

CHAPTER NINE

Music: A Gift We Cultivate

EXERCISE

If someone tells you that she likes country music, what other things do you assume about her? If someone says he likes heavy metal music, alternative music, rap music, hip hop, jazz, or pop, what other things do you assume about him?

Introduction

Music is not just a raw human experience devoid of cultural context. We must come to terms with the fact that music is inextricably tied to our cultural experiences.

Discussion

Music Should Be Contextual

Living in North America in the twenty-first century means that our music should not be like the music Jesus would have heard in the Middle East more than 2000 years ago. God used the types of instruments that they played and the sorts of songs that they sang at that time to convey his gospel story to those particular people. We need to do the same with today's instruments, songs, and culture. This is called contextualization.

1. Contextualizing the Gospel to Our Culture

None of us chooses the culture in which we live, but we need to study to understand our culture if we are to create and use music that conveys the gospel message contextually. The Bible tells us that we are all strangers in a foreign land. One of the best examples of this in Scripture is the story of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

ILLUSTRATION

Daniel 1 tells us that, *[Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon] commanded Ashpenaz, his chief*

eunuch, to bring some of the [captive] people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish...to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

Daniel and his friends did not choose the culture in which they were placed. But faithful presence for Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego meant that they learned the language, the literature, and the whole culture of the Babylonians. And ultimately these young men brought glory to God and great good to the king of Babylon because they were obedient to God in that time and place.

Some of us are not happy with the culture in which we have been placed. We might wish it were more conservative or more liberal, more urban or more rural, more like Calvin's Geneva or more like America's 1950s. But God has put us right where we are and, like Daniel, we have before us the task of serving our neighbors by learning their language, their literature, their aesthetics, and their priorities. When we understand our culture we can bring glory to God and great good to our neighbor by using creative cultural vehicles to bring God's word to life for them.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Do we study our culture's literature, music, and language? What are some creative cultural vehicles for bringing God's word to our neighbors contextually?

2. Being Culturally Contextual, not Subcultural

To be contextual with the Gospel story means to put it into the language, literature, and music of the culture in which we live. To be subcultural with the Gospel would be to create a separate culture within this culture and give it its own language, literature, and music that do not interact with the rest of society.

ILLUSTRATION

Imagine that Daniel had not moved into the king's house, learned the language and customs, and served in the king's court. Instead he and his friends, out of fear of these strange people, decided to stay camped outside of Babylon and have their own culture instead of engaging with the Babylonians and getting to know their hopes and dreams. But imagine that they also liked the haircuts, the fabrics, and the music of Babylon, so they brought those aspects of Babylonian culture into their own culture without also taking in the Babylonians themselves. This wasn't what God was calling Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego to do. God had plans to use them in the context of this people's culture.

This is a danger that we face in our own culture. We might like the cool t-shirts, the music, the radio stations, and the bookstores of our society. So we make Christian versions of these elements of our culture that are only used by Christians. We thereby create a Christian subculture.

But how can we practically tell the difference between creating subcultures and contextualizing the gospel? When we are contextual with the gospel we say, "For the sake of my neighbor, I will move into this culture and try to understand her hopes and desires by listening to her music and reading her literature." When we are subcultural with the Gospel we say, "For my own sake I want what my neighbor has. And out of fear I don't want to know him."

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Are we, for the sake of our neighbor, moving into our culture to try to understand her hopes and desires by listening to her music and reading her literature? Or are we, for our own sake, taking elements of our culture for ourselves without taking in our neighbor?

3. Challenging Places of Cultural Brokenness

This doesn't mean that we can't evaluate or speak words of challenge into our culture. Part of studying and learning our culture is keeping our eyes open to the places it is broken. And it is not enough to recognize those places of brokenness; we must also look for loving ways to challenge them. The music we choose and the ways in which we choose to play and sing it should do this.

ILLUSTRATION

In Daniel 1:8 we see, *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.* Daniel knew the God who had created all things and knew God's heart through the laws he had given his people. Therefore Daniel could see that Babylon was broken in ways they couldn't see because they did not have God's law. So he explained this to the man over him and asked not to be forced to enter this brokenness himself.

In 21st-century North America, we have been given a vision by the music industry that says each person in our family—our 13-year-old, our 16-year-old, our 25-year-old, and we parents—should choose a different music to listen to and identify with. Music is treated as a deeply individual experience that we can each use to define ourselves rather than a corporate experience to draw our families closer together. This is a way that our culture is broken musically and needs to be healed.

The story continues: *Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you. Daniel then said to the guard... "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal*

food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego needed to adopt many new practices in order to serve their neighbors, but there were some customs put in front of them that they literally could not swallow. They would not be swept away by this new culture in ways that would make them disobedient to God. But Daniel did not want his decision to mean the death of the man in charge of him. So when this man expressed his fear, Daniel lovingly suggested a trial period. God honored these young men's decision to challenge the culture while loving their neighbor by causing them to flourish physically and giving them understanding and skill. And God used them by bringing them into the center of this society to counsel the king and eventually lead him to their God.

Are there things that our culture puts in front of us musically that we should not swallow? Recently I observed a radio station promoting a new record with giant posters of a Christian musician's face with the words superimposed, "Can this man change the way we worship?" Is this vision of worship coming from the Scriptures or from our People magazine-influenced culture where celebrity sells? Is this vision of Christian musicians and how they should look and dress good for our congregations and our worship? Should we lovingly push back against this kind of brokenness?

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What are musical practices or customs being put in front of us that are broken?

Lesson

In Christian worship, the Church inspires our culture to greater things and heals our culture where it is broken. (1 Corinthians 9:19-22)

Exercise

If someone tells you that she likes country music, what other things do you assume about her? If someone says he likes heavy metal music, alternative music, rap music, hip hop, jazz, or pop, what other things do you assume about him?

Discussion Question

1. Do we study our culture's literature, music, and language? What are some creative cultural vehicles for bringing God's word to our neighbors contextually?
2. Are we, for the sake of our neighbor, moving into our culture to try to understand her hopes and desires by listening to her music and reading her literature? Or are we, for our own sake, taking elements of our culture for ourselves without taking in our neighbor?
3. What are musical practices or customs being put in front of us that are broken?

Lesson

In Christian worship, the Church inspires our culture to greater things and heals our culture where it is broken. (1 Corinthians 9:19-22)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

O Lord, Searcher of hearts,

It is a good day to us when you give us a glimpse of our true selves. Show us how to know when a thought is evil which we think right and good – how to know when what is lawful comes from an evil principle. Give us grace to know our lack and our emptiness without You. And let us not lay our pipe too short of the fountain, never touching the eternal spring – never drawing down water from above. Amen.