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# What the Church Can and Must Do About Modern Culture

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## Abstract

*Dealing with modern culture can challenge the church. Second and third generation Adventists live in the midst of such a world. This article examines scripture to discover the foundation for how the church should relate to culture. It increases understanding by identifying the important elements of today's culture. The conclusion shares practical principles to positively help the church deal with modern culture and the people who live in it.*

## Introduction

**W**hat is culture and why is it important? If culture is like a pool in which people swim, then understanding the pool in which young people are swimming will enable us to understand them and the Gospel that speaks to them. One of the reasons why young adults leave the church is because the church is “either not interested or simply clueless to their generation’s needs” (Dudley, 2000, p. 62). We propose that if we are to reach second and third generation Adventists we must understand the world in which they live.

This article presents a biblical approach to culture. An exploration of several key texts will give direction in understanding God’s relationship to culture. Then we will identify some of the realities of current culture. In the conclusion we will share principles to follow in the constant dance between ministry and culture.

## A Theology of Culture

For centuries, churches have used the Great Commission found in Matthew 28 as a rallying cry. A less popular version of the Great Commission can be found at the end of the Gospel of Mark. Note the added dimension in Christ’s final command when He stated,

“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15 ESV). As we see in this verse, it is Jesus’ command that His disciples go into the world. There are parts of Christianity that believe it is necessary to separate oneself from the world but Jesus is clear. His expectation of a disciple is to go into the entire world with the gospel message. Too easily people understand this as only geography rather than proximity, as breadth of coverage rather than depth of experience.

Many Christians, especially those who have the separatist mentality, have trepidations about being tainted by the world. Of course culture affects a person, but we must never forget the words of Jesus in John 16:33: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Jesus takes a realistic approach to culture stating that going into the world will be challenging but it is not something to fear because Jesus has conquered the world, including anything evil within the world’s culture. He helps us understand that if we enter culture under His command with the intent on spreading the gospel under His power, we do not have to fear.

Continuing his prayer, Jesus stated, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Jesus’ prayer for His disciples was not that they should be pulled from the

world but that they should be protected from the enemy while in the world. This verse, placed in the context of what Jesus said at the close of his ministry in John 16:33, demonstrates a consistency with Christ's early words in the Sermon on the Mount in which he used the metaphors of being the salt of the world and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). As the people of God, the mission of the church is to be light, sharing the gospel within the culture, under the direction and protection of God the Father. That's why Jesus also included in his prayer for his disciples, "Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world" (John 17:18 NLT).

We can be confident that God's will for us includes reaching the world with the gospel message. But this must be held in balance with another reality when it comes to how we relate to culture. Jesus made this statement in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world." Although Christ's desire is to reach the world with the gospel He makes it clear that this world is not the world of Jesus. He is coming again to establish his true kingdom. When we think of culture we must remember that God's desire is not to accept all elements of culture but to transform culture with the Gospel. Many Christians are afraid of engaging culture because of the danger of it infiltrating the church. But this fear cannot keep us from dialoging with culture in an attempt to share a message that can transform it.

In Romans 12:1-2 Paul gives the key to having the ability to be in the world but not of the world. One must become a living sacrifice, a disciple that is completely surrendered to God and willing to give up his or her life. Living in that level of surrender enables one to be in the world without being conformed to the world.

These texts give us the understanding of how important the connection to God is in the process of interacting with culture. Only those who are surrendered to God will be successful in being "transformed" rather than "conformed."

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 Paul presents the reality that the cross is foolishness to those of the world who consider themselves to be wise. He follows this idea with verse 27. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." Most people recognize that there are positive and negative elements within culture. Paul helps us understand that God will use the elements of culture for His purposes. Moreover God is already working

within culture to accomplish His will. When the disciple begins to engage culture God has already been working.

We receive counsel from God on how to decipher whether or not something is from God or from the world. Writing about testing the spirits, John informs his readers, "They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, whoever is not from God does not listen to us" (1 John 4:5-6 NIV?). For Christians to successfully engage culture, God must be present, working within that culture. No one in the world will be open to the message unless God is laying the groundwork. It is God's responsibility to prepare the person to hear the message.

Sometimes those in church feel safe and secure from the evils of culture by living separate from the culture. By dressing differently, listening to different music, speaking church talk, and modeling the expected behaviors, adults expect that young people will automatically copy what happens at church and ignore what happens outside of church. Some congregations even provide alternate social activities to fill Friday and Saturday nights with acceptable alternatives, such as Friday Night Vespers, Sabbath afternoon AY, Saturday night socials, church sports leagues, banquets (with vegetarian food), etc. In essence, these churches develop their own culture, separate but possibly parallel to the main culture.

And this might work, as long as young people have exposure only to the church culture and not the wider culture. But for those who interact with the larger world, whether it's through school, friendships, or the ever-present media and internet access, the church culture becomes increasingly quaint or meaningless or unattractive. Paul may have told the Romans, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold" (Romans 12:2 Phillips), but it might seem like the church is the one putting on the squeeze with its own mold!

God's will is that all will come to know Him. For that to happen the message of Jesus Christ crucified must be shared in the entire world, across nations and in every culture. This includes the culture in the church as well as the culture in the world. Once this call is embraced the next step is to understand the culture in such a way that one is effective in communicating the gospel message. That is what will be explored in the next section.

## Today's Young Adult Culture

Trendwatching.com (2012) claims that young, urban culture is today's consumer culture. The energy, dynamism and endlessly shifting goalposts that define the young adult's experience may start in the heart of the metropolis but they radiate from this source and influence the way each of us chooses to exist. This is because the lifeblood of today's young adult culture is a renewed understanding of our communal need for meaning. Inseparable from meaning is a need for community that young adults seek with enthusiasm. In these communities, stories provide nourishment for the soul. Stories create a semblance of order amidst the chaos of postmodern life. Stories are more powerful than ever and young adults today not only want to hear their stories, they want to shape them. This modern marketplace presents an ideal setting for the Gospel—mined for meaning, shared within warm community, and presented as a vivid and untiring story.

*Meaning.* Young adult culture rejects the ownership claims of traditional sources to truth. Organized religion, with its carefully defined articulations of truth, does not bring the peace that it did for past generations. Instead, these aging institutions look like crumbling former greats that sought to control public opinion. Wars, ugly politics, scandals, molestation and coercion only fuel the perception of religious institutions as having missed the mark.

The search for meaning and the mission of our Church in this new era must transcend these currently outdated and misguided sources. In this new spiritual marketplace nobody has all of the truth and meaning can be derived from the spiritual explanation that you find true. Does Hindu chanting do it for you? If so, then chant away. Does Greek Orthodox Christianity turn you on? Great, go for it. Prefer a North American spin on Zen Buddhism? More power to you! How about elements of all three along with a solid antiwar stance? Now that sounds balanced. Modern religion and meaning-seeking (out with the old-fashioned "truth seeking"!) allow for a mix-and-match on a veritable smorgasbord of non-binding options. Come to the table, you get to mix the ingredients yourself. Feel free to toss the resulting creation—if it turns out to be unsavory, the smorgasbord has so much more.

Openness must be the starting point for conversation about meaning to even start. With evaluations based on

things that are solely subjective and personal, individuality reigns. Until meaning becomes personal, the current generation of young adults rarely cares about what may have been voted as "truth" sometime in the past. What has meaning now counts far more than what had meaning bygone eras. Those shocked by such seemingly shallow and transitory measurement tools need to first stop and listen. Perhaps that can help them share what has been personally meaningful and has stood the test of time.

*Community.* The above mentality may seem irresponsible to the traditional religious mind, but it is just the start of the story of young adult culture's take on spirituality. Community is central to a sense of meaning in today. Truth and meaning is found less in fundamentals of belief and more in the practice of communal worship (Faith House Manhattan Mission Statement, 2012).

Whether it is a meditation room, Gregorian chanting or foot washing and communion on Sabbath, there is something about the practice of shared spirituality and ritual that nourishes the modern soul. Fewer feel the need for a rational, watertight argument to "seal the deal" for them on spirituality. Rather, the practice and discipline of worshiping within community is attractive and satisfying. Young adult culture has a desperate need to belong, to feel part of something bigger and find companionship. This sense of community is often found in groups online but many feel the need to have a physical community that they can call their own. They may not necessarily believe the orthodox articulation of a group's belief system when they choose to join. They are often joining out of a desire for community.

*Stories.* Stories drive communities and fascinate the young urban adventurer. No, they do not want to be told that this story is The Truth, the metanarrative that transcends all else, but they are hungry for stories that illustrate life and provide structure for meaning. Stories inspire and allow for personal interpretation. The need for stories is as current as it is ancient and they are what make sense of the chaos out there. The constant stream of bad news served by world events and politics can be counteracted by a beautiful, life-giving story that calms, inspires and emboldens listeners for the good. The beauty of story and narrative is that it is not only about something that has happened in the past. Stories continue to be written. Young adults want to be part of the writing of this story. As they find meaning in community and stories, they want to be part of the future stories that emerge from their new communities of faith. Renewed interest in social justice, international human rights, and

sustainable living often define communities and narratives in which young adults have decided to invest. This is to be celebrated.

## Conclusion

Considering God's will to reach culture and the reality of what it offers as a challenge and a blessing we suggest some approaches to engaging culture for the purpose of fulfilling the call to reach the world with the Gospel message.

*Offering Meaning.* The Christian, Adventist worldview can no longer stand on the laurels of its place in history and doctrinal soundness. The time has come for our denomination to state clearly what Adventism has to offer today's world. Culture searches all options to find meaning for life and Adventism is one of the options. Does what Adventism offers make sense as it applies to the lives of this generation? Dudley tells us that many young adults are frustrated with the level of superficiality and shallowness found in the church (Dudley, 2000). We can offer young adults in today's culture true meaning from the experiences of Adventists who have lived out their faith in this wider culture. Dialogue and interchange opens the door for each Adventist Christian to articulate the meaning he or she has extracted from following God on the unique Adventist path. This approach is one that can happen anywhere this is openness to listen and to speak. This provides a sacred place for a person to share with another person one's unique journey with Christ.

*Offering Community.* Community begins with open arms, which gives permission for anyone, even those who feel unworthy, to approach the group confidently. The act of dialoging with culture shows an attitude of acceptance and a willingness to listen. This openness doesn't blindly condone whatever is spoken. It simply supports the expectation that each person deserves the respect to be heard and to think to one's self.

Unfortunately, many Christians are not known for their tolerance. In *UnChristian*, the authors reveal that young adults "believe Christians are trying, consciously or not, to justify feelings of moral and spiritual superiority" (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 182). A judgmental approach to culture will put the disciple at a disadvantage in the ever-growing competition to gain attention for one's message to the world. Remember that the clubs, sports bars, cafes and the Internet are already ahead of the church in creating the modern version of community.

With an attitude of acceptance, understanding, and love, the church can surpass these incomplete versions of community and provide a fellowship that helps them stay aligned with God (Lyons, 2010, p. 163).

*Offering An Unforgettable Story.* In the search for meaning, the young adult culture looks to stories to understand the world. The story of God is one that inspires, gives meaning and tells the individual that they are not alone. They have a God that loves them, died for them and created a community of faith for them to live in forever. This is the type of story that our current culture longs to hear. To add to this reality, a young adult wants to understand how he or she fits into the story. Our understanding of history, or "The Great Controversy" if you will, is that each of us is part of the story that is being written about this world. Each plays a part that has been especially designed for us. This story must be presented as a structure that gives meaning to modern life and the current global realities. "Without a story to tell, there is no faith; without a language to tell our story, Christianity remains on mute – and the church's missional imagination atrophies" (Dean, 2010, p. 156).

Ultimately, the work of the disciple is to reach the world with the message of Jesus Christ. To do that work completely means we must engage the culture and converse with it. To do that effectively one must understand today's culture and find common ground. God is already working within the culture to open doors to hear the story of his son. The Christian's job is to be authentic, inclusive, listen, and tell the story of Jesus. These are our greatest tools in our mission to share the gospel message with the entire world.

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