

“As Western culture abandons more and more of its Judeo-Christian roots, it is becoming ever more important to think carefully about how to respond. Daniel Strange offers both theological reasons for learning such skills and practical guidance for getting there.”

**D. A. CARSON**, President, The Gospel Coalition; Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“A clear and practical challenge to engage in sharing the gospel in our culture. Inspiring and biblical. Buy *Plugged In* today and apply the truth in these pages to your everyday context.”

**GAVIN CALVER**, Director of Mission, Evangelical Alliance; Chair of Spring Harvest

“Without sacrificing depth or nuance, Daniel Strange makes cultural engagement accessible to the layman. *Plugged In* is a fun read, traversing diverse cultural landscapes. And what’s more, he shows how each of these carries its own theological challenge, and how we can respond as Christians in ways that are winsome and gracious, rather than crusty and insular.”

**TED TURNAU**, Author, *Popologetics*

“Whatever your take on the relationship between Christianity and culture, I encourage you to hear Dan’s brilliant contribution to this important discussion.”

**KRISH KANDIAH**, Founding Director, Home for Good

“This book is both thought-provoking and practical. Daniel Strange skilfully guides the reader on a journey to both confront and connect with what they see around them in the media, film and television. A much-needed book!”

**NOLA LEACH**, Chief Executive, CARE

“A compelling, biblically rich and decidedly practical guide to engaging Christianly with culture. I’m excited about putting it into the hands or onto the tablets of the rising generations.”

**MEL LACY**, Director, Growing Young Disciples

“In this gem of a book, seasoned author Daniel Strange manages what few people could do. He pre-digests the unwieldy and complex realm of culture studies and makes it unaffectedly clear. Most of all he tells us why we should care about engaging culture, and he makes crucial suggestions for how to do that. All of it is in a writing style that is full of imagination, enviably lucid, down-home without being folksy. This will be the go-to text for years, even decades, to come.”

**WILLIAM EDGAR**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“It’s vital we think about how being a Christian shapes the way we interact with the culture around us, and I know of no better guide than *Plugged In*. Dan Strange provides both a biblical framework and practical nuts-and-bolts tools, and shows how culture can be a great starting point for speaking of Christ with our friends and colleagues. I warmly commend it.”

**TIM CHESTER**, Faculty member, Crosslands Training; Author, *Enjoying God*

“A fresh, generous and humorous look at how we can engage with culture intentionally, enjoyably and effectively. Years of reflecting and teaching on this topic have enabled Dan Strange to distil his best insights down to this small but deceptively sharp and persuasive book. The modern church needs tools like this. I recommend it wholeheartedly.”

**RICHARD CUNNINGHAM**, Director, UCCF: the Christian Unions

“Dan Strange helps us to ‘stop and think’: to consider all that we see and hear and do through the lens of Scripture. This book is designed to equip this generation of Christ’s people to engage faithfully with the culture around us for God’s glory.”

**SHARON JAMES**, The Christian Institute

Daniel Strange



# PLUGGED IN



the good book  
COMPANY

*Dedicated to Bill (Edgar) and Ted (Turnau)  
for being both mentors and friends  
on this excellent adventure.*

Plugged In

*Connecting your faith with what you watch, read, and play*

© Daniel Strange 2019

Published by:

The Good Book Company



[thegoodbook.com](http://thegoodbook.com) | [www.thegoodbook.co.uk](http://www.thegoodbook.co.uk)

[thegoodbook.com.au](http://thegoodbook.com.au) | [thegoodbook.co.nz](http://thegoodbook.co.nz) | [thegoodbook.co.in](http://thegoodbook.co.in)

Unless indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 2011 Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

ISBN: 9781909919419 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

# CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Timothy Keller</i>	7
Introduction	11
1. What culture is (and why you should care)	19
2. The story of culture	39
3. Culture as story	59
4. “Can I watch...?”	77
5. Confront and connect: the theory	95
6. Confront and connect: in practice	105
7. Your turn: cultural engagement for disciples	117
Here are some I prepared earlier...	141
Endnotes	183
Acknowledgements	191

# FOREWORD

BY TIMOTHY KELLER

I once heard one of my professors tell a story about Paul Tillich, a German theologian who was very prominent in academic circles. When my professor was a young faculty member at a seminary in the United States, he was given the task of moderating the discussion after a public lecture by Tillich. Students began asking questions, but each time, the guest lecturer completely reformulated and “corrected” the question before answering it.

Finally my professor summoned some courage and said, “Professor Tillich, that wasn’t really the student’s question. Could you answer the question the student actually asked?” The response was quick and withering: “No, because they aren’t asking the right questions.” Maybe that was partly true, my professor concluded, but the result of this tactic was that the students completely tuned out and dismissed Tillich.

Dan Strange knows that contemporary Christians are a lot like that ineffective lecturer. We believe “Jesus is the answer,” but we are so deaf to the cultural forces around us that we often present him as answering

questions that people are not asking. Of course, because of sin, human beings do fail to ask the most fundamental question of all: “How can I, a sinner, be made right with a holy and just God?” And yet, as Dan shows in this book, the image of God in all people and common grace mean that people also ask some right questions: “Who am I? What is meaning in life? How can I find true joy and fulfillment?”

Every culture produces “texts”—things to watch, read, and play—that are based on answers to those big questions. Dan Strange shows us, in the most accessible way I’ve ever seen, how to do Christian cultural analysis. That is, he shows us how to identify the culture’s particular answers to those big questions in any text. Then he demonstrates how to both critique those answers and yet affirm the basic aspirations, and finally how to redirect people toward Christ as the true fulfillment of their quests and the true answer to their questions.

The basic method used here is one formulated by some 20th-century missiologists. The name “subversive fulfillment” perfectly describes the approach. Christians are to show members of other religions and world-views that the gospel fulfills basic human longings and aspirations, but at the same time they are to critique the false idols in every culture that people look to for the satisfaction of those longings. Subversive fulfillment avoids the twin errors of syncretism and irrelevance. Sin must not just be denounced in general, but in the particular idolatrous forms found in the culture.

Salvation must not just be declared in general, but as fulfilling the very hopes that the culture wrongly puts in its idols.

In *Plugged In*, Dan Strange takes this method, brings it into the 21st century, and makes it wonderfully useable for any reader. Dan convincingly shows that this is the way Paul preached. But the approach is not merely a strategy for evangelistic conversations (though it certainly is that). Dan shows that it is also a way for Christians to understand the world they live in and the cultural texts that are coming at them every day, so that they can live faithfully “in the world but not of it.”

Even more, Dan is calling for subversive fulfillment to pervade our approach to all our communicating—in public preaching and teaching, personal shepherding, instructing, and conversing. It means never simply beating on people from the outside, saying, “I am right and you are completely wrong.” Nor is it merely a way to show how up-to-date and relevant Christianity is. It involves both respecting and contradicting. It means challenging people, but showing them that their efforts fail on their own terms. And it means offering them, on gospel terms, what all human hearts rightly need—a meaning that suffering can’t take away; a satisfaction not based on circumstances; a freedom that doesn’t destroy love and community; an identity that doesn’t elude you, crush you, or lead you to exclude others; a basis for justice that doesn’t turn you into a new oppressor; a relief from shame and guilt without resorting to relativism; and a hope that can enable you to face anything with poise, even death.



There are now plenty of books calling us to find new ways of connecting our gospel presentation to the needs and questions of people in a secular, pluralistic society. And there are plenty of other books calling for us to live faithfully in a post-Christian Western culture, neither simply withdrawing nor assimilating into it. But Dan's book *Plugged In* actually tells and shows us how to do it. There really is nothing else like the book now in your hands.

# INTRODUCTION

**W**e live in a world of constant information. Just think about your day so far. Here's how my morning looked...

Alarm turns on the radio: government minister being grilled over education policy.

Walk the dog, headphones firmly in, listening to a film-review podcast.

Make the kids packed lunches with radio in background, trying to stop our youngest from activating Alexa and playing the Power Rangers theme tune at ear-bleeding levels. (Tell me: Why is it, when I shout, "Alexa, stop", she doesn't, but when my kids tell her to stop, she immediately does?)

Scan the news app: politics, economy, sport, economy, politics.

Check the weather app: rain.

I've only been awake for forty-five minutes and already my senses have been subjected to a barrage of information.

Technology experts have stated that the amount of recorded information generated from the dawn of humanity to 2003 was in the order of 5 exabytes of data, where an exabyte indicates 1000000000000000000 bytes. From 2003 to 2010, we generated an additional 5 exabytes. By 2018, 90% of the world's data had been generated in the previous two years alone. When you consider that 400 hours of new video is uploaded to YouTube every minute, it's hardly surprising. That's a lot of prank videos to get through.

## TELLING STORIES

But people don't take on information as bytes. Our smartphones might be downloading bytes of information, but our brains aren't—the unit our minds and hearts operate in is stories. Now when I say "stories", I don't mean the sort of stories you were taught to write in school, with a beginning, a middle and an end (usually a very predictable one). These stories are all the experiences, feelings, imagination and ideas that we communicate from one human being to another. We read them in the newspaper, we watch them in the cinema, we hear them sung from the car stereo, we glance at them on Instagram, we frame them in our homes.

All of us spend a lot of our waking moments taking in, and telling, these cultural stories. Recent research showed that the average American consumes over ten hours of media every day. It's thought that you'll spend seven and a half years of your life watching TV, and over five years on social media. But there are so many hours

in a day, right? No wonder that it's been said of the TV-streaming service Netflix that their greatest competition isn't another company but the human need for sleep.

Yet many of us find this barrage of information overwhelming, at least some of the time. We feel like the title of the old 1940's Rodgers and Hart song: "Bewitched, bothered and bewildered". Search engines have given us access to more information than the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ever could (if you're too young to know what this is—google it!), but we are never sure that we have the right answer.

All this information presents us with a problem: how do we know what's true? So we look for an authority we can rely on. By and large, most people still seem to have a deep-seated desire to trust people and institutions. We want our athletes to be dope free and our sports administrators not to succumb to a bribe. Some of us nostalgically remember when kids could play on the street, and when we could go and buy milk from the corner shop without locking the front door. But now we can't read a news story online without wondering whether it's a fake. It seems that our social-media diets are dictated either by clever algorithms or sinister corporations.

For Christians, there's an added question: how do we know what's *right*? As followers of Jesus, we want to think, speak and act in a way that honours him. We want to "set [our] minds on things above" (Colossians 3 v 2), but in reality, most of the time our minds are submerged in a constant stream of stories. The problem is not that these cultural stories are bad in and of themselves; it's

more that we're ill-equipped to know quite what to make of them. How does what I watch on a Saturday night link with what I hear at church on a Sunday morning? We barely begin to think about it before the next thing starts on autoplay. So more often, we just don't.

I'm no different, and I think about this kind of stuff for a living. Moral ambiguity abounds. A while ago I read an interview with Miley Cyrus, the Disney-star turned global pop icon. On the one hand I read, "I am literally open to every single thing that is consenting and doesn't involve an animal and everyone is of age. Everything that's legal, I'm down with. Yo, I'm down with any adult—anyone over the age of 18 who is down to love me. I don't relate to being boy or girl, and I don't have to have my partner relate to boy or girl." However, towards the end of interview she started describing her homeless charity: "I can't drive by in my [expletive] Porsche and not [expletive] do something. I see it all day: people in their Bentleys and their Rolls and their Ubers, driving past these [veterans] who have fought for our country, or these young women who have been raped. I was doing a show two nights ago ... dressed like a butterfly. How is that fair? How am I so lucky?"<sup>1</sup>

What's my reaction? How do I reconcile Miley's sexual philosophy with her sense of social justice? Do I laugh? Do I cry? Do I rage? Do I just sit in stunned silence? Do I do all the above? Or maybe all I can do is emoji: 😞

Using old-fashioned words, a recent poem by Anthony Thwaite seems to express how many of us feel. He describes the poem as "a weary sigh by an old man".

Oh dear  
 How many times these days I say those words,  
 Muttering them quietly under my breath  
 Or petulantly as the telephone rings  
 Or shocked at some reported piece of news  
 Or simply as a constant formula  
 For things that pass by daily, and are gone  
 Into the nowhere that life seems to be  
 Day after day, as if unceasingly.  
 Too soft to be an expletive, too repetitive  
 To have distinction, more sigh than cry of rage,  
 How many times these days I say those words  
 And may well say them till the day I die  
 When everything's worn out and stiff with age  
 And I have nothing else to say but 'Why?'<sup>2</sup>

In short, when we look around, we might have a "Keep calm and carry on" poster on our wall, but we're not particularly calm and we are finding it increasingly difficult to carry on.

### THREE REACTIONS

If you've been a Christian for a while, then chances are that you've heard the old cliché that we need to be "in the world but not of the world". But what does that even mean? Or perhaps you've read the bit where Peter tells us to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3 v 15), but you're scared that someone might actually ask you, because you wouldn't know what to say. What if it was someone like Miley?

So what do we do? I think many Christians respond to culture in one of three ways (and the rest of us respond in a mixture of all three).

Some of us just want to “*look in*”. We stick our heads in the sand, get into our holy huddle and Christian bubble, and hang on for dear life. We put our fingers in our ears so that we can’t hear the noise outside, while at the same time singing loudly to one another about Jesus coming back soon when all the outside stuff will go away. Until then, we keep ourselves safe from worldly influences by only ever reading Amish romance novels or the latest releases from our favourite celebrity pastor. If we were in therapy, this would be called our sanctified “flight” response.

Some of us instinctively “*lash out*”. This is our sanctified “fight” response. We get all huffy, red-faced and finger-pointy at the culture around us. Or we just tut and roll our eyes at sex scenes in films or the bad language on TV. At its worst, our healthy belief in judgment turns into an ugly judgmentalism. Our proclamation of the good news of Jesus is heard as a rant on morality. And then we wonder why people “out there” don’t want to come and be with us “in here”.

Then, some of us end up “*looking like*”. Whatever the motivation, our lives—and our cultural diets—are indistinguishable from the neighbour’s next door, and our churches end up looking not much different from the local sports club. Maybe it’s a well-intentioned drive to be “relevant”. Maybe it’s a reaction against judgmentalism. Maybe it’s simply an indulgence of our sinful nature. Whatever it is, we struggle to be recognised as “a chosen

people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Peter 2 v 9). We have become experts at conforming "to the pattern of this world" when we've expressly been told not to (Romans 12 v 2).

Look in, lash out, look like: which response are you most prone to?

## ENGAGE

Let me suggest that there is another way—and that's what this book is all about. Because it is possible to be truly "in" the world instead of "looking in"—without being "of" the world and looking like it.

It's possible to engage with culture in a way that's truthful and gracious, not angry and self-righteous.

It's possible to consume culture without either being bewitched by it—buying into everything it tells us—or bewildered by it.

It's possible to watch TV and read novels and play video games in a way that actually feeds our faith rather than withers it.

It's even possible for you—yes, you—to be that person who starts off talking to a friend about last night's football and ends up talking about Jesus.

And that's what this book will equip you to do. It will help you to process the cultural stories you hear every day. I want to give you the confidence to think about and speak about culture in a way that points people to a bigger and better reality: the story of King Jesus and his cosmic plan for this world. Because you can't escape culture. But you can engage culture.





# 1. WHAT CULTURE IS (AND WHY YOU SHOULD CARE)

**A**s you might have guessed from the front cover, this is a book about engaging with culture. But what is “culture”, exactly? It’s a notoriously difficult term to define and has a complicated history.

If you’re into etymology (the study of words and where they come from), it’s helpful to know that the original word “culture” has three senses coming from its Latin roots. *Colere*, referring to agriculture. That’s about tilling the ground and growing things. *Colonus*, which is to do with the idea of inhabiting something. And finally *cultus*, which is to do with honour and worship. Store these away for now because we’ll come back to them later.

Today, we use the term “culture” in different ways, mainly as a reflection of the way it’s been passed around between various academic disciplines.

## THE “ARTS” DEFINITION

Coming from the arts and literature, “culture” is still associated with the idea of refined taste and manners.

It's about *being* "cultured". So Rupert (a.k.a. "Rups"), who goes punting in Oxford with a picnic and Pimms, reading P. G. Wodehouse out loud to his friends, before going to play cricket and then spend a night at the opera, is being cultured. Garry (a.k.a "Gaz") going for a kick around in the park and then down Southend seafront to cruise in his Ford Escort and pick up a kebab and girl from Tots nightclub is *not* being cultured: he's uncouth! By this definition, culture has a definite sense of "oughtness": there are things that belong to culture, and other things that definitely do not.

Of course, if you're reading this and you're not British, then those descriptions of Rups and Gaz might have made little sense to you, because you're from a different... well, *culture*. Which takes us on to our next definition...

### THE "SOCIAL SCIENCES" DEFINITION

Then the social sciences took ownership. Here, the definition of "culture" is less elitist and broader in its scope. All human beings *belong* to a culture, and every culture brings its own distinctive contribution. Moreover, culture doesn't refer to just one part of our existence, such as the arts. Instead it refers to every activity and artefact that humans create—both individually and as communities and societies—which gives them order, identity and meaning. It's everything from music and stories to what you eat and what you wear (and when); from what happens at a wedding to whether it's socially acceptable to whistle in the street or not. It covers the ordinary and the everyday.

While not as elitist as the “arts” definition of culture, in this “social sciences” view, it was, and still is, possible to claim that some cultures have more to contribute to human existence than others. Distinctions might be made between “primitive” or “advanced” cultures, or between “high” culture and “pop” culture. Of course, such distinctions are up for debate and can be controversial.

For example, measure your reaction in our current cultural setting to this comment of General Charles James Napier in the 1850s. As Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in colonial India, he said the following when Hindu priests complained to him about the ban on *sati*, the practice of burning widows alive on their husband’s funeral pyres:

Be it so. This burning of widows is your custom: prepare the funeral pile. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them, and confiscate all their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned, when the widow is consumed. Let us all act according to national customs.<sup>3</sup>

It’s safe to say that no Foreign Office spokesperson would say that today. Our reactions to General Napier demonstrate changes in cultural sensibilities in the intervening 160 years. We appear to be far more reluctant today to make *prescriptions* about cultural practices—that is, judging whether something is right or wrong. Instead we prefer to stick to *descriptions* of cultural practices, which carry no value judgements. This

is the social-science way of doing things. However, this alleged neutrality does grate with our daily experience and natural instincts. We say we “don’t want to judge” and “each to their own”, but deep down we don’t find it easy to separate facts and values. Something within us wants to give our opinion on *sati* (or give our opinion on Napier’s opinion on *sati*!).

### THE “CULTURAL STUDIES” DEFINITION

In the last 50 years, “cultural studies” has become an academic discipline all to itself. It’s a pretty complex area which draws on all kinds of other fields of study, most noticeably semiotics: the study of signs and symbols and how we interpret them. Cultural studies is interested in the subjects of power and politics, and how these relate to ethnicity, class, age and gender.

Part of what makes it complicated is the recognition that cultures are not static, fixed and separated “things” but are fluid, evolving and interconnected. It’s confusing and messy because the world is confusing and messy. Culture and cultural studies are about identity—how it’s defined and, more importantly, by whom. And cultural theorists use all kinds of complicated terms that you may never have heard of unless you play Scrabble. Annoyingly though, they do seem to describe our world and our state of mind.

It’s all about our “glocal” world: recognising both global and local influences. It’s all about “hybridity”: recognising that we seem to be made up of a mix of cultural identities. It’s all about “liminality”: the disorientation of living in

the midst of cultural change—in the gap “in between” where we’ve been and where we are going.

So, it’s McDonald’s looking like McDonald’s the world over, but selling beer in some countries and not others. It’s how we have food halls with lots of international cuisine, but with the hard edges taken off for mass consumption. It’s rap and hip-hop that originated “straight outta Compton” but that have gone worldwide and have inspired British rap, French rap and more. It’s making the old new again. It’s *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. It’s lo-fi music and the resurgence of vinyl records. It’s going retro—my kids wanting to wear sweatshirts that I wore in the ’80s. But the strange thing is that the more identities we seem to collect, the less we are sure about who we are.

### THE “STORIES” DEFINITION

We see elements of truth in all three of these definitions. But as we come to see what the Bible says about culture over the next few chapters, I want to suggest a more helpful way of framing our thinking. Rather than seeing culture as a “thing”, we’ll be thinking of culture as the way we live in the world and interpret what’s around us. For the purposes of this book, we’ll define culture like this:

Culture is the stories we tell that express meaning about the world.

Two things to note here.

First, culture expresses meaning. It’s the way we make meaning and sense of the world, even if our

conclusion is that there is no meaning. Culture is the way we communicate and “live” our worldview—what’s important, what’s right and wrong, what is true and how we can know it, and how to be happy. And this is where the definitions start to get confusing, because when a group of people share the same worldview, we tend to call this “a culture” too (as in British culture or Japanese culture). This “worldview-culture” is primarily expressed through the cultural stories we tell, and the stories we listen to in turn slowly shape our worldview.

For example, some cultures have roots that prize the individual over the community and vice versa. Or what about this? In the UK, most of us expect a government-run health service which meets the needs of everyone, is free at the point of delivery, and is based on clinical need, not ability to pay—the celebrations for the National Health Service’s 70th anniversary both reflect and reinforce its position as a national treasure. Yet this is certainly not a description of other cultures’ health-care provision, nor is it universally believed to be something that should be aspired to!

Second, culture is stories. Some stories use words; others are wordless. Some stories are fictional; others are factual. Some stories are long; others are 140 characters.

So your favourite soap opera has a plot with characters who fall out, make up and get together. But that story expresses meaning about the world—the plot communicates something about what the people making it think is heroic, what is despicable, and what is truly valuable. As do *Trainspotting* and *Titanic*, “Sweet Child O’

Mine” and “Single Ladies”, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Real Housewives of Orange County*, Facebook Messenger and Mario Kart, Tracy Emin’s *My Bed* and da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, BuzzFeed and BBC News. All of these—in one way or another—are telling stories that express meaning about the world around us.

We’ll explore this definition in the context of the Bible’s storyline in the next two chapters, but before that, let’s stand back to consider another question: why should Christians bother engaging with culture?

#### **FOUR REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT CULTURE**

Of course, given that you’ve picked up this book and read this far, it’s clear that you do already care about culture to some extent. But just in case you need convincing, let me lay out four reasons why, as Christians, we should be seeking to engage with it—instead of looking in, lashing out or looking like it.

We’ll pick up many of these themes in later chapters, but consider this a fast-paced overview of where we’re heading and why.

##### **1. We care because we’ve got no choice**

Let’s get straight down to it: we have no choice but to engage with culture. Whether we like it or not, engaging with culture is inevitable because created humans are cultural beings. You both consume and create culture every day. You can’t help it. But you also *belong* to a culture—and that’s an undeniable part of who you are.



As Christians, our identity is first and foremost as people who are “in Christ”. But this spiritual reality doesn’t cancel out the earthly reality that we all come from somewhere. We were all born at a certain time and in a certain place, into a certain family. We all have our own identity that we express in the stories we create, and a set of cultural stories that we grew up with that have in turn formed our identity.

I am a 40-something, 15-stone/210lbs, 6-foot-2-inches, ethnically half white/half Indo-Guyanese British man, born in Southend-on-Sea in Essex, converted through a youth organisation called the Boys Brigade. I’m married with a load of kids, and I teach in a theological college, watch West Ham United Football Club and am a jazz and classical music geek. All this makes a difference to how I hear other people and how I am heard by other people, even though I’m first and foremost “in Christ”.

And it makes a difference to how I read the Bible, how I communicate the gospel, and what I do when I gather with other Christians as a church. For example, at my church we meet on a Sunday morning, I sit on a chair next to my wife, and I keep my shoes on for the duration of the service. But if my church was in Lahore instead of London, things would be very different! Or think about the example I gave earlier about health-care provision. Can you imagine what different issues might arise and what decisions might have to be made by a local church and its leadership in a country where there is state health-care provision compared with one where there isn’t?

None of us can escape our culture when we approach the Bible—all of us look at it through a particular cultural filter, like coloured lenses in a pair of glasses. As one of my Christian heroes, the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, has said:

Each time the gospel is preached in a different language, to a different people, it has to transmute [translate] a variety of words, as it were, and give them new content. The gospel does not find anywhere in the world a ready language that fits completely and absolutely like a garment.<sup>4</sup>

The gospel doesn't "fit" one particular culture—it's bigger than that. But I, of course, have the tendency to assume that the perfect gospel "fit" is English and middle-class; that the way we do things as Christians together is the way it should be and always has been. Or I assume that I'm above culture and unaffected by my context. This lack of cultural self-awareness can and does lead me into trouble, especially when it comes to working with and worshipping alongside Christians from other backgrounds. If I don't think carefully about culture, I can't discern when I have confused gospel and culture, and become either too rigid or too flexible.

Please don't mishear me. The gospel is not so culturally fluid that it ceases to have any meaning at all. God reveals himself truthfully and clearly. He is not located in and limited by culture. He is the unique Creator and distinct from everything else which is created. So although no human can *communicate* gospel truth in a way that is

unaffected by culture, that *truth* itself *can be* above and beyond culture.

We can't escape our culture, so we need to be aware of it. But there's more to it than that: we can and should *embrace* it, because we recognise and celebrate the wonderful combination of *both* Christian cultural unity, which is not a bland uniformity, and Christian cultural diversity, which is not ugly division.

Our monthly bring-and-share church lunches in East Finchley are an amazing, dizzying mix of dishes from all over the world that reflect the nationalities in our congregation: West Indian, Nigerian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Iranian and British just to name a few. We might dress a little differently on a Sunday. English might not be the first language spoken, so some things might be lost in translation. Our musical tastes might be very different. But because we're brothers and sisters in Christ, we can still worship our Saviour side by side—and that's beautiful. Indeed, as a pastor friend of mine says, in this way the church is meant to be a “show-house” of the new heaven and new earth.

## **2. We care about following Jesus**

Second, we engage with culture because we want to follow Jesus faithfully as we live in his world. And part of living in his world involves consuming culture and creating culture. Let's take both of these in turn.

First, we want to be faithful to Jesus as we consume culture. When the apostle John wrote his first letter to Christians in Asia, the final thing he wanted his audience

to hear as it was read aloud was this: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5 v 21). We’ll have more to say about idolatry as we go on, but for now, let’s define idols as counterfeit god-substitutes which have captured our hearts, when our hearts should be captured by Jesus. In order to keep ourselves from idols, we need to be able to recognise them and learn how they operate. This is easier said than done. I think we are often like the guy who, upon seeing the sign “Beware, pickpockets operate in this area”, determinedly puts his wallet in his back pocket because he’s sure he’d feel any attempted pinch from there. After all, he’s got a sensitive bum. You know how that story ends...

Like pickpockets, idols are hard to spot. Idolatry is subtle because Satan is crafty and cunning. Idols don’t approach us with “I’m an idol: keep yourself from me” tattooed on their foreheads. No, idols are *counterfeit* god-substitutes—and the better the counterfeit, the harder they are to identify. Most of us know to look out for well-known idols to do with money and sex. And in our churches we’re getting better at talking about “deep idols”, such as power, comfort, approval and control. But I think that when it comes to *cultural* idols, we’re pretty insensitive, partly because of what I’ve already said above: we either think culture doesn’t really matter or we think we aren’t cultural beings. The problem is that culture is comprehensive: there is no escape.

So how are you doing at keeping yourself from idols in your voting? In your decision about where the kids go to school? About your choice of this evening’s television?

About all you do in all the hours of your life that isn't "church stuff"?

There's more though. What I've said so far could sound passive, defensive and reactive. We also need to recognise that as human beings, we are designed to be culture creators and builders. Keeping ourselves from idols requires us to put something else in their place, because our hearts are hardwired to worship *something*. More on this in the next chapter.

### **3. We care about telling others about Jesus**

We engage with culture because we care about evangelism and apologetics. Now, it is certainly true that unbelief is 100% a spiritual issue; no one becomes a Christian unless the Holy Spirit miraculously makes a dead heart alive. And yet, the Holy Spirit works through means. Look at the words that are used to describe the apostle Paul's evangelism in the book of Acts:

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. (9 v 22)

Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (18 v 4)

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. (19 v 8)

Paul fully relied on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and yet still he reasoned, argued and proved.

Here's what that doesn't mean. Reasoning doesn't mean being "rationalistic": putting reason as our final judge or authority. God speaking through his word is our final authority. Arguing doesn't mean being "argumentative" like characters on a day-time television talk show.

But every Christian is called to "give a reason" for hope (1 Peter 3 v 15). This not merely an intellectual exercise, as if we are just brains on sticks. Nor is it a vague, airy-fairy "maybe" hope. It's a confident "living hope" (1 Peter 1 v 3). It's the kind of hope that engages all of who we are: our emotions, intellect, will, desire and imagination. We are whole people talking to other whole people and introducing them not to a philosophy or a worldview or even a message (although the gospel is all three) but a person. The old King James translation of Acts 8 v 35 gets this sense well:

Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.

But what's any of this got to do with engaging with culture?

The point is that sin and unbelief manifest themselves differently in different cultures and sub-cultures. Academics call this a "plausibility structure"—essentially, a worldview:

A plausibility structure is a web of beliefs that are so embedded in the hearts and minds of the bulk of a society that people hold them either unconsciously or so firmly that they never think to ask if they are true ... One of the main functions of a plausibility

structure is to provide the background of beliefs that makes arguments easy or hard to accept.<sup>5</sup>

You don't need to be an academic to get this. 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 that it's not for them. 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's that the cultural air 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's 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 are more effective ways to proclaim the gospel?

To put it another way, and a little flippantly, we want to help people to meet the VIP Jesus Christ, but there are these big scary bouncers getting in the way, all bald heads and neck tattoos. Until we can get past them, introductions to Jesus can't be made. *And precisely what these "bouncers" are depends on a person's culture.*

I'll illustrate.

When I'm lecturing on this culture stuff, I sometimes pretend I'm the TV mind reader Derren Brown, because I can guess the objections that the audience's non-Christian friends have. But this isn't really mind reading: it's based on the principle that, roughly speaking, "I like people who are like me" (which means that most of my friends end up being like me). So in a room of mainly white, middle-class Christians, I know that their friends' objections will be things to do with science, miracles, evil, religious hypocrisy, sexuality and so on. I'm spookily accurate.

Here's the thing: I know that if I spoke to a group of Christians from a Muslim background, their friends would give a whole set of different objections. I've never heard a middle-class white British man say Christianity can't be true because of American foreign policy!

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 round 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.



As an example, it might be helpful to focus on what is probably the most pervasive worldview we encounter in the West today: secularism. The word “secular” is notoriously difficult to define, and academics (yes, them again!) spend a lot of time arguing over its meaning. However, the best analyses I’ve come across say that our secular age is not so much about declining church attendance, or even the question of whether religion should have a place in the public square and in politics. Our secular age is not about what people believe or don’t believe, but more about what is *believable*. It’s about believability. Christianity, and religion in general, is questioned and contested in a way that it just wasn’t hundreds of years ago. It’s now one option among many which are equally contested, and *that includes atheism*. Every option has its strengths and weaknesses, and we end up caught like a rabbit in the headlights.

As a result, one of the features of our secular culture is that people are disorientated and ill at ease. It’s the spiritual equivalent of searching online for the best restaurant in our town and finding there are ten possibilities. Every single one has at least one one-star review. As a result, we become perpetually uncertain and increasingly anxious, or as one philosopher labels it, “fragilised”.<sup>6</sup>

Part of this is all about trust. We know that life thrives on trust; we want to trust people and are nostalgic for days when parents could let kids play in the street. However, we are perpetually confronted with stories of adults and authorities abusing trust. We know we let ourselves

down and so we ask whether we can trust anyone? As a result, we end up with guarded trust: we become obsessed with security and safety (when statistically we are safer than ever), always aware of abused trust and longing for true trust. This is not a comfortable place to be. Of course, there are those willing to cash in on this culture of distrust. Have you watched the advertisements between kids' shows on daytime television recently? For as many commercials as there are selling toys, there are loads selling insurance, or advertising lawyers asking whether you've been in an accident, with the promise of compensation (no win no fee, of course!).

It's important to note that this sense of disorientation isn't limited to those outside the church. Whether we like it or not, secularism is the framework for unbelief *and* belief: we all live in the secular age. *Even as Christians*, we inhale this worldview as we consume culture day by day. For example, how do we decide to trust (or not) the teaching of the pastor in a world of a million podcasts? We need to be honest and shift our thinking from seeing the "secular" as simply being "out there" to understanding it as the cultural context in which we follow Christ and tell others about him.

There is hope though. These bouncers I've been talking about are a bit like your average school bully. They talk a good game, but that's what they are: all talk. Prod them in the tummy and they'll double up. The reason? Generally speaking, many non-Christians have assumed their objections without ever questioning them in detail. A little poking and prodding will show this.

For every passionate atheist like Richard Dawkins or Stephen Fry, there are multitudes of those who might call themselves atheists or agnostics, but who can't quite fully accept that this "life under the sun" is all that there is: those who have no time for Christianity, but who still want to believe in significance, meaning, love, and even transcendence—a spiritual level beyond what we can see. Those who daily read their horoscopes or talk about what was or wasn't "meant to be". Those who might actually be called "religious" because they're certainly worshipping *something*.

It's summed up in the poignant opening of Julian Barnes' book *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*: "I don't believe in God but I miss him".

In a culture where we often think no one's interested in our message, we do in fact have an evangelistic way in. But we need to know where to look.

#### **4. We care about Jesus!**

Our last reason is perhaps the most important. Maybe it should have come first on the list. We engage with culture because we care about Jesus.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the one to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given" (Matthew 28 v 18). He is both *our* Lord and the Lord of the universe. The theologian and Dutch Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper was spot on when he said, "There is not a single inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>7</sup> Jesus Christ has the right to be

Lord of all. His is “the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2 v 9). He does not accommodate or adapt himself to any culture; rather he reclaims it all because it’s all legitimately his.

As for us, we are his ambassadors and vice-regents. Christians have a duty to challenge areas where Jesus’ rule is not respected. Stories about anything in creation that do not relate that something to Christ are always incomplete and, to that extent, misleading. For that reason, “we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10 v 5).

And that starts with working to make our own thoughts obedient to Christ for the sake of his glory. Not just the obviously “wrong” thoughts on lust and love but *all* of them. Our thoughts on money, family, government—all the assumptions our culture feeds us day by day that in reality are contrary to Christ, if only we could see it.

So we engage with culture because we’re compelled to contend for Christ’s honour—we want him to get the glory he deserves.

## **BUT HOW?**

Engaging with culture concerns our view of who we are as human beings, our Christian discipleship, our witness and evangelism. Most of all, it concerns the lordship of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more important than that.

Engaging with culture is essential—so how do we go about actually doing it?

Before we can take apart the counterfeit cultural stories that we consume every day, the first step is to have our hearts and imaginations captured by a truer and better story—the Bible’s story. That’s where we’re heading next.