

# ENGAGE OR EVADE OUR CULTURE?

*By John Gagliardi*



As the old saying goes, we are *in* the world, but not *of* it. We all know and, I am sure, quote that line repeatedly - it is an old one, but a good one!

But let's stop for a moment and think about what it actually means to be in a world that we are not part of - how are we supposed to relate to such a world if we are foreigners - "strangers and pilgrims" as the Bible calls us (1 Peter 2: 11)?

Are we to "come out and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6: 17) and keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1: 27), or to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel..." (Mark 16: 15) and help Jesus in "...reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5: 19)? Are we to *engage* the world and its system, or are we to *evade* it hoping it will just somehow go away?

The Bible itself, as always, answers this question and all other questions that relate to "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1: 3). We are told in 2 Corinthians 5: 20 that we are "ambassadors for Christ", people sent on a mission from our King to represent Him as "special envoys" with authority and to try to make peace with a foreign and fallen world.

The word "reconcile" means to bring back together in harmony and friendship, and whether we like it or not, our call is to engage the world - our culture - and to bring it back into harmony with God's original plans and purposes for mankind. We quite literally have "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5: 18), and Paul tells us in this letter that God is actually "pleading" with the world through us.

What an incredible responsibility! God has redeemed us, transformed us, and authorized us to be His ambassadors plenipotentiary to our culture. And He tells us this in the Great Commission in Mark 16: 15. A "commission" by the way is an order or a command, not a recommendation or a suggestion.

So we are, by God's express commission, both reconciliation ambassadors and culture missionaries - we are to "go into all the world (Greek, "kosmos" - "culture" or "social order") and preach the Gospel to every creature".

Going back to my original question - do we ignore or engage our culture - there are a number of ways we can react when we walk out the door into the world - the marketplace. Back in the late 1940's, theologian Richard Niebuhr in his forward-looking and famous book, *Christ and Culture*, described five "paradigms" as models for Christians relating to their culture:

1. Christ against culture - the "Christian ghetto" syndrome, with Christians holding themselves aloof from the world, and acting as contrarians and combatants in an ongoing battle;
2. Christ of culture - the other extreme, trying to make Christ and His ways fit into contemporary culture, so we all get a "god" of our own making and liking;
3. Christ above culture - an attempt to synthesize the standards and edicts of Christian revelation with the issues of the culture;
4. Christ and culture in paradox - an understanding and acceptance of the ongoing tension between the Christian's responsibility to his faith, and the responsibility to his culture; and
5. Christ transforming culture - by engaging the culture, Christians engage and transform their culture for Christ.

As "culture missionaries", I believe the correct response is Niebuhr's #5 - our call is to transform our culture, becoming relevant and influential carriers of salt and light (Matthew 5: 13 and 14). By excellence and integrity, we lead by example - and allow Christ's glory to shine out through us in our words and deeds.

Of course, there are times when we must oppose and confront society - in areas of hypocrisy, gross sin, violence and blatant heresy - as did the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah in their day. We must have, deep within us, Godly values and lines that we do not cross, and compromises we will never make.

But we should also look at Joseph and Daniel - both men of great excellence and absolute integrity, who by their trust in and obedience to God, were able to play dominant roles in their cultures. Both became "movers and shakers", Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon.

While we may not think much of our own current culture, it compares quite favorably with the Egyptian and Babylonian cultures of Old Testament times. Both cultures were cruel, decadent and pagan. To be part of those cultures, and to move forward and actually play prominent and influential roles, both Joseph and Daniel would have needed to have made many trade-offs and concessions in areas such as dress, education, language and relationships.

Joseph married an Egyptian wife and brought up his children as Egyptians, and Daniel not just learned the basics of Babylonian knowledge and literature, but was "...10 times better than all the magicians and astrologers ..." (Daniel 1: 20).

Both Joseph and Daniel not just engaged their cultures, but excelled in their local cultures, while at the same time remaining committed and loyal to the God of Israel.

Is it easy? No. But if we are to engage and influence our own culture, the marketplace, we have to be better than the world, and beat them at their own game. Jesus told us to be both innocent and wise (Matthew 10: 16) - we operate in holiness, purity and integrity but we are the best salesmen, teachers, doctors, mothers, lawyers, politicians, singers, writers and TV presenters that the world has ever seen!

The way we deal with our culture should be positive interaction without accommodation. We are called to be ministers in the workplace, taking Christ into the far reaches of our world. We are missionaries to our culture - we are the “extended” and the “scattered” church, a modern-day Christian Diaspora as we disperse daily into our offices and factories and schools and parliaments and courtrooms.

Whatever we do in our particular part of the Diaspora, we have two unchanging and unwavering mandates from King Jesus: we are to glorify God in whatever we do, so that our work becomes worship, and we are called to serve others as Jesus himself did (Luke 22: 26-28). Even the Lord of all creation did not come to earth to be served, but to serve.

God so loved the world (Greek: “kosmos” - “culture”) that He gave his only begotten Son...” (John 3: 16). If God loved the “culture” so much, can we do any less? A little later in the Book of John, Jesus goes on: “I am the Light of the ‘culture’ ... He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the ‘culture’ those things which I heard from Him” (John 8: 12 and 26).

And isn't it wonderful that He who is in us, is greater than he who is in the “culture” (1 John 4: 4), while at the culmination of all things, God Himself tells us that “...the kingdoms of this ‘culture’ have become the Kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11: 15).