How to Function as a Christian in a Shifting Culture

Part 1 of 3: Defining Culture with a Worldwide Perspective
with Mark Bailey, Jeffrey Bingham, Jenny McGill, and Darrell Bock
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Mark Bailey: Welcome to The Table. That's a term that we're using here at Dallas Seminary for our podcast conversations and our engagement around the table, literally, here in our own studio, but also with a desire to talk to a broader audience within our culture and the cultures around us.

I'm happy to introduce at the table today Dr. Jeff Bingham, who chairs our Department of Theological Studies, whose expertise is in early Christianity, but who teaches and writes in the area of church history and systematic theology and various ministry topics.

Also, Jenny McGill, who is our administrator and, in essence, coordinator for our international students, ministers to them from start to finish here on our campus, and she also serves as an adjunct professor in our World Missions and Intercultural Studies Department. So Jeff and Jenny, welcome.

Alongside of me is Dr. Darrell Bock, who serves as research professor of New Testament Studies, as well as in a new position that we have inaugurated this year, directing a Center for Cultural Engagement, out of which these podcasts are produced and for which these podcasts are produced. So welcome to all of you. Thank you for spending the time with us, and I know that our audience will be the richer for it.

We want to talk about cultural engagement as a topic today. And in order to talk about cultural engagement, we need to define what we mean by culture. I teach a course in hermeneutics, and one of the elements of study in that course is cultural backgrounds.

And so we have all kinds of definitions of culture: what people think, what people say, what people do, what people make or some of the artifacts of culture in the Middle East, in the Greco-Roman world, et cetera. What do we mean by culture today? Darrell, why don't you start and we'll ask the others to chime in as we go along. But when you think of culture, what does it mean to engage culture?
Darrell Bock: Well, culture is a web. It's a web or a system of ideas and norms and standards and beliefs and artifacts that shape and give meaning to life. And, actually, culture is made up of many cultures, and that's probably one of the more important features to appreciate about it. You know life in Dallas isn't the same as life in New York City, and life in New York City isn't the same as life in Nairobi, Kenya, and life in Nairobi, Kenya isn't the same as in Melbourne, Australia.

And so we sometimes talk about culture as if it's this monolith, this single thing. But, in fact, it's a very complex thing. Some people or sociologists have said that it's among the more complex words that we have in our English language. But I think of it as a combination of ideas, beliefs, norms, by which people regulate their lives and give meaning to life.

And then the flip side of it is culture also shapes us by the way culture because in one sense, although we contribute to culture, we don't make culture. We're born into culture. We're born into the world and it makes and shapes us to a certain degree as well. And so there's an interactive element to culture as well.

So you live in culture on the one hand, but you also engage with culture on the other. The other analogy that you often hear is it's what water is to fish. It's all around them and you can't escape it. It's where you live and breathe and, in some cases, both defines what you're able to do and limits what you're able to do at the same time.

Mark Bailey: Jenny, you deal with our international students and minister to them so well from application all the way to placement, from coming from other cultures and going back to, or even into other cultures in a missional element. What do you see? When you think culture, what is it that you see in those students that is reflected?
Jeff

Mark

Jeff

Jenny McGill: I've heard that some would refer to culture as a grid or framework. And, recently, by Brian Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, they called culture a conversation. But in working with the students, I find that culture is an expression of the image of God instilled in them that God’s brought in the creation.

So any student coming from all over the world, they're bringing an expression of their culture as instigated by how they grew up and what impacted their upbringing, either their family or historical events or social environments. So I see culture as an expression of the diversity in God's creation.

Mark Bailey: Well, Jeff, from a theological perspective, Acts 17 in Paul's famous sermon on Mars Hill, the Areopagus there, he talks about from one man – I take it be a reference to Adam in that passage – he has determined the boundaries and the habitation of all humanity. Is there a theological underpinning to the culture, and is culture good or is culture the result of failure on the part of humanity? Or how, from a theological perspective, do you see culture operating?

Jeff Bingham: Well, I think we have to acknowledge that culture can be either pagan or Christian. A culture can be a culture which reflects divine revelation and submission to it or culture can be in opposition or in rebellion to divine revelation.

So a culture such as we find in Acts 17, a polytheistic culture, a culture of idols, a culture which believes in many divine beings, and into which Paul has to enter in order, essentially, to tell them that their ideas are wrong, and by virtue of one of their idols, declare the only true God and the resurrection of his Son. And so I think what we can see is that cultures can have components of both paganism and of Christianity, of truth and of error.

And Christian communities can be combinations of truth and error, as can the non-Christian or even pagan community. So even in a community out of which we get a Plato, we have Plato's monotheism. But then we have, also, a Hellenistic culture, which has other aspects which we would definitely declare as being in contrast with a Judeo-Christian concept. Cultures can be true; cultures can be false in terms of their relationship to divine revelation.

Mark Bailey: No culture is perfect.

Jeff Bingham: No.
Mark Bailey: And no one ethnicity has God's trump card upon it. Darrell, from a New Testament perspective as well, how do we see God loving the world on the one hand, and what does that mean in the way that we define culture, and friendship with the world being enmity with God on the extreme side, on the other side.

If somebody came up to you after church on a Sunday or after a lecture that you give on the university campus and put those two in front of you and saying, "Are those both culture or is there something else operating with that term, 'world,' in those two passages?" how would you address that?
Darrell Bock: Well, I'd actually go very much to the beginning of the Old Testament. I'd start in Genesis 1 and say that part of what God did when he made us in his image was to make us image bearers and stewards of the creation that he has put us having responsibility for. That's where culture starts.

Now, what happens, of course, in Genesis 3 is that we rebel against that responsibility and that leads to the fall, and that produces the mix that Jeff was discussing, that we have the good and bad side by side, mixed together almost like a stew. And so that complicates the situation.

But I think what often happens is that when we look at culture, we tend to want to assess it, which is one aspect of it. The other factor that culture does for us that I think is important because it is a part of our living out, our being in God's image, is how we engage in culture, how we live in culture, how we live, I mean simply put, and we can live well and we can live poorly.

And we also have to be aware of what culture does to us. Culture does things to us. I said earlier it defines what we do. I don't see anyone at this table who walked in and had a quill in their hand, who writes with a quill. No one writes with a quill anymore. Or if you do, it's because you have a love for the way in which writing was done. It's not the way you know. We have a ballpoint pen or something. Some people today don't use a pen at all; they're on a computer. All those things either limit us or open us up to do things the way maybe things weren't done before, that kind of thing.

And some of that is the creative living out of the way God made us when he asked us to be stewards, to help manage what it is God has created and to be, if you will, his cohorts in stewardship of the creation. And so that is a complicated relationship that we have with culture. It's something God has asked us to do on the one hand, and yet, it's something because of the way we've done it, sometimes well and sometimes poorly, the record ends up producing all kinds of fallout.

Because the other thing that happens with culture, when you make things that contribute to the culture, is that you may intend something to do something, but then there are the consequences that other people will use it for that can build or distort what it is that's been created. And we get that impact in culture as well.

So it's a complicated question, Mark, which is why I'm not doing a great job of answering it. Because culture is a mix. I do think that we have tended, in Christian circles, to see culture and the world as this enemy that we're in a battle with. And that's one part of the picture, and it certainly is an important part of the picture.
Let me go back to the definition of culture. Could we say and would we say that the culture of people that are in “the world,” the group of people God obviously, passionately loves enough to give his Son to pay the penalty for their sin, that's a love for the individuals that God has created for his own purposes and for his will.

Another sense in which “the world” is used is the world of ideas that fallen humanity have advanced. And it's not that I can't have Christian – or non-Christian friends, like neighbors, whom I can genuinely love. That's not the evil of loving the world that makes me an enemy of God. It's the love of the world's ideas, the distortions, the falsehoods that have come in because of the fall, and the image breaking – to go back to the metaphor of the image making versus image breaking – and reflecting God.

Would that be a fair way to differentiate a love of God for the people of the world versus the danger of friendship with worldly ideas that really take me away from God? Talk to me about that. Would that be an adequate way to answer that kind of a question between two definitions and what we mean by "world," which is similar to the term, "culture," but a little bit different?

Well, we find “kosmos” or “world” used in the New Testament in a negative sense but, perhaps, also a neutral sense. So yeah, the New Testament has a great concern for the perversity, the rebelliousness, the unrighteousness, and wickedness of humanity, which is super cultural. So no culture is without those negative attributes, and those are always rebuked by Scripture.

And yet, it is clear that we also find a very tender, gentle, and optimistic stand of God to the world where he sends his Son to the world, becoming like us in every way, yet without sin, joining us in our humanity. So I think it's a helpful paradigm that we can look at a culture and realize that every culture has neutral aspects, positive aspects, and negative aspects. And God hates the negative, loves the good, and is probably neutral about the neutral.
**Mark Bailey:** Let's go back to the question of culture versus cultures. We're in the Metroplex here in Dallas. We have students that come from all over the world and all over the country. And they find that Dallas is not a monolithic culture that they have experienced on television.

Not all of us live like the Dallas television program and reflect that. Many are surprised we don't all have a Southern accent. So the cultures of Dallas. Talk to me about the multiplicity of cultures, even within a geographical entity that have to be taken into account for good ministry and good understanding.

**Jenny McGill:** Most of my students are surprised by the nationalism. Not only in Dallas. That would be reflected in other states. But that's one thing they face when they come. They're not necessarily expecting that level of patriotism. I think that's one factor. Dallas isn't as diverse as, perhaps, other parts of the country, and yet we have our multi-cultures represented.

So I think a challenge for the students arriving is adapting not only to the idioms or the language or the dialects—for a foreign student— but also how they're hearing their peers and professors express their faith in a culturally driven way. They're now being brought into another culture expressing its version of Christianity. So sometimes I get very fascinating comments on what they're hearing, what is being represented as Christianity.

**Darrell Bock:** Would it be fair, Jenny, to say that sometimes students from the outside see things about the way we express our Christianity that we might not be aware of because we live inside the culture. And so we don't see how culturally framed that particular expression of faith might be. Is that what you're hearing when you hear students comment from the outside, that kind of thing?

**Jenny McGill:** I would say so. One of my favorite psychologists—she's in Biola—she says every culture has its pathology. And I like listening and learning from the other students of how they’ve given their heart and lives to follow Christ, and how are they seeing a situation. That gives me the exposure and awareness of, "Oh, maybe I actually had a blind spot. Maybe I don't see in totality."

I have the cultural representation of what I understand and the way that I've been socialized my whole life. Whether or not I traveled—which I have—internationally, I still have been socialized over years to see the world a certain way.
Darrell Bock: You know the one thing that strikes me about that is that sometimes our experience does have blinders on it because of where we've been. And one of the values of a seminary can be this mix that you get. You actually have a conglomeration of cultures. You have a mini – and I mean this in a metaphorical sense – United Nations of sorts of Christianity that comes together on the seminary campus, so that students have an opportunity to interact with other students from other cultures and other backgrounds, and see their own faith through fresh eyes that they normally wouldn't see if they were just in their own communities or home churches, which tend not to be as diverse as a seminary campus is.

I think of Houston. You know Houston has actually just been named, I think, the most diverse city in the United States. And we have a campus there, and our campus is actually located in a place that reflects very much of that diversity. There are actually enclaves in Houston that are very clearly nationally marked. I grew up in Houston, and I remember going back to Houston and going to a section of the city that has become a little Vietnam, for lack of a better description. And I'm sitting here going, "Boy, that's not the Houston I remember in this part of the city."

And so it's changing, and that forces us to engage at a level and with an awareness of the difference as we interact with students, and as we seek to train them to engage in how they help other people think about how they engage in life with this diversity in a way that we haven't before.

So I think the issue of cultures within culture is actually another one of the tricks that makes this category of discussion and this aspect of life challenging for us. Because most of us are used to living in our own communities with our own expectations and that kind of thing. And so it takes extra effort to be sensitive to learning why people think differently, how they put the world together differently than we do.

Mark Bailey: Jenny, let me ask you to follow up. Give us and our audience an example. You mentioned the nationalism. We've often heard the incredible individualism of American culture, that it's my way; it's my thought; the lack of community involvement in one sense.

What else have you heard from international students as they come here that we might not expect in the expression of – like you said – the expression of faith, the articulation of faith? Give us an example, if you can, of how it would be different.
Jenny McGill: Well, I have several, but I'll pick the first. If certain students are coming to the U.S. – and most Americans would define the self as "me." For many of these students, they would define the self as "other." Everything they choose – the words they use, the gestures they operate by, the mannerisms, the deference, manners, customs – it's always in reflection of the "other" to the neglect of the individual perhaps. The self as "we." So I think that's a huge one, which touches on your individualism.

I think that's a good example. The prior one was a huge one. But also, I think the expression of their identity would have been placed in different things. Growing up, they would have more of an extended familial identity, which again gets into collectivism. Whereas in the United States, our identity might be in the purchases make or the products we live by, or various orientations that we could adopt. So the source of identity is quite different among students coming in as well.