



Engaging Culture

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

- Romans 12:2

Christian Living

Have you ever wondered what the Bible has to say about social media? Or how Jesus would have responded to any of the other hot topics in our culture? Frankly, the Bible has a lot more to say about farming than it does about social media. Yet, we know that God's Word was given to show us how to live not just in the age of Jesus, but in every age following. Romans 12:2 reminds us that we are not to look like the world, but rather to have our minds renewed that we might learn the will of God. Indeed, John 17:16 quotes Jesus as saying, "they are not of the world, even as I am not of it," about his followers. So we know that while we live in this world, we are "not of the world" and are not to conform to it either. But how does this play out in our daily lives?

What We're Up Against

The average American college student faces many challenges in answering the call of being in the world but not of it. We find ourselves in conflict with the culture on everything from our sexual ethic, to how we handle alcohol, and even where we find our identity. Our college culture, and indeed the culture of our world, is always trying to form us in more ways than we can fathom. Some of these ways are obvious, like violent and sexually graphic television or music that glorifies a sinful lifestyle. But what about gossip or influencers who always tell us to have the latest brand name clothes or resources? Or how about the way we spend hours scrolling through social media, or how we confront someone over text messages rather than waiting to speak face-to-face? Our modern world is filled with intricate social structures and phenomena that aren't specifically mentioned in Scripture, but are all deeply formative in how we follow Jesus.

If you feel the argument of: "wait a minute, not everything has to be bad all the time" argument welling up inside you, please pause for just a minute. I'm not trying to say that taking a selfie is a sin, or that you need to delete your Netflix. As Christians we are not called to live totally separate from the world, yet it is important to be cognizant of the ways we are being formed by the culture. If we simply avoid the culture, it holds us back from the goal of reaching those who do not yet know the Lord! Instead, we need to think critically about how to engage with culture without compromising our witness. We are also not called to be antagonistic towards culture. It is too easy to point out problems from the outside without stepping into the world to offer solutions and care in the midst of brokenness. We are called to look different because we are citizens of a different Kingdom!

Even still, we must point out perhaps the *most* common danger for our generation of Christians: falling into the alluring trap of relevance. We all feel social pressure to connect with people and no one wants to be considered strange or elitist or judgmental or lame. Relevance draws us in with thoughts of, 'everyone else watches it' or 'they won't listen to me if we can't relate over anything!' However these arguments are just a rationalization for indulging our own desires. Walking this line of thinking and questioning, 'how harmful can it be?' minimizes God's call to holiness. All of a sudden, Christians who are called to be the prophetic voice in the brokenness of a culture are participating in it along with the very people they're trying to welcome into the Kingdom of God.



What Then Are We To Do?

So, we are not called to live separate from culture, but neither are we called to love it. But what then are we called to? We know that Jesus lived a radically pure and self-sacrificial life, yet he also entered into some of the most rejected and sinful subgroups of society. Somehow, he formed those places rather than being formed by them. Jesus was neither separate from, nor part of those cultures - he was *countercultural*.

Gabe Lyons, in his book *The Next Christians*, points out that those who live counter-culturally like Jesus:

“...see themselves as salt, preserving agents actively working for restoration in the middle of a decaying culture. ... They understand that by being restorers they fight against the cultural norms and often flow counter to the cultural tide. But they feel that, as Christians, they’ve been called to partner with God in restoring and renewing everything they see falling apart.”

We are the salt of the earth, and our call is to be restorers and renewers. We must learn to discern what is good, what is not, and to pursue holiness.

Sin Is Sin

How do we enter into culture with the hope of redeeming it, yet not be swayed by it? The first and obvious point is to know and avoid sin. Not just the “large” sins, like murder/theft/adultery, but also the sins we consider not as dangerous. We may find ourselves indulging in things like watching or reading pornography, swearing, gossiping, or underage drinking. You may think underage drinking is no big deal, but when God tells you to obey laws, your underage drinking is not just casual – it is sin.

Patrick Lencioni reminds us of the truth behind our worldly ranking of sins:

“...which brings me to a powerful truth that I easily and often forget: **every sin is a sin**. None of it is good, and all of it, in every form, can corrupt us. I love the saying “whether a bird is tethered by a chain or a piece of twine, it still can’t fly.” We must face the fact that the secular world – the one that is the theater of the prince of darkness – will be happy to see us tied down by twine. It/he hopes that we will be falsely comforted by the idea that ‘it is only twine.’”

This can be a hard truth to live out. The smaller sins seem so innocuous but we have to face the truth, even if every sin isn’t necessarily equal in earthly consequence, they *all* hold us back from the freedom that God desires for us. They lead to death, and we are called to repent of and cease them *all*. We can’t have our secret sins in the Kingdom of God. Living in the Kingdom of God means that we submit our lives, in every small decision, under the rule and reign of God. In other words, we don’t have the right to decide something is okay when God has said it isn’t. It’s as simple as that.

But What If It’s Not Sin?

There’s more than sin to confront in the question of how to consume culture, right? What about the gray areas? Hebrews 12:1 says to, “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Even if something is not a sin, it can *hinder* our accomplishment of the life Christ has called us to.

Philippians 4:8-9 has the same encouragement with a positive spin: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”

Is the culture you are consuming helping you to think about true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable things? Or is it hindering you from running the race God has set before you?

Maybe this needs to be more specific. Consider how these things may be forming you: Is that movie going to help you think of pure things? Is cursing helping your witness? Are hours alone playing video

games or binge-watching shows drawing you into deeper community? Is the time you are spending on Instagram or TikTok forming you to look more like Jesus? These little things that we consider to be so inconsequential can actually begin to corrode our sense of God's purpose and desire for our life.

What if these small things, even more than the sins we can name, are holding us back from making an impact in our relationships and our community?

Why It's Worth It

Reevaluating how we engage with our culture can have a positive impact on different aspects of our lives. In our relationship with God, it can help us to recognize and eliminate sin, ultimately leading to a greater sense of freedom and intimacy with the Lord. In our relationship with others, confronting our engagement with culture can help us to let go of behaviors that hinder our ability to form genuine connections and to love others as we are called to do. Finally, the way we engage with culture can also have a significant impact on our witness to the lost. When we choose to look different and live by God's standards, we demonstrate to the world that a life in Him is worth far more than a life in the world. This, in turn, can offer hope to others that there is something better than what they currently know.

This is Jesus' invitation to all of us, to live in the world but not to be formed by it. Jesus is inviting us to look beautifully different from the culture and in doing so, to live in a way that showcases the radiance of Christ to a world in desperate need of His eternal hope.

Relevant Scriptures

Psalms 141:4

...Don't let my heart be drawn to what is evil

1 Corinthians 3:19

... For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight

Colossians 2:8

...See to it that no one takes you captive by empty deceit.

Jeremiah 10:2

...Do not learn the way of the nations.

Questions For Discussion

1. Where do you find yourself most tempted to look like the culture?
2. What might be things that aren't sin but fall under the "hindrance" category?
3. What do you think it means to "take up your cross" on an average day?
4. Have you ever been inspired by someone who lived differently from the rest of your friends/community? What was it about them that inspired you?

Application: It is important to turn our understanding into actions. This week, fast from something you engage with regularly (TV, secular music, Instagram, TikTok) that you think may be hindering you from the race God has set before you. Fill that time with praying or reading His Word. When we refocus our brains on truth, these cultural lies or hindrances become more apparent and we can begin to submit our desires to the Holy Spirit's transforming power!

Recommended Reading:

Beautiful Resistance by Jon Tyson

Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis

The Next Christians by Gabe Lyons

