

COMMITMENT #6

A STRONG CHURCH IS CONTEXTUALIZED AND DIVERSE, REFLECTING THE COMMUNITY WHERE IT'S PLANTED.

*From the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do....
—1 Chronicles 12:32 NASB*

DEFINITION

God has reconciled all peoples into a multiethnic family in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). To reveal this beautiful theological reality, we intentionally pursue a multiethnic expression of the church that approaches the diversity of the average public school in our context. God has also given us a ministry of reconciliation. This means we follow Jesus' humble example in the Incarnation. Jesus emptied Himself, came to our turf, and communicated in our terms so the gospel Word could be communicated without cultural hindrance. Strong churches remove any unnecessary cultural offenses to the gospel as they seek to be a welcoming community for all in their context.

QUOTES TO PONDER...

What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together...because... they have all been loved by Jesus himself.... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake. —D.A. Carson

Because of our cultural blinders, we must not only speak to the people over the bridge; we must listen to them as well. We need to listen to what they are saying and take seriously their questions, their objections to what we are saying, and their hopes and aspirations. More often than not, this interaction with a new culture shows us many things taught in the Bible—things we either missed altogether or thought unimportant, possibly even ways in which we misread the Bible through the lens of our own cultural assumptions. —Timothy Keller

If we over-adapt to a culture, we have accepted the culture's idols. If, however, we under-adapt to a culture, we may have turned our own culture into an idol, an absolute. If we over-adapt to a culture, we aren't able to change people because we are not calling them to change. If we under-adapt to a culture, no one will be changed because no one will listen to us; we will be confusing, offensive, or simply unpersuasive. To the degree a ministry is over-adapted or under-adapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power. — Timothy Keller

Having entered a culture and challenged its idols, we should follow the apostle Paul in presenting Christ to our listeners as the ultimate source of what they have been seeking.... Put another way, we show our listeners that the plotlines of their lives can only find a resolution, a "happy ending," in Jesus. We must retell the culture's story in Jesus. —Tim Keller



Every culture has good and bad elements in it...yet in every culture it is important for the evangelist, church planter, and witnessing Christian to flex as far as possible, so that the gospel will not be made to appear unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level. — D.A. Carson

Too often, ethnic minorities are asked to put aside their discomfort to come and sit at the white table. —Soong-Chan Rah

BIBLE STUDY

Read I Corinthians 1:22-25 and 9:19-27.

In I Corinthians 1:22-25, we discover that the gospel is at one level offensive to all cultures. What aspects of the gospel are most offensive in your context?

In I Corinthians 9:19-27, Paul models great flexibility and personal sacrifice in order to maximize the gospel's advance in the culture. Can you think of instances where you or your church make similar sacrifices for the sake of the mission?

On the spectrum of rigid rebuke of culture vs. over-assimilation to culture, which ditch is your church mostly likely to fall into and why?

In 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, Paul references personal spiritual discipline. Which prevalent sins in your context are your people most likely to fall into? How does your purity in this regard cause you to stand out as salt and light amidst your context?

QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

Tim Keller observes, "Contextualization...is giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them." Which of the four components are you strongest in? Which part(s) do you tend to ignore?



Where might one go to “listen” to your cultural context? How aware is the average member of your church of the dominant story and values of your community? Describe the cultural intelligence amongst the average members of your church.

Do your members love and talk positively about the city/neighborhood, avoiding disdainful and embattled language and speaking in language that is not filled with pious, tribal, or technical terms as they minister to not-yet-believers?

To what extent are members of your church other-focused rather than self-focused in relation to cultural values and ethnicity? Are they avoiding the tendency to make uninformed assumptions about others who are different than they are? Are they consistently attempting to walk in the shoes of not-yet-believers...to hear as he hears, to see as she sees, to love those who are different than they are, to fully embrace others in community?

Is your church famous for loving people of various ethnicities? Is there a clear dominant cultural ethnicity that is prioritized? What are you doing to pursue a diverse expression that more closely represents the diversity of the average public school in your context?

What would be the most confusing aspect of your community's life together for an uninitiated, not-yet-believer in your city/town? Is it a cultural/ethnic barrier or a theological one? What are you doing to actively remove cultural/ethnic barriers that arise in your community?

What other insights would be helpful to better understand this area in your church?

To dive a bit deeper, see Appendix IV: Awareness - Contextual Analysis.



COMMITTED TO ACTION

What's one thing you or your team could do this week to strengthen this area?

What would it take to see this commitment strengthened over the next year?

