**OVERVIEW:**
How to engage the culture is a tough question for Christ-followers young and old. Should we stick to only having friends who also follow Christ? Should our fun only involve church activities? Or should we only dress and act based on the latest trends and fashions? This is tough, and many young people who are earnestly trying to follow Christ get turned around navigating the culture conversation. Instead of focusing on a list of restrictions or boundaries, this lesson will focus on a few examples of followers of God who approached the topic of faith in culture the right way. It will also help start a discussion to uncover the nuances of this difficult topic.

**OPENING QUESTIONS:**
- How can you follow Christ and still be friends with people who don’t?
- Your friends are cheating in school. They know you won’t, so they don’t ask you to join in—but should you say anything?

**WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY ABOUT IT:**
“In the world, but not of the world.” Have you heard that before? That’s a line many Christ-followers use when thinking about how to deal with culture—things like art, songs, ideas, and movies. That’s a pretty abstract concept. How are we supposed to be a part of the conversations the world is having—infusing Christ into those conversations—without also getting entangled in the mindset of the culture? The Bible says some tough things about avoiding that entanglement. Check out 1 John 2:15: “Do not love the world, or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

Our example in this, as in everything, should be Jesus. Jesus did not remove himself from the culture of his day. He was a part of the conversation. He was a friend to those who needed one. He loved people who were far from the biblical standards of righteous living. He brought truth and love to the broken corners of the world. But as he engaged his culture, Jesus never left the will of his Father (John 5:19). Jesus never bowed to the pressures of the world because his focus was always on what his Father wanted. And maybe that’s the first step in unpacking this difficult issue. As we engage our cultures and connect with people through music, film, art, sports, and other things, our focus should stay on what God wants. Think of it this way: before you post a photo from Instagram, what’s the first thing you do? Pick a filter, of course! The picture you post is still the same photo, but the filter changes everything about it. That’s how we should interact with culture—everything we do is filtered through our relationship with Jesus. That means we’ll see movies and music and relationships differently than people without that filter. Paul tells us that part of our mission is to engage in culture for the sake of the gospel. As you read the following passage, think about what Paul’s words mean for us today.

*Read:* 1 Corinthians 9:19–23
LEADER'S NOTE: Paul was spanning many different circumstances and cultures when preaching the gospel. The Jews still lived under Mosaic Law, upholding a set of rituals, sacrifices, and observations. When Paul was with them, he would lose his influence if he didn't observe those requirements (even though he didn't have to). It would have been unbelievably offensive for him to bring a delicious plate of bacon to dinner when the Jews believed pork was unclean! Likewise, when he was with Gentiles (who did not adhere to the law), Paul didn't turn down a meal even if it didn't meet Mosaic Law requirements. But one thing Paul always did was uphold the law of Christ. The things Paul joined in culturally were never outside of the boundaries Christ called us to. In this, he was following Jesus’ example. Jesus met and ate with sinful people, but he never sinned himself.

Discuss:
• What is the point to becoming like the people you’re telling about Jesus?
• How does Paul become like a slave?
• Are we free to do whatever we want? Why or why not?
• How do you think it might look to “become all things to all people” today?

A SECOND LOOK:
Not long ago, a high-school sophomore wanted to start a Bible study to meet some fellow Christ-followers. But she was having some trouble getting people to come. Her school wouldn’t allow her to use the word “Bible” on her flier. But she knew it was important, so she chose a quote from Christian author C.S. Lewis: “What draws people to be friends is that they see the same truth. They share it.”¹ She hoped that would be enough to give people the hint about what her “unofficial group” was all about. But only a few other people showed up. It seemed like in the battle between culture and faith, culture was winning.

Then something unexpected happened. More girls started showing up for the group, but they weren't other Christ-followers. They were Muslims. And while some people might consider this a failure and either shut down the Bible study or keep the Muslim girls from coming, the group changed to incorporate them. Instead of a Bible study, the group became a place where these Christian and Muslim girls could get to know each other, talk about their respective faiths, and become friends. The girl who started the group thought she was forming a Bible study to meet like-minded people and stay comfortable. But by engaging her culture—even when it was uncomfortable—she had the opportunity to learn from and to share Christ’s message with people she probably would have never met. She learned that, in this case, C.S. Lewis’s quote didn’t quite apply. By engaging her culture with God as her focus, she became friends with people who didn’t “see the same truth.” That way, she was able to “share it” with them.

Discuss:
• What would this girl’s “Bible study” have looked like if she had stayed comfortable and refused to engage her culture?
• What would it have looked like if she had abandoned God as her focus to embrace her culture?
• How did God use her willingness to focus on Christ and to engage her culture to make a bad situation into an amazing one?
• What do you think will happen if you start engaging your culture with Jesus as your filter and focus? Will it be different from how you do things now? How so?

LEADER’S NOTE: If your students are having a hard time grasping this concept, this might help a little: Dick Staub explains how many Christians exist in a parallel universe—kind of an alternate reality—with Christian music, books, art, and even cruises. Christians can live in a bubble that rarely intersects with the rest of the culture, but that’s not the way it’s supposed to be. Staub encourages Christians to break free from this parallel universe. He suggests that Christians follow Michelangelo’s advice: “My art is my critique.” In other words, instead of complaining about how culture is broken, or hiding from it, go out and make a contribution to it. Make deep, thoughtful works of music, art, and literature that show the reality of a world created by God. Yes, the world has been broken by sin, but God is at work in the world, redeeming it for his purposes. We can be a part of that.

LIVE IT OUT: In the World vs. Of the World Debate
Split students into two groups. One group will be arguing for the “In the World” position, and the other group will argue for the “Of the World” position. There are five scenarios listed below. Choose a couple that are relevant to your group, or if you have time, go through all of them.

Say something like:
Today we’re going to have a debate. I’m going to give you a couple hypothetical scenarios that you might encounter in everyday life. Each scenario will involve how Christ-followers should interact with their culture. We’ll spend about five minutes on each scenario. “Of the World” team, you will have two minutes to make the case that followers of Christ should avoid this situation at all costs. Give the best reasons you can think of for believers to separate themselves from this cultural situation.

When your time is up, the “In the World” team will have two minutes to give a response. They will argue that this scenario should be embraced by Christ-followers. What are the best reasons you can think of for believers to participate in this cultural situation instead of avoiding it? After that, each team will have about a minute for last thoughts and rebuttals. Then we’ll move to the next scenario, but this time, the “In the World” team will have the first word.

Cultural Scenarios:
• Should a Christ-follower go to a concert where they know they’ll encounter excessive drinking, drug-use, etc.?
• Should a Christ-follower attend prom?
• Should a Christ-follower watch a well-made and well-acted movie or television show that includes objectionable content?
• Should a Christ-follower smoke e-cigarettes with friends?
• Should a Christ-follower date a non-believer?
LEADER'S NOTE: The point of this debate isn't to declare a winner. One problem with the old “in the world, but not of it” saying is that it may convince Christ-followers that the only two options are participating fully in certain cultural activities or staying aloof and avoiding specific situations at all costs. Hopefully, this debate will prove that neither of these attitudes is sufficiently nuanced to deal with the complex things we encounter every day. Students should start seeing that they need to make decisions of whether or not to embrace an aspect of culture on a case-by-case basis. Even then, they'll need to decide how to embrace or avoid that scenario. Many students will look for you to draw rigid lines for them, but ultimately they'll be better served by learning to listen to the Spirit guide them through their experiences. Help students open themselves to being countercultural in their faith, but remind them that Christ has the power to transform whatever culture he encounters.

APPLY IT:
Write down one way you are going to apply what you now know about faith in culture. Think of something you can do this week to engage culture and infuse it with Christ.

Be specific:
What are you going to do?
When are you going to do it?
Is there someone who can keep you accountable?

LEADER'S NOTE: Whenever students make applications, challenge them to be specific. It’s one thing to say, “I’m going to trust God more.” The truth is, our students won’t really know if they did this, or if they grew in trust over the week. It’s another thing to say, “Every morning this week before I eat breakfast, I’m going to tell God that today is his and that I trust him, and I’m going to ask him to give me the strength to replace worries with trust.” Challenge your students to answer the questions under the “Be Specific” section. You can even have them pair up, share their applications, and ask for accountability from their partner.

THINK ABOUT IT:
“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ,” (Col. 2:8).

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven,” (Matt. 5:14–16).

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