FIRST PETER

Part 4: “How to Engage Culture”

1 Peter 1:22-2:10

Sunday, October 18, 2015

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I. Introduction – Mistakes In Cultural Engagement

Read: 1 Peter 1:22-2:10.

Today, we are continuing our study of the New Testament book of 1 Peter. This is a letter written by the Apostle Peter, who was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Writing to the churches of Asia Minor (which is located in modern day Turkey), Peter is teaching Christians how to live as God’s people in a culture that is growing increasingly hostile to the gospel.¹ I believe the message of 1 Peter is important for Christians today, because many Christians in modern day America are finding themselves living in a culture in which Christianity is often misunderstood and mistrusted.

In this place of social estrangement, Peter encourages his readers by reminding them that they are to see themselves as “elect exiles” (1 Pt. 1:1). As God’s “elect” they are rejoice that they have been chosen and loved by God as his holy people. Nevertheless, as “exiles” they are to live as God’s holy people in a world that is not their own. Peter has reminded them of the hope that they have in the gospel, and the holy calling that flows from that hope. Now, he is going to show them how to engage the culture that they live in.

When it comes to Christians engaging culture, I think there are two major mistakes that we can make. The first mistake is an attempt to conquer culture by forcing people to obey the gospel by whatever means necessary. In the Middle Ages this was done by converting people literally at the point of a sword through holy war. But in the modern era it more often takes the form of a culture war. We stage protests, sign petitions, lobby for policy, and post angry social media statuses. While we should always try to plead and persuade for a just society, we must realize that the power of force will never transform the hearts of people in our culture.

The second mistake is the exact opposite of the first. Instead of trying to conquer culture, many Christians and Christian denominations allow themselves to be conquered by culture. You see this when you see the church bowing itself to the preferences of broader culture. For example, in the 1920, old theological liberals tried to create non-miraculous version of Christianity for scientific society. Today, new theological liberals try to create version of Christianity that validate progressive society’s view on sex. In both examples, the attempt is to make a version of Jesus that society likes. Like new version of the golden calf, this essentially amount to deifying culture by placing Jesus’s name on it. Recent history has shown us the failure of both of these strategies.

But the New Testament offers an altogether different strategy for cultural engagement, which is at once more simple and more strange than what we might expect. What is that strategy? That strategy

is the local church itself. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in their book *Resident Aliens: “The church doesn't have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy.”* Essentially, the church itself is designed to engage broader culture by being a foretaste, a sample, and an example of the Kingdom of God that is purposefully different from the surrounding culture. Essentially, the church is most culturally effective when the church is most faithful to representing the kingdom of God.

II. The Text – 3 Ways of Engaging Culture Being the Church

From this text, Peter shows us that the church is to faithfully represents the kingdom of God and effectively engages culture by displaying: 1) A Pure Love, 2) A Prophetic Identity, and 3) A Priestly Mission.

1.) A Pure Love.

Let’s take a look at the command in verse 22: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Pt. 1:22).

Peter is reminding Christians that in order to engage culture, we must create within the church a culture of radical love. For the Christian, earnest love for one another is the mark of spiritual growth. And this love – as the Bible defines it – really is counter-cultural.

Today there is a lot of talk about love, but usually what we mean by love is nothing more than tolerance. Now, at one level tolerance can be a good very thing. A biblical view of tolerance acknowledges that there is always a certain dignity and respect that every human being deserves simply because they are created in the image and likeness of God. This view of tolerance should cause people with very different values to at least be able to communicate with mutual respect. However, while the Bible doesn’t demand anything less than tolerance, it does demand so much more. Love is greater than tolerance. Society can bully and pressure you into so-called tolerance, but love comes only from a pure heart. You can tolerate someone at a distance, but love entails a real relationship. You can fake tolerance, but you can’t fake love. And God wants us to be a people defined by earnest love.

So where does this love come from? Peter says, if you are a Christian, you love “…since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.” (1 Pt. 1:23-25). According to Peter, pure love derives from the word of God, the good news that is the gospel. We love because God has loved us in Christ.

Likewise, we love because God’s word is eternal, whereas our petty drama is not. God’s word makes us into eternal beings. Specifically, when Christians are relating with fellow Christians, we must understand that we are relating with eternal beings with whom we will share eternity because of the eternal work of love of Christ.

So how do we do this? We “...put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (1 Pt. 2:1). Gossip, competition, pettiness, pretending, and fakeness are habits that must be

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banished from the people of God. Instead the church should be defined by service, sincerity, sacrifice, encouragement, honesty, and rejoicing in the other person.

In the church, Christians get the opportunity to practice how to love one another, so that we may love even our enemies. Think of the radical display of love that the church in Charleston recently displayed to the world when they publically forgave the man who walked into one of their meetings, and murdered their members. That type of love doesn’t come easy, and it doesn’t come without practice.

But without love we are simply pretenders. Hatred, bitterness, and forgiveness is the epitome of Christian hypocrisy. Love, on the other hand, is the truest mark of being a disciple of Jesus. As Jesus himself said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:34-35).

This pure gospel-inspired love is the “pure spiritual milk” (1 Pt. 2:2) that creates maturity. Like newborn babies who drink milk eagerly and often, we should be a people that constantly seek the nourishment of Christian community. Lone ranger Christianity isn’t biblical and it doesn’t work.

But not only does loving community contribute to our own spiritual growth; it is also inherently missional. Like taste, the grace of God is something that is necessarily personal and experiential (1 Pt. 2:3). Through true, earnest loving community we offer to the world a taste of the kingdom of God. The New Testament vision for a church of loving community is a refreshing alternative to the shallowness of rampant individualism in modern society.

When we display true, earnest love we offer to the world a glimpse of the kingdom of God. As Dr. Russell Moore has written: “The church is a signpost of God's coming kingdom, a preview to the watching world of what the reign of God in Christ is to look like, a colony of the kingdom coming.”

2.) Prophetic Identity.

Peter wants Christians to see their identity prophetically. Now, what do I mean by that? I mean in order for Christians to engage culture effectively, we must see ourselves as God sees us. We must view our identity through the lens of Scripture. And how Peter defines the identity of God’s people is saturated with the words of Scripture, specifically the prophetic words of the Old Testament concerning the nation of Israel.

In these verses Peter defines Christians those who are invited to “come” to God (1 Pt. 2:4). They are “living stones” (1 Pt. 2:4) of God’s “spiritual house” (1 Pt. 2:5). They are “chosen” and “precious” (1 Pt. 2:4). They are a “royal priesthood,” a “holy nation,” and the “possession” of God Almighty (1 Pt. 2:9). Shockingly, these are the categories of ancient Israel, now applied to all believers – even non-Jewish believers.

As Dr. Wayne Grudem comments: “...all believers now enjoy the great privilege, reserved only for priests in the Old Testament, of ‘drawing near’ to God in worship. But rather than coming to the

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5 Carson, 650.
altar or even to the holy place in the Jerusalem temple, now thy come 'to him’ in whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

But, a prophetic identity is two-fold. Even though Christians are immensely valuable in the sight of God, like Christ, we will be rejected by many in society. We must set our expectations accordingly. Our expectations should be that we will be “rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious” (1 Pt. 2:4). Thus, As Russell Moore has written we must shift from viewing ourselves as a moral majority that deserves power and privilege to viewing ourselves as a prophetic minority that influences society from the margins.

Society will not reward you for being a good Christian. In fact, to live for Christ will cost you something. As verse 5 says, to be a follower of Jesus entails the offering of “spiritual sacrifices” (1 Pt. 2:5). In the New Testament, sacrifices include service, financial giving to support the ministry of the gospel, the singing praise, and even suffering rejection for one’s faith. And rejection is a big deal, because many in our society measure their worth on whether or not other people thing highly of them.

But by embracing a prophetic identity, we can endure temporary shame from society, resting in the eternal honor that belongs to those who believe.

I once attended a lecture by a pastor named J.R. Vassar, who planted a church in New York City. He talked about how he was trying to equip his congregation to engage the largely secular culture around them. He said this, and I found it very helpful: “Honor or shame. You get one now and the other later, but the one you choose for later is yours forever.” If we choose shame for now, we will receive the honor of Christ for eternity. Our ultimate sense of worth must derive not from how our society values us, but rather how Christ will vindicate us. This is what it means to have a prophetic identity.

3.) A Priestly Mission.

Let’s take a closer look at verse 9. Peter says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt. 2:9).

Peter is saying that Christians should see their mission through the lens of priesthood. Now in the Old Testament, a priest was someone who represented man to God and God to man. Thus, priest had to have a dual ministry. Priests are engaged in the world in which they live, but they are also set apart unto God.

As priest represents man to God, Christians are to actively be engaged in praying for those who are suffering in the world. We should pray for justice where there is injustice. We should pray for peace where there is war. We should pray for integrity where there is corruption. We should even pray for the salvation of those who desire our destruction.

But priests are also represent God to man. This means Christians must always seek to provide a haven of health and healing for those who have been wounded by the power of sin.

Our job isn’t to condemn the world. Our job is to speak and display the goodness of God’s kingdom. The world is weary of hypocritical Christians who make hateful moral judgments, but it is aching to

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6 Grudem, 103.
7 Moore, 45-46.
feel the healing touch of Jesus through his church. This doesn’t mean that Christians should shy away from the truth of God. But what it does mean is that our truth-telling words should always be saturated with radical love.

To put some skin on this: we must not simply condemn abortion. We must also tangibly love the single mom and adopt and foster children.

We must not simply talk about the biblical sexuality and marriage. We must love those who have been abused, suffered divorce, and wounded by sexual sin. We must counsel marriages and equip people for marriage. And above all we must sanctify our own marriages.

Likewise, we can’t just talk about the union that Christians of different cultures and races share in Christ. We must tangibly work for racial reconciliation by worshipping together and seeking change in our own city. For we are now a new nation, a new race united not by the blood of our ancestors, but by the blood of Christ. As Peter says, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pt. 2:10).

This is how we declare the excellencies of the one who saved us from darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Pt. 2:9).

**III. The Gospel – Christ’s Cultural Engagement**

We effectively engage culture by being a church with a pure love, a prophetic identity, and a priestly mission. Now, if you think about it Peter isn’t offering a radical new strategy. He is simply describing what he personally witnessed in the life of Jesus. The church is after all the body of Christ filled with the Spirit of Christ, called to continue the mission of Christ.

If you think about it, Jesus Christ is the ultimate form of cultural engagement. He is the one who loved us with a true and pure love, even unto death on a Cross. He was the stone rejected by men, but by the power of resurrection has been made the ultimate living stone. He ultimate priest, who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and is interceding for us even now. He is the King whose kingdom we have the opportunity to display.

Redeemer Christian Church, may we display Jesus’s kingdom by being a people who love one another earnestly with a pure heart. May we rest that while we may at times be rejected for our faith, we are chosen and precious in the sight of God. And may we embrace our priestly mission, that we may display the excellencies of our great High Priest! AMEN.

Questions for Community Groups:

1) **What are some ineffective ways that you have seen Christians engage broader culture? Why do you think the New Testament portrays local church itself is such an important strategy for cultural engagement?**

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9 71, Hauerwas.
11 Ibid., 84.
2) Why do you think Christians loving other Christians is so essential to effective cultural engagement?

3) How should Christians seek to be priests to broader culture (see 1 Pt. 2:9)?