

PLUGGED-IN Workshop

Culture and Its Seductive Stories

1. What is Culture?

Culture is part of the 'natural habitat' we inhabit daily as we live our lives, yet something - like the water fish swim in - that we seldom stop to seriously consider. It's one of those words we throw around and assume that everyone knows what it is and what we mean, but sometimes find it hard to actually define it. We feel caught off-guard. Sort of like if you're asked to define "what is irony?" (Answer: it's what you're experiencing struggling to define the word "irony")

A. A Definition of Culture

The original word "culture" has three different senses coming from its Latin roots. Firstly, *colere* which refers to agriculture - as in cultivating crops. Secondly, *colonus*, which has to do with inhabiting something. And finally, *cultus*, which has to do with honour and worship - think our English word, "cult".¹ There is an intrinsically religious aspect of culture which we will look at later in this workshop.

There are many ways the word culture is used. For our purposes for this workshop, this is what we mean by 'culture':

Culture is the cumulative and shared product of what people believe, value, do and make as image bearers of God in various times, groups and places.

So, for us, the culture we live in is the result of what people have and continue to believe, value, do and make publicly in our particular groups, area and time in which we live. We cannot help but create culture and live in it.

B. Result of the Imago Dei

We cannot help but be 'cultural' beings because we are all made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). Genesis 1 & 2 lay the groundwork for any Christian discussion of culture. In Genesis 1, we see God create everything and then bring order to the raw materials of creation by separating, organizing, and filling the spaces He had created in order to make them functional, flourishing and fruitful. So, when we talk about humans "imaging" God - we are

¹ Daniel Strange, Plugged In, 19

talking about our activity of imitating God by taking raw materials and bringing order to chaos to make things functional, flourish and fruitful.

God gives us the **creation mandate** which is the foundation for culture in Genesis 1:28,

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

There are a few important things to note about the creation mandate:

- I. **Blessing** - It starts with His blessing given to all humanity
- II. **Procreation** - this is an ongoing command to humanity to multiply within the bounds of marriage and the family is the primary unit of community and societies.
- III. **Subduing the earth** - the word does not mean a destructive or violent subjugation but rather enabling us to make sense of creation and to understand the possibilities that creation represents. It is our cultivation of creation's 'raw materials' into something productive.
- IV. **Have dominion** - this is the natural result of humanity fulfilling the command to fill the earth and subdue it. Humanity is to take its place as the crown of creation caring and ruling as God's vice-regents.

Fulfilling the creation mandate produces what we call culture. Bruce Ashford comments,

"Pause for a moment to reflect on the fact that God's command to work was a command to change and even enhance what he had made. Adam and Eve were not supposed to leave God's creation as it was, but to make something out of it. They and their descendants would be able to "work the garden" not only by cultivating plant life (agri-culture), but also by cultivating the arts, the sciences, or the public square (culture in general)."²

As humanity is fruitful and multiplies, we form new people groups who are image bearers meant to glorify God. As we subdue the earth, we take the raw materials and potential of God's creation and harness them to make tools, technology, art, music and all the artifacts of culture. Finally, as we exercise our dominion, we maintain order over the earth resulting in governmental structures, set up just laws to order societies and care for our environment and wildlife. In short, the creation mandate is the basis of culture.

² Bruce Riley Ashford, Every Square Inch, 26

C. Culture after the Fall

Ever since the Fall in Genesis 2, our world under the curse of sin. But does the Fall destroy the creation mandate and, by implication, the goodness of culture?

I. The goodness of creation is not eradicated but corrupted

No. As we saw, culture is not inherently evil but rather the product of the creation mandate as we image God as humans. However, the Fall's curse does affect all of God's good creation - more specifically to our creation of culture, it corrupts its direction. The Fall doesn't totally destroy goodness, it corrupts it.

The **structures** and elements of the material creation itself still retain aspects of their goodness from creation. The Fall doesn't automatically make apples or wood or even cats evil (though some people might contest that last example). But it does corrupt the **intentions** of humans and the **direction** to which they are oriented. No longer are they directed towards glorifying their Creator as they ought with the work of their hands, words of their lips and affections of their hearts. Rather, now they have disordered and misdirected works, words and desires.

"Every cultural context is **structurally good**, but **directionally corrupt**. For this reason, we must live firmly in the midst of our cultural contexts (structurally), all the while seeking to steer our cultural realities toward Christ rather than toward idols (directionally)."³

For example, in the creation mandate - we were told to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth". This command to procreation forms the basis of the family unit which is the foundation of societies. However, since the Fall we have adultery, abuse, abandonment, abortion, etc which corrupt what was meant to be a good part of culture.

So, while in this workshop I'll be pointing out and critiquing a lot of the corruption of the culture around us, I don't want you to get the idea that culture is inherently evil.

II. We become idolatrous

Culture reflects the fallenness of the creation's curse of sin, while also retaining some of the goodness of its original intention. Thus, because of our misorientation/misdirection of our intentions and desires, culture can reflect our fundamental sin problem of idolatry. All culture is a reflection of the people who create and live in it. **Our fundamental nature as 'worshippers' remains unchanged after the Fall - we still work and act in such a way**

³ Bruce Ashford, Every Square Inch, p.18

to bring glory to something. And so, all cultures will also reflect the sinful idolatry of that people group. Some people groups will idolize materialism and wealth, or health and beauty, or status and power, or sex, or prestige and honour, or a host of other things... our hearts are, as Calvin said, a factory of idols and our culture likewise can both enshrine and produce those idols.

D. The Culture Wars

So we see that sinful, fallen humanity can create idolatrous culture. Secularism or any other worldview likewise produces a culture. **It is often believed that secular culture is neutral because it rejects religion. But I want you to see that it is actually deeply religious.** This is because every culture is based on practices, beliefs and affections that shape what type of culture we produce.

"It is interesting that the Latin term "colere"... also refers to religious service, and comes into English as cult, cultic and so on. Culture and cult go together. If a society worships idols, false gods, that worship will govern the culture of that society. If a society worships the true God, that worship will deeply influence, even pervade its culture."⁴

For Christians, God reforms us into a new people for Himself through faith in the Gospel - as we come to believe, love, and do what we were originally intended to. **Therefore, the Gospel itself produces a culture.**

Culture then is really "religion externalized" - it reflects outwardly what we value inwardly, it is how we worship and show what is really in our hearts.⁵ So, when we're talking about what we see as the 'culture wars' we are talking about nothing less than competing religions, competing worship and rival gods. Our experience as Christians of the 'culture wars' is inevitable since we are dealing with two (or more) completely antithetical visions of life and human flourishing.

Today's Hostility

Today, in our context in North America - many of us feel like there is a growing hostility in our culture for Christians. For many decades we enjoyed being a part of the majority culture in the West. The majority of Western first-world countries were founded on Judeo-Christian principles, and even our laws and foundational documents reflect this. So for a time, being a Christian carried much cultural advantage and little cost - especially when compared to Christianity in other times and places.

⁴ John Frame, The Doctrine of the Christian Life, 857

⁵ Daniel Strange, Plugged In, 47. See also Joe Boot, [Christ and Culture](#) (Oct 1, 2011), online

However, the times and tides have changed as our culture has moved from being 'Christianized' to Postmodern, and now being called 'Post-Christian' as many of the formerly shared fundamental assumptions Christians had with the larger culture no longer exist. This has happened at what is warp speed by historical standards. However, the vestiges of our Christian heritage still linger.

The majority of people still believe in the fundamentals of human dignity, freedom and rights. But the roots of these ideas? **Our progressive culture seeks the kingdom without the King.** It tries to replicate its own vision of the kingdom - a world with human rights, dignity, freedom, love, equality, joy, etc - but without Jesus at the centre. Indeed, in much of our culture, Jesus isn't even in the vicinity of their thought!

Questions for breakout

- Do you sometimes feel tempted to dismiss all culture as inherently bad or embrace all of it as purely good?
 - Have you ever considered culture as "religion externalized?" What are some ways you've experienced our culture's idolatry or hostility?
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2. The Religious Nature of Culture

Sometimes as we're analyzing things that we're so familiar with, it's helpful to make it strange to us again so we can look with fresh eyes. So, let's try a little thought experiment. Close your eyes and imagine with me this scenario.

You are a Martian anthropologist researcher from an alien species that is exploring earth seeking to understand humanity's religious practices. You land in the southern United States, in a strange district called Flo-Rida, pre-COVID - let's say in 2018 - in order to gather data on the rituals and religious habits of its inhabitants. You've heard that its megachurches are a great place to gather this sort of data.

The place that you've landed looks like a great place to start - there's a large gathering of humans in this area. The popularity of this site of devotion is indicated by the sea of SUVs parked around the building. The site throbs with pilgrims from all around the vicinity. This holy building provides the pilgrims with a sanctuary from the daily grind of their lives, and some even come for respite in the cafe area or to simply walk around and mingle. Many habitually come to it every weekend faithfully throughout the years. It is also a communal retreat, as families and friends come together to meet, spend time together and connect.

Deep bonds of affection and connection have been formed here as the community unites around its shared traditions and rituals.

As you make your way into the building, the architecture has a dazzling array of glass and its colonnade of chromed arches that guide your gaze up to the heavens with a sense of vertical transcendence. It shuts off the clamor and distractions of the mundane world outside, with few windows and the baroque manipulation of light inside this cathedral - time itself seems to stand still. But the cathedral has its own markers of time with its liturgical calendar of various festivals and holidays - brilliantly communicated through large colourful displays. This site is part of a bigger network of religious communities all committed to the same common vision and providing as many faithful adherents with similar services. You can tell the regular faithful worshippers - as they whiz pass the maps to guide the visitors, instinctively knowing where to go by heart.

As you walk around, you are struck by the rich iconography that lines the walls. Unlike the flat stained-glass depictions of saints seen in other, lesser worship sites, these are in three-dimensions, moving and captivating us by their exemplary appearance - a clear depiction of what the ideal adherent to this cult would look like. They provide for us a concrete example of what the 'good life' looks like that goes hand-in-hand with the printed bulletins that explain the doctrine of the good-life. Many of the congregants in the cathedral actually resemble these saints in their demeanor and dress. There is also a great unity of the iconography, as these same icons of the good life are found in temples around the world! Their colours and symbols are readily recognized across many cultures as they have been very productive in proselytizing their message to the ends of the world through aggressive temple-planting and televangelists on the airwaves and social media spreading this gospel of beauty, the good life and acceptance.

You stop to enter into one of the small chapels in this large complex to consider what happens inside. There, visitors are invited to taste and see. An usher of sorts welcomes them to shepherd them inside. They make their way cautiously and curiously through the chapel contemplating its message. As they ingest the message that is beautifully communicated through screens and printed materials, they feel their sense of need. It exposes their inner deficiency - what they lack to achieve that vision of the good life embodied by the saints and icons on the walls. Convicted, they prepare to make their offering to attain fulfillment through a holy object they have found. They proceed to the altar to consummate their worship. The usher helps to guide the new worshipper as a priestess stands smiling behind the altar. They are invited to give and to take - to leave not just with a transformative experience but also with something tangible as they receive their newfound relic. And so, they make their sacrifice and leave their donation with the

priestess who releases to them their holy relic. She then utters a benediction and blessing over the worshipper as they make their way out of the chapel to the serenade of the encouragement and smiles of the ushers - thankful for yet another convert.

Of course, what we have just described in our martian thought experiment is a trip to the mall.⁶

By approaching the mall as if for the first time through strange sets of eyes, we can start to see the close analogy to religious practices - it is a "liturgy" of sorts. We could do this with many other artifacts and places of culture. In today's workshop, I want to give you the tools to recognize the deeply religious nature of culture so that we can see that what's really at stake is a competing religion and worship.

We will look at culture as the product of the:

1. **Practices** that form us (Liturgy)
2. **Stories** that give meaning (Gospel/Doctrine)
3. **Groups** that define us (Community)

These three features feed into and out of each other to form a self-reinforcing feedback loop. We'll see how secular culture imitates and distorts these things and how Christianity gives us the true alternative. I want you to see how the culture 'disciples' us in very religious ways, and how Christianity offers us the true form of these things as a **disruptive witness** to the culture.

This is a huge topic and we will only scrape the surface in this workshop, but I hope it will give us some good food for thought, and there will be recommended readings for you to dig into more at the end.

A. Practices that form us (Liturgy)

We've all heard the saying that practice makes perfect. However, it's not true. Practice doesn't make perfect. **Practice makes permanent.** If you keep practicing the wrong thing, you won't become perfect, you'll just reinforce bad habits.

We sometimes tend to think or live as if our spiritual lives were disconnected from our embodied physical lives. We think that certain things are sacred - prayer, reading our Bible, going to church, meditation, etc. And other things are secular - unconnected with our spiritual life but part of what it means to live in the world. However, this is untrue. What we see in the Bible is that all of life is meant to be (and is) worship (see 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17).

⁶ This illustration is modified from James K.A. Smith's book - Desiring the Kingdom.

We are at all times training ourselves for worship and directing our hearts to desire and love some specific end. This is because we are a unified whole of body and spirit. They aren't able to be separated, and **what you do with your body necessarily will affect your soul.**

The religious word we use for this is called 'liturgies' - they are the practices of the church in worship.

What I will be arguing in this section is that the practices of our culture shape us in a profound way to be a certain kind of person through its own liturgies. Professor James K.A. Smith of Calvin University observes that,

"liturgies—whether "sacred" or "secular"—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we love. They do this because we are... shaped from the body up more than from the head down. Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects."⁷

WATCH VIDEO: [Cultural Liturgies](#) and [Defined by our loves](#) - James K.A. Smith (3 mins)

I. Character Formation

What we are talking about here is how our practices form our character. That is, the type of person we will be. The chain of development for character formation usually looks something like this:

Beliefs > actions > habits/practices > automatic responses > character

However, this also loops back on itself - where our character will inform our beliefs and so it becomes self-reinforcing. Research has shown that the development of automatic behaviours and skills depends on the frequent pairing of internal responses with external events. As this is repeated, over time, the need for conscious choice drops out. Thus, the acquisition of these automatic dispositions (or character) is learnt by practice.⁸

We all experience this on a small level as we build certain skills like typing on a keyboard or riding a bike or driving a car. At one point, it took a lot of conscious attention to every

⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 80.

movement. However, after practice and repetition, it can become so automatic to us that we can even drive all the way home and not remember how we got there sometimes!

Professor James K.A. Smith notes:

“Whether we intentionally choose to participate in a practice, or unintentionally just find ourselves immersed in it over time, the result is the same: the dispositions become inscribed into our unconscious so that we “automatically” respond the way we’ve been conditioned... ***“People should be able to put goals into gear through external means and thereby ‘bypass the will’ entirely.”*** Since research indicates that **only about 5 percent of our daily activity is the product of conscious, intentional actions** that we “choose,” one can see that there’s a lot at stake in the formation of our automatic unconscious.”⁹

Our character, in a very significant way, is who we are on a non-cognitive level. It is who you are in your automated responses to situations.

We say that a person is of strong and noble character when they stand up to some great evil or temptation by acting valiantly in a crisis situation. However, that response was conditioned well before the crisis situation arose. Good habits produce virtues and bad habits produce vices. No one in the heat of the moment consciously processes through their moral reasoning, the doctrines and ethics they’re supposed to believe and then acts - especially in situations that require split-second reactions. At that point, we’re operating on an almost sub-conscious non-cognitive level. What determines what happens in that split second is what habits we had formed, through practices and repeated actions of the past. **In that split second decision - we reveal what we practiced to truly love most.**

This is especially important because for the large majority of our daily activities, we are “on autopilot” so to speak.

Digital Habits

It’s not only what we practice in the real world that affects us. What we do in cyberspace also forms us into a certain kind of person.

For example, research has shown that the tweets with the highest engagement are only 100 characters long. The optimum Facebook post was found to be only 40 characters.

“Compare this to the books of print-oriented culture, which can pursue arguments and develop ideas for hundreds of pages. No wonder argumentation on the

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 81.

Internet consists largely of insults, snarky observations, and snappy comebacks. Anything else would require too many characters! The medium itself prevents sustained thought.”¹⁰

A feed of bite-sized unrelated tid-bits instead of books train us to be like people with extreme ADHD - unable to follow a long train of thought. Satan would love nothing better than to keep people from God’s truth. Because His truth is contained in the Bible - the written Word - which is a pretty long book requiring attention spans able to follow its narrative and arguments, **this diminishing of our attention spans can effectively rob us of the truth of scripture even as we have plenty of access to multiple copies of the Word** like no other time in history! We might end up in a self-inflicted Dark Age.

The more we practice a liturgy - whether it’s a pre-workout gym ritual, shopping sprees at the mall or on Amazon, checking out phones, or a hidden addiction to the erotic - the more it shapes our character by forming our automated responses and directing our desires for a certain version of ‘the good life’.

II. Secular & Spiritual Disciplines Inventory

Have you ever looked at a mature saint and wondered - how is it that his first instinct is prayer? How is she so joyfully self-sacrificing? How is it that they have joy in times of trials and peace amidst persecutions? How is it that she lives like if she really believes that Jesus is worth counting it all as loss? Don’t be too surprised to find out that they have made regular use of the spiritual disciplines in their rhythms of life. They have utilized what the scriptures have given us to shape us into a people that desire the Kingdom.

If we simply took an inventory of the ratio of secular disciplines to spiritual disciplines that we made practices of - perhaps we would understand why so much of the North American church struggles to resemble a people who ‘seek first the Kingdom’.

So, how did our culture (and even some churches) become Post-Christian? Well, one explanation is that we practiced and disciplined ourselves to be.

Secular and sacred liturgies form us to be a certain kind of people who desire a certain kind of kingdom. However, we’re often unaware of what kind of kingdom and what kind of people they are forming us to be.

There is no escaping it - we are always being disciplined, it’s just a matter of who is discipling you and for what kingdom. So which kingdom are you practicing for?

¹⁰ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (p. 177).

What Can We Do?

Consider, why is it that is so easy and automatic for us to plop down on the couch and turn on Netflix or the TV after work to seek rest and refreshment after a hard day? **What has been the series of events or “disciplines” that produced that automated behaviour?**

What was the action that led to repeated action that became a habit - and, which will eventually turn into character? These are, in effect, a secular sort of version of spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual Disciplines and Character Formation

This is why the church historically has seen the importance of the regular practice of biblical spiritual disciplines. Just like the secular liturgies, **spiritual disciplines direct our desires to a particular vision of the good life, they shape us into a peculiar type of people and orient us towards a certain Kingdom.** They help us to frame reality using embodied practices.

For example, the church’s liturgical calendar of feasts or celebrations - such as Lent, Easter, Advent, etc invite us backward - to remember the power of the incarnation, cross and resurrection - a power that continues to break into our present. Thus it makes us a people who live between times - remembering and hoping at the same time. This can be a powerful counter-action to our culture’s fixation on the immediate and latest greatest news, merchandise, hashtag and trending topic that is forgotten as quickly as it arose. Instead we remember and fixate on old, timeless truths. We are called to be a people of memory whose tradition is millennia older than the latest Billboard Top 20 chart and a people of expectation looking forward to the Kingdom that will come as a thief in the night. So, we are a people *stretched* between the already and not-yet. The liturgical calendar of festivals frame and order our understanding of time - we’re always coming out of, or looking forward to some celebration that will remind us of this already-but-not-yet reality.

The other spiritual disciplines likewise provide for us a counter to the culture’s secular disciplines that shape us.

- The **personal disciplines** of fasting, prayer, meditation, silence and solitude - these train us to be the type of people who respond in virtue automatically by practicing self-denial and dependence on the Lord.
- The **communal disciplines** of hospitality, communal singing of hymns, feasts and celebrations, confession, church discipline, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper shape us into an inter-connected community of citizens of the heavenly kingdom who desire

the Day when we will perfectly inhabit and enjoy what these spiritual disciplines foreshadow.

- The **sacrificial disciplines** of giving offerings and tithes, service, alms, witness, evangelism and suffering for the sake of Christ form us to be the kind of people who loosen their grip on the trappings of this present age to call others to join us in losing our lives today to find that we will gain them with Christ for eternity.

Because we're exposed to our culture's liturgies over and over, we need Christians who will intentionally seek to disrupt these habits for the sake of their own soul's desire for a better Kingdom.

We need Christians who will decide to cut down or cut out their TV consumption to spend more time pursuing meaningful community and life-on-life discipleship. We need more Christians who will log off social media and cancel their Netflix to train themselves to read more so that they can be better thinkers and equipped to disciple the next generation. We need more Christians who will intentionally forego luxuries and live below their means so that they might store up treasures in heaven by being rich in good deeds. We need more Christians who will be so committed to the local body and corporate worship that they would even turn down job promotions that take them out of town and away from their covenant community. We need more who will decide to make fasting, meditation, scripture memorization, and silence a part of their regular rhythms of life so that they would learn the benefits of delayed gratification, train themselves to suffer well and tune their hearts to long for God more.

Why? Because **all these things are shaping us to be a particular kind of people, desiring a certain vision of the good life, and directed to a certain Kingdom.**

Questions for breakout

- What practices are you regularly immersed in as part of your daily/weekly habits? And if you were honest with yourself, are these positive (forming you into the kind of person who embodies the kingdom of God) or negative?
 - How have spiritual disciplines played a part in shaping your vision of the good life? What are some concrete ways you can use spiritual disciplines to change your practices to form your character?
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B. Stories that give meaning (Gospel/Doctrine)

"Culture is the stories we tell that express meaning about the world."¹¹

In Christianity, we have Doctrine - what the church teaches and believes is true as deduced from the Word of God. Secular culture also has its "doctrines". It teaches and disciplines its adherents in these cardinal truths and even exercises "church discipline" for those who go outside the bounds of its orthodoxy. **The culture, in effect, is preaching its own "Gospel" - its own way to salvation - fully equipped with its own doctrine and story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation.**

These stories answer four main questions:

- What were we made for? (Creation)
- What went wrong? (Fall)
- What can solve it? (Redemption)
- What's the hope of "the good life"? (Consummation)

We only have time to take a look at one of these popular competing 'gospels' in our culture, but there are many more we could analyze.

I. Dangerous Stories | Another 'gospel'

In 2019, British doctor, David Mackereth lost his job because he refused to use preferred pronouns for his transgender patients because of his Christian beliefs. He took his employer to court and lost. What is most revealing about this particular case is what the tribunal stated in regards to Dr. Mackereth's case. The tribunal stated:

"Belief in Genesis 1:27, lack of belief in transgenderism and conscientious objection to transgenderism in our judgment are incompatible with human dignity and conflict with the fundamental rights of others, specifically here, transgender individuals."

This is not just a case somewhere across the Atlantic. Today in Canada, Bill C-6¹² is currently in its final reading in the House of Commons to criminalize what it calls 'conversion therapy'. The Bill explicitly states:

"The Bill would discourage and denounce harmful practices and treatments that are based on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ2 people. These include myths and

¹¹ Daniel Strange, Plugged In, 23

¹² Bill C-6 will criminalize our Biblical ethic of sexuality with jail time and fines. (So make use of the opportunity to [contact your MPs](#) about it!)

stereotypes **that the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ2 people are undesirable and temporary conditions that can and should be changed.**"

Notice how any opposing view of sexuality other than the currently accepted LGBTQ2 narrative is called a "myth". **These secular stories are not just other competing narratives - they actually are starting to become more antagonistic to the Christian story.** The Biblical story is now a "myth", even something harmful and dangerous. What is the alternative "truth" that the LGBTQ narrative offers to counteract this myth?

The alternative story that the transgender narrative offers is an alternative Gospel. It has a doctrine of our **origins (Creation)**: usually derived from materialistic naturalism - that we evolved from the chaos of an unguided process, yet also embraces a gnostic version of the soul - that who we authentically are, our true self, exists within and apart from our physical body. It has a doctrine of **fallenness** - what's wrong with us. What's wrong is that some people are born with bodies that do not correspond to their authentic self. This is possible because we're just a product of unguided processes not loving design - so there is no inherent purpose or correspondence with our physical and psychological self. Thus someone can be a man trapped in a woman's body, or any other configuration of gender disconnects. There is also a doctrine of **redemption and "the good life"** - what will make us right? Through gender transitions, hormone therapy, surgeries, etc. - a person can become in line with their authentic self and live happily ever after. Or so the story goes.

Stephen McAlpine notes:

"What is arriving is the hope of a new world that is all glitter and rainbows: a good-news story! Online articles, news stories, movies: these all showcase people who, once lost and confused or struggling with identity because of societally imposed standards, have now been freed by being true to who they feel themselves to be. The former Bruce Jenner, an Olympic champion decathlete and epitome of masculinity, is unveiled to the world as Caitlyn, an example of how we can soar above our pain and hurt and become someone new-and all of our own making. We are being offered a rival gospel: a narrative that seeks first to expose the Christian gospel as bad news, and then to replace it with much-needed good news."¹³

Dangers of a false 'gospel'

However, this alternative 'gospel' does not give true hope. Seldom is anything told about the long-term health effects of such treatments and irreversible damage such as infertility, inhibiting proper bone growth and permanent side effects that would make

¹³ Stephen McAlpine, Being the Bad Guys, 18

de-transitioning impossible if they were to change their minds later. In one study, over 80% of teens who originally reported same-sex attraction and sexual activity reported exclusively heterosexual attraction and sexual activity within 6 years.¹⁴

[A study done in Sweden](#) (a country where the culture is strongly supportive of the transgendered) on long-term follow-up of people who had undergone sex reassignment surgery found that overall mortality was significantly higher - the **suicide rate** among those who had undergone sex-reassignment rose **twenty times that of their comparable peers**. The study concluded that “sex reassignment, although alleviating gender dysphoria, may not suffice as treatment for transsexualism”. The American Heart Association has linked terrible health implications to those who undergo hormone therapy. A [Dutch study](#) noted **doubled the average stroke risk, doubled risk of heart attack in men and triple the risk in women**.

Additionally, our secularizing culture is not just putting this other ‘gospel’ out there, but also actively trying to suppress and silence the truth - all in the name of their version of love and acceptance. Just recently, [Ryan T. Anderson](#), Senior Research Fellow in American Principles and Public Policy, who researches and writes about marriage, bioethics, religious liberty and political philosophy has written about his concerns with sex-reassignment and transgenderism - and for this, his books have been banned by Amazon.

A hospital for the hurting

These ‘other gospels’, while promising fulfillment and life, actually delivers disillusionment and death. If we don’t worship the True God and honour Him - seeing that our sexuality and gender identity are good gifts He gave to us, then we’ll worship ourselves.

“When we take the place of God, we do not emulate the Christian God who cares for his creation, is providentially involved in its every facet, and became incarnate for its redemption... But in our role as gods, we are not righteous at all, demanding that reality serve and obey us but doing nothing that brings salvation. Our very attempts to exalt ourselves to the point of taking God’s place disclose how sinful and small we are, as the god we turn ourselves into is pathetic, tyrannical, unloving, and unworthy of worship.”¹⁵

This other ‘gospel’ has been spread amazingly effectively through college campuses and our media and entertainment - disciplining our younger generation. From some polls, it is

¹⁴ Diamond and Rosky, “Scrutinizing Immutability”, supra note 10; see also Douglas C. Haldeman, “The Practice and Ethics of Sexual Orientation Conversion Therapy.” Professional Psychology: Research and Practice

¹⁵ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (pp. 75-76)

estimated that **one out of every six young people in iGen identify as LGBTQ**. That is a staggering increase from previous generations. The rapid growth in kids and teens undergoing hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgeries will undoubtedly lead to many who find themselves irreparably damaged in a culture without the tools to provide true hope of restoration. **This should make us as Christians concerned and compassionate to those who struggle with issues of sexual identity.**

The false gospel of the sexual revolution will eventually collapse on itself (as will all unbiblical ideologies). However, the question is how many will be damaged by the sexual revolution's ideology before it collapses totally? More importantly, will the church be seen as a hospital for the hurting to those who have been left damaged and disappointed by this other 'gospel'?

We live in a time of strange paradox:

“...our culture has rarely been more hostile towards the gospel, but at the same time it has rarely been more open either... Our time would be better spent preparing for what I believe will be a tsunami of the broken and wounded who wash up on our shores.”¹⁶

II. Distorted Stories | The effects of algorithms & agendas

In addition to the dangerous stories our culture tells, it also distorts stories.

We live in an information age - or perhaps, these days, more appropriately called a mis-information age. We live in the age of fake news, manipulated social media algorithms, and also those who unwittingly share misinformation. Additionally, the fact is that a handful of companies control the majority of the world's access to information. The majority of our digital information is provided by Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft. As we saw earlier, nothing in our culture is ever neutral. Our access to information is also determined by their algorithms and policies which are affected by their agendas or worldviews - after all, at some point a human has to program the machines.

Examples of How Big Tech's Agendas Shape our Culture's Stories

YouTube (owned by Google) recently permanently took down LifeSite News Channel and every single one of their videos. LifeSite News had over 314,000 subscribers and is a non-profit internet service dedicated to issues of culture, pro-life and family from a conservative perspective based in Toronto. LifeSite reported that their ban from YouTube was from strikes against their account because of videos by a nun, a medical doctor and a

¹⁶ Stephen Alpine, Being the Bad Guys, 74-75

bishop and finally for comments by a vaccine expert which YouTube determined was violating their misinformation policy around COVID-19. Facebook, which has over 2.3 billion users, has likewise instituted similar policies around issues which ban any speech contradicting what they have deemed acceptable on such topics.

Twitter has flagged Focus on the Family for what they labelled as 'hate' speech in telling the truth about biology, purged massive amounts of followers from conservative accounts like PragerU, banned ads from Pro-Life groups like LiveAction, and even banned former US president, Donald Trump. Amazon has been known to censor books which they consider against their own ideology and when they were looking to establish their second headquarters judged potential cities by their LGBTQ policies - compelling many cities to fall over themselves to attract such a boost to their economies. Amazon also owns some of the largest server farms for hosting web services and have recently removed competing social media platforms like Parler and Gab from their servers. Now, whether or not you agree with these big tech company reasons for labelling some content as misleading or their right to do what they want with their private businesses, **it does illustrate the immense power these companies wield to direct public thought by controlling what access to truth we have and even over cities and governments due to their economic impact.**

This is simply to point out that these big tech platforms are not operating neutrally and will censor and curate things on their platforms according to their worldviews. In addition to the effect of their algorithms which are designed to keep users addicted by showing more content that they will likely engage with (which we talked about in our previous workshop) - this has the effect of magnifying biases and creating an echo chamber of ideas.

Not only is bias introduced on the end of the providers of these services, but also on the consumer end - because humans use these services. And so, people can manipulate and extort the algorithms behind these services for nefarious purposes.

WATCH VIDEO: [Facebook Manipulation](#) - Smarter Every Day (3 mins)

Social Media and the Internet are not the only sources of distorted stories in our culture. News is also affected in its objectivity. In Canada right now, news agencies like CBC and CTV receive massive funding and support from the Liberal government (Over \$1.2 Billion tax dollars and almost \$600 million in tax cuts). Furthermore, our news cycle is so fast now that it multiplies the urge to need to respond immediately to every breaking story and injustice right at this moment. **The majority of people don't read their news anymore, we watch it. Images rather than texts tend to invoke more of an emotional and visceral**

response than a logical response. And, as we've seen, this can lead to a lot of poor decisions and not a whole lot of progress.

In our day, we must realize that you're not just watching news - you're watching a narrative being weaved using facts. This is true on both sides of the political spectrum. Liberal news sources like CNN, MSNBC, CBC, CTV, CP24, and conservative media such as Fox News, the Epoch Times, Rebel News, True North, The Post Millennial and Toronto Sun all have their own implicit biases. **There simply is no such thing as an uninterpreted fact.** Every news agency is making decisions on what to show and how to show it. Every fact must be placed within a larger story for it to have meaning to us and depending on who's telling the story and what their underlying commitments are will determine what the narrative is.

It seems like in this information age, we've gained lots of information but might have lost truth in all the clutter. Zeynep Tufekci notes this in an article in Politico:

"...the glut of information we now face, made possible by digital tools and social media platforms, can bury what is true, greatly elevate and amplify misinformation and distract from what is important...

As a result, open and participatory speech has turned into its opposite. Important voices are silenced by mobs of trolls using open platforms to hurl abuse and threats. Bogus news shared from one friend or follower to the next becomes received wisdom. Crucial pieces of information drown in so much irrelevance that they are lost. If books were burned in the street, we would be alarmed. Now, we are simply exhausted."¹⁷

How a Culture's Stories Affect Gospel Receptivity

Why is all of this important to us as Christians?

The stories that a culture tells inevitably affects what people in that culture will be willing to believe. It creates what is called a "plausibility structure." James Sire explains,

"A plausibility structure is a web of beliefs that are so embedded in the hearts and minds of the bulk of a society that people hold them either unconsciously or so firmly that they never think to ask if they are true... One of the main functions of a plausibility structure is to provide the background of beliefs that makes arguments easy or hard to accept."¹⁸

¹⁷ Zeynep Tufekci, "An Avalanche of Speech Can Bury Democracy," Politico, Sept 2018.

¹⁸ James Sire, Naming the Elephant, 112

Thus, these shifts in the stories of our culture also represent a challenge to Gospel proclamation to the people around us. **Christianity isn't just one of the options out there on the religious menu, it is increasingly not even in the restaurant!** And seen as irrelevant and ridiculous. **Not only that, the mass of information available can make people feel lost and hopeless in ever finding any objective truth.**

"The good news of Jesus Christ is deeply implausible in our culture at the moment. It's not that most people have spent endless hours studying Christianity and then decided that it's not for them. It's not that they've necessarily had a bad experience of Christians in the past which has turned them off (although some have). Rather, it's that the cultural air they've breathed in all their lives has shaped them to assume that Christianity is irrelevant, untrue and intolerant. And that's why we often hit a brick wall in our evangelistic efforts, and are left scratching our heads as to how we can ever get past first base with people. Our culture is such that Jesus is so far down people's agenda that he's not even an option to consider, much less one to accept."¹⁹

Our current struggle is not so much with what people believe, but what is believable to people.

What Can We Do?

Brett McCracken makes the observation that our social algorithms are today's Lady Folly. Lady Folly in Proverbs is the personified as "the forbidden woman" who speaks "smooth words" (Prov. 2:16-17) whose lips "drip honey" (Prov. 5:3), she is "loud," "seductive," and "sits at the door of her house," "calling to those who pass by" (Prov. 9:13-15). McCracken notes that:

"A. W. Tozer describes lady folly as "moral folly personified" who "works by the power of suggestion." In today's world, we see "lady folly" at work through the "watch this next!" algorithms that lure us into constant distraction by putting "suggestions" into our minds."²⁰

McCracken comments that "Just as the devil is a smart deceiver, tailoring his temptations to our particular weak spots and sinful proclivities, so too are algorithms." And so, we have in our digital age the new incarnation of Lady Folly - and many are lured to her doorstep as we wander aimlessly on social media - pulling the slot machine lever for her to offer her curated wares to tickle our fancies and lead us to destruction.

¹⁹ Daniel Strange, *Plugged In*, 32

²⁰ Brett McCracken, "[Social Algorithms are Today's 'Lady Folly'](#)", Crossway, online.

I. Wisdom in a Distracted Digital Age

What's the solution that McCracken offers? **Firstly, simply to go online with purpose.** He advises us:

"The antidote to dangerous distractibility in the digital age is purpose, focus, and intention. Proverbs 4:25 says, "Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you." This is wisdom in contrast to the unwise woman of folly, who "does not ponder the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it" (Prov. 5:6)."²¹

When you go online - ask yourself what is your specific goal? **Instead of being distracted, be purposeful and intentional.**

Secondly, we need to remember the effect of these social algorithms and biases in the media. This will cause Christians to **think soberly before reacting.** You don't need to respond immediately and have an opinion on everything. Do research and check the facts and context out yourself.

In the Bible, the standard of justice for any case was to have at least two or three independent lines of witnesses to safeguard from false testimony and bias (see Deut. 17:6 & 19:15; Num. 35:30; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; John 8:17; Heb. 10:28; 1 Tim. 5:19). So, Christians who want to stay updated and balanced on current issues will have to check independent sources from various political spectrums. In this world of fake news, manipulated algorithms and outrage culture, Christians would do well to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry (James 1:19).

II. Connecting the Gospel's Story to Culture

All of these dangerous or distorted stories our culture tells express the longing inside each of us...

"Another reason that the truth keeps bursting through is that we are made in God's image, and so we speak and make only as creatures. We can't even make stories out of nothing! That's why throughout history there seem to be perennial questions, themes and plots that storytellers are attracted to time and time again-the search for love, riches to rags and rags to riches, heroic self-sacrifice, the quest for home. One theologian calls them "magnetic points"-primal questions to which we are irresistibly attracted. All these stories are mere echoes of the gospel story."²²

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Daniel Strange, *Plugged In*, 69

Telling a better story

“Are we always consuming culture and never creating it? Why aren't we telling better stories with all the same realism, imagination, subtlety, complexity and beauty, but without those aspects which make it difficult and unhelpful for us? Why aren't we strategically locating, discipling, resourcing and sending out Christians gifted in the arts and the media?”²³

The challenge for us as Christians is to act in the right play. Know the right script and don't dramatize the wrong story. We counteract these false gospels - such as materialism - by letting our lives reflect the true gospel that calls us to costly self-sacrifice in the now for lavish returns in the future Kingdom with Christ. Or, as Paul puts it: “live in a manner worthy of the Gospel” (see Philippians 1:27).

We need more Christians to take up the mantle of not just consuming the culture's stories, but also challenging it with the true story of the Gospel through music, arts, literature, movies, business, teaching, parenting, dance, acting, selling cars, and much more. Why not raise up and encourage young people to aspire to be the best at their crafts and professions - to climb the corporate ladder, or become a film director, principle of a school, or professor or hold political office so that they can live for the benefit of the city - because in its welfare you will find yours too?

All of this is part of how we love God and love our neighbors practically. We cannot be silent and love our neighbours if the culture is shouting its dangerous stories. All of this is part of the mission. We need to expand how we think about the mission of God in our lives and see that there is no part of your life that is not 'on duty' for Christ - after all, no soldier gets entangled with civilian affairs but seeks to please the one who has enlisted him! (2 Timothy 2:4)

The truth of the matter is that **the Gospel message of the Cross will both *CONFRONT* and *CONNECT* with our culture at various points.** It will take Christians who take God's Word seriously and have applied themselves to knowing thoroughly the story of redemption - being fluent in the Gospel - to be able to speak as prophetic voices to our culture. **This is why we cannot neglect a love of doctrine and theology - not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of loving God and loving others and witnessing to the truth.** You cannot confront and connect with which you do not know.

²³ Daniel Strange, Plugged In, 88

What does this look like?

We see Paul model this for us in Acts 17 as he enters Athens and “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (v16). Daniel Strange lays out a helpful model for us in his book:

- **ENTER** - Step in and listen to the story.
“I passed along and observed the objects of your worship” (v23)
- **EXPLORE** - Search for elements of grace and the idols attached to them.
“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious... I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’” (v.22-23)
 - What story does _____ tell?
 - How does _____ fit into our story?
 - How does _____ shape our story?
- **EXPOSE** - Show up the idols as destructive frauds.
“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.” (v29)
 - “To point out the religiousness of our idolatry means pointing out things like veganism, yoga, soul-cycle, and a thousand other diet/exercise/financial freedom/beautification methods/sexual identities/etc., that carry with them the promise of ultimate freedom and satisfaction if lived out fully. Utopia awaits not just the individual, but society itself if we cared enough about animal welfare/social equality/fitness, and so on. These goals are unattainable, and if our lives become oriented around them, they'll crush us.”²⁴
- **EVANGELIZE** - Show how the Gospel is the fulfillment they were really looking for...
“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” (v23)

Two great books seek to help us do just this are: [The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long For and Echo the Truth](#) by Mike Cosper and [Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith with What Your Watch, Read and Play](#) by Daniel Strange

Questions for breakout

- What are some ways you've observed that the stories our cultures tell make it more difficult for people to receive the Gospel?
- How have you ever caught yourself being influenced by the distorted stories our culture tells due to algorithms, agendas or biases?

²⁴ Cosper, Mike. Redemptive Participation: A "How-To" Guide for Pastors in Culture (p. 32)

- What are some fruitful ways you've found to connect the Gospel's true story to the longings that our culture's stories express?
-

C. Groups that define us (Community)

We are created to be social or communal beings - truly, no man is an island. This is a good thing as the Lord Himself affirms that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18).

We naturally form groups and as such, we create identity markers that reinforce belonging to those groups. For example, politically - MAGA hats in the US, for better or for worse, became a strong symbol of belonging to a particular political party and personality. We all do this - whether it is in company branded clothing, activist groups, churches, sports clubs and teams, or even hobbies.

I. Our Sinful Tribalism

Some interesting experiments by a Polish psychologist - Henri Tajfel - show just how hard-wired we are to form groups and social connections. In the 1960s, Tajfel performed a series of experiments where people were divided up into groups based on trivial and random criteria - such as flipping a coin. What he found is that no matter how trivial or minimal the distinctions were between the groups, people tended to favour those in their own groups above others when asked to distribute money or even arbitrary points to people only identified to them by their groups.

One particularly interesting experiment had participants hooked up to an fMRI machine and watched videos of people's hands being pricked by either a needle or a Q-tip. When the hand being pricked with a needle was labelled with the participant's own religion it was observed that the participant's brain activity spiked in areas having to do with pain than when the same hand was shown with a different religious label! This held true when the experiment was repeated with arbitrary group assignments decided by a coin toss instead of religious labels. The experiment proved that we naturally don't feel as much empathy for those who we see as "other".²⁵ **Our sinful dispositions lead us to tribalism.**

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that today, many people's social lives tend to be shaped significantly by social media - our Facebook pages have hundreds of 'friends' whom we have maybe never met. They are disembodied to us and embodiment is critical for developing empathy towards others. **There is a certain disassociation that happens when our only interaction with someone is mediated by a screen - they become just**

²⁵ Experiment described in Haidt & Lukianoff, The Coddling of the American Mind, 57-58

a name and picture instead of an embodied soul. This is why social media can so quickly degenerate into the worst displays of human depravity towards one another - spewing verbal vitriol we would otherwise never do in person when we have to come face to face with their common humanity. Gene Veith comments on the social climate of the internet:

"This context makes it easier to dehumanize people—they have no faces, no bodies—and thus to treat them viciously. You treat them as abstractions, personifications of the ideas or qualities you hate, rather than as tangible "neighbors" whom the Bible enjoins us to love."²⁶

Additionally, real world social groups necessitate us interacting with people who differ from ourselves. In a real-world golf club, for example, one must navigate interactions with people from different political spectrums, phases of life, religion, race, etc. However, now because of our online social lives, we create social groups based on shared commonalities and perpetuate tribalism.

"Groups that consist solely of individuals who are like each other, as in online communities, will often define themselves by their opposition to other groups. This is a formula for social discord."²⁷

II. Us vs Them

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, a secular lawyer and social psychologist, in their New York Times best selling book, [*The Coddling of the American Mind*](#), describe three great 'untruths' that have been spread in our culture today. One of them is the 'untruth' of Us versus Them which says that life is a battle between good people and bad people. It sees life primarily through the lens of conflict and differences.

"The combination of common-enemy identity politics and microaggression training creates an environment highly conducive to the development of a "call-out culture," in which students gain prestige for identifying small offenses committed by members of their community, and then publicly "calling out" the offenders. One gets no points, no credit, for speaking privately and gently with an offender-in fact, that could be interpreted as colluding with the enemy... Life in a call-out culture requires constant vigilance, fear, and self censorship. Many in the audience may feel sympathy for the person being shamed but are afraid to speak up, yielding the false impression that the audience is unanimous in its condemnation."²⁸

²⁶ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (p. 175).

²⁷ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (pp. 174-175).

²⁸ Lukianoff & Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 71-72

This has led also to the cultural phenomenon of “virtue signaling” - the practice of saying/doing things for the public eye to be seen as virtuous and avoid the ire of the cultural mob. We see this in Hollywood and celebrity culture which seems compelled to constantly signal their morals and politics constantly - even though these actors usually have no experience or expertise in the issues to which they speak. “Movie stars and directors, for example, have become agents of moral revolution - they create a cinematic experience designed for moral persuasion.”²⁹ This trend has gained so much momentum in our day that even those from the political and moral left have started speaking out against it. Trent Eady, a Canadian LGBTQ activist, wrote:

“Thinking this way quickly divides the world into an ingroup and an outgroup-believers and heathens, the righteous and the wrong-teous.... Every minor heresy inches you further away from the group. When I was part of groups like this, everyone was on exactly the same page about a suspiciously large range of issues. Internal disagreement was rare.”

This is also why every issue today seems to become politicized. If everything is about power struggles and being in the right group or crowd, we can understand the appeal to look for salvation in political solutions.

In a culture that has lost its belief in God and anything transcendent, politics becomes the new religion. Without the Gospel, there is no sure grounding for unity - and so we become tribalistic and hostile to one another.

What Can We Do?

Even our best technological solutions will not help us in this battle. However, the Gospel gives us something more powerful: a common humanity rooted in the imago Dei and for the church - Christ-centred unity bought by His blood.

In modern Western society, we have a tendency to over-emphasize the individual. This has even seeped into the church, where we sometimes minimize the importance of churchgoing, emphasizing small-group Bible study or personal devotion over large congregational worship. “American evangelicalism too can unintentionally create the impression that since a personal relationship with Christ is all-important, the corporate side of traditional Christianity is superfluous.”³⁰ However,

²⁹ R. Albert Mohler, *The Gathering Storm*, 146.

³⁰ Veith Jr., *Gene Edward. Post-Christian* (p. 271).

“Christians withdrawing from church while retaining (to some degree) their Christianity is parallel with the other trends we have been discussing: nones formulating their own interior religions; being “spiritual” (having a private religion) but not “religious” (adhering to institutional religion). Not wanting to be a part of a religious community is one facet of the larger lack of community that we have been chronicling: the privatization of truth; the isolation of living in the Internet; the illusory relationships of social media; the breakdown of our families, municipalities, and politics.”³¹

Many churches are being secularized from within by this.

I. Counter-Cultural Community

Given the powerful force of our culture’s groups - we can see why scripture warns us: “Do not be deceived: “Bad company corrupts good character.” (1 Cor. 15:33)

The Bible gives us a powerful counter-culture to our culture’s hyper-individualism and tribalism of Us versus Them. It is found in the authentic expression of Biblical community. When we show self-sacrificing love for others as described in Philippians 2, or genuine love for the brethren in word and deed as in 1 John 3, or live out our oneness in Christ which breaks down the racial dividing wall as in Ephesians 2, or show impartiality as in James 2 - we are modeling for the world a counter-cultural community. **Our culture wants to define us by its groups - however, we are already defined by our membership in a group: the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. That should be the primary group we find identity in.**

Now is the time for us to push even more into Christian community within the local church. For in the church, we are a covenant community bound to one another in Christ. We have said that, “there are many other communities out there, but this one is mine. These are my people and we’re going to work things out for the glory of Christ.”

We cannot face this cultural moment alone - we’ll get eaten alive. When it will cost us dearly to hold to the Christian faith - in jobs, social prestige, and reputation - without a community around you, you will crumble. However, it becomes more bearable when we know we have brothers and sisters around us who have our backs. We are able to be courageous together.

Questions for breakout

- How have you felt the pull of our sinful tendency towards tribalism (being partial to people who are in your own groups) in your own life?

³¹ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (pp. 272-273).

- Have you ever felt like everything is becoming politicized today? How has this affected you and your willingness to speak on certain topics?
 - How does your membership in our local church and Christian community practically affect your identity? How much of your life is defined by your relationship to your local church?
-

3. What now?

So after we have surveyed these three aspects of culture and seen its fundamentally religious nature - that we are really dealing with competing religions that are fighting for our ultimate allegiance and affections, what do we do?

A. Vicious or Virtuous Feedback Loops

These three things - culture's liturgies (practices), stories (beliefs) and groups (community) form a feedback loop that magnifies the effect of little habits, ideas or social groups that are introduced to the system.

The practices you do affect your character, which affects the stories you tell and believe. The groups you belong to also affect the practices you do and the stories that the group tells and sees as believable. It's all interconnected.

Especially today with our digital lives moving things forward exponentially - it's like having a massive amplifier on this feedback loop. This feedback loop effect can be massively good or detrimental. Christians can make use of this knowledge to help spur on their lives of holiness and mission by intentionally practising good habits and spiritual disciplines, studying sound doctrine and theology to live out and tell a better story, and forming counter-cultural communities. However, the feedback loop effect can also end up leading us astray and even to ultimately fall away from the faith if we passively go along with where our culture leads us in these three areas.

B. Withdrawal is not an option

With all of this, sometimes we can be tempted to withdraw from the world into our Christian safe spaces. However, as Robert Letham comments:

"We are in a war. There is an enemy. That enemy is no gentleman, prepared to play by the rules and on a level playing field. When the world around us is relinquished

to a supposedly neutral 'common kingdom,' that enemy will seize control, and in many ways has done so and is increasingly advancing."³²

Many of the metaphors the Bible gives us are wartime analogies - a soldier, ready for battle, awake and alert, with weapons that are mighty to the tearing down of strongholds - taking captive every thought and bringing it into submission to Christ. No soldier gets distracted by civilian pursuits. **Yet many in the church have been picnicking on the battlefield when they should be on guard. We do not have the option of withdrawal from cultural engagement. As we saw, we cannot help but be part of culture.**

"What is at stake here? Nothing less than true and false worship. Nothing in a culture is entirely neutral. Cultural institutions are either directed toward Christ or against him, or perhaps they are an inconsistent mixture of the two. When God's people neglect cultural engagement, they do so to the detriment of society. To ignore culture is to ignore the cultural institutions that shape people's lives and that will point people either toward Christ or against him."³³

Much of the challenges we are experiencing and the hardships we may have to endure have come precisely because Christians had withdrawn from meaningful, Biblical cultural engagement. We had left the cultural engines of our societies - schools, colleges, universities, film, TV, movies, media, arts, technology, science, etc - to our secular neighbours and they did with it what they were destined to do with their worldview.

C. Faithful Presence

So, what's the alternative? I think we must be in the culture, for the culture but not of the culture.

IN THE CULTURE - because we cannot help but exist within the cultural structures of our world and the structures themselves are not evil.

NOT OF THE CULTURE - Jesus prayed for us in John 17:15-21 that we would be his witnesses in the world, but that we are not of the world because we are his. This will inevitably bring points of clash and opposition - if they hated our Master they will hate us also.

BUT FOR THE CULTURE - although we may be rejected by the culture, because God has called us to live for the benefit of the world as salt (preserving) and light (witnessing to

³² Robert Letham, Systematic Theology, 593

³³ Bruce Riley Ashford, Every Square Inch, 130.

truth). We live as elect exiles in this world (1 Peter 1:1), as ambassadors for our King calling all people everywhere to submit to His lordship and gracious rule.

I call this disposition to culture **Faithful Presence**. Since we're in the culture, not of the culture but for the culture - our presence will be marked by faithfulness to Jesus Christ in all areas.

God's final plan is to restore his creation instead of trashing it and He expects us to minister within our cultural context rather than attempting to extract ourselves from it. We are required to be prophetic voices to a culture gone astray. God tells His elect exiles in Jeremiah 29:5-7,

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease... **seek the welfare of the city** where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, **for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**"

Here we see a reiteration of the Creation Mandate we saw at the beginning of this workshop - they were to engage in culture building even during their exile, and this is our task also.

What does this look like?

Renew your commitment to take up the Creation/Cultural Mandate.

Procreation - God's general will for humanity and for us as Christians is to be fruitful and multiply. Like the Israelites in exile - we're to marry, have kids, and train them up in the ways of the Lord. Even for those who don't have biological kids - adoption and evangelism are other ways we fulfill this command to be fruitful and multiply, both through physical progeny and spiritual offspring.

Subdue the earth - Create to the glory of God. Shape your vocation in light of Christ's lordship. Whether you're an artist, business person, stay-at-home mom, or whatever - realize that you are involved in creating culture - in your personal life, your family and home, your community and the world. So create culture that glorifies God.

Have dominion - We take captive every thought and lofty opinion and bring it into subjection to Christ's lordship. Our weapons are not carnal but mighty through the spirit to the breaking down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-6). We must live and act as Christ's

vice-regents in creation - to rule and seek to spread His truth and justice for the love of God and neighbour.

God's blessing - Jesus has told us that all authority has been given to him, and therefore, in light of this we are commissioned to go to the world (Matthew 28:19-20). He has promised his blessing of his presence with us.

D. Courage and Realistic Expectations

It is always better to prepare in times of peace for the war. Now is the time, indeed, it may be far past time, for us to prepare ourselves. **Increasingly it is becoming clear that a nominal Christian faith will be of no benefit to anyone - not that it ever was.** I want us to have realistic expectations.

The future indeed may involve many trials and hardships. Our suffering for the sake of Christ may not look like North Korea's, but it may very soon start to cost us something tangible to be Christians here in North America. Our churches may lose charitable status. You may lose out on job opportunities or even lose your job for your faith. You may be hated and spoken ill of by all men. You may be mocked and scorned. But you will be in good company Jesus says. He told us this upfront that following Him was to go the way of the Cross (Luke 9:23-26).

When the famous Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton was looking to build a crew for a dangerous expedition, these were the words of the newspaper ad he put out:

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success."

Shackleton wasn't trying to pull a bait-and-switch because the stakes were high. If the wrong type of men signed up for the expedition the cost could be their lives. Apparently some 5000 men signed up because of that ad! I'm sure that none of them were asking about if there would be good coffee or comfortable seating.³⁴ Yet, in a similar way, this is how Jesus calls us to discipleship. He tells us we must be prepared to count the cost.

But, unlike Shackleton's ad, Jesus has already guaranteed our safe arrival into His eternal Kingdom where glory and honour await us. Indeed, **the story of God's people throughout the Bible is always one of "suffer now, glory later."**

The apostle Peter in 1 Peter wrote to Christians who weren't yet experiencing full-scale persecution. They weren't being fed to lions or being put to death - that came later. Rather,

³⁴ Illustration from McAlpine, Being the Bad Guys, 32

they were experiencing what we are or may experience in the future. They were being maligned by their culture for not joining in their wild parties (see 4:4), and being insulted for the Name of Christ (4:14). They were being accused of doing wrong (2:12) and being spoken of maliciously (3:16). Yet, it was to these Christians that Peter told them,

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-13)

Stephen McApline, in his book - Being the Bad Guys - makes the case that we are living in a culture that increasingly calls good, bad and bad, good. We're no longer the good guys and this shouldn't surprise us. How about instead of worrying about winning the world's approval, we endeavour to be the best bad guy you can be and look to the only 'well done, good and faithful servant' that matters?

We need to be those who are convinced that Jesus will come through on his promise to build a church that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against, though our enemy rages against us. We need Elijahs who will challenge our culture's prophets of Baal and expose them for the frauds they are (1 Kings 18). We need John the Baptists who confront the sin in our culture with an unflinching resolve even if we lose our lives (Luke 3:15-20). We need Pauls who will bring the Gospel to bear on kings and those in authority - wishing that they would become like him, except for these chains (Acts 26). We need those who will love and give sacrificially and lavishly for the sake of the Kingdom (2 Cor. 8:1-5; John 15:13). We need those who understand that, as Tertullian famously said in the third century AD, “the blood of the martyrs is seed.” Who can sing with Martin Luther,

Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.

We need Christian men and women who are fearlessly and fanatically committed to faithfulness to the Word no matter the cost because they realize they've already died with Christ and you can't threaten a dead man. We are inheritors of the faith once for all delivered to the saints passed down by the sacrifices of many thousands of martyrs.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also **lay aside every weight**, and sin which clings so closely, and let us **run with endurance**

the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Our world today requires Christians with backbone who will stand for truth in an age of compromise. We require courage and steadfastness, boldness and perseverance. These only come through dependence on the Holy Spirit and can be cultivated by our regular practice of the spiritual disciplines as they form us to be citizens of the Kingdom who desire a better country.

Recommended Resources

- [Being the Bad Guys: How to Live for Jesus in a World that says you shouldn't](#) - Stephen McAlpine
- [Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians](#) - Bruce R. Ashford
- [Plugged In: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play](#) - Daniel Strange
- [Redemptive Participation: A "How-To" Guide for Pastors in Culture](#) - Mike Cospers
- [Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture](#) - Gene Edward Veith
- [The Gathering Storm: Secularism, Culture and the Church](#) - R. Albert Mohler Jr
- [The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth](#) - Mike Cospers
- [The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure](#) - Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt (non-Christian book)