

Is Cultural Engagement Biblical?

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We've all seen the misguided claims of some nationalist groups that one particular nation or other in the world today is "God's country," or the dubious claim that one specific political system such as democracy, or a specific economic system such as socialism or capitalism, is God's universal pattern for humankind. Throughout history, and the worldwide wars of the 20th century were no exception, combating sides often claimed that "God was on their side." Following the same pattern, a conversation concerning "the culture wars", or cultural formation and the place of Christians and the Christian faith in impacting that formation, can be similarly incendiary.

In recent times, there has been a move in some strongly committed evangelical circles to call Christians to withdraw from cultural engagement language and activities. Energy expended in these activities in the mid and late 20th century was seen by many evangelicals as being an unacceptable social gospel, and in the 21st century, cultural engagement has again been labelled as a dangerous diversion from genuine Christian activity. It is being viewed by some as a bypath meadow, and as an affront to real gospel witness which, it is claimed, has to do solely with sharing a message of individual salvation through Jesus Christ and with a sanctifying, patient endurance by his faithful believers until physical death and the ultimate reward of eternal life in heaven.

On the other hand, some Christians around the world, just as committed to the authority of Scripture as the people described in the previous paragraph, are exhorting fellow believers to re-engage with the public sphere in an open, critical realist manner as a legitimate and indispensable expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So which group is right? Are faithful Christians called to help shape temporal affairs or not? Is the good news of Jesus Christ being thwarted and diluted by those who argue for Christian cultural engagement? Or are those who limit the gospel witness of Jesus Christ to personal salvation the ones who are missing out on the glory and fullness of the true biblical story? In this paper, we seek to introduce readers to a few significant perspectives on this important question.

First, we will define some of the terms that are used in this debate, so that we can have a clear understanding of what is meant by "cultural engagement" and "biblical." Second, we will provide material taken from the two divergent positions, to give a genuine voice to the arguments of both sides. Third, we will explore perspectives from the Bible itself in an attempt to provide some insight as to whether or not Bible-believing Christians are called to view cultural engagement as a significant part of the gospel story and their witness to that story in everyday life. Next, we will suggest ways that contemporary Christians can respond to this issue, and provide examples of believers in past history and modern society who have led the way. Finally, because the issue of cultural engagement is at the heart of its activities, we will explore the implications of this issue for Christians involved in education.

Definitions

Definitions are important, because even definitions are not neutral. They are culturally-bound attempts to understand something, and as such in their very nature, even definitions must be seen as argumentatively committed, weighted contributions to any discussion or point of view.

Biblical

This paper uses the term “biblical” to refer to the written Word of God, as found in the Old and New Testaments. The definition used here assumes that genuine Christians on both sides of our debate (often referred to as evangelical Christians) recognize the over-riding supremacy of the Bible as God’s authoritative Word for all of life. Therefore, when considering not just theological issues, but all other issues as well, these Christians seek to understand the biblical story and its rich literary, narrative, prophetic, didactic, historical, and divinely inspired character, as their primary presuppositional foundation for all of life. They try (sometimes unsuccessfully) not to reduce the Bible to some form of science manual or systematic theology textbook, but they comprehend it as God’s big story about his love for his world, and his gracious gift in Christ that is at the heart of the gospel. Therefore, all Christians in this discussion celebrate a clear allegiance to the divine authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary formative document for life. If they come to sense that a particular lifestyle or course of action is consistent with the witness of the Bible, then they have a solid foundation to commit themselves wholeheartedly to that lifestyle or course of action. Thabiti Anyabwile, a Baptist pastor originating in the USA and ministering in the Grand Cayman Islands is the representative spokesman identified in this paper to speak against Christian cultural engagement. As he said in his blog (Anyabwile, 2010), “We need to hear the Bible, believe the Bible, preach the Bible, and live the Bible.”

Cultural Engagement

What is meant by the term “cultural engagement?” In the sense that this term has to do with one’s activities that both respond to and influence the shape and direction of the world in which we live, cultural engagement is inescapable. Think of a range of ordinary activities in which both Christians and non-Christians in many countries take part: taking a bus (or a train) to work each day; teaching your children “good manners”; driving a car on the right hand side of the road (or on the left in some countries); discussing politics or sports teams with friends at a weekend barbeque; interacting with friends (whatever that term means today) on an internet social networking website; hanging the household laundry on an outside clothesline or putting it in an electric clothes dryer; attending school, polytechnic, or university; paying taxes to enable governments to deliver an increasingly growing range of services; investing in the stock-market; watching and being influenced by advertisements on television. The list goes on. As we participate in these common human activities, we unavoidably affirm some cultural practices and repudiate others. We join with the rest of the people around us in shaping these cultural activities of our contemporary communities. This is inescapable. There is no neutral position. In this sense, a person can’t avoid engaging the culture.

If this is so, then the concept of cultural engagement in the title to this paper must mean more than just carrying out the myriad of daily activities of life. What cultural engagement really refers to here is the deliberate, thought-out, philosophically-consistent activity of vocational and societal living that is proactively designed to reflect a biblical perspective on the world. Therefore, the question being asked in this paper is, “Does the Bible speak with clarity on the matter of how to live in 21st century society, and is it right for Christians today to spend significant time and sustained energy on deliberately seeking to shape how they and other people live and relate together and use the environment in response to this supposed biblical mandate, as a legitimate witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?” Or is such an activity a dangerous diversion from the true biblical position of doing what is necessary to sustain life whilst focusing on the only truly worthwhile purpose of helping individuals to become Christians and so in some future day after death, to enter into the wonderful promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord?

One Point of View: Christian Cultural Engagement is Unbiblical

Together for the Gospel (also known as T4G) is a biennial conference of evangelical church leaders from differing denominational persuasions, but who are committed to celebrating the truth and integrity of the gospel. Though there has been some falling out in recent years, original organizers include Al Mohler, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, and Thabiti Anyabwile. Their key affirmation is as follows:

We are brothers in Christ united in one great cause – to stand together for the Gospel. We are convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been misrepresented, misunderstood, and marginalized in many churches and among many who claim the name of Christ. Compromise of the Gospel has led to the preaching of false gospels, the seduction of many minds and movements, and the weakening of the church's Gospel witness (Duncan, J., Mahaney, C., Dever, M., & Mohler, R., n.d.)

At the 2010 conference, held in Louisville, Kentucky, 7000 church leaders, many of a reformed persuasion, met together under a theme consistent with T4G's primary affirmation noted above. The theme was "The Unadjusted Gospel", available from 2014 in a book published by Crossway. One of the keynote addresses was given by Thabiti Anyabwile, with the title of *Fine-Sounding Arguments: How Wrongly 'Engaging the Culture' Adjusts the Gospel*.

Anyabwile is a dedicated Christian, and an engaging speaker who desires to be guided in his thinking and living by biblical principles. In his T4G address, he chose as his reference point a section from Paul's letter to the Colossians. His basic concern is that the language and activity of Christians relating to the term "engaging the culture" detracts from the centrality of the cross of Christ and is a diversionary distraction from the true gospel. He claims that it may sound right to use language like engaging the culture, or to talk about the coming of the kingdom of God (another diversionary phrase according to Anyabwile), but that these beguiling concepts, in terms of T4G's key affirmation, are really misrepresentations of the gospel. They're just the old social gospel dressed up in new diction, and they displace the true message of the Bible.

Anyabwile suggests that the only really worthwhile focus for Christians, and the true meaning of the gospel which must reject the intolerable mission drift of cultural engagement, is the preaching of the gospel of individual salvation through the sacrificial and substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. He seems to suggest that the Bible, as our true guide, refuses to address the secular culture and its unfortunate excesses. According to Anyabwile, the Bible calls church people to live gospel lives rather than seeking to engage or reform the culture itself. The world and its ways of thinking are dangerous, and manipulative. There is an antithesis between culture and the gospel. Referring to James 4:4, he reminds his hearers that to be a friend with the world is to be at enmity with God. He points to the prosperity gospel as an example of the dangers of engaging the culture which leads to a diminution of the true gospel. "Almost without fail, discussions of engaging the gospel include some rationale for using the culture in ways that undermine the gospel," said Anyabwile (2010, T4G conference address). The glory and centrality of the cross is lost when this mentality is adopted, he claimed.

A review of the blogs written by those who attended T4G in 2010 confirms that Anyabwile struck a chord with many of the church pastors who heard him. His focus on the centrality of Christ and the development of a uniquely Christian culture as a faithful alternative to engaging the culture seemed particularly appealing.

Since the T4G conference in 2010, other evangelicals have joined with Rev Anyabwile in supporting his cultural withdrawal position, which he saw as being necessary to avoid the twin evils of a social gospel and mission drift. Among these like-minded people are John MacArthur with his admonition for Christians to avoid fornicating with the world, and more recently Rod Dreher with his advocacy of a cultural reactionary option that he termed The Benedict Option (2017).

Another Point of View: Christian Cultural Engagement is Biblical

In recent years, many Christian writers, especially some who would classify themselves as being of a reformed theological persuasion, would take a very different perspective concerning engaging the culture, to that presented by Anyabwile at T4G. Some would say that biblical insights from earlier Christian figures such as Abraham Kuyper and Francis Schaeffer led the way that celebrated the biblical concept of the centrality of the gospel for all of life in every area. Christians committed to this position claim that it is a gospel imperative, securely grounded in a faithful biblical hermeneutic, that the cross of Jesus Christ, the central point of all human history, is the key not just for personal salvation, but also for any understanding of faithful Christian living and gospel witness in every sphere of life. They often claim that there is no such thing as a neutral position when we think about life—that every thought, word, and deed is lived either in obedience to the Word of God, or out of service to some god-substitute. They highlight the importance of worldview, and suggest that the unexamined adoption of lifestyles of contemporary culture is little more than cultural idolatry.

There are many Christians that one could name as being representative of those who support the concept that Christians are called to engage the culture for Christ. One such person is Chuck Colson who, with Nancy Pearcey, wrote the book *How Now Shall We Live?* Colson, whose own religious conversion from being a central Watergate conspirator to becoming a leading Christian figure in the cultural wars and a strong advocate of the particular cultural engagement activity of prison ministry, is well known. Speaking about the need to develop a Christian worldview and thus be equipped to address every part of life with a biblically faithful, gospel focus that celebrates the Lordship of Jesus Christ over everything, Colson (1999) says the following (several ideas scattered across those pages are combined as one in this extract):

Many believers fail to understand that Scripture is intended to be the basis for all of life. In the past centuries, the secular world asserted a dichotomy between science and religion, between fact and value, between objective knowledge and subjective feeling. Evangelicals have been particularly vulnerable to this narrow view because of our emphasis on personal commitment...[But] genuine Christianity is more than a relationship with Jesus, as expressed in personal piety, church attendance, Bible study, and works of charity. Genuine Christianity is a way of seeing and comprehending all reality...In every topic we investigate, from ethics to economics to ecology, the truth is found only in relationship to God and his revelation. (pp. 14-16)

For Colson and many others like him, cultural engagement, with the cross of Christ at the centre, is an essential part of authentic Christian worship and service. “In every area of life, genuine knowledge means discerning the laws and ordinances by which God has structured creation, and then allowing those laws to shape the way we should live” (Colson, 1999, p.15).

Colson appeals to many biblical passages to support his contention, including the same letter to the Colossians that Anyabwile used in his T4G address to support his opposing view of genuine Christian living.

In more recent times, Chatraw and Prior (2019) expressed their commitment to biblically authentic Christian cultural engagement by saying that, “ultimately, engaging in culture is nothing more – and nothing less – than seeking the truth in order to love with a godly love.” (2019, p. 60).

How Do We Relate These Two Positions Together?

So there we have it. Two apparently contradictory positions. Who is correct? What does it really mean to live a gospel-driven life in the 21st century? In order to understand the situation, first it is necessary to note a key point of agreement.

The Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

We should recognize that this is not a debate between a group of Bible-believing Christians on the one hand and liberal postmodernists on the other. Both groups champion a clear allegiance to the Bible as God's revealed, authoritative written word, to the centrality of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's beloved son, and to the Great Commission task of every believer. Therefore, a fruitful discussion should be possible between both groups as they both admit to a common authority. This may not result in reconciling the irreconcilable, but it may point towards a re-shaped approach that can be understood as of a faithful way forward for all evangelical Christians.

What is Meant by Engaging the Culture?

Anyabwile (2010, April) is clear in rejecting engaging the culture. However, though he does attempt a definition of the word culture, nowhere in his address does he really define what he means by the concept of "engaging the culture". His understanding of this term has to be gained inferentially from his talk. The closest he comes to a definition is his comment that, "This attempt to acculturate the gospel, to make it fit into our own cultural confines as we engage the culture, is an adjustment of the gospel and is less than the gospel." From this comment, and from his presentation as a whole, it appears that his understanding of the term "engaging the culture" is synonymous with the term "conforming to the culture". That is, he and those who oppose cultural engagement, seem to believe that cultural engagement refers to the unexamined adoption of ways of seeing and being in the world that mimic the values and lifestyle of the pagan communities in which we live.

A pivotal example that Anyabwile provides in his talk against cultural engagement, is the prosperity gospel movement. Wayward and worldly Christians, he claims, beguiled by a love of money, reconfigure their faith so that a biblical rejection of fulfillment through wealth somehow turns into a belief that faithful Christian living will be demonstrated through wealth acquisition. The prosperity gospel movement, suggests Anyabwile, is an example of the errors of cultural engagement, and should be rejected.

The prosperity gospel movement should indeed be rejected, but it is not an example of engaging the culture. The prosperity gospel is an example of conforming or acquiescing to the culture, which is the exact opposite to the position of those who advocate cultural engagement. Unlike Anyabwile, I do not know of any evangelical Christians who espouse authentic cultural engagement but who also are committed to the prosperity gospel. Those two positions are antithetical.

The comments that follow might help to give some definition to the term cultural engagement as it is used by many evangelical Christians – apart from those who share the perspective of Rev. Anyabwile:

- Engaging the culture does not mean conforming to the culture; it means challenging and reforming it, as being the best way to follow God's instruction through the prophet Jeremiah, to "seek the welfare of the city in which you live." (Jeremiah 29:7).
- Engaging the culture means examining all that we do in the light of the Word of God which encompasses all of life, and then seeking to bring the hope of the gospel to bear on every thought, word, and deed.
- Engaging the culture presupposes a biblical worldview that starts in Genesis, recalls the cultural mandate, and recognizing that God in Christ has never given up on his world, and nor has he repudiated that mandate.
- Remember that we said earlier that shaping culture is something that everyone does. It is an indispensable part of living (the cultural mandate again). Engaging the culture means doing this culture-shaping activity proactively in a manner that does not mimic contemporary cultural patterns (which is cultural idolatry), but which seeks to bring every thought, and action into subjection to the Lordship of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Therefore, whether it be our understanding of music, traffic patterns, family life, the church, politics, the internet, competition in sport, education, business studies...in all of life, we are called to celebrate the Lordship of Christ.

- Engaging the culture means subjecting all of life to the scrutiny of the Word of God, and breathing God’s message of hope where only secular hopelessness exists.
- Engaging the culture means carrying out the old social gospel not as a “liberation theology” alternative to grace in Christ, but as a faithful and pointed expression of that grace.
- Engaging the culture means recognizing that when John 3:16 says that God so loved the world, it means that God truly does love the world. There is a very significant multiuse of the term *world* in Scripture. God is offended by the sin of worldliness as opposed to godliness, but he loves the world which he made, and he sent his son to redeem that fallen world back to him. To assume that every time the word “world” is used in the Bible it is used in a derogatory sense, is misguided exegesis. We must use the context of the word within Scripture to help us comprehend which meaning is appropriate.
- Engaging the culture means to recognize that personal salvation, and the promise of eternal life, is part of the great hope of the Christian believer, and that we are called to give witness to this new life in Christ by how we live now in every sphere of life (John 10:10).
- Engaging the culture means that Christian living for the Christian who is a businessperson, for example, does not just mean praying for and with his/her workmates, but it also means applying biblical principles of justice, mercy, and constructive relationships in the workplace, and considering matters such as the value and stewardship of a product as being as important as the potential for profit that a product or business practice provides.
- Engaging the culture means that Christian cultural engagement and living for the Christian academic for example, involves understanding the philosophical presuppositions upon which one’s discipline rests, exposing these to the light of Scripture, and unashamedly exploring that discipline in classes, academic papers etc., in a manner that reflects a biblical worldview.

Biblical Foundations for Engaging the Culture

Although they may employ differing hermeneutical tools, both Anyabwile and Colson are committed to the authority of the Bible, and seek to subject their understanding and actions to its scrutiny. Therefore, an exploration of the truth or otherwise of the matter of Christian cultural engagement should be based upon the Bible. By so doing, it should be possible not to drive a wedge between Anyabwile and Colson and those who share their views, but to bring them together, even if this ultimately does require a substantial perspectival revision by one or other (or both) of the two groups.

How then, do the Scriptures shape our understanding of the issue of whether or not Christians should engage the culture? First of all, we must affirm the all-of-life embrace of biblical Christianity. Mike Goheen, another advocate of cultural engagement, put it this way:

The biblical story shapes us at an individual level so that it leads to personal conversion. However, it does more than that. It provides the whole context for our life and orientation. It begins with the creation and ends with the renewal of the universe. It gives meaning and shape to history. As such, this story must not only touch us as isolated individuals; it must shape the way we think and behave as we engage with the world. (Goheen, 2010, p. 5.)

It’s all very well for Goheen to reject the dualism of Greek thinking and its deification of reason during the Enlightenment. It’s all very well for him to make his claims about the Bible, but how does the Bible itself demonstrate this position of the centrality of the gospel for all of life and of the imperative therefore to carry out our culture-shaping activities in conformity to Scripture?

The answer is that the Bible’s big picture story itself demands such an approach. One could turn to instructive passages such as Psalm 8, or Paul’s letters to the Corinthians or the Colossians to understand this point. Or one could look at Jesus’ rebuke of the self-righteous in Matthew 23 when they were condemned for their failure to seek for grace and social justice. Such biblical explorations, plus many others that point in the same direction of exhorting cultural engagement, would all be very

worthwhile. However, for our purposes here, it is very instructive to look at two famous passages of Scripture, and see the strong cultural engagement link between them. I refer to the Great Commission in Matthew 28, and to the Cultural Mandate in Genesis 1. Here are these two passages (NIV version):

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mat. 28: 18-20)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. (Gen. 1: 26-30)

There are many things to explore in both of these passages. However, with regard to cultural engagement, we should note first of all Jesus’ Matthew 28 instruction to those who sought to nurture Christians: we should teach them to obey everything that he had commanded us. If Jesus, as part of the one triune God, commanded us to abandon the world as a fallen and irredeemable place, and concentrate only on personal salvation, then that is what we should do. If he has commanded us to recognize that the whole world is his, and that we are to assert the lordship of Christ and the relevance of the gospel for all culture, then that is what we should do. If he told us not just to make converts, but to make disciples, teaching them to observe all that he commanded us, then this is what we should do. Which is it?

The answer is provided for us in the very first command that God (and remember that Jesus is a part of the Godhead which is referred to as “us” several times in Genesis) gives to humankind in Genesis 1, verse 28. The creative God, who had just made the world out of nothing, made human being in his image and in so doing gave us a capacity to create. We are to shape culture, and to do this as a faithful exercise of authority in obedience to our Heavenly Father. Read again the extract from Genesis 1 above, and the meaning is clear: cultural shaping or engagement (ruling over the animals, engaging in farming, work and labour etc) is not a secular exercise, to be done in some God-ignoring manner. As we are reminded in Psalms 8, cultural shaping or engagement for the Christian is the joy-filled gift of obeying God’s pattern for life in how we live day by day in everything. It means denying the false claims of dualism which have restricted Christian activity to the spiritual realm, and it means celebrating the purpose and meaning of the Good News of the gospel in all that we do – despite the added challenge of doing this in a fallen world where even our own hearts are tainted by sin and error. So not only is cultural engagement inescapable; the calling for the Christian to engage and shape the culture in a biblically faithful manner also is inescapable.

In the light of this clear biblical perspective, supported as it is by many examples from within its pages—some of which are detailed below—it seems that when Anyabwile clarifies his definition for cultural engagement so that it reflects the biblical understanding and the intentions of people like Colson and Goheen, there may well be substantial agreement between the two camps on this issue. The claims and the hope of the gospel are for all of life, both here and in eternity; they are the legitimate concern of the church; and they are available exclusively through Jesus Christ to all who put their trust in him. In his T4G address, Rev Anyabwile commented that when one determines to

engage the culture, the result is that the gospel becomes inappropriately adjusted, and that one might miss the deeper strategy of embodying the gospel itself. The contention here however, is that the opposite is true: faithful Christian living is actually carried out in part by engaging the culture in a manner that asserts the challenge and hope of the gospel for all of life.

In passing, we note that some years after the 2010 conference, Rev Anyabwile (2014) seemed to shift his position somewhat, and argue that his belief no longer was one of discouraging cultural engagement, but came to have a new focus on the ways or methodologies that Christians should use to carry out this engagement.

It is also important to reflect briefly upon the term culture, from a Christian perspective. Anyabwile told his hearers, quite correctly, that all cultures are impacted by sin. This is a consequence of the Fall, and it's why cultural engagement by Christians involves the vital gospel ministry of proclaiming the hope and truth of the gospel into all fallen cultural structures. However, this does not mean that the *concept* of culture, or the cultural mandate, as God originally gave it in Genesis, is evil. The concept of people forming habitual structures in their relationships with each other is good. The concepts of the family, or of government, or of work, or of creative communication for example, are not in themselves evil. If the concept of culture is evil, then the incarnation could not have occurred. But praise God that his perfect son dwelt among us in a culturally embedded way. He came as a first century Jew, like us in reflecting and forming culture in every respect, yet of course he was without sin. Therefore, let us remember to differentiate between the concept of culture which is a part of God's good plan, and the practice of culture which is what fallen humanity has done with that concept, and which is in need of the light of the gospel for it to be made well again. Craig Keener (1993), in his powerful introduction to the *IVP New Testament Bible Background Commentary*, unpacks this issue in greater depth.

Biblical Examples of God's People Engaging the Culture

So far, we have identified two prevailing positions within the Christian community concerning cultural engagement, we have outlined key points of each position, and we have indicated the scriptural warranty for suggesting that, understood and exercised in a biblically faithful manner, cultural engagement is an important gospel task for all Christians. At this point, it is instructive to note some of the examples God provides us with in Scripture of what engaging the culture actually looks like. Here we have people of faith who sought not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they could know God's good and true and acceptable will as they lived for Him in their varied cultural settings (Romans 12):

- Joseph, faithfully serving God and the people of Egypt by instituting a food conservation program (Genesis 47);
- Moses choosing to identify with the Jews rather than with Pharaoh's court (Exodus 2);
- God's instruction to Jeremiah whilst in exile, to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which God's people found themselves (Jeremiah 29);
- Daniel and friends becoming qualified to function in the king's palace in pagan Babylon (Daniel 1);
- Jesus endorsing the institution of marriage by his joining in the celebration at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2);
- Jesus confronting the culture by communing with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4);
- The men of faith in Hebrews 11:34 who, among other things, "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." These are great examples of cultural engagement;
- Paul making himself familiar with the pagan Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Greece so that he had an onramp into the public discussion in Athens as he presented the truth of Jesus and the resurrection at the Areopagus (Acts 17).

Examples of God's People Engaging the Culture in More Recent Times

The concept of engaging the culture and so, in Jesus' name, of seeking the welfare of the pagan city in which we live, has been borne witness to by humble Christians down through the ages—men and women, mostly unknown but who understand that God is their primary witness, and who have sought to bring a biblically faithful perspective into their cultural formation. They have not done this as an addition to the gospel or as an alternative to the gospel and the cross of Christ, but as a faithful witness to the centrality of that gospel for all of life. One would do well to explore the example of these Christians at a later date, in more detail. A few of them are mentioned briefly here:

- William Wilberforce who, for the sake of a gospel perspective on justice and the God-image-bearing nature of all humanity, persevered for decades in the English political scene in seeking to outlaw slavery;
- The White Rose student group in Nazi Germany, some of whom were Christians, who stood up against public evil, even at the cost of their own lives;
- The Newvale Coal Company in New Zealand which implemented a costly land restoration program as an act of faithful stewardship before God and as an example to other similar businesses, in a time when extensive conservation measures were not a legal requirement;
- Gabe Lyons and the Q Project, plus his family's joyful leadership in Down's Syndrome issues;
- The interventionist, child protection activities of South American missionaries like Marcia and Edson Suzuki, as recounted by Darrow Miller (2009) in his book *Lifework*.
- The Cadbury brothers in England—famous not only for chocolate, but also for their practical, Christian concern for their employees which covered worker safety, education, provision of quality housing, recreational activities, women in the workplace, and prayer and worship opportunities;
- Dr. Phil Bishop, in appealing all the way to the US Supreme Court in defence of the right and responsibility of university lecturers in public universities to acknowledge their own worldview prejudices to their students, and to admit to the impact that these beliefs have on the content and direction of their instruction;
- Andy Robinson, an ex-student of mine, spending time sharing a Christ-centred understanding of education with non-Christian teacher trainees at the University of Glasgow, and in so doing, encouraging his pagan hearers to find purpose and meaning in their vocation and in life as a whole by committing themselves and their pedagogical practice to the lordship of Jesus Christ;
- Benson Kamary, a Kenyan PhD student of mine at Kosin University in Korea, whose newspaper op-ed pieces on education and culture which emanate from a Christian worldview, have been printed in secular newspapers all over the world;
- The strategic activities of Christian leader Paulus Samuels and his dynamic organisation in southern India. Among other things, their work has seen homework clubs commence in dozens of rural villages where Hindu parents enthusiastically send their children to local after-school clinics where the children are assisted with their literacy and numeracy homework, and where they also learn about Jesus and sing Christian songs;
- Mark Roques, Arthur Jones and friends in their work in cultural engagement in education in the United Kingdom and around the world.
- Steve Bishop and the All of life redeemed website (www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk).

For all of these Christian people, and for myriads more all over the world, their motivation is Christ. Their all-in-all is Christ. Their hope is Christ. They take seriously the calling to not be conformed to this world's way of thinking, and their purpose in cultural engagement is obedience to Christ. They take seriously Jesus' injunction in Matthew 5:16, to be salt and light in this world, and to "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Implications for Education

A key reason why some Christians, particularly in western countries and in some post-colonial settings elsewhere, reject the concept of cultural engagement, is because they have been educated in a modernist worldview built upon the myth of dualism. Despite the opportunities (and challenges) provided by a postmodern paradigm, popular belief even among Christians continues to assert that religion is an important but private affair, which has no place in public arena areas such as education, politics, or business. This Platonic position obviously is contrary to the biblical claim that in and through Christ are *all* things (Colossians 1); that God has made and redeemed the world and sustains it moment by moment in all its capacities, by his word of power (Hebrews 1); and that we are called to bring every thought into subjection to Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 10).

In a world where the church and the gospel is consigned to a marginal belief area, and where public education nurtures children to accept this position by claiming that subjects such as science, history, math, etc., are religiously neutral, it behoves Christians to think very seriously about the educational choices that they make for their children. Jesus' comment in Luke 6 that blind teachers (i.e. those who believe that religion is a peripheral matter and that it doesn't impact core subjects in the curriculum) will result in blind children who also come to believe in the essential irrelevance of religion, is very sobering. The Christian message is the exact opposite: fulfilled life, and knowing how to live, come only from a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and this impacts how we understand and learn about everything.

Therefore, as Edlin (1999) has written elsewhere, education from a Christian perspective will seek to challenge students with a celebration of the lordship of Christ over all of creation. A key mission for the Christian school should be to assist Christian parents in equipping children for biblically authentic, radical, cultural engagement. As Wolterstorff (2002, p. 170) has put it, "The idea of a Christian school in our society is the idea of a school producing dissenters and agents of change in the name of Christ. The Christian school is a training ground for...dissent and reform." Several writers such as Carpenter (2002, p. 3) have termed this biblical imperative "educating for shalom."

This cannot occur in a secular school, so that Christian parents must consider very carefully the type of school that they will select to assist them in the education of their children. Jesus, again in Luke 6, reminds his hearers that the student, when he is fully trained, will be like his teacher. But we want our children to be like Jesus, with a biblically powerful, culturally engaging, gospel mentality. This can only happen if our teachers, like St Paul, strive to be like Jesus. And despite the vital missionary witness of Christian teachers in public schools, this perspective can only fully flourish in the context of a Christian school.

All schools are hothouses or glasshouses—nurturing institutions that select and deliver programs consistent with the religious beliefs or worldview of the educators. The choice that Christian parents must make is not between the Christian educational glasshouse on the one hand, and some supposedly neutral state educational institution on the other. There is no neutrality. We must help parents realise the powerful implications of what Shults (1997, p. 230) correctly describes as the "unacknowledged ideological partiality of every discipline and theory." in all teaching and learning. As a result, Christian parents will come to appreciate the sobering choice that face them in selecting schools for their children: the choice is between an educational community that seeks to put Christ first in every aspect of the curriculum and organization, or an educational community which nurtures children in their own omnipotence and in the essential irrelevance of the gospel message. Which would you choose?

Cultural engagement is also important at the tertiary educational level. Unfortunately, as is discussed elsewhere (Edlin, 2009, 2014), many Christian academics have succumbed to the delusion of modernist dualism in their scholarly endeavours. We have contemporary Christians, and not non-Christians, to blame for the widespread assumption that Christianity is simplistic and anti-intellectual. Praise God for the growing cohort of Christian intellectuals who, despite often being criticised from within the church for spending their time on "non-essential, earthly things", seek humbly to engage

the culture and explore their scholarly disciplines in the light of God's revelation as an act of obedient gospel service and worship.

Where To From Here?

In its most simple form, the contention of this paper, founded in biblical principles as illustrated in Matthew 28 and Genesis 1, is as follows: Our Lord commands us to obey him in everything; the first command that he gave humanity is that we are to exercise a godly response and form culture, doing all to the praise of his glorious grace. Witnessing to the truth in Christ is culture-challenging, undermining the false gods of our present age, so that cultural engagement is a faithful expression of the gospel. It is not cultural acquiescence. In fact, genuine sharing of the gospel *requires* godly cultural engagement in all those aspects of ordinary life listed earlier in this paper (riding a bus, attending school, using technology wisely, enjoying the weekend barbeque etc.). It seeks the welfare of the city in which we live, and it highlights the centrality of the Cross for all of life. As Mark Greene (2010) urged during the October 2010 Lausanne congress in South Africa, it involves a fundamental, nondualistic re-think by the church of the relationship between authentic evangelism on the one hand, and the daily walk of every church attender on the other.

Cultural engagement is a core theme of Scripture. It's what Goheen and Bartholomew (2008, p.8) call "living at the crossroads." It is at least a part of what Jesus was referring to in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10) when he prayed that God's "kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." Cultural engagement is a genuine, biblically-directed work that the church neglects to its own detriment and to the peril of the surrounding pagan communities to which it is called to witness. In the words of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010, p.1), "Popular pressure to define and stick to 'the essence of the gospel' can become an avoidance of the gospel's full biblical challenge, and is like asking for a beating heart without the rest of the body."

The slightly altered comments of Harry Fernhout and Nick Wolterstorff say it well:

A Christian school is a dynamic and challenging place where Christian educators refuse to be satisfied with providing only factual knowledge, high exam scores, and marketable skills. Rather, teachers in a Christian school boldly and humbly seek to transform all activities and studies into an expression of biblical wisdom, training the students to walk as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Christian school not only shapes everything that happens within its walls in the light of the biblical story, but it also celebrates the Christian story in the way students are taught to engage the world round them. The students' whole walk of life, if they come to confess Christ as Lord, is to be missionally shaped by their identity as committed followers of Jesus, citizens of His kingdom here on earth. Nicholas Wolterstorff has summarised this view as follows "The goal of Christian education is not just the formation of a way of thinking. Nor is it that plus the development of moral character. Nor is it that plus the cultivation of a mode of piety. Nor is it that plus the transmission of one and another part of humanity's knowledge. Christian education is for the totality of life in God's kingdom now and for eternity."

Adapted by Richard Edlin, from Harry Fernhout,

https://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/Fernhout/Fernhout_Christian_Schooling.pdf

Surely the best way to conclude this discussion is by once again referring to Scripture itself, noting carefully how the wonderful gospel truths of personal salvation through grace and also of the importance of cultural engagement, are part of the same coherent whole, in Paul's exhortation to believers in Ephesus:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2: 4-10).

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