How to Function as a Christian in a Shifting Culture

Part 3 of 3: Practical Ways to Culturally Engage
with Darrell L. Bock, Jenny McGill, D. Jeffrey Bingham, and Mark L. Bailey
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Darrell Bock: That brings in a dimension that we haven't talked about that I think is important to this conversation. And that is that engagement isn't always just about ideas. Certainly they can reflect ideas, but one of the things that is often associated with culture is the way in which people contribute to culture by creatively serving, by creatively creating things that help people in one way or another that express care and concern.

It doesn't have to be commercial, commercially driven, that kind of thing. And so it opens up the possibility of what people do in their vocation – most people who live their lives don't live the life of a seminarian. They don't get to sit in front of a Bible all day and teach about what's going on in the Bible. They sell a car or they engage in business or something like that. That's part of culture. That's part of cultural engagement. In fact, there's a lot more – I think we'd say – there's a lot more cultural engagement going on outside the seminary, oftentimes, than in the seminary. So how do we think about culture and cultural engagement in the context of where most people live their lives? I'm talking about 9:00 to 5:00. And what does that look like?

How should we think about that aspect of living in cultural engagement? Because I think sometimes we think of cultural engagement strictly in terms of this clash of ideas that we have in the world, as opposed to thinking about it relationally – if I can say it that way – how we're interacting, relating with people that God brings us into contact with on a regular basis just through the living of our lives.

Jenny McGill: One of the most exciting things about culture is the cultural connections we can have. Whereas theoretically or theologically we differ with another individual, any cultural connection we can find, whether it's a Lamborghini, how you make jewelry, anything, that is the point of connection that you can enter in and enjoy with them, and live life over that cultural point. It could be any hobby, literature, music. I mean basically anything that humans have created. And then in building the relationship, we may have opportunities to speak the gospel truth according to Christ.

Mark Bailey: If one listening is not engaged in ministry as a profession, as a vocation, they're in business, homemaking, teaching, selling cars, coaching soccer. What would you say for the average Christian in those kinds of settings, what would be some practical ways they could engage culture, with a view, obviously, to influencing people within the culture for the cause of Christ? You mentioned some in terms of handiwork, art, even sport and things.
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But stopping short of an evangelistic presentation, that may not come, obviously, on the front end of a relationship. But how do we get there? How do we start into that engagement so that we build a platform for the articulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ at the right point in time, led by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit? What are some ways that you would think we could think about or give counsel to?

Jeff Bingham:  I think immediately of charges that were being brought against the Christians in the 2nd century by the Roman Empire. One of the charges was that Christians were irreligious and that they made, therefore, terrible Romans. They were irreligious and unsocial. They were monotheistic rather than polytheistic. That made them atheistic as far as the Romans were concerned.

And they were unsocial. They made lousy Romans. They didn't participate in the temple ceremonies; they didn't participate in the temple sacrifices; they didn't attend many of the games which had religious significance to them; they weren't part of the pagan festivals. And so they were accused of being unsocial and of being lousy Romans.

The way in which the apologists of the 2nd century, particularly Athenagoras, respond is by saying, "You know what? We may not attend your feasts, your games, your temples, but that doesn't mean we're lousy Romans. When your children end up with both parents dead because of plague, we're the ones who take them into our homes and give them new parents. When our Roman neighbors are ill, we're the ones who sit up with them and tend to them in their illness. When plague hits the city, we are the ones who share our food with others who are hungry. And so we're actually very good Romans. We may not be Romans on your terms, but we're very good Romans because we care for the Romans."

I'm thinking that – in answer to your question, Dr. Bailey – what happens here is that Christians look for ways to serve. That Christians look for ways to become good neighbors. That Christians look for ways to become good business partners. And, in so doing, excel in the virtues which are Christ-like and distinctly Christian. We become servants of the citizens of our culture in ways which do not compromise our ethics and our call to virtue.

Darrell Bock: Your example is a good one. And I think of something that happened a few years ago when Katrina hit New Orleans. And it was the religious organizations that rallied around the caring of the people who had scattered all across several states. I mean Dallas absorbed a lot of people and Houston absorbed a lot of people and, of course, Mississippi and the states to the east as well.
And there was an editorial in the New York Times, which isn't exactly a Christian publication. And in it the Times said, in effect, "Where would we be on the Katrina catastrophe without the religious organizations that came in and served, in effect, so well?" And they recognized that what the government couldn't do, those organizations were able to do and made possible.

And so the disaster was far less of a disaster the thrust of the editorial was. The disaster was far less of a disaster because of the way in which religious organizations – which were primarily Christian – had stepped forward and done this. And they admitted in the midst of the piece that they often give the very people who had stepped in to help a hard time on a lot of issues, but not on this one.

And I often think – this is Athenagoras in the 21st century – that the more we think about how we contribute as good neighbors, showing our love for God by the way we love our neighbor in the positive sense of that term, is one of the most practical ways to engage that we can have. It makes a clear statement, or attempts to make a clear statement, “We love you and care for you in ways that are healthy as being a human.”

And I don't think we often think of cultural engagement in those kids of terms. I think we have been so captured by the battle that cultural engagement often is, at the level of ideas, that we have lost this dimension of thinking about cultural engagement. And I have the hope, and the prayer perhaps, that part of what we can be talking about as we talk about this area of cultural engagement now – and this does spill over into tone, but it's tone operating at a different level. It's the point you were making, Jenny. It's not what you do with your words. It's about something far more profound. Symbolic is too soft a word. It's far more relationally rooted.

Mark Bailey: Living it out.

Darrell Bock: Exactly right – in such a way that a person looks at how you extend your hand in an area where it might not have normally been expected, and they go, "That was extraordinary. What in the world caused you to do that? Most of the people living around me would never think of doing that."
And that dissonance is – I'm going to go back to a word I used earlier – is subversive in the positive sense of that term. Because what it communicates is a love and a commitment and an understanding and a willingness to engage and to reach out to someone who's different in a way that says, "I really do care about you and what's good for you and what your welfare is. I'm not just in the business of shaking my finger at you. I really want you to understand I do care about you." And I think we far underestimate the value of what that kind of relational, personal engagement can engender in people. And we don't talk enough about it in the pulpit.

Jeff Bingham: No. It was the Lord Jesus who said, "The Son of man came to serve and not to be served." And so there is our model of cultural engagement in one direction, that we exist in culture to serve and not to be served. And in doing so, we imitate the Son of man.

Mark Bailey: And I think, in one sense, whether we use the term culture – but the profile of a committed Christian, living a godly life in front of those cultures would be – if all believers were out of debt, we might have a better standing to say our country ought not to be in debt. If our cultures were modeling marital values, we would have a better basis of talking about biblical marriage and sexuality.

Darrell Bock: Like faithfulness.

Mark Bailey: And yeah, faithfulness. And I say this not at all to draw attention to me. It's my wife who deserves all the credit. We had an Indian couple move in across the street from us when we first moved here to Dallas. And Hovna and Bashoke were the couple, a delightful couple, and she and Barbie started walking just around the neighborhood.

But the question that broke the ice in the ability to witness was, "Why do your boys love you? They're respectful." They saw in our boys a respect for Barbie. And they probably knew that I would fix it if they weren't. I never allowed them to be disrespectful to her. But the fact that they loved their mother, even into the junior high years, so much so that my youngest son begged my wife to apply for a teaching position at the school where he was attending so he could hang out with mom. Well that was a little bit unheard of from her perspective.

Darrell Bock: That's pretty exceptional, Mark.
Mark Bailey: That is exceptional. But that's why I said I have an exceptional wife. But what the amazing thing was, here is an Indian couple that has the idol box in the house, living across the street from us, but the opportunity, the crack in that shield – if I could say that – or the crack in that door that allowed a conversation of what made the difference in life came at a visual level, not at a verbal level, which is what you were saying.

To visualize what it means to live like Christians, so that when we have the conversation, the charge of hypocrisy – it's an easy charge the world has, and it's a valid charge that the world has, but it's an easy charge. But to eliminate that reason for slander is a part of what Peter says to that early church, that by the kind of behavior we live, we put to silence the criticisms of people.

Darrell Bock: And Barbie wasn’t bragging about that.

Mark Bailey: Not at all, never.

Darrell Bock: She was just living her life, faithfully, in the context of a different cultural practice and standard that happened to be theologically grounded. And, again, I think that this is practical cultural engagement if you want to think of it that way. It's not ideological cultural engagement; it's practical cultural engagement.

And, sometimes, it's able to work its way in and through the clash of ideas that's going on in the culture. It's a way through. And, as I said, I just don't think we talk about that near enough in the pulpits. We don't have illustrations that pastors use in the pulpits as they preach that encourage people in this direction enough, so that they think about how to integrate the lives that live 9:00 to 5:00 where they are enough so that Christ represents them. They think the only representation they have is verbal. And sometimes, actually, even the hypocrisy charge tells you is that what people are doing is they're watching, not so much by what you say but what you do.

Jenny McGill: And to give you a practical illustration, I would stay with the car salesman. It's such a valuable opportunity to be in mission. So if the car salesman employee has a commission, thinking through, "How am I going to use that? Would I ever give it to a fellow salesman who didn't earn it because – " whatever circumstance he's encountering?
Would we give of ourselves and our time and our resources, even our money, to serve the people with whom we're working? For all those, whether in car sales or business offices, as a Christian, if you're stealing office supplies, there's nothing more practical, and I would offer ideological as what you do in that moment. And that is what people see.

If you want a Christian witness – how you treat your wife, your relationships, et cetera – once you start to break it down to think through, "What am I doing on a daily basis that is evidencing Christ or not, and am I following him in this behavior?" that's your witness.

Mark Bailey:

This is always a delicate tension and we're always out of balance. The truth versus the deed, the confrontation of ideas and the compassion in the relationship. And the church, Jeff, as you mentioned, our model is not our history, because we've been out of sorts on that. And in the fundamentalist, modernist controversy, it shifted one way. It then grew back into another. It continues to shift back and forth.

And so we have now a mission for mission's sake that has – we wonder if there's ever a message that comes through. On the other hand, there's the message that we're not sure whether the person cares about whether that message gets believed or not. We just get to say we had the mission when we shared the message. And that's a delicate, delicate balance.

This will be our last question. How do our churches, as well as we as individuals, how do we fight to keep at least more balance? We'll never be perfectly in balance, but how do we fight to keep that balance? What are some practical ways we can be thinking that ask the hard question to rebalance us, at least to one degree or the other?

Darrell Bock:

Well, I think to the extent that ministry has a relational component to it, there has to be this wedding between whatever you're communicating verbally in this relational dimension that a person senses in some way.

And they may react to it like the Romans did. The reason the Romans called Christians atheists is because everything that they did had a polytheistic religious significance tied to it. The ancient world was not our secularized world where there's this public square that's kind of neutral and detached from religion. Everything that Romans did had some type of religious dimension to it. I like to illustrate it this way. The calendar, the religious calendar in Rome, had over 150 religious holidays a year that were supposed to be celebrated. That's a holiday every three days.
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We complain about how we've added holidays so we get one a month. Every three days, something's being celebrated that has some type of significance. So my point here is that without the relational dimension, it can look like, "Well, all that you want is to have a notch on your belt. All that you're interested in is communicating faithfully that you've shared the gospel, but do you really care about me as a person?" That kind of thing.

So I think at some level it's got to have a relational element. Even if that relational element sometimes has a challenge built into it, it's still this person has a sense of, "Well, I know you said that to me because you care," that kind of communication. I think that's one way to do it. And I think the other danger is that sometimes you can so push the relational side of it, without explaining the core relationship that drives you, that that can be empty.

Mark Bailey:

One of the challenges that we recognize that we have in American Christianity, within our culture, is that we've had the advantage of at least the tip of the hat towards Christian values, Christian symbols, Christian verbiage, Christian holiday, for a long time, and we, in some respects, have confused that democracy and Christianity.

And now we come to a position in our culture where if we get outvoted, we then have the issue of being disenfranchised, the anger, the reaction, our tone, it's hostile. Takeover becomes the message. And we have mistakenly identified Christianity with an ability to win an election. And that's going to be a constant challenge for us as we go forward.

Let me leave you with one illustration that was meaningful to me. I was with a friend the other day and he said, "Let me tell you how --" and he mentioned another Christian, who engaged the culture at a restaurant like I've never seen before. They were getting ready to pray for their meal. But they intentionally waited to pray for the meal until the waitperson came back to the table.

And he reached out and he said, "You know we're getting ready to pray a prayer of thanks for our food. Is there anything we could pray with you about, anything we could pray for you? Is there anything on your mind or in your life for which you would like us to pray?" That opened a conversation that ultimately led to two more meetings and that person coming to faith. It was a very simple, gracious, non-confrontive and yet fairly bold approach.

Darrell Bock:

So very relational.
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Mark Bailey: But a very relational approach to reach out and say, "Could we pray for you?" And out of that came the conversation that ultimately brought that person to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. It can be as practical as that, but the challenge to represent Christ well in a very complex set of cultures, is what we face. And yet, that's the privilege that we have at the same time.

Darrell Bock: That's why we're just getting started in this in some ways and talking about it, because I do think that we wrestle as a community, as a Christian community with how to balance these features that we all sense create tensions within is.

And so the question becomes how do I do that faithfully, how do I do that well. I don't measure it by victory; I don't measure it by popularity. I should measure it by a kind of faithfulness that's committed to honoring and representing God well, and lifting him up and what he represents well.

And that may bring curiosity. That may bring hostility. That may well bring rejection. But that's part of the calling. And if we do that well, there will be people who will be drawn by the Spirit of God to consider what it is that we're representing. And that's the best kind of cultural engagement.

Mark Bailey: I love the way Acts 17 ends. We hadn't planned – we hadn't talked about using that passage. But I'm glad we did, because there were some who stayed hostile and reacted to the message of truth. There were a couple who came to Christ. A particular man and a particular woman that get referenced. And then there were some others that said, "We'd like to talk about this some more."

What a great compendium. We will have people who will reject the message. We will have people who will stay interested if we're willing to take the time and the patience to engage. And there will be people who will respond.

I love that fact, that it represents an honesty of the hostility that exists. It represents the patience that's needed to engage. But it also represents the joy that when the message is preached and the Spirit of God works, people – and these two – one of the guys was known as an Areopagite. He hung around that hill all the time. He was known for being one of the –

Darrell Bock: That's something I haven't been called.
Mark Bailey: No, me neither. I'm not known for hanging around the philosophers too often. But he was known as somebody who hung on that hill for a long time, enough to be called basically a Mars Hillian, an Areopagite. But that was one you'd probably not expect to have made a confession of faith on that particular day. But God chose, with the truth, through the Spirit to bring him to Christ.

What a great hope and joy that we have. That's our goal, to engage with the ultimate purpose of seeing people understand who God is, through his Son, Christ, by the ministry of the Spirit in their lives, and come to a different culture that will last through eternity. God bless you. Thank you for being a part of this discussion today.