

GRACE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE CHURCH: STUDENTS OF THE CULTURE

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RESPONSES TO CULTURE IN THE CHURCH

“Cultural relevance” has become something of a taboo term in evangelicalism today. It evokes images of attractional churches a mile wide numerically, and an inch deep spiritually. In a 2011 *Christianity Today* article, the author laments over his experience at a “seeker-friendly” megachurch, in which he observed a great deal of showmanship at the cost of substantive teaching and discipleship. The music was excellent, the stage lighting and sound dynamics were professional, the speaker was vibrant, but the service emphasized entertainment techniques. The author evaluated the service an attempt to reach the “lowest common denominator” in which the religious and secular could co-mingle. “Instead of an encounter with the living God,” the author argues, “the methods themselves [became] the overwhelming focus.”¹ Many churches today are taking these methods to the extreme. My sister and my brother-in-law recently told me about their bizarre experience at a church they visited in suburban Chicago where the worship band played contemporary American radio hits – not worship music. The front page of the church’s website proudly states that the congregation “worships” every Sunday to artists such as Adele, Journey, Dave Matthews Band, Coldplay, and Guns-n-Roses.

The opposite end of the spectrum is equally as off-putting. I was a guest preacher at a church in rural Indiana in the spring of 2018. This church was miles from any town, did not have a website, employed no full-time staff, and ministered to a congregation of approximately 30 people, all of whom were north of 60 years of age. I remember sitting in on their pre-service Sunday school during which the teacher, a kind, loving older woman, attempted to teach the group about loving others in the name of Jesus– even those who believe, act, and live differently than we do, such as homosexuals, immigrants, and Democrats. I listened with growing

¹ D. H. Williams, “The Cultural Medium and the Christian Message : What Kind of Christians Do Contemporary Services Produce?,” *Christianity Today Jun 2011*, June 1, 2011, 48.

frustration as the group pushed back on this idea, and explained why homosexuals, immigrants, and Democrats should be treated differently in the church. One man proudly proclaimed that he would gladly be tolerant of the homosexual couple that had just moved in next door to him – as long as they kept to themselves and he didn’t have to interact with them.

These are a few extreme examples of the church’s response to culture. At one extreme, we see the Accommodators – churches that forego any external features that may identify them as a church in order to accommodate and blend into the culture. In a few cases, this means foregoing worship music or preaching from the Bible. At the other extreme, we see the Isolationists – churches that try so vehemently avoid being “of the world” that they reject and draw away from any and all perceived threats to their understanding of a Christian way of life. These churches are not interested growth or reaching lost people – they are interested in keeping the status quo within their own buildings, even if that status quo was set thirty or forty years ago.

STAYING IN THE MIDDLE

As American cultural values continue to drift away from biblical values, there is a very real temptation as leaders in the church to either follow the cultural shift, or shy away from culture altogether and become a community of religious recluses. Already we have seen many Christian denominations make groundbreaking decisions to amend their statement of beliefs to accommodate cultural values – the most obvious regarding homosexual marriage and the ordination of homosexual clergy.² Other churches have withdrawn even further from culture and made Christianity all but inaccessible to outsiders. Another Christianity Today article suggests that it may be time for believers to mount a “strategic retreat” from culture, given that the church

² For example, the United Methodist Church convened in February of 2019 to amend the Methodist discipline to allow clergy to marry same-sex couples. Jim Patterson and Heather Hahn, “United Methodist Assembly Meets to Make a Decision on Sexuality and the Church,” *Christian Century* 136, no. 5 (February 27, 2019): 15–16.

has all but lost the “culture war”. Therefore, the author suggests, it may be beneficial for believers to retreat and regroup.³

If we view the two extremes – Accommodators and Isolationists – as a spectrum, I believe most churches lie somewhere in the middle. These churches are Contextualizers. They making honest and earnest efforts to engage culture and maintain relevance in their cultural context while holding fast to biblical convictions. Contextualization, I will argue, is the ideal. Christ did not call his disciples to isolate themselves from the world, nor did he intend for his disciples to lose their identity *in* the world for the sake of being relevant. In our changing culture, the church is called to speak into the culture with clearly communicated biblical truth, while maintaining the integrity of the gospel.

WHAT ARE WE SO AFRAID OF?

If I could one day sit down and have a conversation with leaders of Accommodating churches and leaders of Isolationist churches, I imagine I would attempt to discover the key motivations behind their behavior. I want to be gracious and assume – with some exceptions – that every church leader and believer has noble intentions. For Accommodating churches, I imagine that the motivating factor behind their desire to blend in with culture is maintaining the relevance of the gospel. They want as many people as possible to meet Jesus, and they want to strip away any of the elements of “church” that may leave a bad taste in peoples’ mouths so that there is nothing standing between them and an encounter with God. For Isolationist churches, I imagine that the motivating factor behind their isolation from culture is a desire to uphold the integrity of the gospel and the strength of Christ’s Body. They are turned off by our culture’s

³ "Is It Time for Evangelicals to Strategically Withdraw from the Culture?" ChristianityToday.com. February 28, 2019. Accessed June 12, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/february-web-only/benedict-option-evangelicals-strategically-withdraw-culture.html>.

wide-ranging acceptance of differing lifestyles, opinions, and cultural distinctions, and they want to keep the church and their faith clean and separate from the ever-shifting tides of culture. Both of these motivations are important and, I would argue, biblical. However, also I sense a deep-seeded *fear*; fear in Accommodators that our shifting culture is going to make the church and the gospel obsolete and irrelevant, and this fear breeds a desire to change the church and the gospel to fit the culture. Fear in Isolators that the integrity of the church and the gospel is under attack from the culture, and unless the church withdraws from and rejects culture and maintains the status quo, Christianity as we know it will cease to exist.

STANDING FIRM IN THE MIDDLE

Though the situation may seem dire, this is certainly not the first “culture war” the people of God have ever fought – nor is it the most severe. During the time of the prophets, God had allowed the inconceivable: his chosen nation, the people of Israel were overthrown by foreign nations and sent into exile. The Promised Land was no longer theirs; the Temple would eventually be reduced to ruins, and the Israelites were scattered about a vast pagan empire amongst a people who had no knowledge of Yahweh. Israel was not in the midst of a mere culture war; they were subject to a cultural takeover. All that they had known seemed lost. Yet they stood firm in the faith that God was there with them in Babylon. Daniel is an excellent example. In the book of Daniel we read of the Babylonians’ attempt to assimilate Daniel and his friends into their culture and control every aspect of their lives. They were taught the literature and language of Babylon, they were given Babylonian names, and they were thoroughly trained to enter the king’s service. However, Daniel and his friends refused to accept the rations of food and wine that the king assigned them (Dan. 1:8). While Daniel’s rationale is not made clear in the text, the importance of this detail is that Daniel’s refusal of the royal diet sets him apart from

the Babylonians. He chooses to remain distinct from the Babylonian culture in one of the few areas he can still control.⁴ Notice how Daniel does not violently oppose the king's orders; he does not protest his new name, there is no indication that he slacks off in his study of pagan literature and language. Daniel humbly learns from and even *serves* within the Babylonian culture while still maintaining his identity as a man of God. As a result, God sovereignly blesses, protects, and empowers Daniel in his humbly subversive act. Daniel's ministry in Babylon saw him rise through the ranks of Babylonian leadership, and through Daniel God caused entire nations to recognize Yahweh as Lord. Throughout the ordeal, Daniel was able to maintain his identity as a man humbly submitted God.

How can we learn from Daniel's story as God's people today? First of all, we can stake our hope in the fact that God goes with us into exile. God will never be outwitted or overwhelmed by human culture, as sinful as it may be. The Babylonians were Israel's archetypal picture of evil. In Israel's mind, the unspeakable wickedness and perversion of the Babylonians rendered them incapable of receiving anything short of wrath and destruction from God. Yet God worked through Daniel's faithful submission and service to draw even the wicked Babylonians to himself. The church today does not need to be afraid of sinners acting like sinners. The very thing that sets the church apart in a pagan culture is humble submission to God and a willingness to allow God to work through the church to glorify himself. There is no point at which the wickedness of a culture will overwhelm the work of God. The promise of the Bible is that God's Kingdom will prevail.

The second lesson we can learn from the story of Daniel is the lesson of Contextualization. Recall that Contextualization is the middle ground between the two extremes

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel: His Kingdom Cannot Fail*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 32.

of Accommodation and Isolation. Daniel is proof that one can be a student and servant of culture without sacrificing his identity. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive. Daniel's life of humble submission to God was attractive to people, even though they certainly did not fully understand it. Daniel did not have to participate in pagan sacrifices in order to effectively point pagans to Yahweh. Today, it is entirely possible for the church to point people to Christ without embracing the sinful elements of the culture. It is possible to love and serve the LGBTQ community without embracing their choices as biblical. It is possible to offer community, friendship, and accountability – three elements our culture is desperately lacking – over performance, shock value, or leadership strategies. It is possible to open up the doors of the church to people of other backgrounds and lifestyles, even ones that are contradictory to God's design. Where humans gather, culture is bred. The church cannot escape culture, nor is that even the goal. The people of God must learn from and serve the culture, pointing people to God without bending to the will of the culture. The result, as we see in the story of Daniel, is that God will be glorified through the humble faithfulness of his people.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND REDEEMING CULTURE

Perhaps the church is not fighting a “culture war” at all. All culture will have sin as long as humans are sinful. No amount of sinners grouped together will ever equal a righteous culture. Thus, our war is not a cultural one but a spiritual one (Eph. 6:12). But there are elements of culture that are *redemptive*, and it is the church's job with the help of the Spirit to find the redemptive elements of our broken culture to point people to Jesus. Take for example Jesus' parables. Jesus employed teaching method that entailed putting forth hypothetical scenarios that people of the culture would have immediately recognized as at least conceivable, if not shocking

or unlikely.⁵ Jesus showed a clear understanding of his culture and all of the customs, values, and beliefs therein. This is why we have to work so hard to understand Jesus' teachings – we are a couple thousand years removed from the culture in which he chose to incarnate! Through his teaching ministry, Jesus revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom of God in language that made sense to the people whom he taught. Never mind that that his teachings were not widely accepted – the public's response as it is attested to in the gospels clearly indicates that, for the most part, they understood the implications. Jesus contextualized his message. Now, imagine Jesus coming to earth and teaching in heavenly languages, using heavenly metaphors and making heavenly observations. Imagine how difficult it would have been for his followers to comprehend his message. Jesus recognized that people are inseparable from their culture, and he became a student of the culture in order to better communicate his message. On the other hand, Jesus did not become a product of his sinful culture. He remained distinct. He ate with prostitutes and tax collectors, but did not partake in their sin or change his message to fit their interests. He gently came alongside them to point out their sinfulness and draw them to himself.

Herein lies the problem that American Christianity faces today. The gospel of Jesus Christ contradicts the American cultural narrative. Today, Jesus calls his followers to glorify God by humbling themselves and sacrificially seeking the good of others in a culture that preaches self-seeking consumerist gain as the formula for success. In response to this contradiction, there is a temptation in Christian churches to alter the message and implications of the gospel to fit the more comfortable American cultural narrative in the interest of making the gospel more accessible. In other words, the gospel does not “fit” with our American cultural

⁵ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008), 18.

formula for success, so the gospel message must be changed in order for it to advance.⁶

However, we must realize that the gospel contradicts *all* human cultural norms. Humans shape their own cultural narrative; the gospel is that God incarnate draws humanity to himself and calls them to be sanctified to advance his heavenly Kingdom here on earth, and reside in it for eternity after death. The gospel is inherently counter-cultural. Thus, the goal of the church is not to change the message of the gospel to fit the more comfortable cultural narrative – the result will inevitably be something that it not the gospel. Rather, the question that churches must ask is “What can we learn from our culture that will enable us to advance the message of the gospel, and what shortcomings can we expose in our culture that the gospel has an answer for?”

CHURCHES AS STUDENTS OF THE CULTURE

If we become students of our culture, we will learn what our culture values, desires, fears, and needs. Our church recently facilitated a focus group made up of young people, mostly Millennials, to gauge how the church can better reach and minister to young adults and families. The topic of conversation focused on one key aspect of our culture today: social media. Our social media focus group concluded that, above all, young people in our culture value being *known* and *loved*. This is the very reason behind the rise of social media, personal blogs, lifestyle models, and online personalities: young people find meaning and purpose in being seen, heard, and understood. However, social media cannot satisfy this desire. Recent studies have shown that the opposite may be true: social media use shows an association with inattentiveness, loss of interest, fatigue, and *loneliness*.⁷ In some cases, the very medium through which our culture attempts to be known and loved results in symptoms of loneliness and depression! What can the

⁶ Joshua R Ritter, “Occupy Theology: Hyperbolic Christianity and American Culture,” *Review & Expositor* 110, no. 2 (2013): 211–38.

⁷ George Aalbers et al., “Social Media and Depression Symptoms: A Network Perspective,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, December 3, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000528>.

church learn from this? First of all, we must understand that the desire to be known and loved is not sinful – in fact, it is the way God created us, and this desire points us to God himself. Yet our culture has manufactured an artificial medium to satisfy the desire that will never be adequate, and will only result in increased loneliness, and in some cases, depression and addiction. Rather than shying away and decrying this unfortunate reality, as students of the culture, churches can seek to understand the *why* behind the cultural phenomenon to better understand the mindset of the culture to which they are attempting to minister. In this example, when we understand the cultural mindset behind social media – the desire to be known and loved – we understand that young people in our culture today are seeking a relationship that satisfies their deep need to be loved unconditionally; to be called worthy in the eyes of *somebody* despite their brokenness, insecurity, and imperfection. The gospel offers *exactly that!*

This is Contextualization. Cultural phenomena almost always speak to the deep-seeded desires of the culture. Some churches accommodate the culture and go along with every temporary fad, and some churches isolate from the culture and relegate it all to sin. But when churches are students of the culture and seek to understand and *contextualize* it, they can more effectively point people to the gospel and show them how a relationship with Christ satisfies the deepest needs of the human heart.

THREE QUESTIONS

Churches are incarnate in human culture just as Christ was. Cultural trends are not something to be fearful of and shy away from, nor are they the ideal toward which all churches must strive. They are opportunities for Christians to understand the people they are attempting to reach with the gospel. Contextualization does not change the message of the gospel, nor does it make the gospel inaccessible. Contextualization forces the church to ask three key questions: 1.)

What can we learn from our culture? 2.) What shortcomings or deep needs can we expose in our culture? 3.) How can a relationship with Christ resolve those shortcomings or satisfy those needs?

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