

Introductory Remarks

A Practical Guide to Culture class

I want to thank all those who participated in the formation of this class. Barbara Hunter, Jan Garner, and Elizabeth Pergande initiated this class following their studies into the culture and its influence and their heart for our children. Jan and Elizabeth eagerly shared what they have studied and faithfully held to our intended purpose and audience: equip our families with the understanding necessary to train our children as disciples in a secular culture.

Thank you for the opportunity to facilitate this class. The topics are important. It is essential that these matters be discussed within the church. Thank you for your earnestness. Thank you for your commitment in both heart and mind to search these matters out.

The stated mission of our church, partly, is to equip and edify. If we equip without edifying or edify yet fail to equip, then we have missed the mark. How do we equip and edify in order to promote the mission of the church in our study of culture?

Equipping must be about discipleship. We equip by committing to solid study of scripture, to prayer, to meditation upon His nature, worship (in a variety of ways), and other spiritual formation practices that remind us of our hope in the living Christ. What is our hope in Christ? Our ever present fellowship with Him and the promise of His return to restore all things. This is our hope. We gather together, as the early church did, to remind each other of this truth. Similarly, we explore together how to love the Lord with all our hearts, soul, and strength and how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Edification is a wholly different task. Edification is building up the body of Christ. Galatians 3 tells us that when we put on Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” How can they be one when clearly they are different? They have different backgrounds,

perspectives, experiences, privileges, struggles... surely they do not agree on all things. We know there are contrasting groups within the church. To the church of Nashville, Paul may write: in Christ there is neither Republican nor Democrat, liberal nor conservative, American nor foreign; for all are one in Christ Jesus. If we are called to be in unity within the church, then that unity cannot be dependent upon complete agreement in thought or experience. So, on what does unity of the church depend?

Edification must promote unity. The church is not about our labels but about our concession to honor one another in love as Christ loved us. On this, the unity of the church depends: fellowship with the living Christ that empowers us to lay down our lives for one another in love. My aim as facilitator has been to listen and articulate different points of view in order to gain understanding. Love compels me to understand the different points of view because I know the motivations are good, and the conclusions have merit and should be heard. The law of love requires us to stay close to one another and stay close to Him.

There are things we must avoid because they do not equip and do not edify. Anything that rings of political or sectarian division misses the mark and must be cut out. Anything that leans too heavily on one approach to culture must be balanced. Within the body of Christ, Jews will still be Jewish and Greeks will still be Grecian. They do not abandon their distinctions when they form the body of Christ. Instead, those distinctions are given meaning. The body is diverse. We have different talents, gifts, and backgrounds, but we share the same allegiance. All other allegiances must bow before the lordship of Jesus Christ. We will see things differently. Yet, we can both be sincere and devoted followers of Christ. These distinctions, these differences are like looking at a sculpture versus a painting. The painting requires only one vantage point to be perceived. The sculpture requires several vantage points to be seen completely. We need each other in this way. We are incomplete otherwise. In this manner, we edify one another.

Timothy Keller talks about three approaches Christians take regarding culture making. Each approach has its own merits and each its own dangers when taken to an extreme. He talks of the **transformational approach, the justice approach, and the church building approach**. The transformational approach tends to be more confrontational. The justice approach is to love and serve the poor. The church building approach is to disengage and just focus on the church. We need the leaning of all three in order to achieve a balanced structure. It is for this reason that multiple points of view will be encouraged. However, relational knowledge of the living Jesus must be the central focus of our gathering in order for the church to be the body of Christ to one another and to the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Cost of Discipleship has a chapter on "The Disciple and the Unbeliever." It is worthwhile to read the thoughts of a man who put himself on a cross to stand in opposition to a political regime that had hijacked his religion and his culture.

"The disciples are not to judge. If they do so, they will themselves be judged by God. The sword wherewith they judge their brethren will fall upon their own heads. Instead of cutting themselves off from their brothers as the just from the unjust, they find themselves cut off from Jesus. Why should this be so? The source of the disciple's life lies exclusively in his fellowship with Jesus Christ. He possesses his righteousness only within that association, never outside of it. **That is why his righteousness can never become an objective criterion to be applied at will.**

The only way to reach others is through him in whose hands they are themselves like all other men. . . The disciples are taught to pray, and so they learn the only way to reach others is by praying to God. Judgement and forgiveness are always in the hands of God. He closes and and he opens. But the disciples must ask, they must seek and knock, and then God will hear them. **They have to learn that their anxiety and concern for others must drive them to intercession.**

The mainspring of his life and work is the strength which comes from fellowship with Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer reminds us that the call to discipleship is the call to a living Christ and not a worldview or religion. We stand before Jesus just the same as all others and He must say “I know you” or “I never knew you.” Scripture shows us how to love Him and others. It guides us into His Presence. But it cannot replace the presence of Him who desires to know and be known by us.

These topics are not new in essence. They have been around a long time. How did the early church engage these topics? Does scripture really speak to what we face today? What does scripture say about pornography, sexual immorality, idolatry, addiction, sectarianism, entertainment, and affluence? In addressing the chapters in the book, we must simultaneously ground ourselves in the history of God’s activity amongst His people and the context of scripture. God came for people– not positions. We must identify names and not topics. We must pray for people and not abstract divisions. We must engage without assimilating, hold a standard without wielding a sword, and build the church without isolating ourselves. The early church did just that. That is the challenge before the church today.

What is Culture?

(3/31, 4/3)

In this opening session, we will use Timothy Keller’s video of this same title. This segment was chosen because it closely aligns with the book but offers something of value that is not in the book. Keller addresses three approaches of culture-making taken by the church. The **transformative approach** tends to be more confrontational with the systemic culture. The **social justice** approach tends to ignore the problems of culture and focuses on love and compassion. The **church-building** approach tends to isolate itself from the systemic culture and

disengages. Each approach has its merits and each its dangers when taken to an extreme.

The parallels to the early church and its approaches are interesting and exemplify why the study of history is so vitally important. GK Chesterson writes, "if we are uneducated, we shall not know how very old are all new ideas." The Jewish community at the time of Jesus had three distinct approaches, not unlike our own. While the parallels are not perfect, they serve the point of the illustration. The **Pharisees** engaged in personal acts of worship with a commitment to social justice. The **Sadducees** used political power to enforce their views of scripture. They were more conservative in nature. They administered laws of state, represented the state, collected taxes, equipped the army, regulated relations with Rome, and mediated grievances. The **Essenes** isolated themselves from the world and rejected the comforts of the world. They disengaged. Again, each has its own merits and each its dangers.

Which is the right approach? I don't know exactly. But I know that we have all three views within our church. Each needs to be given a voice. Each needs to be held in check. I believe each offers something to edify the body when the love of Christ is allowed to form unity amongst our diversity.

This is why the The "**Way of the Exile**" is such an important lesson. It weaves scripture to reveal the story of how God's people make culture within a culture that is not their own. Deuteronomy 10- 12 speaks to this as well. God wanted a people that loved and worshipped Him alone. They were called to resist evil and called to reflect His love and compassion. In Exodus 33, Moses asks God, "What will distinguish us from all the other people unless your Presence goes with us?" His Presence and our allegiance to the One True God becomes the foundation of His culture. The legal system, economic structure, family life, individual ethics, and communal ethics were to reflect this allegiance. God is making a Kingdom culture within His people by calling us to freely give our heart and allegiance to Him alone. Pagan worship rites or political power structures become two sides of the same coin- a coin that does not bear the image and Presence of God.

Francis Schaeffer, in How Then Shall We Live?, cites Edward Gibbon's The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in listing five attributes that marked the fall of Rome:

1. an increasing love of luxury (affluence)
2. a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor
3. an obsession with sex
4. freakishness in the arts
5. an increased desire for people to live off the state

Interestingly, these are the things our culture class will discuss. While the work of Gibbon does not neglect the role of Christianity and the tyrannical Crusades, nor the resultant pacifism that stemmed from Christianity, this description is apt. How does the Christ-follower create Kingdom culture within a culture of similar attributes?

Balance is required in our discussion on culture-making because those who contend in one way, will inevitably miss the other. At times we must confront cultural practices, at times we must simply show love and compassion, and at times our focus should be on just the church. Our call is to remember the teachings of God and teach them to our children. We are to show them the ways of God's love and compassion while simultaneously resisting evil. We are to live in the third way, the way of the exile, that gives its allegiance to God alone while seeking the welfare of its community. Allegiance to God alone and making space for His Presence is how God designed His people to distinguish themselves from all other people (Exodus 33). May we make such a culture for our children.

How To Read the Bible

(4/7, 4/10)

In this section we will use the notes from the book. Along with that, we will provide access to a commencement address by NT Wright regarding authority. We will also discuss reading scripture from an eastern and western perspective. The Bible Project series on this topic will be promoted for those who want more information. We will touch on rabbinical methods of teaching and synecdoche as well as exegesis contrasted with eisegesis. The aim of this class is to promote

better understanding of scripture as unified story that points us to Jesus with the power to transform our lives. The Wednesday night session will be follow-up discussions and an opportunity to share how our reading of scripture has changed, how it has changed us, how the Holy Spirit has spoken or revealed something to us, and how we can demonstrate the love and transforming power of God's word to our children.

Racial Tension

(4/14, 4/17)

Being with Christ in the midst of our divisions. The "Way of the Exile" challenges us in our allegiances. Race, sex, nation, region, and political parties are among things that claim our allegiance and serve to divide us. We will consider the stories of Will Campbell and Clarence Jordan. Will Campbell was unique in that he was the only white person on Martin Luther King Jr's inner circle yet also performed burial ceremonies for klansmen. Clarence Jordan established Koinonia farms in Americus, Georgia during the height of the civil rights movement. He endured much hardship but chose to follow Jesus despite the cost. What allegiances divide us? What allegiance unites?

In this session we will examine cultural lies regarding racism. We will discuss God's better story that creates a multi-ethnic family centered on Jesus. The chapter provides action steps to identify and bridge false allegiances of race, sex, nationality, and political parties (p291). The challenge of hopecasting is for the church to lead the way in "exposing, confronting, and condemning any and all acts of discrimination and dehumanization (p293)."

Addiction

(*4/21, 4/24)

Being with Christ in our emptiness is the basis for our session on addiction. Ryan Glover will share his story. What was the allurements of alcohol? What was he looking for? What did he find? How did it affect his relationships? How did Jesus meet Him in the struggle? When is he tempted to return? What role does

community play in his better story? How is his walk with Jesus different today? What do we need to know in order to better guide our children?

The informational session will be an opportunity for discussion on the testimony Ryan shared as a means of seeing God's story. It will also be an opportunity to look at cultural lies of addiction. Action steps from the book will be discussed. Questions from the end of the chapter will be considered, such as "what addictive substances are most prevalent in our community?"

Affluence and Consumerism

(4/28, 5/1)

Being with Christ in the good life is the focus of this session. Joey Lankford (Cul2vate) will share his story of having everything people strive for yet still hungry and thirsty for something else. Jesus called him and his family to move to South Africa, leaving this world and all it offered behind. In doing so, Joey and his family found the satisfaction that only the presence of Christ can provide. Now he enjoys the good life as part of God's better story.

The informational session will look at the cultural lies regarding wealth. We will reflect upon Joey's example of joining God's better story and consider action steps to challenge us and our children. The section on hopecasting will look at the generosity observed in millennials.

The Hook-up Culture

(5/5, 5/8)

Being with Christ in our relationships is the focus of this session. Clint and Emma will share with us the challenges our children face and ways to promote healthier relationships. How is our church community presenting the better story to our children?

The informational session will look at the cultural lies in this area. We will reflect upon what Clint and Emma shared regarding the better story. Action steps to encourage Christ-centered relationships will be discussed. We will consider the hopecasting portion of the chapter and consider the question of what we as parents may be doing to inadvertently encourage a sexually oriented culture.

Entertainment

(5/12, 5/12)

Being with Christ in our storytelling. Mike Fernandez will share with us about engaging the arts and entertainment with discernment alongside our children. Imagination, creativity, and storytelling are not accessories to life but essential in our design. In what ways can we complete the story the world tells, as Paul did in Acts 17?

The informational session will reflect upon what Mike shared. We will also consider the Timothy Keller video on culture-making when he spoke about finding the good, or the incomplete truth, and pointing to Christ's completion of the story. Cultural lies regarding entertainment will be discussed, as will action steps. Hopecasting centers on Christian artists with a statement from Lecrae.

Sexuality (Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation)

(5/19, 5/22)

Being with Christ in our sexuality. Chandler Means will discuss the prevalence, science (scientific claims and reclassification), and dangers related to gender dysmorphia and sexual orientation. What is it like to work with people undergoing these struggles? What is the underlying pain? What is the better story?

The informational session will address cultural claims and action steps for bridging this topic with our children. Timothy Keller's video plays role into this as well. How do the transformational, social justice, and church building approaches each play a role yet hold danger? The hopecasting on sexual orientation presents the story of Rosaria Butterfield and Christian Yuan. The story of Walt Heyer and statement by Dr Paul McHugh will offer hope in the area of gender identity. Do you know someone who is transgender or homosexual (couple)?

Information Age

(5/26, 5/29)

Being with Christ in a world of other voices will be the focus here. This section will address the bombardment of ideas and the consequences of those ideas. These ideas will compete for "our kids' attention and allegiance (p88)." We will consider: origins, identity, meaning, morality, and destiny. We will examine practical ideas for helping our children discern the competing voices regarding these worldview components.

“Identity and Christianity” will be part of this session. It will center on cultural identity and the story with which we identify. Identity formation stems from our commitments and from our community. We will discuss ways our church and family communities discern the voice of God and tell better stories.

Pornography

(6/2, 6/5)

Being with Christ in our longing for intimacy. Donald Scott will share his story. What was the allurements of pornography? What was he looking for? What did he find? How did it affect his relationships? How did Jesus meet him in the struggle? When is he tempted to return? What role does community play in his better story? How is his walk with Jesus different today? What do we need to know in order to better guide our children?

The informational session will reflect upon what Donald shared as a means of seeing God’s better story. We will discuss the cultural lies regarding pornography. The action steps will examine ways to get involved to both prepare and protect our children. Hopecasting will look at ways people are beginning to confront this dangerous industry.

What now?

(6/9, 6/12)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote regarding Jesus’s disciples: “they have to learn that their anxiety and concern for others must drive them to intercession.” We are called to be disciples and to train up our children to be disciples. We will pray for Jesus to capture the heart and imagination of our children and families. We will pray for their friends to see in us God’s better story lived out in the midst of a culture that is, as CS Lewis writes, “too easily pleased.” We will reflect upon the quarter to remember what was inspirational, helpful, and challenging. In what ways do we need to confront the world? In what ways do we need to promote love and compassion? In what ways do we simply need to build the church as we make culture? We will also consider where we go from here.

In closing, I think people will find A Practical Guide to Culture beneficial. The book is well thought out in its design and purpose. A few supplements will be included to offer balance and to give weight to all three approaches of culture-making.

Supplements:

Timothy Keller video, "Why Culture Matters"
"The Way of the Exile" from the TheBibleProject
NT Wright address on "Authority of Scripture"
(reliability and authority are different ideas)
Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
How Then Shall We Live by Francis Schaeffer

See links to Elizabeth Pergande's material

Excerpts from Clarence Jordan (obituary in the Tennessean) and Will Campbell (The Essential Writings of Clarence Jordan).