CULTURE SHOCK

A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO TODAY’S MOST DIVISIVE ISSUES

CHIP INGRAM

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Chip Ingram, Culture Shock
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
I dedicate this book to Blythe, Ella, and Emory; Nola, Ryder, and Sam; Miles and Jessie; and last but not least, Noah.

I pray they will hold unswervingly to the truth of Jesus and His Word and communicate that truth by life and word with winsomeness and love.

_Holy Father, I ask You to protect these little ones from the spirit of this age and ever-changing winds of what is deemed right and wrong. May they know You deeply and trust You fully. Help them hold unswervingly to the truth that is in Jesus and His Word, even when to do so means to be unpopular or even persecuted. Cause them to see and treat others as You do, Lord Jesus._

_Help them to so winsomely and radically love all kinds of people, from all kinds of backgrounds and all kinds of beliefs and all kinds of lifestyles, that Your heart and Your truth would be powerfully revealed through them._
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been in the making for a very long time. I didn’t know it at the time, but looking back, it’s now obvious. In the mid-1970s, I was a new Christian, unwilling to “throw my brains in the trash” and blindly believe what was so at odds with the spirit of the “make love not war” and “if it feels good, do it” mentality of my era.

As I wrestled with the major tenets of Jesus’s teaching, His claim to be God, His claim to be truth, His insistence that His Word and Scripture are truth and authoritative, His teaching on sex, marriage, idols, loving your enemies, and His claims to be the unique and only means of the forgiveness of sins and author of eternal life, I began an intensive journey to examine the evidence.

I have to thank Steve Vogal, who introduced me to Francis Schaeffer as we traveled through South America, playing basketball and sharing Christ. I am forever indebted to the graduate faculty at West Virginia University, who allowed me to write my master’s thesis on the philosophical basis of teaching ethics in sports, and in so doing, allowed me to do extensive historical and philosophical research on what and how truth, values, and reality have been determined both inside and
Acknowledgments

outside the Church through the millennia. I am grateful for the requirement to verbally defend my thesis (all three and a half hours) before brilliant professors who forced me to think at a new level and answer every objection imaginable. They challenged the core of my beliefs and the Biblical teaching concerning truth as an absolute, objective, nonchanging reality.

I also want to thank Country Bible Church in Texas, Santa Cruz Bible Church in California, Walk Thru the Bible in Georgia, and Venture Christian Church in Los Gatos, California, for the privilege of helping me work out in real time the application of truth as it applies to these controversial and often divisive issues in both very conservative (rural Texas) and very liberal (Santa Cruz) environments.

God, in His mercy and wisdom, allowed me to minister to, and learn to love rednecks who used racial slurs, leaned far right, and didn’t use words like “gay” when referring to those who practice homosexuality. Later I would live and minister in one of the most politically correct cities in America. They viewed the University of California at Berkeley as too far right. I got to know and deeply care about liberal politicians, radical feminists, gays and lesbians, new agers and passionate environmentalists.

As a pastor seeking to teach the same truth that was radical and unpopular with both groups for very different reasons, the pressure to conform in each situation was immense. But the big lesson was how similar both groups and I were with one another. Out of our insecurities, prejudice, and backgrounds, we all held the others with suspicion, assumed the worst, accepted labels, and defended and judged rather than seeking to meet, know, and understand one another as unique individuals.

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I’ve learned a lot in the last thirty years pastoring these very different groups, and then teaching the very same truth in almost one hundred countries with Walk Thru the Bible. The real issues are not abortion, sexuality, homosexuality, politics, or the environment; these are merely the lightning rods of conflict and controversy. The real issue before the Church today is “What is true?” and then “How is that truth communicated?” I’m deeply thankful for the privilege of learning from ultra-conservatives and ultra-liberals. I know from personal experience what truth shared in love can do.

My plea for a strong, clear stand on Biblical truth as absolute and authoritative could not have been more countercultural in Santa Cruz, California; but when we translated that same truth to meeting real needs, driving HIV patients to the doctor or grocery store, addressing poverty and runaway teens, and meeting with gay public officials to address the needs of our city . . . everything changed.

When God’s direction was to build relationships with blacks and Hispanics and even move the church into an African American neighborhood in rural Texas, I was extremely unpopular with some, to the say the least. Yet, years later, I watched one of the most adamant objectors, whose vocabulary had been filled with racial slurs, mentor boys from the neighborhood and teach them a craft to earn a living. His heart changed. He loved them and they loved him. When we baptized at the African American church across the street (because we didn’t have a baptistery), we helped one another; prejudice and suspicion were replaced with genuine caring relationships.

So, I thank God for letting me watch the power of His truth when shown in love. This isn’t a book to bash anyone or build a case for some particular group. The Church is losing its commitment and
courage to believe and stand for what Jesus and our forefathers in the faith have given their lives for.

Yes, some have used truth as a club, but today we have become so fearful of appearing unpopular, anti-intellectual, or intolerant that we have become bland, lukewarm, and anemic. We are not bold because we don’t know what we believe or why. We are not loving because we have missed Jesus’s heart and His deep compassion for every person regardless of their gender, race, beliefs, or sexual orientation.

So finally, a big thank-you to Jerry and the Living on the Edge team who made this book possible. Thank you, Chad and the Baker Books team, for your support and commitment to me and this project. Thank you, Venture Christian Church, for the privilege to live this out, by God’s grace, in the most diverse city in America. Thank you, Curtis and the Yates & Yates team, for your insight and for building the bridges that led to this book. And thank you, Theresa, for being an amazing, patient, loving, and prayerful wife, without whom I could never have done this.
INTRODUCTION

This book is for Christians. It is about issues we don’t normally discuss. We often argue about these issues or scream about these issues or say nothing about these issues, but we rarely sit down and have meaningful, deep, respectful conversations around these issues.

These issues polarize! Within the larger Christian community, there are a great variety of views and opinions concerning human sexuality, homosexuality, abortion, the environment, and politics.

These are the kind of issues that bring division and confusion in families, small groups, and churches. As a result, Christians—except for a vocal minority on the opposite sides of these issues—have been strangely silent. Many, if not most, followers of Christ report that they have never heard a message from the pulpit on politics or the environment, let alone human sexuality, homosexuality, or abortion.

The result is a generation of sincere Christ-followers who have embraced the values and morals of our culture rather than those of God’s Word, to our own detriment.

This book is written for those of us who take seriously our relationship with Christ, His Word, and His ultimate directive to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.
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We unashamedly believe that the Bible is God’s Word, and we have experienced a supernatural, spiritual birth that has radically changed our lives and our eternal destiny. We want to be authentic, grace-filled followers of Jesus, who live out our faith 24/7 and long to be instruments of life and love to those around us.

We are deeply concerned about injustice, famine, and slavery around the world and the ever-increasing violence, moral erosion, and family disintegration here at home.

We are equally concerned and disheartened by two, common vocal responses to the moral and cultural issues of our day.

We cringe with remorse and embarrassment when we hear hate-filled speech and name calling and see violent actions by “Christians” in their effort to address issues like abortion, homosexuality, and the environment. We understand their passion for truth and moral fidelity but perceive their method and lack of love to be anything but Christlike.

On the other end of the continuum, we are equally dismayed by those in the Church who have abandoned or compromised the moral absolutes in Scripture. In the name of tolerance, relevance, political correctness, and compassion, they have embraced popular culture’s views on human sexuality, abortion, and homosexuality as “Christian” views while violating the clear teaching of Scripture. We understand their passion to champion God’s grace and acceptance, but grace without truth is unloving and—again—anything but Christlike.

This book is an honest effort to get Christians talking openly and respectfully about these issues. It’s an effort to seek out what it looks like for us as followers of Christ to bring to the table both...
grace and truth in dealing with these issues and the people they impact. I’ve tried to present the presuppositions of both sides of the issues and report research and statistics in context.

I certainly have a bias, but we all do. Most of all, Jesus does, and that’s the “bias” I want to get clear on and follow. Jesus brought light, not heat. He confronted unpopular and controversial issues with clarity and truth, but He treated people with dignity and respect unless their motives and hypocrisy dictated otherwise.

For too long the Church has been silent on these issues that are shaping our culture. For too long opposing groups have thrown rocks, slanted statistics, and vilified one another, even within the Church.

Jesus promised that the truth would set us free. Let’s explore the truth together. He also commanded us to love one another. Let’s put truth and love together and explore what the Bible says about today’s most divisive issues.
CHAPTER 1

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO RIGHT AND WRONG?

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6
Jesus of Nazareth
If you are old enough, you may remember a time when the difference between right and wrong was clearly understood in America. Even those who committed criminal acts did so in spite of knowing better. Up until the beginning of the last half-century, all of recorded human history had been characterized by a clear understanding of moral absolutes. From the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi to the Judeo-Christian ethic, every culture declared certain behaviors to be wrong and evil.

America’s standards for moral behavior and ethics sprang largely from the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Christ, and the letters of the apostle Paul. Regardless of one’s political preference, race, or socioeconomic status, society generally had consensus on a number of core values and moral absolutes: the value of human life, loyalty, respect, fidelity, commitment to family and marriage, responsibility, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and love.

Things have changed, and the symptoms of this change are all around us—in today’s paper, on the news, on the internet, in the next cubicle, and likely in your own home. The following article is a distressing one, and I apologize for its graphic nature. But I share it with you because it illustrates an important point. Slowly read this account and ponder carefully the future consequences of this kind of thinking and behavior in our world.
Seventeen-year-old Elizabeth and her fourteen-year-old friend, Jennifer, made the mistake of taking a shortcut that night. It was 11:30 p.m. on a hot, steamy June night, and the two had just left a party at a friend’s house. They called home to let their folks know they were on their way, but they never made it. As Elizabeth and Jennifer cut through a wooded area near White Oak Bayou, in Houston, Texas, they stumbled into the initiation night of a gang called Black and White. Gang members had descended on this little area to drink some beer and engage in a macho induction that involved newcomers fist-fighting other members. The gang had just started to break up when the girls came in to sight. “Let’s get ’em,” one of the gang members cried. Elizabeth and Jennifer’s naked bodies were found four days later. They’d been raped repeatedly. Both girls had been strangled—one with a belt, the other with a shoestring. Apparently the girls didn’t die quickly enough. According to police experts, evidence showed that both of their necks had been stepped on to complete the executions. Six gang members were charged with the murders. Police reported that all six youth had participated in the rapes and murders, and they ranged from ages 14 to 18.

One of the gang members had appeared on a local television show the day before the murders. He hoisted a beer and boasted into the camera, “Human . . . life . . . means . . . nothing.” Basically, that message had reached the core of his being. Human life means nothing. Another of the boys upon hearing that they may be charged with murder is reported to have exclaimed, “Hey! Great! We finally made it to the big time.”

What a horrific event. Can you imagine anyone being so calloused, so confused about reality, so incredibly depraved as these young men?
Unfortunately, as we all know, this tragedy is not an isolated case. Moral chaos has permeated our schools, our streets, and often our homes. In fact, in the next twenty-four hours in America, 1,000 unwed teens will become pregnant, 500 adolescents will begin using drugs, and 6 youths will commit suicide. That’s not in a year, not in a month . . . that’s every twenty-four hours in America!

Even many of those who should be setting positive examples for younger generations are instead setting the pace for immorality, inventing new ways to “push the envelope” in regard to degrading behavior. It has become commonplace to read of university administrators misusing funds, padding their salaries, and making obscene phone calls from their campus offices. The nightly news is filled with sordid stories about prominent politicians, professional athletes, business leaders, and even clergy who are involved in adultery, drugs, illicit sex, or domestic violence.

What on earth happened? How did we get here? How did we get to the place where young teens boast of killing one another, where schools require security checkpoints, and where young government interns fall prey to lecherous politicians?

The Core Issue

Opinions on this issue are a dime a dozen. Some say we should spend more tax money on education reform, urban development, or family planning clinics. Others say we need to win the war on drugs or build bigger prisons.
But I believe we need to dig deeper and examine what is behind these symptoms and what they tell us about our national moral crisis.

The core issue is that we’ve lost our foundational understanding of what is right and what is wrong. Our nation—from our leaders to our youngest schoolchildren—has become confused about whose values, ethics, and morals we should adopt as our own. Values are core beliefs or desires that guide or motivate attitudes and actions. Ethics is the standard of conduct that indicates how one should behave on moral issues arising from principles about right and wrong. Professors, politicians, preachers, and pundits all teach their own brand of ethics.

But who is “right” about right and wrong?

This question really boils down to an even more foundational question: “What is truth?” We can’t know what is right to do in any given situation, or make decisions about education or morality or social behavior until we discover what is true. From the 1950s to today, our nation’s understanding of truth has shifted dramatically, so that what was once clear is now clouded with ambiguity and confusion.

In this chapter my goal is to explore the issues, cultural events, and philosophical changes that have brought us to this point. I am going to trace, in a thumbnail sketch, the mountain peaks of our cultural landscape as we look backward through history. Some of the information is somewhat academic in nature, but the implications are incredibly practical.
For those interested in exploring this shift in depth, I’ve highlighted four books to guide your journey under the heading “Read for Yourself!” I hope you’ll take the time to really think through the issues presented. I cannot overstate how absolutely essential it is that we understand not only why we are in our current state of moral crisis but also how we got here. Each of the following chapters will deal with a specific divisive issue, both inside and outside the Church, but all are dramatically affected by our view of truth.

The Big Question: What Is Truth?

Sixty years ago the answer to the question “What is truth?” would have been relatively easy to find. You could have asked any businessman, homemaker, or student, and they at least would have been able to point you in the right direction. While they might not always have done the “right thing,” they probably would have agreed on what the “right thing” was. Courtesy, loyalty, honesty, faithfulness were definitely right. Lying, cheating, stealing were clearly wrong. The Ten Commandments were on target; the Golden Rule was important to follow. But around 1950 a shift in our popular culture’s thinking began to occur. Truth, once viewed as clear and absolute, began to be perceived as relative.

I do not want to oversimplify this complex issue, but for the sake of understanding, let’s consider two approaches to truth.

Absolute Truth

When I say absolute truth, I am referring to something that is always right and true, whether people agree or disagree with it.
Four authors are pivotal in illustrating and understanding how the shift from absolute to relative truth occurred. I highly recommend them.

**Among Intellectuals**—*Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis (1952). The famous Oxford professor and atheist-turned-apologist traces his journey and the philosophical basis for moral absolutes, truth, and its implications with regard to faith in God.

**In Culture**—*The God Who Is There* and *Escape from Reason* by Francis Schaeffer (both 1968). Schaeffer was a Christian theologian and philosopher who accurately anticipated and predicted our current dilemma, tracing the historical and philosophical roots of the shift from absolute to relative truth. His writings had incredible impact in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the accuracy of his predictions adds greater weight today.

**In Education**—Allen Bloom, who is not a Christian author, took an extremely critical look at our universities in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). He pointed out that instead of being a safeguard of what is true, the universities have allowed relative truth to invade every area of academics. Bloom has been a professor at Cornell, Yale, and the University of Chicago, and concluded that as a result of this invasion of relative truth, Americans don’t know how to think. Bloom writes, “Because they can’t think, they don’t know right from wrong, and, unable to make good decisions, they make bad decisions.”

**In Law and Science**—*Reason in the Balance*, written by Berkeley law professor Phillip E. Johnson (1995), emphasizes that ideas and thinking really do matter. Johnson’s book takes a hard look at contemporary culture and provides positive, in-depth reading about the issue of relative and absolute truth.
and whether or not it happens to be part of their experience. If something is black, it can’t be white at the same time. If something is hot, it can’t be cold at the same time. If something is right, it can’t be wrong at the same time. This absolute (thesis/antithesis) view of truth is the way people thought until a group of philosophers began to challenge this concept.

In the diagram “Truth is Absolute,” the circle represents all of our life experience. The square on the outside represents unchanging truth that is absolute in nature. It affects the realm of experience but is just as true (as indicated by the other arrows) in how it affects all of life, whether experienced or not. An absolute truth in the area of morals and values remains absolute and is true, whether or not you agree with it or experience it.

Think about the earth’s gravity for a minute. You may not agree with the theory of gravity, but it remains an absolute just the same. If you step off a three-story building, you will change your belief system very quickly. The reality of the law of gravity does not change. It is an absolute, unchanging truth, apart from one’s opinion or experience. When you drop something, even a feather, eventually it will fall to the ground.
The unchanging reality for the Christian is the Word of God; this is the standard for absolute truth. God tells us He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so we know that His truth cannot be altered simply because we disagree with it.

In one of the Ten Commandments handed down to Moses, God instructed His people not to murder (see Exod. 20:13). According to absolute truth, murder is wrong. It is not wrong *some* of the time or *most* of the time. Murder is wrong *all* of the time. I think it is safe to say that we all agree that murder is wrong all *of* the time.

But do you believe that God’s absolute truth is just as unchanging when it comes to issues like sexual impurity, lying, stealing, idolatry, and coveting? I think it is safe to say that, as we view the behavior of a great majority of modern Christians, the right and wrong of these behaviors are no longer viewed as absolute.

**Relative Truth**

By contrast, the second approach considers truth to be *relative*. This concept of truth says life is validated *not* by a set of principles or outside objective data but on the basis of *personal experience*. This is the definition of existentialism, a philosophy that plays out in attitudes and belief systems that say...
Whatever Happened to Right and Wrong?

- If it feels good, do it!
- Do your own thing.
- You choose your truth, I'll choose mine.
- Hey, whatever works for you.
- Who are you to judge me? (the one we've all heard before)

Sound familiar? These are phrases heard all too often in America today, and they signal the shift that has been made from absolute to relative truth. Now negotiable truth can be freely altered to suit the person, the mood, or the situation.

If you take a look at the “Truth is Relative” diagram, you'll notice that inside the circle is a little dotted square. This represents truth as the individual perceives it to be through his or her experience. Therefore, truth is different for different people. It’s no longer clear, objective, or consistent—it’s just a matter of taste. You can do your own thing and I’ll do mine. We won’t judge each other about what is right and what is wrong. To do so would be intolerant.
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Actually, it seems as though the only absolute in our culture today is tolerance, which really is contradictory in this context. Those who cry tolerance are themselves intolerant of the people they see as intolerant! What they really mean is, “Agree with me and you won’t be intolerant.”

How did we arrive at this place where relative truth is so thoroughly embraced? How could something as basic and foundational as our answer to “What is truth?” change so dramatically and so quickly?