



What Is Your Culture?

By Dr. Gregory Wiens

I have had a number of conversations this last year about the variety of cultures we find in Florida and within Florida Church of God Ministries. The challenge with understanding cultures is that we can easily see others who are different from us as different or wrong. I was convinced for years that people from Michigan didn't speak with an accent. However, having been gone for thirty years, it is easy for me to "hear" someone that is from there. Seldom do we see come to appreciate the distinctives of our own culture without someone else (from outside of our own culture) pointing it out.

Cultures are developed through communities that practice living, working or ministering together. Cultures can be seen through the:

- Types of clothes we wear
- Style of music preferred (and the type of instruments playing the music)
- Language or words spoken
- Special days observed
- Leadership style preferred
- Things that are considered of value (families, money or time/punctuality)
- Types of food that we eat
- Way we value change or stability, etc.

As you can see, culture is not the same as race or ethnicity, for there are many cultures within a race or ethnicity. Hispanics are comprised of many and varied cultures. My grandfather was part of a German speaking Church of God. There became a culture conflict as the younger generation was assimilated into the English speaking culture. Many of the cultural markers above changed. My grandfather eventually became part of an English speaking Church of God congregation for his children; though he would have been happier in a German speaking (and cultured) congregation.

Even within English speaking congregations here in Florida Church of God Ministries there is a great diversity of cultures. We have congregations where suits are expected and hymns sung to tunes written before 1950 predominate. The leadership style is more committee based and stability is valued. To the contrary, we also have congregations that thrive on change and loud music; they wear casual clothes and don't sing anything written before 2010! These are different cultures.

The challenge of cultures is what I call "cultural projection." Cultural projection is where we project our cultural preferences onto others. This sets up a cultural conflict that can be fought on many surface levels but the real underlying issue is a conflict of cultures. What has been called worship wars (the battle for the predominant style of music within worship) is really the surface issue of this much deeper issue of cultural conflict.

Sometimes the cultural lines are drawn along generational, sometimes racial, while at other times it is over ethnicity. It is easy to understand the difference between generations, but it isn't as easy to understand the difference between race and ethnicity. Race has to do with your biologically engineered attributes determined from birth. For

the most part, you cannot change your race. However your ethnicity is earned cultural behaviors celebrated throughout regions around the world.

I differentiate these terms because cultures are comprised of all three of these distinctives: generations, race, and ethnicity as well as other factors. We are all different. God surely created and appreciates differences. Do you see that the differences between our congregations are often cultural, not wrong or right distinctives?

Let me suggest that all of our congregations have a predominant culture. If you evaluate your congregation by the list above, you, without a doubt could find an accepted majority position in our congregations. All organizations have a predominant set of values and cultures, which form it and align its efforts.

We have a large variety of cultures across our congregations. As I travel across Florida, I can identify at least twenty-five different cultures that I see in Florida Church of God Ministries. We have traditional, family or contemporary style congregations that can be rural, urban or suburban, in any of the races represented in our state. We also have a growing number of multi-racial and/or multi-ethnic congregations across our state. Each of these is a wonderful expression of the Kingdom of God.

We need more of each of them. The challenge becomes when one culture is raised as more Biblical than another. We must resist cultural projection as seen in identifying our culture as the Biblical one. The Orlando Sentinel recently published an article highlighting a local church as being back to the Biblical standard because they require children to sit quiet through long sermons and the people sit on wooden benches. I have no problem with this as simply one culture, as long as you don't see it as more "Biblical".

In *Acts 15*, we see the first cultural clash of many in the church. There were certain practices that were valued in one culture (circumcision) but not in another. These practices were even rooted in scripture! The first century church wrestled with whether they were going to remain a culturally limited church or reach those of different cultures (Greek). In their conclusion, the church attempted to divide the cultural norms from the pertinent Biblical ones; the church grew into the cultures of the world.

We are still wrestling with these cultural distinctives and probably will for the rest of our cruise. The cultures in Florida have radically expanded these past thirty years. And so have the cultures present within Florida Church of God Ministries. Five years ago, we came together as an organization of many cultures. We will continue to expand in our ministry to value different and complex cultures. But we will remain Biblical by majoring on the majors.