



The Park Church Corporate Bible Study
Bible Journey: Course Preparations
Lesson 1: Culture and Theology
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Looking Back – Moving Forward

▶ Who is Jesus in Revelation?

- I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8)
- “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:12-13).

▶ Revelation’s Vision for Believers & Names for believers

- While there will be persecution, believers in Christ will not be silenced (Revelation 1:9; Revelation 12:17; Revelation 17:6; Revelation 18:24; Revelation 22:20).
- The believer recognizes that while there will be tribulation (John 16:33), one may be in a rough place, the purpose to share the gospel continues (Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 10:14; Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 3:15; Proverbs 11:30).

The Bible Is Human and Divine Literature

God works with his human partners in and through the Spirit, not to override or diminish human agency but to empower his people to become vehicles of God's heavenly life here on Earth.

This kind of partnership, between divine and human, is also found in the origins of the Bible. The Bible is a collection of ancient Israelite texts written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek by humans. Yet the consistent experience of God's people through the centuries is that when they meditate on these texts, they hear the word of God leading and guiding them.

When the biblical authors describe the origins of biblical texts, they do not talk about ecstatic, trance-like experiences where they lose consciousness or agency (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 31:19; 31:30-32:43; 2 Sam. 23:1-2; Isa. 8:11-18; Jer. 36)

Reading the Bible Is a Cross-Cultural Experience

- ▶ Many Bible translators took the time to consider what the biblical authors meant in their ancient language and culture so they could find an equivalent way of communicating the message to us.

The biblical authors are ancient foreign citizens, speaking another language. Our modern translations are bilingual translators. And we are learners, having a cross-cultural experience as we read. We have a guide (the translation) who speaks our native language, but there are still things we will need to pay attention to. When a modern translator gives us the word “heart,” we want to know if they are talking about emotions, a cardiac muscle, or a figure of speech referring to a whole person. We want to hear the word in its own context—informed by ancient cultural cues—to understand the biblical author’s intended meaning and respond properly.

Understanding the Cultural Lens of Biblical Authors

- ▶ We do not need to adopt (or reject) an Eastern or Jewish culture to respond to a biblical author's message. However, recognizing the cultural backdrop can help us understand the author's message.

1. Biblical authors view spiritual reality as the foundation for all material (e.g., Gen. 1:2, 2:4-9; Ps. 104; Heb. 11:3).
2. Biblical authors share a collectivist paradigm, viewing the individual as such an intricate part of the whole that one person has the power to affect generations of people—for better (e.g., Dan. 9:3-19; Isa. 53:3-6) or for worse (Josh. 7:6-21; 2 Sam. 24:10-17).
3. Biblical authors also live in an honor-shame culture that elevates men, the rich, and certain ethnicities and religions while often exploiting the rest (e.g., Exod. 1:8-14, 3:15; Jas. 2:5-7; John 4:9).
4. Biblical authors share a paradigm for understanding ritual purity. Words such as holy, unholy, clean, unclean, pure, impure, undefiled, unblemished, sanctified, saints, defiled, profane, and common describe what they consider proper and improper (e.g., Num. 19:2; Ezek. 22:25-26; Eph. 5:27; 1 Pet. 1:19).

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We might have some things in common with these cultural worldviews. One might say, "I get that! My church also says spiritual reality is the foundation for all material." Another might say, "My coach makes us all run laps when just one is late, so I sort of understand the collectivist mentality." Or maybe, "The honor-shame culture makes sense to me. I grew up in a patriarchal family structure where my esteem depended on the wealth of my father's business and how quickly my sister and I got married."

We might empathize with aspects of the biblical authors' culture, but we are living *today*, while they lived thousands of years ago. The ancient context of their assumptions differs from our modern index of understanding, and by acknowledging this we can hear biblical authors more clearly.

Addressing Our Cultural Blind Spots

- ▶ If you get in a car accident by making a hasty lane change, you will probably remember your driving instructor telling you: “Always check the blind spot before you turn!”
Words of wisdom.

We might read a phrase like “the Kingdom of Heaven” in the Bible and, based on our perspectives and presuppositions, assume it refers to a place people go when they die. But when we check our cultural blind spots and respect the way biblical authors use “the Kingdom of Heaven,” we quickly see that it is a place, but it’s more than we assumed. This Kingdom also represents a way of living—a life of loving God and people. And we can live within this Kingdom anytime and anyplace that we honor Jesus as King by living in his way of love for God and others. This reality changes everything, and we could easily miss it because of our cultural blind spots!

To hear the Bible’s message (instead of our own), we want to read its letters, poems, and stories within their literary and ancient cultural context. If we keep the author’s culture in mind, we can appreciate when authors show how Yahweh’s laws challenged social norms or how Jesus’ teachings inverted the honor-shame and social status hierarchies of his day (e.g., Matt. 18:4; Luke 22:26; John 4:7-30; 1 Pet. 4:12-16). Almost certainly, we will miss these revealing truths if we only read with the expectations of our own modern cultures.

Understanding the Cultural Lens of Biblical Authors

- ▶ **The Bible was not written in English. We believe that the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus**

The ancient shepherds, farmers, and fishermen (among others) who wrote the Bible were speaking another language from another world. Modern translations then become bilingual translators who take us back to where it all began. But even as we “go back” to see and hear, we still have our cultural blind spots. And that’s okay. We just have to pay attention to them, honestly and humbly, because doing so helps us appreciate the surprising ways God is loving and healing all of our cultures—modern and ancient—as he continues bringing his Kingdom to Earth.

Culture Example

Solomon: The King with 700 Wives and 300 Concubines.

While polygamy was culturally acceptable in ancient times, it often led to family strife, jealousy, and spiritual consequences.

Through the lives of Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, and others, we see how polygamy introduced conflict into their families and even affected the future of nations.

These stories remind us of the importance of strong family bonds and the potential consequences of decisions that affect both personal and communal well-being.

In today's culture we see that ONE IS ENOUGH!

Culture & Theology

- ▶ **Have you ever wondered how people can be so different, from one culture to the next? Have you ever been surprised at how similar people can be, even with these differences?**
- ▶ **We are in for a crash-course in cultural values in this lesson. You'll find out where you are on the cultural spectrum and just how far you probably are from the values that dominated cultures reflected in the Bible. Be ready for some surprises!**

Introduction to Culture and the Bible

- ▶ This module has a special treat for us. We'll be looking back at some of the biggest cultural themes in the Bible ... themes which surfaced in a big way in the books of this final course. It's not a new idea to you that God used culture to communicate. He used literary forms and social institutions to reveal himself.
 - ▶ But have you ever thought what theology would be like without this cultural fabric? Culture is actually woven into the fabric of theology!
 - ▶ Culture defined: the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular group of people, as a social, ethnic, professional, or age group. The shared beliefs, behaviors, or social environment connected with a particular aspect of society.
- ▶ Theology defined: the study of religious faith, practice, and experience especially the study of God and of God's relation to the world.

Culture : A shared system of associated forms and their meanings

BEHAVIORS

BELIEFS

CUSTOMS

CONSTRUCTS

INSTITUTIONS

IDEAS

High context	Low context
Collectivist	Individualistic
More relational cues	Fewer relational cues
More intuitive	More direct
More implicit	More explicit

High context	Low context
Vietnam	United States
Saudi Arabia	England
China	Germany
India	Mexico

High & Low Context Cultures

Collective & Individual Identity

Collectivist	Individualistic
Prioritize the group over the individual	Prioritize the individual over the group
Tend to be more hierarchical	Tend to be less hierarchical
Deference is expected	Competition is expected
Submission to social norms is more valued	Transparency is more valued
Less supportive of diversity	More supportive of diversity

Various Types of Authority

Hierarchical Authority	Egalitarian Authority
Dictator	Democracy
Seeks to concentrate power	Seeks to decentralize power
Trust of authority	Distrust of authority
Submission	Rebellion

Behind | Cultures: Guilt, Honor & Shame

CULTURE

A SHARED SYSTEM OF ASSOCIATED
FORMS AND THEIR MEANINGS

HIGH CONTEXT (ORAL)

COLLECTIVIST/INTERDEPENDENT

HIGH POWER DISTANCE/HIERARCHY

BEING

PAST

HONOR-SHAME/CONDITIONAL

CONTEXT

IDENTITY

AUTHORITY

ACTION

TIME

MORALITY/VALUES

LOW CONTEXT (WRITTEN)

INDIVIDUALIST/INDEPENDENT

LOW POWER DISTANCE/EGALITARIAN

DOING

FUTURE

GUILT/ABSOLUTE

Behind | Cultures: Guilt, Honor & Shame

- ▶ Social status is indicated by esteem/reputation, which comes from the Greek word *dokeo* (δοκεω), meaning “to be recognized.” In fact, this verb is the root of the Greek noun *doxa* (δοξα), often translated as “glory,” but it is better rendered as “honor.”
- ▶ “The one firm conviction from which we move to the proof of other points is this: that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than it is honorable.” (Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, 4.16.2)
- ▶ Honor comes from the public affirmation of a person’s worth, validated by family, peers, and community members. Honor is awarded on the basis of the person’s ability to embody the virtues and traits that the society values.
- ▶ Some attributes are not earned: birth into a family of wealth or status, birth into a particular *ethnos* (Roman vs. Barbarian).
- ▶ Other attributes can be earned: piety (worship of the gods), courage, reliability.
- ▶ Honor differs according to class: a free man’s honor will differ from a free woman’s, in contrast to a male or female slave.

Behind | Cultures: Guilt, Honor & Shame

- ▶ In a culture where an individual's honor is tied to the group's honor, there is a strong incentive to promote conformity to the group's core values. Violations of the group's code of honor are dealt with severely: adultery, cowardice, theft.
- ▶ In this kind of culture, persuasion often takes the form of showing how certain behaviors result in honor, while others result in dishonor and shame. Praising people and criticizing others is a regular practice.
- ▶ In honor cultures, there is a carefully defined group of elites who define the group's values and practices and who enforce the boundary lines of the community through honor and shame.
- ▶ Honor and shame in the New Testament:
 - The early Christians were a persecuted religious minority whose founding figure was a degraded and shamefully executed criminal of the Roman state. What we see in the NT letters is a reframing of the meaning of Jesus' death as an act of courage and self-giving generosity, which is therefore seen as honorable. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8

Behind | Cultures: Guilt, Honor & Shame

Guilt cultures	Shame cultures
Absolute moral codes	Conditional moral codes
Universal expectations	Situational expectations
Predictable obligations	Unpredictable obligations
Emphasis on conscience	Emphasis on social norms

Uncertainty Avoidance

High Uncertainty Avoidance	Low Uncertainty Avoidance
Tend to be more formal	Tend to be more informal
Resistant to change	Inviting of change
Difficulty embracing difference	Comfort embracing difference
Procedural	Improvisational
Traditional	Flexible

Behind | Cultural Differences & Distances

- ▶ **All the cultures don't fit neatly on one side or the other of the culture chart; there is the tendency for them to run together.**
- ▶ **When we're doing Bible Interpretation, there's a very good chance that if we don't feel culture shock, we have misunderstood the distance.**
- ▶ **The closer a culture is, the more you think you know what's going on. Sometimes the best thing in the world is another language.**
- ▶ **Reminder that the Bible wasn't written in the 21st century or in English in America but in a faraway place a long time ago. From people who don't think like we do.**
- ▶ **Who has the furthest cultural distance to go? Most likely it is us!!**

Behind | Growing Cultural Self-Awareness

- ▶ None of us can read the Bible with cultural ignorance – with a lack of self-awareness culturally.
- ▶ Everyone doesn't think like us, and we can't assume they should.
- ▶ We must be aware of what we are thinking when it relates to the bible.
- ▶ We read the bible and the bible reads us!
- ▶ Cultural context is very important when it comes to the Bible.

Wrap-Up CONCLUSION

This study will have four key cultural themes:

1. Honor: one who's worth brings respect or fame.
2. Patronage: the support, encouragement, privilege, or financial aid that an organization or individual bestows on another.
3. Purity: the state of being unsullied by sin or moral wrong; lacking a knowledge of evil.
4. Kinship: the quality or state of being kin. It refers to the relationship between members of the same family. Kinship can be established by blood (consanguinity), marriage (affinity), adoption, or fictive ties.

Let's prepare for the journey of Culture and Theology