

Culture Series - Subversive Fulfillment

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to 1 Corinthians 1, and if you want to turn there in your Bibles, page 1144. Okay, let me pray and ask for the Lord's help, and then we'll get started that way. Let me pray.

Father, we want to ask for your help. We know we need it. We are going to seek to think carefully and deeply about the world in which we live, and we want to ask that you would help us. We want to particularly pray that we might hold on to the things that we've already thought about, about the power of the gospel to save lost people, but we want to remember that it's not our cleverness that saves, but it is the power of the gospel, and so we pray with that in our minds that we would think deeply and carefully about the culture in which we live. In Jesus' name, amen. Just in case you weren't with us last week, let me just briefly recap. We've been looking at how we live in the world in which we live. So God in his wisdom has called us to live our Christian lives in a world that is broken and difficult and challenging and at times even hostile, but yet still carries the fingerprints of the God who made it in his common grace, and we've been using that book by Dan Strange called Plugged In. I've got four copies left. If anyone wants a copy, you can come and make me an offer for one, and you can have one. If you remember last week, we were seeing that we should resist the Christian temptations to look in, lash out, or look like. So we recognized that the temptation was to look in, was just to kind of build walls or fences and just to seek to set ourselves apart from the world and just kind of set up sub-Christian cultures, or the temptation was to lash out and be angry with the world and just hate on the world, or look like, which is basically just blend in and just follow the world's patterns. And Dan Strange says that none of those are right, but what we should do instead is engage, think deeply, to see where we live and think about what that means and what we watch, the cultures that we live in, and see how they are both confronted and confirmed by the gospel.

Summary statement, well not mine, not yours, but Dan Strange's, was subversive fulfillment. Subversive in the idea that what Jesus says undermines the stories that our world tells us, and fulfillment in the idea that actually the aspirations of our world as they're shaped by common grace are fulfilled by the Lord Jesus. Now I think this is quite tricky, I did get a bit of feedback from last week saying it was tricky. Subversive is not a word that you use very often, fulfillment probably not a word you use very often. Put them together, words you don't use very often, it becomes like super complicated, so we don't really talk in terms of subversive fulfillment.

So let me just work through an example from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 18 to 25 and we'll see it together. Let me read it to you. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. Where is the wise person?

[3 : 26] Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him.

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Now keep your eyes on the passage, just notice the flow with me.

Paul says that the message of the cross is foolishness to the perishing, but like we were seeing this morning, for the believer, that message is the power of God. So it's not the cross, but the message of the cross, which is the power of God for salvation. Why is that foolishness? Well, if you look down

at verse 22, it's foolishness because Jews demand signs, you know, that you think like Moses in Egypt or Elijah on Mount Carmel, you know, show me, you know, give me a sign, show me. Greeks look for wisdom like their philosophers. And Dan in his book lists a whole load of Greek philosophers. Nick here could list Greek philosophers for you. I can't, so I'm not going to. And they find that it doesn't give them philosophical ideas like that either. It's not a sign that Jews are looking for and it's not the wisdom that the Greeks are looking for. In fact, the message of the cross subverts both of those ideas.

It's a stumbling block. Look at verse 23. It's a stumbling block to Jews because it doesn't give them the signs or the power that they're looking for. And it is foolishness to the Greeks because it's not wise sounding in the way that Greek philosophy is. So the power is not in a display of wonder, but in the message of a man hanging naked on a Roman cross, you know, ashamed and cursed in Jewish tradition. It's an undermining, a subversion of the sign that Jews would be looking for. And it's not high sounding wisdom that Greeks like, but it is in simple sacrificial logic. It's foolishness to the Greek. It's, oh, what a terrible, terrible idea. I'm not really interested in that.

So the gospel comes to both the Jew and the Greek culture and subverts its ideas. But it doesn't stop there, does it? Because look at verse 24. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Do you see, this is brilliant, isn't it? The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. For the believer, Jew or Gentile, actually the wonder of the gospel is that it is the fulfillment of their expectations of both signs and power, and of wisdom. Power, because it takes what is weak and uses it to achieve what could never have been achieved. And wisdom, because it takes something we would never have come up with, and demonstrates it to be the greatest and most wise truth in the world. So it is the subversion, welcome, the subversion of false ideas and the fulfillment of true ideas. Do you get that idea, right? So this is how it works. It is foolishness and weakness, but is also power and wisdom as we see it. Now, what I want you to do, just with the person next to you for a couple of moments, is think, what is it that our culture is looking for in a message of salvation? And then think, how does the gospel subversively fulfill that, right? So what is it the gospel says, no, that's not quite right?

[7 : 16] And what does the gospel say that that's true? So maybe think, what is our culture looking for in a message of salvation? And then we'll feedback our ideas. Go for it. How have we been getting on?

Anyone want to tell us what they discuss? What does our culture think it is looking for in a message of salvation? Go on, Teddy. Oh, okay, go on. Anyone, yeah, yeah, right, go on.

We were looking at that last yesterday in March. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Did everyone hear that? That's brilliant. So you saw, and actually that's going to be one of my examples later. Anyway, so you saw in the march yesterday this desire for sort of nationhood, belonging, an idea of identity and being part of something that's bigger and stronger in a community and all that sort of stuff.

[8 : 42] And the gospel comes and it sort of undermines that, yeah, or contradicts it, subverts it by saying, no, actually, that's not Great Britain that you're looking for and longing for.

What you really want is the kingdom of God. And you get into that not through citizenship here, but through the message of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yeah. And so that desire for being part of something is actually only fulfilled.

You get it? Anybody else? Charleston? Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

Okay. So what about the idea that our culture thinks that salvation is found in everybody being right? Yeah. Yeah. Nobody's wrong. Everybody's right. We all end up in the same place.

How does the gospel subvert that? Well, it says there's only one way, right? And it's the Lord Jesus Christ. But actually, the idea that all kinds of different people from all nations and backgrounds and cultures can come that one way, it says, yeah, amen to that.

[9 : 57] Actually, if you want a really diverse place with all sorts of different cultures and all sorts of different people there, look at Revelation 7. Every tribe and language and nation and tongue is there, right?

You don't get any more diverse than that. But they've all come the same one way through the Lord Jesus Christ. So it embraces the inclusivity, but it subverts the idea that you get inclusivity by telling everybody they're right.

Because everybody's not right. Does that make sense? Yeah. Anyone else? I would say, I'm just saying, you're sharing. Because I was at a, I was at a family party yesterday.

And it's a person who knows who knows I'm Christian. And it was playing a game where he asked questions. And their question was, if you have two questions, what was you asked?

The first one was, what's the meaning of life? And if they're God. They know I'm Christian, they're good. Yeah. So I just thought, wow, that question. Because there were some people there saying, hey, the opportunity to really just share.

[10:56] But I say to Tanya, you know, I asked that. There's a stumbling block because of history. So I just think the sentence that you read, it's just foolishness to those who are perishing.

Because people are looking for something that is relatable to them. And they're trying to track the fact that they're not going to be able to do anything. And they're trying to do the gospel. Yeah. But because they're required in the sea, it is just foolishness.

Yeah. Because they're not able to assume that what they're people. And you talked about the Greeks and the... Jews. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No matter what culture. Yes. Yeah.

Yeah. No, I think you're right. So lots of different cultures there. The gospel seems foolish to them.

Yeah. I think there are loads of other examples you could have given. I don't know whether anyone wants to...

Yeah, why not? I'll give you another couple of seconds. Spirituality and transcendence. But before that overlaps with meaning and purpose, then I did. Yeah. Go on. Just say what you mean by spirituality and transcendence.

[11:52] So people are looking like... Well, I mean, like they're looking for like UFOs. Right. Also things like what they call meditation.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. some sort of spiritual thing on the line to give meaning to purpose and meaning to life.

Yeah. Absolutely. So, right, there's a desire built into everybody for a sort of spiritual experience, yeah, and so we go looking for it in all sorts of different places, particularly looking for it internally somehow, and actually, again, the Bible's answer is, no, yes, you are a spiritual person, but you are made for a relationship with the God who made you through the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, and so it both says, yes, you're spiritual, but no, you don't go looking there.

I think you can do the same for it, like things like comfort or material success or family or, you know, any of these things that people think is like salvation.

[13:08] Salvation is getting married or salvation is having a family or salvation is getting a good job or salvation is owning a home or any of those things. You can see how the gospel subverts that because it says, no, actually, you will not find salvation there, but it fulfills it.

So it undermines the ideas, but it fulfills the aspirations as they are shaped by common grace, saying, actually, no, you're made for the family of God. Your home is in the presence of the Lord. Okay. So in people's mind, it says subjective thing, right? Everyone has to go on definition, whatever. Yeah, so everyone will think of salvation in different ways, won't they?

And we're going to come and talk about, so how this links with presenting the gospel as well. And we're going to do that now. So let's keep moving because it's quarter past seven. So one of the really helpful things that Dan does in the book is sort of slow down on this and give a four-step approach to this idea of cultural engagement.

And he does it from Acts 17. So turn to Acts 17 if you want to. It's just on your handout if that will speed you up. Acts 17, verse 16. So this is Paul in Athens speaking on the Areopagus to the Athenians who love to listen to good ideas.

[14:22] Put your hands up if you've been there. Have you been there? Yeah, you see. I knew a few of you would be there. It's worth going if you've not ever been to Athens. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who had happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting. You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we would like to know what they mean.

All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious, for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown god.

[15:46] So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from any one of us for in him we live and move and have our being. And some of your own poets have said we are his offspring.

Therefore, since we are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof to this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them sneered but others said we want to hear you again on this subject.

[17:10] At that Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Diosenes a member of the Areopagus and also a woman named Demarius and a number of others.

Now notice before we get into the presentation to the Areopagus notice that Paul was preaching the gospel. That's what he's doing verse 18. Dan is really careful to point out and you must hold on to this theologically this is very important and actually practically it's really important that cultural engagement is not an excuse for not preaching the gospel.

In a sense what you're doing is clearing away the ground in order to preach the gospel and being able to explain it in a way that people can understand and connect with. So it's in the context of preaching to the people of Athens about Jesus that people have questions about what Paul means and how it all fits together.

They call him a babbler in verse 18 which the book will tell you in Greek means a seed pecker someone who's just got little disconnected ideas and dots that don't fit together.

And in that context Paul gives a presentation in verse 22 to the Areopagus which is the place where everyone goes to debate the latest ideas. And Dan points out in his book four steps in Paul's presentation there.

[18:24] Firstly entering. So Paul the first thing he does is step into their world he listens to their story he's been walking around and carefully looking at the objects of worship.

Paul is not hiding out in Athens in a corner and praying but he's walking looking seeing what's going on and he's engaged in where he is. Dan suggests sort of thinking through some basic kind of questions what is it that's being said here?

Who is saying it? Who are they saying it to? That kind of thing entering into the world. The next step is exploring back in Acts 17 that's what you see happening notice that Paul is looking for the stories for things to affirm and also the idols that are behind them.

So he says I see that in every way you are very religious noticing that they have lots and lots of idols including an idol to the unknown gods. Now that's obviously not a good thing to have idols that are made to unknown gods but it does point to a religious hunger which provides Paul with a hook to hang his ideas on.

Dan calls this step exploring x-ray glasses wanting not just to see what's happening but to think about why is it happening? Why do they have an idol to an unknown god?

[19:42] It's because there is a deep religious hunger that they recognize is still yet unsatisfied and that's worth exploring and thinking about some more. Remembering that human beings build cultures that if you remember from last week flow out of our deep held beliefs about life and what

it's for.

So culture is this sort of expression of the stories or the stories that tell what we deeply believe. So what is it that has been taken to be a good thing?

What has been turned from a good thing into being an object of worship and an idol? Where is the story of the gospel being twisted? So here in Acts 17 it's clear that this being made for the divine and this God-shaped hole has been filled by man-made idols.

So explore. Next, expose. Notice again what Paul says in verse 23. As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

So he's done exploring and he then goes straight for confrontation doesn't he? So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and this is what I'm going to proclaim to you.

[20 : 55] They've been thinking about God all wrong. They are ignorant of the truth and their idols are destructive. So says Paul in verse 29. Therefore, since we are God's offspring we should not think that divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by human design and skill.

Dan here quotes Ted Turnow who we met last week as well and says that here what you're doing is showing the explanatory poverty of the idols that you see around you.

Do you really think that you can carve an image of God? Do you really think you can make God out of gold? How's that working for you? Or today maybe. Do you think that the blind forces of chance that created everything how's that working out?

Really? Is that what you think? I think often we can miss this step because we want to get straight to a gospel presentation but actually what Paul is doing here is saying to us it's really worth asking some good questions exposing the poverty of people's thinking and of the ideas of our world.

and then finally evangelizing. Dan calls this showing off the gospel as the subversive fulfillment of what you were looking for in the first place. So at the end of verse 23 he introduces his presentation of the gospel the very thing that you're ignorant of I am going to proclaim to you.

[22 : 18] Actually you've demonstrated that you're ignorant of the thing that you want to worship let me show you what God is like let me show you that God is the one who made you who sustains you in him we live and have our being one day we will stand before him a fact that's proven by Jesus' resurrection from the dead which then sparks the response of verse 32 where some people believe and other people reject and wander off.

There's an example in his book of someone doing this kind of work in a more contemporary setting and so let me read it to you and then we'll think about how this works out for us.

This is a former student of Dan's who wrote him an email he says this I was recently asked to talk about faith to a group of professional sportsmen. I began by exploring the issue of identity and tried to highlight how their impression of themselves has been determined by the opinion of others from a very early age.

Teachers, coaches, age group coaches, professional coaches, international coaches, media and fans. In the eyes of these people their value is determined by their performance.

I tried to get them to see that tying their joy or satisfaction or ultimately their identity to these things is a volatile thing that leaves them very vulnerable. One of the players said that he agreed with this and it was why he didn't put all his eggs in the sport basket.

[23 : 51] His faith was his family. I then explored how that too will ultimately leave you vulnerable. From there I held out Christ as the only certain and sure place to stand and the only place where our identity is secure.

I said that as long as our family, coaches, fans or the media make their demands we will have to measure up. As such we will lie and put on a front when things are bad. Christ knows the worst about us and accepts us anyway.

The opinions and love of others are fickle, changing according to our performance. Christ accepts us unconditionally, liberating us to be honest and humble towards others.

Of course, I had to show them how living with a focus on themselves as the end of all things might be offensive to God. Finding security in Christ can only happen if you repent of those things. One guy asked me what he needs to do to become a Christian and now another wants to read the gospel.

I am 100% certain this wouldn't have happened if my presentation had been a standard God is in charge, you have sinned, it's going to go badly so you better repent approach.

[25 : 00] That is what Dan is trying to recommend to us that we kind of engage with where people are coming from and show them Christ, show off Christ against the backdrop of the poverty of the way our culture thinks.

Any questions or comments before we go on to our final exercise which is not real exercise but a thinking exercise. Any questions? Yes.

Go on. Yes. This takes longer and is more difficult and requires listening. Yeah. Definitely. Definitely.

Yeah. Yeah. Sorry, Florence's gone? Yeah.

Yeah. And I think especially in a context like London where everyone's from a very different culture, different aspirations are very different, aren't they? And I think age affects it as well so the culture of young people is quite different to the culture of older people and of people in between.

[26 : 10] So yeah. Okay. Now then, right at the very end of our meeting together I'm going to ask you to do the really hard part which is to pick a cultural phenomenon and investigate it using those four steps.

Okay. So I want you to enter into it, think what's it about, who wrote it, who's the audience, explore it, why is this happening, what is valuable, what's the supreme good for that cultural phenomenon and is that good or bad.

Expose, where does it break down, what's wrong with it, how is it a poor story and then evangelize, how is Jesus a better story. Now, I've got some suggestions so that you don't spend ages thinking of a cultural phenomenon but maybe you could think of a friend who is always telling you about the successes of their grandchildren or maybe you could think of a conversation about the Tommy Robertson march on Saturday.

Teddy's already done that for you anyway but you could maybe think about that. Maybe a colleague at work who is always career planning or a school student who is always stressed by work and works obsessively or you could think of something else, right?

What is it that's going on in those, enter into it, explore it, expose it and evangelize it. We'll go for that for about five minutes or so and then we'll collect our answers back and then we'll finish. Okay.

[27 : 26] I'm sorry to interrupt your conversations. Does anyone want to briefly, we'll do one.

Does anyone want to help us out on what you were thinking about? Come on. Let's hear it. Just one good point, Isaiah. Right.

Yeah. And you just talked about how, I mean, there's nothing wrong with planning from being, I don't know, looking forward and stuff like that.

There's one good point where you may or may not find yourself trying to be close. Yeah. And then when things don't go the way of the original plan for this world, you're like, oh, what's going on?

[28 : 27] Yeah. Well, why is this happening? Yeah. But actually, God has a plan to be used and he wants you where you are and the ones of those you know, what you expect to be.

Yeah. Actually, there's a sense in which, you know, the Bible says that God will be of harm. So, actually, yeah, also in terms of the other position of the world to the world that actually God has got that whole and the world to God.

Yes. So if your career turns out to be the source of your purpose, meaning, and identity, you've turned what is supposed to be a good thing for you to enjoy into a God that you worship.

And it's a terrible God because it's unforgiving and merciless and you're only ever one bad decision away from it judging you and crushing you.

And God is a good and merciful God who forgives you and, yeah. And actually, so we were talking a little bit about this down here as well. So actually even the aspiration, the career aspiration to build something or make something that lasts is only really fulfilled in Christ as well, isn't it?

[29 : 37] And so we're made to work. We will work in eternity, but we'll work for the glory of God in the world that he has made in a perfect way. Yeah. Really helpful. Great.

Hopefully you've had enough of a taste of it to think a little bit differently about some of the things that we engage with in the world. But I know we've not exhausted it. So I've got some books that you can purchase and that will help you.

And if not, you need to come back in a couple of weeks when we finish off the series. But let me pray to close. We're not going to sing our final hymn, but we'll close in prayer. Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, how we thank you that Jesus tells a better story than the world around us.

It's a story of love and forgiveness and mercy. It's a story of a new identity in him, a greater purpose, a greater glory in the future, of a certain home and hope in you. And we want to pray, please, that you'd make us better at telling that story to those around us by showing them how it both undermines and contradicts the things that they believe, but also provides a fulfillment for the things that they long for and that they're looking for in the wrong places. [30 : 56] Lord, we see that many people around us and even ourselves are tempted at times to turn to things, good things, that you've given us and turn them into objects of worship as if they were gods themselves.

Forgive us and help us, we pray, in a confusing world with lots of different cultures colliding with one another in the city in which we live to present the gospel clearly and faithfully as we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.