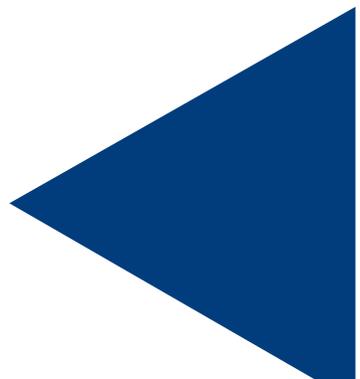


# CHRISTIAN VOICES ON THE CULTURAL MOMENT

A collection of essays by Southeastern women on issues facing Christians today

INTERSECT  
WHERE FAITH MEETS CULTURE





# INTRODUCTION

From an early age, we learn to place our faith in a box. We may pull it out on Sundays, but we neatly return it to its hidden place the rest of the week. As a result, faith has little to do with our day-to-day lives. We live, work and play as if God does not exist.

Faith deserves to be reunited with Monday to Saturday; faith should have everything to do with our day-to-day lives. We should live, work and play for God's glory.

How does our faith impact the rest of our lives? Women around Southeastern asked that very question, bringing the timeless truths of the gospel to the timely challenges of our day.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5** **Discipling Women to Engage Culture**  
Laura Thigpen
- 10** **The Mommy Wars Within Me**  
Amy Whitfield
- 14** **The Recovering Perfectionist**  
Alysha Clark
- 18** **The Joys and Difficulties of Our Adoption**  
Brittany Salmon
- 24** **Human Value and the Pro-Life Ethic**  
Amber Bowen
- 29** **Why the Church Needs Black Girl Magic**  
Anteneshia Sanders
- 33** **Black Lives vs. Blue Lives: You Don't Have to Choose**  
Krystal Wilson
- 38** **Helping the Poor Without Hurting Them**  
Christy Britton
- 44** **Walk in Justice**  
Brianna Copeland
- 50** **Your Smartphone is a Tool. Do You Use it Well?**  
Ashley Gorman
- 54** **Confessions of a Christian Who Struggled with Gender Identity**  
Jean-Yael Wallis
- 59** **A Framework for Both the Energized and the Overwhelmed**  
Cas Monaco
- 64** **How Southeast Asia Helped Me Engage My Own Culture**  
Harper McKay

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## **DISCIPLING WOMEN TO ENGAGE CULTURE**

by Laura Thigpen

Some Christian women struggle to see how cultural issues matter to their everyday lives. But avoiding these cultural debates is increasingly difficult.

For example, the young mom may not care about LGBTQ issues—until she takes her children to the playground, finds herself in conversation with a parent of her child’s playmate and discovers the parent is in a homosexual marriage. Or the teacher may not care much about immigration reform—until one of her immigrant students suffers from anxiety because he fears that his parents might be deported.

At these moments, such cultural topics are no longer just “issues.” They are tangible faces, real people.

Yet, some women feel inadequate to engage these issues and

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**Women bring a unique voice to cultural issues that our churches and societies need.**

the people most directly influenced by them. They struggle with the confidence to understand and engage them from a theological conviction.

Some women lack confidence because they have not received a higher education. Others know little about particular issues. Sometimes, moms of young children are so consumed with diapers, meal times and t-ball games that they have little room for organized study and discussion. Yet, women bring a unique voice to cultural issues that our churches and societies need. They must be disciplined to do so.

A few years ago I recognized my own need to have “iron-sharpening” relationships with other women to help me better engage difficult cultural issues. I decided to meet regularly with a few ladies from various backgrounds and career fields. Each of these women brings a unique perspective, a thoughtful question and insightful encouragement to our time together.

Thankfully, you do not need to start a formal program to have these relationships for yourself. There are four simple ways to disciple women—whether they are single, married, career, stay-at-home, academically driven or academically intimidated—to be theologically informed about culturally relevant issues in everyday life.

### **1. TEACH HER TO BE DEVOTED TO GOD’S WORD.**

If a woman seeks to engage any of these cultural issues and the people affected most by them, she must first be devoted to meditating on God’s Word both privately and corporately, as is the case for every believer. The Scriptures are our deepest well

of knowledge and truth, so they should be our first resource to form convictions.

Private meditation on God's Word involves spending time alone as a student being tutored by the Word through the Spirit. Corporate meditation on God's Word means being instructed by the teaching of the Word from one's pastor and church. This meditation is not passive; rather, it involves actively listening like the Jews in Berea:

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” (Acts 17:11-12)

Engaging difficult cultural issues should begin first by eagerly receiving and examining the Word.

## **2. TEACH HER TO GET INSIGHT.**

After meditating on the Word, women can read books, journals or articles as a gateway to receiving a broader perspective on an issue. For example, the faith-journey of Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*, gives insight into the joys and hardships of ministering to members of the LGBTQ community.

Likewise, instead of relying on one news outlet to stay current on issues, read three distinctively different outlets to gain comparative perspectives. The point here is not to read massive amounts of information, but to read for understanding. There are multiple sides to every issue, so we should heed Prov. 4:7:

“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.”

Not all women are avid readers, so women can be creative with their resources and time. Podcasts and online sermons are also helpful tools for women to use to gain understanding. They can even listen to these while shopping for groceries, working out or during kids' naptimes.

### **3. TEACH HER TO FELLOWSHIP AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE.**

Deep and important insights are gained by studying the Word and seeking understanding. This insight, however, is not meant to be hoarded but shared. Women need regular fellowship with other believing women with the intention of discussing a culturally relevant issue. This can be as simple as a conversation about a book or an article over coffee or while sitting on the back deck.

Having spent time under the instruction of God's Word and creatively gaining insight on these culturally-charged issues, women need to engage in conversation with other believers who can help challenge their thinking and their theology as well. This practice does require intentionality, forcing depth and substance in conversation.

### **4. TEACH HER TO BE ACCOUNTABLE.**

Finally, women need to have these conversations with fellow believers for the sake of accountability for their thoughts and actions. It would be better for a woman to say something heretical in the presence of her Christian brothers and sisters who will lovingly rebuke her in kindness, rather than repeat something heretical to an unbeliever and lead him or her astray.

Priscilla and Aquila modeled brotherly love toward Apollos in this way:

“He began to speak boldly, in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God *more accurately*.” (Acts 18:26, emphasis added)

Priscilla and Aquila were quick to realize that Apollos lacked knowledge and understanding about the way of God. They didn’t rebuke his passion or fervor, but they held him accountable to the gospel he was preaching and gave him the insight he needed to carry out his public ministry—or, to put it in today’s terms, to engage culture. Providing women with opportunities to be sharpened by other believers gives them the encouragement they need to speak boldly with grace.

Women are often called gatekeepers who monitor what comes in and goes out of the home. They need to be theologically informed and culturally aware in order to fill the void of the uniquely female, Christian voice in society. This does not require a class or a formal program. It does require time in the Word, a love for wisdom and insight, regular fellowship with other believers and intentional accountability when wading through these murky cultural waters. On the playground, in the classroom or in the grocery store, these practical steps encourage our sisters to be more confident in “the way of God” and less intimidated by “the way of the world.”

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## THE MOMMY WARS WITHIN ME

by Amy Whitfield

One of my goals when I look at my home and office is that I would one day become completely organized, down to the last item. (I know myself well enough to realize this goal is unlikely, but a girl can dream.) I have visions of walking into a room where there's a place for everything, where everything is in its place and where every container has that wonderful finishing touch—the label.

It's hard to understand why labels are so attractive. I imagine it has something to do with the desire to group items into categories. We like to know exactly what we are dealing with. To see a row of boxes and immediately know there's a place in the world specifically for plastic bags or furniture polish can give us a surprising sense of security.

“**Our search for identity can never stray too far from the truth that we were created in God’s image.**”

We feel the same tendency with people. We like to label one another, and in many ways this is a good thing. We all have roles to play in the world, and proper and common nouns give us that sense of connection and understanding—it’s one reason we ask one another, “What do you do?”

This is a mom. This is a dad. This is a fireman. This is the mayor or the governor or the president. We like to know who we are dealing with, and even more, we like to know exactly who we are.

There is something right in that labeling. Those nouns and titles help us understand ourselves and one another, and they point to real and important roles in society and the family.

But we also tend to *add* to the labels and start seeking identity in descriptive words. We allow adjectives to group us into even smaller boxes—like the box that contains only red Legos. But when we do this, we miss out on the breadth that comes from celebrating multiple qualities, as well as the joy of locking arms with a diverse group of brothers and sisters.

Our search for identity can never stray too far from the truth that we were created in God’s image.

### **WORKING MOM**

I’m 41 years old. My children are 14 and 12. I spend most days in my office and most evenings in my house helping with homework or at the pool as a swim mom. Last week—like many weeks—was pretty hectic. I prepped for some important meetings, participated in a few conference calls, worked on projects and conducted

several marathon email clean-outs.

I also incorporated carpool trips, a child's dentist appointment, grocery stops, church gatherings and time in my own kitchen. Some moments I felt like I lived in the car. I went from dawn to dusk with few breaks, some highs and lows and the occasional sleep interruption.

It's easy to say, "I'm a working mom." I might say it with an amount of pride, or I might say it with an amount of insecurity. And some might say, "I don't know how you do it."

Around a dozen years ago, things looked a little different. I was 29. My children were 2 and not yet 1. My daughter was in the throes of a chronic health condition that required two hours of intensive treatments each day. We lived in a small town 90 minutes away from her doctors, and we had a regular rotation of appointments.

My husband was a pastor with a limited staff and massive ministry responsibilities. On any given day, I would change diapers, clean messes, read books, administer wet-wrap therapy or drive to the doctor's office. I also incorporated several ministry responsibilities in my church, a book club at the town library, a few contract hours as a transcriptionist and time in my own kitchen.

Some moments I felt like I lived in the car. I went from dawn to dusk with few breaks, some highs and lows and the (more than) occasional sleep interruption.

It's easy to look and say, "I was a *full-time* mom." I might say it with an amount of pride, or I might say it with an amount of insecurity. And some might have said, "I don't know how you do it."

The truth is, 10 years ago I was working. And I was a mom all the time. Last week I was working. And I was a mom all the time.

God has called us to be workers—all of us.

Our search for identity can never stray too far from the truth that we were created in God's image, and that we were created to be workers. Even after sin shattered everything, God sent his Son to make us new creatures who would be sent on the mission he established.

When we bear his image, we don't have to look at each other or in the mirror and say, "I don't know how you do it." Because we know the answer. God has given us all a mission and has given us each a unique calling. He has called us to be workers at home, in the marketplace, in churches and ministries, in the dentist's office and in the carpool line.

We all look different, but we fit into one box with one label: sinners saved by grace and deployed to do his work.

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## THE RECOVERING PERFECTIONIST

by Alysha Clark

I love rules and quality standards. Every field of study—whether art, music, mathematics, science or literature—has agreed upon standards of excellence. These standards reflect shared ideals of what is good, worthy or beautiful. Marks of goodness and beauty point toward a perfect, good and beautiful God. God is perfect in every way—in knowledge, in ethics, in love. Anything that is perfect and good in the world reflects his nature and character.

Worship of a perfect God demands perfection of his followers, or the closest we can get to it. Thus we ought to do everything with excellence. Paul exhorted the Colossians,

“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”  
(Col. 3:17)

Everything believers do—whether in work, studies or behaviors—should demonstrate that we live before the face of God and seek to honor him. Excellence involves fighting complacency and laziness, and it means being honest and stewarding time well.

## **THE CONSUMING NATURE OF PERFECTIONISM**

Pursuing excellence is a good thing. Yet my desire for excellence has often led me down the road of perfectionism. In certain areas of my life I want things to be “just so” in order to maintain personal harmony. As a result, I have taken on jobs that encourage this quest for perfection. The BBC News recently reported on “The Apostrophiser,” a vigilante who goes around at night fixing grammatical errors on store signs by adding or removing apostrophes as necessary without the owners’ knowledge.<sup>1</sup> He calls his mission a public service. This guy is my hero.

But at what point can we demand too much perfection, if there is such a thing? Recently I realized my pursuit of excellence was making me overly-critical of everything. I became frustrated when clients at work sent me reports full of comma splices and typos that I had to correct before entering them into our databases. I was irritated when someone I was trying to contact did not set an away message on her work email when she was out of office. I found myself consistently showing up to events on time, only to have to wait for everyone else to arrive.

After a few weeks of growing agitation, I came to see my own selfishness. While I do want everyone to do their best work and strive for excellence, I was frustrated because others’ actions were inconveniencing **me**.

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<sup>1</sup>“Meet the ‘Grammar Vigilante’ of Bristol,” BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-39459831/meet-the-grammar-vigilante-of-bristol> (accessed May 2, 2018).

## **PERFECTION AS IDOLATRY**

When I think about trying to do everything perfectly, and encouraging others to do the same, I wonder why this is so important. Nitpicking every detail and demanding precision causes me to ask myself: Which god am I trying to appease? When others fail to act according to my preferences, they aren't breaking rules or being incompetent or lazy. They are exposing my self-absorption.

An idol is anything that we place above God, who should be the highest object of our worship. When I obsess about minor things and correct everything that bothers me, I put myself at the center and demand others conform to me. God requires obedience of his followers, not flawlessness. If I try to spiritualize this desire by saying God requires perfection in everything, I am deceiving myself into thinking I am holier than others. I am the righteous one, the perfect person everyone should venerate and emulate.

Most people would admit to idolizing themselves. But if we examine ourselves closely enough, most of us are guilty of this. We think our time is more valuable than others' time and that other people shouldn't inconvenience us or cause us to do more work.

## **EXCELLENCE VS. PERFECTIONISM**

The self-aggrandizing nature of perfectionism does not negate the importance of excellence. We do honor God by doing good work, and the integrity of excellent work points to the gifts, skills and talents God graciously gave us. One way to assess whether we are striving toward encouraging excellence instead of perfection in others is to consider our motives. Do we want our colleagues to succeed and grow in their skills? Do we care about their personal growth and development? Or do we want our colleagues to perform in such a way that corresponds to our preferences because

“**Whom do we seek to serve - God or ourselves?**”

we like when things are done our way? Do we give others room to rise to new skill levels or do we tell them exactly what to do and how to do it?

**CONCLUSION**

Pursuing excellence is a good thing. We glorify God, the perfect creator and sustainer of the world, when we do good works. But in all that we do and in all our interactions with others, we must consider our motives for pursuing perfection. Whom do we seek to serve—God or ourselves?

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## THE JOYS AND DIFFICULTIES OF OUR ADOPTION

by Brittany Salmon

If you hang around our family for long, you'll quickly learn that we are passionate about orphan care and prevention. We have been blessed to grow our family through the gift of adoption and Lord willing, will do so again.

But discussing adoption can be difficult because everyone's adoption story is different. Our son's adoption was a transracial-domestic-open-infant-adoption. We have friends with foster-to-adopt stories, international adoption stories, adoption of older children, closed adoptions, semi-open adoptions, adoptions of children with varying medical and emotional needs. And if all of that lingo confuses you, it's okay. It confused me too before I started studying up on adoption.

The point I'm getting at is that our experience differs from oth-

ers, so I cannot speak to the experiences of the entire adoption community. But I wanted to share six things about adoption that our family has found to be true.

### **THREE THINGS WE CELEBRATE**

#### 1. Birth Parents

First and foremost, we love our son's birth mother. She is one of the bravest people we know, and we celebrate her every chance we get. Any person who finds themselves with an unplanned pregnancy but chooses to love the child enough to give them the gift of life is a hero in our book.

And in our family, birth parents are celebrated regardless of their story because they are some of the most Christ-like people who walk the earth. Choosing life, choosing stigma, in the face of an abortion-prevalent culture is a brave, hard thing.

#### 2. God's Sovereignty

We celebrate God's sovereignty even in the midst of difficult aspects of our stories, knowing that God is working for our good and his glory. Adopted children and families will have to wrestle with the loss of an initial birth family and come to grips with God's sovereign hand in those heartaches.

Celebrating God's sovereignty is incredibly difficult, and yet we choose to do so in both the highs and lows of life. We recognize the hand of God in placing each of us in our own families through a variety of means, and we choose to praise God for His provision and sustenance in both the joys and hardships that come with adoption.

### 3. Diversity

Our family looks different than most. We have identical twin blonde-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned girls and a loud, charismatic, chocolate-skinned, 20-month-old boy who doesn't meet a stranger. Not all adoptive families look physically different, but some do, and most adoptive families want to honor and celebrate their children's original culture, regardless of skin similarities or differences.

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**Adoption has taught us how to weep and praise at the same time.**

I know of all-white and all-black adoptive families who make frequent pilgrimages to their child's birth country or state. I know about interracial families who are intentional about exposing their children to their birth family's heritage and story. And our family does the same. We celebrate our children's differing abilities, cultures, backgrounds and personalities.

Adoption has been such a blessing in that it has opened the door for us to see God's good design in diversity and has given us the opportunity to openly celebrate and reflect His glory.

### **THREE DIFFICULTIES WE NAVIGATE**

#### 1. Co-mingling Emotions

Adoption has taught us how to weep and praise at the same time. I remember sitting in the hospital room thrilled to have met my new son, yet my heart broke as one woman placed her baby into my arms entrusting me to raise him in the ways of the Lord and to give him a life that she could only dream about. Sure, joy existed; both of us mamas in the room were smiling and crying. But grief and sadness were also ever present.

Learning to embrace two conflicting emotions at once is a difficulty that must be taught and learned, as many of us don't do this well. It is our responsibility as parents to teach our children that grieving the loss of their birth family doesn't conflict with their joy about being a part of our family. It is our responsibility to teach our son that loving his birth mother doesn't betray the mama who rocked him all those nights. His questions about his birth father don't betray his earthly father, and his grief and questions don't surprise his Heavenly Father either.

The co-mingling of joy and sorrow and questions and celebrations is a difficulty we joyfully navigate, leaning into God, the author of our stories, and wisdom from adoptive families who have gone before us.

## 2. Stigma

Some of our most painful difficulties thus far have been navigating the topic of adoption outside our home. Whether it's stigma due to the racial makeup of our family or adoption and orphan care, we have had our fair share of difficult conversations due to both the intentional and unintentional insensitivity of others.

One way you can bless adoptive families is to have the conversation with your kids about families who look differently and are made differently than yours. Talk about race, talk about adoption and explain that diversity is God's good design. One great resource to start is *God's Very Good Idea* by Trillia Newbell, (The Good Book Company, 2017) which is a great place to start when discussing diversity and God's design.

## 3. The Savior Complex

A savior complex in the adoption world is toxic for both the

adoptive parents and the adopted child, as it makes the child a ministry project and the parents the heroes. Once a week someone usually says, “You’re such a good person for taking that poor child in.” I get that folks are trying to be supportive. I’ve heard much worse, so I appreciate the good intentions behind those words. But addressing hurtful language, regardless of good intent, is one of the hardest difficulties to navigate as both a believer and an adoptive parent.

Hear me out: I am no one’s savior. I’m not my son’s hero, nor is he some poor child to be pitied. Our son’s story started out with loss, and he is not “lucky” to have us as parents. He is not anymore fortunate to have me as his mother than his sisters are. And if there is a hero in this story it is his birth mother, but truthfully she isn’t his savior either. We have one Savior who is the author of all our stories.

So we fight against the Savior Complex. We fight against elevating ourselves, against allowing others to elevate us and against the narrative that our son is some lucky orphaned child who is so fortunate to be saved by our goodness. This is difficult to navigate as the savior complex is so prevalent in not only our society, but it has slipped into our churches as well. As David Platt has said, “It’s important to realize that we adopt not because we are rescuers. No, we adopt because we are rescued.”<sup>1</sup>

## **WHY WE ADOPT**

Adoption is a blessing.

We love adoption and feel called to both the hardships and joys that it may bring, not because we are good people. No, we love

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<sup>1</sup> David Platt, “The Gospel and Adoption,” The Church at Brook Hills. <http://www.brookhills.org/app/blog/the-gospel-and-adoption/> (accessed May 2, 2018).

adoption because we are broken sinners who have been changed by a love that knows no bound. We adopt because we believe that God loves the orphan and the widow. Because of His love and redemption in our own lives, He has softened our hearts towards these he loves, too. We adopt because we believe when Jesus famously prayed “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”, He was praying for redemptive stories that reflect His glory in heaven to be lived here on earth. After all, adoption is but a mere glimpse of our own glorious redemption stories.

We celebrate our son’s adoption story. We remember God’s sovereignty. And we keep sharing our family’s story, hoping that as we celebrate adoption and navigate both its joys and hardships, we reflect God’s redemptive story in our own lives.

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## HUMAN VALUE AND THE PRO-LIFE ETHIC

by Amber Bowen

What does it mean to be pro-life?

The term “pro-life” has a narrow meaning in our current context and political discourse. Typically, when we say someone is pro-life we mean that they stand up for the rights of the unborn and oppose abortion.

While being a voice for the unborn is a significant part, that issue alone does not encompass the whole of being pro-life. We must be careful not to mistake the whole for the part.

The scriptures open our narrowly-focused definition, reminding us that all life is precious and should be defended. This is true of the unborn child at the earliest stages of development, a child with special needs, a wayward teenager bent on ruining her life, orphans, the homeless, refugees, immigrants, minorities, the elderly.

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**The Scriptures  
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focused definition,  
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should be defended.**

What do these examples of life have in common? What is the common thread of value that runs between them? The theologically-correct answer is that they are each made in the image of God and are the crown-

ing work of his creation. Our society, however, has proposed other bases for the value of human life.

Even though Christians may cognitively believe that humans have life because of the *imago Dei*, I believe if we dusted for the fingerprints of these alternative bases of value, we would be shocked by how scattered they are throughout the Church and within our hearts.

Here are three such models:

### **1. THE DARWINIAN MODEL**

The Darwinian model says people have value based on what they can and cannot offer to society. Those who have much to offer should be defended and protected, and those who will be a drain must be eliminated so they would not be an undue burden on others.

This model disguises itself under a false mask of compassion. For example, it argues for “quality of life” as a justification for terminating pregnancies of children with disabilities or ending the life of the elderly. It denies any intrinsic value of human life and claims that a person’s worth can be affected by a disability or a lack of functionality as determined by society. The meaning of life is centered on the survival of the fittest.

## **2. THE HUMANITARIAN MODEL**

Those who operate under this model value certain people based on their ability to evoke compassion or pull on heartstrings. One person's value is based on someone else's pity.

The problem with this subjective basis is that it extends compassion to some types of people but not others. For example, it's easy to feel a flood of compassion for an infant starving from hunger or lack of human affection. It's harder to feel that same sense of compassion for a 15-year-old with disabilities throwing a fit in the back of the movie theater. Some people may have a "heart" for certain groups of people such as refugees or the homeless, while others don't feel that same sense of compassion for them.

If we base our awareness or affirmation of the value of life on our own sense of pity for them, we are saying that worth is in the eye of the beholder, not intrinsic to the person.

## **3. THE PHARISAICAL MODEL**

The Pharisaical model bases a person's worth on their own choices and actions. If they have been responsible, hard-working, good people, they deserve our affirmation of their dignity and worth. If, however, they have messed up their lives through poor decisions and bad habits, they will reap what they have sown and will suffer Karma's justice. This model generates excuses and justification for overlooking certain people, placing them beneath our care and love.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?**

How much have these models seeped into our own hearts? Take the *Darwinian* model. Perhaps we wouldn't advocate for euthanasia or terminating the pregnancy of an unborn child diagnosed

with disabilities, but we do tend to value people based on what he or she has to offer.

James calls out this tendency in our own hearts manifesting itself in the Church. He writes:

“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ while you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there,’ or, ‘Sit down at my feet,’ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (Jas. 2:1-4)

What about the *Humanitarian* model? Though the Lord in his grace does give us compassion for the weak, it is all too easy for the Church to allocate more resources, time and pleading for the rights of those for whom it is easier to feel compassion. We must keep guard over our own hearts lest we begin to root our belief and conviction of others’ worth based on our feelings toward them. Instead, we must affirm a person’s intrinsic value and pray the Lord grants us hearts of compassion for them.

What about the *Pharisaical* model? Determining a person’s worth based on the choices he or she has made in life is a huge pitfall for American Christians operating under a stronger allegiance to the American Dream than the gospel. We look with pharisaical disdain at the homeless people on the side of the road, certain that they brought their condition on themselves and are therefore beneath our care and respect. We do the same for the high school girl who gets pregnant out of wedlock or the middle-aged man suffering from AIDS. We position ourselves to aid in the reaping of what we presume they have sown.

Clearly, then, we are tempted in all three areas. When it comes to being pro-life, why is it so easy for us to joyfully and passionately uphold the part and forget about the whole? Could it be that we are actually more heavily influenced by these alternative models of human value than we are by the gospel? We may not realize the traces of these models in our hearts and throughout our Churches, but they are most certainly there.

We must allow the Scriptures to shed light on those traces and remind us that all of life, from the womb to the tomb, is precious. The Fall corrupted many things, but even it did not take away the *imago Dei* from us. Our value is not based on what we have to offer, on our ability to evoke pity or on our aptitude to lead a perfect life. This is very good news for all of us.

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## WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS BLACK GIRL MAGIC

by Anteneshia Sanders

**“And don’t get it twisted, sis. I wake up every morning next to a headscarf and coconut oil. I’m married to a black queen.”  
– Randall Pearson**

I know I’m not the only person who erupted with a flamboyant “Yesssss!” from the other side of their TV screen in response to Randall Pearson’s praise for his wife. The scarf. The coconut oil. The melanin. I may as well be Beth Pearson. *This Is Us* is always in my business.

Fictional as the scene may have been, I could not separate my emotions from the moment. Having aspects of my own reality endorsed as good is like medicine to a dull ache that I live with.

I’ve been the black girl in predominately white spaces for much of my life. I’m used to standing out from those around me. My hair

seems to get bigger before it gets longer, and my skin is dark. The difficulties that come with being a double minority are not lost on me. Most of the time I don't feel unwelcome, I just feel *other*.

My sense of otherness has only increased in recent years. After events like the murder of Trayvon Martin and Colin Kaepernick's protests, some sort of chasm seemed to have opened between me and my white brothers and sisters in Christ. In recent months I have sat at Jesus' feet, asking Him to renew my fissured faith. As a result, I have found a greater appreciation for who God has created me to be. A growing movement has played an important role in this process.

### **#BLACKGIRLMAGIC**

Were you to comb through any social media platform, you would uncover a whole movement of black women celebrating the skin they're in. They're artists and scientists, activists and stay-at-home moms, and they're pushing back against the idea that the marriage of their melanin and femininity is a novelty. In realizing that my blackness and my womanhood is a gift, I've joined them.

The movement has a name: *Black Girl Magic*. It's a hashtag and a sentiment I can get behind both personally and theologically. When I'm able to look at women who look like me and see them succeed, it does feel like magic. We all long to see possibility. The deeper longing, however, is to see the ways that God has wired me and all my sisters for excellence. We too can take the gifts that God has given us and make an impact on the world around us. We can create, we can nurture, we can discover, we can dream.

For the believer, *Black Girl Magic* is not some manifesto of racial superiority. While some people would rather live in isolation, such isolation is contrary to the unity that we have been called to

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in Christ. Jesus has reconciled to Himself all who believe, creating in Himself one new man. The celebration of the black woman is not for the sake of division, but for the advancement of the Kingdom.

**The celebration of the black woman is not for the sake of division, but for the advancement of the Kingdom.**

The way that women of color are celebrating themselves is the way that the Church should be celebrating them, too. In fact, the church should be the loudest voice telling black women that they have value as image bearers and that they are prized by God. Further, it is important to women of color to hear fellow believers say, “We see you. We hear you. We believe you. We need your gifts.”

The church needs black girl magic.

### **EMBRACING #BLACKGIRLMAGIC IN THE CHURCH**

Not long into my seminary education, I began to question why I had no knowledge of black female theologians. The discovery of Truth’s Table podcast encouraged me in my call to ministry and desire for a theological education.

Representation matters.

My seminary is steadfast in the pursuit of diversity, seeking to equip students from all backgrounds to reach the nations. I am grateful that my school encourages my pursuit of a theological education both as an African American and as a female. It takes this kind of vocal and active advocacy to draw those who have been historically underrepresented.

Recent discussions have centered around the role that women have in theological education. Take the invaluable gifts and voices

that women bring to the theological table and add a little black girl magic. Black women’s experiences give us a unique perspective on the world, and this perspective is vital to the body of Christ. Often, we feel like we’re on the outside of evangelicalism looking in. While sometimes uncomfortable and isolating, this offers us a vantage point that allows us to see and hear things that might otherwise go unnoticed by our white brothers and sisters. In seeking faithfulness to the mission of God, the voices and insight of black women are vital in these areas.

Of course, black women are not the only minorities who need to be seen and heard. I can only speak from my own experience and from the experience of those like me. I’m increasingly in awe of God’s creativity and intentionality. From every tribe and tongue, He gathers a family who, by their love for one another, tells the world who He is.

As I attach the hashtag to tweets and photographs, I am thankful for *Black Girl Magic*. I’m thankful for the black women who have lived it in front of me—for my mother, grandmother and aunt. Through their faith, they have taught me that what Scripture says is true of us. We were knit together in this skin and we’ve been set apart for good works.

Head scarf, coconut oil and all.

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**Anteneshia Sanders is pursuing a Master of Arts in Ministry to Women at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She enjoys rich friendships and gold glitter.**



# BLACK LIVES VS. BLUE LIVES: YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHOOSE

by Krystal Wilson

It happens all too often. I turn on the evening news and cringe at another shooting involving a white officer and black male victim. Officer-involved shooting victims have become household names.

Unfortunately, our thinking about these victims and discussion about these tragedies is fraught with polarization and division. Some people are pro-officers; others are pro-Black Lives Matter. And competing voices urge us to decide: *Whose side are you on?*

As the daughter of a retired police officer, a former officer myself and a black woman, I have a unique perspective on these events. Here are a few things that are helpful to keep in mind.

## WHY ALL THE SHOOTINGS?

Hundreds of people die each year from officer-involved shoot-

ings. The majority of those shooting victims aren't black, but unarmed blacks are killed at a higher rate than other races.<sup>1</sup>

Before we point the finger at our officers by assuming they're all untrustworthy racists—and before we vilify the victims by digging up criminal histories—we must take a step back. We must look at the framework of our larger society, the society the officers and black males operate within. It is time we consider the imbedded systemic racism existing covertly within our society.

First, consider the historical framework. In our not-so-distant past, officers were hosing black protestors in the streets, and blacks who were seen as a threat were murdered in alleys or bludgeoned beyond recognition with batons. Thus for years a tension between the black community and our officers has grown, and many blacks are taught to distrust (or even hate) police officers and view them as the enemy. Of course, history alone doesn't explain the shootings; it merely helps us understand that these issues aren't recent developments.

Second, consider the cultural framework. The media often portrays blacks, particularly black males, as dangerous criminals or predators. Society often buys into these perceptions. Think about it: In many instances, an officer is dispatched to an area because of a citizen's phone call. Now who observes a young black child playing in a park and assumes he's dangerous? Who sees a black man sitting at an elementary school and assumes he's a predator? Or who sees a black male running down the street and thinks, "criminal"? We must look at each shooting as an individual case, each shooting does exist within a historical and cultural tapestry.

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<sup>1</sup> Mapping Police Violence. <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/> (accessed May 2, 2018).

## **WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?**

The media will show us images of slain officers in uniform and vacant patrol cars, meanwhile broadcasting images of angry family members, city-wide protests or even riots. The talk of the day will center on, “Whose side are you on?”

Many voices will say the victims are at fault. They should have obeyed the officer’s commands; they shouldn’t have run or resisted arrest. Other voices will argue that the officers are at fault. All officers are racist and not to be trusted.

But both viewpoints are wrong. We must be careful not to allow the few to represent the whole. We cannot see a few officers who have misused their power and assume that all officers adhere to such practices. We cannot see a few black males that committed a crime and assume that they are all up to “no good.”

I recall many sleepless nights researching ways to improve the community I patrolled. And I’m not alone. I know many officers who spend their evenings walking the streets and talking with the residents about their hopes, dreams and fears. I know many officers who are weighed down by the evil they see day in and day out; they see the worst people do to one another and must find the strength to continue. I know many who suit up every day and kiss their spouse and kids as if it could be their last, as the spouses are haunted by the fear that they may never see their loved ones again. I know all the little moments they miss, all the holidays they’ve worked through, all the family celebrations they’ve skipped to work and serve citizens who may never appreciate their sacrifice.

However, I also know the very real struggle of being black in America. I am all too familiar with the hateful rhetoric and negative treatment of blacks. I’m mindful of how people can expect the worst of blacks, despite their efforts to “be a good person.” I’ve felt

the awkward feeling when something is stolen from a coworker and I'm the first person everyone looks at.

Nevertheless, we don't have to choose a side. We can be both pro-officers and pro-Black Lives Matter. We can value officers' lives and question someone's decisions. We can believe most officers are honest and upright and analyze whether an officer should be held legally responsible for disregarding another's life. We can acknowledge that, yes, all lives matter and that black lives matter. (And to say black lives matter doesn't negate anything; it simply calls attention to what should be true within our larger society but isn't. Many black Americans would like for others to acknowledge that they cannot be slain in the street by those sworn to protect them.) So, as we process these tragedies, may we stop rushing to extremes and stand on solid middle ground.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

How do we move forward? First, we need to understand that these shootings are symptoms of a larger deep-seated problem. Unfair sentencing within courts, biased hiring practices and racial zoning and land use all point to a larger, structural issue.

Second, we need to understand our responsibility as Christians. We need to pray for our broken world, view law enforcement officers as people in need of the gospel, seek unity in our churches (not merely in representation) and believe that silence is not an option. After all, God's word tells us that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and have inherent worth and value. We must share our truth with a hurting world.

Within our churches, we can also intentionally develop deep, healthy relationships with church members that look nothing like us. Elders can speak with their black congregates and other

“ **Be more than social media warriors.**

people groups to get their perspective. Pastors can create spaces in which the body can come together to dialogue about these tragedies.

Refrain from being dismissive or ignoring the issue because race is a sensitive topic. Pray for wisdom and opportunities to address these issues. Be more than social media warriors. And refrain from remaining silent.

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**Krystal Wilson is a mother, wife and daughter of the King. She's the daughter of two selfless public servants, and she's passionate about criminal justice and seeing low income, high-crime areas reshaped by the gospel.**



## HELPING THE POOR WITHOUT HURTING THEM

by Christy Britton

When I boarded my jet for Kenya in 2015, I couldn't wait to arrive at the Nairobi slums and get busy. Many people there needed help. I was prepared to visit, assess the needs and figure out what I could do. The need was overwhelming, but I'm a fixer—and I was armed and ready to fix.

I traveled with the best intentions but the worst approaches. I was arrogant, ignorant and culturally insensitive—like most Americans who have had little interaction with different cultures. I needed a good dose of cultural sensitivity.

Cultural sensitivity involves acknowledging that cultural differences exist between peoples and that one culture is not necessarily better or worse than another. Engaging different cultures with humility requires us to be culturally sensitive.

## “ Good intentions aren’t enough.

One of the more innocent examples of my cultural insensitivity occurred during lunch at a restaurant in Nairobi. I was uneasy about using the “squatty potty.” Many places have restrooms that consist of a hole in the bottom of the floor that you squat over to use the bathroom. I asked my new Kenyan friends if there were any “real toilets” nearby. My seemingly innocent question displayed my belief that the Western toilet I was familiar with was right and the toilet they were familiar with was wrong. The squatty potty isn’t an inferior toilet; it’s just different.

Cultural sensitivity becomes an important issue when we try to provide aid or fix injustices. As image bearers, we desire to step in and bring reconciliation to injustices around the world. But when we step into a situation believing Western ways are best, we are not necessarily in step with Jesus. Jesus was not a Westerner. We should be ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), not our culture. We should walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), seeking solutions to problems that bring him glory above all else. We should humbly acknowledge that what is best in America is not necessarily what is best in Ukraine.

We want to help. We have good intentions. But good intentions aren’t enough. Here are five ways to demonstrate cultural sensitivity when helping different cultures.

### **1. SHORT-TERM MISSIONS TEAMS SHOULD STIMULATE THE ECONOMY, NOT SQUELCH IT.**

We think we’re helping the poor when we send boxes overseas filled with our old shirts. They need clothes, and we have more than we need. Problem solved, right? But when we send our old clothes overseas, we’re actually putting a local seamstress out

of work. We're causing a clothing store to let go of an employee because no one in the village is coming in to buy clothes. Why? Because the Americans gave them clothes for free. No price discounts can compete with that market.

Of course, we should give indiscriminately at times. For example, in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, victims need food, clothing and shelter. But entire villages don't need rice flown in indefinitely. They need the ability to grow rice for themselves, and families need sustainable income to be able to buy rice from the rice farmer.

People in Vietnam have been feeding and clothing themselves for centuries. Skilled craftsmen live in Haiti. We need to focus our efforts on empowering them to provide for their themselves, for the glory of God.

## **2. EMPOWER LOCALS BY PROVIDING TRAINING IN USEFUL TRADES.**

We think we're helping the poor by building a community center for them. We send a team to their area and spend the week constructing the building. They need a space to meet, we can take a week's vacation, fly there and give it to them. Problem solved, right? Yet we're actually denying the local craftsmen the ability to provide for families by performing their trades.

We can empower locals by teaching them the skills to perform trades in their communities and thus develop their local economies. For example, we could train seamstresses and tailors to clothe their own people instead of shipping our used t-shirts overseas. We could train local craftsmen instead of doing the work for them.

I work with an organization called 127 Worldwide, and we partner with local leaders around the world to care for orphans and widows. We have befriended a pastor in Malawi who shepherds

a church of 600 people. The community is very poor, and their average offering is about \$11 per week. Instead of throwing money at this sister church across the world, we've partnered with the Acts 29 church planting network, of which pastor Robert Manda of Malawi is a member. Together, we're developing an aquaponics system (symbiotic relationship where fish and vegetables grow simultaneously) on the church's land. We'll train locals to manage it. When the fish and vegetables are harvestable, members of the local church will be able to sell them in the market to provide for their families—and invest more giving back into their local church for Kingdom work.

We are not creating an environment where the Malawi church is dependent on us for survival. We are empowering this church to care for themselves and contribute to their local Kingdom work.

### **3. PROMOTE AN ENVIRONMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING INSTEAD OF DEPENDENCY AND ENTITLEMENT.**

My Kenyan friends have taught me more about having joy in the Lord and depending on him to supply all my needs than anyone else. I don't visit them anxious to teach them all I know that they don't. I listen. I learn.

We should value what we can learn from one another. We recognize we're all image bearers. When we don't honor the *imago Dei* in others, we devalue them. We also pity them. Pity may seem harmless, but pity comes from our pride. When we pity someone, we inherently put ourselves above them. However unintentionally, we view them as inferior.

Like Christ, we are called to show compassion. Compassion is different from pity in that we sympathize with the sufferings of others. We understand them because we feel alongside them. We

recognize that a poor person's identity does not come from their lack of material possessions. We can identify with their poverty because we are aware of our own poverty before the Lord.

When we see a person in need, we aren't looking down at them. We're side by side in our poverty. In Christ, we have no superiority. We have our need and they have their need, and we stretch out our hands horizontally, not vertically.

#### **4. REALIZE THAT WHAT WE VALUE IN AMERICA IS DIFFERENT THAN WHAT IS VALUED IN OTHER COUNTRIES.**

We value efficiency, speed and results. Many other cultures value relationships more than results. Imagine the tension this creates when Americans come in with the fix-it mentality.

Last year, I was working alongside a team of Kenyans and Americans building an agricultural project. The team leader asked me stop working and sit under a tree and visit with a Kenyan woman who'd come to see the project. While I was grateful for the break, I felt guilty that everyone was working hard all around me while I conversed in the shade. My team leader knew this Kenyan woman valued our relationship with her over our labor for her.

#### **5. REMEMBER THAT GOD IS ALREADY AT WORK.**

We aren't introducing Him to a place He's forsaken. He's there; He's working, and we want to humbly walk with Him where He is. He is what every culture needs, not us. We work alongside and for Him, for the glory of His name among the nations.

#### **HELPING WITHOUT HURTING**

We want to help people, but we often end up hurting them. I fear that we are unintentionally conditioning generations of people in

materially-poor contexts to be dependent on us. Our actions communicate that they are incapable of handling their own survival, and we must do it for them. We undermine their dignity. We are not their savior; we must point them to the One who is.

The key to helping the poor with cultural sensitivity is to acknowledge and honor the imago Dei within them. Gen. 1:27 teaches that we are all made in the image of God. In the book, *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert write, “Instead of seeing themselves as being created in the image of God, low-income people often feel they are inferior to others.”<sup>1</sup> They are not inferior, nor do we need to treat them as such. They are fellow image bearers.

We must walk humbly and recognize our own poverty before the Lord. We, like David, cry out to the Lord, “As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me (Ps. 40:17).” In humility, we recognize that everything we have, we receive from our father (1 Cor. 4:7). We recognize God’s grace towards us and that motivates us to show grace to others.

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**Christy Britton is a wife and mom to four sons. She is an orphan advocate for 127 Worldwide, and she writes for various blogs including her own: [www.benedywell.com](http://www.benedywell.com).**

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2012), 61.



## WALK IN JUSTICE

by Brianna Copeland

On a summer night six years ago, the Lord burdened the hearts of my two best friends and me, and he moved us to act. We were tired of just hearing statistics and stories about human trafficking. *We wanted to do something.*

That night, Save Our Sisters was born.

After much prayer, we asked our youth pastor if we could have a cookout with our youth group to raise some money. That was our first event in September 2010. Last summer, July 2017, we will open the first of two safe homes for rescued trafficking victims in Moldova. And it all started with a sleepover.

Our desire to do something that night did not come from our knowledge about the slave industry—because trust me, we knew

nothing—but that desire came from what we loved. And this is what we’ve learned: You walk in justice when you love justice, and our love for justice must come from our love for Jesus.

So how do you walk in justice? More than that, how do you love justice? The greatest truth about justice is that it has a name, and that name is Jesus Christ.

We can learn what it means to walk in justice, to love justice, by looking at Jesus. What did Jesus love? How did He choose justice every day?

### **JUSTICE IN SCRIPTURE**

In our pursuit of justice, the Lord has used three specific passages to clarify what it means to walk in justice as a believer. In Is. 61:1, 3, the prophet writes:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is talking about the Christ that is to come and what He will be like. This is the same passage of Scripture that Jesus reads in the synagogue in Luke 4. Luke tells us that after Jesus finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and told the congregation, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Jesus came to earth, anointed by the Spirit of God, to do just

this: to bind up the broken-hearted, to preach good news and to set the captives free. And Luke 4 teaches us that if we are in Christ, this is also our calling. We are the ones now anointed by the Spirit. We are the ones sent to bind up the broken-hearted, to preach the good news and to set captives free. When Save Our Sisters began, we realized with so much conviction that to be like Christ means we must walk in justice. The Lord has made that very clear, and we want to be obedient.

Another passage that always reminds me of what I should love is Matthew 23:23. In this passage we find Jesus sternly correcting the Pharisees for trying to gain favor with the Lord by keeping the letter of the law, while completely missing the spirit of the law: to love God, and to love others. Jesus tells them, “[You] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). Walking in justice is about loving God, loving what God loves and loving our neighbor.

The Lord has shown me that he does not just call us to fight for justice or campaign at an event. More than that, He calls us to love justice, to clothe ourselves in justice and to walk in it daily. True justice is a little less about passionate advocacy, although that is definitely a part of any justice ministry. But it is more about faithful love.

### **THREE WAYS TO WALK IN JUSTICE**

So how do you love justice? What do you do when the problem of injustice seems overwhelming and pervasive?

#### **1. BE A CONSCIOUS CONSUMER.**

Educate yourself and start considering what small life choic-

es you can make to create life change for your neighbor. For example, my husband and I have decided to buy only fair-trade coffee and chocolate for our home, where we know that our enjoyment of those good things does not come at the expense of hours of exploited labor for harvesters on harsh cocoa and coffee bean farms.

Also, consider where your clothes come from. Often, large department stores and even many name-brand companies outsource their labor to factories in Southeast Asia where women may work for 16-20 hours a day for little to no pay. Practically, you can buy second-hand clothes, where your consumer money is not going back into the pockets of these companies but towards a local business or non-profit. Another way to do this is to adopt a minimalist mindset and slowly start to replace your wardrobe with fair-trade clothing from companies that pay their employees a fair wage.

## **2. STOP WATCHING PORNOGRAPHY.**

This seems like it might be unnecessary to say, but it is not. Pornography is inextricably linked to the international sex-slave trade. Nearly 80% of the women and children found in pornographic material have been forced, coerced or threatened into performing sex acts in front of cameras and many of them are sold, traded and trafficked by pimps. The connection between the sex-slave industry and pornography can no longer go unnoticed.

The revenue from sex trafficking is higher than ever before at \$99 billion dollars annually, and that is largely due to Internet consumers. In addition to explicit pornography, the soft porn found in many movies and shows today is the result of America's hyper-sexualized culture and further desensitizes us to the

# “Our daily decisions end up defining our lives.”

humanity of the person we are watching. So, consider what you watch and the effect it has for the 22 million sex slaves around the world.

## 3. CARE FOR THE ORPHAN.

Orphans, whether they have biologically lost both parents or are functionally left without guardians, are among society’s most vulnerable. Because of their vulnerability and lack of life skills, they are intentionally preyed upon by traffickers and after a period of conditioning are exploited for sex and labor. There are a multitude of ways to care for orphans, and the Lord has made it clear that this is part of justice and part of being a believer:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (Jas. 1:27)

You can care for orphans through adoption, sponsorship, support of orphan-care ministries, fundraising for adoptive families, fostering and fostering to adopt domestically. The foster care system is the number one way that American children end up in the trafficking industry. Consider opening your home, your heart, to care for the Fatherless.

## DAILY DECISIONS

Perhaps you believe that just because you cannot end the problem of injustice by yourself, your efforts are worthless. This is one of Satan’s greatest lies, and everyday justice chooses to believe just the opposite:

Our daily choices end up *defining our lives*.

So, consider the effect your everyday choices can have in changing lives. Choose everyday justice and let your love for justice come from your love for Jesus.

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**Brianna Copeland is a founding member of Save Our Sisters, an anti-trafficking organization that pursues justice and healing for victims of human trafficking. She studied English at The College at Southeastern, and she hopes to continue to develop her love for writing and use it to glorify Christ by giving a voice to the voiceless and vulnerable.**



## YOUR SMARTPHONE IS A TOOL. DO YOU USE IT WELL?

by Ashley Gorman

Recent developments and conversations have opened our eyes to the various ways technology has impacted daily, human life. Notice the term *human* life is used here—not Christian life, or American life, or male life, or female life, or church life, or righteous life, or unrighteous life or any other subset of life we could think of. Technology is an equal-opportunity life-changer and rains down on the just and the unjust alike all around the globe. The smartphone is obviously the most common vehicle of this impact.

### THE GOOD

Some of the impact of the smartphone is good. For example, we are better equipped for emergencies and tragedies. Severe weather notifications and Amber Alerts can be sent to all phones at once, helping the public rally behind one another in hardship

and even track down a kidnapper.

Also, smartphones allow us to document life-altering moments in real time, whether that's the birth of our child or a crime witnessed that can help in court cases. There's even evidence suggesting that although the smartphone is changing the way our brain is wired, the transformation is a good one for humans.<sup>1</sup> Instead of logging away random information, we log away something better: how to *find* information. The smartphone has changed the filing system in our brains, and many say that it's a step forward in human thinking, not backward. In a world cluttered with more information than we know what to do with, this new filing system will save us where we would have otherwise drowned in the constant, lightening-speed, bombarding data this digital age throws at us.

On top of this, the person-to-person app industry (also known as the "sharing economy") has finally put a lid on the big business trend of overcharging for certain services and enhanced human connection. For example, we stay in another person's home when we travel (through Airbnb) instead of staying in an isolated, one-size-fits all hotel room, and we get in another person's car to catch a ride somewhere (through Uber and Lyft) instead of grabbing a cab. We're using each other's goods and services instead of trusting a big corporation to do it for us, and as a result, it's making big businesses more ethical in their pricing and experiential in their philosophy in order to keep up. These sharing-economy smartphone apps also help Americans trust each other in an age of outrage, skepticism and distrust.

For Christians in particular, our smartphones can connect us to

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<sup>1</sup> Betsy Sparrow, Jenny Liu, and Daniel M. Wegner, "Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips," *Science* 333 (2011): 776-78.

wonderful teaching from anointed and prophetic leaders by means of video sermons or podcasts. For believers overseas who can't meet in person due to safety reasons, technology offers them the ability to update other Christians nearby about their situation. Some pastors in persecuted areas can even take online seminary courses to learn biblical exposition and good theology for their congregations.

Added to all this, of course, is the basic pragmatic help certain apps offer us. Moms in the neighborhood can coordinate play dates, parents of kids on the soccer team can communicate much more efficiently than they did 10 years ago, text threads offer a work team the ability to collaborate quickly without clogging up their email, invitations can be sent out electronically to save on unnecessary event costs and so on.

## **THE BAD**

We all know that some of the impact that smartphones have on us, however, is also bad. For example, our smartphones usually further our addiction to distraction. They tempt us to ignore the flesh and blood around us for in favor of a glowing but lifeless screen. In other words, we miss really wonderful moments with those we love because we'd rather spend time clanking away at an aluminum box. Though technology promises to give us more time by making life more efficient, more often than not, it's actually stealing a ton of our time.

Constant use of smartphones is also linked to high levels of depression, anxiety, anger and comparison. These symptoms are especially acute in teens. On top of this, research tells us that society is losing its literacy, social skills, creativity and empathy due to the immediate, condensed and virtual communication style on our smartphones.



**The effect of smartphones in our daily lives is contingent upon the motivations of the hands that hold them.**

And then there's the other obvious bad things technology offers us through the use of our phones. The sexual objectification and exploitation of human beings in the form of pornography. The dark web where criminals go to hatch plans that could destroy innocent lives and entire economies. The central role smartphones play in the sex-trafficking industry. The growing teen-suicide rates due to online bullying. The list could go on.

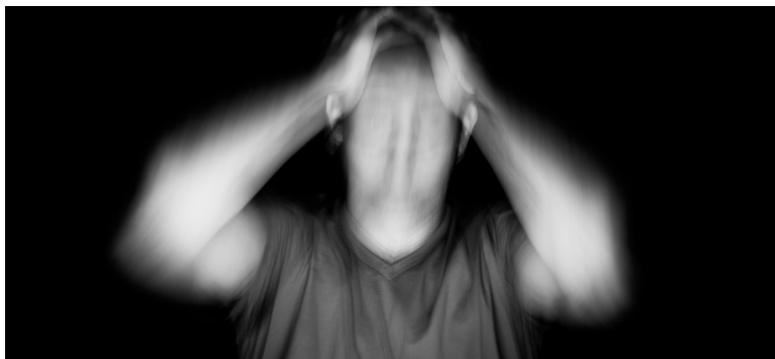
**A TOOL**

Given that our smartphones have the ability to bear either bad or good fruit in our daily lives, we must conclude that it's simply a *vessel* or a *tool*. The effect of smartphones in our daily lives is contingent upon the motivations of the hands that hold them. In other words, technology is just another thing humans should thoughtfully and prayerfully steward.

Research far and wide suggests that technology is best used, as in the case of almost everything else in life, in moderation. *Overuse* is usually the culprit of smartphone addiction, and it is usually the dividing line between enjoying technology and being enslaved to it.



**Ashley Gorman is the Acquisitions and Development Editor for Women's Books at B&H Publishing Group, an imprint of LifeWay Christian Resources. Her passions include books, biblical literacy, women's discipleship, writing, speaking and foster care. She is currently finishing her M.Div. at SEBTS, where she has served on the leadership team of The Society for Women in Scholarship. She and her family live in Nashville, TN.**



## CONFESSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN WHO STRUGGLED WITH GENDER IDENTITY

by Jean-Yael Wallis

“I was born a girl, but I want to be a boy.”

I never actually said those words out loud, but I thought them a lot. Between the ages of 9 and 15, I did not want to be a girl. I wanted to be a boy. In my mind, I wasn't fit to be a girl. I wasn't pretty (or so I thought). I enjoyed sports and roughhousing. I was stronger than the guys my age and a more naturally-gifted leader.

According to the religion and culture I knew, being a boy made so much more sense. My religion said that only men could be leaders, and my culture told me that women should be beautiful. Since I was a strong leader and didn't think I was beautiful, I logically thought, “Perhaps I should not be a woman.”

Of course, I never voiced something so taboo out loud. Instead, I made subtle changes to make sure that I was perceived like one

of the boys. Over the course of my fifth-grade year, I progressively cut my hair shorter and shorter until I had something slightly longer than a pixie cut. I had already been running around in tomboy clothing since the third-grade, so finding clothes in the boys' section of the store was not difficult. When I entered sixth-grade, my teachers actually mistook me for a boy. I was proud.

Many children are going through the same struggles I went through. Puberty hits, and suddenly these children are uncomfortable with their bodies and places in the world. Some of them will decide that they do not fit the manhood or womanhood mold they've been exposed to. Logic will then say, "If I am not one, I must be the other."

Studies show that, left to themselves, these feelings will disappear toward the end of puberty for most of these children.<sup>1</sup> However, in the future, most of these children will not keep their thoughts to themselves. Instead, they will confess their feelings... and then be encouraged to follow them.

Between the rampant media coverage about transgender issues and the bathroom wars, children are not really being left to themselves anymore. For any child who does struggle with gender identity, our culture is going to assault them with loads of information. And most of this information will not come from the perspective of truth.

The church needs to be ready for an open dialogue about this significant problem. Here are some practical tips for what your church can do to help these children navigate such a serious struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael W. Chapman, "Johns Hopkins Psychiatrist: Transgender is 'Mental Disorder;' Sex Change 'Biologically Impossible,'" CNSNews.com, <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/johns-hopkins-psychiatrist-transgender-mental-disorder-sex-change> (accessed May 2, 2018).

## **1. PRAY.**

This seems like the obvious “Sunday School” answer, but we truly have no more powerful weapon than prayer. Here are some specific things to pray for those struggling with gender identity and children in general:

1. That they would know salvation through Jesus Christ.
2. That they would know and cherish the Bible as authoritative and allow it to continually renew their minds.
3. That they would have a clear understanding of manhood and womanhood.
4. That they would have a clear sense of God’s calling for their lives.
5. That they would have a clear view of themselves, the way God sees them.

These items are crucial for any person to pray over any child but especially for those struggling with gender identity.

## **2. TEACH BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD.**

From my own experience in struggling with gender identity and from reading the accounts of people who choose to go through a transition of gender, I find that most people struggling with gender identity simply think they do not fit the mold of manhood or womanhood that they have been presented with.

But we need to understand that womanhood and manhood are not molds like cookie cutters. Just like people come in all different physical sizes, shapes and colors, women and men come with all different kinds of gifts and ways of thinking that are still compatible with manhood and womanhood.

Even within the scope of biblical roles, our personalities encom-

pass a beautiful spectrum. Women are strong, sensitive, loud, quiet, tough, social, introverted, thoughtful, empathetic, athletic, direct, passive and assertive. They can be gifted with leadership, evangelism, hospitality, faith, creativity and technological intuition. Not one of those traits is incompatible with womanhood or manhood.

What makes a man a man and a woman a woman involves biology, to be sure, but it also involves a loving God who makes no mistakes and cares about every facet of our lives, including the ways we express womanhood and manhood. Every good thing is gifted to us by God (Jas. 1:17) and gender is one of those good gifts. The logic that initially drove me away from embracing my true gender identity (“I am not this, so I must be that”) is also part of what drew me back to seeing what God had intended for me. “God does not make mistakes. God made me a woman. God also gave me these gifts and ways of thinking. Therefore, God fully intended for me to be a woman who thinks, feels, looks and is gifted the way I am.”

### **3. PRACTICE SPEAKING TRUTH.**

The church is the physical representation of Christ on earth. Therefore, the church needs to speak the words of Christ to the world at large. This includes children, especially children struggling with gender identity.

Call them chosen. Call them beloved. Call them beautiful. Do not wait for girls to tell you they believe they are ugly. Do not wait for boys to tell you that they cannot do anything right. If you wait for that time, you will be fighting an uphill battle. Another part of what drew me back from my gender identity struggles was that I started to hear people when they told me I was beautiful. The thing is, it often takes more than one person to speak into the

“**People need to know that it is okay to struggle, but it is not good to struggle alone.**”

life of a struggling child before they begin to get the message.

Church, work together. Tell the girls they are beautiful. Tell the boys that they are strong. This is how they will come to know the way that God sees them. Remember, Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter

long before Peter actually became a rock in the church. So encourage them with your words. Even if you do not see it yet, our omniscient God does.

The culture will spend plenty of time telling children that they are not enough. The church needs to be a place where they will be told the truth, including the truth of how God sees them.

Ultimately, the church is going to be the key to helping all people navigate through tough issues. In order to do that, we need to open a dialogue about these struggles. People need to know that it is okay to struggle, but it is not good to struggle alone. The church needs to be ready to come alongside these children in their struggles with compassion and understanding. Only then will they be ready and able to listen to truth— the truth about who God is and who He made them to be. This is the truth that actually does have the power to set people free.

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**\*Name changed.**



## **A FRAMEWORK FOR BOTH THE ENERGIZED AND THE OVERWHELMED**

by Cas Monaco

As a budding missiologist, I am being trained to research and analyze the church and culture within a sound, biblical framework. Since I'm on staff with Cru, I put my learning into practice as I interact with city leaders and Kingdom citizens participating in the Great Commission across the country actively.

We collaborate with all sorts of leaders who seek to steward the gospel well. Many pastor or partner with churches in the urban core. Some serve millennials by helping them to navigate the precarious path between faith and work. Others encourage actors, artists, filmmakers and authors. One thing these believers have in common, whether Cru staff, educators, civil servants, financial analysts or computer programmers, is passion and a longing to make a difference for God's Kingdom in their field of

influence or their neighborhood.

As we dialogue with followers of Jesus, we reflect on the rapidly changing culture and consider how we can effectively express the gospel in word and deed. We ask questions like:

- What does it look like to stand for Christ in the public square?
- How can we wholeheartedly engage in social justice and serve the marginalized in our society?
- How do mass migration and immigration pose new challenges for the mission and missions?

“**The global reality screams for hope, and the gospel provides the answer.**”

I don't know about you, but I vacillate between feeling energized by the myriad opportunities and overwhelmed by the weight of our current reality. How can we, the Church, faithfully steward the beautiful gospel of Jesus Christ?

As I've mulled this over, I've become convinced that we must develop a missional framework that is eschatological, Christocentric and Trinitarian.

### **1. WE NEED A MISSIONAL FRAMEWORK THAT'S ESCHATOLOGICAL.**

The global reality screams for hope, and the gospel provides the answer.

The entire storyline of the Bible points toward an eschatological hope: God makes Himself known through his creation and new creation. God's promise of redemption, announced at the Fall and wrapped in hope, echoes across salvation history and

promises never to disappoint.

Here's why this matters: True hope provides peace now, in the face of uncertainty and an ever-changing landscape and motivation to persevere as we anticipate the kingdom not yet realized.

“So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:17–20)

## **2. WE NEED A MISSIONAL FRAMEWORK THAT'S CHRISTOLOGICAL.**

We must make every effort to situate Christ at the very center of our missional framework, for He provides the plumb line for hope. Paul, in the book of Colossians, reminds us of Christ's preeminence:

“He is the very image of God, the creator and sustainer of all things, and the one through whom all things have been reconciled. Through Christ alone we are free to draw near, with confidence, to the throne of grace because in Christ we are holy and blameless” (Col. 1:13–23; Heb. 4:14–16).

Not only that, but Jesus incarnate also modeled a life of selflessness and service. He proclaimed good news to the poor and the marginalized, dined with the dirty, forgave the dastardly and freed us all from the prison of sin by hanging on the cross. Peter reminds us,

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Pet. 2:21–24)

By adopting a Christocentric missional framework, we’ll focus on the One “who was, and is, and is to come,” (Rev. 1:8) and we’ll hold in tension the reality of life in this moment with the promise of God’s restored Kingdom still to come.

### **3. WE NEED A MISSIONAL FRAMEWORK THAT’S TRINITARIAN.**

The Trinitarian nature of mission is remarkable. As noted above, eschatological hope and the story of redemption begins in Genesis, speeds through the canon and ends in triumph in the City of God. All throughout, our Triune God is at work in the nation of Israel, and in the hearts and lives of individuals like Abraham and Sarah, Hannah and Samuel, David and Solomon, and eventually Mary and Elizabeth.

The Trinity is at work in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, and together they inaugurate the new Kingdom evidenced by God’s new creation coming to life in the book of Acts. We watch as the wind of the Spirit blows through Middle East and into Europe, calling and empowering individuals like Paul and Peter, James, and John, Priscilla and Aquila, Lydia and Philip to plant and grow new churches.

The ripple effect of growth and expansion continues today, some 2,000 years later, not because of our deep and abiding understanding of the church and culture, but because of the un-

changing nature, purpose and faithfulness of the triune God.

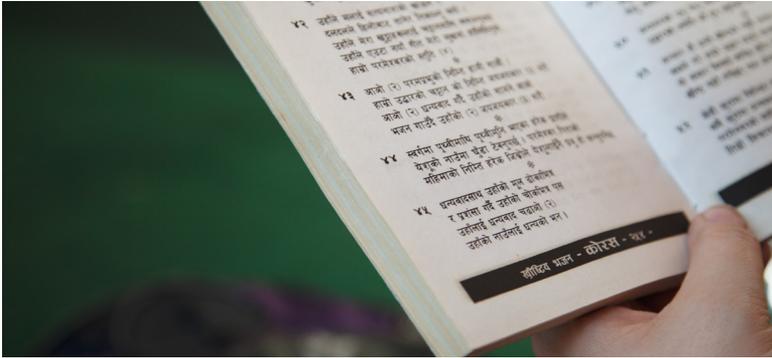
By adopting a Trinitarian missional framework, we recognize that we're relying on the same faithful God whose hand is so clear in Scripture.

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’” (Rev. 21:3–5)

So, how do we faithfully steward the beautiful gospel of Jesus Christ today? We can start by developing an *Eschatological-Christocentric-Trinitarian* missional framework that regularly reminds us that our sure and steadfast hope, both today and forever, centers on Jesus Christ, and rests on the faithfulness of God the Father, Son and Spirit.

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# HOW SOUTHEAST ASIA HELPED ME ENGAGE MY OWN CULTURE

by Harper McKay

I'll be the first to admit that reverse culture shock is hard. After living in Southeast Asia for nearly two years, America was both strange and familiar, welcoming yet uninviting.

In the midst of eating all the Chick-fil-A I could and catching up with friends and family, I found myself often confused in conversations, sometimes even angry. I criticized people for how they spent their time. I couldn't understand the topics people chose to talk about.

I heard it explained that I came from a square culture (America) and moved to a circle culture (Southeast Asia). My constant efforts to understand a circle culture as a square turned me into a triangle, resulting in me not fitting into my own square culture upon my return. While explanations like this helped me not to

feel crazy, they really didn't give me a way to live as a triangle in a square culture. Basically, you're told you've changed, no one gets you and now you just have to deal with it.

But then someone told me I didn't have to settle for "that's just the way it is." I could use the differences in me to make an impact on my home culture.

You see, to be a triangle means you have the unique privilege to be a constant learner of culture.

Although I'm really just beginning this process, I have noticed a few things that my time in Southeast Asia taught me about engaging my own culture from the inside.

## **1. TO ENGAGE CULTURE, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND IT, EVEN YOUR OWN.**

As a missionary, I entered Southeast Asia with a constant drive to learn—learn the language, learn the culture, learn the needs. At least some part of my day every single day was spent asking, "Why do they do it this way?" and often "How does the gospel link to that?"

But that was just for Southeast Asia, right?

Someone told me that I needed to approach my culture with the same enthusiasm and grace that I had in Southeast Asia. I am forever grateful to that person. Once I stopped seeing reverse culture shock as something I just had to endure and started trying to re-learn my home culture despite the frustration, things began to change.

I realized that God had given me the unique opportunity to start over with the culture I'd grown up in and approach it as a missionary. As a triangle, I could notice things about the squares that they saw as normal life, and I could explore why people cared

## “**People might actually listen to you if you first listen to them.**

about the things they did.

But you don't have to live in another country for two years to be able to learn your own culture. Anyone can step back and say, “Why are my friends interested in this?” or “Why does this issue make people so mad?” And the list goes on.

I've noticed that you can learn a lot by asking questions, either to yourself or others, even if it's about something that you've done all your life. You'd be surprised what you discover and how you can understand the desires, interests, fears and dreams of the people you barely know or have known since you were born.

If you understand where someone is coming from and why they think or do what they do, you can find ways to tell them about Jesus that will mean something to them. People might actually listen to you if you first listen to them.

### **2. THE GOSPEL WILL OFFEND SOME PEOPLE, BUT THAT ISN'T AN EXCUSE NOT TO SHARE IT.**

I think I struggle with this the most in my home culture. America seems hyper sensitive about things that other cultures accept politely, and one wrong word can get you blasted on social media. But the gospel is counter-cultural and does offend many people.

As a missionary in another culture, I spent time trying to figure out how to share the gospel so that people would understand. But I didn't spend much time on trying not to offend people (not to say I was trying to be offensive). To share the gospel was to tell them the religion they've believed since childhood is wrong. To talk about salvation was to tell them their loved ones who died without knowing Christ are eternally separated from God. That's offensive.

The interesting thing is that although I knew these things were offensive, I knew I had to tell them. Their eternity was worth it.

Coming home, I have noticed that Christians (including myself) are silent because they are too afraid to offend someone.

I've been convicted even in writing this post that I avoid some people because I know I will offend them. But if the gospel is offensive anyway, why do I not share it? Just as it was for my friends in Southeast Asia, my American friends' eternity is worth it.

For now we have freedom to share the gospel in America. In some places that is not the case. While we have it, we should use every opportunity to share the full message of the gospel. It may very well offend some people. But as I saw in Southeast Asia, it doesn't offend everyone and often opens doors for more conversations.

### **3. EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING THAT THEY CAN ONLY FIND IN JESUS.**

I sat in a dimly-lit room in South Asia while a man who had once burned Bibles and persecuted Christians told me how he had given his life to Jesus. Like everyone else who gave a testimony that day, he was born a Hindu and had heard the gospel and believed. Person after person related their stories to me, and while each was beautifully unique, one phrase reverberated time and again.

“When I found Jesus, I found peace.”

In another part of South Asia, I met a group of new Christians who had been driven from their homes when their government demolished them without warning. No one came to help them. No one, except a pastor and his friends.

When I asked these people what made them want to give their lives to Jesus, they said, “No one came to help us. Our Hindu neighbors didn't help us. Only the Christians showed love to us.”

They searched for love, and they found it through Jesus.

These kinds of stories could be repeated for people all around the world. We are all looking for something in life—peace, love, fulfillment, success, purpose. No matter what someone is looking for, they can always find it in Jesus.

As a triangle, I have yet to really understand what my fellow Americans around me are looking for. It seems harder to pinpoint with people who seem to have so much and in a culture that is post-modern or post-religious. But everyone is looking for something, and as Christians it is our job to show them that the something is Jesus.

These observations mean that living a life focused on taking the gospel to the lost takes time and effort. To engage my own culture, I will need to study it as I did Southeast Asia. To know what people are looking for that they can only find in Jesus, you have to talk to them, get to know them, listen to them. And to present the gospel to people who might be offended, you need to have an eternal mindset combined with sincerity and humility. This doesn't happen naturally for me. I am prone to think about my wants and needs and avoid situations where I will feel awkward. But engaging culture takes work, and the work is more than worth it.

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