



Cross Before Culture

The culture of the Cross must inform all cultures. Where the Cross and culture are compatible (since all culture is the collective expression of God's image within a people group), both can be embraced. Where the Cross and culture clash (since all cultures have been infected by sin), the servant leader must side and stand courageously by the Cross.

Thinking about culture is like trying to cram a ten pound ham into a five pound bag. One text book on culture identifies over 160 definitions of culture found in other texts. As with pornography, we know culture when we see it, but we really have a hard time defining it.

For our purposes, let's define culture as the ocean of ideas within which we swim and move and have our being. Culture conditions everything we think, say or do. In fact, even the ways that we go about thinking, saying and doing cultural studies (e.g. cultural anthropology) are themselves the product of culture.

Why the wide diversity of cultures? Cultures allow humans to adapt to local ecologies; many people, widely scattered over the face of the planet, generated differentiated cultures accordingly. In some cultures, collectivism is a necessary virtue (e.g., the !Kung bushmen) whereas in other climes, entrepreneurial capitalism thrives (e.g., Mary Kay cosmetics in North Dallas). Which is "right?" Well, both are, of course, relative to local conditions. Some cultures walk dogs, others wok them. In the wrong context, one person would be charged with having an inordinate affection for a luncheon meat--and another might find himself in jail.

Our conundrum is this: if culture colors our vision of everything, it must color our vision of Jesus. Does that mean that the "meaning" of Christ changes according to the cultural context? Given the fact that Chinese and Americans have different interpretations of the "meaning" of dog, does it not necessarily follow that they will have different interpretations of the Bible? More importantly, is one of them wrong? Most importantly, could both of them be partly right?

Western, conservative, evangelical exegesis virtually demands that each text (or pericope) have a single meaning. Ideally, then, a Chinese exegete should find exactly the same meaning in the text as the American exegete. Sometimes this is true--especially if the Chinese exegete was trained in an American seminary. But other times two equally God-fearing persons will find different meanings--or shades of meaning--in the same text. Does meaning reside in the text or in the culture? Does meaning reside in each person?

Is it time to panic? If cultures are valid human expressions that aid in local adaptation, and if cultural values vary between cultures, aren't we stuck in the sticky morass of relativism? Aren't we forced to conclude that "meaning" in the text is relative and not absolute? In a word, no.

First, we must remember that culture is a human construct. Frogs, spearmint-flavored Chiclets and fruit flies don't form cultures because culture is a distinctly human activity. In turn, humans

alone are image bearers of God; we have God-like qualities, including creativity, intelligence, aesthetic appreciation, etc. Thus, culture, is a reflection of the person and nature of God. Perhaps even the Trinity represents the ultimately inclusive culture.

Second, we must remember that God is bigger than culture. The sinless God-Man Christ is above all humanity and culture is a human expression. When humans sinned, they infected all of creation, including culture. All cultures have values, many of them good. But all cultures are also evil to the extent that they fall short of God's standards. As finite, fallen creatures, we cannot help but view Christ through the imperfect lenses of culture. But we cannot let our cultural lenses distort the image of Christ. We do this if we think that the only valid view of Christ is the one our culture champions, or if the Christ is merely the sum total of human observations about him. Whether we're talking about the Big Hair Prosperity Gospel we find on American television, or the gun-slinging theo-Marxism of South American barrios, we must not mistakenly dress Christ in a white linen suit or put a Kalishnikov in his hands because our worldview tells us to do so.

Perhaps, then, the problem is also a solution. If there are many cultures and only one Christ, and if each culture only has a partial view of the person and work of Christ, then the multiplicity of cultural perspectives gives us the best overall view of him. Perhaps this explains why the end of history will witness the gathering of "every nation, tribe and tongue" around the throne of the Lamb. Nothing less than the totality of human expression will suffice for worship.

But there is another danger. The reality is that Christ is also a rock of offense to each and every culture. While we rightly look to all cultures as a means to help us fully appreciate the person and work of Christ, we cannot hide behind the skirts of multiculturalism as an excuse to not speak out against what is wrong in our culture or in others.

In arrogance, Western cultures historically "proved" the rightness of their societies and condemned non-Western ones from a "biblical" perspective, employing a distinctly Western exegesis. Today we hold an opposing arrogance: only Western culture is wrong. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, exploitation of the poor and all of the other sins which characterize human sin are not the exclusive domain of any culture. We are all victims, and we are admonished by Christ to forgive all who oppress us. And we are all victimizers, which is why we all need to repent to each other and God in humility.

The old Hindu proverb describes several blind men each holding a different part of an elephant. The one holding the trunk thought it a snake; the one grasping the leg believed he held a tree in his hands. The meaning of the proverb is that each person only has access to a limited amount of information, and though each perception was equally reasonable, each was equally wrong. None beheld the larger reality.

To view Christ as transcendent is risky business, and to speak against one's own culture when it contradicts the teachings of Christ is downright dangerous. Throughout history, Christ's disciples were called to stand against the evil resident in their own cultures as the cost of following him--often at the cost of their lives. We must esteem Christ higher than culture if we ever hope to

escape the prison of perception that culture represents. The gospel is a transcultural reality that will redeem all cultures as the Kingdom unfolds. But that redemption, under the guiding hand of God's sovereignty, only takes place as each of us views Christ as more important than culture.