# *Engaging the culture and its philosophy*

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*... with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other ...*
- attributed to Karl Barth



*St Paul preaching in Athens*
- Raffaello, 1515

## Understanding the times

Since God's people are called to assert Jesus as both Saviour and Lord, we must learn about the culture and its values, as we help unbelievers turn from activities that contradict the divine plan. Rather than reading only Christian literature, and never giving attention to current national and overseas events, and relating only with other believers, God's people should serve like the men of Issachar - *who understood the times and knew what Israel should do* (1 Chronicles 12:32). Seeking to relate the word of God meaningfully, we do well to minister while *understanding the present time* (Romans 13:11).

## Christ engaging wrongful values held by the individual

Our Lord gently tackled the materialist and racist worldviews held by the Rich Young Ruler, and a self-righteous lawer, when they sought salvation. While he did not require his disciples to sell their possessions, no-one who loves treasure can be saved, so Jesus challenged the materialist who said *"Good teacher ... what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* (Mark 10:17):

> *... Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor"... At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth* (10:21-22).

Jesus also tackled the racism of a lawyer who raised that same question: *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* In reply, Jesus identified a barrier to faith by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Exposed as hating the Samaritans, the lawyer would not use the term *Samaritan* positively when Jesus asked him who was the neighbour. Giving the evasive response, the lawyer replied: *"The one who had mercy on him"* (Luke 10:25-37).

## The Lord Jesus engaging national and international culture

Jesus engaged the culture by commenting on two current affairs relating to Jerusalem and Judea: a massacre of pilgrims at the temple, and the death of eighteen people at the collapse of the tower in Siloam (Luke 13). While his remarks on the massacre rose from concern expressed by his disciples, Jesus took the initiative to speak about those killed by the fallen tower, and he used those newsworthy events to urge his listeners toward repentance - something the culture might otherwise overlook.

Jesus not only engaged the culture of his own people, but he also challenged Samaritan ideology when ministering to the Woman at the Well (John 4). Entering foreign territory he demolished three cultural and religious barriers by ministering as a righteous Jewish male to an outcast Samaritan female. Placing himself in her debt by asking a favour, his love was foundational to challenging her sin. Moreover, his deeply penetrating words powerfully rebut the modern world's inclination toward equating cohabitation and marriage: *"You are right when you say you have no husband ... the man you now have is not your husband"* (John 4:17-18). He then further challenged the culture (and modern anti-Semitism) by stating: *"salvation is from the Jews"* (4:22).

Further, our Lord's ministry had implications for the culture of the nations (as well as that of Judea) when he cleansed the temple. That action upheld the element of Jewish culture which greatly valued non-Jewish pilgrimage. So temple renovations made by Herod the Great included a new area, called the "Court of the Gentiles". Christ saw this as fulfilling the word in Isaiah 56:7 - *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"* (Mark 11:17a). But quoting Jeremiah 7:11, he rebutted the elements of the culture that so devalued the Court of the Gentiles as to make the temple *a den of robbers* (Mark 11:17b). His action in the presence of Gentiles (the foreign pilgrims) helped them realise that the grace of God was coming to all people, which occured though his atoning death, which removed all the temple barriers.

Sharing the gospel in the modern era, we can affirm or rebut aspects of the culture, like Jesus whose ministry (and commissioning of us) has relevance in *Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8). Answering questions, we should also take the initiative to share a word in season, especially calling for repentance, and we are to earn the right to speak a warning to the world by having firstly given it our love.

## The Apostle Paul addressing secular forums

Paul's initiative enabled his ministry within non-Christian contexts:

At the **marketplace in Athens**, Paul became *greatly distressed* by the pagan culture and its idolatry. So he reasoned *in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there* including *Epicurean and Stoic philosophers* who disputed with him (Acts 17:16-18). Marketplaces were the location of debate and adjudication - as Paul experienced in Philippi (Acts 16:19-21).

At the **Areopagus**, Paul responded to a request given by the philosophers: *"May we know what this new teaching is ...?"* (17:19). In Paul's era, the Areopagus considered law, politics and philosophy as the most prestigious council of Athenian elders. It was a venue for local and foreign intellectuals who *spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas* (17:21). Addressing that international academy, Paul converted several people, including one of its own members (17:34).

At the **lecture hall of Tyrannus** (apparently a pagan institute in Ephesus) Paul *took the disciples with him and had discussions daily ... for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord* (19:9-10). During those two years he probably applied Christian wisdom to a multitude of spiritual, social, and philosophical issues.

## Paul appropriating wisdom from secular sources

Just as Paul gave philosophical ministry at Athens (Acts 17) and at Ephesus (Acts 19) but preached only *Christ and him crucified* (I Corinthians 2:1-2) in between at Corinth (Acts 18) we today can use secular wisdom alongside the plain gospel when speaking to unbelievers at their own forums. Like Paul, we do well to comprehend, quote, apply, and (if necessary) refute secular wisdom as we endeavour to instruct and educate believers and unbelievers:

**Epimenides of Crete** is probably quoted within Paul's Letter to Titus (1:12) - *Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons"*, and he is probably quoted by Paul at the Areopagus - *"For in him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28).

**Aratus of Cilicia** and **Cleanthes** may be quoted by Paul at the Areopagus - *As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring"* (Acts 17:28).

**Meander** is quoted as part of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (15:33) - *"Bad company corrupts good character."*

## Influencing the marketplace

God's people may participate in city fairs, county shows, new age events and adult learning courses, utilising them for the gospel and promoting the social good. Further, Christians may assert the value of the marketplace as a focus of engagment, by urging the authorities to approve new shopping centres only if they provide community space where people can meet and sit together for dialogue and interaction. This approach proceeds from recognising that the Lordship of Christ must extend to all areas of life including shopping centre design, and that Jesus himself ministered in the marketplace. Knowing this, the people ran ahead through villages, towns and countryside in the region of Gennesaret, and they *placed the sick in the marketplaces* (Mark 6:53-56).




The sovereign rule of God over the marketplaces was understood and declared in a previous age. So in 1904 the **Adelaide Fruit and Produce Exchange** began its work under an arch displaying a text from Psalm 24:1, *The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof* - so as to give a helpful message to all who bought and sold.

Another recognition of God (dating from about the 13th Century) is the usage of the letters *D.G.* on English coins, abbreviating the Latin words "Dei Gratia" - *By the grace of God.* It was used in Australia until 1966. Then from the era of President Abraham Lincoln, US money has featured the words *In God we trust* - as a reminder that each buyer and seller should depend on divine providence.




## Engaging international cultures

It is vital that God's people share such insights when befriending overseas students who study in Western nations. They are often the elites in many lands including developing countries that are non-Christian or closed to the gospel. Many of those students will return to their countries as emerging leaders who have the potential to transform their nations. We can further engage the peoples and cultures of the world by training nationals for ministry in their own countries (which is cheaper and more useful than sending missionaries abroad) and by sponsoring children in the Third World, who will become future leaders.

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