

The Gospel Changes Everything

HOW WE CAN BIBLICALLY ENGAGE
OUR CULTURE **FOR GOOD**

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To BSFers around the world
who are biblically engaging
their culture for good

*The Gospel Changes Everything: How We Can
Biblically Engage Our Culture for Good*

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Ten years after my husband, Roger, and I met Christ, we left our comfortable life in a Kansas City suburb and followed God's call to Sao Paulo, Brazil.

During our six years in one of the largest and most dangerous cities in the world, we had the wonderful opportunity to lead Bible Study Fellowship classes and work in an orphanage that was home to 20 precious children. We didn't do everything perfectly, of course, but this time of sharing the gospel with words and practically caring for orphans was one of the most rewarding seasons of my life in ministry, at least to that point.

Now, though—20 years later—my life revolves around my family, my church and BSF. I believe I'm doing the work that God has given me at this point in my life, but it's not an everyday occurrence for me to spend significant amounts of time with people in need or people who don't know the Lord.

And I don't think I'm the only one.

In 2017, BSF's board of directors hired a seasoned organizational strategist and a leading Christian research firm to survey our current membership and, among other things, help us develop strategies for reaching a broader

audience in the future.

The primary finding, though not entirely surprising, was disappointing: too many BSF members are living in a “suburban Bible bubble.” Though we are commissioned to impact the world around us with salt and light, when it comes right down to it, we are more likely to withdraw and oppose than engage with culture.

There are many reasons for this. Some of us may feel anxious about how to respond to changing cultural mores. Some of us sincerely desire to be salt and light but don’t know how or are apprehensive about offending people. Some feel ill-prepared to “share the gospel” effectively, and others simply don’t have time to get involved with another “project.”

There is good news for all of us, though. In fact, it’s the best news ever—the life-changing, powerful gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, the gospel isn’t just for people who have not yet believed. It’s for you, for me, for all of us who make up the Church today.

This gospel is not simply a plan to be presented, it’s a life to be lived. And therein lies the key to effective cultural engagement—living the Good News.

This is a priority focus for BSF right now. With 400,000 class members in more than 40 countries across the world, I believe that God has uniquely positioned our organization for cultural impact on a global scale. To that end, we have articulated a two-fold goal: to face forward and reach the rising generations with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to face outward and engage the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We want to equip all our class members to take the gospel into their individual spheres of influence—their homes, their schools, their workplaces and their communities. This year, one way we hope to do that is by teaching the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome—a first-century book with massive 21st-century implications.

I had the privilege of serving as a teaching leader when BSF studied the book of Romans in 1999, and it was a life-changing experience. Ten years or so after I first met Christ, working my way through this book helped me form a more complete Christian worldview and actually solidified my understanding of—and joy for—all that Jesus had done for me.

Most people won't have the chance to spend extended periods of time spreading the sweet

aroma of Christ on foreign soil, like Roger and I did while we were in Brazil. But each one of us—wherever we are, and whether we realize it yet or not—has regular opportunities to touch the lives of individuals who are different from us, who don't agree with us or who simply don't understand us.

It happens in the normal course of life—at the doctor's office, the town hall, the grocery store, the jobsite, the golf course, the conference room, the college football stadium, the public library, the hair salon—wherever we connect with other people, if only momentarily.

In the following pages, we will seek to understand more fully what it means to practically live out the gospel. What we uncover might surprise you. It might challenge the way you think. It might even make you uncomfortable.

But I also hope that it encourages you and motivates you. After all, it is through this very gospel that God is redeeming, reforming and transforming everything on this earth that has been lost and broken because of sin. And, even more amazingly, He has graciously invited you and me as His children to participate in this work.

My hope and prayer is that each of us can

reach a point where we join Paul in proclaiming, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”¹

Before we delve into what this all looks like in real life, however, let’s take a look at the root of the challenge in front of us, and that is: why, apart from the gospel, it’s so hard to change our culture for good.



CHAPTER 1

Culture Shock

“I can’t imagine anything more important or significant in our lifetime, than to be a part of the church recapturing its role in shaping culture. When we do this, the life-giving message of Jesus Christ will go forward in ways unprecedented throughout the 21st century.”²

— Gabe Lyons

You may not know this about me, but I’m an attorney by training. When I graduated from law school, the legal profession—as well as much of corporate America—looked quite different than it

does now when it comes to women in leadership positions. In fact, I was the first woman ever employed by my law firm, a milestone that upset some of the partners very much.

Being a woman in a man's world was one of my first encounters with the stark differences that often exist between cultures. Even all these years later, it remains a powerful lesson in how difficult it is to effect positive cultural change—whether it's within a confined context like a law firm or on a global scale through an organization like BSF. Yet how different is the law office today! It is a great example of culture change that has benefitted women and the legal profession.

DEFINING CULTURE

In general terms, culture consists of a society's values and belief systems, language, rules and norms, organizations and institutions. It also includes everything the members of a society produce or cultivate—laws, art, architecture, stories, status symbols and more.

Because culture is so all-encompassing, it inevitably affects how we understand and relate to the world. That is why, when we leave one culture and enter another, we often undergo what's known as "culture shock." Roger and I

experienced this in Brazil, and again when BSF sent us to India in 2006. It was jarring, to say the least, to walk down the street and experience sights, sounds and smells so different from what we were accustomed to: auto rickshaws, begging children with monkeys, red-dotted women dressed in saris, skinny cows and fat water buffaloes.

Culture is also dynamic. In centuries past, the changes occurred slowly—over the course of hundreds of years. With the advent of digital technology, however, the pace of change has accelerated to near breakneck speed. The Western world, in particular, has experienced seismic culture shifts in recent years. What many people living in western civilizations believe about God, the Bible, morality and reality today is dramatically different from just 25 years ago.

Great divides exist even within belief systems—for example, many who profess faith in Christ are growing more skeptical of biblical, orthodox Christianity, especially regarding issues such as marriage and the inerrancy of Scripture.

TAKING SIDES

These cataclysmic shifts in culture have led to increased polarization. People today are more diverse than ever before—with different

ethnicities, traditions and community values, differing political parties and platforms, differing ideas and beliefs—and it can be difficult for all these differences to co-exist peacefully. As a result, what often emerges from these polar opposites are culture wars.

Culture wars exist everywhere: in cities, families, churches, corporations, political parties, secular venues—you name it. We even have them in BSF, if the truth be told. Our younger members often want freedom in how they study and discuss the Bible, while more traditional BSFers desire a daily structure for questions and discussion groups that move quickly through every question. These aren't moral issues, of course; they flow out of generational preferences and communication styles, along with the very human tendency to resist change. But these differences can lead to conflict, just as they do in other areas of life.

Wherever culture wars happen, it's easy to get caught up in the desire to win them, especially when it seems as if our foundational beliefs and practices are being tossed aside like yesterday's newspaper. For Christians, though, the work of cultural redemption cannot and must not hang on

our efforts to win culture wars.

CHANGING TIDES

Change is tough, no matter who or what initiates it. Even something as seemingly simple as distributing BSF materials electronically represents a huge shift for an organization that has historically studied the Bible through handwritten answers and paper pages. When it comes to changing the culture at large, however, there's much more at work than getting used to a new means of delivering information.

Our own sin and Satan's activity have eroded what God intended when He created the earth. As a result, there is constant tension as various subcultures push hard for acceptance of their own views of the world.

We see this play out on a daily basis within our pluralistic, relativistic society. Pluralism commands us to treat all beliefs as equally valuable, despite being contradictory, while relativism degrades our communication. In the past, people trusted that words could describe reality in a meaningful, objective way. Today, however, people are increasingly skeptical of language as a way of communicating reality. We no longer trust words and their objective

definitions; rather, we define words for ourselves.

While pluralism and relativism are only two of the realities we face in the midst of cultural upheaval, they are particularly significant and concerning for Christians because our lives and beliefs rest upon the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

TEMPTED TO CONFORM

Other forces are at play too, including the enticement for Christians to conform to the culture instead of prayerfully working to transform it. We're all swimming in the cultural flood waters of media, entertainment and daily interactions that speak into our lives.

This is particularly true for younger generations—teenagers and young adults especially—who are bombarded with temptation at every turn, from excessive partying and the desire to be popular with the “right” crowd to all kinds of harmful addictions and the commitment-free hookup culture.

As we see our Christian children and even our peers give in to these secular ways of thinking, we often fail to address these issues with them. We know a life of moral purity is God's best for all of us, yet we fear the barriers that may arise if we speak up. How do we express our concerns in

love? How do we show love without falling into conformity ourselves? The answer is a combination of courage and compassion, but we often take one and forget the other—always with unhappy results.

LIVING IN THE MARGINS

The other significant challenge we face is the stark reality that Christians are falling out of favor. That might sound a bit harsh, but there's really no gentle way to put it. What we believe no longer seems reasonable to most people in the culture or marketplace; to some it even seems hateful or intolerant.

Christians in many parts of the world are being forced into the margins by those who find our beliefs distasteful. As a result, many Christians find it tempting to look down on our culture, withdraw from it or go along with it.

But Jesus, who lived in the cultural margins of His day too, models a far better response for believers who long to make a godly difference in our culture. He left His glorious home in heaven and became one of us in this sin-stained world.³ He purposed to save the world, not condemn it.⁴ He came to overcome the world through His sacrificial love, and as believers, He gave us His

Spirit so that we could be overcomers too.⁵

What Jesus provides is a different kind of culture shock, one that exudes love and cleanses guilty stains. Think of what happens when you take the cover off of a swimming pool in the spring. After a long, cold winter, the water might be as murky as a pond and smell worse than a swamp. But when you dump in a type of chlorine called “shock,” over the next several days, the water gets lighter and lighter until the pool clears up completely.

In a way, that’s what the gospel does when it comes in contact with culture. The gospel tells us of God’s love poured out on us.⁶ A love that redeems. A love that transforms. A love that showers us with the purity of Christ.

It doesn’t happen by osmosis, though. We are the conduit God uses to spread His “shock” throughout creation—broken people saved by grace loving broken people in desperate need of grace.

As the gulf between biblical Christianity and our culture gets wider—and the margins get thinner—it’s increasingly critical that we love others, stand on truth and live our faith in a way that is relevant to our friends, co-workers and family. We have been empowered by the Holy

Spirit to be Jesus' hands and feet to bring His redemption. It is our responsibility and our privilege to be about the restoration of those in slavery to sin and of a culture in decay.

And it all begins with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.



CHAPTER 2

The Glorious Gospel

“The gospel is like a caged lion. It does not need to be defended, it just needs to be let out of its cage.”⁷ — Charles Spurgeon

The year was 1517. European culture was clueless, but a firestorm was about to break out—one that would change the course of both secular and Church history.

Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk for more than 15 years, was endlessly plagued by the

depth of his own sin. Nothing the Church of his day offered—from confessionals and the spiritual guidance of priests to penance and the purchase of indulgences—brought him any peace. As he saw God as an angry judge ready to condemn, his sense of his own sin only grew deeper.

In the midst of his turmoil, Luther turned to the Bible for answers. He was captivated by Romans 1:17, which says, “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ ”

Suddenly, a light dawned in his heart. Luther grasped the good news of the gospel—that what God requires, God provides. He realized that God isn’t an angry judge as he had believed for so long. On the contrary, He is a loving, kind and generous Savior who offers sinners His very own righteousness—something we could never attain on our own—through grace, not works.

Empowered by this new understanding, Luther composed his *95 Theses*, which he famously nailed to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on Oct. 31, 1517. That simple act 500 years ago ushered in the Protestant Reformation and, along with it, a gospel-centered culture

within the larger world culture.

In the coming years, the glorious gospel of Jesus, which had been buried under centuries of human church culture, burst forth like a resurrection. Courageous and authentic witnesses, including Luther, John Calvin, William Tyndale and John Knox, reestablished the Bible as our infallible authority and Jesus Christ as our Savior by grace alone, through faith alone, in Him alone, to the glory of God alone.

Truly, the world has never been the same.

In 2017, while the Church celebrates the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, it's no coincidence that BSF is studying Romans, the book that lit the spark and set the fire ablaze. I believe our sovereign Lord planned this for us so that we too may continue—even strengthen—a gospel-centered culture within the larger global culture.

Romans was originally written to the church at Rome—to believers. Speaking to an audience plagued by the cancer of division and disunity, Paul knew the gospel was the church's only hope of finding unity and bridging the divide that existed between Jews and Gentiles.

What a timely message for us today. We are constantly bombarded by warring factions that

bring division and discord, both within the Church and without. With the gospel of Jesus Christ as our bridge, however, and following in the footsteps of the apostle Paul, we realize that the gospel enables us to think about others and the world around us from the perspective of our Father and Creator. It is God's wise and loving perspective alone that has the power to bring unity, even to the greatest cultural, theological and philosophical divides.

Before we can best know how to properly engage today's culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, we must fully understand and embrace the complete gospel. Here's how my friend Steve Graves explains this in *The Gospel Goes to Work*: "I believe many Christians have been living with an abbreviated gospel without knowing it. For them, the drama of the gospel has just *two* acts: Fall and Redemption. . . . But there are actually *four* acts in the drama of what God is accomplishing in human history: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Renewal." ⁸

We must take advantage of the full reach, power and intent of the gospel. It begins with God who is still creating and imagining, even though man has fallen. The story of the gospel is the story of God working in man, with man and in His

universe. There is nothing outside the scope of the gospel. Perhaps that is what both theologians and songwriters in past decades had in mind when they would say “the gospel changes everything.”

Let’s dig a little deeper into this stunningly beautiful gospel.

IN THE BEGINNING

The story of the gospel is the story of the Bible, and its first lines are familiar ones: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.... And God saw that it was good.”⁹ The biblical account of Creation proves the original goodness of the material world—the sovereign God, who is good, created a world to reflect His goodness, truth and beauty.

The entire narrative of Scripture begins with this reality, and this is exactly where Paul begins his letter to the Romans as well:

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”¹⁰

Glimpses of God’s character—His kindness, beauty, creativity and order—can be readily observed throughout the created world. His

attributes are seen in the rhythm of ocean waves crashing upon the seashore, in the order of the days and seasons, in the consistency and splendor of the rising and setting sun, in the majestic spectacle of a total solar eclipse. We gain insight into who He is through the cheery call of a cardinal as well as in the color and shape of every plant, tree and blossom.

But all the beauty and grandeur of the natural world pales in comparison to the pinnacle of God's creation: you and me. Genesis 1 tells us that God created men and women in His image for the clear and universal purpose of proclaiming, reflecting and enjoying His glory. We accomplish this purpose through communion with God, mirroring His character and representing Him on the earth. To do so is to fulfill what theologians call the Cultural Mandate, which is spelled out in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

The Cultural Mandate establishes meaning and purpose for all of human history. All humankind—believers and non-believers alike—are commissioned to rule over and cultivate God's

good creation. As image-bearers of our Creator, we are called to work and create, just as God works and creates.

“Why should God care about us?” asks Tim Keller in *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms*. “Because He has made us in His image and given us the world He created to care for as His agents. Living with care for the land, sea, and air and all who live there, and doing justice for every human being stamped with His image, brings God glory.”¹¹

Sadly, though, when we observe the created world and look at each other, we don’t always see the radiant goodness of our God. Death, decay and destruction surround us. Meaning and purpose elude us. What on earth happened?

WHAT WENT WRONG

Enter the Fall: humankind’s blatant rebellion against the one true God who knows them fully and loves them completely. Adam and Eve had the unique privilege of walking and talking with God in the most beautiful paradise imaginable, and yet, they still decided to reject that relationship in favor of going their own way. God instilled within them the power to choose, and they chose independence instead of dependence on their Creator.

Paul describes the Fall like this:

“ ‘All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’ ... ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ ... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”¹²

The effects of Adam and Eve’s rebellious choice are unbearably pervasive. As Dr. Thomas Schreiner of Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary told BSF teaching leaders at our recent Romans Institute, “Sin is universal, it affects both our speech and our actions, and it is the root of everything on earth that is wrong.”¹³ Because of this, we as sinful human beings have become objects of God’s wrath.¹⁴

But the pervasiveness of sin doesn’t stop with man. Sin has affected the entirety of God’s created world. All of creation was “subjected to frustration” at the Fall, according to Romans 8:20, and has been “groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”¹⁵

Sin’s stain damages every area of culture that was originally intended to be good, from government, business and education to the arts, the family and the church. Even so, we don’t write off the institutions and products of our culture. We know,

for example, that cultural elements such as movies, sports, technology and fashion can be used for good, though many use them for harm.

It is abundantly clear, however, that humanity is in bondage to sin and is groaning to be set free. Do you feel it? I know I do. The same deep ache for freedom that sent Martin Luther on his quest for answers is all too familiar for every single human being in existence. And—joy of all joys—the hope he found is still available for us today.

THE DIVINE RESCUE

As far back as Genesis 3:15, God gave His people regular glimmers of hope, found in His promises regarding the redemption and deliverance that would come through a Son. Now, through Jesus Christ—God’s one and only Son—our hope has been realized. Through faith in Jesus, who suffered the wrath of God in our place, we are redeemed, justified and reconciled to God.

As Paul explains:

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall

we be saved from God's wrath through him!"¹⁶

The outcome is this: Our condemnation before God has been exchanged for peace and friendship with God. Dr. John Hannah of Dallas Theological Seminary put it like this at our Romans Institute: "Our greatest need is forgiveness. And our second greatest need is a friend. You find both in Jesus, through the gospel."¹⁷

After we accept God's gift of forgiveness, we receive a new commission, one that is articulated by Jesus Himself: "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"¹⁸

Paul takes Jesus' words as a divine directive—a Gospel Mandate—and so should we. That Paul gives his life to go and make disciples is clear from the first paragraph of his letter to the Romans, where he writes, "Through him [Christ] we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake."¹⁹

The Gospel Mandate is a profound extension and reiteration of the original Cultural Mandate that God established at Creation. Now, as those who have been made new in Christ and who are being formed

into the likeness of Christ with every new day, we look to Jesus—the ultimate, impeccable example of what it means to image God.²⁰

Throughout Jesus' entire earthly life and ministry, He loved and cared for the lost, the poor, the sick, the helpless and the hurting. Wherever He went, He left a wake of regeneration, healing and restoration. As we rely upon the power of the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we now have the awesome privilege of participating in this same work of God, as He is even now redeeming and restoring all that has been lost and broken.

That privilege is a gift of love from Christ to believers. We cherish the mandate from the One who has loved us abundantly. He withheld nothing to save us. Even now, He stops at nothing to lavish His love on us, including giving us a role in proclaiming the gospel and bringing restoration and renewal to our world.

ALL THINGS NEW

As amazing as this is, there is more. Restoration—our hope of glory and final freedom—will consummate the fullness of Christ's loving promises as He goes about the work of making all things new.²¹

Paul describes it beautifully when he says “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”²² Can you even imagine? By God’s power and in God’s time, every broken place in every broken believer will be made whole and new. You cannot begin to fathom how glorious you will be.

And that’s not all. All of creation will be redeemed, restored, renewed and freed from its bondage to sin. This is our certain hope.

Until then, we are called to wait in the “now but not yet”—that space between redemption and restoration. We don’t wait in aimless passivity, however—not at all. Rather, we purposely and actively wait for God to fulfill His promise of restoration by living out the Gospel Mandate, which includes the Cultural Mandate that came from God “in the beginning.”²³

As John Stonestreet and Brett Kunkle write in *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today’s World*, “The New Testament employs all kinds of ‘re’ words to describe life between redemption and restoration: renew, repent, restore, regeneration, reconciliation. Paul offered a mission statement to those who have been made new in Christ: ‘All this is from

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5:18). Reconciled ones are to be reconcilers."²⁴

And, I would add, renewed ones are to be renewers and restored ones are to be restorers of the people and the world around us. But the bottom-line question still remains—how? How do we go about reconciliation, renewal and restoration? How do we breathe out this God-ordained mandate as we swim in a pluralistic culture?

We start with a commitment to truth—the Word of God—and a willingness to live it and proclaim it.



CHAPTER 3

Grounded in Truth

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” — Romans 1:16

Jesus was perfectly faithful to the Bible.

In John 1:1, He is described as the Word of God. In John 17:17, He prayed to His Father saying, “Your word is truth.” He repeatedly quoted the Old Testament and described Himself as the fulfillment of “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and

the Psalms.”²⁵

Like Jesus, we too can practice biblical fidelity. It begins with a deep knowing within our souls that God is speaking His divine words of truth to us. When we read the Bible, we are filled with the beauty and profundity of our Creator’s words that tell us of His mysterious, weighty and loving nature. We consider the whole counsel of God—from Genesis to Revelation—even while studying its parts. We trust that the Bible is the place where God meets us in wisdom and mercy, enabling us to live by “every word that comes from the mouth of God.”²⁶

Being faithful to the Bible means believing that while everything else in life fades away, the Bible stands and endures.²⁷ We hold fast to God’s truth and His promises, finding strength and stability in His presence, no matter how hard life gets.

A key part of biblical fidelity involves upholding the Bible’s divine authority. As we study the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit witnesses to our spirits that this Word is true and right, and that it reveals God as our loving Master and King. And when we meet the Divine in His Word, we want nothing more than to come under His loving rule and care.

This was my experience when, as a 30-something mom with two small children, I heard the gospel preached—*really preached*—for the first time in my life. Right there in the middle of a church worship service, I knew I needed my burden of sin lifted, and the cross of Christ was the solution. Like a bolt of lightning, Jesus jolted me with truth, convicted my heart and lavished His supernatural love and gracious cleansing on me.

Even now, I'm thankful that the pastor of that church, as well as my early BSF teachers, was so committed to the truth of God's Word and faithful to proclaim it.

If we want to engage our culture with the gospel, we have to start here—by personally and faithfully holding on to the attributes and promises of God, as well as the hope we have in Jesus Christ, our Savior and our King. Stated differently, biblical fidelity is the foundation on which we stand as we seek to permeate our ever-shifting world with the sweet aroma of Jesus. And once we understand the amazing beauty of God and His Word, the next step is to portray that beauty to others.

It is our mission at BSF to teach the Bible so that men, women, boys and girls are passionately

committed to Christ, His Word and His Church. In the context of this mission, we train people in spiritual leadership, equipping them to faithfully proclaim the Word of God. Our greatest hope is that when our class members grow in their comprehension of the saving, redeeming, restoring work of Jesus, they will desire to share that knowledge of Him with others.

Yes, we are called to be salt and light in our culture—to speak loudly with our lives, as we will discuss in the coming chapters. Ultimately, though, the gospel doesn't continue if we don't pass it along. First Peter 3:15 spells it out clearly: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

This is especially important when we consider all the difficult cultural issues that are swirling around us in the world today. Francis Schaeffer got it right when he said, "Christianity is not merely religious truth, it is total truth—truth about the whole of reality."²⁸ When we allow the Scriptures to inform our thinking and shape our worldview, we are able to respond rightly to our culture—with a loving heart, a nonjudgmental attitude and insightful thinking about hot-button

issues such as racism and human sexuality.

When public opinion moves away from Scripture, the biblically faithful continue to hold fast to Scripture. We seek to discern biblical principles that enable us to draw biblical conclusions about cultural currents, then we seek to live them out graciously. Even in the wake of negative consequences, we faithfully proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do so in love and compassion, because that's what Jesus did.

It's worth mentioning here that faithful proclamation does not inherently mean engaging in divisive debates and arguments—with believers or unbelievers. Nor does it mean hijacking a conversation to get your gospel presentation across. Faithful proclamation begins with listening, understanding, dialoging and letting God create opportunities to share His truth.

As Paul wrote to the Roman Church, the gospel is the “power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”²⁹ As God the Spirit leads conversations, He has the power to move even the greatest skeptic to a seeker, and even an ardent believer. As the Holy Spirit works and we learn to remove barriers by listening to cynics' perspectives and loving their souls, skepticism

can soften and faith can begin to bud.

We will talk more about that in a few chapters. Before we go there, though, let's be sure we are biblically informed and faithful while remaining ready to listen and love with pure hearts and gentle spirits.



CHAPTER 4

The Struggle is Real

“The mark of a saint is not victory over all their sins, but struggle with the sins they have.”³⁰

— Dr. John Hannah

As human beings, we will never achieve sinless perfection.

But the defeat of sin’s power at the Cross and the power of the Holy Spirit working in us do give us the ability to pursue purity of mind, body and soul.

Authenticity is the goal, not perfection. And it’s

the gospel that enables us to live transparent lives—to freely admit when we mess up, to ask for forgiveness and to continue to grow into the likeness of Christ.

One of our BSF teaching leaders told me of the story of a man I'll call George. George was angry because he felt his former business partner had not sufficiently paid him money he was owed. Feeling cheated, George created false records and filed a police complaint. After listening to his BSF class lecture, however, the Holy Spirit convicted his heart and he realized that what he had done was wrong.

George went to the police and withdrew his complaint, but he didn't stop there. He also called his partner, apologized for his actions and asked for forgiveness. He told his partner it was the love of Christ that had transformed him, and that he would never again bring up the issue of the money. Following this experience, he began growing in his relationship with Christ and is now serving as a children's leader in his BSF class.

As George discovered, believers must actively fight the temptation to assimilate into the broader culture. We must endeavor to keep our lives pure by living according to the Word of God in the power of

the Holy Spirit and full of the fruit of the Spirit.

OBEDIENCE THROUGH FAITH

Do you remember how Paul expressed the Gospel Mandate in Romans? He urged Christians to call others to the “obedience that comes from faith.”³¹ This phrase, which occurs once at the beginning of Romans and again at the end, helps us better understand the implications of the gospel upon our individual lives. Faith and obedience are like two sides of the same coin. A right faith response to the gospel will always include a simultaneous call to obedience because a response to the gospel is a response to Jesus Christ who is Lord of all.

It’s only by the power of the gospel that we are set free from our bondage to sin and enabled to live a life of purity and obedience. Not only are we rescued from the *penalty* of sin, we are rescued from the *power* of sin.

Nevertheless, we all know the believer’s battle with sin is not over. The struggle is real and ongoing. And the solution is never simply personal resolve; that inevitably leads to failure. Purity comes only from the power of the pure—Jesus Christ. As we call upon Him for lives of obedience to His will, the Holy Spirit will do a

cleansing work and give us strength to resist the temptations of our flesh and the selfish motives of our hearts.

I once heard BSF founder A. Wetherell Johnson teach a powerful lesson about this.

When struggling with a particular temptation, she said, kneel at the side of your bed, hold on to the bed post as if it were the cross of Jesus Christ and pray these words: "Lord Jesus, You defeated sin's power at the Cross, but I am struggling with a temptation of my tongue or lust (or whatever was plaguing you). Lord, I need Your power within me to overcome. By the power of the Cross and the Holy Spirit, defeat this temptation within me."

When we put this into practice, we will find the power of Christ to be all that we need—even if we need to return to that bedpost multiple times for the same struggle!

THE PATH TO PURITY

Here's the key: Sanctification is a path, not a destination. And staying on that path requires a commitment to spiritual disciplines like spending time with the Lord, meditating on His Word and connecting with other believers. We cannot do it alone.

There's one more thing about this path to

purity that we need to remember. As we continue our struggle against sin—with our eyes on Christ and His victory—we must never forget that unbelievers have no power to defeat sin in their lives. Instead of judging and condemning people who don't know Christ for the sins they commit, we need to show compassion and grace, just as Jesus did for us in our fallen state.

Here's how Dr. John Hannah described it at our BSF Romans Institute: "We're not on a crusade to make others look small. We're the spokesmen of God, and the way to understand the enormity of salvation is to understand how broken we are."³²

With this reality of our own sin in mind and the hope of Christ in our hearts, we are able to replace judgment with love. And, as we season our lives with grace, kindness and humility, we begin to have a purifying influence simply by being present in our culture.



CHAPTER 5

Intentionally Present

“Listening to Beethoven’s Fifth, you get the feeling there’s something right with the world, something that checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.”³³ —
Leonard Bernstein

Jesus didn’t rescue us from afar. He is Immanuel—God *with* us.

Through the incarnation, He chose to identify fully with you and me by taking on flesh and living among us—intentionally and lovingly present in a world created good yet full of sin, insecurity, pain, suffering and brokenness.

The Son of God healed bodies and transformed hearts in the course of His daily life. In His personal interactions and teaching, He challenged cultural norms regarding religion, death, wealth and the status of women. He cast aside societal traditions to walk, work and eat among the very people He came to redeem. His faithful presence through His life, death and resurrection revolutionized the Jewish and Roman cultures—and continues to revolutionize our world today.

He is our perfect and best example.

Our divine assignment is to interact in the worldly sphere as Jesus did—neither antagonistic nor separatist, not absorbed by the culture but set apart for the gospel and for the loving obedience that comes through faith.

But what does this life of faithful, intentional presence really look like? How can we be present and active in the world without fully assimilating into our culture? Like Jesus, our calling is to find ways to identify with the people around us and

pursue genuine relationships with them. Before we get to that, though, let's take a look at the inherent goodness of God's created world.

LOOK FOR GOOD

First Timothy 6:17 tells us that "God . . . richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." God's world proclaims His majesty and might, His beauty and grace. People created in the image of God accomplish good work (even though we also produce the opposite).

My friend Jason, for example, has a daughter who was struggling in school due to learning difficulties. Her teacher, a person who did not embrace a Christian belief system or lifestyle, assembled a team of Ivy League experts—including a doctor who is an atheist—for the sole purpose of helping this young girl grow, learn and thrive. Jason's entire family was a recipient of God's goodness coming through the public education system and a teacher who cared.

If we're used to focusing on the negative aspects of our culture, it might take a little effort to start finding things that are lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (as Philippians 4:8 instructs). But evidence of God's goodness *is* everywhere, if only we take the time to notice it.

When we look for reflections of God's goodness in the secular environment, we start seeing them everywhere. We see parents imaging God's love as they love their children. We receive a salary or a Social Security check and can thank our earthly provider who embodies God's provision. We see doctors and nurses restoring health even as Jesus healed. Goodness is all around, and we can be thankful. Thankfulness that replaces a critical attitude paves the way for positive cultural engagement.

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Even as we search for good, we're commissioned to practice good—in everything we do. Matthew 5:16 makes this clear: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can set an example of goodness in our relationships, in our work and in our acts of service. Our marriages can demonstrate loving submission and peace. We can seek forgiveness when we mess up at our jobs and extend grace when a co-worker or client hurts us or makes a mistake. We can celebrate the accomplishments of others in ways that honor and affirm them, rather than reacting in ways that

are envious or petty. We can actively seek to restore broken relationships through healthy, biblical reconciliation. Whatever our profession, we can do our work with humble excellence—never cutting corners or simply doing just enough to get by.

Goodness also flows as we seek ways to serve in our circles of influence—at our children’s schools, in our neighborhoods, in the ministries we are involved with at church, as we look to partner with the foster-care system or agencies that assist the elderly. Performing acts of service like these is often rewarding, but, more importantly, they also are evidence of our faith.

James 2:14-17 leaves no doubt: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

POP THE BIBLE BUBBLE

Remember the “Bible bubble” we talked about earlier—that sad-but-true reality that a large

percentage of Bible-knowing believers are more likely to withdraw and oppose rather than engage the culture for the cause of the gospel?

Perhaps it's time we pop that bubble and turn that trend around.

As Christians, we're not supposed to be content with the ways things are, are we? Deep in our souls, we long for how things were always intended to be. So let's be about the work of restoration in the world around us. Let's intentionally find ways to live out our faith in the present age so that people's hearts and our culture are redeemed through and for Christ.

This isn't about adding more tasks to your already full to-do lists. People aren't projects, after all. It's more a matter of stepping out of your personal space to connect with the people who are already around you—from the grocery store to the workplace and everywhere in between. Just keep doing what you do, and look for ways to interact while you do it.

If you love sports, for example, connect with other fans of your favorite teams. If you have tickets to a game, get to know the guy in the seat next to you. Take a walk in the neighborhood and pray for opportunities to get to know your

neighbors. Make friends with other parents as you cheer on your kids at all those soccer matches. Invite a co-worker to play golf or tennis. If your favorite channel is the Food Network, take a cooking class and get to know someone else who loves to cook. If fashion is your thing, develop a relationship with a personal shopper.

In these settings, your shared interests give you a solid starting point. From there, ask good questions about your new friends' perspectives, especially if they have differing views. Learn about their backgrounds and life experiences. This is where deeper similarities will start to emerge. You might not think you have much in common with other people besides your mutual affection for theater, music or sports, for example, but as you listen to their stories, you'll likely discover it goes deeper than that.

Every trial, every struggle and every stretching experience we've ever had—even those that happened before we met Christ—can become a connection point with people in our circles of influence who are lost and hurting. Financial struggles, infertility, sickness, family problems—you name it; all of it can be used to help someone who is hurting and bring glory to God. As we

intentionally look for ways to share God's love with others, these chapters of our lives can open doors for us to share the eternal hope that we have with someone else who is walking through them.

Now that we're thinking about how we can make the most of the personal interactions that already exist in our daily lives, let's take a step back and examine how we can more fully engage in the various segments of culture that are ripe for the restorative power of the gospel.



CHAPTER 6

Gracious Engagement

“We are made to be makers, but as makers we remain lovers....So make what you love.”³⁴

— James K.A. Smith

In 2013, HGTV began airing a home-remodeling show featuring a couple of entrepreneurs from Waco, Texas—a wacky contractor and his interior designer wife. Four years later, Chip and Joanna Gaines of *Fixer Upper* fame are the proprietors of a “booming home and lifestyle brand” that has

expanded beyond the show to include books, a quarterly magazine, the Magnolia Market store in Waco and their own personal lines of paint, wallpaper and rugs.³⁵

The millions of people who tune in to the show each week see evidence of the Gaines's Christian faith in their commitment to their family, their creative designs and quality workmanship, and in the way they treat people with respect and kindness. Their initial goal of "making Waco beautiful, one home at a time" has grown into a far-reaching cultural platform that they manage with grace and dignity.³⁶

What Chip and Joanna are doing in the formerly infamous city of Waco is redemptive and restorative—on many different levels. And as they continue to live out their calling on a national stage, people are attracted to the presence of God in their lives.

This is a good example of how the restorative power of the gospel can intersect with various aspects of our society. Cultural anthropologists segment culture in various ways, but for our purposes here, we will break it down into what today's leading Christian thinkers call the Seven Areas of Gospel Intersection: arts and

entertainment, the church, business, education, the social sector (which includes the family), government and media.³⁷

Whether it's immediately obvious or not, we all interact with each of these areas every day. As you read the following thoughts about the seven segments, I hope they open your eyes to specific ways that you can engage the culture around you using the skills, interests and relationships God has sovereignly placed in your life for such a time as this.

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

God is a God of beauty, order, detail and purpose. So when we stop to contemplate the intricate detail of a piece of art or seek to decorate our homes in an orderly and beautiful way, we are living out the Creation Mandate we received from God at the beginning of time. And we're actually pointing others to God Himself, who is the source of all beauty and who brings order out of chaos.

As image-bearers of our Creator God, we were made to create. We can prepare beautiful and delicious food (or, in my case, buy beautiful and delicious food) and open our homes in hospitality to others. We can express our emotions and awe

through song, dance and poetry. We can construct beautiful items with our hands and compose compelling literature that is wholesome and true. We can create useful and attractive designs and build parks, bridges, cars, buildings and technology.

This is what New Zealander Olivia Cashmore has done with her award-winning “Revelation” fashion collection. Inspired by the last book in the Bible, Olivia created her line of clothes while a college student in her hometown of Auckland. Guided by her faith in Jesus and years of participation in BSF as a child and adult, Olivia’s designs are an “outward expression of an inward reality.” She boldly states that creating fashion is an act of worship, and even goes so far as to use the great hymns of the faith as the soundtrack when models parade her designs on the runway.³⁸

THE CHURCH

As the body of Christ, the Church is called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. There are as many ways to accomplish this today as there are churches, but love is always an essential element as we reach outward to engage the broader culture of our day.

First, though, love must be primary in the

community of believers. Within the Church, love is defined by unity among diversity, where each member is encouraged to exercise his or her gifts for the common good.³⁹ It is marked by sincerity, patience, generosity and hospitality.⁴⁰

On the flip side, love for those outside the Church—even and especially those who may be hostile toward us—is distinguished by sacrificial service that meets practical needs.⁴¹ It's characterized by peace, blessing and goodness, for the purpose of redeeming that which is lost and broken in the world.⁴²

In recent years, churches across the globe have found innovative ways to love the communities that surround them. In Portland, Oregon, for example, a group of congregations has partnered with the State Department of Human Services to develop a network of foster families. Through the efforts of this non-profit organization called Embrace Oregon, vulnerable children and their families are being served by members of many local churches, a bridge of trust has been built with this government agency, and Christ is being made known.⁴³

EDUCATION

Education isn't simply informational, it's

formational. It can be the channel through which students discover their origins, their purpose and the dignity of every human life. They can be trained and equipped to redeem broken aspects of society using the giftedness that God has hard-wired into them. Instead of absorbing material just to make a grade, students can learn to make a difference in the world for the good of all humanity.

Legions of Christian educators faithfully teach our children, teenagers and young adults in public schools throughout the world. They include dedicated professionals like Jefferylynn Davis, a BSF teaching leader in San Jose, California, who taught English Language Arts for years before moving to an administrative position. While never initiating conversations about the Bible or God with her students, Jefferylynn sought to give her students the freedom, space and encouragement to ask difficult questions of the material they were reading. Many times, this opened up the conversation to topics such as morality, the character of God and the dignity of life. ⁴⁴

Of course, you don't have to be a teacher or principal to make a difference in the education system. Schools are always looking for help, and

volunteering in the building where your children or grandchildren are enrolled is a great way to influence teachers, students and other parents with the love of Christ.

BUSINESS

People were designed to work. It's a key part of the Cultural Mandate that we talked about in Chapter 2, in which God gave humanity dominion over the earth and everything on it. While it's true that our labors were made more difficult by the Fall, work itself is not the curse. Work motivated by love for God, in fact, is an act of worship and service to our Creator and the people He created. That's a good thing, considering a majority of many people's waking hours (and years) are spent at their places of employment.

Over the last few decades, a number of practical theologians and pastors have published some helpful books aimed at helping believers identify tangible ways to live out their faith in the workplace.⁴⁵ These publications highlight the understanding that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between Sunday morning worship and Monday morning business.

As Timothy Keller recently tweeted, "Work is a

major instrument of God's providence; it is how He sustains the human world."⁴⁶ Because God is invested in every square inch of His creation, we can find great purpose and meaning when we begin to view our vocations as a foundational way to pursue and proclaim the infinite worth and glory of our God and make this world better for all.

In our workplaces, we gain daily direct access to individuals with whom we otherwise may never come in contact. We reflect God's character to them when we conduct business in an ethically upright manner, when we use our wealth or position to provide for the needs of others, and when we generously care for the co-workers and employees who work with and for us.

Lewis Shock, a BSF teaching leader in Baltimore, manages his company's employee benefits program. On a regular basis, he helps people who are ill or who have family members in need of medical care. As he realized the great financial and health burdens his co-workers were carrying, he began to ask them if he could pray for them.

"In every single instance when I asked if I could pray, the answer I received was yes," Lewis says. "I think for some of these people, it was the first

time they experienced genuine concern and compassion from someone other than a relative. It is my prayer that this exposure to what the love of Christ really looks like may lead some who have no relationship with the Lord to reconsider their position and perhaps seek Him out."⁴⁷

SOCIAL SECTOR

It is within the social sector of society that we are confronted with increasingly complicated questions related to race, the environment, moral issues and relationships of all kinds. The gospel—God’s over-arching story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration—gives us a template for engaging and responding in a meaningful way.

At times, we must challenge and even confront the culture with gentleness and respect. Simultaneously, we must pursue the things that define the kingdom of God—peace and reconciliation, justice, love for our enemies, freedom and life, grace and mercy.

We view the world in terms of how things ought to be—as God originally designed for us at creation—then we work to make these things a present reality. So we pursue racial reconciliation, knowing that all human beings are made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect.

We remember Christ died for all and that heaven will be full of diverse peoples.

We care for the environment because it is God's creation. We uphold the institution of marriage as it was designed by God, while still reaching out to and loving those who do not. We train up our children in the way they should go, teaching them the gospel—our motivation to love.⁴⁸ We look after aging family and neighbors, widows and orphans, knowing that this represents the very heart of God.

Some friends from my church in San Antonio reach out to women in the adult entertainment industry by way of beautiful care packages filled with cosmetics, accessories and a simple message of love and grace. Trained female volunteers take these care packages to women working in the strip clubs while their husbands wait and pray in the cars parked outside. The volunteers invite the dancers to dinner and a support group, and connect them with a Christian mentor with the hope of redeeming a life. That hope is being realized as many of these women are learning what it means to be loved, valued and created with a purpose by God. Some have even come to BSF classes where God has met

them and put them on the path to wholeness.

GOVERNMENT

While Christians ultimately are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, we do live on earth—under the jurisdiction of the governments of our land. By God’s common grace to all, He established government to play a positive role within society—by making and enforcing laws, as well as providing security and justice. Our duty as believers, then, is to “be subject to the governing authorities.”⁴⁹ We accomplish this by obeying the law and exercising our rights as citizens, realizing that ultimate authority belongs to God Himself, who both establishes and overturns the governments of history.⁵⁰

Some are called to live out the gospel in this sector of culture by running for office on the local, state or national level and allowing their Christian worldview to influence the decisions they make and the causes they champion. Others serve in the military and as police officers, firefighters and judges. We need Daniels and Josephs of today—godly leaders who will set the direction of our countries.

We also live out the gospel in this arena when we vote, hold government jobs, pray for our

president and other leaders, and work to elect ethical individuals to public office. These efforts are often done quietly, but every now and then, someone has the opportunity to effect change on a broader level.

Such was the case for Michael Cromartie, an executive with the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., who worked to encourage thoughtful public discourse and help secular journalists understand Christianity in America. “In a political arena often dominated by competition, power grabs, and culture war debates, Cromartie stuck out by offering a friendlier, humbler approach,” *Christianity Today* said when reporting on his death in August.⁵¹

MEDIA

One of the primary means by which we interact with our culture today is through media—television, magazines, newspapers, the Internet and the like. The advent of social media, in particular, has enabled people to broadcast their thoughts, beliefs and feelings across the globe like never before. This trend has some well-documented drawbacks, of course, but it also presents followers of Christ with unprecedented opportunities to permeate our culture with the gospel.

For starters, we need to be familiar with prevailing cultural thoughts, practices and beliefs. “We must enter into the stories of the surrounding culture, which takes real listening,” Chuck Colson writes in *Being the Body*. “We connect with the literature, music, theater, arts and issues that express the existing culture’s hopes, dreams, and fears. This builds a bridge by which we can show how the gospel can enter and transform those stories.”⁵²

As we thoughtfully listen and look for ways to bring a gospel perspective to conversations on various media platforms—including our own—we gain the attention of others who are listening. Doing this allows us to “become all things to all men so that by all possible means [we] might save some.”⁵³

The content we post on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or our own personal blogs should never be about attracting attention to ourselves or building the biggest following. Through the use of words and imagery, however, we can point others to Christ as we highlight and affirm the good, true and beautiful aspects of humanity and culture. We can clearly and creatively communicate truth as we give reason for the hope that we have. If we

use our media platforms as a means of showing sincere love to all, rather than a means of furthering divisive arguments and debates, then we may know what it means to sustain the weary with our words.⁵⁴

Finally, whether we are looking for ways to engage in our media circles or in one of the other areas of gospel intersection, one verse sums up our marching orders: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”⁵⁵

Salt full of grace savors rather than stings.



CHAPTER 7

Restoration Complete

“Christians are called to redeem entire cultures, not just individuals.”⁵⁶ — Chuck Colson

When the gospel is embraced, things change. Renewal and restoration are byproducts or outcomes of the gospel. As we clearly saw in the last chapter, every channel of culture can experience the renewal and restoration of the gospel. Because of this, we must not withdraw, condemn or conform to the culture. We must be

agents of transformation.

There remains a hope fueling our souls, a longing for the final restoration. When Jesus returns, He will make all things new. There will be no more “death or mourning or crying or pain.”⁵⁷ He will dwell with His people on a new or restored earth, and we will walk with Him in glorious resurrection bodies for all eternity.

Restoration—the fourth and final stage of the gospel story—is our certain hope for today and our glorious future. We long for it because it is what we were made for. This is why we desire to see our culture restored with the beauty of Christ. We long for His goodness, peace, truth, beauty, joy and love to permeate life on this earth.

We are hopeful that we can have impact, and we can. We can make a difference by faithfully proclaiming and demonstrating God’s truth as we interact with our friends, neighbors, co-workers and social media connections. But the reality is that there will be no heaven on earth until God ushers it in. True human flourishing will only be realized in a world where Christ is Lord and King. Jesus will transform all of creation—including every aspect of culture—into all it should be, and He will receive all the glory.

Until the day when we see Jesus coming on the clouds, we serve to bring His sweet aroma into every realm of His world—from the workplace to the refugee camp, from the statehouse to the sports stadium.

As we study God's Word and prayerfully search out ways to live as Christ's representatives in our spheres of influence, we can trust that He will open doors to deeper relationships. He will give us the words to speak when we need them. We do need to be intentionally present even as Jesus is present with us. But God is responsible for drawing people to Himself, not us.

This mindset frees us up to be gracious and caring yet bold as we go about the business of life. It allows us to bless and not curse, love with acts of kindness, and overcome evil with good.

Living out our faith in this present age takes intentionality. It takes prayer for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. It takes energy. But it's why we are here. So let's shine the incarnational light of Jesus Christ so others will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

Let's make a difference on the journey—for the fame of Jesus Christ in the culture.

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