

Culture Series - Introduction

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[0 : 00] Let me pray for us and we'll come and look at this together. Let's pray. Loving Heavenly Father, we want to pray now just for your help as we consider living life! in this world now and engaging in the culture around us.

Pray that you give us wisdom, thoughtfulness. Pray that you give us the energy that we need. And pray ultimately that our time together on this topic over the next few weeks just might help us to live lives to your praise and glory.

As we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. In the mystery of God's providence, he has chosen for us to live out our lives in this fallen, broken world.

Where our plans come crashing down, as we have considered together as a church. And where we maybe struggle with various different kinds of sins, various different kinds.

And where we live in a culture, in a context which sometimes likes the fact that we're Christians.

And sometimes, look at this, we're doing many things all at the same time.

[1 : 15] And sometimes dislikes the fact that we're Christians. If you had been God, you might have chosen a different way to do this. But the Lord, in his wisdom, has chosen for us to live our lives in this world for his glory.

And he is about the process of your sanctification. God's plan for you is that you grow in Christ-likeness. It is not that you might have a successful career.

It is not that you might be in good health all your life. It is not that you might be wealthy. Those things may or may not come to you. But what will be under the hand of God is your growth in Christ-likeness.

That is what he wants for you. And he wants other people to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has not abandoned this world. He loves this world, as we've been considering in John 3.16.

So God is at work, isn't he? He is at work by saving grace. He is at work bringing us from death to life through the work of the Lord Jesus. And he is also at work in what we call common grace.

[2 : 19] That is, he has not completely abandoned this world. His fingerprints are all over what he has made as he is at work in this world, as he calls us to live in it.

Now, that means that one of the most important questions for us as Christians, the question that I'm really hoping that we get to deal with over these next few weeks is, is how do we engage with life in this world?

How do we engage with all the things that are thrown at us in different ways? How do we live godly lives in an ungodly world, which still retains the fingerprints of God all over it?

What can we celebrate? What should we not celebrate? What can we watch? What should we not watch? What can we take part in? What should we not take part in?

Now, Dan Strange, in this book *Plugged In*, is tackling those kind of things. And that's, this book is basically forming the backdrop to what we're looking at.

[3 : 15] And if you'd like to own a copy of this, I have a few copies to sell, and you can come and ask me afterwards. But one of the things he does in the book is he points out that Christians have tended to have one of three unhelpful responses to the culture in which they live.

The first unhelpful response is to look in. By this he means that Christians have tended to respond by retreating into some kind of Christian fortress, behind which we then sort of throw grenades out at the ungodly world in some kind of manner.

So we educate our children in Christian schools. The Christian church dominates all our spare time. So if we want to enjoy music or play football or eat dinner or get our flat rewired or whatever it is, we must do that with other Christians.

Now, obviously, that's not all bad, is it? This kind of defensiveness, in some senses, reflects some of the scripture's teaching. 2 Corinthians 6 reminds us that this world is not our home.

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God, as God has said, I will live with them and walk among them and be their God, and they will be my people.

[4 : 29] Therefore, come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. You have to acknowledge that actually that's not all that the Bible says, and it doesn't tell Christians to retreat behind some kind of high fence and just look in at ourselves.

We should flee sin, but we do still live in this world. And besides, actually, it is a terrible lie, isn't it? It is a lie that you can just look inwards, build a fence around yourself, and keep yourself safe from the world, because actually you bring worldliness with you in your sinful fallen heart anyway.

The second response that Dan mentions is lash out. This, he suggests, is the angry Christian. It is in a sort of fight and flight response.

This is the fight response. The previous one was the flight. It's going to fly and run away and set up some kind of fortress. Here it is the, well, let's get angry with the world, finger pointing at the world around us, tutting at the bad language on the television.

Dan describes it in his book like this. He says, At worst, a healthy belief in judgment turns into an ugly judgmentalism. Our proclamation of the good news of Jesus is heard as a rant on morality.

[5 : 56] And then we wonder why people out there don't want to come and be with us in here. Well, they think that we're angry with them and that we hate what they're doing.

Perhaps you've seen or heard some of that. The third unhelpful response that he outlines is looking alike or looking like, which is just that assimilating the world around us.

See, we see that the culture is different to the Christian culture, so we just sort of do everything that we can to blend in. We just do the things that everyone else is doing, assuming that the opposite of angry judgmentalism is just living for the same priorities as those around us.

At its worst, it's just kind of conforming to the pattern of this world, isn't it? And the church just becomes an extension of the world. It has the same sexual ethics. It has the same material ambitions, the same core beliefs about what life is for and what a good life looks like.

I don't know whether you've had this conversation with other Christians where they say of their children, they've done very well for themselves. And you ask what that actually means, and you realize that they mean in the sense of the same aspirations as anybody would have for their children, which is not necessarily all bad, is it?

[7 : 10] But actually, our aspiration is more than that. Now, in his book and in this series, I want to suggest that actually none of those three responses are good ones. Instead, the better response, which again is Dan's thing in his book, is we are to engage.

Here, his thought is that really, as Christians, we are called to think seriously and live responsibly in the world. Yes, we need to retreat from sin. Yes, at times we need to speak out against the evils in the world.

And yes, at times we need to enjoy the things of this world, but we do so for reasons that we have thought through and understood. Ted Turnow, I don't know if anyone's heard of Ted Turnow.

Ted Turnow is a guy who is a professor somewhere in Europe, an American guy. He's written a book called Popologetics, which is how you get from popular culture to talking about the gospel. He's written a book which is very similar to Dan Strange, this book Popologetics. And he says this, the main question that drives this book then is this, how should we as Christians engage in non-Christian popular culture?

[8 : 20] I wrote it for thoughtful, everyday Christians who believe that these issues are worthy of serious reflection. This resource is intended for Christians who want to reach people where they live, who want to be able to talk about popular culture with their friends, spouses, and children in a way that has spiritual health, not death.

That was a typo. But that won't scare folks off. Either in short, this book is for those who want to be able to give an intelligent, warm-hearted, biblical answer back to the worldviews presented in popular culture.

That's what we want to do. We want to engage, don't we? So that we can speak to the world and explain the gospel. In his book, he talks about how you want in the office to be able to go from a conversation about the football into a conversation about Jesus really naturally, because you

understand what it is that is the relationship between the lordship of Christ and the football results from yesterday, because you've thought about it.

You're engaging in the culture of this world. You know why you're interested in certain things, and you know why you're not interested in others. Now, what I want you to do, just so that you can think on those things for a moment, is think about which one of those three you are most inclined to do. Look in, lash out, or look like. And why do you think that's the case? And why do you think it's important for Christians to engage in culture? So just have a think about that with the person next to you for a few moments.

[9 : 42] If no one was sat next to you, you can think on your own, if you like, and then we'll feed back in a moment. Okay. Sorry to interrupt your discussions.

What do we think? What do we think we're most likely to do? Look in, lash out, look like.

Anyone want to? Come on. Can I ask a question? Of course you can. Oh, that's the next bit.

I see. Yeah. So, no, that's, it's fine. You're not being thick. That is, but I'm going to come. So you're just making some assumptions at the minute. But yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Do you think it's necessary to propose? Yeah. Sometimes it's right to react. Great. Yes.

[10 : 45] I think you're right. So I think at times it is right to, to be angry about what's going on in culture. I think if you look at the change in the law about euthanasia and the decriminalization of abortion, I think it's right that we're angry about those things.

Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yeah. Yeah. It's difficult to understand culture when you live in a city where they're all different cultures knocking at your door. Yeah. Yeah. Anybody else? Do you think, go on.

Sorry, Samin, go. I was thinking, my tendency might be so much to try to give as much time of agreement, like, try to explain it as possible.

Yeah. So I don't know if you get interested. I'm almost like saying nothing. I disagree. Yeah. Yeah.

[11 : 49] Yeah. This is what I actually believe. Yeah. Yeah. That's really helpful. Thanks for being honest like that. Yeah. They're just trying to kind of look like, and the assumption there is, the more like my non-Christian friend I can appear, the more likely they are to become a Christian, which is, of course, not necessarily true, is it?

But yeah. Clifford, yeah. So if you're starting to know, you can become unquicit. Yes. Yeah. That's what we're saying. Yeah. So you just end up just falling, falling into the world.

Teddy, were you going to say something? I would probably lean towards lashing out. I mean, I'd rather, if I'm saying, but it probably looks more like similar, I think it would be a more sort of quiet lashing out.

Right. Yeah. Okay. There's another frustration, where you see someone believing something, agreeing to something, following something, that once you know the gospel is so obvious, futile and sick, Yeah.

and dangerous, it can be, I can definitely lead to a lot of, just sort of, I'm so annoyed with that, but I don't even know how to address this. Yeah. Yeah. So I, instead of addressing it with them, I'm just going to point them apart.

[13 : 08] Yeah. That's really helpful, isn't it? I, it's sort of the internal frustration and anger. I, I think you see that thing with the, well, say for me, you look at the world's sexual ethics, and you see the carnage that it just brings in people's lives.

And you're just like, the whole thing that you're assuming about what your body is for, is ruining you, you know, and yeah, how do we even begin to answer that? Yeah. It's actually very interesting, but these four, you know, it's a little, like, you and I are saying the same thing, that people see us as following, you think, you're just wondering, you know, almost a mixture of, Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You're getting a lot of nods around the room. So we all fall, we all fall into all of those, any one of those three at any time.

And it can be exhausting, can't it, to engage, because actually what we're saying is, that living the Christian life requires just more thought about the world, than perhaps our non-Christian friends.

We, we, we're not going to be just thoughtless consumers, nor are we going to be thoughtlessly angry, or thoughtlessly just defending ourselves by building sub-Christian cultures that the world doesn't penetrate, although it does.

[14 : 23] But actually we're going to engage deeply. So if we're going to engage, the first thing that we need to answer is Ray's question, which is, what is culture? So what is culture?

What do we mean by it? Now, the term is very slippery, isn't it? So the word culture could mean, you could mean high culture, can you cultured? As you say, someone is very cultured, by which we mean, they enjoy classical music, or something like that.

They, they wear fine, smart clothes. It's something elite and distinguished. But I don't think that's what we're really talking about now. But we, we see that we use the word culture more broadly than that, don't we?

Cultural studies has become quite a big thing in social sciences. And we have acknowledged to be in a period of significant cultural change. Now, Dan Strange goes into lots of wordy explanations of all those different cultural studies and that kind of thing.

And you can get his book if you want to learn about that. But the definition that he lands on, which I think is really helpful, and we're going to use in this series is this culture, he says, are the stories we tell that express meaning about the world.

[15:31] Now, let's think about that definition. In other words, culture is a way of expressing ideas that we already have about the world, right?

We, we all have what we call a worldview, right? A way of a big story that we think explains the world, how we got here, what's good, what's bad, what life is for, what's going on and what matters. And our culture is simply the way that those assumptions and those beliefs are expressed in our day to day activities. And, you know, if you think that the big story of life is evolution, it's the result of selfish forces of biology and physics that ends in oblivion, you might expect your culture to be highly individualistic, to be about self-fulfillment, to be a little bit depressing when viewing death. If your culture's worldview says that actually the highest good is community, and our contribution to that, then you would expect your culture to express loyalty and the sharing of resources and all those kinds of things, right?

The other thing though, is that as culture expresses my ideas about the world, my worldview, it does it in stories, but then reinforce or subvert that worldview.

[16:51] So I've put a little diagram on there, which is absolutely sensationally revolutionary, isn't it? But you get this idea that basically what I think about the world and my ideas about the big story of the world are expressed in culture.

Is my microphone gone off?

No, you're just wondering about that. And then culture displays itself in the stories that we all listen to and think about. So I think it's helpful that culture in this definition is about stories, not just about actions and activities.

In other words, the things that we enjoy culturally are saying something or not telling a story. So, for example, our cultural obsession with superhero stories not only expresses a view of the world, but it also tells a story that shapes how we live in that world, which then cements or alters the things that we think are true.

Now, with those things in mind, here's the next big step. And I'm trying to condense what's quite a large section of the book. So if this is confusing or doesn't work, then it's my fault, not Dan's fault.

[18:12] And you can ask me later. But cultural stories, in fact, all stories have essentially three main parts to them. Our cultural stories express an ideal.

They then express that that ideal has somehow been broken. And then they express how that ideal can be fixed. So, the ideal, perhaps, is that this world lives in ecological harmony.

It has been broken by human exploitation of the planet. And we can fix it by reducing, reusing, and recycling. So that's what we do. Or perhaps life is for family.

What has broken it is busyness and employment pressure. So we can fix it by buying a van, living off grid, and spending all of our time together. So that's what the YouTube algorithm tells me I should be doing.

Now, if you're still awake, and you're still thinking this through, so cultural stories, state and ideal, they say how the ideal has been broken, and then they say how the ideal is restored.

[19:13] Right? Those are the main points of stories. You might think, well, actually, that sounds quite familiar. It sounds like creation, fall, and redemption, doesn't it? And this really is going to be the heart of these Sunday evenings, is that the cultural stories that we tell, which are expressions of the worldview that we all have, are really shadows of a big story about God making the world, us rebelling against that God, and God redeeming that world in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So there is a bigger, truer story in our world that our cultures don't tell us, but are shadows of. So God made the world, made us, didn't he?

And made us for him. The ideal is being with God who made us, living in the Garden of Eden, developed and grown by humanity in relationship with him.

And the breaking of that ideal, the fall, is human rebellion, the disobedience of Adam, who was our representative, reached out for the status of God himself. He said, no, I don't want to be with God, I want to be God.

And that fall not only broke Adam, but also broke all of humanity. And the world is placed under a frustrating curse of God's judgment, because we are not God.

[20 : 32] So the world is troubled by sinful rebellion and righteous judgment from its holy creator. And redemption is the return of that ideal, that we might be with God.

And how might we be with God in redemption? By God coming in the person of the son to be with us and to save us through his death on the cross, living in submissive obedience as a man and dying as a sacrifice for our sin on the cross, so that the ideal might be returned and even bettered as this world is transformed by God's power and his glory from a garden to a city that covers the world and not just a corner of it.

Now, we've covered loads of ground. Just gather this up with me for a moment. Culture is the stories that we tell that express meaning about the world. But this world already has a story.

And it's the story of what God is doing. And it's the story written by him in his word. And that means that we should expect our culture to either accidentally echo the true story or try and undermine it and subvert the true story.

And so that means cultural engagement for the Christian is that we need to see and show where the big story of who Christ is and what he is doing either fulfills the aspirations of our culture because they are echoes of it or subverts them because they're going against it.

[22 : 04] Now, you can see how this might work, for example. The search for intimacy that we have is an echo of this fact that we were made not to be individuals, but we were made to be with God.

The desire that we have for relationship with one another is a reflection of this fact that we are made by God for him, that we might live together for his glory.

But we pursue that intimacy in all sorts of broken ways in our cultures, don't we? And actually, the Bible speaks against those ways, but it doesn't speak against the search for intimacy.

And so as a Christian, we can see, can't we, how Jesus really is the, what Dan would call, the subversive fulfillment of the aspirations of our world. He both subverts the wrong and fulfills the true and the good.

And that the key to cultural engagement really is seeing how Jesus does that in every little aspect of our culture and our world. Now, we're going to do more of this in weeks to come, but I want just to give you an opportunity for questions or comments, and then I'm going to give you two challenges before we finish.

[23 : 17] Anyone want to ask a question or make a comment? Any bit that was confusing? Any bit that maybe was clear? That might be a shorter question, but yeah. Sorry?

Subversive fulfillment. Okay, so this is the idea that there's this big story about what God is doing in our world, and because of his common grace and his fingerprints all over the world, you see this big story both echoed and undermined in our cultures.

So, Jesus is the subversive fulfillment. He says he's working to sort of go against some of our cultural things, but he also fulfills some of their aspirations, right?

So, yeah, so I said about intimacy, you could do it with all sorts of different things, can you? So, yeah, I know, trying to think of examples on the spot. Anyone want to help me out with an example of subversive fulfillment?

So, yeah, we could do, we could do something about, say, music, yeah?

[24 : 32] So, music is an echo of the fact that we are made by God, we're made to be creative, we're made to enjoy life, we're made to enjoy him, we're made to sing and praise what is praiseworthy, right?

And so, the fulfillment of that desire to make music is because we're made in the image of God, his fingerprints are all over us. But, in our fallenness, lots of the things that we sing about and praise are not praiseworthy, and are not good.

And so, Jesus both fulfills the desire for us to sing and praise what is good, but he subverts this idea that we sing and praise what is ungodly and unholy.

And that's, it's really helpful. Once you start to get your head around it, it's really helpful because it means that you can ask questions about what is, what is in here that is, is good? What is here that reflects the fact that we're made in the image of God and that the desires are not all terrible?

But what is here that is working against the Lord? What is immoral? What's wrong? What's bad? What is Jesus saying no to? I'm in this. Okay.

[25 : 43] And you can see, can't you, how the, wait, the look in and the look alike, basically one is all subversion and one is all fulfillment, isn't it?

Yeah. But we need to hold the two together. Okay. We're going to talk more about that. So next week, I'm hoping that we're going to dive more deeply into some examples and we're going to think carefully about that.

But let me just give you a couple of things, which I think may make this even more difficult than it's already seems. The first is this, the stories of our culture are hidden, right?

So as our culture expresses the stories, they are, they are assumed they're not necessarily written out for you. So if you want, you can call it like the presuppositions or the big ideas of the story are by definition presupposed.

They're not expressed. So the worldview of the TV series Friends, for example, the box set does not come with a warning that says to you, listen, what's wrong with the world is that it's full of broken friendships.

[26 : 52] The ideal of the world is that we have friends. What will fix it is a loft apartment in New York and friends living next door to each other, right? It doesn't have that on the box.

So because the story is hidden, it's beneath the surface. And so you need to think about it. It just assumes that story. And it assumes not only that you will agree, but it assumes that by consuming it, you will begin to agree if you don't at the beginning.

And so you begin to sort of think along with that. And that means that if you and I are going to be people who engage in culture, we're actually going to have to think quite deeply and ask questions about what we're watching and what we're consuming and the world in which we're engaging in a way that others won't.

And that's going to be tiring at times, isn't it? So why would you bother? Well, ultimately, I think because Jesus is bothered. This is his world. He is returning here and he wants the people that you and I live around to know and understand the gospel.

And he wants us to explain it clearly across all sorts of different cultures. So we need to be good at reading the stories that culture is telling us about what is the ideal, how has the ideal been broken, and how can the ideal be restored?

[28 : 03] Second challenge, though, is that stories are religious. I think what you get to see in Dan's book is that because culture is the expression of stories of meaning, it means essentially that culture flows from faith, right?

In other words, culture flows from statements of belief about what the ideal is, how it is broken, and how it can be fixed, that are not necessarily empirically true, but are just statements of faith that are believed.

Ted Turnow in his book says that worldviews are fundamentally religious. That is, they are types of faith. They deal with life at the level of deepest commitment. Now, that religion might not be a strictly orthodox expression of Islam or Judaism or secularism.

And I think this expresses one of the challenges that Mike was mentioning earlier, which is that we meet all sorts of different people, but they are often a mix of all sorts of different cultures as well, aren't they? Especially in London.

It's not that they are just holding to one worldview. They're holding to three or four all at the same time and not seeing the contradictions of them. And that's a challenge as well, isn't it? Because really what you are inviting people to is a new set of beliefs, a new faith.

[29 : 17] And what we need to understand is that you and I, even if we're the most culturally engaged and thoughtful Christian who sees these worldview stories more clearly than anybody else, you cannot change someone's beliefs by yourself, can you?

Even clever sounding arguments and cultural engagement cannot save people. We need God to be at work by his spirit, because without that, our work is futile, because we're in the realm of faith,

aren't we?

We need God to be at work for them, as we were thinking about this morning, to be born again by the power of the spirit.

So we're not thinking about magic solutions that mean you'll be able to explain the gospel in a culturally appropriate way and live in such a way that everybody around you becomes a Christian, because that's not how it works, because these are expressions of deeply held beliefs.

Great. That's, I think, where I'm going to finish for this evening. Any questions or comments before we sing to close? It's like last period maths, isn't it?

[30 : 30] And the teacher says, any questions? And you're pleased to ask. Pleased to ask a question. The bell's about to go. Don't ask a question. Great. Let me pray for us, and then we'll stand and sing together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that the true story of our world has been told to us by you in your word, that the ideal is that we're with you, that it has been broken by our sin, and we're under a curse, and that the ideal is restored in the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

We want to pray that you would help us as Christians to be really good at understanding how that true and bigger story both subverts and fulfills the stories of our culture.

So we want to thank you for all that is praiseworthy and good here in this city in which we live. We thank you for this desire that there is in our city to reflect all sorts of diverse cultures.

We thank you that difference is valued. Difference ultimately comes from being made by you. But Lord, we want to see and show how the gospel subverts the idea that actually there's no truth, because there is a true story told by you in your word.

[31 : 55] Lord, there's countless ways that this engages with the lives that we live, and we want to pray in these coming weeks as we think through what we watch on TV, the music that we listen to, the places that we go, the things that we do for fun, the places that we work.

We pray, please, that in each of these places you'd help us to live lives of praise to you, that others might see this truer, bigger story of Jesus Christ and his work for us, as we pray in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.