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# A Student's Guide *to Culture*

Discussion Questions Resource



DAVID C COOK™

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO CULTURE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS RESOURCE

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## *Chapter One*

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# What Culture Is and How It Shapes Us

Culture is to humans what water is to fish—the environment where we live and move and eat and work and play and, therefore, think is normal. But like fish in water, we can become so immersed in our ways of thinking and patterns of living that we develop blind spots and lose sight of how culture shapes us. We lose our ability to see problems and find it hard to resist the temptation to do what everyone else is doing.

If we don't do the hard, intentional work of examining the world around us, it won't occur to us that things should be any different. We're much more than mere products of culture, however, and we must never lose sight of the biblical vision of who we are as the most precious of God's creation. Resisting the cultural tidal wave may, at first, seem impossible. Thankfully, God's given us a Story bigger than the cultural movement that makes it possible.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you thought carefully about culture's influence before? Why, or why not?
2. In your own words, what is culture and how does it shape us?
3. What ideas are most influential in American culture today? Who are the champions of these ideas? What types of media are used to communicate them?
4. What cultural ideas, champions, artifacts, and institutions are important in your life? How are these things influencing you personally?

## *Chapter Two*

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# Don't Confuse the Moment and the Story

God is always at work through—and at times *in spite of*—His people. He is using His people to lead nations out of poverty, create brilliant art, tell life-changing stories, adopt orphans, heal the sick, and restore broken lives and cultures. As Christians, we belong to a larger Story that God has been writing since before the beginning of time. When we allow ourselves to be shaped by His Story, we'll be better equipped to make a difference in our cultural moment.

The Bible provides the overarching Story of the world, humanity, and history. God's Word tells us where everything came from, including us, and where everything is going, including us. No matter how chaotic, grave, disturbing, broken, or troubling our cultural moment may be, its full meaning is revealed only in light of the larger Story of which it is a part. We must learn to approach our cultural moment from the Big Story; otherwise, we'll miss the meaning of both the moment and the Story.

## Discussion Questions

1. If you were raised in a Christian home, how were you taught to think about culture? If you weren't raised in a Christian home, how have your thoughts about culture changed since coming to Christ?
2. Where do you think our culture is at right now? Is it mostly good, mostly bad, or somewhere in between? Are you encouraged or discouraged, or both, by what you see in the world around you?
3. Why is knowing God's True Story of the world important? How should it impact the way you see the world?
4. Is thinking about God's story in the four chapters of creation, sin, redemption, and restoration helpful? Why, or why not?

## *Chapter Three*

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# A Vision of Success

Before you decide how you will deal with culture, you need to know your responsibility as a Christ follower. Christ didn't save us from being human; He saved us from our sins so that we would be fully human again. The Story in Scriptures makes it clear that just as God intended His image bearers to bring life to the world by ruling over it, He also intends redeemed humans to join His work in bringing new life to the world. Not only is it impossible to escape our cultural situation, but God asks you to do the opposite. Christians should see their culture as the setting for living out their God-given calling to bring life to His world.

So, how will you respond when the cultural pressure is on? We need an all-encompassing vision of life that demands our deepest allegiance and grounds our identity. It's a life deeply engaged in the moment in which God has placed us, where we courageously navigate the threatening currents and know that we serve a cause, and a God, far greater than ourselves.

## Discussion Questions

1. Complete the following quote from this chapter in the book, but personalize it: “[I am] Christian, and [I am] \_\_\_\_\_; therefore, [I am] responsible for \_\_\_\_\_.” (Hint: think beyond geography to any area of your life that God has clearly gifted to you for His purposes.)
2. What do you struggle with more: withdrawing from culture or going along with it? In what ways?
3. Why is it difficult to resist the views, trends, and habits of culture? What would give you courage and strength to stand for your beliefs more often?
4. Who are examples of Christians who have positively impacted culture, and how have they done so? (Think historically as well as people you know personally.)

## *Chapter Four*

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# The Information Age

Life in the Information Age is noisy, and it only becomes noisier as the competition grows fiercer for your ears, eyes, and money. Every song, movie, tweet, and billboard tells us something about what to believe and how to live. Because ideas can come at you quickly and from many directions, it can be difficult to recognize them, much less think critically about them. And if we can't master ideas, ideas will master us. That's why it's crucial to build a firm foundation by asking tough questions about faith from your parents, church leaders, and mentors.

In a world of bad ideas, we need good ideas. But if true information is merely added to the flood of information, the truth can be drowned out. To rise above all the noise and live well in this culture, discernment is required. We must develop the ability to not only recognize the truth but also to see all of life through the truth. Developing a Christian worldview, rooted in Scripture, will prepare you to navigate the age of information.

## Discussion Questions

1. How has growing up in a digital world shaped your life? Do you feel equipped to handle all the information coming your way, or are you overwhelmed by it? Explain.
2. Define your worldview. Who or what has shaped your worldview the most?
3. Think about a conversation or interaction you've had with someone whose worldview clearly differed from yours. In what ways were his or her views different from yours?
4. Choose a popular song, video, television show, or movie and analyze it from a worldview perspective. What is the main idea(s) it's trying to communicate?
5. Have a friend or parent role-play a conversation with you in which one of you pushes a different belief or worldview. Use the three questions presented near the end of this chapter in the book to engage in the discussion.

## *Chapter Five*

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# The Loss of Identity

Our culture has lost what it means to be human. Christianity has contributed many things to the world, but none more important than its vision of the human person. God created humans specially and uniquely, endowing them with eternal value. Many people, however, want the fruit of human dignity while soundly condemning its Christian roots. Human culture wants to flourish without God. But it won't happen.

This cultural identity crisis creates a personal identity crisis. And if we don't know what it means to be human, how can we know what it means to be Christian? Identity is found when you commit to a life in the service of Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Identity requires believing. It also requires belonging, so don't wrestle with these questions alone. We all need to be part of the church community from the beginning, developing relationships with all age groups, learning to serve, and participating in God's mission, *together*.

## Discussion Questions

1. List the various ways in which you and your friends identify yourselves. What labels do you use? How have you seen the brokenness that results?
2. What is the biblical vision for human identity? How is it different from the vision of humanity that other worldviews offer? How is it better?
3. Look back at the different idols listed in the chapter. Which one do you struggle with most? Write down other examples of modern-day idols that you've seen and experienced.
4. Using James Marcia's four categories of identity formation (*diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, achievement*), how would you evaluate your sense of identity? Why? Where do you think most of your friends would find themselves?

## *Chapter Six*

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# Being Alone Together

There is virtually no place in our lives where a screen isn't front and center. It's no exaggeration to say that life today is lived out more indirectly than directly. Today, our digital devices intrude on every experience, conversation, and relationship. Over time, the pressures of our online platforms can even cause us to abandon our deeply held convictions.

So how can you counter the tech tsunami engulfing your life? An obvious practical step is to limit screen time, especially with your smartphone. Is it easy to take breaks from technology? No. It will take time and effort. But the payoff can be huge. Instead of letting technology shape you, you'll take the lead in controlling your technology. Talk with your parents, youth leader, or close friend about helping you set boundaries and limits and checking in periodically to see how you're doing. Then smile at their shocked expressions as you explain your desire to control your online life and honor God in every single area of your life.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever lost your phone? What was your reaction? Have you ever witnessed someone whose reaction revealed a deep addiction to his or her technology?
2. Have you or anyone you know ever been deeply hurt on social media? What happened? Have you ever been mean or hateful on social media? What did you do, and why did you do it?
3. Do you ever struggle with loneliness, anxiety, or depression? If so, how do you use technology to cope with or relieve your emotional distress?
4. Which of the five technology lies are you tempted to believe? In what ways?
5. Luke 12:2 says, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." In light of these words, do you have any secrets or addictions that you need to deal with in your online life? Are you ready to change? Talk to your parents or a trusted adult to make a plan.

## *Chapter Seven*

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# Pornography

Because our culture largely views porn as harmless, too many are watching it. We're in the midst of a pornography epidemic, and being addicted to porn actually changes the structure of your brain, in ways similar to being addicted to drugs and alcohol. In the end, people are left with perpetual feelings of shame and guilt.

If we have questions about the way we ought to live, we must consult the Designer. We must follow His design for human relationships if we want to thrive. Sexuality was intended to be experienced in a one-flesh union between husband and wife—not in isolation. There is no shame in God's design for sexuality—only beauty and delight. In contrast to the culture's lustful passions and uncontrolled sexual desire, God's Story paints a breathtaking picture of the beauty and intimacy of sex within marriage. When you choose to protect yourself from pornography, you'll honor God and strengthen your relationship with Him and others.

## Discussion Questions

1. When was your first exposure to pornography? How did you respond? When was your most recent exposure to pornography? How did you respond and was your response different from the first time? What could you have done better to protect your heart and mind?
2. Do you have adequate filtering and monitoring measures in place for your online activities? What is missing? How can you help your parents or a mentor fill the gaps?
3. How can you be a leader in saying no to porn? How can you help your friends better see the evils of porn and the damage it does? What friend needs your help and prayers right now?

## *Chapter Eight*

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# The Hookup Culture

You're surrounded by a hookup culture that says sex with no strings attached is perfectly normal. However, hookups increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, are correlated with depression and poor mental health, and undermine your marriage later. Clearly, casual sex delivers brokenness.

For too long, the church's main contribution to the cultural conversation on sex has been to shout: "Don't do it!" And it's given the impression that Christianity has a negative view of sex. But the sexual desire men and women have for each other is a good thing that God designed. Only an amazing God could think up something so beautiful and wonderful and thrilling as sex, which also serves His purpose of populating the world. In contrast, our culture says that sex is merely a means to our personal satisfaction. The hookup culture is powerless to deliver both love and intimacy. Recapture the wonder of God's Story about sexuality. Not only is it better; it's beautiful.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the culture's views and attitudes about sex and relationships? Where and how do you see this communicated (e.g., social media, movies, celebrities)?
2. What mistakes have you made when it comes to sex, dating, and relationships?
3. Have you run *to* God for grace and forgiveness, or have you run *away* from God? Why?
4. How can you treat members of the opposite sex in an honoring, respectful, and life-giving way?
5. What characteristics are you looking for in a potential husband or wife? (List your top five below.) How can you keep from compromising on your values when you start dating?
6. Who do you look to for wisdom and advice about dating? Is there anything you need wisdom and advice about right now?

## *Chapter Nine*

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# Sexual Orientation

Culture won't tolerate someone who doesn't hold the "right" view on sexual orientation, which is complete acceptance and affirmation of the gay lifestyle. So how should followers of Christ move forward? The truth is, all people—gay or straight—are God's image bearers and should be treated with dignity and respect. And the reality is, most Christians do not mistreat gay people. Christians want to share what the entire world, including the gay community, desperately needs: the forgiveness and restoration that only Jesus can offer.

At the heart of every sexual issue is the question of identity. Homosexual behavior is unnatural because it disregards God's natural order of creation. Homosexuality attempts to replace God-given identity with self-identity. However, not only does God's Story describe our fall into sin; it also proclaims our redemption by His grace. Jesus is reconciling gay and straight sinners to the Father. His desire is to restore everyone to new life through the power of His resurrection.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the most prevalent lies about sexual orientation in today's culture?
2. How would you respond to someone who says, "Homosexual behavior isn't sinful because love is love"?
3. In what ways has sexual orientation been confused with identity? What might be some of the negative consequences of gay identity?
4. Where is true human identity found according to the Christian worldview?
5. How can you show love and still speak the truth to your gay friends and family members? Use Jesus as your example.

## *Chapter Ten*

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# Gender Identity

In this brave new world, gender—and almost *anything* we believe about ourselves—is fluid. When it comes to gender and sexuality, our culture says there are no objective truths, only subjective preferences. On top of that, tolerance isn't sufficient. We must now accept and affirm whatever lifestyle someone chooses.

However, objective facts about physiology, anatomy, chromosomes, and DNA exist, while there are no objective medical or scientific tests to determine transgenderism. You won't find the word *transgender* in Scripture, but that doesn't mean God has nothing to say about the issue. God didn't make gender-neutral humans. Gender is part of God's design, deeply grounded in His created order and woven into the fabric of reality. Human wholeness comes not by denying reality but by accepting it. The only thing that will put a fractured human being back together is the One who fashioned him or her.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does our culture shape your understanding of gender? Are the dominant views on gender in our culture healthy or harmful? Why, or why not?
2. How did you come to understand your identity as male or female? What were the most important influences? What were the most harmful?
3. How would you respond to a friend who shares his or her gender-identity struggles with you?

## *Chapter Eleven*

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# Affluence and Consumerism

When you think about it, much of our life is aimed at making money and buying things. Our culture tells us that acquiring wealth and possessions is not only the path to true happiness but also an important part of our identity. We seek identity in our stuff because it validates our worship of self. Reinforced by media, entertainment, and the endless stream of advertising, we devour goods, services, and even people in an attempt to satisfy our souls. And when we've exhausted ourselves with the resources of this world, we look beyond this world.

In God's Story, human flourishing is grounded in God Himself. He is our highest good. Our souls are thirsty for fulfillment. Wealth and possessions are false gods unable to quench that thirst. God is the one who fills us, not earthly goods. Simply put, affluence and consumption are poor substitutes for God.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are you shaped by the constant commercials and social-media posts you see on a daily basis? Do you find yourself positively or negatively swayed by the posts of influencers and others on social media?
2. Do you agree that the pursuit of wealth and consumerism can be forms of idolatry? In what ways?
3. What values have your parents taught you about money, debt, savings, and shopping? Are there any changes you need to make in your view of money or in your current lifestyle?

## *Chapter Twelve*

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# Addiction

According to many psychologists, we've become a culture of empty selves. We express and cope with our inner emptiness in myriad ways, and today, more students are turning to drugs and alcohol to soothe their souls. In a culture of isolation and fragmentation, people search for something to save them from their pain. However, using substances as a replacement for the real Savior only dulls life for a few fleeting moments and doesn't satisfy empty souls. Real rescue can be found only in God's Story.

In God's Story, Jesus rescues, redeems, and reconciles addicts to their creator. The addicted and sinners of all stripes can now say, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). A Spirit-filled, self-controlled new life brings wholeness to body and soul. God's Story can find us in the midst of the messiness and brokenness of life and move us toward the health and wholeness found only the gospel of Jesus.

## Discussion Questions

1. Are you struggling with substance abuse? If so, what actions do you need to take? Write them down, and then follow through with them.
2. How have you seen addiction affect your family or friends? What were the short- and long-term consequences?
3. How are alcohol and drug use portrayed in media? In what ways are these portrayals misleading or inaccurate?
4. Which addictive substances are most prevalent in your community? What effects do you see?
5. What are some ways you could help an addicted friend without being tempted yourself?

## *Chapter Thirteen*

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# Entertainment

All entertainment, whether it's music, movies, TV shows, video games, or YouTube videos, is loaded with ideas with the power to shape us. Entertainment has become an overwhelming cultural force. There's nothing in Western civilization that rivals the power of entertainment to shape what we think and how we think.

Often, the message of a movie or song isn't straightforward, though. The ideas and worldviews are disguised within the entertainment. And slowly but surely, these forms of entertainment shape our views of the world, standards of acceptable behavior, and our identities.

This isn't to say all entertainment is bad. Indeed, creating art is the activity of image bearers, and art can be entertaining. Producing a film, writing a song, or painting a picture doesn't have to be separate from our life in Christ. Creative pursuits should be done with and for Christ. Entertainment that tells God's True Story can renew our minds with His truth, goodness, and beauty.

## Discussion Questions

1. Revisit the last movie you watched. Who were the heroes? Who were the villains? What messages were embedded in the movie?
2. How much of your entertainment is spent on screens each day? Is it too much? How might you reach a healthy balance?
3. If you want to make changes to your screen or viewing habits, will your friends support your choices? How can you prepare for pushback? What information can you share with them?
4. What was the last book you read that wasn't a school assignment? Ask a parent or youth pastor for a suggestion of a good fiction or nonfiction book that will help build your Christian worldview. Invite some friends to read it with you, and discuss it with them.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

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# Racial Tension

Culture says our identity is linked to our racial group—Chinese, Mexican, Egyptian, Russian, Swedish, African, and so on. Racial identity is in our genes, and therefore, our primary identity is based on our ethnicity.

Overly identifying with an ethnic identity makes racial divisions worse, and no one can deny incidents of racial tension. Certainly, there is an ongoing need for constructive conversations on race relations. Christians must be vigilant not to absorb racialized views of the culture. To accomplish this, our perspectives on race relations must start and end with God's Word.

God's Story begins not with the racial superiority of some and the inferiority of others, but with the value and equality of all humanity. As God's Story unfolded in Acts, the incredible power of the gospel transcended deep ethnic barriers. And as people pledged their allegiance to Jesus, their loyalty to Christ and His mission took priority over ethnic and cultural loyalties. In Christ, we have the one tool that can ultimately overcome racial strife and tear down ethnic barriers.

## Discussion Questions

1. How ethnically diverse is your school, neighborhood, or community? What are the benefits or drawbacks?
2. Is racism a problem in your school, neighborhood, or friend group? In what ways? Ask these same questions to someone who is a different ethnicity as you. How does this person's experience compare to yours?
3. How can the gospel help us overcome racial barriers? Do you really believe Christ can overcome racial problems? Why, or why not?
4. Read the book of Acts in one sitting. Pay special attention to the ethnic divisions in the first-century church and how the gospel overcomes them.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

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# How to Read the Bible

The Bible, like the uniqueness of Christ, sets Christianity apart from all other worldviews and religions. The Scriptures are essential to knowing God. No new discovery or cultural trend will ever take its place as the primary source of knowledge about reality. However, the Bible can be intimidating and confusing. It's hard to know even where to start. So, many find it just easier *not* to read it. But unless we're immersed in the Scriptures, we'll never have a Christian worldview. If we aren't learning from all of Scripture, we won't be fully equipped.

Every individual sentence and paragraph in the Bible fits into the larger Story, and Jesus is central to that Story. If we approach the Bible as a mere collection of verses, we miss the immediate context and overall story and may misunderstand the meaning. Since God inspired this book, He not only intended what was written; He also intended how it was written.

## Discussion Questions

1. How often do you read the Bible? What are the biggest obstacles for you when it comes to regular Bible reading?
2. How were you taught to read the Bible? How is it similar or different from what you read in this chapter?
3. What is your Bible-reading plan? Do you have one? If not, make one. Include details about when and where you'll read the Bible and what you'll read. Be specific.
4. Do you have favorite Bible verses? Memorizing God's Word is a great idea (see Ps. 119:11). As you read the Bible, start memorizing important verses while also understanding the context and true meaning. Make a list of the top three verses you'll start with here:

## *Chapter Sixteen*

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# Why to Trust the Bible

Ultimately, the authority of the Bible comes from the God who has given us His Word. If the Bible is just another man-made religious text, then it doesn't hold any authority over us. However, if God spoke His Word through human authors, using their own individual personalities, to write and compose His unique revelation to humankind, it does hold authority.

Not only did God give us His Word, but He also passed it down to us in a way we can trust. No other book has been written, passed down, and protected like God's Word. Because God is the highest authority, the Bible is authoritative. Because He is true, good, and beautiful, so is the Bible. The Bible is our ultimate source of knowledge on which we can base our most important beliefs about the world and from which we should test all other knowledge claims.

## Discussion Questions

1. What questions do you have about the trustworthiness or divine inspiration of the Bible? What have you done to seek out answers? Do you know someone who can help you with your questions?
2. From the content of this chapter, summarize the reasons why you can trust the Bible. Add additional evidence based on what you already know of God's Word.
3. If the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, what are the implications for how you think about cultural issues? What are the implications for how you live your life?

## *Chapter Seventeen*

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# The Right Kind of Pluralism

In our pluralistic society where people believe many different things about religion, it's difficult to confidently assert your own beliefs without being labeled close minded or a religious bigot. To share that Jesus is the only way to eternal life, we're told, is the height of intolerance. The various religions offer *mutually exclusive* views about God, salvation, the afterlife, and a host of other issues that cannot all be true at the same time. Each religion has its take on the true Story of the world. Each is either objectively right or objectively wrong.

As Christians, we need to be ready to make a case for the Christian worldview while recognizing the inherent dignity of people who hold differing opinions. Proclaiming Jesus as the exclusive path to God won't win any popularity contests. The world is going to take offense. But when you go beyond "the Bible tells me so" answers and equip yourself with the rational arguments and historical evidence for God, Jesus, and Scripture, you'll have the courage and confidence for every encounter.

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe an interaction you've had with someone who held a different worldview. Was it productive or frustrating? How? What could you do better next time?
2. How does our culture currently define truth? What is a better definition?
3. How would you respond to someone who says, "It's intolerant to believe any religion is better than another"?
4. What two questions will help you engage with people who have worldviews different from yours?
5. Do you know the evidence for the truth of the Christian worldview? What questions do you need answers to so that you'll be confident Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life?

## *Chapter Eighteen*

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# Taking the Gospel to the Culture

We must learn to live well in this cultural moment. To do so, we must put our hope in the biblical Story of the world, from creation to new creation; it is our true Story, secured by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christians should celebrate aspects of culture that reflect God's character and nature. Christians should *create* culture. When we create a successful business or write a beautiful song, not only do we bring the truth, goodness, and beauty of God into the lives of others, we also point them to the source of those things, God Himself. At other times, Christians must confront culture. Whatever evil you can stop, you should. And whenever possible, Christians should co-opt and correct culture, redirecting it to its God-given potential.

Some Christian students mistakenly think that change will come only when they get older and acquire the controls of cultural power. God has called some of His people to high places, but He's called all of us to be faithful right in our own spheres of influence.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you really believe that God can use you *now* to make a difference in the world around you? Why, or why not?
2. What good in your sphere of influence (e.g., family, school, friends, neighborhood, sports team) can you celebrate and promote?
3. What is missing in your sphere of influence that you can contribute?
4. Is there an evil in your sphere of influence that should stop? How?
5. What is broken in your sphere of influence that you can help restore?
6. Who in your sphere of influence do you need to share the good news of Jesus with?