

Biblical Theology of Christian Formation in Culture

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)

Lesson Objectives

After this lesson, students should be able to

- Define *culture*.
- Understand culture's influence on behavior
- Know how to use Scripture to challenge culturally acceptable norms that violate biblical principles
- Use culture to affect the classroom positively

Introduction

As educators, we have the privilege of passing on apostolic truth to those we teach both in the classroom and in the church. One man said, "We teach what we know. We reproduce what we are."

Being a teacher is both a privilege and a pressure, because we will have to give an account before God concerning what we know and how we communicated this knowledge. James 3:1 cautions us, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (NKJV).

Today, I would like us to have a discussion on culture and how it affects our biblical theology of Christian formation. I believe that when we are conscious of the impact culture has on our biblical theology, it will help us become more effective as educators. The big idea or question is, what is culture and how does it affect our biblical theology of Christian development or Christian growth?

To answer this question, I want to ask some smaller questions that should build upon each other to give us the big idea.

I. What Is Culture? (DISCUSSION)

The term “culture” comes from the Latin word “colere,” which means “to till, tend, or take care of” as in agriculture (cultivation). Culture can suggest an environment that is pieced together and refined. That is why Ghanaian culture is different from German culture or in a more general context explains some differences between African culture and European culture. It is not that one is better than the other or that one is right while the other is wrong. Culture is whatever we fashion, cultivate, and pass on to others – whether intended or unintended – like knowledge, ideology, art, language, dress, and even physical artifacts (Estep & Kim, 2010, 275).

Schmidt defines culture as “society’s established values, beliefs, norms, knowledge, and practices that are learned throughout human interactions” (Estep & Kim, 2010, 276).

II. Two Worldviews on Culture

When it comes to culture, two main worldviews exist: collectivism and individualism.

- COLLECTIVISM teaches that society functions as a whole and values the need for interrelatedness.
- INDIVIDUALISM teaches that society is made up of a group of individuals who value the need for independence (self-autonomy).
 - The collectivistic worldview focuses on meeting the needs of the group over individuals’ needs.

Two Worldviews Compared

Feature Compared	Collectivism	Individualism
Definition	Connected with social context	Separate from social context
Structure	Flexible, adjustable	Limited, undivided, stable
Important Features	External, public (statutes, roles, relationships)	Internal, private (abilities, thoughts, feelings)
Tasks	Belong, fit-in. Occupy one’s proper place. Engage in appropriate action Promote others’ goals. Be indirect: “Read others’ minds.”	Be unique. Express self. Realize internal attributes. Promote own goals Be direct: “Say what’s on your mind.”

Role of others	Self-definition: relationships with others in specific contexts define the self	Self-evaluation: others are important for social comparison, reflected evaluation.
Basis of self-esteem (value)	Ability to adjust, restrain self, maintain harmony with social context	Ability to express self, validate internal attributes

* Adapted from Figure 9.1: Summary of Key Differences between Collectivism and Individualism, (Estep & Kim, 2010, 278).

QUESTION: Between the two worldviews, which best describes us in the culture in which we live, collectivism or individualism? (Collectivism promotes a We-consciousness while individualism encourages an I-consciousness.)

III. How Does Culture Influence Faith?

Now that we have taken some time to look at culture and the two prominent worldviews: How does culture influence faith?

As educators and spiritual leaders, we must understand how our culture affects our faith, because this will certainly affect how our students receive and apply the biblical truths we teach in the classroom. Our goal is to teach in a way that positively addresses cultural challenges and applies faith in a biblical, life-transforming way.

EXAMPLE: Last term in my Year Two Spiritual Leadership class, I wrote the word “socialization” on the board. I then asked students to tell me what they felt this word meant.

- They gave different answers. Some said it means to be friendly with people; others said it means to have a good time.
- **SOCIALIZATION** is the process whereby society teaches an individual (normally a child) what is acceptable and what is not acceptable within that society. Socialization happens all around us and produces a culture.
- I then asked, “Has society taught us that there are different levels of lying?” If so, how can we as spiritual leaders counteract this aspect of socialization?

Culture teaches different levels of lying. But Bible culture teaches otherwise.

- These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue (Proverbs 6:16-17, NKJV)

- A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish. (Proverbs 19:9)
- Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight. (Proverbs 12:22)
- Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him. (Colossians 3:9-10)
- He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight. (Psalm 101:7)
- The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment. (Proverbs 12:19)
- He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death. (Revelation 21:7-8)

When one is born again, he or she becomes part of a bigger culture known as the “culture of Christ.” The culture of Christ is explained in the Bible and is lived out through the daily application of biblical theology.

WORK GROUPS: Take ten to fifteen minutes to form a list of how culture positively influences our faith. Then give some real-life examples where our cultural worldview negatively affects our faith.

As Bible school instructors, we need to consciously influence and sometimes correct Christian development that takes place in the lives of our students due to culture. Through consistent teaching and modeling, we can explain how culture should never cause us to go against a higher culture, a world culture, and that is the Bible culture [culture of Christ].

- “Christian formation can no more be removed from its cultural context as from its theological [foundations]” (Estep & Kim, 2010, 274).

When you look at the Bible, it is clear that many cultures are represented: Hebrew, Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman. One culture is not better than another. However, there is a God who transcends or rises above world cultures. “When Paul started his missionary work, his purpose was not to impose a Jewish culture on a Gentile population, but to get them to accept Someone who rises above culture – and that Someone is Christ” (Estep & Kim, 2010, 286)

In Romans 14 we see that some religious practices that contribute to a person's Christian formation may change depending upon the cultural context.

- Non-vegetarian vs. Vegetarian (v. 2)
- Special Days vs. All Days Alike (v. 5)
- Unclean Food vs. No Food Unclean (v. 14)

Paul began with a question in Romans 14:22-23, "Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin" (NKJV).

Within the boundaries of God's Word, contextualization is fine. However, if our culture conflicts with the Bible culture and we insist on our culture the result is sin.

Two important observations about culture:

- 1) Faith in Jesus is consistent throughout the New Testament regardless of culture.
- 2) Christian formation is done in-community – not just individually; and that community is an intercultural setting (Estep & Kim, 2010, 287).

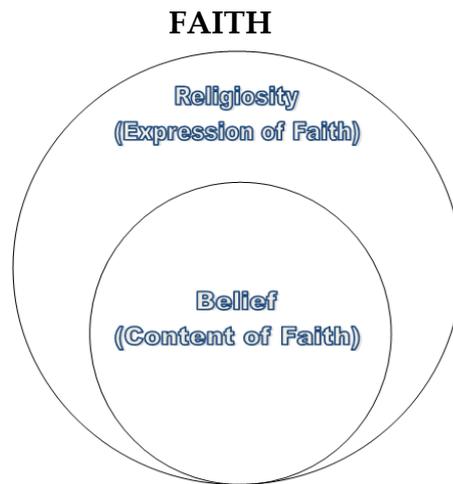
IV. Clearly Communicate Bible Theology

QUESTION: How can we make sure the Bible theology we are communicating is being understood and contextualized correctly in Christian formation?

To answer this question properly, we need to divide faith into two parts. When it comes to Christian development, we must make a distinction between the content of faith and the expression of faith.

- The content of faith comes from the revealed truths of Scripture.
- The expression of faith refers to faith being applied and lived out.

When it comes to Christian formation, faith can be broken down into an inner and outer circle. The inner circle represents the content or essence of our faith known as "belief," while the outer circle speaks of our expression of faith known as religiosity.



Adapted from Figure 9.6: Essential and Experimental Domains of Faith, Estep & Kim, 2010, 292

Remember the example given in Romans 14 by the apostle Paul? He was not dealing with the content of faith but with the expression of faith. In contextualizing our theology, our students must understand these two dimensions of faith.

Even though faith is applied within a cultural context, the essence or content should be independent of cultural influences. In other words, culture shapes the expression of faith, but it should not influence the content faith.

In their book *Christian Formation*, Estep and Kim (2010) explain that because culture is a human product, it is part of our human existence and expression. Therefore, it has no legitimate authority to judge or validate the content of faith. The Bible is the only foundation and standard of faith (II Timothy 3:16-17; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11:6) (292).

So if my natural culture teaches different levels of lying but Bible culture teaches no different levels of lying, then it is not contextualization that allows me to practice levels of lying but disobedience, with the end result being sin. "One of the crucial challenges facing Christians today is finding the proper balance in our response to culture and various challenges that come with it." (Estep & Kim, 2010, 297)

V. Stand Up and Stand Out

As educators we must clearly communicate the biblical message of Christ to our students that as men and women of God, we must stand up and stand out.

CLASS INTERACTION: Let us to look at five scriptural references and then share what you believe is the cultural practice God's Word is teaching us to cultivate and pass on to others [HOLINESS].

- But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (I Peter 2:9, NKJV).
- Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. (II Timothy 1:8-9)
- For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. (I Thessalonians 4:7)
- For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)
- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. (Ephesians 1:3-4)

Faith should transform culture. As Christians, the culture of Christ should prevail and complement our own cultures whenever and wherever possible.

Before we became followers of Christ, we may have thought a certain way and behaved a certain way but through His kingdom of Christians, Christ is redeeming culture (Estep & Kim, 2010, 299). Bible culture should control us and guide us more than anything else.

How can we allow God's Word to influence us more than any other culture? Christ does this by transforming people with "I" and "We"-consciousness to a Christ-consciousness, giving us the new heart the Bible promises believers (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 24:7; II Corinthians 5:17).

Estep and Kim (2010) explain that the new heart allows us to have spiritual consciousness to commune with God and with others which allows us to experience a full Christ-consciousness (I Corinthians 6:17; 12:27-28). As the Source of all things, Christ is the core of faith and the incarnation of eternal Truth (Deuteronomy 32:4; John 1:14; 8:32; 14:6; 17:17) (299).

And be not conformed to this world [culture]: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2)

God empowers us with His Spirit (Acts 1:8) so we can stand up and stand out (I Peter 2:9).

Conclusion

What influence should culture have on faith? Culture can affect our expression of faith and is seen in our religious practices. This is acceptable as long as it does not go against the Word of God. However, when our culture conflicts with the Bible, we must submit ourselves to the higher culture of God's Word. That is when real transformation takes place—first within and then without. So with confidence we can impart into future generations what we know: the power of God that flows in and through a vessel who is willing to stand up and stand out.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17, NKJV)

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:10-11)

Faith believes in the objective facts and truth of Scripture that generate complete trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It stands beyond the confinements of culture. The content of faith describes what is real based on THE story recorded in the Bible. Allowing the content of faith to be determined or interpreted by culture does not make sense and is unbiblical. The content basis from which faith proceeds is very precise and independent – based completely on the Bible that rises above the context of culture, language, and tradition. For Christians, this is one of the fundamentals that cannot be compromised on any grounds whatsoever. Culture should not influence the content of faith (belief). (Estep & Kim, 2010, 293-294)

Biblical theology should shape and develop us into the image of Christ. Certainly, our culture will influence our expression of faith but it should not affect the content of faith. Culture should not be the major factor in our Christian development; it should be the Word of God. A biblical theology should shape us within our cultural context.

Bibliography

Estep, J. R. & Kim, J. H. (2010). *Christian formation: Integrating theology and human development*.

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Lesson in Review

Name: _____

Nation: _____ Date: _____

1. Explain the statement "We teach what we know; we reproduce what we are."

2. Explain the difference between "expression of faith" and "content of faith."

3. Describe the two worldviews of culture.

A. _____

B. _____

4. What is the "culture of Christ"?

5. What is "socialization"?

6. Based on Estep and Kim's statement about Paul's purpose on his missionary journeys, what should modern missionaries strive to do?

7. Complete the following statement: Through _____
And _____, we can explain how culture should never cause us to go against _____ . . . that is the Bible culture [culture of Christ].

8. How can we make sure the Bible theology we are communicating is being understood and contextualized correctly in Christian formation?

9. The lesson cites two important observation about culture. What are they?

A. _____

B. _____

10. Write a paragraph concerning how local or national culture can affect standards of holiness.
