



CULTURE CLASH

Encountering differing cultures in a seamless world

Encountering foreign cultures in a rebellious world, is a challenge even today! But the Bible has much to say on culture and God's perspective, and His involvement with it. From being surrounded by idolatry, to promotion in a public office, true followers of the faith are victors in the face of adversity, and God has quite a lot to say about this to us.

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Judging Culture

Our view of culture must include biblical insights. Reading the Bible shows us the truth of how God wants us to see the World. How He sees the World. And we need to see it through His eyes. Not our own, and not through what we have been born into, as our transformation into sons and daughters of Light, of the Most High God, as heirs and co-heirs, is important as we become more like Jesus.

Chapters 31-39 of Exodus provide a unique perspective of **culture** and God's involvement with it. On one hand the **work of man was blessed through the artistry** of Bezalel, Oholiab, and other skilled artisans as they cooperated to build the tabernacle (35-39). On the other hand, the **work of man in the form of idolatry**, the golden calf, was rejected by God (31-34). This contrast serves to suggest a guideline with which we can begin to **judge culture**.

Chapter 31:1-11 of Exodus contains God's initial instructions to Moses concerning the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness.

While Moses was on the mountain with God, the people became impatient and decided to make a god, an idol. The end result was tragic: three thousand were slain as a result of their idolatry.

Then the attention of the people was directed toward the building of the tabernacle. Chapters 35-39 contain detailed accounts from God pertaining to the tabernacle, and the subsequent work of the skilled artisans, including Bezalel and Oholiab. The finished product was blessed (39:42-43).

Art is certainly a vital element of culture. As a result, we should take the lessons of Exodus 31-39 to heart. Our evaluation of culture should include an **awareness of intent** without being overly sensitive to form. If not, we begin to assign evil incorrectly.

How do you react when you're out of your comfort zone: your surroundings, friends, and family? Do you cringe and disengage yourself? Or do you boldly make the best of the new locality?

The first chapter of Daniel tells of four young men who were transported to a culture other than their own by a conquering nation, Babylonia. Their response to this condition provides us with insights concerning how we should relate to the culture that surrounds us. Daniel, of course, proves to be the central figure among the four. He is the focus of our attention. Daniel and his companions learned from the culture, they did so by practicing **discernment**. They obviously compared what they learned of Babylonian thought with what they already **understood from God's point of view. The Law of God was something with which they were well acquainted**. Edward Young's comments on v. 17 clarify this: "The knowledge and intelligence which God gave to them ... was of a discerning kind, that they might know and possess **the ability to accept what was true and to reject what was false in their instruction**." We need to be mindful, careful of a separatist, isolationist mentality because they create moral and spiritual vacuums throughout our culture.

Encountering Foreign Cultures

God approved of the four men's condition within the culture and even gave them what was needed to influence it (Daniel ch1 v. 17). Today, we may be directed by God to enter a foreign culture – which is far more common with travel and immigration - that may not share our learned world view, nor the view of the World from a Godly perspective. Or, they may be directed to enter the culture that surrounds them, which, as with contemporary western culture, can be devoid/absent of the overt influence of a Christian world view. Such as China, Nigeria, Australia and NZ and other countries who are beginning to reject God. If so, we should do so with an understanding that **the Lord will protect and provide. And He will demonstrate His power through us**.

In the New Testament, the Book of John, we are to be in the world but not of it. The terms *kosmos* and *aion*, both of which are generally translated from the Greek into "world," are employed numerous times in the New Testament. Men are seen "as sinful, rebellious, and alienated from God, as fallen humanity. The kosmos is characterized by wickedness (John 7:7), and does not know God (17:25) nor his emissary, Christ (1:10)." "Again and again ... the world is presented as something hostile to God."

Rebellion of the World

First, **the world is hostile toward God**; this includes the rebellion of mankind.

Second, this hostility was not part of the original created order; the world was created good.

Third, this world is also the object of **God's redemptive love and Christ's sacrifice**.

Fourth, the world is not to be seen as an end in itself. We are always to **view culture in the light of eternity**.

Fifth, we are to be about the business of **transforming the world**. "We are not to follow the world's lead but to cut across it and rise above it to a higher calling and style."

We are in need of a balance that does not reject beauty, but at the same time recognizes the ugly. Our theology should entail both. **The world needs to see this**, see both sides and God's glory in the midst.

"You're a Corinthian!" If you had heard that exclamation in New Testament times you would know that the person who said it was very upset! To call someone a Corinthian was insulting. Even non-Christians recognized that Corinth was one of the most immoral cities in the known world.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains many indications of this. The believers in Corinth were faced with a culture which resembled ours in several ways. It was diverse ethnically, religiously, and philosophically. It was a centre of wealth, literature, and the arts. And it was infamous for its blatant sexual immorality. How would Paul advise believers to respond to life in such a city?

My city, my culture as opposed to present, as opposed to God's eternal/heavenly kingdom:

How do you get a hearing when you have something to say? In particular, **how do you share the truth of God in ungodly surroundings?**

As alert, thinking, sensitive, concerned, discerning Christians **we are challenged to confront our culture** in all of its variety and pluralism.

It is easier to converse with those who are like-minded, but that is not our only responsibility.

In the Book of Acts in the New Testament, Paul's encounter with Athenian culture (Acts 17:16-34) is illustrative of the manner in which we can dialogue with contemporary culture. In verse 18 some of the philosophers call Paul an "idle babbler" (i.e., one who makes his living by 'picking up scraps').

Application: we should realize that the Christian world view, in particular the basic tenets of the gospel, will often elicit **scorn from a culture that is too often foreign to Christian truth**.

This should not hinder us from sharing the truth.

Verse 16 in Acts 17 says that Paul's "spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols." We should note that the verb translated "provoked" here is the Greek word from which we derive the term paroxysm.

Paul was highly irritated. His agitation was a logical result of his Christian conscience and that it was continuous. The idolatry which permeated Athenian culture stimulated this dramatic response.

Application: the idolatry of contemporary culture should bring no less a response from us.

Materialism, Individualism, Relativism, and Secularism are examples of ideologies that have become idols in our culture.

In Acts 17, Verses 17 and 18 refer to several societal groups Paul ministered to: Jews, God-fearing Gentiles, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, as well as the general population, namely "those who happened to be present." Evidently Paul was able to converse with any segment of the population.

Application: as alert, thinking, sensitive, concerned, discerning Christians **we are challenged to confront our culture in all of its variety and pluralism.** It is easier to converse with those who are like-minded, but that is not our only responsibility.

This should not hinder us from Sharing the Truth

The narrative of Acts 17 verses 19-31 indicates that Paul knew enough about Athenian culture to converse with it on the highest intellectual level. He was acutely aware of the "points of understanding" between him and his audience. He was also acutely aware of the "points of disagreement" and did not hesitate to stress them.

Application: we need to "stretch" ourselves more intellectually so that we can duplicate Paul's experience **more frequently.** The most influential seats in our culture are too often left to those who are devoid of Christian thought. Such a condition is in urgent need of change.

Paul experienced three reactions in Athens (Acts 17:32-34):

First, "some began to sneer" (v. 32). They expressed contempt.

Second, some said "We shall hear you again concerning this" (v. 32).

Third, "some men joined him and believed" (v. 34).

We should not be surprised when God's message is rejected; we should be prepared when people want to hear more; and we can rejoice when the message falls on fertile soil and bears the fruit of a changed life.

Conclusion

We have seen that **Scripture is not silent regarding culture.**

First, in some measure, God "is responsible for the presence of culture, for he created human beings in such a way that they are culture-producing beings."

Second, God holds us responsible for **cultural stewardship**. A steward is resourceful and bears good fruit.

Third, **we should not fear the surrounding culture**; instead, we should **strive to contribute to it through God-given creativity, and transform it** through dialogue and proclamation.

Fourth, we should **practice discernment** while living within culture.

Fifth, the products of culture should be judged on the basis of intent, not form. Or, to simplify:

Our Father views human culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by Him and His people for Christian purposes, rather than as an enemy to be combatted or shunned.

Let us use the vehicle for the glory of God!

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