

ENGAGING CULTURE

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I'm not a very cautious person. As a business owner, my partners and I have built our media ministry on the bedrock of dreaming language. Every day we say, "Let's try it and see what happens..." At the end of my days, I want my tombstone to read, "He inspired others to dream." I'm all about throwing caution to the wind, and moving into the unknown, without thinking about logistics much, if at all. I'm a terrible conservative, and I don't care much for the word "stewardship" because I feel like some people use it as an excuse to not have faith.

So when I feel cautious about something, I've learned to stop and pay attention. Cautious is not who God made me, so any feeling of caution is usually His voice speaking to my heart. Or it's fear from the Enemy that feels strikingly similar, but shouted. That's how I know the difference.

As I peruse blogs, articles, tweets, and podcasts from respected leaders in the Christian media world, I keep hearing one phrase repeated over and over again. Seems like everyone these days is talking about "engaging culture".

Every time I hear that phrase, something in my heart leaps, recognizing the Divine potential to change the world if Christians could actually engage their culture. But at that exact moment, something in my stomach turns as well, recognizing my own Human potential to get this thing completely wrong. And I feel...cautious. There it is again – His voice, I think.

As we discuss engaging our culture, and as we continue to discover ways to do it more passionately, I wonder if we need to stop for a minute, and ask an extremely rudimentary and basic question? If Christian leaders are going to encourage pastors and other influencers to engage their culture, then we must pit stop, and ask The Question. Here it is...

If we are called to engage our culture, then what exactly is the culture we're called to engage?

Yeah. Me too. I think we were all expecting something far more profound than that. But let's journey through this thing together.

ENGAGE

Engage. Good word. It gained popularity when the Emerging Church movement began using it, in large part as a response to the non-relational, get-everyone-through-the-classes-and-call-it-discipleship, church of the 90's. The word "engage" felt far more relational than any other word out there. Great word, to be sure. But what does it mean?

Truth is, you don't really care if I give you a Webster's definition. We're more concerned with the perceived meaning when normal people say or hear that word. When the masses speak of "engaging", they're talking about formulating or furthering a relationship with someone or something. In other words, there is either an initiating, or a nurturing, of a relationship with a noun.

We engage the iPhone when we purchase one. We also engage it when we spend time with it, learning some cool new app.

We engage our church when we attend a new one, or stick with an old one. We also engage our church when we serve the people who attend.

We engage God when we start following Jesus. We also engage God when we push deeper into Him, or when we're broken by Him.

God engaged us when He walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening. He engaged us when He showed up on a mountain with ten things, and then some. He engaged us when He spoke loud and clear through the prophets. He engaged Hosea about Gomer, and about Israel. Ultimately, God engaged us when He put on skin and experienced the joy of the birth canal, becoming like us, and nothing like us at the same time. He continues to engage us through our pain, our addictions, our right choices, and our stupid choices. He engages us in our highs, our lows, our loneliness, and our successes. God is surely the Great Engager. It's not only what He does; it's who He is.

So when we speak of engaging, we can begin to see some patterns developing:

- With any engagement, there is a relationship. We can't get away from that.
- We can engage someone or something by BEGINNING a relationship.
- We can engage someone or something by NURTURING an existing relationship.

While this stuff is really important, it pales in comparison to what's next.

CULTURE

Culture. There's a really good word. What is it? What is a culture? What would you say to foreign exchange student who has never heard the word, but needs a definition from you?

Culture.

It's packed with meaning, tradition, and definition. It's also where the cautious side of me begins to become engaged.

Simply... A culture is a group of people with a set of values.

The first part of this definition is the key to the whole deal. A culture is a group of people. We can't get away from that. When we either INITIATE or NURTURE a relationship with culture, we must understand and accept that *people* need to be involved in the engagement, somewhere, somehow.

People.

Friends.

Coworkers.

Family members.

Church mates.

Drummers without much tempo.

Media team members who click "enter" during the Powerpoint presentation before the pastor ever speaks what just appeared on the screen.

Elders who are against our leadership.

My caution meter reaches peak levels when I see or hear people claim to "engage their culture" by purchasing the latest cell phone, developing the coolest blogpost, or creating the most

visually-impressive short movie. While every one of these actions meets the definition of “engaging”, they may or may not meet the criteria of a culture. Why not?

Because where there are no people, there is no culture.

No people, no culture.

God engaged our culture at large, in Christ. And He didn’t simply engage Palestine. He engaged the people who lived in the Palestinian culture. Jesus didn’t heal systems, or religion, or dogs. He restored people.

We cannot engage a culture without engaging the people of that culture. The first public words out of Jesus’ mouth declare what He’s all about.

LUKE 4:16-21 - DON’T SKIM IT

Normally, when it comes to Scripture in the middle of an article I’m reading, I’ll skim the Scripture to get to the rest of the article. Bad idea.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Digest that for a minute.

Christ went to the synagogue. The synagogue was full of people.

Jesus preached good news to people. Specifically, the poor.

Jesus proclaimed freedom for people. Specifically, to prisoners.

Jesus offered recovery of sight to the... you guessed it... people. Blind people.

Jesus released people. Specifically, the oppressed.

I have to ask myself the most difficult of all questions. As I sit in my office and create films, write articles, update websites, and exercise any of my gifts or talents, am I engaging culture? The short answer is...

It depends.

It depends on whether or not people are involved somewhere in the equation. iPhones are so totally cool, I can't believe it. But an engagement with my iPhone is not, in my opinion, a cultural engagement. Neither is an engagement with an HD video projector at my church. Unless, of course, I become the aroma of Christ to someone on the other end of the iPhone, or if what is shown from that video projector boasts of the glory of God to viewers.

As web designers, worship leaders, media leaders, and artists, we must ask ourselves that very same, very difficult question. Are people involved somewhere in the equation? It's so easy to sit in the corner and create media stuff, removing ourselves from people altogether. And there's nothing wrong with doing that. Just don't claim to be engaging culture if people aren't somehow involved in the mix.

INTROVERTS

I have a good friend who is an introvert. He would rather not deal with the public at large. He is also a worship leader.

Last Sunday morning, I watched him get up on a church's stage, and leave his heart there, with the people he led. After the services, he stood in the back of the auditorium. There, I watched him greet people, receiving their hugs and kind words, and simply encouraging them by saying, "Thanks. Have a good week."

Not his cup of tea.

But my introverted friend engaged the culture of that church, because he made a decision to not simply engage his guitar, but to engage the people he stood in front of.

FASTENED

The result of our engagement? *"The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him..."*

Fastened.

I want fastened.

Our culture needs fastened.

Fastened people smell Christ's life in their midst.

People will watch you as you engage them. They really will. That's what happened every time Jesus engaged the people in His culture. Their eyes were "fastened on Him". Some watched in wonder. Some watched in critique. Some watched from the ground up, as blood and water flowed. But they all watched.

And a few of those people followed.

On that day, I don't want God to look at me and say, "Great videos. Loved how you played around with that shallow depth of field on the 'Gay Christians' piece."

On that day, I desperately long for God to look at me and say, "Your life touched people, and pointed them in my direction. Thanks for making videos that did this."

Both God-responses engage. But only one God-response engages culture. May we become people who allow the aroma of Jesus to leap off us in our engagement of the people He died to redeem.