

1. Soup and Sandwiches

Have you ever argued with someone about sandwiches? I have...way too many times. It all started when I was eighteen years old and I left my hometown in the Philadelphia suburbs and moved just 300 miles west to attend college outside of Pittsburgh. I quickly realized that even though I was still living in my home state of Pennsylvania, I had actually moved to what seemed like another planet...and that's where the sandwich comes in.

If I were to show you around Philadelphia there are lots of things I'd want you to experience...especially the food! One of those delicacies is a local sandwich that I once naively thought everyone called a 'hoagie.' Then I moved to Pittsburgh. I asked a new-found classmate from the area where I could get one of my beloved hoagies. He looked at me like I was speaking another language. To him, I was.

'Umm...what's a hoagie?', he asked through a facial expression that told me he thought I was nuts. 'Umm...it's a sandwich on a long roll that's filled with meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, onions, oil, and vinegar. Duh,' I replied. His eyes lit up, 'Oh, you mean a sub?' Now it was my turn: 'A sub?!? No, I mean a hoagie!' That's when the sandwich arguments began. And as I've traveled around the country I've had to continue to argue as I've encountered people who have misnamed my hoagie all kinds of things, including 'Grinder', 'Wedge', 'Hero', 'Po' Boy', 'Spuckie', 'Torpedo', 'Gondola', and who knows what else.

The reality is that nobody in these sandwich wars of mine was wrong. Rather, we were all being true to the unique local *culture* of our different hometowns. Our 'sandwich wars' were only the tip of the iceberg regarding the marked differences in how we understood life and how we lived it. (Don't even ask me about our arguments over whether or not to call Coca-Cola 'soda' or 'pop'...which may both be wrong if you're a 'Coke' drinker from the South!)

Whether you know it or not, from the moment you were born you have been part

of a culture. And, as is the case for me, your particular culture has shaped and influenced you in ways you're not even aware of. And, as you will come to see as we travel this little journey together, God has much to say about culture. But before we get to God's order, design, plans, and desires for culture, we need to define *culture*.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture, it has been said, is one of the most difficult words in the English language to define. Take time to Google 'culture', and you will find yourself falling into a never-ending rabbit hole filled with endless definitions. Let me try to make it easy for you with a couple of definitions of culture that have been helpful to me.

A Godly thinker and Christian leader by the name of John Stott defines culture as 'a tapestry, intricate and often beautiful, which is woven together by a given society to express its corporate identity.'¹ According to this definition, the tapestry of my world included a sandwich known as a hoagie. Depending on where you are from, the tapestry of your

1 John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p.26.

culture probably calls it something else. But our tapestries aren't completely different. While there are unique local threads in each, our local cultures share many of the same threads since we are all part of an even larger western culture where people tend to think in generally the same way about the bigger issues of life. For example, we are all shaped similarly by living under similar governmental systems, watching the same movies and television, and being marketed the same clothing styles.

My friend Bill Romanowski has spent his life looking at the life-shaping cultural messages you and I see and hear every day in our favorite music, films, television, books, and online world. He says that culture refers to 'the way humans define and live in God's world.' It is a collection of 'ideals and beliefs, values and assumptions, that makes up a kind of master plan for living and interpreting life.'²

CULTURE IS A SOUP

Let's think of culture as including what we believe, what we do, and how we live our lives day to day. Because we share our culture with others, it binds us together with those

2 William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), pp. 44, 49.

who think and live in a similar manner. I like to think of my culture as 'the soup' of beliefs and behaviors that I swim in every day. My cultural soup shapes how I think about identity, relationships, sex, life purpose, gender, justice, work, play, academics, money, race, authority, and everything else under the sun. Because this is where I live, soak, and marinate 24/7, there are ideas I adopt without even thinking about them (for example, a long sandwich is a hoagie), and there are things I do based on the fact that I have adopted those ideas (for example, argue about sandwich names with those who have grown up in a different 'sandwich culture'!).

I've learned over the years that everyone swims in culture. Wherever there are people, there is culture. I've also learned that culture exercises more power over all of us than we know or are willing to admit.

Have you ever spent an entire hot summer day in a swimming pool? You just can't get enough. And when the afternoon finally comes to an end and you have to climb out of the water to head home for dinner, the effects of your time in the pool are obvious. You are dripping wet. The chlorine has left your eyes

red. Your head might feel a little water-logged and stuffy. And your fingertips are all shriveled up. Your time in the pool actually *changed* you in a variety of ways. Culture has that same effect. It changes us. It shapes us. It forms us. And if we are not careful, it will even deform and misshape us by pushing us away from God's good desires for who we are and how we are to live in our world.

WHAT MAP WILL YOU FOLLOW?

You need to realize that the cultural soup you swim in each and every day *is* changing and shaping you. New ingredients (music, film, websites, ideas) are being poured into the soup each and every day. What you read, what you listen to, what you watch, how you spend your time, who you spend time with...all those things make up the 'soup' that maps out for you a path through life, guiding you into what to believe and how to behave. This is why it's so important for you to understand the particular cultural soup you're swimming in and the role it plays in your life. You see, when Jesus Christ calls us to 'come and follow me,' He is inviting us into a life where He guides us through His Word, the Bible, into an understanding of what to believe and how to behave. His purpose in

doing so is to lead us into a life where we are able to flourish and grow into the fullness of all He has in store for us, not only on this earth, but for all eternity!

We need to be intent on following God's map for our lives rather than the cultural map for our lives. Sure, there will be times when the cultural map will get it right and agree with God's map. But more often than not, those two maps will lead in different directions. Jesus tells us that there is a wide and easy way through life, but that wide and easy well-traveled way leads to destruction. He maps out a way for us to live that is narrow and difficult, but that is the way that leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14).

IN OR OUT OF THE POOL?

Think again about summertime swimming in the local pool. I've watched the lifeguards and caretakers at public pools regularly test the water. They skim it to remove anything they spot in the water that shouldn't be in the water. They treat the water with chemicals, testing it regularly throughout the day to be sure that it remains clean and the way it's supposed to be. As long as the culture of the water tests clean, the lifeguards allow us to stay in the pool. But if a test shows something unhealthy

in the water, whistles are blown and everyone is told to get out. Each and every summer, I see multiple news reports on pools shutting down because of the presence of a bacteria known as fecal coliform. Just the word 'fecal' should cause us to take notice and realize that this is *not* the kind of water in which to be swimming, because it might somehow compromise our health in dangerous ways! The pool might close for a few hours, a couple of days, or in extreme cases for a week at a time because the culture of the water is not the way it's supposed to be. While we might not be able to see the dangers lurking in the water, they are there. And while it might *feel* okay to be swimming in the midst of the invisible dangers, swimming in them means that we are risking compromising our health. Why? Because without even knowing it, what's in the water has an effect on us.

So, what actually is the effect that culture has on us? Keep reading!

Main Point

Culture is not optional. It's an ever-present 'map for life' that either shapes or misshapes our beliefs and behaviors.

Questions for Reflection

- What are some aspects of your culture that are unique and different from other cultures? (foods, words, beliefs, behaviors, clothing, etc.)
- How have you seen culture misshape or deform people in your generation?
- Where do you see today's culture agreeing with the map of God's Word? Disagreeing with the map of God's Word?

2. We all Wear Glasses

I recently watched a video describing the eyesight challenges faced by people living in sub-Saharan Africa. Like many of us living here in the United States, some had battled poor eyesight from as early as childhood. Others could see, but couldn't focus well enough to be able to read. Many had contracted eye diseases and disorders that limited their vision to the point where they had trouble navigating even the easiest and most normal daily life tasks. But unlike us, getting to an eye doctor is a virtual impossibility for these people. In fact, in sub-Saharan Africa, the ratio of optometrists to people is about 1 to every 8 million! Imagine what it's like for those with poor eyesight who finally do get to visit an eye doctor to have their vision checked and then corrected with the proper prescription. Watching videos of the wonder and awe these people experience

is amazing! They put on glasses and have an 'Aha!' moment where they can see clearly for the first time!

I know that some of you wear contact lenses or glasses in order to overcome deficiencies in your eyesight. You, like me, know what it's like to take out your contacts or remove your glasses, only to be looking at everything in a blur. You can't read. Maybe you can't make out faces. The pictures on your smartphones are unclear. You have difficulty seeing the baseball when it's pitched. Driving is a dangerous endeavor. But then in that space that exists between your face and everything in the outside world you place the correctly-prescribed lenses, and suddenly it all comes into focus with amazing clarity!

Thinking about our eyesight offers a helpful way to think about the way that culture shapes our lives. The cultural soup that we swim in every hour of every day has an effect on the way we look at the world.

WHAT GLASSES ARE YOU WEARING?

I like to think of it this way, we all wear 'glasses' that shape the way we look at everything in the world around us. Take for example the issue of identity. Experts tell us that as teenagers, we are working to figure out who we are and

to find our place in the world. If I look at the issue of identity through the set of glasses ‘prescribed’ by the current cultural soup, I will most likely come to believe that my identity is to be found in a variety of things, including what I look like and/or my achievements (grades, championships, awards, etc.). Having internalized this understanding of identity, many of our peers do everything they can to create a persona on social media that aspires to something way beyond the reality of who they *actually* are or ever *could* be. Ultimately, as most of us painfully know through our own experience, this leads to great stress and anxiety.

The glasses we choose to put on and look *through* shape...or even misshape...the way we look at everything in the world. Culture has power! This is why we need to think about the concept of a *worldview*.

Think for a minute about your current music playlist. The music you and I listen to is all part—just one small part—of our cultural soup. But along with every other cultural ingredient that we swim in, our music refines and tweaks the prescription for the glasses we choose to wear. You see, all popular music

communicates a worldview. The messages communicated lyrically and visually make both overt and covert suggestions on how to think, talk, act, and live. Certain values and beliefs are promoted as virtuous. Others are portrayed negatively. What we listen to and watch shapes us, sometimes without us even knowing it.

WHAT'S A WORLDVIEW?

Whether you know it or not, every one of us has a worldview. It's the model, lens, framework and basic beliefs through which we view the world around us, our purpose in life, and our future. That's right...we all wear worldview glasses!

What does a worldview do? Bill Romanowski says that our worldview maps out life for us as it 'describes the way the world is, while also providing a model for the way the world ought to be.'¹

Shaped mostly by culture from the day you were born, your worldview gives you answers—whether you've thought about them consciously or unconsciously—to not only the

1 Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, p.59.

identity question, but to all the questions you have about life, including:

- Where am I?
- Who's in control?
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- What's wrong with the world?
- How can I know right from wrong?
- What is right and what is wrong?
- What should I believe about academics, work, sexuality, gender, family, etc.?
- What's the remedy for what's wrong with this world?

Each of us lives our culturally-influenced worldview every day. It's the basis for how we think and act. Some of us have consciously chosen our worldview. For others...most of us perhaps...our worldview is an unconscious collection of answers we've picked up along the way as we've been swimming in the soup of our culture. For example, all of our music, film, books, advertisements, etc. communicate something to us about what to believe and how to live in this world. This is why it is so important that each of us take the time to understand culture, what it is, how it functions,

and how it is influencing us all...without us even knowing it.

The worldview 'glasses' you choose to wear will shape how you understand, interpret, and live your life. It is shaping your decisions about identity, relationships, sex, gender, justice, work, play, academics, money, race, authority, and everything else under the sun. If you're wearing the wrong prescription, your worldview 'glasses' will keep you from understanding how the way things in life really are, and how they should be. You will consistently have difficulty seeing clearly and finding your way. In fact, you will wind up getting lost...and you might not even realize it. But if you're wearing the correct prescription, you will begin to see, believe, and live in a way that not only helps you realize with clarity who you've been *made to be* and what you've been *made for*, but in a way that brings glory to God...which is ultimately what you and I have been created for!

I want to see things clearly. Here's the best news: we don't have to wait in line with 8 million other people and hope that we get to see someone who can give us the worldview

glasses we need. God has given us the gift of His prescription in His Word.

It is said that David used the words he wrote in Psalm 119 to teach his young son Solomon the alphabet. But he used it for something more. He used it to shape Solomon's worldview. David writes, 'I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways' (Psalm 119:15). Why? David wanted Solomon to see things clearly. He says, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Ps. 119:105).

The Christian worldview is rooted in the story of what God is doing in the world. God desires that your personal story will be a tiny chapter in His master story. And that's the next step we will take on our journey together as we look at culture and your place in the context of God's grand story!

Main Point

God desires that we develop a Christian worldview that shapes our beliefs and behaviors...all to His glory!

Questions for Reflection

- Choose a song from your current playlist. Watch the video and listen to the lyrics,

paying careful attention to see and hear the worldview messages of the piece. How does the song answer the nine worldview questions mentioned in this chapter?

- Do you believe that music and media has shaped your worldview? Why or why not? If so, how?
- How has this chapter changed your thinking and perspective on the power of culture?