

A Biblical View of Civilization

By Stephen Mizell

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, students will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read the comments related to “The Christian and Civilization” in the section **It’s in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: Which one of the five categories of answers do you think is correct? What are its strengths? What weaknesses do you see in the other four categories of answers? What are some weaknesses other Christians might see in the category of answers you think is correct?

Assignment Two

Read the comments related to Daniel 1:1–7 in the section **It’s in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What were the Hebrew young men being taught in Babylon? How far into the lives of the Hebrew young men was this education to extend?

Assignment Three

Read the comments related to Daniel 1:8–17 in the section **It’s in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: Which of the five categories of answers in the section marked “The Christian and Civilization” best explains Daniel and his friends’ decision to refuse the king’s meals? How does your selection account for God blessing Daniel and his friends in verse 17?

Scripture to Memorize

“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As you sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” John 17:15–18

Session Goal

Consistent with God’s Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will be able to identify the five major answers Christians historically have given to the question of their relationship to culture and better understand which of those five answers best reflects what the Christian’s attitude toward culture should be.

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As a professor he enjoys journeying with students through the great authors and ideas that have shaped Western culture. Through that journey he hopes to instill in students a desire for intellectual and moral excellence in their Christian walk, to uproot prejudice for novelty by pointing out the value of what is old, and to help students sift through the competing and, at times, contradictory ideas they encounter by reminding them that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Consider your everyday decisions—what you wear, the movies or shows you watch, and the food you eat. How do you make these decisions? Does the fact that you are a disciple of Christ affect your decisions? Should the fact that you are a disciple affect your decisions? Consider an important decision you will face soon—such as the college you will attend, the college major you will select, or the career you will pursue. How will you go about making these decisions? Will the fact that you are a disciple affect your decisions? Should it?

The Christian and Civilization

Civilization is a synonym for *culture*, which is the artificial environment people superimpose onto their natural environment. Culture consists of everything from language to music, beliefs, customs, government, dress, technology, artifacts, and values—everything we as human beings have created, inherited, and preserved. Since the early days of the church, Christians continue to wrestle with how they are to relate to the culture in which they live. From this wrestling, five categories of answers have emerged.

1. Christians are to reject all expressions of culture as evil.
2. Christians are to express their Christianity by adopting what is good in the culture.
3. Christians are to combine their Christianity with the culture to overcome the limitations of culture.
4. Christians are to recognize that the demands of Christianity and the demands of culture are irreconcilable and yet seek to obey both.
5. Christians are to recognize that culture has been corrupted and seek to transform the culture by restoring it to what God intended it to be.

The difficulty of understanding how Christians are to relate to the culture is revealed by the fact that Christians of all theological and denominational persuasions can be found in every category of answers. But difficult or not, no Christian can ignore this issue, for each Christian lives in a culture.

Assignment One Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now report on the category of answers the student has initially selected.

Daniel in Babylon: A Case Study

Read Daniel 1:1–21 out loud.

Studying the Passage, vv. 4–7

Verses 4–5. the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The Hebrew youth selected were to be taught the intellectual and social aspects of Babylonian culture.

This cultural integration went even further than this, for note that the Hebrew youth were given a **daily ration from the king's choice food and . . . wine** and were specifically being groomed for **the king's personal service**. The Hebrew youth were to adopt Babylonian lifestyle habits and focus on a career in the Babylonian government.

Verses 6–7. assigned new names. Note that Daniel and his friends are first identified by their Hebrew names. Then we are informed of their new Babylonian names. The changing of their names was an attempt to completely transform the Hebrew youth into Babylonian citizens.

Assignment Two Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share answers to these questions: What were the Hebrew young men being taught in Babylon? How far into their lives was this education to extend?

Discussion Question

Is anything wrong with Daniel and his friends being groomed for Babylonian citizenship? If so, what is it? If not, why?

Studying the Passage, Deuteronomy 4:8–17

Verse 8. But Daniel . . . would not defile himself. Daniel and his friends (see vv. 12–13) decided not to defile themselves with the king's meat and wine, most likely because the Babylonians offered the meal up to their gods. Eating the meal would make them participants in idol worship, which God expressly forbade in Exodus 20:4–6.

Verses 11–16. test your servants. Lest this refusal be seen as an act of defiance, Daniel suggested that the officer in charge allow him and his friends to test the wisdom of refusing the king's provisions. The officer agreed. Their decision was shown to be right, and they were allowed to continue their practice.

Verse 17. literature. The word translated "literature" is the same word in verse 4. **knowledge and intelligence.** God blessed Daniel and his friends by giving them understanding in the culture they were being taught.

Assignment Three Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now report on which category of answers best explains the decision to refuse the king's meals and how that category of answers explains God's blessing of Daniel and his friends.

On Your Own

Read 1 Corinthians 10. In the space below, list both similarities and differences between what Daniel and his friends did and what 1 Corinthians 10 describes and proposes.

Based on your answers, in the space below, list some guiding principles that would help Christians decide how they ought to relate to culture.

Studying the Passage, Daniel 1:18–21

Verse 18. the end of the days. This would be the end of their three-year training (602 BC).

Verse 20. ten times better. When it came time to present the Hebrew youth to the king as Babylonian citizens, Daniel and his friends entered into Babylonian governmental service. They stood out as wiser and more intelligent than the native Babylonian intellectuals already in the king's service.

Verse 20. magicians and conjurers. Of the different groups of counselors to the king (see Daniel 2:2, 27), only magicians and conjurers were mentioned here. This seems significant. The *magicians* are literally “the engravers,” the scribes and sacred writers. The *conjurers* are the so-called experts who communed with the spirit world. Modern-day equivalents to these two groups would be academically trained secular theologians and non-Christian spiritual teachers.

Verse 21. until the first year of Cyrus. This is 539 BC when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and brought it into the Persian Empire. Daniel was brought to Babylon as a teenager. He was around eighty years old when his governmental service ended. He was well versed in Babylonian culture and appears to have flourished in his career. In Daniel 10:1, we see that Daniel was still receiving visions from God into the third year of Cyrus, indicating that he also outlasted Babylonian culture.

Discussion Questions

Why do you think Daniel and his friends were far wiser and more intelligent than the native Babylonian intellectuals? Which of the five categories of answers in “The Christian and Civilization” best fits with your answer? Is this answer different from the initial answer the student gave in **Assignment One**? Why or why not?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven.

Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart (the real you) for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something in your life for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit says to you below, and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

Since the church's early days, Christians have answered the question of how they should relate to the culture in one of five ways.

1. Reject all expressions of culture as evil.
2. Express one's Christianity by adopting what is good in the culture.
3. Combine Christianity with the culture to overcome culture's limitations.
4. Obey both Christ and culture, recognizing that the demands of both are irreconcilable.
5. Understand that culture is corrupt and work toward restoring culture to what God intended it to be.

Because each Christian lives in a culture, this issue cannot be ignored. Each Christian must settle on an answer based on the witness of Scripture.

To help with finding answers, this study used Daniel 1:1–21 as a case study.

- As captives in Babylon, Daniel and his friends were selected for grooming in Babylonian culture and governmental service.
- Daniel and his friends refused to be defiled with the king's food, and God blessed them with knowledge and wisdom in Babylonian culture that exceeded native Babylonian intellectuals already in governmental service.
- Daniel's recognition of God's authority over his life in his new cultural situation allowed him to outlast the culture.

First Corinthians 10 describes a similar situation to that of Daniel 1:1–12. This study encouraged you to compare those passages for the purpose of developing guiding principles that would help you as a disciple decide how you should relate to culture.

John 17:15–18 states that even though disciples are not *of* this world, they have not been called *out* of this world but have been sent *into* the world. Disciples have dual citizenship, living as citizens of God's kingdom and citizens of their communities. Until Christ returns, each disciple must decide how to live as a good citizen in both contexts in order to glorify God.

Parent Questions

How do you think disciples should relate to the culture, and why? What guiding principles have helped you make this decision, and why do you think these principles are biblical?

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