

The Cultural Captivity of the Gospel

My father's roots were in West Virginia. He married a Pennsylvania "Dutch" girl. He never did find a way to fit in. The locals always seemed to him to be focused on more money and more land and more.... The poor, and seemingly less cultured, folks from West Virginia were polite and shared the little that they had. They said, "please pass the bread." In Pennsylvania it was, "I need more bread!" The Southerners called you "honey" and "sugar." They hugged you. The Northerners spoke their incomprehensible Deitch even knowing that the strangers could not understand. They shook your hand.

How could Dad fit in? He did not. He was eventually ostracized. He never was able to adapt to the North. He would have been far more at home in a Southern culture. They had the same Christian doctrine as the North, but they applied it very differently. Is that a sin? Of course not. The easy-going South seemed lazy to the North. The extreme diligence of the North seemed materialistic to the South. Is that a sin? Of course not.

Both cultures were impacted by Scripture, but they had very different applications. This is true in many places in the country and in the world. Do not force your culture on someone else. No matter how much you think that farming is part of the gospel, it is not necessarily so. All cultures can be informed and controlled by Scripture and still be quite different in application.

My father was easily taken advantage of in the North. He assumed the asking price was the fair price. He did not know that he was to offer far less, and then, after dickering, they would come to an agreed price. He would pay the price that was asked to the shock of the high-price-asker. He did not know that people would intentionally take advantage of him. Christian people. He did not understand that that was just the way the culture operated. For him, the playing field was not level.

Dad thought that the culture in the North would eventually understand him. They did not. Their cultural practices were normal to them. They were Christians, but the cultures clashed. That is not necessary. Do not try to force your specific applications on other cultures. Share the Scriptures with them and allow them to make the applications. That will transform their culture.

How is it with you and your congregation? Do you focus on Scriptural teaching and implement that doctrine, or is your focus elsewhere? Is the Church of Jesus Christ your passion? If it is, then teach and live the Scripture, and inform all other cultures that you meet about that culture-changing message. Allow those people to adopt Scriptural principles within the individual elements of their culture.

The Gospel and Culture

We need to offer the gospel to the world. We need to offer the gospel without contaminating it with our own culture. We need to offer truth that will inform, confront, and change every culture. There is nothing wrong with our culture as long as we do not make it the gospel. The gospel will change individuals, and it will change entire cultures.

Wrong doctrine and violations of Scripture need to be corrected. If they are not, leave the situation. Applications of principles that are not wrong but simply expressions of culture are not in need of correction, but they may not be useful to persons of other cultures.

We are not called to create clones.

We are called to make disciples.

That is what Jesus said.

That is what we need to do.

Culture, Doctrine, and Scripture

Cultures vary widely. Beliefs, practices, foods, and relationships form cultures. When the Bible is introduced to and embraced by a culture, the culture changes. Scriptural beliefs and practices create a Biblical culture. A Biblical culture is any culture that has been changed by application of Scripture to reflect Scriptural beliefs and values.

For example, Pennsylvania Dutch culture is quite different from Spanish culture. Both can be informed by and controlled by Scripture. Their food and dress will be different. Their worship styles will be different. That is understandable. Their doctrine will be the same. That is

imperative.

Christian doctrine, very simply, is what the Bible teaches. Doctrine informs and directs culture. Culture should not control doctrine.

Doctrines do not vary, but practices do vary. Doctrines unite believers. Culture and practices should not divide true believers. That said, people are more comfortable experiencing faith with their own culture. Attempting to mix cultures in religious settings will typically create tensions.

Jesus is God in every culture. In every culture, it is true that He was born of a virgin. He is coming to earth again in every culture. Sin is sin in every culture. Salvation is needed in every culture. These things are doctrine; they are not negotiable. Doctrine is not cultural.

What we do not want is a cultural captivity of the gospel. Every culture tries to take the gospel captive. "You cannot be right with God unless you drive a brown horse pulling a black buggy." That is captivity. "You cannot be right with God unless you believe in five-point-Calvinism." That cannot be sustained from Scripture. That is also captivity.

What we do want is a culture informed and directed by Scripture. Scripture will proscribe and prescribe principles and practices. These are derived from Scripture. They are crucial and not negotiable.

- Do not get drunk.
- Do not steal.
- Do not kill.
- Be modest.
- Be honest.
- Be diligent.
- Love God and neighbor.
- Worship the Creator Jehovah God.

These are elements of any culture that is formed and informed by Scripture. Such elements will be present in every Scripturally informed culture. No Scripture teaching or doctrine can be ignored, if the culture is to be truly informed and controlled by Scripture.

To create a Scriptural culture, we must first know the Scripture. That means we must “Study to show [ourselves] approved unto God, a workman who needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”¹ That means the study of Scripture must take precedence over our preconceived notions, our cultural captivities, and other pursuits in life.

Scripture does not specifically dictate what Christians should eat or where they should work. Their choices need to be consistent with Scripture; at the same time, Scripture does not dictate details about:

- Types of food to eat
- How many meals to eat in a day
- Types of attire—as long as it is modest
- Worship styles—enthusiastic or more subdued
- Employment—as long as the work does not violate Scripture
- Types of vehicles to drive
- Kinds of houses in which to live

The Culture Must Be Scriptural, but It Is not Scripture

While each church group with its Scripture informed/controlled culture is free to make the needed applications of Scripture to life, it is all too easy for those applications to become defended as Scripture itself. We must be careful not to demand loyalty to a particular set of applications. Our focus must be on lives of integrity before our Father in Heaven.

A church led by the Holy Spirit will create a culture by applying and living the principles and doctrines of Scripture. Thus, the created culture is Scriptural, but it is not Scripture and

cannot be defended as if it is. When the created culture is defended as Scripture or equal to Scripture, we return to cultural captivity and that is where we dare not go if we want a Scriptural Church.

We cannot reason backwards and claim that to practice a Scriptural culture is to be Scriptural. You can loyally keep each practice, while your heart is not right with God. That is the inherent danger. We must start with integrity and Scripture, and from there produce a culture that reflects and demonstrates the principles and commands of Scripture. Thus, we have a Scriptural life controlled by the Holy Spirit and a Scriptural culture derived from Scripture.

We start with the love of God and commitment to Him and allow the direction of the indwelling Holy Spirit to develop our Spiritual life. From there we apply the principles and commands of Scripture to produce the Scriptural culture.

Principles for Practically Relating to Culture

The Principle of Respect

Respect the cultures of other people. They may not worship as you do or may not do church exactly as you do. If they are not breaking any principles of Scripture, do not fault them and do not try to force your culture upon them. If they are not aware of principles that they should be following, share the Scripture with them on those subjects and live out the truth for them to see and experience.

Worship Jehovah God in Spirit and in Truth. That is the Scriptural injunction. In numerous places the Bible expresses the worship and teaching of the early Church. Those passages are instructive for our time as well. We need to know what Scripture teaches and adhere to and teach the doctrine as expressed in Scripture.

We should not be creating tensions in our groups about details of culture. Many Scriptural expressions can be acceptable to God. If your group does not practice exactly what you think is best, either submit to the group or find a group where you can submit. Do not try to change the group unless they are in doctrinal error or if they have left their first love of Christ.

The Christian woman's head veiling is such a subject. Some prefer one type and some another.

Scripture does not spell out the specifics. Respect the practices of those who differ with your group. If the group of which you are a part has a particular practice, respect and submit to that practice.

The Principle of Examination

*"Let a man examine himself and so let him eat."*²

Examine Scripture to see and know what it teaches on every subject.

Develop a culture that is informed and controlled by Scripture.

Follow the Holy Spirit in His leading to know God's will and heart for our time.

Do not allow the culture, no matter how Scriptural, to replace Scripture itself.

Do not demand loyalty to a cultural expression of Scripture.

Do live a life of absolute integrity before God and His written Word within your culture.

The Principle of Recognizing Tension

Different church cultures reflect local customs. Those cultures can be informed by Scripture. Those cultures can be transformed by Scripture. That transformation will not necessarily change the type of food they eat or their basic habits.

If they are not violating Scripture, allow them to express their unique culture. Attempting to blend cultures can cause needless clashes. Those kinds of clashes can cause loss of fellowship. That is not necessary.

The Gospel does not change for the culture; the culture changes by the Gospel.

The book of Acts chapter six describes **"a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration."** Cultural

differences were causing tensions, and the Church needed a solution. The Apostles said: **“Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men: of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”** The Church chose spiritually qualified men to remedy cultural tensions.

Satan is using all kinds of tactics to cause dissent in the Church. Do not allow Satan to destroy your congregation. Recognize the cultural emphases and tensions. Appoint godly men who can oversee the situation, recognize the needs, and impartially minister to all the people.

Resisting the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel.

Every culture attempts to take the Gospel captive instead of allowing the Gospel to captivate and change their culture. The Gospel is viewed through the cultural eyes and made to fit the culture. The culture is defended as the gospel. That is idolatry.

There will always be a cultural aspect to the gospel because we are formed by culture. But the Holy Spirit redeems the culture as we allow the Gospel to penetrate our culture and change us. The result is a supernatural culture because the culture is being changed by the gospel. It may look different in different cultures, but in every case, it will be a culture formed and controlled by the Holy Spirit of God.

As Scripture and the Holy Spirit convey the gospel, lives are formed and captured by the Lord, and the culture becomes a reflection of the gospel, not vice versa.

Jesus Christ is Lord and King of His Kingdom.

My Prayer

May the good Lord grant us wisdom and grace to live the life to which He has called us—out of darkness into life and peace.

May He grant us prayer and worship and fulfillment in losing (and finding) ourselves in Him.

May He grant us peace and harmony to love and to live life in faithfulness together.

May He bless us with relationships that show the world that we are His children.

May He grant us discernment to live our lives in integrity to Him and His people, the Church as His body here on earth.

May He grant His children discernment and humility to recognize each other as we live here in this world.

May he deliver us from the error of thinking that loyalty to any system is the same as absolute fidelity to Christ.

May He show us how great things we must suffer for Him.

May He return quickly and receive us to Himself.

His bride is making herself ready. She is committed to Him.

Amen

REFERENCES

¹ 2 Timothy 2:15 Return to context↗

² 1 Corinthians 11:28 Return to context↗