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The Alternative Church and the Alternative Society

(In the first part of his address to the annual meeting of 1975, Roger Forster analysed the tendencies that had given rise to the 'alternative' sub-culture, before considering how the church might respond.)

Christians may feel that they have answers to some of the problems taken seriously by the alternative society. Those of us who assert that God has already spoken to these world problems in Christ can give answers to those who are seeking true freedom. But so long as we show ourselves to be simply bulwarks of the established order, unwilling to enter into the experiences of members of the 'alternative society' or even to show sympathy with them, they are unlikely to listen to our Christian answers.

Christians must define freedom as being what we were meant to be, **not** doing as we please. We must give answers concerning structures recognising that forms are necessary if life would be preserved, but they must be the sorts of forms that are always subsidiary and subservient to the life itself and freedom itself. Nevertheless, with such answers as these the church will be seen as credible only if we are prepared to express in practice our own 'alternative life style' and to listen to and learn from what the sub-culture has to say by theirs. After all, we are exhorted as Christians in our particular form of society, not to be conformed to this world, and the sub-culture is certainly an attempt to be not conformed. Perhaps we should more seriously take their challenge to our own system and understand ourselves better for it. As I cite the following fourteen aspects of the Alternative Society it will be understood, of course, that in each case the difference from the Christian counterpart might be very great indeed but the basic concept at least brings the two life styles together for comparison.

(1) *Brotherhood* is an important aspect of the sub-culture society. Nationality, culture, colour, economic distinctions go by the board in the sense of a oneness of humanity, even though this brotherhood has difficulty in finding a meaning for humanity in a naturalistic society. Nonetheless those who drop into the sub-culture generally would see it as held together by social concern and a disgust of war. Such a concept no doubt was implied by the apostle Paul, when he said, "We are all one in Christ Jesus", and by Jesus himself, when he

told the story to the Jews of the Good Samaritan, the hero being a hated enemy (dare we say "Arab" if the story were told in the twentieth century?). The courage of such a pronouncement of true brotherhood is something from which we can learn, first as seen in our Lord Jesus and secondly as expressed today (unfortunately sometimes on a greater and more realistic level) by those who belong to the drop-out society. Perhaps the use of our buildings could be looked into: are they truly resurrection-cum-rescue shops for those who are the victims of life, and places where a oneness can be built which will make the society ask questions again concerning the Christian faith?

(2) The drop-out society's use of *communes* (or pads) is instructive to us. These emphasise love a great deal, though not always of course is love truly expressed there. I remember a Brazilian girl who belonged to one such communist pad of anarchist culture, who found herself totally excluded when she was unwilling to carry fire-arms in a sortie in which all the other young fellows and girls were shot; the great distress through which she went because of this rejection experience indicates a lack, a deficiency, in the sort of love which is seriously aimed at in these communes. We Christians surely should have an answer there if challenged by the existence of such situations: to accept people as they are, and to love them still when they have become unloveable and acted contrary to the group. Jesus commands (John 13: 34) that we should love one another: this is surely something which could be emphasised a little more than it is in our societies, where doctrinal correctness is considered the criterion rather than the fruit of the Spirit which is love. Our homes, our halls, our informal meetings, our loose associations in work for Christ, all could express more adequately the fact that we are fellowships of love; rather than just having a hall, for instance, giving the impression that we are only a fellowship of instruction or lecturing, with rows of chairs facing a platform—we could also install lounges with carpets and easy chairs, which would give an opportunity for face-to-face interest in one another, which surely is the essence of love.

(3) Can we learn from the *equality* which is claimed in these sub-culture stratas? The priesthood of all believers is a time-honoured concept in most of our churches, and Jesus not only said he is greatest who is servant of all, but himself illustrated it on the Last Supper night when the incarnate God, on hands and knees, washed our feet. Such a respect, such a value for one another, is at least attempted in some sub-culture situations, in which a man's pretensions are unacceptable and the fact that a man is a man is all that generally is required. So too it should be with ourselves, with our

respect for each other's opinions, contributions, and expressions of faith and love and worship.

(4) Sub-culture has seen a move towards *unisex*. This is not surprising, since, if there is no god, there is no devil; if there is no light, there is no darkness; if there is no male there is no female; if there is no norm there is no change from the norm. So all forms of sexual practice are acceptable, and male and female dress merge into one. But doesn't this challenge us again as to what place women have in the church of Jesus Christ? Truly we don't assert unisex, but we do assert that in Christ there is neither male nor female, in the sense of intrinsic differing value of the irrelative souls. That between these two unlike entities neither can be inferior to the other has implications for position, service, and respect, and the employment of the female side of our congregations and these tendencies should be much more in evidence if we are going to learn from the challenge of the sub-culture (Galatians 3: 28). Perhaps we should be serving womanhood, as did the early church, by a Christian restatement of her value and role in the twentieth century world.

(5) *Individualism* is a fifth characteristic of these societies: individualism of expression and opinions. In our own worship, evangelism, work and ideas, is there not plenty enough room for many and varied ways of doing things? Ezekiel was a man on his own. He used pavement artistry, visual aids, drama, cooking and even hair-dressing, to get his message over. Such an individualism needs to be reasserted and reallocated if we are going to depart from a colourless, insipid Christianity, in favour of one in which individuals are respected in themselves and for their particular contribution to the overall community of God.

(6) A *protest* is found amongst those of the sub-culture, against the establishment, and against their parents; there is a rebellion because of the sort of world they seem to have been given and inherited from their forbears. They are 'angry young men,' their anger no doubt heightened by their own guilt, though not a guilt they necessarily know how to solve, as they live in a world which they did not necessarily ask to be given. It is significant that in a book like Nahum, two things which are singled out by the Old Testament prophet as he delivers his tirade against a foreign nation (not, we note, the people of Israel), were the two crimes of economic oppression, and political and military oppression. Economics and politics—the two issues that so often raise issues of protest to-day: these were the themes of the Old Testament prophet Nahum as he pours his tirade against the old empire of Assyria with its world-dominating force. 'This is what I have against you, says the Lord, . . .' (Nahum 2: 13 and 3: 5). Perhaps as we look round our churches and see older men

with no love for people, no love for prayer, no love for an enjoyment of the things of Christ, may we not ask again: is this because of the lack of concern we have had over the issues of our day? over the society in which we live? whereby we have been put to shame by the rising younger sub-culture generation. Is this not the time when the Spirit of God would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children (not the hearts of the children to the fathers, but of the older generation to the children (Luke 1: 17), to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, as we seek to understand why the children's hearts protest?

(7) A strong *anti-capitalistic* bent would be found within the sub-culture. It is largely to do with money and property, often born out of envy, the have-nots set against the haves. Nevertheless, Jesus taught us that the abundance of our life does not consist of what we possess. Surely sacrifice 'for my sake and for the gospel's' as Jesus challenged, should be the hall-mark of the churches of Christ, not contented, capitalistic affluence. Evangelism works at a faster pace when we pour all of our lives, thoughts, money and property into the project.

(8) *Obscenity*—of course, we know the dirty language phase of the late 60's. It was a reaction against delicate and fine speech; a reaction perhaps against the etiquette of the day as it reflects petty shibboleths when there is no real social concern. Consequently war is said to be 'obscene', changing the meaning of the word 'obscenity' in our sub-culture. Nevertheless, if we are unconcerned to witness to our Lord Jesus but prefer to write articles discussing whether we should have unleavened bread at the Lord's Table or not, surely we should be called to account for such trivialities, such inconsequential points of order and etiquette? Perhaps even called to account in the dangerously invective language that the New Testament writers themselves sometimes approximate towards. In Matthew 23 the Lord Jesus does not mince his words as he speaks to those who are the advocates of meticulous detail and etiquette, denouncing (v. 27) scribes and hypocrites 'like whitewashed tombs who outwardly appear beautiful but are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness'—in other words, they stink! Again, in Matthew 23:23: 'Hypocrites! You tithe the mint and dill and cummin and you neglect the weightier matters of law and justice, mercy and faith'. All our Christian etiquette, gentlemanliness and courtesy, right as it is, should be called to account if it goes hand-in-hand with total unconcern about (and merely covers up our lack of interest in) the weightier matters.

(9) There is an *unconventionalism* in the sub-culture of our day, of the 'alternative society'. Manners go by the board. Why? Because we will not flatter others; flattery is eschewed. Rich and poor are treated alike, just as James recommends. 'If men come in who are

rich, don't say, "You sit here," and to the poor, "You sit at my feet." In the same spirit, Jesus was prepared to talk to a Samaritan woman. The labourer himself is worthy of his hire, he is not to be treated as though he were nothing, whatever his work or occupation in life may be. So the flattery which the unconventionalism of the movement eschews is something that God hates. We might well learn from this as we make a show of the professionals and the monied people who come to our meetings.

(10) The whole sub-culture is bound together by a *musical experience* and expression. This is one of the most unifying influences throughout the whole of this alternative society, from the Americas through the whole of Europe to the Far East: the young men and women are held together by the unifying music which has arisen from the sub-culture. Have we lost the place of Philippians 2 with the beautiful song of the Lord's condescension and exaltation? or the joy of that young, if not teenage, Mother of our Lord Jesus, singing in her patriotic spirit about the God whom she sought to magnify (Luke 1)? Music should be an expression which binds us together, as it did in the days of Wesley, when doctrine was taught through the hymns that were produced.

(11) *Drug experience* has been a common feature of the alternative society. Because we have presented a religion of the letter, of the mind, and of the intellect (as it indeed is, but it is more than that), so the reaction has been a closedness to Christianity. We have shut the door on the kingdom of heaven. Lacking true spiritual satisfaction and true spirituality, the experience of 'at one-ness', atonement, becomes more a statement of doctrine than a spiritual life force. In the sub-culture, drugs are the alternative for spiritual experiences. (12) Or perhaps, from a spirit-arid church, *mysticism* is spawned off, our 12th feature of the sub-culture, with Hare Krishna and transcendental meditations among the ways of seeking after the supernatural and its gifts, perhaps because of the lack of it found amongst our companies.

(13) *Casual dress* is a manifestation from which we may learn. Did the Scriptures not say for centuries that 'God looks on the heart and not on the outward dress'? Perhaps dress, hair-style, and the like, should always have been considered as a very minor aspect since God is concerned primarily with the heart's love.

(14) Finally, we can mention the casual attitude to *sex* which exists within this community of the alternative society. Can we not learn from the Lord's attitude of forgiveness to harlots, and his concern over those who are divorced? Then we might think again as to what

the meaning of these relationships, in a pragmatic sense, really is, and why they are safeguarded by the laws of God, instead of issuing dictatorial statements to our communities. Often we present a pharisaism which does not recognize that the heart act is in itself no less culpable than the physical: indeed they are the same in our Lord's definition (Matthew 5: 28).

In conclusion we can thank our sub-culture community of the twentieth century for its reminder to the church of the church's true calling and nature, as an alternative life-style from the dying world. We must also carefully consider its challenge and consequently be able to offer it the realities for which it seeks and which we know are to be found in Christ.