



California Lifestyle

I recall once, while visiting a department store in a chic California mall, the PA system broke into my reverie with its velvety chimes and well-modulated voice, pleading, “Barbara Brown, please return to California lifestyle.” Oh my, I thought, some valley girl has broken her mother’s heart by sneaking out and joining 4-H! But, of course, California Lifestyle was a department in the store, where the clothes cost more because they covered less. Barbara, I suppose, was an employee on break.

But the call keeps coming—across this country and across the world—for all of us to join the “California lifestyle.” Odder even than the voice in the department store was the sign above the only restaurant in a tiny Masai village in southern Kenya. The small, windowless space, serving local fare in decidedly less than health department approved conditions, proclaimed itself “The California Tea Room.” California—for better and for worse, it will get us all.

The premise of this issue of *Word & World*, occasioned by the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition, is that Americans created the “America” we and the world know best as they moved west—escaping from European tradition and culture and beginning anew. Several articles in the issue remind us that putting aside childish things like going to church was part of what it meant to become a “man” in the Marlboro image of the West.

Now, the religious culture of the American West has become considerably more complicated, including still a large population of “unchurched,” but also adherents of every conceivable new religion or expression of “spirituality” (including resurgent Native spirituality), growing numbers of Mormons, and many very conservative Christian groups, made the more so perhaps in reaction to the prevailing syncretistic or agnostic brew. Those whose parents and grandparents once left the U.S. East, fleeing across the mountains in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, are joined now by many leaving the Far East, fleeing across an ocean, and others from the South, fleeing across the Mexican border—all crossing boundaries in search of the same “California lifestyle” that has lured folks for a century or two. Boundary crossing produces an exotic cultural and religious mix—or sometimes a religious and cultural vacuum.

What will this mean? What will constitute a form of Christian faith and life suitable for the American West? And as made-in-the-West culture seeps eastward back across the mountains (and worldwide via the media), how will it influence church life everywhere? Will this be for good or ill?

Such questions are not new, of course. They have arisen every time people of faith have been confronted with new contexts—the more different the situation, the more radical the questions. So, we will answer as people have answered, strug-

gling with various Niebuhrian responses: Don't we need the "Christ of culture" option this time, just to get people of such a secular mind-set in the doors? Or, surely, *this* context is so ungodly that only the "Christ over culture" stance will be faithful!

As far as I can tell, the people of the Bible tried all the options, too—sometimes successfully, sometimes disastrously. Most interesting, perhaps, is the counsel of Second Isaiah to those surrounded by a "Babylonian lifestyle," those who discovered just how difficult it was to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" (Ps 137:4). To be faithful, says the prophet, will require two seemingly contradictory things: "forget the former things" (Isa 43:18 NIV), on the one hand, and "remember the former things" (46:9), on the other. Both are apodictic commands: not a modicum of forgetting and a tad of remembering; but Forget! and Remember!

Forget the old traditions, says God—even the exodus, for heaven's sake (43:16–17)—because "I am doing a new thing!" This is more radical than simply (or not so simply!) adopting new worship styles. Old understandings of the good news itself will no longer suffice—or better, understandings that point to the past as the time when God did amazing and wonderful things, that keep the "old, old story" old. Only bold proclamations will do, says Second Isaiah: "What is God up to now, even in this complex cultural mix?" Simply to repeat the tradition is not yet preaching, as I learned from Gerhard von Rad. The times require audacious interpreters.

But audacity is a dangerous thing. How do we remain faithful? Well, "remember the former things"! And what are those? Chief among them, according to Isaiah, is this: "I am God, and there is no other"; and second: "My purpose will stand" (46:9–10). That is, though God will work in new and surprising ways (even for God), God remains God (the only God), and God's purpose (to do whatever it takes to rescue all of humanity in ways consonant with God's long-suffering love of all humanity) will never change.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," says Hebrews (13:8). True; but we use that insight incorrectly when we assume that we got it right once, and so, forever after, "it" has to remain the same (whether "it" is doctrinal formulations, worship customs, ecclesiastical structures, or carpet color). What remains the same is Jesus Christ as the gospel, Jesus Christ as the personification of the purpose of God that "will stand" in the midst of change.

Traditions and traditional formulations matter, of course. When describing God's "new thing," for which Israel was to forget the exodus, Second Isaiah said, in effect, "Well, remember the exodus?!" (43:19–20). The old exodus was a dry way in the sea; the new one will be a wet way in the desert—surprisingly similar and daringly different at the same time. Getting right what must stay the same and what must change remains the church's task always. Not easy, especially in light of the brave new world of "California lifestyle," but we keep working at it, recognizing that we need all the voices in the process and confident of the guiding presence of the Spirit.

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