

I. Christianity and Culture

Christians and culture – not a good mix. At least not for a lot of people. It’s nothing new because many in the church have had a tough time determining how to interact with the culture outside its walls. Historically, Christians have considered themselves to be citizens of two worlds: the Christian world under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the cultural world in which we live. How we as Christians manage this dual citizenship has been a real problem. By culture, of course, I am referring to the social environment in which we live – Our language, ideas, customs, institutions, art, ceremonies, and symbols. These aspects of society get passed on from generation to generation and give a culture an identity. Now, various parts of culture affect us in different ways. Just think of how our lives are impacted by politics, education, business, medicine, religion, sports, and entertainment. All of these aspects of culture communicate a worldview and influence how we think and live together.

In this series we have been focusing on popular culture. Popular culture is that aspect of culture that is, well, popular. It is the major influence in shaping values and behavior in our society – particularly among youth. Pop culture is known not only for what it says, but how it communicates: television, movies, music, and the Internet are the most obvious forms. Pop culture tells us who is popular and who is not. It shapes our ideas about what is acceptable and what is to be rejected. It instructs us on how to dress (and how not to dress) in order to communicate that we are a certain kind of person with certain kinds of ideas.

Movies and television are the parables of our day. Music is the poetry of today. And don’t forget, every song, movie, and television show has at its base a worldview.

II. Three Approaches to Culture

A. Approach #1: Offended? Withdraw!

It seems that Christians have always had a love/hate relationship with culture. At the practical level Christians have taken one of three approaches to interacting with culture. The first is to be *offended by culture* so that we *withdraw* from it. This approach, by its very nature, excludes any meaningful interaction with the world around us. Basically, this approach teaches that culture is ungodly and to have anything to do with it only affects us in a negative way. The dirt and grime of the culture can rub off on us if we get too close.

From this approach many Christians would say, “Stay away from movies unless they have Christian themes and honor God.” They would encourage us to exclude any popular music from our listening except that which is performed by Christians and has Christian themes. Most broadcast television would be off limits as well with the exception of a few family-friendly programs. Oh, and sports programs are OK, too.

Now, I’m probably getting different responses from many of you. Almost all of the teenagers are saying, “That’s right, nobody should tell me what to listen to and what to watch.”

On the other hand, many adults are saying, “Wait a minute! There has got to be some standard we use to discern what our kids watch and listen to.”

These two responses are the result of more than the generation gap. They represent a conflict over how we should confront the powerful entertainment culture. It’s helpful to take a step back and realize that entertainment is not a right; it’s something extra added on to life. Discernment is not an option; it is crucial. Instead of seeing culture as something that defines us, maybe it’s time we define it.

However, I do think a withdrawal approach to culture short-circuits what should be a thoughtful and active response to our world. There is much in the world that is offensive, and there is a lot to avoid. In fact, Jesus Christ said it would be this way. But what usually happens is that so many young people feel there is a wall between what they are struggling with and the Christian environment that they are driven to the second approach.

B. Approach #2: Delighted? Assimilate!

This second approach to culture is to be *delighted* by what we see in the world around us so that we *assimilate*; that is, become a part of it. We do this in two ways. First, we can uncritically become part of the prevailing culture. This is our world, let’s enjoy it! Whatever is popular, whatever is exciting, whatever is enjoyable, it must be OK. The musical taste of most Christian teenagers is basically the same as that of non-Christian teenagers. Unfortunately, many become fans of a group, an actor, or a movement without even considering the worldview basis they are presenting. Even more confusing is the fact that many artists and actors today thank God for their success yet glorify an immoral lifestyle in their music and videos.

Adults don’t get off so easy either. Unfortunately, many Christians adopt secular means to judge success in the Christian realm. We assimilate to the values espoused by the prevailing culture. We measure success by the numbers; it’s hardly the value system taught to us by the Lord.

As someone once said, “I looked for the world and I found it in the church. I looked for the church and I found it in the world.”

If Christians are no different from anyone else, then what is compelling about our faith to those outside of Christianity? How does this allow us to be salt and light?

C. Approach #3: Distressed? Engage!

This leads us to our third approach. This approach challenges Christians to be *distressed* by what they see in the world around them so that they *engage* it with the heart and mind of Christ. Instead of being offended and withdrawing, we engage. Instead of being delighted so that we become just like it, we have our hearts broken by a world that is without Christ. Our hearts are so broken, in fact, that we engage them with the truth of God by our service, our love, our sacrifice, our integrity, our understanding, and our explanations.

III. Paul’s Approach: I Corinthians 9:19

In I Corinthians 9 the Apostle Paul talks about the freedom that he has in Christ. Then in verse 19 he makes an unusual statement: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” Paul says he “makes himself a slave to everyone.” You notice how this is the reverse of what we have been doing for so long? Many Christians will say to others, “You enslave yourselves to us. Then you can join our church and become a part of our fellowship.” Paul says it’s the other way around. We enslave ourselves to them in order that we might win them.

He wants to get inside their heads and their hearts. His goal is simply to build a bridge to Jesus Christ for them. He wants to know what it is that makes them tick, where it is that they find security and significance. He knows that the truth of Jesus Christ is at the heart of their needs. Whatever their questions, whatever their needs, the answers and provisions are ultimately found in Jesus Christ. Our goal then is to understand the hearts and desires of the prevailing culture and then communicate the message of Christ to them. It is about them, not about us.

So this is our challenge. We are called to engage the culture with the heart and the mind of Jesus Christ. When we look at the world around us, our hearts should break. As a result we should have a passion to think deeply and broadly so that we might be able to communicate clearly the hope that is found in the person and message of Christ.

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