

## The Legacy of the Sixties

When I arrived in Canada in 1954, it was not yet a Big Nanny state, interfering with just about anything or what anybody may do, say, or think. Pay equity, political correctness and inclusive language were not on the government's agenda as yet. The first television programs I became acquainted with were Father Knows Best, I Love Lucy, and the safe and innocent world of Andy, Barney, Aunt Bea of The Andy Griffith Show. The most shocking media event was the popularity of Elvis Presley. I remember people's concern about Elvis's songs and his hip and pelvis gyrations. In the fifties, families were still relatively stable. Divorce was rare. Homosexuals were in the closet. Church attendance was good. But seemingly overnight times have changed. With the sixties, a whole new and uncertain era began.

What happened in the sixties? It was a time of great complexity. It heralded a catastrophic culture shock, in theory as well as in practice. It was a period of romantic socialism, anti Vietnam protests, the drug culture, the arrival of the hippy movement, dramatic changes in sexual behavior. Commitment to one's partner, family, and church became a thing of the past. The cry for rights without responsibilities was loud and clear. Families broke down. Divorce rates went up. Reading declined. People began to journey inward. Self-discovery became the new passion. Psychology turned into big business. Therapists became the new priests who told their clients how to feel and what they should think about themselves. Knowing yourself became more important than knowing God. Mental health became the equivalent to salvation. A youth culture developed without the necessary nourishment of soul and mind. There was little interest in the past. Youth wanted to live for the moment. They were not interested in the great store of knowledge about their cultural tradition they were supposed to inherit. Television's Bill Moyers remarked that "Americans seem to know everything about the last twenty-four hours but very little of the sixty centuries or the last sixty-years". Young people became addicted to music. Rock music became popular. The taste for classical music evaporated. Students and professors wanted to radicalize universities. The climate was anti-intellectual. Allan Bloom said that as far as he was concerned this new trend was "an unmitigated disaster."

This revolutionary period was a watershed in the Western world. It brought the re-emergence of paganism, the insurgence of New Age, occultism, liberation movements focusing on the plight of minorities – blacks, the poor, women, gays and lesbians, the handicapped. It witnessed the erosion of cardinal Christian doctrines and the disintegration of moral standards. Its effects are still with us today. With the collapse of historic Christianity in the halls of higher learning, Biblical references, which were once common knowledge, became incomprehensible. In Canada, explicitly Christian symbols began to vanish from public schools. And during this period the church experienced a substantial decline.

Generation X, the baby busters born after the 1960s who follow the post World War II baby boomers are enchanted by Michael Jackson and Madonna. They do not share the confidence their parents had in their sexual, political and social exploits.

They lack optimism about the future, go to Disney World for entertainment and watch MTV. They are the "digital" generation, raised not only with TV but also with the internet and faxes. An astonishing number of youth have their view of life impacted by soap operas and talk shows and few are familiar with great works of art. They distrust organizations and are excessively self-absorbed. They seem to want their fifteen minutes of fame on talk shows. They may ask: "Does it make me feel good?" rather than "Does it make sense?"

Because of television, the world has become a stage and even the news has become entertainment. Whatever is seen on TV is considered real and true. Appearances take on the form of reality. "I have seen it on TV" is now almost synonymous with gospel truth. Consequently, TV has a powerful influence on public opinion. Its programs increasingly feature violence, gossip about scandals and a preoccupation with sex. The global impact of American television introduced a mass culture and the cult of consumerism through its relentless commercialism. The pursuit of happiness now means the pursuit of things. The mass media also created the cult of celebrity. They encourage youth to identify with the fame and glory of famous movie stars and sport "heroes". Success is celebrated. There seems little room left for the suffering and the weak and elderly. Someone commented that suffering, which was once regarded as the "school of life and virtue", is now seen as a stumbling block. Radical feminists began to redefine their role in the family, society and church. Women's Studies programs and feminist scholarship started to proliferate throughout North America during the 1970's and 1980s. The Women's Studies program had a dual purpose – educational and political. The constitution of the National Women's Studies Association (U.S.A.) clearly states its agenda:

Women's Studies ... is equipping women to transform the world to one that will be free of all oppression ...[and is] a force which furthers the realization of feminists aims.

How did the church react to the new era? Generally speaking, it became captivated by its "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ"(Col. 2:8).

The revolutionary spirit of the 60s and beyond had a greater impact upon the church than the church had on the world. The mainline denominations had already surrendered the heart of the Gospel to the spirit of the age before the sixties.

Today evangelical churches risk losing the integrity of their message because they attempt to compete with popular culture on "its own terms" in the name of evangelism. They are in danger of recasting the Gospel in such a way as to undermine its integrity and render it unrecognizable to its original apostolic message.

The barriers between the Church and the world have been removed in favour of respectability and popularity. John Stott observed that the church has been more

influenced by the world than the Word. Instead of challenging the status quo with values of the kingdom of God, it has acquiesced in [it](#). The church has accommodated itself to the prevailing culture, leaped on all the trendiest bandwagons, and hummed all the popular tunes of the day.

How have the sixties impacted the church? I can only write in broad terms, of course. But this is what I have seen happening, The preoccupation with self has found its expression in the exuberant health-and-wealth theology that shuns a lifestyle marked by sacrifice and even suffering for the sake of the Kingdom. But the Christian faith is not an escapist religion. The modern focus on self and feelings distorts the gospel and the development of a genuine Christian lifestyle. The believers' new life in Christ cannot be based on good feelings or experiences nor on the process of self improvement or self-actualization but on the facts and promises of the Gospel.

In an age where "the customer is king" the church attracts audiences by trying to meet "felt needs" of the religious consumer to achieve success. Marketing techniques are used to spread the gospel but these techniques have also shaped its content. Church marketing principles as advocated by George Barna and Schallar give the impression that the gospel is a product that must be sold. The target of the church's outreach is the consumer and the church is the provider of a product. The emergence of the highly pragmatic church growth movement has greatly contributed to the rapidly expanding phenomenon of "seeker sensitive" services. Doctrines once regarded as essential are played down. The sermons tend to be populist and aimed at an emotional response. Some even claim that in an age of television and instant information, sermons are irrelevant. But the Christian faith is spread by the Word. Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy, that people do "not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Biblical preaching has always been the key to revival and reformation. "Is it not clear," asked Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching declined?"

A common practice today is church shopping. Churches with attractive programs draw crowds. One church marketer has even written a guide for church shoppers. Denominational loyalty is no longer strong, specially among youth. Linda Cannell of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School describes the pastor of a market driven church as the religious entrepreneur who holds a large, corporate-style, pace-setting church with his managerial skills and compelling platform presence. The market philosophy also influences worship style. The assumption is that if churches choose the right kind of music, people will be attracted to the Gospel. And more and more churches succumb to the temptation of changing their services into "religious performances" where appreciation is shown with applause. Marva Dawn comments that the ones applauded become the center of attention instead of God, to whom the gifts are offered; it also heightens the attitude in other members that they are not as important in the Body as those with special musical gifts.

Feminism has impacted the Church. Some women advocate the need for feminist interpretation of the Scriptures. Radical feminists are even redefining God. Feminists

Judith Rock and Norman Mealy stress in their book *Performer as Priest & Prophet* that "it is important to work at doing away with sexist language in hymns, whether it be sexist language-about human beings or sexist language about the Deity." They promote the liturgical dance as a means of bringing the Gospel message, as it explores the nonverbal and intuitive feminine side of communication.

In our age of rapid change we must resist the temptation to be swept off our feet by new fads. When confronted with new concepts we must test them with Scripture. We must remain faithful to our fundamental doctrines. When we marry the spirit of this age, we will be widowed in the next. The question is not what does this generation have to say to the church but what has the church to say to this age? In the early church, Christians were noted for their different life style. They were counter cultural. Their godly lives and their courage to proclaim the Gospel even in the midst of fierce exploitation became one of the powerful attractions of the Christian faith. As John Stott put it: "We must do our utmost to ensure that it [the Word] speaks to our time ... Our calling it to be faithful and relevant, not merely trendy."

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