

Fingerprint - Culture

November 17, 2013

You know what many people love about church? It is a place they can go to escape from the world. The church is a place they can step back in time. At church, they can sing songs nobody knows on instruments nobody uses out of old books they have never seen before. God calls his people to be separate from the world, and for many people, they want a church that is completely different from the culture around them.

If that is the kind of church you are looking for, Faith Church is not for you.

My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors at Faith Church. I want to send a special greeting to the Spencer campus that is joining us this morning via live stream video. This morning is the last week of our series called Fingerprint. In this series, we are looking at the Faith Church fingerprint, that is, what makes Faith Church a unique church in our community. This morning we are looking at our final core value in this series. It describes how we handle the culture around us.

Culture — We believe in engaging our culture and redeeming it for the glory of Christ.

If you are taking notes, there are two key words I want you to circle. They are the words *engaging* and *redeeming*. What does it mean for us to engage culture? What does it mean to redeem it? Many churches encourage you to do the exact opposite of what we strive for. They tell you to escape from culture and condemn it as you leave. We want to engage culture and redeem it. Why are we heading in the opposite direction?

For a moment, use your imagination. I want you to join an imaginary missions team. As a missions team member, imagine you are evaluating a missionary that is home from the field. Let's say he is a missionary in the country of India. As this missionary shares about his ministry, you discover that rather than meeting with the people of India in their homes and on the street, this missionary expects Indians to knock on his door and visit his home first before he visits theirs. Rather than translating the Bible into the native Indian language, this missionary expects the people of India to learn English so they can read the English Bible rather than understand God's Word in their native dialect. Rather than following the customs of India and eating food with his hands, this missionary insists on using a knife, fork and spoon no matter where he goes.

While this missionary is serving in the country of India, he is not willing to engage the culture of India. His insistence of keeping his own culture is ruining his ability to be able to share the Gospel in the Indian culture. If you were on the missions team, would you be in favor of continuing his support?

Each one of us is a missionary. We are not trying to reach the lost of India, we are commissioned by God to reach the lost in the Iowa Great Lakes region. Just like a missionaries in foreign lands needs to work hard to understand the culture — they flex themselves so they mold into the culture they are trying to reach. We are called to understand our culture and flex out of our comfort zones to reach the culture we live in. At Faith, we are a missionary outpost in our community. As missionaries, we intentionally disassemble church

traditions that are barriers that keep us from reaching the culture we live in. Let me show you why.

Engaging the culture means studying the culture and flexing your ways to meet it.

Paul before the Areopagus

In the book of Acts, we can follow Paul's missionary journeys and learn how he presented the gospel to different cultures. For example, Paul's standard practice was to first visit the Jews in the local synagogue of a city. He opened the Old Testament and reasoned from the Old Testament Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God.

When working with Gentiles in the very same cities, a culture without a biblical background, he used the exact opposite approach. Instead of starting with the Bible and working into the culture, he started with the culture and worked back to the Bible. A good example of this comes from Acts 17.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for " 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, " 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:22–31 (ESV)

Athens was home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Alexander the Great. They were proud of being one of the greatest cultural centers in the world. After Paul's five-mile walk into town, he was troubled by seeing people of great cultural heritage who didn't know the truth about God. They were very religious. In Athens, there were between 30,000-40,000 statues to different deities. Paul was eventually brought before the Areopagus, to the same place Socrates defended his teachings 450 years before.

When Paul began his speech, he began by talking about one of their altars, an altar to an unknown God. Why did he begin there? Six hundred years before, Athens was struck with a plague. The people of Athens sacrificed to their gods but the plague continued. One, or more, of the gods in Athens needed to be appeased. The town fathers enlisted the help of a famous Greek poet named Epimenedes to figure out how to stop the plague. He had an idea to let sheep roam freely and hopefully they would lie down next to the statue of the deity that needed to be appeased.

Unfortunately, many of the sheep didn't lie down next to statues of deities. They laid by themselves in the open field. What were the people to do? Epimenedes reasoned that there must be a god that was missing. The city erected altars to the unknown god and sacrificed the sheep on them. Miraculously, after those sacrifices, the plague stopped. Paul studied the Athenian culture. Paul began by saying, "Let me tell you about that unknown god who stopped the plague 600 years ago. For years you have known him as the unknown God. Today, I will tell you his name."

As Paul continued his talk, he didn't quote Jewish philosophers, he quoted the poets from the Athenian culture. Paul didn't just understand the Jewish culture he came from, but he studied the Athenian culture he was trying to reach. He didn't change the gospel but he completely changed the way he shared the gospel to fit the Athenian culture.

Four different Gospels

Another example of studying a culture and flexing your ways to meet it comes from the Gospels themselves. When you read the New Testament, it seems repetitive. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the same story about Jesus one right after the other. While they are similar, they are not identical. What cracks me up is brainiacs in big schools claim that since the Gospels aren't identical, we don't know if we can trust them. That is crazy. Sometimes people are too smart for their own good. The four Gospels tell the same story, but there is a reason they are slightly different. Each one was tailored for a different audience.

Matthew — He wrote to the Jews. This is why he started out with a genealogy proving Jesus came from the line of David. That is what the Jews cared about. God's Messiah must come from the line of David or the Jews wouldn't listen to anything else Matthew had to say. This is why Matthew began with a genealogy that showed how Jesus came from the line of David. This is also why Matthew quoted the Old Testament many times. The Old Testament is what the Jews respected.

Mark — He wrote for the Romans. It is the shortest and the quickest Gospel. The Romans didn't care about Jesus' genealogy, so Mark didn't include it. The Romans lived fast-paced lives similar to the way people in New York or California live today. They didn't have much time for reading. That is why Mark is short, sweet and to the point. It was tailored to the Roman culture that lived a fast-paced life.

Luke — He wrote for the Gentiles. Luke was also written for academics because it was written by an academic, Dr. Luke, the physician. There is a genealogy but it traces Jesus back to Adam to show Jesus was fully human.

John — It was written to the Greeks and the Jews. The focus on Jesus is as the eternal Word of God. John tied into Greek philosophy and the Jewish culture simultaneously in a number of places.

Why are the Gospels different? They were written to share Christ with different cultures in the ancient world. The Gospel writers studied the cultures they were trying to reach and shaped the gospel message accordingly. They didn't change the gospel message, they just shaped it.

Paul's letter to the Romans

Probably the most powerful example of flexing the way you present the gospel to reach a unique culture comes from the book of Romans. What I am about to share with you comes from my doctoral thesis, which because of challenging life circumstances, I never published. This is fresh stuff I know you will enjoy.

When Paul wrote the book of Romans, he was writing to a large church in Rome that he had not established or visited. The number of Jews in Rome was the same as the number of Jews living in Jerusalem, roughly 600,000.

In that culture, letters served as stand-ins for a personal appearance, much like Skype or FaceTime does for us today. A letter was written and the courier of a letter was trained by the writer of the letter how to read the letter. This way proper emphasis and pauses were included. When a letter's courier read the letter, it was not a flat reading but a dramatic reading. This is true of all of your New Testament letters. They are by nature oral documents not designed to be read by one individual silently but designed to be read by a courier in front of others publicly.

The book of Romans has a very structured feel to it. There is a reason for that feel. The early Roman Empire was considered one of the most eloquent periods in human history. When Rome was a republic, public debate decided public policy. In Rome, young boys dreamed of becoming successful public speakers in a way similar to young boys dreaming of playing in the NFL today. Eventually Rome moved from being a republic, where public debate decided public policy, to an empire ruled by a Roman ruler. That didn't mean that skillful public speaking skills withered. They didn't have television. Skillful public speakers became a source of public performance. Audiences of thousands gathered to watch the highly skilled orators of the day debate the issues. If you were a skillful public speaker in Rome, you achieved rock star-like status. The Roman Emperor Vespian even established schools of public oratory with public

funds. Young men flooded these schools to learn public speaking and debate from the best minds in the ancient world.

In Roman society, public speaking developed into a highly structured art form, similar to the way lawyers work in a court of law today.

Since public speaking was such a huge part of Roman society because it drew crowds of thousands, schools were flooded with young students learning public speaking, all hoping to achieve fame and fortune. You would think somebody would write a book about this. After all, when you have learning and you have schools, you have books. The brilliant scholar Quintillian was commissioned to write a book detailing proper public speaking and debate in Roman society. His massive work became the textbook of speaking and debate in the Roman world. Quintillian's handbook is a massive work that can still be found in some of the best libraries today.

Here is where it gets interesting. When you put Quintillian's handbook of Roman oratory in one hand and Paul's letter to the Romans in the other, you find the structure of Romans matches Quintillian's outline for how to give a persuasive speech in Roman society. Quintillian called for six sections in a persuasive speech. Paul's letter to the Romans follows all six sections from Quintillian's book. In fact, the letter of Romans in our Bible is so tightly matched to the public speaking structures that Quintillian said was demanded by Roman society that if you were to give an example of how public speaking should be done and put it in Quintillian's book, you could use the book of Romans as that example, because it is Roman oratory that was done to perfection.

Can you imagine the audience in the church of Rome as Paul's courier arrived with his letter? Their first thought would have been, "Who is Paul? I've never heard of the guy. I think he is a Jew that has never been to Rome. He doesn't understand us. He doesn't know us. What could he possibly say that would apply to our lives?"

As Paul's letter was read, all the rhetorically-savvy people in the audience began thinking, "This guy is amazing. Where did he learn these highly-sought after public speaking skills? I think he understands us. Maybe we should listen to what he has to say about this guy named Jesus."

One of the clear conclusions is Paul worked very hard to understand the Roman culture and to flex the way he presented the gospel so the gospel would be clear in that culture. At Faith Church, we want to live the same way.

Some of you wonder why we use the Internet so much at Faith Church. That is the way our culture works. When you go to a new community, how do you check out a church? Online. If you don't have good web presence, you aren't in touch with your culture.

Some of you wonder why we have a black stage with lighting and cameras. The stage provides us with the opportunity for visual creativity in a way that is in sync with our culture.

Why do we have the Gathering Grounds coffee bar? Coffee shops are in vogue in our culture. When people come in the door and get good coffee, people can relate and be comfortable. The coffee bar is not there for coffee, it is there for culture.

Some of you wonder why I wear jeans. Personally, I don't care what I wear. My wife will tell you I do not have a fashion bone in my body. My kids, my wife, even my 80-year-old parents have told me I look better in dress jeans because I look more in sync with our culture. Since purchasing dress jeans involves spending money, which I don't like to do, I hesitated. One day over lunch, while lifting at the gym, I was joking around with a friend I keep inviting to church. He hasn't come, but we are friendly and I keep trying. I asked him, "What do you think we are like at church? Do you think I wear a white collar, black robe and a wig?" Some of my friends in town think I do. He said to me, "I hope you dress in jeans and something casual because when I come, that is what I will wear." In that moment, God gave me a punch in the chest. "Spend the money on dress jeans you tight wad." If Paul took the time to master Quintillian's hand book of oration, so he could share the gospel with the Roman culture, you can spend \$70 on dress jeans to more effectively reach the culture you live in.

As a church, we actively seek to engage the culture in every way we can and not be behind the culture. In culture, there are some things that are questionable. What do we do then?

We seek to redeem culture for the glory of Christ.

There are a number of aspects of our culture that are questionable. What should we do? For instance:

Electric guitars — I remember being in churches where we were told that electric guitars were Satan's instrument. They were considered evil.

Movies — There are really bad movies out there. Should we watch them or avoid them altogether?

Halloween — Halloween is a die-hard pagan holiday. It is traditionally the night the cults believed the line between the dead and the living was thinnest. While it is little known, some of the hardcore druidic traditions say it is a night where a child was sacrificed. As Christians, how should we handle this holiday?

There are three things you can do with culture, you can receive it, reject it or redeem it.

Receiving it means there is nothing necessarily wrong with it. It is a good product of culture and God has blessed us by allowing us to have it. My Mac computer is something that I receive from our culture and rejoice in. It allows me to get a lot of work done. My car is something that is a product of our culture and we receive it and thank God for it.

Rejecting part of culture is looking at it and realizing it is sinful and has no redemptive value. It should not be part of the Christian life. Pornography is a huge part of our culture and it needs to be rejected because it is outright sin. Drugs are a huge part of our culture. They should be rejected as having no part of the Christian life.

Redeeming things is taking what some consider sinful, extracting the good out of it, discarding what is evil and using it for the glory of God. At Faith Church, that is something we work hard at.

Electric guitars — Yes, I remember having conversations with people claiming electric guitars were Satan's instrument. That just isn't true. While

electric guitars have been the instrument many people use to sing ungodly lyrics, that doesn't make an electric guitar evil. Why give all the electric guitars to Satan? As Christians, redeem them and use them for worshipping God.

Movies — While there is a ton of completely ungodly movies, there are Christian movies and even secular movies that have redemptive value. As Christians, it is appropriate to see some movies so we can better connect with our culture.

Halloween — Halloween is a little trickier. Having studied Halloween and its pagan backgrounds, Cindy and I completely rejected it. God worked on us a bit on how we could redeem it. One of the churches we served began a fall harvest party on Halloween. No evil costumes were allowed, lots of carnival games for the kids were present and candy was given away. It was a chance to introduce many in the community to the church because the church was the most happening place in town on Halloween night.

No, we did not have a haunted house, that is something we rejected. We allowed no evil costumes. We had a harvest party. We redeemed something, sucked what was good out of it for the glory of Christ and discarded the rest. That is our desire at Faith Church. While there are things to outright reject in culture, for the sake of building bridges to the lost, we try to find what we can redeem out of questionable things in our culture, use that for the glory of Christ and throw out the trashy stuff.

I know some of you have questions about this approach.

Doesn't the Bible tell us to avoid worldliness? Jesus taught us we are no longer citizens of this world but we are citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world. In the New Testament, the apostle John told us not to love this world. James told us part of our duty is to keep ourselves unstained by the world.

It is true that some Christians, in an attempt to reach the world, have become just like the world. They abandoned the gospel and holiness to become adulterers, divorcees, alcoholics and perverts. Culture and worldliness are not a synonymous. Worldliness is loving the world. Our job is not to love the world but to be missionaries that reach our culture. To reach our culture, we want to think like missionaries and speak the gospel in a way that is relevant to our culture.

Doesn't the Bible tell us to avoid every appearance of evil? Maybe you heard this. Be very careful nobody could even think you crossed the line into sin. Sorry to pop your bubble but the Bible doesn't say avoid every appearance of evil. Where did that idea come from? It comes from a poor translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:22 found in the original King James Bible.

Abstain from all appearance of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 (KJV 1900)

Abstain from every form of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 (ESV)

Modern translations straighten that out. The problem with avoiding every appearance of evil is you end up with Christians who try and get so far from the culture they lose their connection to the culture.

Conclusion

During the time of Jonah, the nation of Israel was financially prosperous but spiritually impoverished, much like our own. Israel's bitter enemy was

Assyria. Its resume included witchcraft, murder, prostitution, drunkenness, cruelty and pride. Ninevah, one of the chief Assyrian cities, was fortified by walls 100-foot high that were wide enough for three chariots to drive on top of side-by-side. As a city, it was deeply evil and the residents felt invincible.

God commanded Jonah to preach to Ninevah and call the people to repent. As many of you know, Jonah went the opposite direction to Tarshish. As part of God's discipline, Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a huge fish, which must have smelled terrible as he swam for three days in its digestive tract. A partially-digested Jonah wasn't too appetizing for the fish because after three days the fish threw him up, conveniently next to Ninevah, of course.

Realizing he wasn't winning his fight against God, Jonah reluctantly fulfilled God's word. He went through the city moaning, "Forty days and Ninevah will be overturned. Repent." Amazingly, it worked. Half of a million people dropped to their knees in repentance and fear of the Lord.

In the final chapter of the book, after one of the greatest revivals in world history, Jonah was sitting on a hill waiting to watch the barbecue of the 500,000 people of the city. God, in his grace, caused a plant to grow that shaded Jonah from the heat of the blistering sun while Jonah waited in a front-row seat to watch God's ultimate destruction. God caused a worm to eat the plant, and it was destroyed. Jonah was so angry about losing the shade of that plant he just wanted to die.

What we find is Jonah was more concerned about losing a simple plant than he was about the lives of 500,000 people whose eternal lives hung in the balance.

To this day, the Jews gather in the synagogue each year on the Day of Atonement to read Jonah. After the reading, they reply, "We are Jonah." We confess that we care more about losing a few comforts than we do about the lives of those around us.

Are we Jonah too? Are we more upset over a few changes in the church than we are about reaching the thousands of people around us that are in danger of the Lake of Fire for eternity apart from Christ?

At Faith Church, we want to be different, we want to engage our culture, not because we want to be hip or cool but because we are called to be missionaries who remove any barriers that stand in the way of sharing the good news of Jesus with the culture around us. We want to be different and not reject everything in our culture but find what we can redeem from it and use it for the glory of God.



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