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Christ and Culture Revisited



A THEOLOGY OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

Darrell L. Bock*

Cultural intelligence requires knowing our calling as well as the real nature of our battle. The spiritual nature of the conflict means we must utilize both a spiritual perspective and divinely appointed resources. It also means appreciating what is going on with the people around us who have made different choices. In the section that follows, we will consider six of the most significant texts on the cultural places and spaces we find ourselves occupying, as well as how the resources we have enable us to engage wisely.

I. SIX KEY TEXTS

1. *Ephesians 6:10–18*. The key text is verse 12:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.

Christians fight a battle in a fallen world. Scripture often speaks of the world as being opposed to the things of God and, as a result, opposed to believers. John 15:19 reads, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you.”

In a battle, it is essential to understand the calling and the mission. For decades the church fought a culture war where we often made other people the enemy. But this core biblical text on engagement reminds us that our real battle is spiritual. It requires spiritual resources, and we are armed with those in response to the conflict.

Ephesians 6:10–18 is the most explicit battle text among the NT letters. In fact, the Greek word for battle (or as v. 12 calls it, our “struggle”) entails

*Darrell L. Bock is executive director of cultural engagement and senior research professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary. The following is chapter 1 of his recent book, *Cultural Intelligence* (Nashville: B&H, 2020). It is used with permission from the publisher.

hand-to-hand combat, and the context involves arrows being shot during the struggle. It is a life-and-death fight.

Verse 12 of this text says we are in a wrestling match that needs armor. The metaphor is mixed, with arrows also coming from afar. In the passage, Paul is telling the Ephesians to stand strong as they resist the devil (vv. 11, 13). Ground has already been won. That ground is spiritual and is tied to things such as our theology and our character. That ground resides in the church and with the believing people of God. We need to hold our ground, not take over new territory.

This is what the text mentions as armor: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and God's Word. Commentators debate whether this is about truth in the abstract or truth applied; whether it is about righteousness as justification or righteousness applied. Given what has been said in the letter of Ephesians to this point, it is probably all of this rather than either/or. Both a guide to the battle and a description of the battle are present in this text. Strength is to come from the Lord (v. 10), and we are to equip ourselves with what he provides: his armor (v. 11).

If we were to state the key verse emphatically, it would read: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens" (v. 12). I emphasized "not" because on the other side of it is a fourfold description of the enemy that makes our opponent and the nature of the battle clear. Our mission is not to defeat or crush people. It is to stand with spiritual resources against an unseen enemy. These spiritual enemies are so invisible that people may not even realize they exist.

To repeat an essential point, the rest of the text names our resources: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer (vv. 13–18). There is nothing about circumstances here. There is nothing about political ideologies here. The resources are our theology, our faith, and the quality and character of our lives as believers.

People are not the enemy. They are the goal. When Jesus sent forth his disciples with the Great Commission in Matt 28:18–20, he said to go into the world and make disciples. He did not say, "Go into the church and be disciples," or "Withdraw from public space." He sent the church into the public space, armed for battle with spiritual resources that only God and the gospel provide through Christ.

Now, let's think through our battle metaphor. We are members of the

GIA (God's Intelligence Agency). Our assignment is to rescue people, as special forces do. We are to seek to rescue people from the clutches of unseen enemies. Those people walk "according to the ways of this world" (Eph 2:2)—a reality that should not surprise us. It is unrealistic to expect people who are not connected to God to live in ways he directs. This is why the gospel is so important in this struggle. The gospel equips people with ability and capability that they otherwise do not possess.

What does a member of the GIA do, and what is the mission? The mission is to so faithfully and relationally live out the truth of God that a way of rescue is made apparent. To so faithfully represent the truth of God that our lives and words demonstrate a flourishing, alternative way of life—his way of life.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to rescue people out of the clutches of destructive spiritual forces so sinister that people may not realize they are in any kind of danger. This is an enormous part of the challenge. People are in extreme danger, yet they don't know it or see it. Understanding that our special-forces operation involves the rescue of people in harm due to sinister forces they often don't recognize totally changes how I engage. If I see the person across from me not as an enemy but as one who needs to be recovered, as lost and needing to be found, I will engage differently.

This is not mission impossible, and this tape will not self-destruct in five seconds. This is the call of God, where we possess the resources to fight the battle he describes in the way he prescribes. Those resources are contained in and deployed through the truth we live out day by day individually among our neighbors, as the body of Christ before the world, and as believers engaging the world in ways that are distinct from how the world engages.

In the culture-war approach, we have all too often grown misguided in the mission, making people the enemy. In that faulty execution of our assignment, we've not only failed to accomplish the call of making disciples, but we have actually damaged the church by robbing it of its good news. Our challenges to culture, which were intended to attract, have sometimes been expressed so hard and so heartlessly that the recipients have been repelled instead. This is especially the case when we do battle in the same ways the world battles, or when we neglect to live in contrast to the world. As soon as we shed the relational distinctives that are the church—the call to love our enemies and to live authentically with integrity and grace—we

look like any other special-interest group. Then people will choose cultural options with their own special interests in mind.

The damage to the church's reputation and the cause of Christ is immense when the mission is as ill-defined as we've made it. Masses of our own young people look at how we older generations engage culturally, and they reply, "No, thank you!" Our assignment is to engage in this spiritual battle using the spiritual resources we've been given so that, by the distinctive way we live and love, others will be drawn in. That distinctiveness is most evident when we love our enemies as Jesus called us to do. It is not an easy assignment, which is why it requires spiritual resources to accomplish.

Many biblical texts point to the rich resources we possess. Ephesians 1:3 says we have been given every spiritual resource we need from heaven, and we can praise God for that. Second Peter 1:3–4a blesses the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ because, "according to his great mercy, he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is unperishable." And as 1 John 4:4 says, "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." This is true no matter what the world says, does, or thinks.

Ephesians 1:21–22 likewise teaches that Jesus has been exalted over all other powers and appointed head of the church. Nothing can remove him from his place, regardless of what happens in the world. And nothing can alter our position in Christ as a result. There is nothing to fear in the battle, for the spiritual resources we have are great and the identity we have is unshakable. Our assignment is to draw on those resources rather than rely on those that make us more like the world. We do so by engaging intelligently with people who think differently than we do, not by despising or disrespecting them, but by seeing them as hostages in need of rescue. When we act like the world and perceive them as enemies, our rescue mission goes off course and we lose our spiritual advantage.

2. *1 Peter 3:13–18*. The key text is verses 15–16a:

But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and respect.

First Peter is a great book. Much of it covers engagement. The apostle Peter, the author, sat at Jesus's feet and took the engagement class the Savior held as he prepared the disciples to go into the world with the gospel. One of my favorite engagement passages is 1 Pet 3:15, a verse often used in Scripture-memory programs. We are to be prepared to explain what we believe, our hope. Our faith is not ultimately about ideas, though it certainly has those, but is about hope.

Peter had one word he could choose to summarize everything that faith comprises, and he chose "hope." That hope is about understanding and appreciating why we are on Earth and how we can connect to the Creator who made us. First Peter 1:13 ends with the exhortation to "set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." We see that hope in the way that God made the connection between us and him possible. It is why the believer's message is called the good news. We get reconnected to the living God. We "get located" in the way we were designed to live, both now and for eternity.

First Peter 3:15 is an exciting call and a wonderful verse. But we often miss what is around it that helps answer our question about what intelligent engagement involves. Starting in verse 13, we're given a picture of the world as it ought to be: "Who will harm you if you are devoted to what is good?" If we do good to others, things should go well. Simple enough.

Only we live in an upside-down world, so the next verse reads, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed" (1 Pet 3:14a). Now, look at that verse. It anticipates that we will suffer for doing right, just as Jesus taught his disciples (Matt 5:10–12). It sounds as if Peter actually understood what Jesus had been saying in effect throughout the entire second half of his ministry: "If you follow me, there will be pushback. The disciple bears a cross daily. That is the world we engage in and with. Yet we are blessed, because our acceptance does not come from the world but from God and being faithful to him."

The next part of the verse is even more amazing. "But do not be terrified of them or be shaken" (1 Pet 3:14b NET). There is no cause for fear as we engage, even though we can anticipate rejection and injustice. Now, I have to be honest. A lot of what I see in the church's response to our culture looks like fear or our being shaken. We fear for the loss of the Judeo-Christian net that once encircled much of Western culture. We tremble at the way the world lives and the choices it makes, disturbed by the influences it produces. These are disturbing events, but they should

not surprise us.

Our fearful responses never help us engage well. The believer's hope and identity rests in God. It is at this point that we connect to Christ as our hope and march into the world ready to engage, ready to give a defense, ready to stand firm, and armed with the spiritual resources that allow us to stand. And our dominant message is positive. It is about hope.

The tension of sharing the gospel and engaging with our culture is always a balance between the challenge the gospel presents to people about their sin and failure to live rightly and the gospel's invitation to enter into hope and a new kind of life. As we engage, we have to simultaneously challenge and invite. How do we do that well?

The church often fails by focusing so hard on the challenge that the hope gets lost. We so wish to highlight what is wrong in the world that we mute the hope that God has made available, or we defer that hope to the future alone. Yet this hope starts now, in this life. Now, the only reason to come to a new hope is because we realize shortcomings in this life, many of them our own. So, challenge has to be there somewhere. Yet our landing place is hope. It cannot go missing. Biblical hope is not about prosperity or a trouble-free life. It exists in a life that is plugged into God's purpose for creating us and aligned with his reasons for making us to begin with. So, in our engagement, it is important that we never lose the message of hope in the midst of a defense of the gospel and the challenge that comes with the gospel.

The only way for good news to be good news is for the good news to be in the message! And it needs to be communicated with an appreciation of why the news is good (because there is a rescue) and why grace is grace and not deserved or merited. Often, we stop reading 1 Pet 3:15 right there at the mention of being prepared to give a defense for our hope. That is a major mistake. We don't merely offer our content, but the tone we present it with matters. Verse 16 says: "Do this [give this defense of hope] with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame."

Of all the things to digest here, let me make three quick points: First, our engagement should come with gentleness and respect. It is not to be delivered with fear, or anger, or resentment but with hope, because it is hope we share. We need not be threatened; we can be gentle and respectful because we know God stands with us. We engage not arrogantly but

humbly because it is only by the grace of God that we stand in this hope. I see less of this gentleness combined with respect than I would hope to see from the church as it engages the world. We can do better here.

Gentleness and respect are crucial in engagement. The two terms refer to a positive kind of meekness and humility placed alongside a regard for those with whom we interact. Tone really matters because it communicates our love for those we challenge with the gospel.

Second, our good behavior will be slandered. This is the second time Peter has said our good will meet with bad. Every good deed will be punished. Do not be surprised when pushback comes. People don't like to be challenged, though it is a part of the gospel message. However, it's not the whole message. Hope still needs to be the dominant note.

Third, we are to maintain a good conscience while knowing God is fully aware of the wrong we have experienced. First Peter 4:19 consoles us as we suffer: "Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good." The shame our accusers will have is before God. This is one of the reasons we need not fear as we engage.

In 3:17, Peter explains why we can conduct ourselves in this way: "For it is better to suffer for doing good [yet another mention of injustice!], if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." We are not to respond to the world in kind, even in the face of unjust responses. Disciples engage and show a different way of relating, even to those who reject them. This is part of how we love our enemies in a distinctive way.

The reason for this approach is what Peter says next: it is the example of Jesus himself (v. 18). He was the just One. He suffered and served in order to draw the unjust to God. Only note that the text does not only put it so generically. It says, "that he might bring you to God." Peter personalizes it with a reminder about our own entry into grace. Christ is our model. We suffer because we are mirroring what he suffered so that we may be like him.

We ought to remember where we came from and how we arrived at such blessing. In other words, as we engage others and mirror Jesus, we need to recall that there was a time when God was gracious to us while our backs were turned on him. We should be able to understand what it means to be opposed to God and how God drew us graciously to him. That is the tone that matters.

We operate with cultural intelligence when we engage in the same

manner that God interacted with us. We focus on hope even as we challenge people, and we do so with gentleness and respect because we remember our own experience of his grace.

3. *Colossians 4:5–6.*

Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.
Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so
that you may know how you should answer each person.

Paul includes this brief but significant remark on engagement as he is offering final exhortations to the Colossians. Set in a context of prayer and the hope of open doors for the gospel (vv. 2–3), Paul turns our attention to how we can make the most of such opportunities. Two terms are fundamental in this text: “always” and “gracious.”

First, “always” is a technical term. The dictionary defines it as “all the time.” No exceptions. That means twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks out of the year, 365 days a year (and 366 days in leap years). There are no days off every four years—or ever. In other words, it is an emphatic time marker. “Always” is all the time.

Second, our tone always matters. “Gracious” is like the gentleness and respect we read about in 1 Peter 3. We should always be ready to share our hope, but always do it with this gracious tone. In fact, this is how gentleness and respect translate into application and action. It means to be gracious as we interact with those outside the faith.

The idea of salt as a preservative reinforces the imagery. Our speech should help things to settle—and to settle down. It should be constructive in dealing with issues, not destructive by engaging in personal insult. Again, I’m not sure how well many in the church have been applying this idea in their engagement, including many of our most prominent leaders. Yet how we relate what we believe matters. Without such gracious speech, we are not being culturally intelligent.

4. *Galatians 6:10.*

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good
of all, especially for those who belong to the household of
the faith.

This short exhortation comes at the end of a long section where Paul has explained the law of love—the royal law that Jesus gave the church, the law of distinctive love. In Gal 5:14, he noted that the entire law is fulfilled in the exhortation to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Once again, the relational dimension steps forward as the supreme application that God desires in our interaction with people.

Jesus had underscored in Luke 6 that this love is distinctive: it includes enemies and those who hate and oppress us (vv. 27–36). Jesus drove home the point that there is no distinctiveness when we only love those who love us; even sinners do that. The disciple is to do better, and the disciple’s love should be greater.

Jesus told a story—the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)—to make clear that our call is to be a neighbor, not worry about who is our neighbor. A scribe had asked him, “Who is my neighbor?” The question itself suggested that there are people who are not our neighbor, not our concern. Jesus’s parable said, “No, that idea is false.” Our call is to be a neighbor and to know that neighbors come in surprising packages, and Jesus underscored the point by presenting a hated Samaritan as the example.

So, in Gal 6:10, Paul ends his exposition on loving our neighbor with this: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.” This is a call for us to actually do good. Engagement is not left to words alone. We have to show through our actions what we declare.

A technical term in this verse is the word “all,” which the dictionary defines as “any and every one.” This love is directed toward all. It excludes no one. Just as Jesus illustrated in the parable, we are to be good neighbors to all. With some texts, we are prone to get into a somewhat sinister debate about whether they apply just to those of the faith or to everyone. I think of Matthew 25 as an example. New Testament scholars have spilt much ink debating whether the text refers only to how believers are treated or how all people are treated. Frankly, it’s not an easy choice contextually.

This text in Galatians suggests the debate may be somewhat superfluous, because all people are to be loved and treated the same. We undoubtedly ought to treat believers with kindness; then again, they are to be treated as everyone else is to be treated. When we say, “Believers are to be treated one way and others another way,” we miss the point of this text. The call to love applies especially to those in God’s community, but it also applies

to all people.

The result of a too-narrow application is that we excuse ourselves from a responsibility we all possess and reduce our call to love all people. We also limit actions of love and care, undercutting the most powerful visual proof of our claims. We become like the scribe who asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”—as if there is a limit to our care.

To narrow this kind of a text is to misapply the passage and fail at our calling and mission to love. I fear that in our recent past we have fallen into this trap. Cultural intelligence says our love is most distinctive when it includes all people.

5. *2 Corinthians 5:17–21*. The key text is verse 20:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: “Be reconciled to God.”

Another major text for engagement is found as Paul discusses the gospel in 2 Corinthians 5. It is actually one of the most important Pauline texts in the NT. It gives a picture of our mission and how we ought to minister in light of the gospel.

Verse 17 reads, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” This alludes to the newness of life gained at conversion, to one’s spiritual rebirth. Specifically, it refers to being born again and the new life acquired by a connection to Christ in faith. This verse explains why the gospel is at the center of mission and engagement: without the new life, living in ways that honor God is not possible.

There is a provision that comes with faith—an enablement that a person who does not know Christ lacks. This is because salvation is not just about forgiveness of sin but also about enablement for a new kind of life, a life that honors God and has access to the indwelling Spirit of God to live that way. This is what Rom 1:16 says is “the power of God for salvation.” A formerly spiritually dead person is forgiven and made alive through faith in Christ. That person receives the enabling power of the indwelling Spirit of God to walk in God’s ways. That is the message of Romans 1–8 and is what Paul calls being “a new creation” in Christ in 2 Corinthians.

Then Paul says this: “Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to

himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). And I sit here thinking that if I were to walk out on the street and ask someone, “In one word, how would you summarize what the gospel, or salvation, is all about?” and I just asked it open-ended like that, I imagine I’d get all kinds of answers: Grace. Forgiveness. Hope. Salvation. Judgment. I’m also willing to bet that if I walked into the average church and asked that question of people who ought to know the answer, the term reconciliation would be way down that list. It would not be in the top five; it might not even make the top ten. Yet Paul’s one word to summarize what his ministry is about is reconciliation. Peter used the word hope in a similar way in 1 Peter 3, but in 2 Corinthians the result of salvation is being focused on. God saves us to reconcile us to him and to others.

Now reconciliation is obviously aimed primarily at our relationship with God. When you read on in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he says more about this work of God: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us” (5:19). And then comes this wonderful verse, verse 20, that I think is actually one of the core verses regarding engagement in general. It reads, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ.”

Now, an ambassador represents a country. He also is a foreigner in a strange land. An ambassador’s calling is to represent his home country and its values. He or she works for peace between the people the ambassador represents and the people among whom the embassy resides. All those things are in play. That is the picture Paul uses to describe what we do when we engage.

There are many parts here. First, an ambassador has a primary allegiance to the home he comes from, not to the foreign country where he lives. In our case, we are citizens of heaven and part of the multinational, multiethnic community God has formed around the world. Our home and representation are primarily with the people of God. In terms of priority, all civil connections come after these relationships. We represent God and his people first.

Second, an ambassador does not ask people to come to the embassy to get to know his country. He goes out and engages with the people of the land in which he now lives. The ambassador is out and about, learning whatever is necessary to understand the country where he or she resides.

Third, we are the bearers of a message from God. That message is

proclaimed not only by what we say, but by how we say it and by how we live. These themes align with the previous texts we have examined. Christians are always ambassadors, visibly representing the One whom they serve back at home, that is, our heavenly home.

Verse 20 has even more to say: “God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: ‘Be reconciled to God.’” Do you hear the interesting tone of the verse that summarizes our message to the world? Once again, tone matters. The human-divine relationship is obviously the focus here. But what we offer is an invitation to be reconciled. It is a plea we give.

Now, the people we’re pleading with are accountable to God for their response, but that also means their response is not part of my responsibility. The response is between that person and God, and so is the accountability for that response. The call within engagement is to be faithful in message and tone—to be a faithful representative of God, an ambassador who is worthy to be heard.

Reconciliation is an important theme in engagement, and to me this category is the answer to the problem of life and finding our proper place in it. Without being reconciled to God, we cannot be fixed. Our human brokenness—and its estrangement from God—overshadows everything: politics, ideology, world circumstances.

Without a change of heart, only externals change significantly. We can posit all kinds of answers as to what might fix what’s wrong in the world, but ultimately reconciliation is the divine answer to the problem that ails the human race. Getting properly reconnected to God, and then letting his resources and his power and his enablement change how we act and interact—that is the answer. And in that process, a healthier dynamic can emerge, a better way of functioning in the world around us.

This is why the gospel is so central to our mission, and central in our engagement with culture. How we represent God in word and tone sets the stage for our credibility about the gospel. What we care about and how we care for others is part of building a bridge to the gospel.

Some people think the answer is in other places, especially in our politics. But we have seen that experiment fail. Israel had God as a legislator in the OT, and they had laws he gave them, and yet their history was a mess. That is why God eventually said the solution is in a new covenant, where he would forgive them and put his law on their heart and give them his Spirit. Without a changed heart, laws and circumstances change little.

So we need to be careful that politics does not become our answer for society's problem. Society's problem, as a spiritual issue, is deeper than any political ideology.

Verse 21 closes the section, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." It is Christ who brings change. In saying this, however, the message is not: "Engagement doesn't matter," or "We should ignore the environment around us, including politics or other social concerns." That is sometimes how an emphasis on the gospel is read. But that is a mistake. We show our care for people by engaging with their lives and what is going on inside them, being aware of what troubles them and why. We help people when we do not just argue but show them that there's a different way to live. One of the best ways to do that is to listen and care.

The reason injustice is so often a topic in the Prophets is because the prophets themselves cared about people, especially when people were being mistreated or marginalized. It is no accident that we have texts in Scripture such as Mic 6:8 or Jas 1:27 or 2:1–13. When we as humans, whether believers or not, appreciate what God cares about in relating to people, then how people—our "neighbors"—are treated becomes our concern.

Cultural intelligence calls us to see ourselves as ambassadors representing God, not so much as citizens of a particular earthly nation or political view, but as citizens of his kingdom. Our mission is to offer an invitation, pleading with any tribe and every nation to reconcile to God, showing love to any and all people.

6. 2 *Timothy* 2:22–26. The key text is verses 24–26:

The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient, instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth. Then they may come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Our final text is hardly ever brought up in discussions about engagement, but it ties together several things the other texts say. The passage is a summary of Paul's advice to Timothy, a young pastor. It starts with Timothy's own character, which mirrors to a degree the spiritual attributes

of Ephesians 6.

Here is verse 22: “Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” Righteousness, faith, and peace are part of the theological-relational attributes noted in the other epistles, especially in Eph 6:14–17. The content of this verse also overlaps with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), attributes that are primarily relational as well.

Verse 23 argues against getting into controversies that lack substance: “But reject foolish and ignorant disputes, because you know that they breed quarrels.” The Lord’s servant is supposed to engage with a different set of goals: kindness, gentleness, and patience (v. 24). There will be conflict, but it takes a certain temperament to get through such tension well.

Two themes that we have seen before reappear here. The first is being kind toward all. Kindness is not selective. The second theme is gentleness (echoing 1 Pet 3:16 yet again). Nothing about this is necessarily easy. Thus, it takes spiritual resources and maturity to develop such responses. It’s all too common to want to snap back during a disagreement. Paul tells Timothy not to go there.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the exhortation comes next, in verses 25b–26. I repeat it because it is so significant: “Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth. Then they may come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

There are several things of note here. First, the person’s response to God is tied to something God does. The ambassador is not responsible for the response of someone’s heart. To come to repentance requires an eye-opening work of God. Still, in a battle of ideas or actions, we don’t want to give someone cause for rejecting what we are saying. It may be unavoidable due to a difference of opinion, but we should never seek conflict. In fact, we should be careful not to descend into debate, but instead work to have a fruitful discussion.

Second, tone is again being highlighted, but we are only called to be faithful in sharing what we have experienced and what we understand by God’s grace. Winning an argument is not a goal because it is not in our control anyway.

Third, the remark about escaping the devil’s trap is another allusion to the spiritual battle of Eph 6:12. We now have come full circle to the fact that a person can be in the clutches of spiritual forces about which they

are unaware. The members of the GIA are skilled at balancing challenge with hope.

Fourth, the result is a liberating escape. Rather than being trapped and captive, the person is given a different kind of freedom—one that links to God and his grace and fills him or her with enablement and hope. The result for that individual is a flourishing life and walk with the Creator.

Cultural intelligence avoids unnecessary disputes and engages in ways that are gentle. It also allows God to own the results of a conversation and trusts that by engaging faithfully and patiently, we are offering the non-believer an opportunity for a life-changing escape.

II. CONCLUSION

Engagement can lose its effectiveness when we lose sight of the primary objectives of our mission. A mission that is poorly defined or that incorrectly identifies what is most central can take us off a productive conversational path and may even result in real damage. The church's recent path may have unintentionally produced such damage because our mission has been misdirected. People are not the enemy but the goal.

In shifting times such as ours, we need a biblical agility that sees what is needed, alongside a relational ability to read and react. As we develop cultural intelligence, we gain this agility, guiding us to carefully listen and pursue gentleness while balancing challenge and hope. We also learn to appreciate the spiritual nature of the challenge of engagement and how to use those spiritual resources that allow us to stand. Skillful engagement means having a sense of our security in God so we do not fear no matter how grave the circumstances may look. Finally, cultural intelligence teaches us to understand that the gospel is the real answer for ultimate human transformation. Every other answer has severe limits.

Such engagement also grasps that not only is what we say important, but so is how we say it. Whether we think of ourselves as being engaged in the rescue of a lost person in danger or being an ambassador who represents the hope of God, the call is to humbly remember where we came from when God drew us to himself. It was by the amazing grace of God that he stretched out a hand of invitation to us while we were being challenged about our need for God through the gospel.

Jesus's death for sin clears the way for the gift of life in the Spirit. The gospel takes people from challenge and deep need to hope. The result is a powerful reconciliation with God. Such reconciliation also opens up a

unique kind of love for others that reflects who God is, what he did in Christ, and who his people should be.

None of this comes easily; it requires the fruit of the Spirit of God. Engaging properly with others requires an enablement and instincts that we do not have on our own. Engagement cuts against the grain and does not react as the world does. It requires a love that extends to all people at all times.

In the end, even if the world sometimes pushes back (as it did against the Savior), biblical engagement reveals the presence of God, who empowers us to live distinctively and speak to others with wisdom and skill. The result is a cultural intelligence that images God's character in our individual relationships, our church communities, and in our society. When we mirror him, we honor him

