



The Bible and Cultural Relevancy: Romans 12:1-2

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

When I became a Christian, I faced the reality that much of what I believed about life was defective. Prior to conversion, my focus was on doing what I wanted, not what God wanted me to do. I viewed life through my lenses, and pretty much agreed with what my prevailing culture had to say about sex, homosexuality, Republicans, and that as long as you tried to make the world a better place, you would be good with God. The arguments seemed logical and quite convincing. However, the moment God called me there was a fresh desire to see the world differently, not from my perspective, but God's.

That is what Paul is getting at here when he exhorts us not to be conformed to patterns of the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. The Greek word for "world" is not the one used to describe our planet (*kosmos*); instead it conveys the idea that the various ages (*ion*) have shaped the way we view and think about our world. Ultimately, Paul wants us to experience a divine transformation in the way we think about culture and ourselves.

Today if you ask a non-Christian what their view on the Bible is, the primary objection will revolve around the cultural practices it mentions. Rarely do people focus on *Divinci Code* conspiracy theories or manuscript controversies. What people are most offended by are the biblical teachings on lifestyle, especially if it infringes on theirs. Frankly, a growing number believe the Bible is regressive, intolerant, and oppressive to a growing number of people in our culture. Sadly, a growing number of Christians are also beginning to question the validity of the Bible based on the same reasons. Cultural perceptions on slavery, sexuality, sexual orientation, and the role of women have played a role in shaping the way Christians view the Bible. How should we engage the culture in lieu of this reality? Here are some suggestions.

1. Admit that we have failed in two ways when confronting cultural objections

When it comes to issues like the role of women and homosexuality, Christians in general have taken one of two roads. First, there is a tendency not to even address it in the course of a dialogue. In many cases, there is a desire to remain on good terms with others....so much so....that ultimately the Bible is ignored for the sake of peace and wanting to be liked. Many Christians have shallow relationships because of conversations that have never been brought up.

On the other hand, some Christians come across with this self-righteous demeanor with their tone and body language, while making eternal denouncements as if they are John the Baptist. These folks are the "Bible thumpers" and they like to beat people up in the name of Jesus. Seldom is this technique effective.....you can pretty much count on not having another conversation.

Non-Christians need to know up front how we have failed when it comes to addressing the hot cultural issues. Such a confession serves to disarm emotion that has been built up against Christians, without them even knowing it. It is hard to engage someone from a Christian perspective because you are “messing with peoples’ lives.”

We need to implement the parable of the Good Samaritan and realize we are to love people despite their race, their sexual orientation, or their religious beliefs. Loving people does not mean we omit what the Bible says regarding cultural practices, nor does it mean we come at people with this Jonah-like self-righteousness. Instead, we love people by respectfully investing our time and being willing to address the deeper issues that matter most to them. Inevitably both parties will grow from this experience.

2. Encourage them to Consider the Possibility the Bible does not teach what they might think.

Many non-Christians believe the Bible teaches that women must be barefoot and pregnant, homosexuals are going to hell, and that the Bible promotes slavery. Most have not read the Bible carefully, yet they carry these beliefs based on what they heard from others...who probably have not read the Bible either.

For example, many believe that God promoted and accepted polygamy as an alternative lifestyle in the Old Testament. In some parts of Utah, Colorado, and Arizona, there are many people who bank on this misunderstanding and make a living collecting teenage wives. HBO even has a name for it, BIG LOVE.

However, anthropologists have concluded that two norms shaped the ancient world, polygamy and primogeniture, which left the inheritance to the older son. As we read the OT, God reveals consistently that cultural norms do not always produce the best results. For example, if you study the effect of polygamy in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, it becomes clear not one person benefited from this type of arrangement. In fact, this lifestyle, lead to hardship, jealousy, hatred, favoritism, and in one case, the rejection of God Himself.

It is also interesting with regard to primogeniture, that in the cases of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, significant patriarchs in the Old Testament...that God choose to give the inheritance to the younger son, once again, demonstrating that cultural norms do not influence God when it comes to discerning the reality of His will.

The Old Testament is mostly a narrative that aims to show the reader through story the result of both good and bad decisions by God’s people. Getting back to the issue of polygamy, not once is there a positive outcome. Consequently, after reflection, the reader concludes, “That’s too bad; all the hardship could have been avoided if he would have stuck to one woman, had he followed the one man-one woman model that God established in Eden.

3. Encourage them not to Read Scripture through their Cultural Blinders.

One example where this happens is when a Non-Christian discovers the Bible seems to advocate slavery. For example, in Ephesians 6:5-9, Paul instructs slaves to obey their masters. Automatically, cultural blinders bring to mind the slavery we read about in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where Africans were kidnapped against their own will and brought to England and America to become slaves.

However, this is not what happened during the first century Roman Empire era. The slavery discussed in the Bible involved indentured servant hood, not forced slavery. Murray J. Harris a professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School wrote a book called *The Slave of Christ*, where he reveals the basics of slavery in the Roman Empire. Here are some key distinctions.

- Slaves were not distinguishable by race, religion, or clothing
- Slaves were often more educated than their masters
- Slaves made the same wages as freed men and could purchase their freedom if they wanted
- Slaves were not slaves for long. The average term was ten years and people were given their release by their late twenties or early thirties.

Now this arrangement does not describe the slavery we know about in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where a slave was identified by race, had no rights over his or her body, had no access to education, and most likely would never be freed.

Likewise, non-Christians must understand that not all women were barefoot and pregnant in the Bible. Deborah was a judge that led Israel to an unlikely victory over the Canaanites, Esther was a queen who risked her life to preserve the Jewish Race, Lydia was a wealthy business women who became the first Christian in Philippi and opened her home as a church to other believers (Acts 16:40).

We must not read things into the text based on what we perceive the Bible says. Instead, we must study the seek and seek to understand the historical context, and then we can draw out the principles for our culture.

4. Challenge their perceptions on what the Bible teaches about sin

I had a neighbor one time that used to joke when I tried to fool him, “You know where liars go!” Everyone that heard that jest knew exactly what he meant, namely that liars go to hell. Likewise, there are those who believe that certain sins will provide the exact outcome, including homosexuality. So, does the Bible really teach gays will go to hell?

Admittedly, this is a sensitive subject in our culture today. Nevertheless, if pressed on this issue, non-Christians need to understand that the Bible lumps homosexuality with other sexual sins like pornography, fornication, adultery, and incest. The Bible does not teach that one goes to hell because of their sexual orientation; it teaches that destination is reserved for those who want nothing to do with Jesus as their Savior, those that reject Jesus. In the end, it must be communicated that just as a heterosexual does not go to heaven because he is heterosexual; so a homosexual does not go to hell because he or she is gay.

In the end, it boils down to what you believe about Jesus. Keep pressing them here because they need to understand that without Jesus, even the person who is charitable and solves world hunger is not good enough to make it to heaven on his or her own accomplishments. Do not let them leave preoccupied with one particular “bad” sin in the Bible; instead make sure they know that Jesus died for *all* sin, homosexuality merely being one of an infinite many.

Conclusion

Now people may still object that homosexuality is not sin, but an alternate lifestyle. However, here is the problem. Who makes the rules? Who determines what sin is and what it is not? Inevitably, without God, a culture makes these decisions, one that deems itself more knowledgeable and progressive. In the end, non-Christians must realize we believe that truth should be constant and not subject to the evolutionary change that occurs with cultures throughout the ages. You may be labeled as narrow and close-minded, but you just have to respectfully communicate that while you understand their perspective, ultimately, you feel that the Bible represents the best option when it comes to trusting what is true. In the end, your goal is not to convince them; it is simply to engage them, even challenge them, with some of the cultural issues that people struggle with in our society. Use the Bible to bridge the cultural gap, not widen it with your presentation.