these
differing traditions.

Consequently, change in the
Christian tradition is a complex
matter and often painful. The
longer we experience the gospel
in the forms of a single tradition,
the more our traditional forms
and the apostolic gospel seem to
be one and the same. That is why
change seems sometimes to be an
attack on our Christian identity.

MANAGING CHANGE

In times of rapid cultural
changes, can the church avoid
change? I doubt it. Mission out-
reach inevitably requires and
creates change, whether it be to
persons of another culture or to
the Baby Boomers and Busters of
our own. Equally important, many
of our own children (now in their
twenties and thirties) desire
change. The style of worship that
pleased and satisfied their parents
does not fully satisfy them. So
change is already occurring.

Will we manage change suc-
cessfully? Will we be Christian
and Reformed into the 21st cen-
tury? Or will we capitulate to the
spirit of our age?

I have no present concerns
about our commitment as a
church to the essential apostolic
tradition. No one among us is
recommending any fundamental
revision of our commitment to
an orthodox understanding of
the Christian faith. I believe that
we will be Christian and ortho-
dox into the 21st century.

My concern is about being
Reformed. I have an impression
that some in the next generation
are less concerned about this
aspect of the tradition and are
governed by a pragmatism will-
ing to experiment with anything
that works. Of course, it is more
important to be Christian than to
be Reformed. Yet the Reformed
tradition has been an important
influence for good in the devel-
opment of the Western world.
Today, in Russia and in some
Third World nations, some
Christians have discovered the
Reformed tradition for the first
time and are excited about its
potential for good in their soci-
eties. The 21st century may well
need a Reformed understanding
of the Christian tradition.

We must not allow change to
happen willy-nilly. Following the
Spirit is not the same as flying by
the seat of one's pants. It requires
reflection, testing, assessment.
Before we change forms and
accept new practices, let's at least
know what the traditional forms
and practices were attempting to
say.

Hopefully, as we necessarily
change, we will continue to be
both Christian and Reformed
well into the 21st century.
Schaller’s Worldly Wisdom

I find Lyle Schaller’s 21 Bridges puzzling, gratifying, and troubling all at once. What puzzles me is that Schaller makes bold claims about trends in church and society, but does not document them. For example, early on (p. 14) Schaller says this: “For literally tens of thousands of children the church has replaced the home city paycheck with country living” (p. 13), and that people drive more cars to church than they used to (p. 38), and that “music has replaced doctrine as the most divisive issue in thousands of congregations” (p. 14).

Schaller presents, and seems to favor, a trend toward “high commitment” church membership (especially chs. 1 and 10). High commitment membership requires weeks of Bible and doctrinal study, hefty financial commitments (Schaller misstates a typical commitment as the promise to “tithe one-tenth of next year’s income”), and signed promises by members to attend worship regularly and to live a devout and serious life.

Schaller’s book puzzles the reader by making large assertions that, without documentation, look pretty naked. In addition, it’s hard to make out Schaller’s point of view as an author. Is he a neutral observer of trends in the church and in society? Or does he want to push some of these trends and discourage others? Is he a reporter or an advocate?

My second response, beyond puzzlement, is gratitude. Much in Schaller’s book is excellent and worthy of praise. He offers a number of sharp observations of trends in society and culture that, whatever their level of documentation, sound right and deserve consideration by church planners—e.g., that a growing number of urban workers “want to combine a

and the public school as the primary channel for transmitting traditional moral values.” This is an interesting assertion, but how is the reader to know that it is true? What is the evidence for this claim? What could it be?

In Schaller’s view, is passive worship, silent, and colorless. (Spirit-filled churches worship in color and traditional churches in black and white).

Nobody wants to deny the adjective “colorful” to the worship of those groups Schaller describes as Spirit-filled. But why deny it to traditional worship? Bach and Buxtehude may seem pale to people brought up on rock music—classical music may sound to them like vegetarian rock—but then, why assume that their tastes are especially discerning. For Schaller’s observation that “mission” churches have lost “high commitment” members is true, and Schaller’s observation that “mission” churches have lost “high commitment” members is true, and

CONT. PAGE 7
Has the future already arrived?

What are the implications for the Christian Reformed Church of what are to be lived the Christian Reformed Church, and what are the implications for the Christian Reformed Church of what is happening in other denominations? One way to respond is to transfer the trends affecting churches everywhere, dismiss some of them as 'fads' and continue to do last year over again or even indulge in nostalgia and try to do the fifties over again. Most churches know that this is a sure path to decline and diminished influence in a society that greatly needs to hear and believe the Scriptures. To ignore the changes is to ask for obsolescence. Sometimes churches must oppose changes in society. By biblical values, the church becomes a counter-cultural force. At other times the church can re-examine its role and goals and ask, "What kind of a church does it take to be a signpost of the kingdom at the end of the twentieth century?"

Making Membership More Meaningful

One of Schaller's answers is the high-commitment church. Churches classify themselves in many ways: conservative, evangelical, liberal, independent, or denominational: urban, suburban, or rural. These classifications continue to be meaningful in some ways. But a key classification question for today is, "Is this a high-commitment congregation or a low-commitment congregation?" Another name for low commitment is voluntary association. No doubt most churches want to be high-commitment churches. What church leader has not lamented, 'If only we had greater commitment we could ...' You fill in the blanks: meet the budget, start more programs, renovate association and high-commitment church. Newer churches, however, are beginning to require extensive entrance classes and membership training for all who seek to be members, including those transferring from other Christian Reformed churches. More and more established churches are experimenting with the same kind of procedure.

A major premise of the high-commitment church is that lack of commitment on the part of the membership is not first of all a leadership problem but a leadership challenge. A second major premise is that membership is seen as a gateway, not a destination-discipleship is more than membership. In the next several years we are likely to hear a great deal more about these things as churches set higher expectations for members and still higher expectations for leadership positions. Along with these expectations many opportunities for growth and training are provided for people on various levels of spiritual maturity.

Several decades. He lists no fewer than 27 reasons for this. More and more, local churches are going their own way, especially those churches who feel their primary calling is to be missionary outposts of the Gospel in their own communities rather than denominational franchises.

One result of this will be the changing role of major assemblies. Schaller asks,

What is the Future of the Denomination?

According to Schaller, the influence of denominations has been steadily eroding in the past

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To ignore the changes is to ask for obsolescence.

- Hart

Which denominational meetings do you believe people will look forward to attending in the twenty-first century? Those organized around adopting legalistic responses to controversial issues, defining the criteria for exclusion, debating new permission-withholding rules, creating new regulations to govern the ministry of congregations and making decisions on means-to-an-end issues with a series of close votes? Or will volunteers look forward more eagerly to denominational conventions organized around renewing friendships, joyful singing, inspirational worship, hope, warm fellowship, inclusion, celebrations of victories achieved, proclamation of God's word, affirmation of the ministries of the churches, grace, recognition of the efforts of the saints, challenges for tomorrow, and the adoption of new goals for ministry?

Recently I attended a meeting characterized by the second paragraph above. The meeting was organized by the urban ministry task force of Home Missions and C.R.W.R.C. Representatives from seven urban churches came together to discuss how they can equip their leaders for the future.

These churches tend to be small, multi-ethnic, and preoccupied with ministry to the city. Their missionary pastors and evangelists brought along some of their leaders—young people, deeply committed to Christ, their church, and Christ's mission in the city. Friendships were renewed, resources swapped, ideas generated, hope renewed, and passionate prayers offered. This is the future! Except for the paid leaders, few of the people there know much about the issues that pre-occupy the

Cont. next page
FUTURE cont.
DIRK HART

denomination. My credentials as a denominational functionary meant nothing to them. What they wanted to know is whether I love Jesus and the city and have a heart for lost and needy people. And did I know where to obtain some used computers so they can set up computer literacy classes as a way of teaching employment skills and reaching people for Christ?

In one of the small group discussions there were three young men: one African-American, two Hispanic—still in their teens. But the weight of glory is on their shoulders. They are the highly committed leaders of Christ’s church. And they find ways and means to minister to other young people, keep them off the streets, and into the Bible. No amount of federal dollars accomplish what they accomplish.

One of the Hispanic churches has started a new church back home—in Honduras. It never occurred to them to ask classis or World Missions for permission. Another church has no pastor at the moment. But an evangelist training program is under way which in four years promises several new evangelist pastors—without the benefit of Calvin College or the seminary. Will the college come to the city? Will Calvin Seminary?

On the whole, the Christian Reformed Church is tolerant of small, urban, multi-ethnic churches who break the mold of established practices. But watch out! Change in the denominational system rarely starts at the center. More often, it comes from the margins or, as in this case, from the mission frontier. Already a number of classes are re-examining their usual way of doing business and beginning to make significant changes.

WORSHIP WARS

A constant refrain of Schaller is “to ask who will reach the newer generations that are now largely missing from church. One answer is: the churches that are able to adjust their worship services to replace passivity on the part of the worshipers and a motionless presentation of the Gospel with motion and emotion. He lists several components of this newer worship style including liturgical dance, a mini-drama, songs projected on a screen, preachers who step away from the pulpit for the sermon, a song book with many songs written by members of the congregation, various instruments instead of the organ, and so on. Frequently in such churches, the sermons are getting longer and are oriented more to application than explanation.

In the Christian Reformed Church, too, these things are happening with increasing frequency. But rarely without controversy and hard feelings as different generations talk past each other. What is the role of the denomination in helping churches explore the issues of worship in the twenty-first century? How can the seminary help current and future pastors think biblically about worship and related issues?

Schaller’s 21 Bridges makes a significant contribution by raising many important issues which will keep the church busy and, sometimes, in turmoil for many years to come.

QUALIFICATION: cont.

qualification are being replaced by the criteria of competence, character, and commitment. Churches are becoming more selective in choosing pasters, and many now raise up additional staff from within their own congregations.

The traditional system for attracting seminarians, the denominational colleges (what Schaller calls the “farm system”), is being supplemented by persons coming from successful large churches (what Schaller calls “free agents”). Denominations successful in reaching the post-World War II generations will be those which can provide a cadre of highly-skilled, visionary pastors; support long-term pastors; and start numerous new mission congregations on the high commitment pattern.

The basic principle of denominational life was for this organizational structure to provide regulatory guidance for local churches. This culture was driven by denominational loyalty, but a shift is now taking place from “loyalty” to “trust.” It is these denominations and agencies which can generate trust through partnering with local congregations which will be most successful in making the transition into the next century.

THEME 4: CHANGING PATTERN OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP – The fourth shift Schaller identifies as significant concerns the changing pattern in the make-up of church membership. A vast “parade of people” move through local churches on a regular basis. Historically, denominational transfers impacted this parade, but a new pattern is now being forged. The distinctive characteristic of the new generations is their propensity to create their own culture. While they borrow from previous traditions, they view their lives as shaped by personal choices more than institutional values. They expect churches to provide more choices for expressing their faith.

These new generations are also influenced more by the electronic media. They expect quality. Enhanced sound systems, the use of visual images, and state-of-the art communication devices are standard fare. One application is congregations which are creating their own song books, replacing the standard hymnal of one size fit all. “Along with this shift has come the demise of the organ as the instrument of choice. The new generations emphasize motion and emotion,” which has implications for worship. Worship in high commitment churches is characterized by such elements as praise, learning, drama, preaching, music, theater, and visual communication.

SUMMARY: Schaller poses the basic question, “Who will reach the new generations?” He notes that they can be reached by churches willing to make some adjustments; by those able to balance relevance with high commitment. He suggests that the gospel does not have to be compromised in order to draw members. In fact, Schaller notes that the gospel is most being compromised today in those congregations which function as voluntary organizations. The question also confronts the Christian Reformed Church, “Will the CRC be able to reach these new generations as it prepares to enter the 21st century?”

Cover Story cont.

CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM
or admirable in these matters? Similarly for patterns of silence and relative formality in traditional worship: Why assume that these patterns are passive or that they are colorless?

Occasionally, Schaller’s false contrasts reach proportions heroic enough to turn discussion into mere propaganda. Churches, he says (p. 31), are changing “from rules to relationships” and one of the best places to see the change is in the style and content of the pastoral prayer. “Once upon a time these prayers were read from a book or carefully written out in advance to be liturgically correct. Today the pastoral prayer is more likely to lift up the intercessions of the people in that room, to reflect the joys and concerns of this gathered community, and to stress the relationship between God and his people.”

So written prayers—especially “liturgically correct” ones—cannot interfere for a congregation, or reflect joys and concerns, or stress the relationship between God and his people? None of the prayers in The Book of Common Prayer achieve any of these goals? How about the prayers of Peter Marshall? Or, to take another example of a prayer that has been written out in advance, how about The Lord’s Prayer?

My main difficulty with Schaller in 21 Bridges is that he often uses such words as “effective” and “meaningful” to describe ministry that produces “growth,” or that succeeds in “reaching” people, without telling us explicitly what he means by these words. When he does tell us what he has in mind by growth (pp. 25, 26, 53), it turns out that he means no more than numerical growth.

Well, I’m for numerical growth as much as the next person, and I’m fully aware that sedate churches sometimes lock up the bread of life in their own cupboards so that they can keep their dignity—and that unbelievers can go to hell, where they belong. Still, is numerical growth the only, or even the most important, measure of success in ministry? And (pp. 46, 52-53) isn’t it at best misleading, and at worst corrupting, to advise churches how to prevail in the competition for members? Doesn’t this advice encourage churches to see people as potential customers—the very category Schaller seems to frown on when he associates it with low-commitment churches? Doesn’t the competition model also encourage those churches that lack biblical and confessional integrity to do whatever it takes (happy preaching, bribery, and celebrities du jour) just to fill sanctuaries with customers who are shopping for a meaningful “worship experience” to fill their “religious needs”? Where in Schaller’s growth scenarios do we find biblical obedience, faithfulness, integrity, historical continuity of the saints, or, for that matter, God?

The impression I draw from this particular strand of 21 Bridges—mistakenly, I hope—is that its vision is driven more by worldly categories of success than by Scriptural ones. Sometimes these categories converge, but often they do not, and Schaller seldom, if ever, draws the distinction.

“Is Schaller a reporter or an advocate?”

—Plantinga

READERS COMMENT

Thanks for all the comments sent to us. We have been overwhelmed by the positive response, and very pleased, of course. Even the critical comments are thankfully received, most of them anyway. The Forum intends to stimulate thoughtful response, not merely agreement.

We are still considering how best to handle your letters and comments. Due to the present length of the Forum, we do not favor a “Letters to the Editor” column. We would like to receive short essays from those who would like to engage in debate, either 750 or 1500 words in length. Be assured, however, that all of your letters are diligently read by the editor, and by the author if the letter responds to a particular article, even though we are not able to send a personal response to every one.

The Spring issue of the Forum elicited again much favorable response. Most seemed to have enjoyed the entire issue. Several sent in critical responses to Professor Plantinga’s article on “Ordination of Women and Gays: Are They On a Path?” They suggested that Professor Plantinga was reacting to an argument they had never heard and that the real argument was not addressed. For them the real argument is this: If the church adopts the hermeneutics used to interpret Scripture as allowing the ordination of women, then the very same hermeneutics could be used to allow the ordination of active homosexuals as well.

It seems to us that this response overlooks two important facets of Professor Plantinga’s argument:

1. that there is an important creational difference in the status of the two that significantly restricts the hermeneutics applied to biblical texts dealing with the issue of homosexuality;

2. that while a positive case for leadership roles for women can be made based on a variety of biblical texts, a similar positive case cannot be made biblically concerning active homosexuals. With these two reasons, Professor Plantinga in fact answered and rejected the argument that the critics suggested he had not addressed. While one may disagree with the position Professor Plantinga adopts concerning the ordination of women, it is not the case that he ignored the key hermeneutical considerations that ground the differing biblical status of the two issues of ordaining women and practicing homosexuals.

Several comments have been received about the weight of the paper on which the Forum is printed. Some of you think we could save a considerable amount of money by using a lighter weight paper. Both our consultant and our printer, however, advise us that the small amount to be saved (about $100) is far outweighed by the lesser amount of damage in printing and in mailing. Two Canadian voices inform us that this kind of paper cannot be recycled. We do not think that this is the case in the United States and we have not yet heard from other parts of Canada. We are listening!

The editor.
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Postman: If addressee has moved, leave with current resident.

CHRISTIAN CLASSICS

TERTULLIAN &
CHURCH GROWTH

The progress of Christianity from the time of the calling of the first disciples (ca. AD 30) to the beginning of Roman toleration of Christianity (AD 313) was one of virtually unparalleled church growth. In those three centuries, Christians as forms of idolatry (Tertullian, The Shows, 5-13). "All the powers and dignities of this world are not only alien to, but enemies of God," Tertullian declared (On Idolatry, 18). It is not difficult to imagine the response of Tertullian and his Christian contemporaries to a theory of church growth that counsels sociological adaptation, or assumes that the church ought to make potential converts feel comfortable in worship by adopting the style and language of the society at large. He would draw out the relationship between such practices and the "powers and dignities of the world" that "are not only alien to, but enemies of God." He would, perhaps, also point out that his somewhat counter-cultural form of Christianity grew churches even under intense persecution from the society around it. And he might argue that a distinction needed to be made between growth in the ways of the world and growth in the ways of God.

The church of the first three centuries experienced remarkable growth. It grew across cultural boundaries, despite antagonism and persecution from the society at large, and despite (perhaps because) it was not an easy thing to be a Christian. Of course, the church was able and willing to transmit and interpret its message of salvation cross-culturally. But throughout the process of transmission and interpretation a clear line was drawn between church and world. "Shall you not shut the balconies where the enemies of Christ assemble," wrote Tertullian: "grant that you will find there things that are pleasant, things both agreeable and innocent in themselves and even some things that are excellent. Nobody diles poison with the honey-drip of a potcake" (The Shows, 27).

Tertullian's eloquent and often strident polemic offers a lesson: culture is never neutral to Christianity. Culture always embodies its own spiritual dynamic. As we make change in the style of our Christian witness, in order to draw people to the gospel, we need to be aware of the dynamic of the culture, and we must learn where to draw the line.