

Why Engage Culture: Calling, Holiness, and the New Creation

Word Alive, April 8th, 2018

Ted Turnau

Introduction: A DJ's story.

Why engage? Because we want a better world for everyone, because the church "exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

So why are so many Christians suspicious of cultural engagement? Two reasons:

1. Why engage? Culture won't last.
2. Cultural engagement stains us and makes us worldly.

I. Is cultural engagement worth it? Will culture last?

A. Culture as calling

The "Cultural Mandate" was given at the creation of the first humans (Gen. 1:26-28).

① Culture = care + cultivation of God's creation

Though now fallen, we are still called to engage and create culture, especially because God's redeeming grace moves in and through it.

Culture becomes our home, our "imaginary landscape." It's important to understand and engage.

②

→ shapes our lived experience of reality

B. Cultural Mandate vs. Great Commission?

It is worth pointing out that the Great Commission (Mt. 28:16-20) is a calling to “make disciples,” training people into a whole way of life. Discipleship is inescapably cultural.

→ including building a Christian worldview

In fact, Cultural Mandate and Great Commission dovetail: they both engage the world so that “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). Both seek to glorify God and spread his *shalom*.

This is why there’s no tension between social justice/mercy ministry and evangelism. Both Cultural Mandate and Great Commission seek to do both.

C. But does it even matter in the long run? Won’t it all burn?

Is everything we pour our time into in our everyday lives vanish like “tears in the rain”? Some Christians think so, think that engaging culture is like “polishing the brass on a sinking ship.”

This understanding of the end of the world is mistaken.

D. Does God destroy his own creation?

The Bible gives us little more than tantalizing clues about eschatology (the doctrine of the last things). But what it says suggest that God will cleanse and renew his creation rather than destroy it.

Why would he destroy it? All indications from the OT are that God protects his land, even from his own people (2 Chron. 36:21, Ezek. 36:17-18), and Rev. 11:18 promises that God will "destroy those who destroy the earth."

There are even passages that speak about God saving his creation, like Ro. 8:19-21. There is no destruction here, unless "liberation" means to destroy.

Other passages that employ images of destruction must be read in light of other passages that speak of God's liberating and cleansing. But does it include culture?

→ Richard Middleton
"New heavens
& new earth"

E. When the kings come marching in.

Consider: the Bible begins in a garden and ends with a city. That suggests cultural development in the story of redemption

Second, consider how in Rev. 21/Isa. 60, pagan kinds come bearing the "glory and honor" of their nations into the New Jerusalem, drawn by the light of God and the Lamb.

Kings weren't just political figures, but patrons and representatives of their whole cultures. What sort of cultural treasures will the British or American "kings" bear into the New Jerusalem? Even in the new creation, culture will continue to matter, and that encourages us to engage it now.

Our salvation is part of the redemption of all creation → We are saved to be the new Adam + Eve.

Salvation in Christ means more than saving individual souls. Jesus saves us for the world. It may be that what we do everyday counts as a contribution to the new creation. Our cultural contributions point forward to the new creation as a witness of it and to our coming King.

II. Will Cultural Engagement Stain Us and Make Us Worldly?

A. What is the "world"?

Many Christians have in mind passages like 1 Jo. 2:15, but what about passages like Jo. 3:16?

John uses the word "world" in two difference senses: positive (the creation, including culture), and negative (the system of rebellion against God's rule, lust of the flesh, eyes, boastful pride of life, etc.: 1 Jo. 2:16).

→ Finding life in things of this world without God

We should keep these two sense of "world" in mind. It's OK to love the world, just not *love the world*, right? Enjoy God's gifts with gratitude, but don't turn them into gods.

B. Jesus calls us *into* the world.

In Jo. 17:14-18, Jesus says:

1. we're not to be "of the world" (our deepest loyalties lie with our King).

→ of the system of rebellion against God

2. we're to be different because of the Word, not because we separate ourselves from the world.

3. this difference will cause friction with those in the world,

4. nevertheless, we have been sent into this world.

5. This is why "In but not of the world" is inadequate. God put us here and Christ calls us further into it for the sake of the world. This is our mission field.

This includes culture. You cannot engage people without engaging their cultural context. But can we do this without undermining our holiness? Jesus says yes, *if we stay connected to the Word.*

Withdrawal isn't an option because our mission field is the world

C. Two kinds of holiness

Pharisees worked with a "contagion" view of sin (see Mark 7).

Jesus showed no fear of contamination, preferring to "contaminate" sinners with his holiness. Why the different approach?

Jesus had a different understanding of clean and unclean. Uncleaness was a thing of the heart, of the "affections" (see Thomas Chalmers' "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection").

What we need is not separation from the world as much as a cultivation and renewal of affection for the Father.

D. A couple of practical points about cultural engagement and holiness...

1. **It's about your heart:** understand where you are weak, gain a mature self-knowledge.

2. **Remember Christian liberty (Ro. 14):** your weakness is not everyone's weakness. Different hearts struggle differently.

→ A widow who gets all rules

3. **Remember the gospel:** you *will* mess up sometimes, and it will not ruin your relationship with God. Don't be reckless, but do relax a little, as if you were under grace.

4. **Stay connected to your local church:** be in a place where you are exposed to the Word of God (that sanctifies us in Jo. 17). We need to be connected with friends in our local church who know our hearts and can hold our feet to the fire when needed.

Conclusion: Who looks out for the *mearecstapa* (the border-stalkers and cultural missionaries among us)?

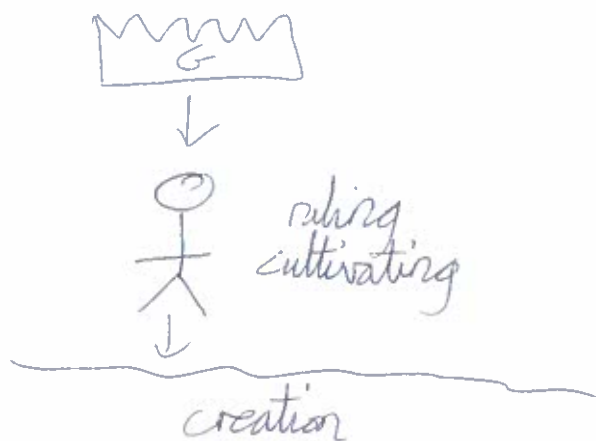
Qns

- Feels like a tension: devoting time to culture
vs
evangelism

• "Counts in the new creation" ?

Cultural engagement = Living in this world as
people in tune with its ~~coming~~ King

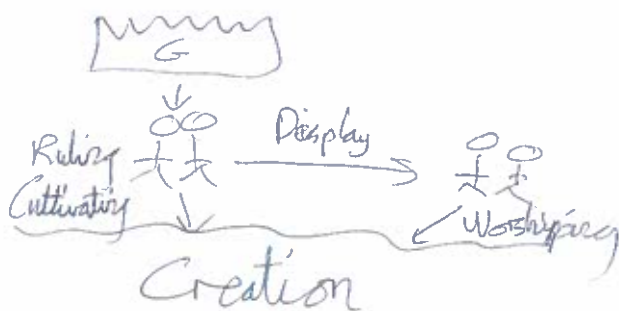
⊗ Living engaged with culture is displaying/demonstrating
what ~~the~~ the end goal of redemption looks like
and actually achieving it



⇒



⇒



Holiness isn't moving
away from creation,
but moving under
God's rule (Word)
as we engage with creation

Talk Two: How Should We Engage? Fight, Flight, or Plant?

Word Alive, April 9th, 2018

Ted Turnau

actually doing

Introduction: What's the goal of cultural engagement? To change the world, to engage imaginings with the reality of God and the new coming creation.

displaying demonstrating

If that's so, then we need to consider carefully what sort of world we are trying to engage. Western culture is disenchanted, inoculated against the gospel.

going culture change through power

Typical Christian responses: fight (politics/culture war) or flight (withdraw/hunker down).

I. Path One: Flight (Politics/Culture War)

→ Get politics back to Christian era before it became post-Christian

The problem: politics involves power, coercion. And where you have coercion, you stoke resentment and backlash.

In pluralistic divided society, using power to shape culture = coercion

A. A Cautionary Tale: The Reagan Revolution

During the 1980s, the alliance between Evangelicals and the Republican Party seemed to go well. But through it, Evangelicals developed a culture war mentality that alienated many.

↓
This kind of use of power makes the cultural witness of Christians tied to politics - what we're going against who we agree with etc.

Further, as the culture wars played out, many of the gains were lost because the political victory never convinced secular, progressive culture-makers who resented the political takeover.

Lecturers, journalists, media artists

So it goes back eventually

This led to cultural backlash movements such as the so-called “New Atheism” and deeper social division.

B. How Church/State relations affect the long-term legitimacy of the Church.

Sociologist David Martin in *A General Theory of Secularization* asserted that wherever Church and State mixed, the Church inevitably lost out in terms of social legitimacy in the long-term.

The closer the coordination, the more severe the loss of legitimacy, from violent anti-clericalism (France) to gradual decline of relevance (Britain, Scandanavia).

In the U.S. where there was strict separation between Church and State, religion fared better, though that separation has been breached by Reagan, Bush, and now Trump.

Why this pattern? Because when the church becomes cozy with those in power, it loses its right to speak prophetically to those in power.

When it uses political coercion, the Church ends up paying for it in the currency of the resentment of the next generation.

C. Of golden calves...

And what's worse, we become addicted to power and end up sliding into political idolatry. That's a big part of the story vis-à-vis the evangelical support of Trump.

There are spiritual hazards strewn about the political path to cultural change

D. Practice politics with humility and love for others.

Not that we should eschew politics altogether, but we must do so with a real interest in the common good, and with humility and love for those with whom we disagree.

Example: Dan Cathy of Chick-Fil-A and gay activist Shane Windmeyer.

II. Pietistic Withdrawal

For those tired of culture warring, the temptation to withdraw is strong.

A. Dreher's ark: *The Benedict Option*

By forming "thick community" we can weather the storm of modernism (relativistic, self-centered, hostile to the faith) and emerge on the other side to save Western culture.

B. A critique of the Benedict Option.

But Dreher's prescription should be critiqued on several fronts:

1. Are "thick community" and cultural engagement mutually exclusive? Is it possible to engage without compromise? Yes, in fact, they need each other.

2. Do we have license to ignore our Lord's call *into* the world? We are all sent.

3. The motivation often seems self-protection rather than intentional community where we are formed to be sent out for the sake of others. It is unbiblically insular, self-centered.

Mission
is response
to the
gospel
Cultural
engagement
is too
central
part of
being human-
and hence
discipleship &
evangelism

4. Dreher lacks balance regarding his assessment of modern culture. There is no recognition of God's blessing in the world (common grace).

Also, why does he think the "darkness" will pass?

5. The implied "doctrine of salvation" is confidence in conservative communities rather than in the sovereign grace of God who is able to preserve his Church in the midst of a hostile world. The bubble will not save you, but God can.

Therefore, I do not find the Benedict Option a viable path for those who care about the world God has place us in. For a more detailed critique, see my review *Foundations* 73 (Summer 2017).

III. Path Three: Planting Oases - Creative Engagement

2 not addressing
• social action
• Hospitality

A. The Parable of the Oasis that Was Really a Portal to Another Universe

B. Oases breathe and creatively challenge both Christian and non-Christian imaginations to see different, question assumptions. They open up spaces for conversations and relationships.

The key is to address the shared "imaginary landscape" of the post-Christian culture so that they can begin to see the gospel as good, true, and beautiful.

C. The church needs to gain a better understanding of the imagination and seek to build networks that support those who engage culture creatively (see Fujimura's *Culture Care*).

We can become a detoxifying force in our current culture, our works the "sunflowers" that cleanse the garden of culture.

D. Why focus on imagination and creative cultural engagement?

1. The church is suspicious of the imagination and doesn't understand it very well, which has led to....

Belief is that too much imagination leads to letting go of sound doctrine

2. a crisis in the aesthetic witness of the church, which makes it harder for the people to take the Christian faith seriously.

What Christians produce culturally puts people off

Why arts? Because narrative speaks to us in a way which proposition does not

Talk Three: Understanding the Christian Imagination
New Word Alive, April 10th, 2018
Ted Turnau

I. What is Imagination? Perception and Creation

A. Active perception: the imagination gives us our world.

Some see perception as mere response to stimulus. Some neuroscience and philosophy suggests a much more active role for the imagination in perception:

Nigel Thomas' "Active Perception" theory.

→ Perception = illuminating our world through constant questioning and interpreting

Kathleen Lennon's understanding of the world as a face with a "readable physiognomy."

Phil 1:8

A transmutation of the senses is 'org' metaphorising processes by which we intake sense data

All of this resonates with what Paul has to say about the "eyes of the heart" (Eph. 1:17-20) that sees past the apparent reality into the truly real.

→ Whether we "see" the reality or deeper truths

B. Creativity: the imagination allows us to create and inhabit new worlds.

When we create, we create a world for other people to inhabit. But when we enjoy these worlds, we also must use the imagination to place ourselves in someone else's imaginary world. Both involve "seeing-as."

C. The link between them: seeing-as.

→ going beyond the obvious, interpreting the meaning of things

The imagination can be bent this way or that, and it shapes our whole orientation to reality. These are the lenses that everyone sees through; everyone has an imagination. The real question: What is it focused on?

D. This is what makes creative cultural engagement so crucial.

We are engaging the collective "eyes of the heart" of our culture, its imaginary landscape.

Living in imaginary worlds (creative) shapes our imaginative perception of reality (perceptive)

Through what imaginative lens do we see?
→ Politics & Power
→ Economic
→ Entertainment etc.

II. What Makes the Christian Imagination Distinctive? A Tension and a Balance

In other words, what kind of Christian imagination is most appropriate in a post-Christian culture?

A. Brightness Control: The Tension between the Cross and the Empty Tomb

Tomb

Creation = seeing as God's good gift
Fall = seeing as broken
Redemption = seeing as being restored

1. What does it mean to "see through the cross"? It means reckoning honestly with the darkness in the world, and in ourselves.

→ No right to sanitize or paper over the cracks of the world, or ourselves

2. What does it mean to "see through the empty tomb"? It means seeing *past* the brokenness of the world into the light that will shatter the darkness, valuing everything in light of the new creation that Jesus will bring in. (2 Cor 5:14-17)

3. The Christian imagination needs to hold these perspectives in tension.

↙ This is where we live

→ The dark twistedness of the world and the light which shatters dark & brings hope

B. Volume Control: The Balance between Shouting and Mumbling

1. Don't shout.

→ how explicit?

This is a delicate subject, but the most effective uses of the imagination are not directly evangelistic. Often, indirection and resonance reaches audiences that preaching cannot reach.

Faulty assumption: it isn't truly *on* unless it clearly proclaims gospel

→ how does this relate to more explicit?

Example, Mt. 21:33-46, the Parable of the Tenants. Jesus' story left people confused, caused them to dig deeper.

Less tools
for proclaiming
More spaces
for exploration
within which
gospel can be
shared & make
sense

Don't aim for Christian propaganda. Instead, aim to create works that create spaces within which the gospel makes sense, that raise questions, that set up resonances that could lead audience members further.

Cultural works ought to make people hungry to dig deeper, and leave room for exploration

2. Don't mumble.

We may try to be so subtle that we end up hiding any hint of Christ. It is possible for Christian creatives to become chameleons, blending in to the post-Christian culture, or turtles, pulling in anything that would cause non-Christian discomfort.

3. Find the right balance: "parabolic resonance" that create oases that invite and challenge both Christian and non-Christian alike.

→ parables - like Jesus caught listeners in unexpected ways

Art goes in the back door of our minds,
getting to dreams + desires

4. This is the point of art: to create a world of resonance, a world that gestures beyond itself, reforming the imagination in the process. Those who can do this well need support.

creates
worlds to
explore

means more than
it outright says

III. The Pitfalls that Derail Christian Art

→ Christian
art causes general
revelation

1. Art is made for the senses

2. Art is valued as art,
not by how useful it is.

A. Death by cute niceness: kitsch.

Identified by:

1. sentimentality/emotional manipulation,
2. instant accessibility (don't need to think too hard),
3. cliché (overused tropes, breaks no new imaginative ground).

Christian philosopher calls kitsch "aesthetic sin" because it oversimplifies, insulates us from the brokenness of the world, and stifles imagination.

1. oversimplifies creation
2. insulates us from troubles
of neighbour/world
3. stifles imagination

Suggests Cns dwell in a snug snug fantasy world, isolated from reality & hence making no impact on reality

There are defenders of kitsch, especially because kitsch is aimed at the poor, less educated, marginalized (Betty Spackman).

Still, we ought to grow into aesthetic maturity.

There are those who see any salvation (Christian or otherwise) as kitsch. This is sheer bias, cynicism.

But this means Cn artists are not playing on a level playing field

We need Christian artists who are willing to be risky, subversive, allergic to cliché and sentimentality.

B. The message *must* go through: propaganda

Propaganda dispenses with indirection and allusion so it can be sure the message gets across.

This is difficult for Evangelicals, who earnestly desire their message to be heard. But it actually gets in the way for those who grew up on propaganda.

Christian art works better when it creates space for exploration, raises questions rather than giving answers.

C. We are the CHAMPIONS: triumphalism.

Triumphalism elevates the culture war and proclaims victory because God is on our side. But we are not conquerors. We are exiles (Jer. 29:4-7).

Triumphalists hide their own brokenness so that we can look better than “them,” cheapening our common humanity. Nothing good art comes from such an ugly spirit.

There will be places where we disagree with society, but the key is *how* we speak: with Pharisaic pride, or with humility and compassion. Only the latter can be called Christian triumph that reflects God’s mercy to messed up sinners like us.

D. Turning to the Dark Side: the compassionless vision.

This used to be rare, but it’s becoming more common in an age of isolationist self-protection.

Can also include “grittiness” or “edge” that deals with dark or difficult subject matter (sex, violence, etc.), but without compassion.

E. Combine the pitfalls, and you have four, off-center “Kingdoms”:

1. The Kingdom of Fluff: mumbling kitsch, vaguely inspirational, inoffensive and ineffectual.

2. The Kingdom of Forced Smiles: swaggering, shouting, propagandistic, sentimental emotional manipulation. No room for subtlety or letting people think for themselves.

3. The Kingdom of Dark Absurdity/Distant God: an overreaction to Christian propaganda and painfully sunny disposition, it is “Christian” art that has lost any sense of hope.

4. The Kingdom of?: Triumphalism + compassionless vision, taking a perverse glee in the hellish destination of sinners. A type of vindictive, gospel-less Christianity.

There are artists who avoid falling off the rails, whose works find a balance between shouting and mumbling, find that tension between the darkness and light. Those are artists worth pursuing further.