

Understanding and Ministering to Your Culture

Purpose: The purpose of this session is to demonstrate that there are cultural values that must be understood and attended to in order to effectively minister to a particular group or society.

Objectives: This session will help you to:

1. Understand how values affect a culture.
2. Discern what values a culture holds.
3. Effectively make disciples in a given culture.

Key Verse: 1 Corinthians 9:22

I. Introduction

Different cultures have different values. These values can cause confusion and disagreements between the parties involved. Here is an example of what we mean. Perhaps you can think of examples that you have experienced or have heard about in others lives.

Several years ago an American high school student was an exchange student in Iceland. At one point during the first few days she was there and was still going through orientation, the leaders of the exchange student program mentioned something to her that was quite shocking. They told her that if she planned on bringing a guy home to spend the night, she should at least let her “Icelandic parents” know in advance. Their reasoning: it would prevent her “parents” from being embarrassed by having a guest at the breakfast table the next morning, without knowing the person’s name!

Alison, the exchange student, grew up in a small town in southwest Missouri in the heart of the “Bible-belt.” This idea would never have been suggested in that part of the country. She quickly learned that certain moral standards she had been taught were much looser in Iceland. Even though she did not intend to take them up on their suggestion, she does recall how relieved she was to know this information, just so she would not embarrass herself by saying something derogatory about their moral openness and laxity.

If we are to effectively minister to a culture, we must understand the makeup of that culture. If we are to present Christ to them in a relevant way, then we must know the standards and values they hold to. And in order to understand the values that they adhere to, and why they do so, then we must first understand where those values came from. We want to know what has helped to shape those values. Once we understand where our values have come from, we can then see how they are shaping our culture. It is imperative that we understand these factors if we are to see our disciples become lifelong spiritual multipliers.

II. A Biblical Mandate

- A. The Bible recognizes that everyone lives within a culture and that there are differences among people. In fact, God created culture at The Tower of Babel to protect us from our own sinfulness and from Satan. We’re told in Matthew 28:19 to go and make disciples of

all nations. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 that he has become all things to all people. When we look further at this passage, we clearly see that people are different and that they come from different backgrounds. Read these scripture references before proceeding.

- B. The Apostles also taught that the practice of Christianity would not be exactly the same in Jewish and Gentile churches. Because of their cultures, their faith would be expressed in different manners. This notion was confirmed by the Jerusalem Council and reported to us in Acts 15.

III. Historical Perspectives

- A. To effectively make disciples in a culture, we need to understand, not just the values a culture holds, but more importantly how those values have been passed on from generation to generation. Discovering what has shaped and influenced a culture's value system will enable us to discern its true spiritual need. Every society has the same basic need, which is to know Christ. But how we relate this to them will strongly hinge on their current view of themselves and the people around them, their idea of right and wrong.
 - 1. In his book How Shall We Then Live? Francis Schaeffer said, "There is a flow to history and culture that is rooted in what people think; and what they think will determine how they act."
 - 2. As values erode, societal chaos is the natural progression. Understanding the cause of this erosion will give us further insight into how people in a particular society currently think and act.
- B. If we can accurately identify the predominant values of a culture, then we can better minister to it. We can evangelize it more strategically, train stronger disciples, and build movements and churches which "fit" the people. Here are two examples of churches that fit the culture.
 - 1. The Korean church: church denomination/affiliation is predominantly Presbyterian, because it reflects their social values of respect for elders; top-down authority; and personal identity within a covenantal group.
 - 2. The U.S. church: our society is more oriented to the individual than to group identity, and so we tend to find Baptist and Free churches to be more prominent because they stress personal faith.

IV. Personal Reflection

Take some time to think about the following questions. Write down some of your thoughts in the space provided. Some of these questions will be discussed when the group meets together.

- A. What shapes our values? Write down some of your ideas. You can use the categories listed below to spur your thinking. Which do you think have had the greatest influence on shaping our values?
1. Family
 2. Religion
 3. Intense work ethic
 4. Economic system
 5. Entertainment
 6. Education
 7. Story telling
 8. Social Structure
 9. Language
 10. History
 11. Beliefs about:
 - a) Future/time
 - b) Security
 - c) Relationship to nature
 - d) Significance
 12. Relationships
- B. What are the dominant culture values in the United States or your own country? Write down your ideas and we will discuss them in the group time.
- C. How do these ideas affect our ability to evangelize, train disciples, and build movements within our own cultures and societies? Write down answers.

V. Conclusion

As we can see, knowing who we are and who the people around us are is of utmost importance if we are to effectively reach them for the cause of Christ. We need to know the dominant culture values we face, what has influenced and shaped them, and the impact they have on our ministry. Abraham Lincoln outlined the necessity of this when discussing the health of our nation on March 30, 1863:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!”

Value and Belief Chart

Disciple/student: _____

Date: _____

Area	Value/Belief
Family	
Religion	
Work	
Economics	
Education	
Social Structure	
History	
Time	
Future	
Security	
Significance	
Relationships	
Rules/Laws	
Leisure	