

Christ and Culture

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We're seeking *Christ in all*: in the city, in work, relationships, and culture. Tertullian, an early church father, famously said, "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?" What does religion have to do with the Academy? What does Christ have to do with culture? So how do you assess cultural issues? What do you use to form your opinions? It's U.S Open season, so let's think about how we assess culture in tennis terms: *Baseline*: where you start. *Sidelines*: How you keep the ball in play. *Point*: Why do you play? Baseline for assessing culture, the sidelines for engagement, and the point of it all.

Baseline Cultural Assessment

How do you form your beliefs about gay marriage, immigration, politics, religion, music, art? What is your baseline, your starting place, for assessing culture? Everybody has one. The baseline used by the church at Colossae was St. Paul's letter to the Colossians where he wrote: "*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel*" (1:4-6). Whatever you pray for, you live for. What you live for reveals your deepest beliefs. Paul says the baseline for forming belief is "*the word of the truth, the gospel.*" What is the gospel? The gospel is the good and true story that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through his own death and resurrection and is making all things new, even us. It is the story of the world seen through the story of Jesus Christ. Everyone sees the world and assesses culture through stories. Muslims through the Koran, Hindus the Upanishads, Christians, the Bible or the gospel. Austinites often claim a story bigger than any one religion, often saying something like, "God is bigger than all the religions." How do you assess this? Is it true? Yes, God, if he's an omnipotent Creator, is bigger than all the world religions. He couldn't very well be God if he wasn't. But that doesn't tell us how we know God. It seems to imply that if God is bigger than all religions, then you can't confine him to one religion, but if not how do we know him? **While it's true that God is bigger than all the religions, the knowledge of God isn't a matter of size.** If it was how could anyone know him? We'd all be squashed by infinite knowing and being. **The size of God doesn't determine the revelation of God.** If God truly is all powerful and all wise, then shouldn't he be able to reveal himself? In one religion? And if you're saying God reveals himself in all the religions, on what basis do you make that claim? The baseline of personal opinion? That's not very strong. So you see, your story (of expressive individualism) influences your beliefs. Christians can confidently appeal to a story bigger than personal opinion. And should always ask: "What does the gospel story say?" *It says, yes, God is bigger than all the religions and at the same time, no, he isn't.* Why no he isn't? If we took the premise that knowing God was a matter of size, then how could God ever fit into Jesus? **The gospel shows us a God small enough to fit into not only one religion but one person.** In fact it's not "religion" (working your way to god) but revelation (god working his way to you in Jesus). As our text says, "*the image of the invisible God*" (1:15). **The gospel story compressed into a single person.** Who didn't consider equality with God something to hold onto but lowered himself and took the form of a servant, humbled himself to the point

of death on a cross (Phil 2). Why? **Love**. Bigger than all things, small as a person, dead as a doornail. Resurrection life. All to redeem his creation. I commend the gospel baseline for assessing cultural claims. Here's why: it's *incredibly unique* and *wonderfully appealing*. Appealing: because its a *personal* baseline, an authority that gets what its like to be us. A sympathetic God. Unique: the story of Scientific reason, Islam, or Hinduism don't offer this.

Sidelines for Cultural Assessment

We've looked at the baseline for cultural assessment: Jesus, his story, his teachings, his love. So what are the sidelines for assessing cultural claims? How do we move forward? This is where many Christians get off track, some try to triumph over the culture making a Christian America; others retreat from culture to create a Christian enclave. The holy rollers and the Christian crusaders. But Jesus shows us another way. In this hymn to Christ, we see three ways engage culture: Affirm, Redeem, Confront (ARC). The crusaders only pick *confront*. Liberal Xns only *affirm*. Notice how the first two verses go out of their way to affirm Greek culture by picking up vocabulary and themes associated with Zeus: "*Zeus was the first, Zeus last, the lighting's Lord, Zeus head, Zeus center, all things are from Zeus...For in Zeus' mighty body these all lie...Such an immortal head, and such his thought.*" Paul picks up the language of first, Lord, head, all things, for in. He doesn't hear secular music, stop up his ears, and say if you play it backwards you'll worship the devil. Instead, he listens to their music, and he **affirms** what's true. What can we affirm? The belief there is source, a center, of all things. There is an authority or head and a lord. Paul taps into the cultural longing for purpose, to know where they came from, and understanding, how things hold together. *Paul does not respond to culture by saying, all you pagans are completely wrong and you just need to believe the Bible. Instead he shows them that their intuition about the universe being created and guided with purpose was right.* Jesus affirms culture, not just by taking it on as a human but by revealing himself through Greek philosophy and religion. But he doesn't stop there. He affirms, and he **challenges**. He says it's not Zeus but Christ in whom all things are made. It is Christ who is first and last. It is Jesus who is the head. He affirms and confronts. He challenges the insufficiency of Zeus with the sufficiency of Christ. **In essence, he says your longings are right but your conclusions are wrong, but he does it respectfully.** He respects cultural ideas and, third, **redeems** them. Affirm, Redeem, Confront from the baseline of the gospel. This happens all over the NT (Acts 17). It's Christian. How does he redeem? The philosophical idea of Zeus being head isn't very promising. The reason being Zeus is a fickle with his lightening. His morals fluctuate. He hangs some of his worshippers out to dry and rescues others. *He may appear to them, but he never becomes one of them.* Neither do the Hindu gods. In the Christ hymn, Jesus is the visible God. He becomes one of us. He's also the head, not just of the cosmos, but of the body which is the church. In fact, he draws on the Jewish idea not Greek of head. Redeeming it. Head of clans acted as fathers to care for their people, provide and protect. Unlike Zeus, God comes into his world to care for his people, to heal, comfort, instruct. Paul redeems the impersonal idea of headship with a personal head. Now how does he do it? By becoming the firstborn from *the dead*. The creator becomes the creature, and the creature becomes the sacrifice. For the arrogance and pride of the holy rollers and the unholy pagans, for the right and the left he also becomes the firstborn *from the dead*. Jesus swallows death and gives away life. *He eats death, sin, and evil for breakfast. So we can enjoy*

life, forgiveness, and good forever. He redeems. Affirm, Redeem, Confront. This also works with kids. My son came to me and asked if he could have a *Skylander's* video game. I looked into it and it's about these hybrid gods of different realms, of the sky, earth, water and so on. Pretty pagan. So at first I was like no way, *confronting* the idea of many gods and explained it to him. But then, I realized I could *affirm* the creativity, and the value of different environments of creation. So I pointed this out, and then tried to *redeem* it by reminding him of the psalm that says, "*The heights of the mountains are his, and the depths of the seas fit in his hands*" (95). Our God is god of all the environments, a personal Creator. Affirm, Redeem, Confront. If you think back, that's what I did with the individualist baseline that God is bigger than all the religions. Affirmed he is bigger. Challenged by saying he's also smaller. Redeemed, he's more loving than any of the other gods. I try to do this in my sermons often so you'll catch it, practice it, and because I want you to bring your non-Christian friends to hear respectful, Christ-centered engagement with their culture.

The Point of Cultural Engagement

Jesus is our baseline, the starting place to evaluate what's true, and he gives us guidelines. On the left we affirm cultural ideas, on the right we challenge claims, and down the middle we redeem them. Finally, what's the point? Is this all an intellectual exercise? Why do it? Because Christ is personal. Because of our prayer, having heard the gospel, the word of truth, "*we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*" Why do it? Remember we live for what we pray for? What does Paul pray? Paul prays we would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, **fully pleasing to him**. Assess culture, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a spiritual exercise, because you want to please God. *Are you living to please God in all respects?* Why should you? Well, it's not because he needs us. We live to please him because we enjoy his attention. My daughters come up to me all the time and beg me to watch them do cartwheels, handstands, and dances. I come from all boys, but I'm learning through my daughters *what it means to please God*. They don't cartwheel for a pat on the head or a reward. They cartwheel for my attention. They want my face. Don't you want God's attention? If you don't its because you're trying to please another face, to meet a cultural expectation. Ramirez (Ball and Chain): "*Be careful with your hobbies; they may define you.*" **Are you living to please your hobby or are you living to be fully pleasing to the Lord?** *Will you to look in his Face? Will you live for him in all of cultural life, not because he needs you but because he loves you?* We live, think, breathe, work, engage to please God, to relish Christ. His attention is the reward. The love of God, big as the universe, small as a Person on a cross, for all our lesser loves. He wants you to cartwheel for him, work for him, engage culture for him in a way that pleases him, because he loves you. This face full of glory and love is saying live to please me in all things. Bear fruit in every good work and increase in knowing me. Baseline, sideline, and the point. **The point of it all is to please God and to enjoy his Face.**