

In•cultur•ating the gospel

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Leader's Materials

Learning outcomes:

1. Participants will describe the difference between gospel promise and cultural delivery.
2. Participants will identify cultural differences in biblical text, inculturations of the Bible, and Christian approaches to “the world.”
3. Participants will focus on an incarnational approach to culture as participation in God’s action.

Key term:

inculturation—learning to live and act within a culture such that it becomes second nature

“Inculturation” is originally a term from sociology used to describe the processes through which individuals and groups adapt to cultural norms. In theology it is used to describe how Christianity is presented and practiced in a particular culture, articulating gospel truths through specific language, imagery, rituals, etc.

Karen Marie Yust (*Real Kids, Real Faith*) makes use of other sociological terms about culture to describe hopes for children and realities in familial and congregational life. She thinks it helpful to aim for teaching children and the whole congregation to be **bicultural**, fluent in the language and images of Bible alongside those of contemporary culture. She says that Abraham, Sarah, and David should be as known, recognizable, and trusted as Winnie-the-Pooh and Mickey Mouse.

Other terms from sociology that might be helpful:

Separation—the life of faith and the broader culture(s) are kept distinct or compartmentalized

Assimilation—the life of faith accommodates to the patterns and truths of broader culture(s)

Marginalization—the life of faith is pushed to the edges of broader culture(s)

Integration—the life of faith permeates the broader culture(s) and seeks transformation

There is a good deal of overlap between these categories and those of H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr’s book is a great read for those seeking deeper discussion on the relationships among Christians and their cultures.

Theological priority:

incarnation—God’s activity to become and be flesh among us

Becoming human is God’s choice to be in relationship with humanity. Because of this, we can expect that God shows up in human lives and communities. What we learn in Jesus is that God’s **promise** to be with humanity is **universal**; God’s love in Christ is for all. What we learn from the Bible and our own experience is the human **challenge** to communicate, perceive, proclaim, and receive God’s love in **particular** human lives and communities.

Our growing edge:

cultural intelligence—the ability to recognize particularities in one’s own culture(s) and the cultures of others. By identifying and reflecting on one’s own culture(s) one makes space to receive another.

The gospel promise is God’s. The responsibility of delivery is ours. How can we be sure that what we proclaim, practice, and pass on is the gospel and not our own stuff?

Provocative ways to enliven conversation about culture

The Cloud

You've read Hebrews 11-12 (and it might be good to read it again).

Now consider "the cloud" with reference to digital storage: "It mostly means a grid of computers serving as a service-oriented architecture to deliver software and data."¹

The digital world borrowed language important to the church—"the cloud"—now what can the church learn from them? Try using the description above to explain what it means to be and do church.

Are there other words or phrases from contemporary culture that get you excited to think about the life of faith in new ways?

Remember WWJD?

WWJD ("What Would Jesus Do?") appeared on bracelets, bumper stickers and T-shirts in the 1990s, a great example of the inculturation of the gospel in contemporary culture.

That question was based on a book from the 1890s: *In His Steps*, Charles Sheldon, enacting 1 Peter 2 in his culture of post-Civil War Industrial Revolution.

"Do you still rock a WWJD bracelet? More seriously, do you think wearing an outward symbol of one's Christian faith helps someone be more like Jesus? Does it help in talking with other people about Jesus?"—Tim Stewart²

Inculturation in film (YouTube is your friend for this one)

Watch a clip from *Veggie Tales*, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Prince of Egypt*. Start with simple responses:

This ___ is ___ is not part of my culture.

I ___ did ___ did not hear the Bible or gospel.

Consider watching the clip again and try to determine the posture of the film to its broader culture(s):

___ God's reality is far above and/or way different from culture.

___ What God asks is pretty much in line with what culture recommends.

___ God encourages action against cultural norms.

___ God calls us to transform our experiences of culture and the ways cultures operate.

___ God's reality neither totally overlaps with culture nor totally contradicts it; *discipleship* is lived as a paradox of God's reality and worldly reality.

Compare different versions of a biblical story. Ask: Who is the intended audience? What is the emphasis? How is the cultural setting revealed in language, props, etc.? What are the character continuities and differences and what differences do the differences make? Has the *Bible* been adjusted for culture? How?

¹ <http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/cloud-computing-work-technology-explained/>

² <http://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/2012/12/06/wwjd-what-would-jesus-do/>

Religious Language

“The care and education of youth (as well as the well-being of our society) demands...the recovery of a lively, vital, usable religious language. This is not simply a task for youth leaders, teachers, and ministers with youth. It is a task for the whole religious community....This is a very difficult task. It involves the recovery of language that is **clear** enough to be comprehended by young people, **rich** enough to be meaningful, **concrete** enough to relate to the world as it is and **critical** enough to keep open the dynamics of inquiry and continuing conversation. Moreover, it involves providing help in—teaching of, even—the art of **interpretation**....It must be a language like that of poets and artists, using the concrete to open up dimensions of transcendence, depth, and mystery.”³

Many people have a favorite version of the Bible. If we're honest, the way a translation becomes a favorite is because we like the language; it reaches us. For some this means preserving the language of the Bible with which they were raised. For others it means a contemporary or even colloquial version. The *King James Version* of the Bible, a favorite of many, was an inculturation of the gospel in Elizabethan English (1604-11). Almost three centuries prior to its publication John Wycliffe was executed for his efforts to translate the Bible into English (1384).

Translation is a notoriously difficult task, which means that every “translation” of the Bible is also a version or an interpretation of the gospel. The drive to create new versions of the Bible is almost always identification of a population in need of hearing the gospel in its own language. This is the case for Eugene Peterson's *The Message Bible* (1993) as much as for *The Action Bible* (2010).

The November 2012 issue of *The Lutheran* featured an article on words to keep, even if keeping them means updating or inculturating them for each new generation. Is your list the same as theirs?: *justification, grace, faith, freedom, adiaphora, vocation, antinomianism, faithfulness*⁴

Powers and Idols

“We need to recover, with the totality of the gospel of the kingdom, the prophetic evangelization of the Bible tradition. The annunciation of the kingdom of God demands the denunciation of the kingdoms of men and of powers, which are destroying human life and exploiting creation. And we need to name the idols.”

—Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*

What are the life-draining powers of our time?

What are the idols?

What are the life-giving powers of our time?

What are the images of life, hope, and the promise of creation?

³ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, pp. 125-6.

⁴ Rolf Jacobsen, ed. *Crazy Talk: A Not-so-stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*

Lesson Plan: In•cultur•ating the gospel

Please modify the Lesson Plan to fit your group. Feel free to break into pairs/small groups or do individual work.

Get participants talking about culture (10-15 minutes)

Use one of the ideas included in this packet or the questions on the handout.

Think of yogurt with its “live active cultures”: **culture** means “conditions that foster life and growth.” Cultural differences do not exist to annoy us; they emerge as humans navigate the world and think up language, practices, and actions that make life meaningful. The gospel must make its home in each culture, critiquing what drains life and nourishing what gives life.

Bible (20 minutes): Galatians 3:26-28. Universality: Jesus is for everyone

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

From Andrew Root, *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry*:

“It is because of his ministry that Paul does theology, explaining why the Gentiles are included in God’s new action through Jesus” (54n. 2).

Galatians contains a radical promise: people who are quite different from one another are made one in Christ. Oneness is possible because Jesus came for all people; Christ is *universal*, savior of the whole world. God’s message of salvation in Christ, though universal, must be shared with *particular* people. In order for the proclamation of the good news to be heard and received, it must be conveyed in the language of the people. Cultural differences have been present since the early days of the Jesus movement. Let’s retune our eyes and ears to discern cultural differences in the passage from Galatians.

The church sometimes confuses its own *particular* way of worship, fellowship, and service with the *universal* message of salvation. When this happens, the gospel message of freedom in Christ becomes bound to expressions of cultural preferences in music, language, art, etc. It can seem like those who leave or protest are rejecting the gospel. It could be that their culture, too distant from church culture, has been untouched by the gospel.

Cultural Intelligence: Christianity and “the world” (20-25 minutes)

Cultural intelligence is our growing edge. How can we communicate the universal promise of the gospel in our particular culture(s)? What happens when the culture to which we are called is not native to us? At times it seems that the church is “behind” and needs to “catch up” with the culture. Others claim that the church should stand against culture. It can feel like an all or nothing scenario. Cultural intelligence does not make a judgment on the church. Instead it provides a lens to see what is *particular* to one’s own culture (individual, group, congregational), therefore making space for the culture of another. Tending to what is particular enables the *universal* to shine as the main event.

Use the identities and definitions of culture from participants. Consider introducing the different approaches to culture borrowed from sociology.

Christianity and “the world” (*Feel free to bring in other passages*):

1) John 18:33-36

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" **34** Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" **35** Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" **36** Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." **37** Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." **38** Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him."

2) Romans 12:2

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Incarnation and Cultural Differences (20-30 minutes)

From Andrew Root, *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry*:

“participate in God’s action as a community by sharing deeply in one another’s lives, by together seeking God next to their questions and yearnings” (51).

“[W]e need to keep the personal and pastoral dimensions of the gospel. Evangelization has to become real and be incarnated in persons and human relationships. To share the gospel means to minister to persons in their needs and in their particular situations.”⁵

Our daily lives shape our understanding of God and our experience of Christ. If this were not the case, there would not be so much imagery from farming and shepherding in the Bible. Without personal connection to lives of agriculture or husbandry we can domesticate the images of Jesus as harvester or shepherd, forgetting about the relevance to the daily lives of his ancient listeners.

How does incarnation shape daily life?

How might focusing on incarnation reframe cultural conflicts present in your congregation or neighborhood?

Tie in to Practice Discipleship 2012: “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD)

Kenda Creasy Dean calls MTD a “symbiote” that sucks the life out of religious traditions. Most devastating with regard to Christianity is the denial of incarnation. God is acknowledged as Creator, but is not involved in daily life except by invitation in response to a problem. God mostly wants people to be nice, good, fair, and happy. MTD is an indication that the church sometimes conforms to the world, passing off contemporary culture for the gospel.

What aspects of MTD are present in your life and congregation?

What difference would it make to claim again the good news of the incarnation?

⁵ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, p. 117.

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Handout

Write down all of the cultures to which you belong—big cultures like the U.S. and small cultures like Lake Wobegon...geographical cultures and cultures of interest, practice, identity, or hobby.

NOW...Draw a line between any cultures that clash with one another.

Circle or star cultures welcome in your congregation.

Place an X next to cultures not welcome in your congregation.

Try out your definition of **culture** here.

Then share with another and write down any of their good ideas.

I. Universality Jesus is for everyone
“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” <p style="text-align: right;">--Galatians 3:26-28</p>

Name the cultural differences in the passage from Galatians.

Do you identify with any of them? What other cultural differences are relevant in your life?

Can you see them at work in your congregation, workplace, or neighborhood?

What are sources of cultural conflict? (age, money, languages, music, worship style, etc.)

II. Cultural Intelligence
with help from the Gospel of John and Romans

“All the sociological realities of the twenty-first century aside for a moment, cultural intelligence is essential for us because it is rooted in a theology of God’s incarnation through Jesus. And Jesus is made incarnate today through you and me—the church. Therefore, we cannot fulfill our God-given mission to love others without contextualizing ourselves through a pathway like cultural intelligence. At the same time, many of the values and ideals of the gospel... We’ll look at the connection between the incarnation and cultural intelligence, and we’ll examine a framework for dealing with some of the tensions that surface in embodying Jesus as we reach across the chasm of cultural difference.”

—David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*

Read John 18:33-36. Jesus’s statement that his kingdom is “not of this world” has become an occasion for bumper stickers, tattoos, and other personal expressions. What messages are sent with “notw”?

What is your congregation’s attitude toward culture or “the world”?
Is it the same as or different from your own?
What is good news in being not of the world?

Read Romans 12:2. What similarities and differences do you see between Paul’s understanding of “the world” and John’s understanding?
How do you see your life or congregation conforming to the world?
Where do you see signs of transformation?
How might your witness in your context change through transformation?

III. Incarnation
Participating in God’s Action/ Expecting to meet Christ

“I will therefore give myself as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.”

—Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian”

Describe ordinary circumstances of your life and work.
What are the patterns of your labor?
How often and in what settings do you encounter neighbors?
Rewrite a parable using the imagery from your life or lives of those with whom you minister.