

# Culture Series - How to engage, share and grow for the glory of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let me pray. Let's ask the Lord's help as we come to this last session on culture. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you that you are not only interested in us, you're interested in this world around us too, and in helping us relate the gospel clearly to the world in which we live.

And you want us, as we were thinking together, to grow in Christlikeness. And so we pray that we do that and that you would help us as we think on these things together. Help us to have understanding, but also wisdom to apply it, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So we've been working our way through the last few weeks through this book called Plugged In by Dan Strange on how we relate to the world around us, connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play.

And we've been thinking about culture. Do you remember our definition of culture? Culture? No.

Okay. Culture are the stories that we tell which express meaning about the world.

Okay. So culture is not just high culture, you know, going and watching the opera or whatever it is.

But culture is just the everyday stories we tell which express what we think the world is really about.

[ 1 : 11 ] And so that might be a story that we tell in music, in film, in a book that we read, in a way of watching sport or whatever it is, which expresses what we think the world is really about.

And we've been thinking about how Jesus, who really is the big story of the universe, how he is the subversive fulfillment of the stories of our culture, subverting what is false and fulfilling what is true.

Now, I know that's the main idea of Dan Strange's book. And Dan travels around the world trying to explain it to people. And so I know that some of us have struggled to grasp it.

So I'm going to try and explain it with some pictures. And so let me see whether this helps us understand it. So the premise is that we all tell cultural stories, right?

So maybe you're into a certain genre of book or music or you're from a particular place. And there's cultural stories that go around that, like how you celebrate birthdays or what you enjoy doing with your free time or the kind of things that you will conceive.

[ 2 : 20 ] And in each of those cultural stories, there are good things. There are things which are true and right and brilliant that we should celebrate. And also things which are not so good, not so true and should not be celebrated.

Now, there are obviously lots of different cultural stories. So there's like maybe an urban culture, and you can't read this because it's too small, where things like community and friendship and loyalty are highly valued.

And those are good things, but it may also be quite violent and even sexualized at times. There's a social media culture, perhaps, that some of us are engaged with, which is a good thing. And it gives voices to everybody and gives positive news and opportunity to circulate.

But it also is very curated. It's very tribal. It makes you just associate with people who watch the same things as you. There's a political culture, isn't there, which in a good sense can be trying to achieve a common good, where we try to bless as many different people.

Or it can be, at its worst, very populist or partisan, again, dividing people up. There's a religious culture, which might be good in the sense of its commitment to morality and commitment to community, but it could also be very self-righteous and proud.

[ 3 : 30 ] Or national identity, which values history and family, but can be really hostile to outsiders. So you get the idea, right? There's lots of cultures. There's lots of different cultural stories. Now, of course, there's not just five, are there?

There are loads of different cultures, right? A huge range. And also that those cultures overlap with one another. So you might not just find yourself in one culture. You might find yourself in several at the same time, depending on what you're into. Now, here's the thing, is that God's story about Jesus is really the big story of the universe, right? And because we all live in the universe, right? We can't avoid that big story. That is the story behind all stories. It echoes in all the stories and cultures of the world. But it does so in such a way that it both fulfills them and subverts them or contradicts them. So it subverts them where they are outside of what God calls good and righteous and right and true. [ 4 : 30 ] And it fulfills them where their expectations are right and true and good. So if a culture values community, we find that actually true community is found in the people and kingdom of God. If a culture is particularly violent or sexualized, actually Jesus subverts that, doesn't he? Because it says actually the place for sexual fulfillment is in the marriage of a man and a woman. Now, it's worth noting that the idea is that in eternity, we're not all just in one kind of homogenous cultural bubble, but rather that all those cultures become inside of God's great story. It's interesting, isn't it? In Revelation 7, every tribe and language and nation are gathered before the throne. It's not that they're all speaking the same language or look the same as one another. Everybody is visibly different in eternity because the difference is not wrong. The difference is a reflection of who God is and how gloriously brilliant he is. There's a right sense, isn't there, that it is impossible for any one culture to represent a God who is so varied and glorious and wonderful. [ 5 : 39 ] It's impossible to express that in just one language or one skin color or one national background. But actually that the glory of God is best reflected in all of those things together, telling the story about who God is and what he's done.

And so eternity will be something like that, which looks a bit weird, doesn't it? But does that make sense? Does that help? Do we know what we're saying? So a few of you nodding, which is encouraging.

I might recommend my pictures to Dan Strange next time I speak to him. OK, so the question for us this evening then is having dealt with that sort of idea, which is the big idea of the book.

What then should we consume and watch and listen to and look at and join in with? Now, Dan in the book gives a really thoughtful two word answer.

Do you want to know, do you want to guess what his two word answer is to what you should watch? The first the first word is it. And it depends is his very thoughtful answer.

[ 6 : 46 ] It depends. And he says that this is really a very difficult question. And it's not really the main idea of his book. But I think it's one of the most helpful chapters as well in his book, particularly if you're trying to read it through with a young Christian who is trying to get to grips with these sorts of things for the first time.

He says that when we when we come to think about what we should consume, what we should watch, what we should listen to. There are at least four ideas that we need to keep in tension. The first one is this.

Number one, that removing ourselves from the world is impossible. Our response cannot be to not watch anything or not hear anything or not consume anything.

Christians down the years have tried to do that. But actually, it is impossible. We have to work. We have to buy food. We have to pay rent. We have to engage with the place in which we live. So the answer can't be watch nothing, consume nothing, no culture, because that is impossible.

That would involve leaving the world behind in some kind of really odd, unhelpful way. So number one, removing ourselves from the world is impossible. Number two, we care about discipleship.

[ 7 : 54 ] We care about our discipleship. We care about other people's discipleship. We want to honor Christ. In other words, we know and have to acknowledge that some things in the world are unhelpful for us.

That it's addictive, even. That God is not honored by them. That to consume them is to waste our time will lead us to being unhelpfully affected by it. And that matters.

So number two is that we know that things exist in a category that is unhelpful for me to go there category. But number three, we also care not just about discipleship, which is number two.

We care, number three, about the lost. We actually want to make sure that we engage and communicate the gospel clearly into the world in which we live. It's easy, isn't it, for people to lose

sight of this.

It's particularly, I think, easy for churches to lose sight of this. Our responsibility is to clearly communicate the gospel to people living in 2025, not 1925 or 1825.

[ 8 : 58 ] So we have a responsibility to understand the culture in which we live. The truth is that the lost are unlikely to be converted through a single gospel tract or a two-minute conversation from zero to 100 miles an hour.

They might be, but that would be extraordinary. Normally, it takes consistent, consecutive exposure to the gospel, which comes only through relationship.

And relationship involves moving into people's lives and communicating with them and sharing with them. So it's not just, is it, you know, caring about the lost is not just going and blurting the gospel out in two ways to live or four spiritual laws, but it's caring about people, caring about the cultures in which they inhabit, asking them questions so we know the stories that they tell, so we can build relationships that the Lord might use to expose them to the gospel.

Dan puts it like this in his book, actually in another chapter, but it's really helpful, so I'll read it to you. He says, you don't need to be an academic to get this. That's brilliant, isn't it? That's good news for all of us.

So we experience it every single day. 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 it's not for them.

[ 10 : 15 ] 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 is that the cultural air that 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 is not even an option to consider, much less one to accept.

This cultural change in air temperature affects the way we do evangelism. In 1989, with 29,000 others, I sat in the Crystal Palace football stadium on the front row to hear Billy Graham preach on the wealth of Solomon.

Do I think I'll be engaged in this kind of evangelistic opportunity again in my lifetime? Sadly, the answer is no. At every West Ham home game, as thousands approach the London Stadium, we pass a man standing on a box shouting out Bible verses through a megaphone.

Have I ever seen anyone engage with this man in any way? Sadly, the answer is no. Am I denying this man's faith or the power of the Spirit if I think there is a more effective ways to proclaim the gospel? To put it another way, and a little flippantly, we want to help people meet the VIP Jesus Christ.

[ 11 : 38 ] But there are these big scary bouncers getting in the way, all bald heads and neck tattoos. Nothing wrong with having a bald head, by the way. Until we can get past them, our introductions to Jesus can't be made.

And precisely what these bouncers are depends on a person's culture. So to effectively engage our friends with the gospel, to give them a reason they'll find reasonable, we need to understand exactly what their unspoken assumptions are and how we can get around them.

And to identify their assumptions, we have to understand their worldview. And how can we figure out what a person's worldview is? By looking at the cultural stories they consume and create.

This is really the sort of central idea in some ways in the book, is that we need to understand the world in which we live if we're going to communicate the gospel in the world in which we live. And it's interesting, I think even since this book was written, I think some of these cultural things have changed, haven't they?

So I think this cultural air is starting to blow in a slightly different direction. Whereas perhaps people thought that Jesus is a long way down their agenda. He's perhaps moved up a little in recent weeks, months, and perhaps the last few years.

[ 12 : 46 ] So yeah, we care about the lost. Number four, we care about Jesus' lordship over all things. Now this, I guess, is perhaps slightly more complicated, but the point is that this is Jesus' world.

All of the world belongs to Jesus. He is lord over all, even that which opposes him and contradicts him. And in order to make the gospel clear, we need to know, don't we, the world in which we live,

and we need to engage with it and demonstrate how Christ speaks in all the world to all things, showing Christians and non-Christians what Jesus says about the patterns of thought and the stories that we tell.

Now, Dan points out in his book that those four things should be good friends, right? These guys should hang out in the playground. They should play nicely with one another, is how he puts it. But oftentimes they fall out and they fight and wrestle against one another. So we can be all one of them and not another one. And so I just want you to talk with the person next to you just about which of those four friends you find it easier to get along with.

Does that make sense as a question? Which one of those things, those four things, do you find easiest? So Jesus' lordship over all things, this desire to engage culturally, carefully with the lost, our discipleship, stepping away, or removing ourselves from the world.

[14:08] Which one? Or not removing ourselves from the world, because that's impossible. Which of those do we find the most difficult? Talk to the person next to you, and we'll get back together in a moment. Oh, okay.

Easier. Sorry, yeah. Sorry, I said easier. Yeah. Okay, sorry to interrupt. We need to move on. I struggle to know exactly how to do this evening's talk, because I sort of wondered that there might just be, it might just be worth photocopying the chapter and just reading it out to you, because there's so much good stuff in it, and we don't have time to go through all of it in detail.

One of the things that he does in the chapter really helpfully, which I'm going to just kind of skirt through super quickly, is he goes through the solas of the Reformation. So scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, to God's glory alone.

And just sort of relates those to how we ask this cultural question about what we should consume, and what we should not consume. So scripture alone means that we need to be good at seeing how the big, deep story of the Bible applies to what we're watching.

Scripture is the explanation and exposure of God's mind, isn't it? It is in scripture that we get to see this big story of what God is doing. So it's not just that we need to read a lot of the Bible, it's that we need to see everything through the eyes of the Bible.

[15:33] Does that make sense? He quotes C.S. Lewis there to say that it's not, what does C.S. Lewis say? That the Bible or the gospel is the light by which I see all things.

So it's not just that it's the Bible that he's reading, but it's actually through that that he's understanding everything around him. Grace alone means that we need to remember, and perhaps some of us need to remember this particularly carefully, if we are tempted towards sort of pride or self-righteousness, is that we are not saved by only watching the right things, right?

Sinclair Ferguson puts it like this. He talks about the grammar of the gospel, okay? Do you know the difference between an indicative and an imperative, right? An indicative is a statement of truth. An imperative is a statement of action, something that we need to do, right? So an imperative is like put your shoes on. An indicative is a description of a truth about why shoes are good for your feet or something, right?

Okay, so, and Sinclair Ferguson talks to actually get in the gospel, it's about grammar. What we want to do is get in our minds, we want to put the imperatives before the indicative. So we want to say, oh, I obey Jesus, and then I experience salvation.

[16:48] But actually, it's the other way around, isn't it? I experience salvation, so therefore I want to obey, right? And so grace alone means I'm saved by grace. Therefore, I want in my cultural consumption to obey Jesus and bring glory to him.

Not so that he might save me, because I've already been saved. The grammar of the gospel means that one comes first, right? So I am saved already, and I want to express my delight in Jesus by pleasing him in the way that I consume culture.

And so we need to remember grace alone. Faith alone means that we should be spurred on to good works that include cultural endeavors. So God has given us works to do, good works that flow from this faith, which means that one of the things about culture is that we shouldn't just be people who consume culture, but we should be people who create culture too.

So we shouldn't just be listening to music, but some of us should be writing music. We shouldn't just be listening to other stories, but we should be telling stories. One of the things he says is that the reason that we get so hung up on this is because actually we live in a moment where Christians are so disengaged from culture that the cupboards are like meager and bare of things to consume.

Where's Tolkien writing Lord of the Rings anymore, or C.S. Lewis writing books anymore, or Handel's Messiah being written anymore? It's those kind of things. So there was a time where the rich cultural products were being produced by Christians.

[18:17] And so faith alone means that God is calling us to live in this world and to express who he's made us to be culturally so that we can write music and produce cultural artifacts which are good and good for others to consume.

Yeah, Christ alone means that while every story will point to him, still stories lead away from him, and that's dangerous. So we need to recognize that because the gospel is about Christ alone, there is a temptation to be pulled away from Christ alone, and we need to recognize that those things are dangerous and idolatrous.

Essentially, cultures without Christ are promoting other gods, aren't they? Whatever they might be. And God's glory alone, which is the final solar, means that you need to ask this very difficult question about whatever you watch, which is not should I or shouldn't I, which is that sort of looking for a law.

The better question to ask is will watching, consuming, listening to this bring glory to God? And if the answer is no, then you shouldn't do it because the world is about God's glory alone.

The gospel is about God's glory alone. So will watching bring glory to God? What he then goes on to suggest, which we're going to spend just a little bit of time on as we finish, are three C's to think about how we engage with culture.

[19:50] The first one is character. When you're answering the question, what should I watch, what shouldn't I watch, you need to understand that your character is different to another person's character.

The answer to that question might be different for one person than it is for another person. And Christians love to make up rules and judge each other, don't they? So you make a decision, I am not going to watch this because I think that will be unhelpful for me.

And then you find that Christian B is watching that. And so therefore you conclude that Christian B is not a good Christian because they're watching something that you would have decided not to watch. That's not necessarily the case.

We're all slightly different characters. Men and women are affected differently by what they watch. For example, young people and older people are slightly different. We're also prone to wander in different directions.

Now, I think we are prone to deceive ourselves, aren't we? Telling ourselves that we are unaffected when really you are being unhelpfully shaped by the cultural stories that we are watching or listening to.

[20:51] So what is our character? How easily led are we? Where are our temptations? So that's one character. The other is conscience. We're all wired differently. We all have different levels of sensitivity as well.

Notice this is what he says. I've put this quote on your handout. For Christians, conscience is our inner God-given witness and warning system. Scripture says that we are always to obey it and should not go against it.

You should not go against your conscience. So as a general rule, if watching something feels wrong, don't do it. Remember, too, that our freedom in Christ should not become a stumbling block for those whose conscience says differently.

So even if you can watch something with a clear conscience, don't start raving about it in front of a Christian whose conscience might be grieved by it. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good to build them up. Romans 15. Importantly, our conscience certainly is not an infallible guide. It can be overly sensitive and it can go rogue and be seared.

[22:01] I guess that means, doesn't it, when he says that, you know, what should we watch, what should we consume? It depends. The answer also is, you know already, right?

In a way. You just need to listen to what your conscience is telling you. If there's a part of you who knows that you shouldn't be doing it, you shouldn't be joining in, you shouldn't be going along, then, well, that's not always the final answer.

It's always wrong to go against that pricked conscience, isn't it? And then, finally, common sense. Dan points out that some judgment calls are quite easy, right? Money, sex and power are areas for constant vigilance.

We need to watch out that we don't get sucked into the world's way of thinking in those areas, areas which are so often corrupted by our culture, by every culture. But common sense doesn't just mean that we should look away or hit the fast forward button or walk out of the cinema at the obvious points, right?

So he talks a little bit about particularly the sexualized cultures in which we live and that we should avoid the unhelpful parts of those where possible. And you can read his book to find out more about that.

[ 23 : 04 ] But he tells us something which is much more subtle as well, which I thought was really helpful. And so, again, I've got this on your handout and I'll read it to you. Most Christians are rightly concerned about the increasing sexualization of our culture.

But what about the sentimentalization of our culture? Sentimentality is emotional self-indulgence. So that what you feel becomes most important.

We often see it in the public reaction to the death of a celebrity. While apparently well-meaning, sentimentality is actually selfish. It directs our emotions to our own emotions.

So we are always the main character of our story. Although it pretends to care for the other, it really only cares for the self. The other merely becomes a means to an end, feeling something.

Sentimentality allows us to experience shared public emotional expression without the commitment of real life relationships. As such, sentimentality is simplistic.

[ 24 : 08 ] It leaves little room for nuance, complexity and fortitude. The sentimental world consists of clear cuts of goodies and baddies, victims and perpetrators. Every situation demands an immediate answer.

That's interesting, isn't it? Haven't we seen that in the Charlie Kirk situation and the response to that sentimentality? Experiencing shared public emotion, which leaves little room for nuance, complexity and fortitude.

Now, doesn't this describe a myriad of reality TV shows and kids comedies on the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon? We might think these types of shows are pretty innocent for us and our kids because they aren't full of sex, swearing and violence.

But they are sickly sentimental and have a rotting effect because they present a fantastical fake world which encourages us to feel in cliches. Or consider the greatest showman.

At one level, it's a family film with a feel-good message and a catchy soundtrack. But its feel-goodness is part of the problem. It's all too easy. Things get patched up far too quickly with an emotional song as the characters go back to dancing with CGI tigers at the end.

[ 25 : 19 ] Real life is messier. I hope it's a really helpful discussion in the book that he engages with, with this sentimentality and how it goes on in lots of different areas.

And what he shouts at the TV in front of his children to make them aware of it so that they don't just get consumed by it. But we need to be conscious, don't we, that there are different areas of our culture which are particularly anti-God and difficult.

Now, I've got a case study for you to talk about just as we finish. Graham, or insert generic name of somebody not in the room or not somebody that we perhaps know, is a young Christian who is beginning to think through the music he listens to.

He's begun to become conscious of the fact that much of the music he listens to has sexualized themes. How do you help him use what we thought through about tonight to help him?

Okay, talk to the person next to you. Think how you might help Graham. And then we'll share our answers. Pray. And we'll finish there.

[ 26 : 28 ] Go for it. Our time is gone, really. So we've probably not got enough time to help Graham in lots of detail. Does anyone want to share what they thought?

What would you say to him? Any thoughts? Any thoughts? I mean, you're all so helpful.

I know that I'm going to come to you with my troubles. Yes. So there is a sense in which the very asking of the question means that he has begun to, his conscience is being remoulded and reshaped, in a good way.

Right. Right. According to the word, he just knows that he's just aware of the word. Yes. Yes.

It's easy to ask him perhaps some questions to draw out from him. yes yeah and why that might be wrong what is it saying about sex that's true and good what's he saying about sex which is wrong and helpful yeah great yes yes yes yeah that's great yeah the asking the why question is a really helpful why is it the unconscious that what is it about it that you think is unhelpful yeah do you want to say something that seth said yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah what does give god glory yeah i think it is interesting is it if someone becomes a christian um and their idols become very distasteful to them in a really helpful way don't they begin to see the sort of where i um say jeremiah describes sin doesn't it is turning to systems broken and dry you know that you go to things for satisfaction and they don't actually give it to you and the more as you grow as a christian the more you realize that the stuff that you were drinking and consuming for satisfaction is actually no longer providing it for you and that's a good opportunity for discipleship and learning and growth yeah um yeah and i think you you might want to say right okay let's let's pull apart one of those songs let's have a look at what is it actually saying what's it saying it's true what's it saying that's not true what's it saying that jesus would say yes to or what is it saying that is desiring something which is actually only ever found in the lord jesus i think particularly sometimes in like parenting or whatever you can give her like a right you know no more kind of thing without actually ever asking the you know the bigger question about what's the story that's being told and beginning to help people understand that and see through it yeah great i have one copy of the book left so if anybody wants a copy you can come and see me at the end and get a copy but i'm going to pray for us and we're going to close there so let's pray heavenly father we live in a confusing and complicated world where although we are sinful and the world is full of sinful people yet in your common grace there are your fingerprints all over this world still so lord we want to pray that you would help us to work our way navigating our lives through this place help us to take seriously our discipleship that we want to grow as christians but also help us to take seriously this responsibility that we have to communicate the gospel clearly to the day in which we live lord we we thank you for christian brothers and sisters who've come alongside us over the years and and helped us to see these things clearly and we pray ultimately that living like this for your praise and your glory might lead to others beginning to hear and understand the gospel that you might open their eyes to the glory of jesus as we were thinking about in the beginning as we pray in his name amen amen amen you