

GODLY CULTURE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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The ultimate message of the Bible is that Yeshua (Jesus) is the Almighty God who came as the promised Messiah of Israel and died for our sins so that by believing in Him, we have the promise of everlasting life. But how do you communicate that message to someone who has a different understanding of God, a different understanding of salvation, and a completely different perception of the nature of time and the universe?

You can never assume that another person shares the same way of interpreting reality as you do. That is why understanding the way that other people think and communicate is nearly as important as the message itself. And that is why we all can benefit by considering the nature of culture.

What is culture?

Many people define culture in terms of the behavior of people groups—the way that they dress, the food that they eat, their style of art and their holidays, and so on. All of these things are part of culture, but they are outward manifestations of the way people think about the world. So today, most definitions of culture emphasize the specific knowledge held by groups that *leads* to their behavior. It's more about the way that we think than the way that we act.

Geert Hofstede, a highly regarded authority on culture, has used a computer analogy by describing culture as the operating system by which we function.¹ In keeping with this metaphor, that means it has to be uploaded. But culture is not just a one-time installation; it is learned over time, much like receiving updates to our operating system. In other words, while culture is resistant to change, change *can* take place.

Both godly and ungodly influences can cause these kinds of updates and changes to occur. Sometimes they are subtle influences where you may not be aware of the influence and the change that comes upon your life. It's like the proverbial frog in the kettle that isn't aware of the water slowly heating up until it is too late and it is boiled to death. In a similar way, there will always be those who deny that they are affected by the culture around them. It is a denial that extends to the music that is heard and the video images that are viewed. But, in reality, there is a correlation.

In recent times in America, a recurring theme involves mass shootings. This year, after one tragic episode at a Kentucky high school in Kentucky, in which two students were killed and many more were injured, Kentucky Governor, Matt Bevin said this:

“We have got to look at the root causes of this. We have to look at the fact that there is a cultural problem in America. . . We have become desensitized to death, we have become desensitized to killing, we have become desensitized to empathy for our fellow man and it's coming at an extraordinary price and we have got to look at the root causes of this. We can't

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¹ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, (London: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

celebrate death in video games, celebrate death in TV shows, celebrate death in movies, celebrate death in musical lyrics and remove any sense of morality and sense of responsibility to higher authority and then expect that things like this are not going to happen.”

It is foolish to think that there is no correlation in being exposed to violent images and words, and violent actions. Whether you deny it or believe it, whether you realize it or not, our behavior is influenced by the information that enters into our thinking. It can be beneficial like a software update, or detrimental like a computer virus.

Evaluating Culture

There are many ways that cultures or the way that people think can be categorized. One of these dimensions of culture is individual orientation versus group orientation.² In individual-oriented cultures, people take initiative and make decisions on their own, they value privacy, and transgressions lead to feelings of guilt. That’s where most Americans and Europeans fall. In group-oriented cultures, people make decisions collectively, they value relationships within their community, and transgressions lead to feelings of shame. That describes most Asian cultures.

Another way of classifying cultures is identifying them as being either oral or literate. This distinction is not just a matter of emphasizing speaking or reading, but it reflects the way that people think and things that they value.

In oral cultures, information is acquired predominately through the spoken word, and people tend to process that information in groups. The exchange of information takes place in public, like watering holes and outdoor markets. People tell stories about what is happening around them. In that kind of setting, concrete relational thinking predominates. It’s concrete because it is based on your senses. And it is relational because it emphasizes the emotions that arise from what is perceived.

Literate cultures, on the other hand, place a greater emphasis on the written word, and people tend to process that information individually. Since people in that setting significantly learn by reading, words, concepts and principles are most meaningful. That means that people tend to think abstractly and they value principles.

Historically, the United States has predominately been a literate culture, as reflected in the great number of books, magazines and newspapers being published nationally. But with the influence of technology, a shift is taking place today away from a true literate culture to a hybrid of oral and literate. This is true in part because technology has been shown to diminish literacy, as evidenced by the recent demise of newspapers and magazines, as well as the current state of education in which a great percentage of high school graduates now are not competent in English and have to take a remedial English course when they enter college.³

In-depth arguments that previously have been made possible in writing, are now giving way to the quick, immediate and superficial exchanges that characterize social media, which is very much like casual conversations that are common in oral societies. And along with this shift of communication style is its respective way of thinking. That means in America today, principles and abstract thinking are becoming less important than relational and emotional matters that are inherent in concrete-relational thinking.

Along with this shift in the way of thinking, we are also witnessing a greater emphasis on

² Other dimensions are equality vs. hierarchy, low risk vs. high risk avoidance, short term vs. long term orientation, direct vs. indirect (also called low context vs. high context), being vs. doing, indulgence vs. restraint, narrow vs. broad, time vs. event orientation.

³ "First-Year Undergraduate Remedial Coursetaking," U.S. Department of Education NCES 2013–013.

shame in America. Fueled by social media and mass media, when someone does something that a significant number of people don't like, that person will be shamed in the public realm of technology. That is not to be taken lightly, because many people have lost their jobs because of this trend toward shaming. And what is so remarkable is that it is a recent phenomenon. Now, more than any time in American history, people are being shamed for their behavior.

Along with this trend is an increase of suicides among young people. There can be no coincidence in the parallel between the explosion of social media and the greater number of suicides among young people who use it. Bullying takes place in the real world and through technology, and it is all about shaming. But unfortunately young people are not as well equipped to deal with it, and the results speak for themselves.

So this is a real wave of culture change that is sweeping through our country, as people are less concerned about personal responsibility as expressed by guilt, and more concerned about the shame that affects other people. And this has great implications for ministry.

Discerning the Difference Between Worldly and Godly Change

For all people, it is important to recognize that in our natural state as humans, we are influenced by the world outside of us. It could be the general culture as a whole. It could be our parenting and our peers. It includes the media in all of its forms. It may even be the physical environment in which we live. All of these things input information into our lives like updates on a computer.

But our will is also involved, because we have the ability to discern the difference between influences that are beneficial to our lives physically, mentally and spiritually, and those that are harmful. That means that although we may not be aware of way that our thinking is influenced, we still have the ability to reject elements of culture.

God's Word strongly makes that point. In Romans 12, Paul shows the difference between external influences on our lives and change that results from the inside out. He instructs us: "do not be conformed to this world" (v. 2). The Greek word used here is *suschēmatizo*. It literally means "to fashion with." It has the sense of a sculptor making a figure just like a previous one. So it is about fashioning something to look just like something else. And that is what happens when we allow ourselves to take on the same form as others that are ungodly. Paul is saying that we, as believers, need to resist that.

Instead, he writes in that same verse that our need is to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Here, he uses a very different term, *metamorpho'ō*, meaning "to change into a different form." These words seem similar, but conforming is a shaping from the outside, while transforming is an inner change that produces a different outer appearance.

So the question is—what brings about this inner change? We know from God's Word that when we believe in Yeshua and we receive the gift of salvation, we become something new. In John 3:3 Yeshua said that we become born again, which is a new birth. In a similar fashion, Paul describes this change as the "regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). So in both cases, it is a depiction of something old and something new that is related to our personal identity. The first is natural and the second is supernaturally new and different by the power of the Spirit. Paul also writes:

"Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature: the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

That tells us that as far as God is concerned, that old natural fallen person doesn't exist anymore. We become something new that has changed from the inside out, and this will be

apparent to others. That is what it means to be transformed.

Paul goes on to say in Romans 12:2 that this transformation occurs by the “renewing of your mind.” It is a new way of thinking that wasn’t there previously. And that brings us back to culture, which refers to the way that people think. A born-again believer is able to think differently than those who are not, and differently than the way you yourself thought before you were saved.

It doesn’t mean that you will never sin again. And it doesn’t mean that you won’t behave like the culture around you. But you have the ability to think differently and to exercise your will in such a way that you are not conformed to the world around you. And all the while, the Holy Spirit, who now indwells you, keeps on speaking to you, guiding you through the challenges this world brings. Whether you listen to the Spirit is another issue altogether. You still have to exercise your will. But the point is that because of this inner change that has taken place, we can act and appear differently on the outside.

Indicators of a Transformed Culture

This personal transformation creates the means for godly culture change in the world around us. We can have an influence for good in the lives of others, as well as our collective identity as a community or a nation. That reality is depicted in the remainder of Romans 12, where Paul describes the characteristics of a godly culture comprised of spiritually transformed persons.

A godly culture is a discerning community

Paul shows that the spiritual transformation that we experience enables us to “prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (v. 2). Unlike the dominant culture around us that tends to be tolerant of all behaviors and beliefs, we have the ability to know what is acceptable to God, thanks to our elevation of the Word of God as our real constitution, and the Spirit of God as our guide. So a culture that is truly consistent with God’s will is discerning and clear in terms of what God desires.

A godly culture is a welcoming community

Saying that a person should not “think more highly of himself than he ought to think” (v. 3) and “we have many members in one body” (v. 4), Paul emphasizes the importance of living with a collective orientation instead of an individual one. He goes on to show how spiritual gifts are distributed throughout the body, and since no individual person gets them all, we need one another in order to flourish.

God’s intention for us to function collectively is a difficult thing for people to wrap their arms around in a place where we exalt the self-made man and being number one all of the time. But the Bible is very clear about the importance of seeing ourselves connected to other people. The metaphor of the body brings that out. The same is true for the teachings of Yeshua. The Lord’s prayer, for example, uses only plural pronouns.

If we see ourselves in that light, it will have an impact on the way that we think about other people. It will lead us to want to know what our own biases are. And we will not think about ethnicity as a basis for belonging. Later, in v. 16 Paul calls us to “associate with the lowly,” which refers to the outcasts of society and those with great needs of many kinds. For all these reasons, a welcoming community says come and join us on this journey of faith together.

A godly culture is a righteous community

We are called to “abhor what is evil; cling to what is good” (v. 9). There is no culture on earth that completely matches that description. Even those nations who demonstrate care for its citizens fall short of God’s high standard. At a time when making America great again is a popular refrain, God’s Word shows that greatness is not about economic prosperity or military power, but that “righteousness exalts a nation” (Prov 14:34). We are given indicators of righteousness in this passage that can be asked as questions:

- Are we, as a nation, “devoted to one another in brotherly love?” Do we “give preference to one another in honor?” (v. 10). Or do we tear down other people who don’t fit into our preferred box?
- Do we as a nation serve Adonai, the true and living God, and Lord above all lords? (v. 11). Or do we serve other lords of power and wealth and false deities?
- Do we rejoice in the kind of hope that is in God alone instead of rejoicing in what we have accomplished in our own strength? Do we persevere in tribulation for our faith in Him (v. 12), or do we experience difficulties because of ungodly behavior?
- Are we truly devoted to prayer (v. 12) or do we seek answers elsewhere?

A godly culture is a caring community

“Contributing to the needs of the saints” (v. 13) is an area where our nation excels. When disasters strike or there are persistent problems of poverty, we give generously. Can we say the same regarding the second part of this verse—“practicing hospitality?” These words address issues that are related to refugees and groups needing compassion. This call to a godly culture presents a great challenge regarding the major issues of today when considered in light of the high elevation of virtues like hospitality in Scripture.

But it is also an important consideration for a local body. Practicing hospitality is one of the most important things you can do in support of a community of any kind. Opening up your home, sharing food with others, and simply being gracious by making people feel at home are all wonderful contributions that can be made for the well-being of a congregation or community.

A godly culture is a respectful community dedicated to peace

It is abundantly obvious that not every culture is dedicated to peace. There are people groups who esteem vengeance, and find themselves in a never-ending cycle of revenge for revenge, often in the name of their own deity. But a godly culture, at least one devoted to the true God—Adonai—will be dedicated to another path. Paul’s words are direct and profound:

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (vv. 20-21).

How that fits into an international relationship is a great challenge. But it is worth considering how retribution feeds the cycle of non-stop revenge in many situations. When we fight back, it may gain a sense of satisfaction for the moment, but that doesn’t mean the matter is over. Because there will always be another revenge to come.

The implication of this passage is that we have incredible opportunities to bring about real change in our world if we act differently than others do in our world. The same is true in our

local communities if we will all work out our differences in the radical way we have been given here in terms of practical steps of overcoming evil with good.

God's Word is very clear in showing that the real issues of culture are not things on the surface, like customs and behavior, but they are matters of the heart. A heart that is corrupted by sin will always produce a flawed and broken culture. But a regenerated heart has the potential of bringing about real, godly change, not just in our own lives, but in our families, our worship community, and in our nation. We don't cease retaining our ethnicity or nationality or general characteristics of culture. But we do bring about a new version of our identity through our faith in Yeshua—one that is a pure reflection of the will of God.

Paul's writing in Romans 12 echoes Yeshua in His Sermon on the Mount. There He talks about the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven, or what we might call the culture of the kingdom of heaven. These characteristics are all internal in nature, including:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mat 5:6).

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (v. 9).

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (v. 10).

He continues throughout the sermon, describing the characteristics of this kingdom-oriented culture. That tells us that when we establish these things as the foundation of our thinking and our behavior, we are manifesting the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, right now, here on earth. The completion and perfection is yet to come, but the character of the kingdom is available now. And that can apply to any people group at any time, and thus any culture.

Instead of complaining about the world around us, we are called by God to make sure that we have made all of the necessary changes on the inside personally. That alone will give us the ability and the confidence to do our part in changing the world around us.