

"Christ and Culture:
A Gospel Is for All Nations"

(1 Cor. 9:19-23)

--CEFC 11/1/20

Here is an interesting fact:

Christianity is the only major religion whose center
is not in the country of its founder.

Judaism is centered in Jerusalem.

Islam's center is in Saudi Arabia.

The Buddha lived in an area of modern Nepal,
and now, less than 2% of the world's **Buddhists**
live in countries outside of Asia.

Hinduism has no distinct founder,
but roughly 95 percent of the world's Hindus live in India.

The center of Christianity was once Europe, which Jesus never visited,
but now 51% of the world's Christians live in Africa and Latin America.¹

What are we to make of that?

Surely, this distinctive of Christianity must go back to Jesus himself
and his Great Commission to his followers—

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

“Go and make disciples of all nations,” he commanded them.

And that’s what they did, and that’s what Christians are still doing.

“all nations”—the Greek word there is ἐθνη,

from which we get the terms “ethnic” and “ethnicity.”

Traditionally, a “nation” was a people group with a distinctive culture.

So Jesus was commanding his disciples to take the gospel to all cultures.

The gospel is for all cultures,

but it is to be captive to none.

That’s the theme I want us to look at this morning.

I want to set this topic up for you with two key quotes—

one from the Bible and one from an early Christian.

First, from the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 9:19-23—which we just read—

“Though I am free and belong to no one,

I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

To those under the law I became like one under the law

(though I myself am not under the law),

so as to win those under the law.

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law

(though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law),

so as to win those not having the law.

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak.

I have become all things to all people

so that by all possible means I might save some.

I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

The second quote comes from the late second century *Epistle to Diognetus*—
 in which an unknown believer speaks of Christians as a "third race"—
 whom he identifies neither as Jews, nor Greeks,
 neither as Romans, nor barbarians.

He writes:

"Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of mankind
 by country, speech, or customs.

They do not live in cities of their own;
 they do not speak a special language;
 they do not follow a peculiar manner of life. . . .

They live in Greek cities and they live in non-Greek cities
 according to the lot of each one.

They conform to the customs of their country
 in dress, food, and the general mode of life,
 and yet they show a remarkable,
 an admittedly extraordinary structure of their own life together.

They live in their own countries, but only as guests and aliens.

They take part in everything as citizens
 and endure everything as aliens.

Every foreign country is their hometown,
 and every hometown is a foreign country to them."/

What both of these have in common is what we could call the cultural flexibility,
 or adaptability, of the Christian message.

Just as the Bible can be translated into any language;
so the Christian message and the Christian life can be adapted to any culture.

Paul can enter into Jewish culture or live as a Gentile—
or he can even adapt to various cultural expressions within the church itself—
without compromising either his central identity as a follower of Jesus
or the essential truth of the gospel.

He is free in that sense—
as one captured by the gospel
he is free from captivity to any particular culture.

And that same sense of cultural distance, so to speak,
is evident in Diognetus—
Christians are not confined to one cultural expression of their faith.

Their lives are distinctive—there's no question about that,
but it is not a geographical distinction—
living within their own nation or ghetto;
nor does it involve the typical cultural distinctives
of language, dress, food, and "the general mode of life."

The central identity of the Christian does not derive from a particular cultural setting,
but from their relationship to Jesus Christ.

In the words of Jesus,

The Christian is one who is "**in the world but not of it**" (Jn. 17:16,18).²

² John 17:16—"They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."

Our true citizenship is in heaven./

The Christian's relationship with culture—

It's not a simple topic, but it's an important one

if we want to live faithfully ministers of the gospel

in the culture in which God has placed us

or in a culture to which he sends us.

II. As we examine this theme,

let's start by considering **what we mean by the word "culture."**

We begin there because the term "culture" itself often eludes definition,

and is notoriously difficult to describe.

One social critic has characterized "culture" as

“one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”³

It is "a comprehensive term for the beliefs, values,

and way of life of a community."

Most broadly, "culture" is the totality of human expression in language, dress, food,

customs, art, literature, education, technology,

politics, law, sports, entertainment, and religion

that is shared by a group of people

and which is in some way inherited and passed on through time

³ Raymond Williams. This description of culture is from Jason Sexton on the California project (TECC Project).

from one generation to the next.

Culture is what provides a "world of meaning," a "web of significance," to what we do.

We can speak broadly of "American" culture—

and there is much that those of us who are Americans share.

But there are also numerous American sub-cultures—

There's Southern culture, African-American culture,

hip culture, rock culture, California culture, NASCAR culture, and on and on.

It's important to see that nothing human beings do

is entirely non-cultural or transcultural—

for everything anyone does—

any act, expression, or creation

in some way bears the stamp of the culture that has produced it.

In that sense, every human act is embedded in a culture—it is "enculturated."

Even my preaching this sermon is a cultural act.

For one thing, I am speaking English—

a particular kind of English that we all share—

at least we share it well enough for you to understand me,

at least most of the time.

We must live within a culture—

the clothes we wear, the language we speak,

our historical consciousness, our intellectual framework--they all reflect a culture.

We cannot escape being "enculturated" any more than we can escape being incarnated—

that is, it's a part of what it means to live in this material world.

It's important to understand that even Jesus himself was enculturated.

When the eternal Word became flesh and entered into this world,
he was immediately embedded in a particular culture.

Jesus was born into a first-century Jewish family.

Who he was, what he taught, and what he did can't be understood
apart from that Jewish culture. /

But this is not to say that what Jesus said was merely cultural.

For though as the human son of Mary, Jesus lived within a particular culture,
we can also say that as the divine Son of God, he transcends culture—
"Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36),
for he comes from God—who is outside human culture.

That's why we believe that what Jesus said,
though it was spoken in a first-century Jewish setting in Aramaic,
is truth that applies to all cultures.

God speaks through human words that reflect a particular culture—
but because it is God speaking, what he says transcends culture.

III. So our question is,

How does this transcendent divine truth of the gospel
relate to particular human cultures?

That has never been an easy question for Christians to deal with.

In this regard,

I found Richard Lovelace's book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* quite helpful.

One of the first effects of spiritual decline among the people of God

is what he calls "destructive enculturation"—

that is, the life of the people of God becomes saturated

with the godless culture of the surrounding world.

That's the situation found so clearly in the book of Judges.

"When men's hearts are not full of God," Lovelace writes,

"they become full of the world around them,

like a sponge full of clear water that has been squeezed empty

and is then thrown into a mud puddle" (p. 184).

The Israelites were explicitly warned against this--

God's purpose from the beginning was to create a people for himself

who would reflect his holiness and character in the world.

The Lord graciously rescued the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt,

and then on Mt. Sinai he gave them his law by which they were to live.

They were to be different--

Lev. 18:1-4 The LORD said to Moses,

"I am the LORD your God.

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live,

and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you.

Do not follow their practices.

You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees.

I am the LORD your God."

Jesus gives a similar warning to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount
when he teaches on prayer--

**“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans,
for they think they will be heard because of their many words.
Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt. 6:7-8).**

God's people were to be distinctive in their relationship with God
and in the ways that played out in the way they lived.

And in the Old Covenant,
without the full benefits of union with Christ
and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit,
which were not available in that age,
it was necessary, Lovelace argues, for God to build around Israel
a wall of what he calls "**protective enculturation**" (p. 184).

The law of God in the Torah welded together the Jewish culture with its religious core.
Israel's religious distinctiveness was to be displayed in certain cultural forms—
in things like the civil law, national holidays, and dietary taboos
which were directly imposed by God.

Lovelace continues the sponge metaphor—

"If a sponge is first dipped in oil, it can be thrown in muddy water
without any danger of absorption" (p. 184).

"The protective enculturation in the Jewish lifestyle
was an accommodation to the spiritual infancy of Israel," he says (p. 184).

This lay behind the commands related to the annihilation of the Canaanite cities
when the Israelites occupied the promised land (Deut. 7:1-2).
Not only was this an act of judgment upon these wicked peoples (cf. Gen. 15:16),
it was also a way of protecting the Israelites
from the corrupting effects of a foreign culture.

They were to break down the altars,
smash the sacred stones,
cut down the Asherah poles,
and burn the idols in the fire.

In other words, they were to destroy all their cultural artifacts
(Dt. 7:2-3, 16; 20:16-28).

The requirements of the Old Testament law that were expressed in meticulous detail
in the cultural expressions that permeated everyday life in Israel
defining what counted as clean and unclean--
these were to be constant reminders of their distinctiveness as God's people (Deut. 7:1).

This law, Paul was later to say, served as a tutor to bring them into readiness
for the coming Messiah (Gal. 3:24).

It was a "protective enculturation,"
but it mainly affected outward behavior,
which, as Paul would also say in Romans 7,
doesn't actually deal with the root of human sin,
but only aroused sin and made it visible.

This recognition of sin and guilt was meant to drive the Israelites
to the sacrificial system—
which was God's gracious provision to deal with their alienation from him--
which, in turn, was to point them to the coming Lamb of God.

But this protective enculturation, because of the effects of sin,
led to a hardening of this cultural encasing of spiritual truth,
and it became encrusted with human tradition—
all of which became indistinguishable from the commands of God.

Divine truth and, with it, the life of the people of God,
was thought to be inexorably enculturated within Judaism.

To be a member of God's people was to be Jewish—full stop.

And to be Jewish meant assuming all the distinctives of Jewish culture./

But the coming of Jesus marked a dramatic challenge to this Jewish status quo.

Jesus himself was born "**under the law**,"

and he did not come to abolish the law,

but instead he came to fulfill it.

And in so doing, he reinterprets the law,

and by his redeeming work, he transforms it,

and in the process, Jesus sets its spiritual truth free

from its cultural encasement.

This, in fact, is just what got Jesus in trouble—

he challenged the cultural identity of the Jews of his day—
with their allegiance to temple worship,
to the sacredness of the food laws
to a legalistic understanding of the Sabbath,
and their protective isolation from the uncleanness of the Gentiles.

They had ceased to be a light to the nations,
and they had forgotten their divine destiny to bring blessing to the whole world.

The protective enculturation had taken them captive,
and it had blinded them to God's purpose
to use them to bring blessing to all nations./

And this cultural issue provided the single biggest challenge within the early church.

Jesus, in his new covenant ministry of the cross and resurrection
and the coming of the Holy Spirit,
inaugurated a new age that burst the bounds of Judaism
when he commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations.

The new wine of the gospel called for new wineskins,
but the first Christians weren't quite sure what to make of this.

Saul the Pharisee thought the whole notion was nothing but blasphemy—
and he was dead set against it.

But even the first Christian disciples weren't sure what to do
with this new way of being God's people.

The Lord had to use persecution to get them to move out of Jerusalem,
and then he had to exhibit the demonstrable work of the Spirit
in the lives of non-Jews to open their eyes to this new work.

Peter's vision and the conversion of the Gentile centurion Cornelius
brought this new covenant work to light in its clearest form.

After Paul's conversion and his mission to the Gentiles,
this became the burning issue dividing the early Christians.

Did a person have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian?—

In other words, did a person have to enter into

this cultural form of Judaism under the Old Covenant law,

this protective enculturation,

in order to be a part of the people of God?

This was the heart of the conflict we read about in Paul's letter to the Galatians,

in which he tells of opposing Peter to his face (2:11)

when Peter drew back and separated himself from the Gentiles.

The council in Jerusalem recounted in Acts 15 addresses this very question.

And the clear answer given by that council was No—

The Jewish law, and the entire cultural way of life that went with it,

was not binding on believers in Christ,

though the Gentiles were told to observe certain moral prohibitions

that were particularly offensive to Jews.

God's people were no longer confined to this particular Jewish cultural form.

The church of Jesus Christ would be
a world-wide, trans-cultural, trans-national people
defined exclusively by the gospel that Jesus died for our sins
and rose from the dead and sent his Spirit to live within us
so that we could be empowered to live a new life.

Lovelace puts it like this:

"After the cross and the resurrection, a wholly new state of affairs comes into being.

The kingdom of God which has been established
is not an earthly cultural and political organization
but a process of spiritual transformation energized by the Holy Spirit
using the catalyst of the gospel message
which will spread like leaven among all cultures.

The message must therefore be dis-enculturated,
freed from its protective shell,
so that it may take root in a thousand different cultural and political soils
and bring them to full self-expression.

The oil must be wrung out of the sponge,
in order that it may be filled with wine," he says (pp. 186f).//

It was Paul, supremely, who sought to "dis-enculturate" the gospel—
in other words, to distinguish it from Jewish cultural life,
a culture which was grounded in the Old Testament law,
but went beyond what the law required.

We are saved by faith and not by the works of the law—
all foods were now clean,

circumcision meant nothing,
and the temple in which God dwelt
was now the church of Jesus Christ.

This is the freedom that we now enjoy in Christ.

Hence, Paul's conviction as stated in 1 Cor. 9—

**"I have become all things to all people
so that by all possible means I might save some."**

So whether Paul kept kosher or ate pork,
whether he ate meat sacrificed to idols or refused it,
whether converts were circumcised or not--
none of this was an issue for Paul any longer.
What mattered was what effect his actions would have
on the impact of the gospel in the lives of other people. /

This passage has tremendous implications for our lifestyles
as we think of evangelism, doesn't it.

Certainly, there are limits here--

Paul doesn't say, "to adulterers I became an adulterer,
and to the greedy I became greedy."

Paul, though free from the law of Moses,
is still bound by the law of Christ.

And certainly, too,

though our presentations of the gospel may take different forms
and the cultural garb in which it is offered to the world may vary,
the essential message must always remain the same—and that is a challenge.

The central issue here is our passion to see Christ proclaimed--

to all people everywhere

in a way that doesn't come with all kinds of cultural stumbling blocks
that necessarily includes all sorts of cultural features.

God's gospel must come to people in a manner that is consistent with its content

but which communicates in their culture.

We must be aware that the message will always be enculturated;

it always come in some cultural clothing,

and we must be discerning in how that is taking place.

How must the gospel be expressed in a particular culture

so that it might best be understood?

Paul was willing to give up every other allegiance for the sake of Christ--

Notice, he says, to the Jews he would become "**as a Jew.**"

This is an extraordinary statement for someone to make

who was born of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day,

was taught by the rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem

and who had become a leading Pharisee of his day.

But for Paul, to act like a Jew was considered an accommodation!

How about you, those of you who were born and raised in this country--

would you be willing to become "as an American" to reach Americans?

More than that, would you be willing to act "as if you weren't an American"

to reach those who weren't?

Paul's understanding of the gospel set him free from
a cultural captivity to Jewish law and customs.
He could become “**like a Gentile**” among the Gentiles,
but he still saw himself “**under the law of Christ.**”

In other words, though the Christian message and life could adapt to all cultures,
it was not to adopt any culture.

There is still something about it that is transcultural—
Whatever culture we are a part of,
we must still be “**under the law of Christ.**”

And Paul was very conscious of what we have already referred to as
“destructive enculturation”—
that is, adopting cultural norms and practices
that contradicted or distorted the way of Christ found in the gospel.

For example,
it was a standard cultural practice in Corinth for rich and poor to eat separately.
Evidently, that practice continued among the Corinthian Christians,
even in their separation when celebrating the Lord’s Supper.

But Paul would have none of it!

That cultural practice was a denial of the gospel itself,
which tore down those barriers and united rich and poor
in one family in Christ.

But these cultural judgments can be tricky.

Culture is about meaning—and the meaning of cultural artifacts
can be perceived differently.

I think of the example of a struggle I once heard of back in the 1970s
between American missionaries and Kenyan converts
regarding the instruments used in their worship.

The missionaries were all for the use of African drums,
as an expression of indigenous worship.

But the Africans were against the use of drums,
because of their association in their minds with spiritism and idolatry.

Contrast this with the use of electrical guitars in worship—
the Africans were all for it, as it represented a contemporary style of music.
While the missionaries were against it,
because of its association with the drug culture.

That's what makes this challenging—
These cultural meanings can change over time.
That's why we need nothing less than the mind of Christ.

Paul says—"Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

The truth is, in this life, we will never be completely disenculturated—
The gospel is like salt as a flavoring for food.

You don't eat salt by itself;
it has to go into your food.

As we live out the gospel,
we will necessarily live as Christians within a culture.

And every church will have a certain culture—we can't help it.

For that reason, I think of the "dis-" in "dis-enculturation"

ought to refer to a "discerning" or a "distanced" enculturation.

But it might even refer to a "distinctive" enculturation.

In some respects, like salt in foods,

the gospel will be enculturated in myriad ways in myriad cultures,
but there will always be something distinctive about it wherever it is found—
something that reflects the transcendent truth and life of Jesus Christ.

There will be something distinctively Christian about Christians in a Hispanic culture,
or Christians in a Sudanese
culture,
or Christians in an American
culture.

We are to be in this world, but not of it.

Therefore, we need cultural discernment, to maintain that distinctive distance.

I appreciate the words of Ken Myers—

“Cultural engagement without cultural discernment leads to cultural captivity.”

Is our Christianity captive to our culture?

That can easily happen.

Certainly, it happened in the South before the Civil War

when Christians were so captive to the culture in which they lived

that they were blind to the evils of slavery.

We see that very clearly now.

Do we now have our own blind spots?

Where do we confuse American values—

the values of democracy or political freedom or free market capitalism--

or where do we confuse Republican or Democratic values—

with distinctively Christian values?

Do we equate political policies—

things like tax policies or certain immigration policies—

do we equate these with the mandates of the gospel?

I am afraid that many Christians—on the left and on the right—do just that.

We need to beware—

the gospel will never align perfectly

with any human culture,

or nation,

or political party

We need the mind of Christ.

for “Cultural engagement without cultural discernment

leads to cultural captivity.”

With the mind of Christ, we can put on the clothes of the culture

without allowing those clothes to define our identity,

or to distort the gospel.

The mind of Christ enables us to engage in

a constant process of evaluation and discernment—

sorting through the values, the norms, the way of life of our culture—

engaging in a Yes or No response to what we find there.

The gospel can work within the aspects of God's common grace

that we find in the culture around us,

and become embedded in any culture

and transform it with truth and beauty.

And that is our prayer—that the beauty of God's kingdom would come on earth

as it is in heaven.

The gospel is for all nations and all cultures—

but may it not be captive to any nation or any culture.

And in the church, we may find a glimpse of that new world God will bring about—

where there will be a great multitude that no one could count,

from every nation, tribe, people and language,

standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

We want the light of Christ to shine brightly—

to show forth the beauty of that new world

in the culture in which God has placed us

and in the cultures to which God may send us.

I want to pivot and invite Dean Short to join me here—

to talk to an active practitioner of what we have been talking about--

Dean, as an American and product of American culture,

is taking the gospel to a very different culture—

□ First, how would you describe some of the distinctives of the culture of North Cypress—
in terms of language, religion, political outlook, etc.?

□ How does this impact the way you need to enculturate the gospel
as you minister there?

□ How do you see the churches you plant there being distinctively Cyprian?

Prayer—

Cornerstone Missions Conference

Nov. 1, 2020

**"Christ and Culture:
A Gospel Is for All Nations"**

(1 Cor. 9:19-23)

Jesus' Great Commission calls us to make disciples of all nations. That means the gospel must be taken to every culture. This morning we consider what this means and how critical it is that we maintain our own cultural awareness.

I. Introduction: two key quotes—

1) The Apostle Paul--1 Cor. 9:19-23

"I have become all things to all people
so that by all possible means I might save some."

2) *The Epistle to Diognetus*:

"Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest
of mankind by country, speech, or customs."

In the words of Jesus,

the Christian is to be

"in the world but not of it." (Jn. 17:16,18)

II. What is Culture?

A. We cannot escape being "enculturated."

B. Jesus, as the divine Son of God,

transcends culture.

**III. How does the gospel's transcendent divine truth
relate to particular human cultures?**

1) "Destructive Enculturation"

"You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you" (Lev. 18:1-4).

2) "Protective Enculturation"

Divine truth enculturated within Israel.

Jesus "disenculturated" the people of God
from being a Jewish nation to include all peoples.

**IV. The personal challenge of "disenculturation"—
a "discerning," "distanced" and "distinctive" enculturation—
being "in the world but not of it."**

The continuing danger of "destructive"
or "protective" enculturation.

We need "the mind of Christ"—

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

Sermon Discussion:

**"Christ and Culture:
A Gospel Is for All Nations"**

(1 Cor. 9:19-23)

- What do you think of when you hear the word "culture"? What aspects of our culture most influence the way you think and act? How does "culture" provide meaning for what we do?
- How was Jesus both enculturated and transcultural? How is the gospel "transcultural"?
- What does it mean to be "in the world but not of it." (Jn. 17:16,18).
- How can we avoid being captive to our culture—becoming "destructively enculturated"?
- What would it mean to "become like an American, to win Americans"?