# THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE: THE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE

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**Category:** The Gospel and Culture

Over a month ago I wrote a post on the relationship between the Gospel and culture which has since expanded into five longer posts - of which this is the final part.Â  In the original post I wrote:

> *...in any culture, we must take the Bible as a whole and read and teach in the context of the full message of Scripture. Each culture has its favourite stories and metaphors from the Bible, but they must be kept in the full context of Godâ€™s mission of revelation and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.*

And in a comment in one of the other posts Ian Pitt wrote:

> *Itâ€™s relatively easy to recognize cultural behaviour in others â€“ whether we look at the prevailing norms and assumptions made historically, amongst different age-cohorts or diverse countries of origin! How can we can form a dispassionate assessment of our own cultural â€œbaggageâ€  ?*
> *Do we need to hear from others, or are there tools we might use to help us?*

It is vitally important that we are all creatures of our culture; of the background that shaped us. No one comes to the Christian faith without a cultural baggage which determines lots of their thoughts and attitudes. We then add another cultural layer depending on the Christian community we belong to.Â  Now culture goes very deep and weÂ  hold cultural values strongly and react to them emotionally. Let me give you an example.

I was brought up to say 'please' and 'thank-you' whenever I asked for or received something and when people don't say please and thank you I find it very rude and I can get quite annoyed. Now, the Kouya don't actually have a word for 'please' they just say 'give me that'. To me, that is very, very rude and I would find irritation swelling up inside me when Kouya people asked me to give something. On the other hand, the Kouya have incredibly complex ways of saying thank-you and I'm pretty sure that they found me rude when I didn't get those right.

Because of the depth of feeling that little things like this create, it would be easy for me to think that the Kouya were wrong for not saying 'please'. We assume our own cultural values to be universal, or Biblical: but that would be wrong. The Bible calls us to be respectful and considerate of one another; but it doesn't tell us exactly how to do that - the Kouya show care and respect one way and the Brits another, both are valid in their context. Yes, there are universals (do not murder, do not steal...) but the Gospel does not give us a step by step blueprint for how we should live. As I've written elsewhere the purpose of the Bible is to shape our thinking so that we can make correct choices and decisions - not to tell us exactly what we should do.

So we can't turn to Scripture to find out what a British Church should look like or how our community should live out the Gospel in minute detail. For example, we are told that Christians should meet

together for the breaking of bread, but we are not told how and when we should meet nor how often. Church buildings, homes, under a shade tree: the location doesn't matter - but the principle does.

Some thoughts:

- If we are to develop a Gospel mindset we need to allow our minds to be shaped by the whole of Scripture. Individuals or communities which over emphasise one part of the Bible over others will tend to skew their expression of the Gospel. I would argue that many British churches I know do not take the Gospels themselves seriously enough and so miss out on Jesus radical call to transform our current society. Too much attention to Paul, or to the Old Testament or to any one part of Scripture over and above the others is not healthy.
- As Ian suggests in the quote above, probably the only way to really tell if our dearly held values are Biblical or cultural is to have someone from outside look at us and advise us. This is part of the wonderful privilege of belonging to an international, multicultural body.
- Don't get me wrong: because something is cultural does not make it bad. But Gospel values must come first and cultural expressions must change when culture changes.
- This is going to sound cynical but stick with me! The tighter that a Christian community holds on to something then the more likely it is that the thing is cultural and not Scriptural. Or to put it in the words of a friend to whom I'll grant anonymity (you can own up if you wish) *many Christians would change their theology before they change their practices.*