



Six Ways to Engage Culture

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In a recent interview, singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright surprisingly **remarked**: "**We're so obsessed about debunking Bush in this country that we don't spend time on any other subjects. That's a little depressing.**" Wainwright's point is that many Americans neglect a whole range of cultural issues, often neglecting political engagement for finger-pointing.

What's more depressing is that many Christians are just as guilty of this charge as non-Christians. As a result, there are few citizens who think through cultural issues *critically*, and even fewer who think them through *redemptively*. Here are six ways to promote critical and redemptive engagement with culture.

Engage culture prayerfully. I'm not suggesting that we should actually bow our heads and recite a prayer before reading a newspaper or book, watching TV or a movie, or going shopping, though that certainly wouldn't hurt. Instead, we are to live life and engage culture in a *spirit of dependence upon God*; we are to pray without ceasing (**1 Thess. 5:17**). We should approach culture just as we should approach all things: prayerfully.

What should we pray? We should thank God for the gift of culture, confessing that all cultures contain truth, beauty, and virtue, asking Him to help us recognize and rejoice in these good gifts, which come down from the Father of lights (**James 1:17**). Alternatively, all cultures also disdain truth, beauty, and virtue. Thus, we are dependent upon God to enable us to recognize and reject those things that are harmfully false, ugly, and immoral. By asking God to give us the perspective of His Spirit, "the Spirit who searches out all things, even the depths of God" (**1 Cor. 2:10**), we can begin to discern between the things which are true, beautiful, and good and the things that are false, ugly, and evil.

Engage culture carefully. When approaching any given issue, from parenting to politics, we all have our biases. In order to engage culture well, we must strive to avoid the paths of both the sectarian and the secularist, of both blind rejection and uncritical acceptance. This will require careful investigation into the issues we face, taking the opposing view seriously and weighing its merits. Make a habit of hearing both sides of an issue before you baptize your opinions. Be slow to speak and quick to listen (**James 1:19**).

Engage culture biblically-theologically. Why hyphenate biblical and theological? Why not just say "think biblically"? Well, the plain fact is that the Bible does not explicitly address most cultural issues. It does not tell you who to vote for, which school to go to, what movies to watch, whether or not you should date, whether or not to abort your baby, or how to respond to cloning. Instead, the Bible offers theological principles which we can appropriate in order to form opinions and convictions about cultural issues. For instance, there is no verse in the Bible that reads: "Thou shalt not have an abortion." However, the Bible does inform us that God is the author of life and that to take human life is murder, which is prohibited by God. The circumstances surrounding abortion can be complex. A mother's life may be threatened if the life of the baby is not taken. The Bible does not say, "Preserve the mother's life." However, there are principles and practices in Scripture that can help us make wise decisions about cultural and ethical dilemmas.

The problem, however, is that we often start with cultural *assumptions* about what is right, beautiful, and good and go to the Bible to prove them. Instead, we need to bring cultural *questions* about what is true,

good, and beautiful to the Bible, reflect on them theologically and then prayerfully, and carefully form our opinions. Don't begin with cultural convictions and end with biblical proof-texts; end with cultural wisdom by beginning with biblical-theological reflection. Start with the biblical text and reflect theologically on cultural issues. Move from Text to Theology to Culture, not the other way around.

Engage culture redemptively. Strive to connect your theological reflections regarding culture to redemption. We can redemptively engage culture in two ways: *practically* and *positionally*. To practically redeem, identify what is broken, what is in need of redemption, and take restorative action. Ask yourself questions like "How can I bring the gospel to bear on this issue?" or "How can I restore, forgive, or reconcile in this situation?" For example, if you come to the conviction that abortion is ugly and immoral, think about how you can help those who are suffering from the devastating affects of abortion. Don't just debate others. Volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center. Learn how to counsel mothers. Don't become self-righteous and inactive; practice your cultural convictions. Live them out redemptively.

Our practice should flow from our position in Christ. Our actions ought to reveal our redeemed identity, not *form* our identity. Consider the danger of mistaking your newly-formed habits for who you are. For instance, do you think of yourself now as an environmentalist or as a citizen of Zion with an environmental conscience? Do you draw significance from being a "pro-lifer" or from being new creation in Christ Jesus? Ask yourself, "Am I confusing my practice with my position?" or "Am I finding my significance in *what I do* instead of *who I am* in Christ?" Guard yourself from subtly allowing cultural convictions to take the place of your identity in Christ. Ground your identity in the gospel and your practice will be more redemptive and more honoring to the Lord.

Engage culture humbly. Recognize that you have much to learn from a given culture. Read, converse, and reflect on cultural issues with a teachable heart. Ask God to shape your convictions through whomever or whatever He wills. Avoid proud dogmatism and cultivate humble conviction. Don't put others down who believe differently from you. Consider others more important than yourself without surrendering your convictions. Yet, be willing to revise your opinions through a process of Text-Theology-Culture.

Engage culture selectively. Realize and embrace the limitations of your own time, experience, and interests. Spend your time wisely. Don't sacrifice time with God, church, or family in order to become more culturally savvy. Everyone has been created differently, to live a unique life. Make the most of your experience by redemptively engaging culture, but try to avoid making the experience of others your own. There are too many issues in the world for you to become an overnight expert on Christ and culture. Be selective about what you engage.

Summarizing the Six Ways

When engaging culture *prayerfully*, we depend on the wisdom that comes from the Spirit who searches out all cultures, who can enable us to recognize and rejoice in what is true, beautiful, and good, and reject or redeem what is false, ugly, and immoral. As a result, engaging culture can become an act of communion with God. Relying on the wisdom of the Spirit will also mean *careful* investigation of cultural issues, being critical of our own biases while maintaining an open ear to the arguments of others. However, we're not left to navigate the turbulent waters of our culture with only prayer and reason. God has given us his Word, a divine and authoritative Text from which we can glean wisdom and theological principles to engage culture.

When wrestling with issues, we must be careful to bring questions, not assumptions, from our culture to the Word, following a pattern of Text-Theology-Culture. This *biblical-theological* engagement with culture should always lead to *redemptive* action, restoring what is ugly and immoral from our position as accepted children of God, citizens of Zion. In turn, we can engage culture *humbly* and *selectively*, recognizing our limitations and rejoicing in our unique opportunities to engage the world around us. Finally, try to practice these six ways of engaging culture not just as an individual but in community. To put a spin on Rufus Wainwright's words: Only when the Church in this country becomes obsessed with glorifying God *in all things* will we critically and redemptively engage our culture on all kinds of subjects.