Christian Leadership Training Around the World

Part 2 of 2: Culture Shock: Living as a Faithful Christian Overseas
with Darrell L. Bock and Scott S. Cunningham
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Darrell Bock: Okay, so we've kind of mapped out the basic here that there – that it depends on whether – you know, actually, this problem is also faced in the West. I was just in Australia this summer talking to them about the abortion issue, which, of course, is something grappled with all around the world, and in a country where the Christian population is about 2 percent. Very, very small. And it is a post-Christian, very much kind of postmodernish kind of culture, very much in the minority, absolutely next to no chance of having any structural political influence because of the lack of numbers, et cetera. The way in which to approach a social issue, like abortion, is limited by where they find themselves.

Scott Cunningham: That's right, yeah.

Darrell Bock: So I'm bringing up that example to show that it isn't – that the minority/majority issue is almost bigger than the East/West or two-thirds world, majority world/non-majority world contrast. Okay, so let's talk about that a little bit. Let's talk about how cultural engagement is different when you are a significant minority. Let's start there, because I think that's where – that's what Christians here sometimes may have a hard time getting their heads around.

Scott Cunningham: But let me start first, Darrell, if you don't mind, with that similarity part.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Scott Cunningham: Because I think it is important that we understand that Christians everywhere are going to be salt and light. That's what we're called to do. We're called to be salt and light within our culture no matter where we are. So that's sort of the commonality. That's the biblical injunction that we can take forward. But given that, the question is how do we do that within our culture. And that's, of course, where the differences are.

And I think that my – I'll say my disappointment, but it might be – to use that word – my disappointment is that sometimes Christians in North America think about cultural engagement in a way that is simply – and they think this is the way that Christians should do it all around the world but without a recognition that the context is different. And their way of thinking about Christian engagement with the culture is not going to work in India; it's not going to work in Egypt; it's not going to work in Latin America because the context is so radically different.
And it may be that the way they're thinking about it in terms of – and oftentimes it has to do with political engagement because of the fact that they have a majority, and within a democratic society they're able to work through that political process to try to accomplish, as it were, an agenda, which they think fits their Christian worldview. That, my friend, is not going to work in India.

And so one wonders whether Christians, even within the West, shouldn't be thinking, "Is this really the best way to engage Christian culture, or engage culture from a Christian point of view? Or are there other ways, we can think of, and perhaps learn from, in those areas, those cultures that are not dominated by Christian thinking and, yet, there are Christians there who are living out their Christian lives."

**Darrell Bock:** And, of course, the reality is, as I think we are learning as we move from election to election, is that the numbers here are not such that you can dictate an agenda.

**Scott Cunningham:** That's right.

**Darrell Bock:** And so, the question becomes how do you function as salt and light in the context in which there is going to be a resistance and opposition and challenge to what it is you're going to want to put on the table. And I think that – it just so happens that right now I'm working in Matthew 10, which is on mission.

And a lot of that chapter in Matthew is dealing with how do you engage in a mission in which there's going to be a lot of people who don't like what you're saying, and there's going to be rejection; there's going to even be hostility. Of course, we see a little bit of that right now. And so how do you deal with those challenges, whether you think you have numbers or not?

I actually think that one of the mistakes we make in cultural engagement is to see cultural engagement as being – I'm going to make a contrast here. It's going to sound stronger than I intend, but it's the only way to picture it. Do we deal from a position in which we claim to have power, or do we deal from a position in which we claim to serve our society? That's the contrast I want to put out on the table.
Scott Cunningham: And I think that's an excellent contrast. And so what has happened, I think, in the West and particularly North America, is that through terms such as culture wars, we think in terms of power. And we think that in order to win this war we need to exercise our power within the culture. And within a democracy such as we have here that often means power at the ballot box.

But, as you said, that, "power" continues to diminish within North America. And so the question is are we really – is this really the best way to frame our thinking about cultural engagement is to think about cultural wars and power. Or are there different ways in which we can think about cultural engagement, ways in which Christians, for millennia, have been operating in situations out of weakness and a minority position. And that, I think, is something that we might look at in terms of the growing trends within the West.

Darrell Bock: Okay, so go there. What do those look like? What can we learn from what you see around the world in terms of the way engagement can function? What are the other models or frames around which we can place Christian involvement that also, at the same time show the potential and power of what it is that Christians are about in the gospel.

Scott Cunningham: Darrell, have you read James Hunter's book To Change the World?

Darrell Bock: Yes.

Scott Cunningham: That's sort of a book that I read about a year ago and I continue to reflect on, and in a positive way, in the sense that what he's talking about there – and we can summarize that in a minute – but what he's talking about there does seem to describe and provide a conceptual framework for thinking about cultural engagement in settings where, as I've described, Christians are a minority, even a persecuted minority, and don't have the power, the political power, to accomplish their agenda.

That framework that he lays out seems to – it resonates with me. And I wonder if that's not – if you would ask me where would I go in terms of cultural engagement, some of the ways that he's framed that discussion might be helpful.

Darrell Bock: Like?
**Scott Cunningham:** You know what Hunter says – and if I can describe him or summarize him accurately – is that some of the things I've been saying about trying to accomplish a Christian agenda through the political process or through power structures may not be our primary objective. It may come about just as we live our Christian lives, but that would be a secondary outcome rather than a primary objective. And that's an important distinction to make.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. And the other thing that it seems to me is in play here, is thinking through how do Christians be Christians and serve well? If I can think about – when I look at the biblical exhortations of say, an epistle like 1 Peter, where it's talking about life as a Christian in the context in which, obviously, Christians were a terrific minority in the first century. Basically his exhortation is, "Be a good citizen."

**Scott Cunningham:** Absolutely.

**Darrell Bock:** "Live well with those around you. Serve faithfully, engage ethically," you know it's just basically looking to see where you can be a positive influence on that which is going on around you, and contribute in such a way that people see the value of who you are as a human being and maybe – to use the words of Matthew – might see your good works and glorify the Father in heaven. So is that the kind of direction we're talking about? Is that the kind of emphasis that we're seeing?

**Scott Cunningham:** I think it is, yeah. And that quote, by the way, "that they might see your good works and glorify God who is in heaven," in 1 Peter, actually you have a very similar situation, that they might see your good works and glorify God on the day that he visits us.

**Darrell Bock:** That's right.

**Scott Cunningham:** So the same idea is there. The other passage I think of is 1 Timothy 2. When Paul exhorts, he begins with the "Pray for all people, and especially kings and those in authority." This is why. "Because this pleases God, who desires all men to come to a knowledge of the truth, for there's one God and one mediator, Jesus Christ, who himself is human."
And then Paul says, "For this very reason I was made a herald, an apostle, one who proclaims the gospel to the nations." And so what Paul does there is he looks at that exclusivity of what God has done in Christ, and says, "Because of that, we have an inclusive mission to pray and to proclaim."

And match that together with what you're saying in 1 Peter, "to live out our lives in a way that they might see our good works and glorify God," that it begins at that personal level of discipleship of what we're doing in our family life and what we're doing in our congregational life. That's where it begins. So how do we live out our lives in a way that people will see that light in the midst of darkness?

**Darrell Bock:** And you know what's interesting is we did a podcast recently with Andy Crouch talking about culture making, and this was his emphasis too, that, really, we tend to go global and political when, perhaps, we ought to think more local about our influence and how we can influence the things that we're more directly, in many ways, involved with. And it's a similar kind of emphasis in some ways.

So how do the – again, learning from what you see globally when you look at what's going on globally, are there models of that kind of engagement that you see that you can share with us that might be helpful in helping people kind of flush out what we're talking about?

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, I think that that is what we see happening in those kind of contexts, where Christians are being faithful to what God has called them to be. And if God has called them to be a businessman, then they're being faithful within that context. If God has called them to be a teacher, they're being faithful before their students.

And faithful, I think, means several things. It means living out the Christian life in a way that's open for other people to see and also, to be competent in what you're doing. Whatever you do, do it for the glory of God, so that they're doing it well. They're not being sloppy or being lazy. They're being diligent; they're competent.

And with that focus in mind, this is part of being a testimony to Christ within the area that they're called.

If they are called to civil service, if they are called to government or to a life in the military, they live out their Christian experience within those contexts. And that, I think, happens in every culture. It can happen in every culture. And without thinking of the, "Well, we have to take over this political structure," or "We have to change this particular way of power engagement."
Darrell Bock: So just as an example, if – I mean, I think of the person who say, is a – I'll give a hard example. I know this happens in the Middle East. You've got a Christian, who's either in politics or in the Army. Obviously, the country's concerns are not being driven by the church. How does a person function in that context? When you were talking about this kind of a model, what are they doing? What are they looking at? How are they thinking about it?

Scott Cunningham: It’s a hard question. Maybe I need to step into their shoes and really deal with the issues at hand. And I think that sometimes there may be tremendous conflicts between what they see as their Christian values, and yet, in those situations around them, there are values that are very contrary to what's happening.

I can think of several testimonies I've heard. For instance, a Chinese Christian, who – there was influence on him to cover up certain kinds of corruption, certain kinds of things that were happening within the manufacturing plant that was in China. But, as a believer, he said he couldn't do that, that he wanted to be above that. And because of that, he lost his job, but he maintained his Christian testimony. Later on, of course, God used that in the lives of other people so that other people came to know Christ through that example.

So in those kind of contexts, that's not going to be an easy thing because a lot of times those values around you are in conflict. Whereas, here in the West, we may feel comfortable because the choices we make to live out a Christian life may not meet that same kind of resistance. Whereas in the situations you're talking about in the Middle East, for instance, when a soldier is in the military or somebody who's in government may find that there's more and more conflict, but yet to retain that Christian witness becomes such an important part of what it is to be a Christian.

Darrell Bock: So how are the schools – you said there are some courses that deal with helping civil servants and that kind of thing. What kinds of courses are those and what are doing? How are they helping their students to face what they're going to face?

Scott Cunningham: Yeah. Think of schools in Singapore, for instance. Seminaries there, the traditional seminary, of course, that has for many years trained, focused on pastors, on teachers and so forth, but then began to see openings within the broader church context of businessmen, who also wanted to learn about Scriptures and wanted to learn about how to live their Christian life within a business context, within the business world.
And the point here is there's integration. That is, our Christian life is not segmented into what we do on Sunday, what we do in our family, what we do in our church. And then there's also what we do in our business, but that's different than what we're doing on Sunday mornings. So how do we actually bring integration within that? And I think that's the kind of course that these seminaries are offering.

So they're approaching these businessmen in Singapore, they're meeting over the lunch hour and talking about their experience as Christian businessmen, and dealing with some very important issues that are about how to live out that Christian life. What does it mean, ethically, to overcome those tendencies toward corruption, for instance, that you might find?

What does it mean to give your employees a fair wage and fair benefits, and to live Christianly in that way? What does it mean to use the resources that God has given you through the profit, for instance, of your company and use those for the glory of God by investing them in the church, investing them in missions, and investing them in centers where more leaders can be trained?

Those are the kind of things that are being discussed. And I think that there's a real hunger for that among Christians in those countries that haven't seen an integration of their Christian life, the Christian worldview, with what they do 40 hours a week.

**Darrell Bock:**

So we get the emphasis on integration and we get the emphasis on service and thinking through that. And we talked a little bit about the challenges of what happens in a situation where you're a minority. Let's flip it again and talk about now, places where the Christian presence is broader, it's more pervasive, but you still have this tension that the world and the way in which operates, oftentimes, isn't quite exactly the way Christians would see things in the tensions that you have.

What advice – you said that there's a consistency across all this in terms of how to think about it. But the situation that we do have here is a little bit different. You're not 2 percent. There is the opportunity to engage. There's the freedom and the right to engage. In some of the countries where we talked about, you don't have those freedoms and those rights.

So how do you see, or what you've seen and learned overseas, applying to the situation in which there might be the opportunity to have meaningful conversations across the whole swath of life?

Does it change very much or are the values pretty much the same? Or what differences make a difference, I guess is what I'm asking?
Scott Cunningham: I'm not sure I'm going to answer your question specifically, Darrell. And if I don't, bring me back.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Scott Cunningham: But I'm thinking about a situation in India, for instance, where, as you know, corruption is a huge issue. And this is something that the church believes it can speak into the culture in a way that the culture might understand and value the Christian voice in this particular –

Darrell Bock: So there's a contribution – I'm going to use a phrase that we see in the West a lot in a lot of these discussions. There's a contribution to the common good of the wellbeing of the society that the church is trying to step into and that's how they're approaching the question.

Scott Cunningham: That's right. That's right, exactly. And so they would hold conferences, for instance, on issues of corruption where they're able to gather together business leaders – non-Christians, often – business leaders, those in the military, those in government, to talk about issues of corruption. And the reason that they're able to bring them together is because all of the culture is concerned about this. They're concerned when there's a building that they build for the Commonwealth Games that collapses and people die. They're wondering, "Okay. Now, did the contractor take a shortcut on this? This is not right." They're concerned when there's huge black holes in the government where money just disappears. They don't want that. And so they're able to gather them together and then provide a Christian voice into this topic.

And that, I think, is something that Christians all over the world are seeing as possibilities where Christians have positive things to say, to speak into the culture from their own values and vantage point, from a Christian framework, that the culture around them will say, "Well, you know, that's something that we would also agree with, that we would value. We value those things." And that's a positive contribution that can be made.
Darrell Bock: Now, the harder situation, of course, is when the values that the Christian has is not necessarily in line with where the culture is going. And we have seen that obviously illustrated in a whole variety of areas in our context today. But that doesn't change the calling in some sense. It may change the dynamics of the calling. But, again, the tension that I see here – let me see if I can make this a clearer question. The tension that I see here is what do you do when the values in the conversation are mixed?

One of the things that's often said today is that when it comes to monetary issues and business issues and materialism issues, and that kind of thing in the West, that, oftentimes, you get a sense that the Christian is defending a certain kind of economic model, as opposed to whether or not that economic model actually works in delivering to people all that we might hope a society would deliver to people.

I'm trying to do this as nonpolitically as possible, and it may be hard to do. And my sense is is that sometimes Christians are accused of having values that line up with more with a politically ideology or an economic ideology than they do necessarily with Christian values. And so, I'll go ahead and say it – medical care, which, of course, is a huge debated area because of what it means for entitlements, and the cost of it, et cetera.

But on the one hand, you sit there and say, "Who doesn't want to create a society in which people can get basic medical care, and whether they can afford it or not, that human beings are taken care of? So you have this tension between what, economically, might be viable, and the human value of reaching out to a person in need and extending compassion and then being sure that they're cared for. How do you wrestle through those tensions, and does what you have seen overseas help us with that?

And the reason I ask that question is because of my own experience, which has mostly involved Europe. The battles that we get into on an area, say like medical care, most Europeans have trouble identifying with because they assume that the human value, even the Christian – they'll even use Christian values – is to make sure that people are cared for. What do you see in that kind of an area where I could say the values are mixed and you're prioritizing a mixture of values.

Scott Cunningham: I'm trying to think of another situation besides medical care in the U.S., for instance. Can you think of a particular issue in a different context, in a non-Western context where that might be an issue. I know there are those things. I'm just trying to get a handle on –
Darrell Bock: Think of what it might be, yeah. Well, I mean, I think that one of the examples that you gave that shows at least the intent, are these agricultural and fishery programs, and which are actually trying to help people move to care for themselves, but where the initial extended hand – if I can say it that way – the initial extended hand is to make sure they're being cared for. Does that make sense? And so you're trying to accomplish multiple objectives at the same time. And I see – and to have – and to teach – you know, it's interesting. To teach pastors to have those kinds of skills is a kind of integration to put together what you've talked about, that, normally, in our thinking we would distinguish, we would segregate from one another. And so I see the driving of a value – and this goes back to them all – I see the driving of a value to serve and to step into the situation in a way that makes clear what the effort to meet human needs are in a healthy way, determining and prioritizing what goes around it, if I can say it that way. And those efforts to foster development and to step in and bring a situation in which development can happen, seems to me to have those priorities right.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, I think I get the drift of what you're – where you're going on this. I think part of it is an awareness on the part of the church as to what the priority issues are. I think that many of our churches, unfortunately, have blinders in terms of the main cultural issues that are going around them. And they tend to either be simply those – and I don't mean to be pejorative here, but it seems just from my sense that they tend to – whatever issues are around there, there's a sense of either denial that those issues are going on, or they’re not important to us or they're making those up. Or there's a sense that whatever we see in the world, the church is contrary to those, and so there's the sense of no. We're the party of no.

Darrell Bock: And we're not going to partner with anybody in anything that involves a global effort because, obviously, the global effort's wrong.

Scott Cunningham: That's right. And so part of it is a matter of awareness. Can we actually open our eyes and see broader than the four walls of our church, of our congregation, to see what's actually happening in the world around us? And so, for instance, you would have – oh, let me take a few examples here – a seminary in Manila that offers programs, typical programs for their pastors, trained pastors and teachers and so forth.
But you ask them, "Well, you know a lot of Manila lives in poverty. How are you preparing your pastors to deal with issues of poverty that they're going to find in their context?" "Oh, well, that's something we haven't really thought about." Now, I'm not saying there is a particular seminary in Manila like that. I think that most of them have begun to deal with those issues.

But here's an issue that the culture around them is screaming, "You know this is a huge issue for us. What does the church have to say in a positive way that can contribute toward helping us deal with this issue of poverty?"

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah. I've got two examples in my life leap immediately to mind. When I was doing spiritual formation work with our spiritual groups, we would – I would purposely take our students just a couple of blocks across the street. And this is at a time when Dallas was made up slightly differently, although there's still some of this now.

But the seminary in the '80s and '90s was located in the midst of what most people would say were some of the worst environment in Dallas. But there were all kinds of women's shelters and outreach things. And the point that I would take them there and show them these agencies and say, "Here are agencies in our context that are trying to help people who are in terrific need."

And we would simply go and say an hour a week, every other week, "How can we help you?" And my point was to say, "You don't need to create a Christian organization to do this. There are organizations right here doing this, into which you can step and volunteer and be of service." That's one example.

The second example, I think of is in Guatemala in SETECA. SETECA's located literally blocks from the garbage dump that literally you can go – I go every two years up until recently – and you can literally watch the garbage dump move across this ravine and cover it.

But there were kids living in that garbage dump, and there was a program, and I don't remember who – I think it was World Vision – ran an orphanage school in the garbage – it literally was located on the edge of the garbage dump. And seminary students from SETECA were going and were part of a volunteer workforce that stepped into that place and they were helping there.

And it was your example of what are you doing to help with the poverty. There also were courses and circumstances in which they were teaching their students how to minister in contexts where there weren't many resources, that kind of thing.
And, in fact, one of the things we did with that group was – in fact, the reason I was there is – we taught a class in which we took North American students from Dallas and from Denver – the person that I taught it with teaches Old Testament at Denver, Danny Carroll. And he still does this.

And he would take a swath of students down, and we mixed them with the Latin American students. The class would be bilingual, some in Spanish, some in English. And the one assignments that the American students had was this. Talk about how you would read the Bible differently if you lived here versus where you live in North America.

**Scott Cunningham:** That's right.

**Darrell Bock:** And, of course, they were only there two weeks. But what immediately became clear from what we showed them, and where the seminary was located and the garbage dump being close – and we took them into the garbage dump so they could see what life was like for someone living in that context. What immediately became clear to them is that all these theoretical passages on poverty weren't so theoretical anymore. It was in their face.

**Scott Cunningham:** That's right.

**Darrell Bock:** And that produced an awareness and a sensitivity – virtually everyone we took on that trip would come back and say, "I am not the same person, and I'm not reading the Bible in entirely the same way." Not in a negative sense. Very much in a positive sense of "I am sensitive to things now I was never sensitive to before I made the trip."

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, I think that's a great example of awareness. When I think of these issues, I think you have three words. And I think I've probably mentioned them throughout this conversation already, but if I just highlight them. The first one is awareness. The second one is intentionality. You know we need to be intentional about actually providing those kinds of experiences or that kind of teaching, that kind of information.

**Darrell Bock:** And moving in the direction of those kinds of services.
Scott Cunningham: Absolutely, yeah. So intentionality. And then the third one would be – and now I've forgotten – no, the third one is integration so that they see that when we're talking about the text and the context, the word and the world, the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, as Karl Barth would say. The double listening, as John Stott would say. We listen to the Word and we listen to the world. Not in the same way, of course, but we still are open to hear those voices. And how do we integrate that within our training, as we train those who would lead congregations. And then how, of course, are they going to be leading their congregations in a way that has those three components as well?

Darrell Bock: Yeah. And when I think about awareness, what I also think about is the impact of – if I can say it – a mentality. There's a mentality that the awareness – we're aware – we're not aware in some cases because we have blinders. We're also not aware sometimes because we're not willing to think about, "How might I approach this differently than I have in the past?" or "What ought I to be sensitive to that perhaps I haven't been sensitive to in the past?" that kind of thing.

And one of the reasons for having this particular conversation on culture engagement and getting a global perspective on things and asking the questions the way that I have, is because I'm trying to picture for people who may never have traveled outside the United States, or that kind of thing, how life in a different world, in a different context, does create different sensitivities and different awarenesses.

And out of those different awarenesses, there are sensitivities that are created that make you think differently. But we're talking about a biblically different kind of thinking.

Scott Cunningham: Sure.

Darrell Bock: We're not talking about just different thinking. It's not something to be afraid of. It's something to actually reflect upon and embrace.

Scott Cunningham: It is. And we think of how we read the text. Also, as we read Scriptures, as you said, people having an experience that would read the text differently. And you, of course, would be familiar from Luke 10 of the prodigal son. And it's an interesting experiment, Darrell, if you would do this.
You ask people here in the West to retell that well-known story of the prodigal son. And then you go outside the U.S. and you tell them to retell the story of the prodigal son. See one important difference is that people in the U.S. hardly ever mention the drought that took place, whereas people overseas will always mention the drought.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Scott Cunningham: And that's because that's in their awareness.

Darrell Bock: They live with it. They're so connected to the ground that if things go bad, they understand how actually bad it can get. And so they read Luke 15, and they're sitting there, and they hit that part and they go, "We understand how a person could be driven to reconsider the way they're living their life and seeing what's going on because we know what desperate condition that puts us in. Well, we're total dependent on what the ground produces."

Scott Cunningham: Yeah. So there is that reading of the text that is impacted by their context as well.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. Well, I appreciate you coming in and discussing these issues with us. Our hope is that this has been helpful to you in thinking about cultural engagement kind of by looking at it from the outside in. That's kind of what we tried to do. And to think about the principles that are involved and the different factors that are involved, and perhaps it's mad you pause and think – as it should all of us – about to culturally engage in our own context as a result. So, Scott, I appreciate you coming in and doing this. We thank you for joining us at The Table, and we look forward to seeing you again. Thank you.