Floating along?

by Miroslav Volf in the April 5, 2000 issue

It was with a dose of suspicion that I started reading the feature article in the *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 27) about the Scheibners, a large family intent on creating a well-defined Christian subculture in the midst of what, from its perspective, is a world gone hopelessly awry. The parents shop at consignment stores, homeschool their kids, keep the teen pop culture at bay (no Leonardo DiCaprio posters!) and teach traditional family values. I have tended to think of such people as well-intentioned but naïve folk who believe that they can replicate for themselves the world of their pious grandparents. Which is my definition of fundamentalism.

I knew, however, that my tendency had done the family an injustice when I read the following sentence in Margaret Talbot's article. The "way they practice their faith," she writes, "puts them so sharply and purposefully at odds with the larger culture that it is hard not to see the Scheibners, conservative and law-abiding though they are, as rebels." Two further paragraphs in the article set this strange rebelliousness in context:

> We have arrived, it seems, at a moment in our history when the most vigorous and coherent counterculture around is the one constructed by conservative Christians. That sounds odd to many of us—especially, perhaps, to secular liberals, who cherish our own '60s-inflected notions of what an "alternative lifestyle" should look like. Ever since Theodore Roszak first coined it in 1968, the word "counterculture" has retained its whiff of *patchouli*, its association with free love, long hair and left-wing youth.
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> Yet today it is conservative Christians like the Schreibners who, more self-consciously than any other large social group, buck the mainstream notions of what constitutes a fulfilled life. Indeed, much of what Roszak said of the '60s counterculture could be said of them too. It's true that the "patterns" and "mores" they have discovered are not so much new ones

> as reinvigorated traditional ones. Parent-sanctioned courtship, the merging of school and home, the rejection of peer-group segregation, the moral value of thrift—all are ideas that, in the United States, last held real sway in the 19th century. But the impatience that people like the Schreibners display with acquisition, their unflagging commitment to putting the group—in their case, the family—above individual ambition, their rejection of pop culture . . . make them radical in ways that would be recognizable to some ’60s counterculturalists too.

For some time now I have been troubled by the seeming disappearance of any robust alternative to the pervasive culture of late capitalism, whether in the church or in the society at large. We are drowning in floods of consumer goods and are drenched in showers of media images. We live in a smorgasbord culture in which everything is interesting and nothing really matters. We have lost a vision of the good life, and our hopes for the future are emptied of moral content. Instead of purposefully walking to determinate places, we are aimlessly floating with random currents. Of course, we do get exercised by issues and engage in bitter feuds over them. But that makes us even less capable of resisting the pull of the larger culture, a resistance that would take shape in formulating and embodying a coherent alternative way of life.

The Scheibners have done what the rest of us seem incapable of doing: they have created an alternative culture. And they have done so in the only way that is responsible—namely, by being “selective separatists.” They vote, pay taxes, work in the mainstream world (Mr. Scheibner is an American Airlines pilot), even do community service; but they also deliberately choose, as Mrs. Scheibner puts it, “not to participate in those parts of the culture that do not bring glory to God.” One can disagree with some aspects of the alternative culture that the Scheibners have chosen to create. I am not so sure, for instance, that a father must be the breadwinner in the family and that a mother’s place is at home with the children. But instead of complaining about the particulars of a robust fundamentalist counterculture, we should ask ourselves: Why are we seemingly incapable of creating a viable and vibrant alternative?

The inability of many Christians today to live out a coherent set of practices in selective separation from the larger culture also has a cognitive side. If we are neither fundamentalists nor evangelicals, we find it difficult to formulate clearly and bindingly the content of the gospel. A year or so ago, *Christianity Today* offered a

summary of the gospel titled “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration.” It was signed by a broad spectrum of fundamentalist and evangelical leaders. With few exceptions, mainline reactions to the document were negative. Commentators found the definition of the gospel too narrow and the document as a whole lacking in theological depth. But could they agree on a more adequate formulation of what is at the heart of the gospel? Mainline churches seem incapable of producing such an alternative—for the same reason, I suspect, that they are incapable of generating a set of robust countercultural practices.

If we can neither state what the gospel is nor have a clear notion of what constitutes the good life, we will more or less simply float along, like jellyfish with the tide. True, a belief in our ability to shape the wider culture is woven into the fabric of our identity. So we complain and we act. But in the absence of determinate beliefs and practices, our criticism and activism will be little more than one more way of floating along.