



Christian Imagination

Copyright © Ted Turnau Porterbrook Network 2013. This file is protected by copyright and is for the personal use of the purchaser of this course only. Distribution or resale of it is strictly prohibited.

Assignment

Taking the course on your own

The purpose of the assignments is to help you reflect on how the materials can be applied in your own church context. They are optional, and designed to help you with the materials, not to be a hurdle. If you do them we suggest adding them to a personal learning journal or filing them as a record of progress. Completing assignments that ask you to write a presentation are a great way of making you turn your learning into something you can communicate to others, even if you never get to formally present your work. Assignments will not be marked.

Studying with a Learning Site

If you are part of a learning site, assignments also help other Porterbrook participants benefit from your thinking, as you will from theirs. With this in mind, written assignments are to be brief (no more than 500 words). If you want to quote someone else's thoughts, indicate where they come from, but your paper does not need to be academically rigorous, with footnotes and bibliography.

Assess the aesthetic witness of your church community:

Step one: Interview your pastor and some of the leadership of the church. How intentional are they about supporting and encouraging artistic output, creativity and culture making in the church? Interview some of the church members. How well do people understand the relationship between the gospel and creative activities. Write a summary of the current situation in your church

Step two: Write out an action plan for helping the church engage with examples of culture creation in your local context.

Introduction

In the Culture course we laid the groundwork for thinking about culture from a Christian perspective: a method for understanding and responding to popular cultural works, essentially a Christian-critical method. This should open the way for talking with non-Christian friends and neighbours about how they understand the world, what is important to them and how the gospel is relevant to them.

But man does not live by critique alone. Cultural engagement means more than simply responding to non-Christian cultural works. That is important, but we must go further. If we are really to engage our world, it is not enough to talk about non-Christian popular culture. We must join the larger cultural conversation. We must be able to speak positively into our culture by *creating* cultural works that reflect a truly Christian imaginative vision. But to create in this way, and to do it well, we must begin by asking some fundamental questions:

- What is the imagination?
- What makes the Christian imagination distinctive?
- How can we train and sustain a Christian imagination?
- What is the role of the artist in the Christian community?
- What makes some Christian cultural works good and others not-so-good?
- How are we to define the 'goodness' of a piece of Christian culture? (Evangelistic directness? Aesthetic subtlety? Moral rectitude?)
- What counts as an authentic piece of Christian culture?

The real goal of Christian cultural works within a non-Christian culture is to be salt and light where there is rot and darkness. Our aim is to be a witness to God and his mercy and beauty in a world where he has become largely forgotten. This is no small task.

The overall goal of this course is to provide a vision and some practical steps for shaping a community that could contribute oases of the imagination to the surrounding culture, and hopefully to influence the shape of the culture's collective imagination. We need to do the hard work to make our culture a place where the gospel makes sense – a gospel-friendly imaginative context, if you will. We want to move our culture a little closer in its imaginative life toward something that breathes life and health and peace for the glory of God.

Exercise

Unit seven will discuss J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy. If you've never read these books, why not start reading them now so that you will understand what we're discussing? If you have already read the books, here is an excuse to re-read them.

Unit 1. Cultural Engagement and the Imagination

Why engage culture?

For many gospel-minded Christians, the whole idea of engaging and influencing culture is an unnecessary curiosity. After all, television shows aren't going to hell, but my neighbour is. Shouldn't we just preach the gospel and live it out?

There are two ways of answering this objection: one theological and one missional.

Theologically, we need only look at the doctrine of creation. God created the world. And he created us to care for it and develop it wisely. That means something. Theologians call it the 'cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26-28). We are called by God so to engage his creation that we bring glory to him, love and serve one another, and nurture and protect his world. *Not* to be intentional in that calling is to abuse a trust. It is a sin against God. To treat culture and imagination as matters of indifference is to be dangerously cavalier about something God calls us to care for.

Reflection

Take an inventory of the cultural things you do (defining culture in the widest possible sense as anything that is a human rearranging of God's creation). Think of your job, the way you wash the dishes, or teach your children, or cook and share a meal. Think of each of these activities as an interaction with God's creation that is designed to glorify God, love your neighbor and nurture his world. Do these activities now seem more or less important as part of the Christian life?

Romans 8:19-21 talks about creation groaning to be released from its bondage to futility. God is not simply going to burn it up. Is creation going to be released from futility into a fire of destruction? 2 Peter 3 does talk about the heavens and earth being "stored up for fire" so that we may have "new heavens and a new earth" (v.7, v.13). But Peter is talking about a refining fire, and the word for "new" in verse 13 means 'renovated' not 'brand new'. God will refine the world by fire in that all that is evil in the present order will be destroyed, leaving us a renovated home filled with what is good and true and right (v.7). Creation matters so much that God himself will renew it. So we do *not* have permission to trash it until then. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." We are called to be intentional about how we treat it.

Extend that logic and you will see that it applies to culture as well. Culture is simply a use (or abuse) of God's creation for the sake of glorifying (or ignoring) God, loving (or despising) others, and caring for (or exploiting) the earth. God cares about what goes on in culture – the kinds of cultural artefacts we produce. (A 'cultural artefact' is any object or

event – like a painting, poem, movie, dance, table setting, song, performance and so on – that people create as an expression of their imagination.)

To put it bluntly, God cares about what's on television, on the radio, on your computer, on the printing press and so on. And not just in a scowling 'What's all this filth?' sort of way. He is intensely interested in how people interact with his creation, how that reveals their hearts, how it engages their imaginations and colours their worlds. Someday all nations will present their "glory" (or treasures) before God in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:24, 26), and that will include all sorts of cultural goods, anything worthy of being called a treasure. The best of culture is destined for eternity, not the furnace. That means that you cannot ignore culture now. Culture is that to which we have been called by God as a way to praise him, love each other, and responsibly care for what he's given us. *That* is the theological reason: a strong doctrine of creation drives us to care about culture and cultural engagement.

The missional reason is that the cultural artefacts of a society influence the imaginations (and collective imagination) of the members of that society. And the shape of their imaginations influences the way they hear, or don't hear, the gospel. Consider the gay marriage debate before and after *Brokeback Mountain*. One brilliantly made movie had an enormous influence on how people thought about homosexual relationships (in this case, as a beautiful but doomed love affair). And the way people think about homosexual relationships influences how, or even if, they can hear the gospel ("You're a Christian, aren't you. You people hate gays. You're a bunch of intolerant fools ..."). There are a million examples out there where cultural products shape imaginations and make it harder for people to hear the gospel. Ironically it is precisely the way Christians abandoned cultural engagement to pursue a more 'godly' calling of simply preaching the gospel that has made it impossible for so many people to hear the gospel. However many evangelistic programmes you have, you are still fighting the resistance from a cultural sphere that Christians have largely abandoned. It is time for Christians to start re-engaging culture for the sake of the gospel.

Reflection

Think back on conversations you have had with non-Christian friends. What sort of objections have they had? Do any of them seem linked to the way the culture thinks about truth, justice, God, Christianity, mercy and so on? Can you see how culture might influence the way the gospel is heard (or not heard)?

Tried, but not true: The political path to cultural change

There is another attitude among evangelicals. These Christians understand the importance of cultural engagement. They desperately want to change culture and they think that politics is the way to do it. Many Christians have become convinced that a political change will bring about real cultural change. If we elect the right politicians who

will enact the right laws then we can start nudging our culture back in a God-ward direction. The fact that the momentum seems to be on the side of those who want to push culture in a God-less direction doesn't deter us. Rather, it makes us all the more determined to recapture the political momentum we've lost. We have to get more organised. We just have to try harder.

But what if political momentum, instead of being a driver of cultural change, is actually an echo, an indication that a deeper change has already taken place? What if a society's politics is a *symptom* or a reflection of its collective imagination? What if real change happens in the imagination rather than in the political sphere?

What is politics? Politics is about the distribution of power among the citizens of a society. Who wields the sword? To whom are resources channelled and who pays for them? Who is allowed to speak and who is silenced? Politics concerns the multiple configurations of power within society. At the end of the day, politics is about *coercion*, about enforcing patterns of behaviour on a population that everyone agrees is for the greater good. This works well in highly uniform societies. But rarely in pluralist societies does *everyone* agree that these enforced patterns are for the best. There are deep divisions over what a good society looks like. Someone's vision is going to lose out as one group's vision becomes enforced and other group's visions are ignored (or survive in a highly compromised form). That enforcement leads, of course, to resentment and an inevitable backlash. Christians are well acquainted with these feelings. But we are not the only ones who feel run over politically from time to time.

In 312 the Emperor Constantine the Great had a dream before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in which he saw a banner with a cross which said, "Under this [banner] be victorious!" This led to his conversion and the Edict of Milan in 313 which turned Christianity from a persecuted minority religion into a legally protected religion. Though there was persecution under later emperors, the momentum had swung in Christianity's favour. This was cemented in 380 when the Roman Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Religion scholars see Theodosius' declaration as the beginning of what is known as Christendom, a system in which state and church worked together to ensure a religious uniformity in society.

Christendom lasted a long time and deeply shaped the imagination of Europe. But because Christendom was a politically enforced belief system, it could not finally last. It led to nominalism in places because being a Christian was convenient in those societies. It also led to the oppression against those who dissented against the majority Christian social system (like Jews, Muslims and Christian sects). Eventually Christendom (and with it, Christianity) came to be despised by culture-leading intellectuals as a straitjacket that constrained their free-thinking pursuit of the truth. It was discarded as yesterday's myth, the irrational beliefs of the Dark Ages. So in Europe, the place where Christianity once held uncontested sway, Christianity is viewed with contempt in many quarters. Europe has now become the most secular continent on earth followed closely by North America.

A politically enforced belief system simply cannot last. Why not? Because the belief system is imposed from the outside. So it never really addresses the collective imagination, the place where people struggle and hurt and love and live. Yet pursuing cultural change through winning at the ballot box remains a tempting path for Christians. Anything else seems like throwing in the towel.

Exercise

Christian cultural critic and screenwriter Brian Godawa (citing author Curtis Chang) underlined the importance of storytelling in cultural change. “The one who can tell the best story ... wins the epoch”.¹ Write down the titles of five different stories that have captured your culture in the last 20 years. They can be movies, television shows, songs, news stories, whatever gained public currency. Now ask yourself: How many of these led the imagination in a Christian direction, and how many led away from God?

What is our real aim in cultural engagement?

One reason we remain enamoured with a political solution is that we have a certain goal in mind: pushing back the clock to a time when our societies were more uniformly Christian. And accumulating political power seems to be the best way of achieving that. But Western societies are too deeply divided, pluralistic, and relativistic to return wholesale to Christian values any time soon apart from some spectacular work of the Holy Spirit sweeping across the land drawing everyone into a nation-wide repentance. We have to accept that fact and work within the context that God has given us rather than pining for one that he has not.

Many Christians model their efforts at cultural engagement on Joshua and his armies, bravely marching to the land to conquer it. Many of our hymns use this kind of imagery to encourage us to live for God. That’s great for we are engaged in spiritual warfare. But to then apply this conquering motif to how we interact with our non-Christian friends and neighbours is not so great. They are not the enemy. And we should not be trying to conquer them. Furthermore, practically speaking, any attempt at cultural domination will lead to deep resentment and backlash. Christ did not call us to dominate our neighbours, but to love them.

A much better model for our involvement with culture is Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 in which the prophet said:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (vv. 4-7).

¹ Godawa, B., *Myth Became Fact: Storytelling, Imagination, and Apologetics in the Bible*, Embedded Pictures, 2012, 34.

We Christians are not in the position of conquering champions. We are, rather, exiles who have been planted in cultures that are far from our true home (as the author of Hebrews implies in his discussion of spiritual heroes in Hebrews 11:13-16). We have been planted in exile for the express purpose of praying for and seeking the good of those cultures in which we have been planted. We are to work for the good of our adopted homeland. We are to love those around us, being salt and light to attract those in the darkness (Matthew 5:13-14). We do not do this to leverage our influence into a potential bid for domination. If anyone is going to conquer anyone or anywhere, it will be God, and he will do it in his own time. Rather we are called as exiles to nourish and bless our new home (though, honestly, as any ex-pat knows, 'home' is a very complicated and conflicted term).

Exercise

Take a quick inventory of Christian groups of which you are aware. How would you describe each of their postures toward the surrounding culture and society? Is it one of striving towards domination? Or is it a defensive 'circle the wagons' stance? Or is it more a Jeremiah 29 stance of the exile trying to enrich the adopted country? Discuss your answers with others.

Working for the good of our new home does not mean we can never speak prophetically to power when it abuses, nor are we forbidden from dissenting. But we always dissent as the loyal opposition. Furthermore, this stance of coming alongside our adopted cultures to bless them does not mean that there are no scenarios wherein Christians wield political influence. Sometimes Christians are called to places of political power in a society hostile to their faith; a difficult calling indeed. We should pray for such people for they need plenty of wisdom, compassion for those with whom they differ and a profound patience grounded in a confident hope that God works in and through cultures. But the bottom line is that if any of us is called to politics, we must practice our political craft in a way that is both honest, and loves rather than alienates those who see the world quite differently. Pray God's blessing for such men and women.

Exercise

Take time *now* to pray for people who you know are Christians engaged in politics. Think about making this a regular practice.

So we should not completely exclude involvement in politics, as some Christian traditions do. It is important for Christians to be involved in the fight for social justice as an expression of our love for our neighbours. But we must be somewhat disenchanted with a political approach to changing culture simply because our aim is not to dominate the culture for God. Rather our aim is to love those around us by providing a life-giving alternative to those who are perishing. And in this work, the imagination serves a key role. We need to establish oases for the imagination, places where both Christian and non-

Christian can be refreshed, and where God can do his transforming work. Rather than imposing our will on those around us, we need to create spaces that tell stories that entrance, show images that haunt, sing songs that resonate, create games that open up worlds no one dared imagine, dance in ways that intimate redemption in a dark world. And for all of this, the use of the imagination is crucial.

But throughout the history of God's people, imagination was met with distrust. There was, and in some quarters, still is an allergy to the imagination. In the next unit, we will examine why.

Key points

- Christians need to engage the culture around them because it is a task to which God has called us. He has given us his creation to develop wisely so that it sings to God's glory, serves our neighbour, and nurtures the earth. Christians are called to cultural creation.
- Christians ought to be concerned with the culture also because culture shapes the imaginations of those who live within these cultures, making it easier or harder to hear the gospel. We ought to seek to influence our culture and change it in a God-ward direction to the extent that we can.
- The primary arena of cultural change is not politics, but the collective imagination. Politics is a symptom of a society's imaginative vision.
- Historically attempts by Christians to enforce a cultural change through politics have not produced lasting change. Instead, they only produce resentment and an eventual backlash.
- The model for cultural change should not be one of domination (winning the culture for Christ or marching to victory), but one of exiles creating oases for the imagination, places of refreshment in a spiritual wasteland.