

PLUGGED-IN Workshop

Culture and Its Seductive Stories | STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed to be used after your group has watched/attended the workshop to facilitate further discussion. Questions and scripture suggestions are provided to deepen our understanding and consideration of these important topics.

1. What is Culture?

A. Definition of Culture

We saw in our workshop that there is an intrinsically religious aspect of culture.

- Have you ever considered culture as “religion externalized?” How do you see that as true?

B. Result of the Imago Dei

We saw that culture is the result of humans fulfilling the creation mandate from Genesis 1:28.

- Read this Genesis 1:27-28 together and discuss how you see the four elements of **blessing, procreation, subduing and having dominion** affecting our view and creation of culture.

C. Culture after the Fall

We looked at two things about culture after the Fall:

I. The goodness of creation is not eradicated but corrupted

“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).”¹

II. We become idolatrous

All cultures will also reflect the sinful idolatry of that people group because we’re created to be worshippers.

¹ Bruce Ashford, Every Square Inch, p.18

- Do you sometimes feel tempted to dismiss all culture as inherently bad or embrace all of it as purely good? What are some of the good “structures” of culture that have been taken in wrong “directions”?
- What are some of the idols that our culture reflects? What are some things our culture glorifies other than God?

D. The Culture Wars

It is often believed that secular culture is neutral because it rejects religion. But it is actually deeply religious. For Christians, the Gospel itself produces a culture.

- What are some areas where you’ve seen these two opposing “religions” clash in our culture today?

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 but without Jesus at the centre.

- What are some things secular culture borrows from the Christian worldview?
- Why are these things only properly based upon a Christian worldview and not a secular one?

2. The Religious Nature of Culture

- What did you think of the Martian thought experiment about the Mall? Did it help you see how something as commonplace as a Mall resembles worship? Explain.

A. Practices that form us (Liturgy)

Practice makes permanent. We are at all times training ourselves for worship and directing our hearts to desire and love some specific end. What you do with your body necessarily will affect your soul.

- Take an example of a ‘practice’ and analyze how it primes you to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, aim for certain goals/dreams, and to work together on certain projects.

I. Character Formation

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.

- If what James K.A. Smith says is true, that “only about 5 percent of our daily activity is the product of conscious, intentional actions that we ‘choose,’”² - why is it important to understand this chain of character formation?
- Have you ever thought about how the little habits we build now shape our character to prepare us to respond in potential crisis situations in the future?

Digital Habits

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 and 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.

- Have you experienced your own attention span diminishing since having a smartphone? In what ways? What things are more difficult to do now?
- What can you do to make a positive change on your attention span?
- Why is our culture’s diminishing attention spans important to Gospel proclamation?

II. Secular & Spiritual Disciplines Inventory

- Take a few minutes to talk through an inventory of your “secular” and spiritual disciplines. If you’re honest with yourself, which ones have more sway in shaping your life? How so?

What Can We Do?

Spiritual Disciplines and Character Formation

Take some time to discuss what the three categories of spiritual disciplines are intended to form us into.

- The **personal disciplines** of fasting, prayer, meditation, silence and solitude.
- The **communal disciplines** of hospitality, communal singing of hymns, feasts and celebrations, confession, church discipline, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.
- The **sacrificial disciplines** of giving offerings and tithes, service, alms, witness, evangelism and suffering for the sake of Christ.

² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 81.

Action Point:

- Take some time this week or this month to consider some tangible and realistic ways you can incorporate the spiritual disciplines into your regular rhythms of life. Don't set crazy goals - set goals that are attainable. Consistency is more important than immensity.
 - Agree to meet again at a particular date to talk about what spiritual disciplines goals you've each set and how you can hold each other accountable.
-

B. Stories that give meaning (Gospel/Doctrine)

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.

I. Dangerous Stories | Another 'gospel'

- Can you think of other "dangerous stories" in our culture? If so, analyze together how they tell their own 'gospel' story of creation (origins), fall (brokenness), redemption (what can save us), and consummation (hope for the future).
- How does this "other gospel" get these things wrong? What are the real-world dangers to people from this other gospel?

II. Distorted Stories | The effects of algorithms & agendas

We saw the immense power of Big Tech corporations to influence people's perceptions of truth. We also considered how agendas and algorithms can magnify biases and distort the truth. There is simply no such thing as an uninterpreted fact. Lastly, we looked at how visual news, as opposed to written news, appeals primarily to our emotive response instead of our logical response.

- Did you know about the distorted stories in our culture before this workshop? How have you noticed it?
- Does this glut of information today make you feel exhausted? How so, and what has been your response?

How a Culture's Stories Affect Gospel Receptivity

We saw how this glut of dangerous and distorted stories in our culture can affect Gospel receptivity by either demonizing Christian beliefs or overwhelming people with too many versions of "the truth."

- How have you seen this affect the people you know and love around you in terms of what they are willing to believe?

What Can We Do?

I. Wisdom in a Distracted Digital Age

- How can you make sure that you are going online with a purpose?
- Do you sometimes feel the need to have to respond to a current issue or have an opinion about a trending topic immediately? How does the Bible help you process this impulse?
- How does God's standard of justice for establishing an accusation of at least two to three independent lines of witness help us guard from becoming unbalanced? (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).

II. Connecting the Gospel's Story to Culture

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 need to counteract these stories by telling a better story. The Gospel message of the Cross will both *CONFRONT* and *CONNECT* with our culture at various points. To do this, we must be fluent in the Gospel.

- If your 12 year old niece/nephew came up to you and asked you, "Aunty/Uncle, how do I get saved? What is the Gospel?" How would you explain the Gospel to them? What are the key points of the Gospel message we have to deliver?

What does this look like?

We saw Paul's model for engaging culture with the Gospel in Acts 17. Choose something from our culture such as a popular TV show (e.g. Breaking Bad, Friends), or movie (e.g. Batman, Lord of the Rings, Pride & Prejudice), or current issue (e.g. abortion, freedom of speech, environmentalism). Use the four steps below to engage the story being told and connect and confront it with the Gospel.

- **ENTER** - Step in and listen to the story. (v23)
- **EXPLORE** - Search for elements of grace and the idols attached to them. (v.22-23)
- **EXPOSE** - Show up the idols as destructive frauds. (v29)
- **EVANGELIZE** - Show how the Gospel is the fulfillment they were really looking for. (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 Cospers and [*Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith with What You Watch, Read and Play*](#) by Daniel Strange

C. Groups that define us (Community)

I. Our Sinful Tribalism

We heard the story Polish psychologist - Henri Tajfel's experiments that showed our sinful dispositions to tribalism. Furthermore, there is a certain disassociation that happens when our only interaction with someone is mediated by a screen - they become just a name and picture instead of an embodied soul.

- Why is it so important for us to prioritize real-world interactions and community?
- Can you think of how our natural disposition to create bonds with people of our own groups can be a positive thing? What does this tell us about how God has made us?

II. Us vs Them

We looked briefly at the phenomena of "call-out-culture" and "virtue signaling" in our culture as a result of framing everything as "us versus them".

- What are some ways you've experienced this or seen it in our culture?
- Are there some scriptures that come to mind about this tendency? Discuss how they help us navigate this cultural problem biblically.

In a culture that has lost its belief in God and anything transcendent, politics becomes the new religion.

- Have you ever felt like everything is becoming politicized today? How has this affected you and your willingness to speak on certain topics?
- Why do you think everything is politicized today? What is the root of that?

What Can We Do?

"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."³ Many churches are being secularized from within by this.

- Do you see a tendency in yourself or in our church to over-emphasize the individual? In what ways do you see this lived out?

I. Counter-Cultural Community

Given the powerful force of groups to define us - we can see why scripture warns us: "Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Cor. 15:33) Our culture wants to define us by its groups - however, we are already defined by our membership in a group.

³ Veith Jr., Gene Edward. Post-Christian (p. 271).

- 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 compared to other groups in culture?
-

3. What now?

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. This can end up being a vicious cycle or a virtuous one. The feedback loop effect can end up leading us astray or strengthen our lives to build godly character and form us to desire His Kingdom.

- Have you ever thought about this concept? How is this encouraging or exciting to understand the feedback loop effect of these things?

B. Withdrawal is not an option

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.

- Do you sometimes feel tempted to withdraw from culture? How so?
- What are some areas of culture that you've noticed Christians withdraw from?
- How can we help each other in this? What can help give us courage to not flee from cultural engagement?

C. Faithful Presence

We talked about being faithfully present as a biblical way to approach culture as Christians. We are to be **IN** the culture (because we can't help but exist in the world), **NOT OF** the culture (because we belong to Christ), but **FOR** the culture (because we're salt and light).

- How does this help you think about your relationship with culture?
- Read Jeremiah 29:5-7 together. Discuss what practical ways we can "live for the benefit" of our city today. What are some areas of public engagement that would benefit our city for Christians to be involved?

D. Courage and Realistic Expectations

Increasingly it is becoming clear that a nominal Christian faith will be of no benefit to anyone - not that it ever was. The future indeed may involve many trials and hardships. The story of God's people throughout the Bible is always one of "suffer now, glory later."

- What are some practical and realistic ways you can prepare to suffer well?
- Read 1 Peter 4:12-13 together. Peter was writing to Christians who were not yet under full-scale persecution like martyrdom (see 2:12; 3:16; 4:4, 14). How does what Peter wrote in 4:12-13 help us today as we face suffering and persecution for the faith?

We are inheritors of the faith once for all delivered to the saints passed down by the sacrifices of many thousands of martyrs.

- Have you ever read any biographies of Christians who suffered for the faith? How did that encourage and challenge you? Exchange some recommendations of biographies of Christians.
- Read Hebrews 12:1-3 together. Let it guide your prayers together as we consider the cloud of witnesses, lay aside weights and sins, and run with endurance looking to Jesus.

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 Cosper