
Theology and Culture

Change has accelerated exponentially in recent decades. Technology drives much of this. So does mobility. As a result, the way people “do life” has morphed so quickly that one generation often has difficulty understanding the next one. With ease of worldwide travel, immigration possibilities also increase, which leads to radical and monumental changes.

When it comes to youth and young adult ministry, how should we move forward in this era of compressed change? Instead of “doing things the way we’ve always done them” we now expect that we will need to seek a current understanding of how young people “do life.” Otherwise, interpreting life and God through an older lens will often blur perceptions beyond what is recognizable, and may even cause harm.

In order to understand God, we do theology. In order to understand youth and young adults, we utilize culture.

What is “Theology”?

Theology, literally “the study of God,” is basically how we come to understand God. The word “theology” often intimidates us and leaves most abdicating in favor of the professional “theologians” to figure out the truth about God.

But in reality, all of us are theologians. We might not have advanced degrees or sit in ivory towers, or read thick and seemingly incoherent tomes, but our understanding of God comes from somewhere. Often this develops in the crucible of everyday life, with its unique twists and turns. Our commitments, traditions, background, and outlook also influence our understanding of the Almighty. Virtually everyone has an opinion about God. How did that happen? Is it static or dynamic? Does it remain constant throughout one’s life? Can one generation pass it on to the next generation “as is”?

If God can be put into a box, even a gilded or gift-wrapped box, then the answer would be, “Yes.” But if God can’t be contained or relegated to a box, the answer would most likely be, “It depends.”

But that begs the question, “It depends upon what?”

If one generation repeats the previous generation’s experience verbatim, the consistency increases the likelihood that the God understood by the earlier generation will be the same God for the succeeding one. But if the following generation faces different situations or dynamics or personalities, they might also seek a new or different understanding of God.

It seems highly unlikely that the next generation will be identical to the previous one, any more than a child will look exactly like a parent. Instead, children are apt to take on physical characteristics that show a blend of both parents, perhaps favoring one over the other. But that describes only the physical similarities and differences. One must also consider dispositions, mannerisms, vocal sounds, and even attitudes and habits.

Biblical examples show that some children seem to be very much like their parents. But at other times they aren’t like them at all. The long list of wicked kings in the Old Testament monarchy often ends with “he did what was evil in the LORD’s sight and followed in the example of Jeroboam, continuing the sins of idolatry that Jeroboam had led Israel to commit” (1 Kings 15:34 NLT).

For the kings of Judah, it seemed they either followed the example of good King David or they didn’t follow the example of David. King Jotham did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight (2 Kings 15:34), but his son Ahaz “did not do what was pleasing in the sight of the LORD his God, as his ancestor David had done” (2 Kings 16:2 NLT). Yet the son of wicked King Ahaz, Hezekiah, “did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight, just as his ancestor David had done” (2 Kings 18:3 NLT). It bounced back and forth from one generation to another. And some kings reversed their allegiance to God partway through their reigns (see 2 Chron 24:1-22; 2 Chron 33:1-18).

Those who treat God as a package to be handed from one generation to the next completely misunderstand God. He is alive and seeks to be in relationship with us. Those zealous to make sure their children worship the same god as their parents risk functioning like

Nebuchadnezzar on the plain of Dura (see Dan 3). You might command others to worship the statue, but you will only force them to break the second commandment. We may prefer a god as solid, visible, and unmovable as stone. We could interact with such a god on our terms, put it in its place, threaten others with it, own it, and basically use it whenever we chose to do so. We could also ignore a stone image, hide it, and never worry about it. After all, it would only be a rock.

But if God is alive, and truly God of the universe, then being in relationship with us far surpasses one generation's comprehension of Him. If we have been invited to spend eternity with Him, will our understanding grow after 100 years? If so, then how could we possibly conceive that we have a complete handle on God and can accurately convey that to the next generation right now?

It's not that we shouldn't make the attempt. With humility we should invite the next generation to join us in a dynamic experience with God. We have the blessing of both natural and supernatural revelation of God through His created works and through scripture. These aid us in forming our understanding of God and how we relate to him through the ebb and flow of our lives. We haven't been left on our own to come up with an individualized god, made in our image, to suit our desires. We can "do theology" by turning to God's created works, to scripture, and considering those who have gone before us. We also have supernatural guidance from the Holy Spirit who illuminates our understanding.

"When a believer accepts the Bible as authoritative, theology is centered in the process of reflecting on and applying biblical truth to a particular situation. This interactive reflective process involves scripture, beliefs of the church, the one who seeks understanding, culture, and the specific ministry context to which theological reflection is applied" (Dybdahl, 2011). All of us "do theology." We should identify it as such, for ourselves and for the next generation as its understanding of God develops.

What is "Culture"?

Some embrace the term "culture" while others stiff-arm it. Does culture provide a context to live out one's beliefs or does it derail or highjack one's beliefs? Could it actually be neutral, or does it always influence?

Culture provides the context for expressing and impressing meaning and practice in life. It's how one

"does life." Culture is more than a vehicle of information. It also shapes and influences—individuals and groups.

Christians often bring the concept of a "worldview" into the discussion when evaluating culture. But that calls for an additional definition. Worldview encompasses the overall perspective from which a person views and interprets the world. A secondary definition could be the collection of beliefs a person or group has about life and the world (The Free Dictionary, 2012). This sounds fairly similar to theology, at least for a person who sees God integrated into life and planet earth.

Some imagine that a worldview forms a rock-solid bastion from which to evaluate the amorphous element termed "culture." In reality, one's worldview continues to flex and change throughout life. One might choose a particular worldview, but could easily adhere to only part of it or do so inconsistently.

"Worldview" for Christians comes from scripture and judges culture. Some confusion exists regarding what is and what is not part of a Christian or Biblical worldview. Instead of majoring in minor things, theology can help to differentiate between macro-issues and micro-issues. Rather than coming up with a once-and-for-all theology, we will look at this progressively, expecting each new generation to discover anew and to put its own stamp on it based on connecting Scripture with current life. Our Adventist pioneers did this very thing. So should we, not limiting it to theology professors.

Those opposed to culture often see only the evil or Satanic evidences and influences of culture. These seem obvious in the media—music, movies, sensuality, partying, and debauchery. The gateway to this slippery slope could be current styles of dress, hair styles, make up, jewelry, theater attendance, contemporary music, specific music instruments, and even worship styles. The blind spot for such critics is that while warning against whatever is current, they simply promote a different culture. Because the different culture is outdated, they assume it has no evil attached to it. But outdated culture isn't spiritual; it's just irrelevant. Pair that with God and you have a God disconnected from the world—the opposite of the Incarnation.

On the other hand, those who embrace culture often do so with little or no thought given to the seductive flow of culture. Choosing to engage in whatever gets presented, they forget that both good and evil exist on this planet and

show themselves in different forms. Blindly participating in whatever presents itself, they lack discernment and end up like a chameleon. This can happen at a raucous rave or on a Christian campus since both have their own culture. Where will you be shaped?

Culture actually functions as a two-way street. It shapes us, and we also shape it. When PBS aired “Merchants of Cool” they unmasked a sophisticated way in which culture keeps changing. They revealed how big business does its marketing based on regular input from everyday people. This keeps them a step ahead by knowing where the public has taken its current step (PBS, 2001). Nowadays with Facebook and YouTube, anyone has the possibility of going viral. Exposure counts more than content, and nobody knows for sure what the new, best thing will be. Yet many aggressively seek it, even if it lasts for only a moment.

Christians rejoice when the good guys make the headlines, and moan when the bad guys claim the top spot. But that’s merely playing the same game. The flavor of the month has changed to the flavor of the week, the day, or the hour.

Those who avoid the evil culture so prevalent in cities escape to the countryside where they can be free of both evil and culture. But they create their own culture in the countryside and get taken by surprise when they find evil in their heart. Good and evil can be found in every culture. Sexual promiscuity can still happen on a spiritual retreat in God’s nature, not just the red light district of some city. Kindness finds expression among the homeless on skid row, not just the delivery of homemade cookies to the new family in the quiet village.

Culture can be compared to the pool in which we swim. No matter how much we deny it or ignore it, culture continues to influence us and we influence it. We may change pools, but we’re still in a pool, and the pool is full of water. The water might be pure. Does it have any chemicals in it? If it’s fresh water, how long has it been fresh? Has anyone else been in the pool? Is anyone else in it right now? What else is in the water besides water?

For those who decide to never go swimming, perhaps for fear of contamination from others, we could change the analogy. Culture can be compared to the air we breathe. We affect it, and it affects us. If we stop breathing, the consequences will be more obvious than if we breathe! But what’s in the air? We need oxygen, but that’s only a

minority of what enters our lungs. Our body processes the air and gains life from it. We exhale our own impurities. We can make others sick from what we exhale. We can also save another person’s life when exhaling by means of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Sometimes you just need some fresh air. At other times fresh air can activate your allergies. Carting an oxygen tank behind you to guarantee pure air means you’re trusting whoever filled those tanks, and it severely limits your mobility by being so pure. Your body can assimilate only a small portion of oxygen, so most of it would be wasted. The analogies continue. Culture is like the air we breathe.

Any group of people will develop its own culture. This provides a way to express what is important. How do we express love? What makes a meal special? How do we ascribe value to something? Culture forms the palette from which we can paint meaning in our lives. How we dress, the foods we eat, acceptable and unacceptable ways of interacting with others, language—all of these have meaning when we do them in a given culture. And culture also changes over time.

Historically, island cultures have been able to maintain a more constant culture because of their isolation. Being surrounded by water keeps other cultures from mixing. But island discovery and trade and travel have occurred for centuries and even millennia. Differences continue; but the world has become a neighborhood. The access, availability, and input from so many cultures continues to mount.

The edges of one people group get blurred where they meet another. On the border between Mexico and the United States, you can easily find English speaking people on the Mexican side and Spanish speaking people on the American side. The line isn’t as distinct as a border crossing, even if there are border patrols. Furthermore, their “native languages” are not from Mexico or America, but from Spain and England!

When a Mexican marries an American, when a Catholic marries an Adventist, when a 70-year-old marries a 17-year-old, when a man marries a man, when a Christian woman moves in with a Buddhist man—all of these can create a clash of cultures. Such a couple may avoid their previous, individual cultures or go to the culture that demonstrates acceptance of the foreign culture. Frequently, the couple will leave both cultures and relocate to where they are apt to find greater acceptance of their union.

Part of our current complication with culture is that the pool has become so large. The air we breathe seems to be at a stadium instead of in our backyard. Even those who seem to be geographically isolated communicate via the internet or by smart phone or Skype. This forces us to address the issue of culture, something we might have avoided in the past.

References

Dybdahl, J. (2011). "Doing theology in the doctor of ministry program." Andrews University. Retrieved October 7, 2012 at <http://www.andrews.edu/sem/dmin/about/theological-reflection/>

The free dictionary. (2012). Retrieved October 8, 2012 at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/worldview>

PBS. (2001). *Merchants of cool.* Retrieved October 8, 2012 at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>.