



THE BEREA PAGE

"Examining . . . to see if these things are so" ~ Acts 17.11

Culture Is Overrated

"Too often, when we try to speak to our culture, we merely adopt the culture of the moment rather than present the gospel to the culture.... This is why the concept of 'user-friendly churches' often leads to churches getting used. There is no way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can't do that even with baseball!" ~ William H. Willimon, "The Culture is Overrated," *Christianity Today*, May 19, 1997, 27; in Michael R. Weed, "The Magician's Bargain: Modern Technology and the Eclipse of God," *Christian Studies* 17 (1999): 41-42

Honesty in Scholarship

"In a subject such as early Christianity, it stretches credibility for scholars to claim to have no personal stake. We can, however, aim for accuracy in presenting the data and even more so in referring to the views of those with whom we disagree." ~ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Eerdmans, 1999), ix

*"But what about you?" he asked.
"Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."
~ Mark 8.29 NIV*

Centered Faith: Listen to John

David Anguish

Charlene Hios's parents did not become church-goers until she had left home. Visiting one weekend, Hios, a lesbian, agreed to accompany them to that Sunday's service. An avid NFL fan, she fully intended to immediately go home and watch that day's game. But her parents asked her to go to the afternoon Bible study and since, as she said, "Even though I was almost 35 years old, I was still my parents' daughter," she agreed. Her decision changed her life. She heard something that drew her in and over time was nurtured by a welcoming community who loved her and waited patiently for her to give up the arguments she raised in her defense and reach the conclusion that, in her words, "homosexual behavior was wrong, and God does not make us homosexual." The church "loved me with the love of Jesus Christ with their compassionate truth-telling, and God used them to mend me, to mold me, and eventually send me out into ministry" (Hios 2013).

What happened in that Bible study? Hios writes:

I quickly got over not being able to watch the game. The study had my attention. It was about God's son, Jesus, the man on the cross who had died for the sins of the world. I was familiar with the cross, but I hadn't known the name of the man on it nor the significance of it.

"I was familiar with the cross, but I hadn't known the name of the man on it." That statement got my attention and led me to ask some questions. How was it possible that even a non-church-goer in our part of the world could reach adulthood and not at least learn Jesus' name? How many others are like her? Have we assumed, but not taught about Jesus? And is what we have taught what people most need to know?

I've shared Hios's story before ([here](#)) in a series (other installments [here](#) and [here](#)) where I elaborated what I'm about to review. But in our secular culture that is also at times hostile to at least what many perceive Jesus and his people are about, recalling how our spiritual ancestors responded is helpful.

We can gain perspective from John who also lived in a

Who Else Could He Be?

“True, Jesus did not go around flying a banner saying, ‘Look, I’m the Messiah.’ But if you proclaim the kingdom of God, declare that the day of national restoration is dawning, compare yourself to David and Solomon, perform what various people considered to be signs of messianic deliverance, enter Jerusalem on a donkey with people shouting ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, and end up on trial on a messianic charge and mocked in death as a Jewish king, well, you don’t need a PhD in rabbinic literature to see what was going on here.”

~ Michael F. Bird, *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2012), 9-10

Shaping or Adapting?

“There is a profound difference between a theology that shapes a congruent pattern of worship and a theology that simply adapts itself to patterns of worship forced on it willy-nilly by quite untheological forces and concerns.” ~ J. J. M. Roberts, “Contemporary Worship in the Light of Isaiah’s Ancient Critique,” *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of John T. Willis*, ed. M. Patrick Graham, et. al. (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 266, n. 1

Complex Christianity

“The assumption that Christianity and complexity don’t mix seems to be shared not just by religious skeptics, but also by many Christians. Yet it actually gets things precisely backward. Complexity is not an embarrassment for Christianity; it is Christianity’s natural element.” ~ David Skeel, *True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World* (IVP Books, 2014), 10

world where information about Jesus was lacking and/or distorted. From 1 John it is apparent that some did not know the Jesus teaching or did not really understand it, the latter reality characterizing some who had once been in the community. So John noted that some had gone “out from” them, influenced by false prophets determined to oppose the apostles’ teaching (1 John 2.18–19; 4.1–6). Because of what he said to those who remained, we have a good idea about what his opponents were saying. He defended Jesus’ uniqueness as the Christ (2.22; 5.1) and Son of God (2.22–24; 4.9, 15; 5.5, 12) who had “come in the flesh” (4.2). He spoke of Jesus’ pre-existence (1.1; 2.13-14) and said salvation is available because of his incarnation (1.2; 3.8; 4.9) and atoning death (1.7; 2.2, 12; 3.8, 16; 4.10, 14). And he got right to the point: he affirmed in the writing’s prologue that Jesus is “the eternal life [that] has appeared to us” (NIV) and then reviewed in broad terms the evidence supporting that claim (1.1–3). His emphasis reminds us what must remain at the center of our teaching and deeds.

Years ago, while preparing to teach a course on worldviews, I discovered Ronald Nash’s *Worldviews in Conflict*. It is helpful for learning how to evaluate any worldview, but the best nugget it yielded was this statement:

Furthermore, consider all the other things we can settle once we know that Jesus is God and that his words are God’s words. We then have an authoritative answer to all our most important questions: Is there a personal God who loves us? What is our duty in life? How do we become children of God? Why did Jesus die? Is there life after death? (Nash 1992, 154)

He’s right: everything begins with, centers in, and flows from the nature, identity, and mission of Jesus. Get off track on any of those ideas, and we begin to believe things that may initially be slight distortions, but will eventually lead to serious departures. Some dismiss attention to basic issues either because they are things “we all know” or because they are theoretical and somehow impractical. John’s response shows that is a mistake. We should listen to him.

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Works Cited

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- Ronald H. Nash. 1992. *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.

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