

Lesson 10

Responding to the Changing Cultural Needs in the Church & World

Equipping ourselves with the understanding and tools to effectively respond to evolving cultural needs.

Introduction

It was Paul who said, *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,*" Romans 12:2. How can Christians today navigate the fine line between engaging with the world's evolving culture and holding firm to the unchanging truths of Scripture?

Understanding the Changing Culture

What do we mean when we use the word *culture*? It depends on the context. Sometimes we use it to refer to what we might call *high culture*, i.e., the arts, music, sculpture, paintings, etc. At other times, we might be referencing *pop culture*, i.e., TV shows, movies, Hollywood, or music. And finally, there may be times we use it to describe anything that is against what we believe as a Christian. We tend to only use the word when we're referring to ungodly music, immoral lifestyles, liberal politics, social agendas, movies, and immodest dress, just to name a few. Generally, we use the word to refer to worldliness.

Two Definitions

In its most basic sense, *culture is what people do with the world.*¹ This includes good things and bad, things morally neutral and morally complex. Culture is what people do as a people.

Culture encompasses the totality of life in this world. It is constantly changing. It is never in a fixed position. Some of us have been around long enough to see things come into style, go out of style, and come back into style. The way we use language is also an example. Culture is dynamic. "Culture changes according to human innovations, inventions, fashions, and ideas. What one generation considers normal, the next generation thinks of as odd or funny. In the same way, grandparents shake their heads at the fashions, entertainment choices, values, and lifestyles of the young, and vice versa."²

¹ Stonestreet, John & Kunkle, Brett. *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

² Stonestreet & Kunkle.

Cultures are perpetuated through ideas perpetuated in songs and books, TV shows, movies, documentaries, entrepreneurs and their marketers, and educators. These ideas are then maintained and circulated by the institutions of higher education, government, media, family, and the church. As you think of these institutions, over the course of your lifetime, which have become of lesser influence? Which have become more? As Satan has worked through educators, media, and government, the family and church have declined in the way they impact society. “As the church becomes less important in the everyday lives of citizens, other sources of moral authority become more important, for better or worse.”³

How the Early Church Responded to the Cultural Challenges of its Day

The early church, established in the diverse and multifaceted Greco-Roman world, faced numerous cultural challenges. Their responses to these challenges offer valuable lessons for us. Let’s consider:

Acts 17: Paul at Athens

Acts 17 records Paul’s visit to Athens, a city steeped in philosophy and idolatry. Instead of outright condemning their practices, Paul acknowledged their religiosity and then introduced the concept of the “unknown god” they worshipped. He used this as a bridge to preach about Jesus Christ. This approach highlights the importance of understanding and acknowledging local cultural practices as a starting point for evangelism.

The early church was fully committed to maintaining the integrity of the Gospel message while also being flexible in their approach to diverse cultures. They navigated the tension between being in the world but not of it, a challenge that remains relevant for the church today.

Modern Challenges

Over the last 25 years, we have witnessed rapid cultural shifts that have posed both challenges and opportunities for the church. Here are some of the most significant changes and their implications:

Digital Revolution: The rise of the internet, social media, and smartphones has transformed how people communicate, access information, and relate to one another. While these tools offer opportunities for the church to expand its reach, they also come with challenges such as online misinformation, addiction, and the decreased personal touch in communications.

Local churches must leverage these platforms for evangelism, discipleship, and community-building while navigating their pitfalls. Livestreaming of bible classes, worship services, etc., social media outreach, and digital Bible studies have become very effective in reaching our world.

³ Ibid.

Moral and Ethical Shifts:

American society has seen huge shifts in views on topics like sexuality, gender identity, marriage, and bioethics. These shifts often challenge biblical truths. Christians need to provide clear biblical teaching on these issues, covered with a spirit of grace and truth. It's essential to approach these topics with compassion, understanding, and a commitment to biblical fidelity.

Decline of Institutional Religion:

Over the last two decades there has been a noticeable decline in traditional church attendance and affiliation across North America. The rise of the "nones" (those with no religious affiliation) signifies a move away from organized religion. We need to find new ways to engage with individuals who are spiritual but not religious, emphasizing personal relationships, authentic community, and practical acts of service.

Other cultural issues the church faces are migration and movement, environmental concerns, and challenges to religious freedom. In addressing these challenges, congregations must remain anchored in Biblical teachings while being flexible in its methods. By doing so, it can continue to be a light in a rapidly changing world, effectively communicating the unchanging gospel to modern society.

Biblical Principles for Cultural Engagement

We're in the World, but Not of It

Jesus said:

I have given them your word. The world hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world, John 17.14-18.

As you read this verse, did you discover the two takeaways?

We are in the world, but not of it.

Isolation is not an option. We can't remove ourselves from this world.

We don't withdraw from the culture, leading lives of isolation and fear, we engage with it where we can, viewing ourselves as representatives of Christ who live for the good of others. We accomplish this by consistent obedience that glorifies Jesus and by providing effective testimony for the gospel.

Holding to Truth

Paul said:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work, 2 Timothy 3.16-17.

These verses emphasize the divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. Our bibles are not merely human writings but originate from God Himself. In a world where values, norms, and moral frameworks constantly evolve, the divine inspiration of Scripture provides a stable foundation. As culture

changes, God's Word remains constant and reliable. As Christians navigate the complexities of a changing culture, the Bible remains the authoritative guide, equipping us to engage the world with wisdom, grace, and truth. Through Scripture, we can find clarity in confusion, stability in instability, and direction in uncertainty.

Love Over Judgment

James wrote:

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment, James 2:13.

God is both just and merciful. While His holiness demands justice for sin, His love provides mercy through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. We are called to reflect both these attributes. While upholding truth and righteousness, we must also be characterized by love and mercy. James is not suggesting that judgment is unnecessary or invalid. Instead, he emphasizes the priority of mercy. When faced with a choice between passing judgment and showing mercy, mercy should take precedence. Jesus established this principle in Matthew 5:7: *blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

Upholding truth does not mean being judgmental or harsh. It means standing firm in God's principles while approaching others with compassion. When we engage with those who may not know or follow God's truth, it's essential to communicate that truth with love. Ephesians 4:15 teaches on our need to "speak the truth in love." Being truthful does not mean compromising on standards or beliefs. However, the way truth is conveyed can either draw people closer to God or push them away.

So, what does this look like? When interpersonal conflicts come, instead of focusing on being right or proving a point, we need to prioritize reconciliation and understanding. The message of the Gospel is one of love, redemption, and mercy. While it's vital to communicate the reality of sin, it's equally important to emphasize God's love and the offer of grace through Jesus Christ. When disagreements happen in the church, the goal should always be restoration and spiritual growth, approached with humility and a genuine concern for the individual.

Practical Steps for Engaging with Culture

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God," 2 Corinthians 5:19-20.

Getting Out the Message of the Gospel

Remember our directive is to circulate and promote *the message*; not fix the culture. Our mission is the gospel, not politics. Our aim is to change *individual* lives because changed lives impacted by the gospel is what will change society. God's mission has never deviated. We see it in the mission of Jonah, who saw the Ninevites as nothing more than wretched and depraved enemies who hated all that was good. He had ample evidence upon which to build his case. The Assyrian nation almost invented the word for *brutality* by the way it slaughtered its enemies and piled their skulls in the entrance of conquered cities.

The Assyrian army combined efficiency with bloodthirsty methods to gain for itself the doubtful honor of being the best military machine the world had yet seen.⁴

It was for these individuals God called Jonah to go to and preach. For him there could have been no nation more revolting, which explains why he boarded a ship headed as far away as possible.⁵ Finally after his underwater experience inside the belly of the great fish Jonah submits ... goes to Nineveh to preach ... and the entire city repents. Chapter 4 tells us Jonah's reaction. He gets mad and wants to die. There may be times we're more like Jonah than we care to admit.

We Provide Rescue

Today, we will encounter those in need of rescue. We'll get to know unbelievers, people trapped in pornography, those struggling with same-sex attraction, women who have had multiple abortions, and people questioning their gender. How will we react? Will we keep the mission at the forefront of our mind? Preaching the ministry of reconciliation always involves making sure those in the world know we love them enough to show them there is a way out of their sin and that entry onto the road to forgiveness is always open. We must never come across in a way that communicates anger and hate. No one hated sin more than Jesus did, but He still wept over those who would be lost in Jerusalem ... and so must we in the Jerusalem's of our day.

Conclusion

In summary, what has been covered in this lesson describes the delicate balancing act Christians must maintain. While our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, we are also called to be salt and light in the world, Matthew 5:13-14. This requires active, thoughtful engagement with the surrounding culture. The early Christians, while distinct in their beliefs, were very much a part of their societies, effectively communicating the gospel.

Jesus perfectly embodied this balance. He regularly dined with tax collectors and sinners, yet without sinning or compromising His message, Matthew 9:10-13. He was fully immersed in His culture, understanding its intricacies, yet remained unstained by its vices. The key is discernment, fueled by a deep grounding in Scripture and a vibrant relationship with God. When we are anchored in biblical truth, we can navigate the complexities of culture with wisdom, grace, and effectiveness.

The Gospel is a message of reconciliation. Instead of building barriers, we should seek to build bridges. This involves active listening, showing empathy, and seeking common ground without compromising on the core tenets of faith. The most compelling witness is a life transformed by the gospel. When we

⁴ Grayson, A. K. "Assyria, Assyrians." Edited by Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005, p. 100.

⁵ Jonah 1.2-3.

embody the love, grace, and truth of Christ in our daily lives, we become powerful testimonies to the world around us.

As the world changes, methods of engagement might need to adapt. However, the message of the Gospel remains constant. We must be open to new methods, technologies, and strategies, all while ensuring the purity of truth. As the culture shifts and evolves, the church has both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to remain firm in biblical convictions. The opportunity is to showcase the unchanging love and truth of Christ in fresh, relevant ways to a world in dire need of hope.

For Discussion

1. Paul cautions against conforming to the world. In today's context, what are some examples of Christians being conformed to the world?
2. How has culture evolved over the last few decades? Can you think of any customs or practices that were once considered the norm and are now viewed differently?
3. Discuss the influence of various institutions (higher education, government, media, family, and church) on shaping culture. Which do you think has the most significant impact, and why?
4. Reflecting on Acts 17, how can we use Paul's approach in Athens to navigate modern cultural practices?
5. With the digital revolution, how can local churches effectively use technology for evangelism without succumbing to its negative aspects?
6. Given the shifts in views on sexuality, gender identity, and marriage, how can we maintain a balance between upholding biblical truths and extending grace and understanding?
7. How should the church address the declining interest in institutional religion?

8. Jesus emphasizes being in the world but not of it. How can we effectively live out this principle in today's society?

9. Reflect on 2 Timothy 3.16-17. How can we hold onto the truth of Scripture amidst changing cultural norms?

10. How can we prioritize mercy over judgment in our interactions with others?

11. What are some practical ways for Christians to engage with culture without compromising their beliefs?

12. In the context of 2 Corinthians 5.19-20, how can we act as ambassadors for Christ in our daily lives?

13. Considering the story of Jonah, discuss the challenges and responsibilities that come with sharing the Gospel with those who might seem opposed to it.

14. How can the church ensure that its approach to cultural engagement is more about individual transformation and less about political agendas??