

Session Six

April 16

Review of praying “Lord what is your will?”



Considerations for Beginning to Engage Culture

- Leaving
- Living
- Listening
- Loving



Application to shepherding:

Considerations for Beginning to Process Personal Leadership

- Calling
- Character
- Culture
- Community



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Jesus Changes Everything
reminders on being missional

Stop Engaging ‘The Culture’

BECAUSE IT DOESN'T EXIST.

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I have two or three social media accounts, created in moments of inspiration or boredom, that I have never actually used. The companies that provide those accounts naturally want to turn me into an active user. But since they know nothing about me, the promotional messages they send, rather than being tailored to my actual interests, are the most generic form of popular culture you can imagine. “Here are some people we think you might like to follow,” Twitter gamely suggested recently to one of my dormant accounts—Ellen DeGeneres, CNN Breaking News, and Kim Kardashian West.

Those generic promotions come to mind when I hear fellow Christians talking, as they so often do, about “the culture”—as in, “the culture” is becoming more secular, or we need to engage “the culture.” Talking about “the culture” in this way causes us to stab blindly in the dark, much like Twitter’s email. It also causes us to miss our actual cultural responsibility and opportunity.

A nation of 300 million people, especially one as gloriously diverse as the United States, does not have one monolithic “culture.” It has neighborhoods and cities, ethnic groups and affinity groups, political parties and religious denominations. There is a shared national ethos, to be sure. But that ethos is constantly being contested, challenged, and reimagined by different groups within the nation, and ignored or actively resisted by others.

Even the idea of “the culture,” in the way we now use the phrase, is fairly new. The New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, prefers the term “the world” (*cosmos* in Greek) for what we might call “the culture,” especially systems of ideology and influence that operate independent of God. But it also speaks of “nations” or “peoples” (*ethne* in Greek—today we might call them “ethnolinguistic groups”). We are called to resist being “conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2, ESV), and to make disciples of all *ethne*, in the hope that they all will join in the multinational, multilingual, multicultural chorus around the throne of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

This suggests a more fruitful way to deal with that default world system that we call “the culture.” Instead of preoccupying ourselves with the *cosmos*, we are called to the *ethne*. Rather than engaging in largely imaginary relationships with the world system (by, say, following celebrities on Twitter—people we will never meet or influence or be able to love), we are called to real people in a real place. With those real people, we reflect on the concrete possibilities and limitations of the time and place we share (including, to be sure, the ways the world system presses in on us). We learn to care for what is lasting and valuable in our particular time and place, and begin to create alternatives to things that are inadequate and broken.

The more we do this—the more fully human we become, entwined in relationships of empowering mutual dependence—the less bound and tempted we will be by “the culture.” And the less bound we are by “the culture,” the more we are able to actually influence culture around us, even sometimes up to very large scales—because we are creating and sustaining real alternatives to it.

The early Christians, living under the thumb of a massive global empire, understood this. “Rome” was “the culture” of their day—the economically powerful, technologically assisted, implacably pagan ethos that had subjugated much of Europe and Asia. But rather than worrying about how to engage “Rome,” Paul wrote a letter to actual Romans. In the 16th chapter of that letter he greets them, one after another, by name—Prisca, Aquila, Epenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, and many more (including some who served in Caesar’s household). Paul’s sweeping vision of wrath and righteousness, covenant and salvation, is addressed to particular people in a particular place.

Likewise, our mission is not primarily to “engage the culture” but to “love our neighbor.” Our neighbor is not an abstract collective noun, but a real person in a real place. By God’s grace, the cultural creativity required to fully love that neighbor may end up having lasting influence. Or, by God’s grace, we may be spared the complexity and compromises that can creep in with cultural power.

Either way, we will be ready to be the people of God in our cities and neighborhoods, among every ethnicity and nation, living faithfully within our particular cultures and trusting God to weave out of our faithfulness the cosmic redemption he has promised and accomplished through his Son. Which is to say, we will be “the church.”

https://andy-crouch.com/articles/stop_engaging_the_culture

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