

GOD

**POP
CULTURE**

**WHAT THE STORIES WE TELL AND THE
PRODUCTS WE SELL SAY ABOUT GOD AND US**

Pastor Chris Tenny

THE GOALS

- Give a basic framework for interpreting “cultural texts” through the lens of the Gospel (Matt. 16:3; Rom. 12:1).
- This is ultimately about formation in Christ and mission to our neighbor: holiness and mission go together (Jn. 17:13-19)
- Holiness - To create awareness to what culture is and how culture shapes us, this is not just about “them” or your kids... its also about you.
- Mission - To equip us as local missionaries to more thoughtfully embody the Christian life and disclose the “secrets of the heart” of people in our community (1 Cor. 9:19-23; 14:25).

REVIEW OF LAST WEEK

- What is Culture
 - “Culture is what we make of the world... We *make sense* of the world by *making something* of the world... We don’t make culture. We make omelets.” - Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*
 - Culture gives us a “lens through which a vision of life and social order is expressed, experienced, and explored; it is a lived worldview.” - Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*
 - We don’t engage culture, we engage people.
 - Culture from Genesis to Revelation, Jerusalem and Babylon
- The Incarnation of Christ is a crucial resource, “The word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.” John 1:14, *The Message*
 - Christian Identity and our dual citizenship, 1 Pet. 1:1; Col. 1:1
 - We are “in Christ” and “in San Jose.”
- **CREATION - FALL - REDEMPTION**, remember the plotline, the story, of scripture
- What should we accept, reject, or redeem of *our* culture?

ALL HISTORY UP TO
THIS POINT HAS BEEN
SPENT PREPARING
THE WORLD FOR MY
PRESENCE.

HMM, 4½ BILLION
YEARS PROBABLY
WASN'T LONG ENOUGH.



CULTURAL TEXTS

- What is it?
 - Understand it on its own terms. Look past sex, language, violence if you are able.
 - What kind of medium does it use? What is the genre?
 - Bill Watterson and *Calvin and Hobbes*
- What is it doing?
 - Narratives, movies, literature, and many forms don't make explicit arguments but propose things by displaying them in concrete forms
- What are the affects?
 - Example: "I now pronounce you Man and Wife."

“ For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.

-Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

THE SECULAR STORY

- Defining Secularism - Taylor's insights via James KA Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*
 - **“Secularism is belief in God as one option among many and thus contestable.”**
God is largely irrelevant to most people.
 - Its a disenchanted world, technology replaces magic and the supernatural (GoT contrast).
- What we have is the abandonment of hope without some sense of purpose, of something outside ourselves
 - “a frightening picture of what we, as a culture, think looms on the horizon: a destruction of our own making, with no hope for renewal.” Joustra & Wilkinson *How to Survive the Apocalypse*
 - The genre of “apocalyptic” is very prevalent. Man vs. machine, environmental disasters, invading aliens, tyrannical regimes, antiheroes more popular than heroes, intergalactic battles of superheroes and super-villains, *1984*, *Brave New World*, *War of the Worlds*
 - Explains popularity of Frank Miller's Batman as *The Dark Knight* vs. Superman or Captain America (cf. *Civil War*). No one finds a pure character plausible anymore.

“Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions that seem so clear and self-evident they scarcely need to be said. Choice is a good thing in life, and the more of it we have, the happier we are. Authority is inherently suspect; nobody should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave.

-Charles Taylor, A Secular Age

WHAT IS THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF TODAY'S CULTURE?

- Expressive Individualism
- “Age of Authenticity” - Taylor
 - only necessity for people to be themselves, “being real”
 - Life about discovering your true self over against society, family, etc.
 - **People derive their significance from their ability to make a choice about who they are.**
- Without belief in anything outside ourselves, we only have individual choice
 - The only thing that matters is the individual choosing to be themselves without any outside influence. *Every single Disney movie is this plot line - FROZEN*
 - Result, No justice only power: Game of Thrones, Hunger Games, House of Cards
 - What does it mean to be human anymore? self-authentication - BSG, Terminator, WestWorld, Her, “coming of age” movies. The values don't matter, only that they can *choose* to be themselves.
 - Logic behind pro-choice, “dignity of death,” all about individual having *a choice, outcome is irrelevant*
- Don Draper advertising cigarettes when health affects begin to appear, “People love to smoke.”



BREAKING BAD

- What is it?
 - The title is a southern colloquialism for “turning toward crime”
 - Ran on AMC for 5 seasons from 2008-2013, Critically acclaimed, winning 16 Emmys
 - Amassed 10 million viewers by the final season, and that on a cable channel
 - Created by Vince Gilligan of the X-Files
 - Walter White, high school chemistry teacher, becoming Heisenberg, drug kingpin
 - Background is he gets cancer, insurance can't pay and their broke with a surprise baby and a teenage son with disabilities.
 - Notably, Affordable Care Act is passed in 2010.

BREAKING BAD

- What is it doing?
 - Its a Machiavellian tale, it uses an antihero
 - Everyone around him's life is destroyed, good characters get killed. Bad ones, eventually die by the hands of worse ones.
- From the Creator
 - “actions have consequences... transformation of a character”
 - expected people to lose sympathy for Walt
 - the evil choices stick with the characters, they become more evil as it goes on.
 - Important that show had an intended finality. It was not intended to go on indefinitely so it never “jumped the shark.” Ratings climbed with every season and ended very high.

BREAKING BAD

- What is the Affect?
 - Reveals the problem with a culture that only believes individual freedom as the highest ideal without a prevailing ethical *telos* (goal or purpose)
 - Reveals one's choices are not solely your own, but the product of your influences, society, circumstances, family, friends, mentors, etc.
 - Reveals your choices do affect others and have consequences
 - Raises question of where our significance comes from if *choice* is all we have left?
 - Why don't people lose sympathy for antiheroes?

THE CHRISTIAN STORY AND DOGMATIC THEATER

- I want to suggest that *eschatology* will become one of the most important areas of recovery for the church
 - Choices matter, freedom in Christ biblically is not about freedom to do what you want, but about freedom from slavery to sin. No one is truly free.
 - It occurs through the invasion of Christ in your life, an invitation to participate in his life through a cruciform living.
 - Glory is the goal
- Know the Christian Story in 5 Acts
 - Creation, Fall, Israel, Redemption, Glory
- Christianity is an Epic Story
 - Creation as the theater of God's glory (Calvin, 1.6.2)
 - The world is the stage, church is an ensemble, doctrine as the script
 - We are not play acting, but doing improvisational acting in the Spirit to carry along the 4th Act, in light of the previous 3 Acts, knowing the ending of the play.
 - We can't replicate or innovate Christ. We are called to imitate him and its take the whole church to do it. Improve is about "Yes and..."