Engaging Cultures

Introduction:

What does it mean to engage cultures?

How does it apply to us today as Evangelical Christians?

Before we can engage cultures, we have to have an understanding of what culture is.

We can describe three aspects of our modern culture:

1) A diversified American populace (the great Melting Pot)

Our country is becoming ever more diverse, and there is a new focus on understanding the norms and traditions of others who are different from us. Our cities are filled with people from all races and social classes, each of which has its own values and customs.

2) Various religious traditions

Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. each have a unique heritage which poses a challenge to Christians hoping to engage them in an understanding and compassionate way.
3) Secular society

Our “post-Christian” society continues to become more secularized and morally neutral. We as Christians withdraw into our own cultural enclave at the risk of losing touch with those who thirst for something true to give meaning and wholeness to their fragmented lives.

Now that we have a working idea of what culture is, how do we engage it with the message of Christ? Does engaging culture simply mean participating in the products of popular culture, cynically adopting bits and pieces of it, e.g., “Hipster Christianity” where “engage” means “consume”, and “culture” means “cultural artifacts” (i.e.; films/tv shows, music, food/drink)? Conversely, do we as Christians simply disengage from culture?

Or, do we go where Jesus would go and do what he would do, not lowering our standards to reach people, but bringing them to a higher level? This would seem the proper way for Christians to address the question of cultural engagement, but it must be done thoughtfully.

As a starting point, it seems important that, as we engage those with whom we would share the Truth of Christ, we should attempt to speak a language people can understand. So often we fail to have meaningful communication with non-Christians because we speak our comfortable “Christian-ese”. This alienates those unfamiliar with our terminology. Communication is the basis for any meaningful engagement, cultural or otherwise.

Ultimately, however, we must keep in mind that we want to influence the world, not have it influence us. We seek to understand both the popular culture around us and the traditions, values, and beliefs of other nationalities and religions without adopting them as our own. As 1 John 2:15 reminds us: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

In our efforts to reach out to those of various cultural traditions, it may be helpful to consider some distinct ways that we may engage culture:

1) **We can engage culture prayerfully.** Engage culture in a spirit of dependence on God, as we would engage any part of life. We depend on God to help us recognize the things about culture that are false or harmful or immoral by giving us the perspective of the spirit.

2) **We can engage culture carefully.** Avoid blind rejection and uncritical acceptance; carefully investigate the issues; listen to both sides; be slow to speak and quick to listen.

3) **We can engage culture biblically-theologically.** The Bible does not address most cultural issues (how to vote, what movies to watch, etc.). It only addresses theological principles. Instead of bringing our cultural assumptions about what is right and going to the Bible to prove them, we should bring our cultural questions to the Bible, reflect on
them theologically, and carefully form our opinions. Go from biblical text to theology to culture, not the other way around.

4) **We can engage culture redemptively.** We should connect theological reflections regarding culture to redemption. We do this in two ways: practically and positionally. Practically means we identify what is broken, and take restorative action. If you think abortion is bad, volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center. Positionally means we act from our position in Christ. Do you see yourself as a pro-lifer or as a new creation in Christ? As an environmentalist or as a citizen of Zion with an environmental conscience? Don’t allow your cultural convictions to take the place of your identity in Christ.

5) **We can engage culture humbly.** Know you have a lot to learn from a given culture. Learn about and reflect on cultural issues with a teachable heart. Ask God to shape your convictions through whatever or whomever He wills. Don’t put down others who disagree with you.

6) **We can engage culture selectively.** Realize and embrace the limitations of your own time, experience and interests. Spend your time wisely. Don’t sacrifice time with God or church or family to become more culturally savvy. Be selective about what whom you engage.

We have to understand the cultural context in which we live in order to reach souls to bring to Christ; it’s participatory, it’s active listening, the opposite of just pandering to stereotypes or imitation. “How can I love those well that I don’t know?”

As our supreme example of this approach to the diversity of culture we can turn to Jesus Himself, who always found a way to communicate his message of God’s love in a way that his listeners could relate to:
Biblical Examples of Engaging Culture

The woman at the well. (John 4:12)
The simple fact that Jesus, being a Jew, stopped to speak with the Samaritan woman, immediately grabbed her curiosity. He then carefully entered into conversation with her, creating further interest by helping her realize that she longed for something greater than what she currently had. Jesus didn’t condemn her, but appealed to her inner spiritual thirst, ignoring the superficial differences of culture.
The Greek woman with great faith. (Mark 7:26)
This woman, regarded as a “dog” by the Jews, had the audacity to ask Jesus to deliver the unclean spirit from her sick daughter. Certainly, she had heard stories that this man did not have the same prejudices that the Jews in general had. Initially, Jesus gave the response that everyone around Him expected, “…it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Her faith still did not falter, “…even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” she replied. When Jesus told her that her daughter had already been healed, He set an example that would take some time for even His own disciples to learn and apply. He did not shrink from challenging old stereotypes publicly.
The Centurion. (Matthew 8:5)
The wealthy Roman Centurion approached Jesus and asked Him to heal his servant. The Roman ruling class typically viewed the Jews as filthy, ignorant, second rate humans. As a result, most Jews hated the Romans. Here, however, the Roman Centurion approached a long-haired, dusty, sandaled Jew to ask him for his help. Not only that, the Centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant remotely because he doesn’t feel worthy to have Jesus enter his house. The love and mercy Christ showed to all allowed men and women of vastly different cultures and economic status to freely reach out to Him without fear of being hurt or turned away in anger.
The World-Our Mission Field (Matthew 4:24)
Here Jesus tells us that we are to consider the world as our mission field. A world filled with hate over race, national pride, and religious intolerance caused Jesus to say that “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” How many of us are willing to step out of our comfort zones, to reach out to those around us with whom we may not feel quite at ease? How many Christians today are willing to practice what it takes to successfully engage culture for Christ?

With the example of Jesus in mind, we can put cultural engagement into practice by suggesting a few rules to guide us in our efforts to reach out to non-Christians:

Rule 1: Know Your Surroundings. Understand context. Culture begins in hearts and minds of people, and ends up as art, literature, music, and other cultural ‘products’. Jesus warned that the cultural conditions of Noah’s day would prevail once again before his return (Matt 24:37). If people’s minds and hearts are changed by the gospel, so will the culture they produce. The ultimate task is to preach the gospel to all people. Understanding cultural context enables maximum impact.

Rule 2: Be Prepared. “Be prepared to give and answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (I Peter 3:15). As believers, we have scriptural reasons for believing what we do, and we should be ready to share them. Thoughts, ideas and beliefs influence the way people live and the culture they create. We should be ready to address these by sharing our own perspectives as Christians.
Rule 3: Show Compassion. As we address others and share our beliefs, we must be wise and gracious, loving and compassionate. We have been forgiven and should be merciful and patient with others, as God has been patient with us. We must try to understand the conditions that produced peoples’ beliefs.

Rule 4: Practice Honesty. God has written His law on our hearts, according to the Bible, so we have a built-in sense of right and wrong that transcends culture or context. If we say we follow Jesus but do not obey His Word, then our faith is disingenuous. Only hypocrites act like their behavior doesn’t really matter because they have God’s grace to cover everything.

Rule 5: Live Transformed Lives. If we haven’t changed our lives and live as new creatures, people will ask why they need Christ. To make a difference, we must be different people.

Rule 6: Be Convinced of the Gospel’s Truth. We must believe the Gospel is true for all, not just for some. The Gospel tells us what’s wrong with mankind: Separation from Him because of sin. We must believe that God did something to heal that separation.

Rule 7: Know that We are in a Spiritual Battle. A person doesn’t have to be demon-possessed to be influenced by the forces of darkness. The thoughts and words of a fallen culture can act as chains that bind people to sinful actions. Thus, we need to pray for the power of the Spirit to loose the chains and shine real light into peoples’ hearts as they hear the gospel.

To summarize, to engage culture is to take and active and genuine interest in the worlds of others. Culture is always moving and changing, and we can’t take a passive approach if we hope to reach the lost souls around us. Jesus engaged whatever culture he was in, and his disciples did the same. As St. Paul stated in Corinthians 9:19-23 (NIV):

“Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”