



WEEK 1: "INTRODUCTION TO CULTURE"

BY BISHOP TODD HUNTER

WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE SESSION: [BIT.LY/2JMQTLY](https://bit.ly/2JMQTLY)

SYNOPSIS: It's been said that culture is one of the most complex words in the English language. We usually speak about culture in terms of the atmosphere in which we live, the customs and patterns that define our lives and work, and/or what human beings do with God's creation. Culture is the environment in which we live where decisions are made and courses of actions are chosen, based on all sorts of factors and influences.

Nancy Ammerman writes, "Culture includes all the things a group does together...Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear" (Studying Congregations, p. 15; pp. 78- 79). She suggests that there are three dimensions to a culture: "what we do here (rituals and routines), what we make (artifacts), and the stories we tell (language, myths, local histories, sacred stories)." Learn more here: studyingcongregations.org/culture-frame.

With such a broad description of culture, the engagement of Gospel and culture is no easy task. But the crucial question that Bishop Todd Hunter suggests we need to keep at the forefront is this: Is my culture-making in alignment with the Gospel and aims of Jesus, or is it aimed at a telos other than which God was doing in and through Jesus? The goal of this discernment should be to cultivate a distinctiveness that points to the world's future, while living and working in the world's present.

When big changes in culture happen, it often causes deep anxiety. And the Christian church is no stranger to this. When the once-dominant religion feels threatened by trends in the surrounding culture, it causes a desperate fear. Specifically, what can emerge along with these cultural changes is an increase of our fear of the "other," or people who are different from us. Xenophobia exists both inside and outside of church, and it is a common reaction to these massive cultural shifts. Bishop Todd asserts that when it comes to cultural proposals, fear is a very bad master. We cannot let fear dictate our attitudes and actions, much less our discernment toward the question of how we engage culture.

Instead, we turn to God's telos, or ultimate plan for the world, as our authority and guide, as a way to enter into cultural engagement without fear. Jesus' pattern of life clearly sets out his chief aim—to create a people who partner with God in putting the world to right. We have

the privilege of participating with him in his work. During his time on earth, Jesus modeled for us a winsome, non-anxious presence in culture, and sent us out as co-creators of culture—on mission because God is mission. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we strive to faithfully and fruitfully engage culture with Christ, but without fear because we know the telos.

As we go through these 8 weeks, let's keep this crucial question in mind: Is our engagement with culture in alignment with the gospel and aims of Jesus?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you define culture? What are some common aspects of culture?
2. Do you think God is pro-culture? Why or why not?
3. Think about your "cultures" (family, work, church, neighborhood, city, etc.). Can you think of at least three rituals, routines, artifacts, and/or language/stories that exist in those spaces?
4. Take one of above rituals, routines, etc., and map them out over the Gospel and aims of Jesus. How would you say they line up?
5. Where have you seen the church "reacting out of fear" to cultural shifts?
6. In our culture, most of us—to one degree or another—have a fear of the "other." Where do you see this playing out in your cultural spaces? What are the effects of this fear on our culture, and on us?
7. What do you think it means to have a non-anxious presence in culture? How could that kind of presence change the culture in your home, school or workplace?

WEEKLY PRACTICE:

Try to embody a non-anxious presence in your home, school, or workplace this week. This might involve:

- Practicing active listening with others, especially with those who are hard to listen to
- Not trying to "win" or have the last word in an argument (especially on social media!)
- Letting go of perfectionism
- Purposely letting someone else take the spotlight
- Noticing when you feel anxious or fearful as you engage with people different from you
- Going out of your way to affirm and encourage those around you
- Praying for those whom you meet or encounter, or people you struggle with
- When feelings of fear and anxiety arise, pray "Lord, your will be done" or "The Lord is my shepherd; I do not have to be in want"