

The ABCs of Culture

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The town of Constanza lies in a fertile valley surrounded by picturesque mountains in the Caribbean nation of the Dominican Republic. Water is plentiful there, and the climate stays moderate year-round. On the floor of the valley, several Dominican families eke out a living by working their small, subsistence farms. They are some of the poorest people in the nation.

At the same time, large homes and villas overlook the valley, each with a spectacular view of the countryside. Japanese immigrants, who moved to the Dominican Republic shortly after World War II, own the houses. They left Japan as impoverished immigrants with virtually nothing but the clothes on their backs. Like the local farmers who work on the valley floor, they also labored as poor farmers after their arrival. Yet after a few decades, they became prosperous, while native farmers continued to struggle with poverty in the midst of this breathtaking setting.

What accounts for the difference between these two groups? They shared identical physical circumstances and natural resources. The probable answer resides in their different worldviews.

The Japanese settlers brought with them a set of ideas that value hard work and perseverance in the face of difficulty. Japanese parents trained their children never to give up. The local Dominican farmers, on the other hand, held to a fatalistic belief system. For them, poverty was a given. They were poor because their fathers before them were poor, as were their grandfathers; poverty was just their destiny, their lot in life. Such fatalism made them passive in the face of hardships, believing that “whatever will be, will be.”

However, destructive beliefs were not unique to the Dominican farmers. In fact, a different but equally destructive set of beliefs led to the Japanese immigration in the first place. A deep-seated sense of racial superiority fueled Japan’s aggressive colonization of East Asia, beginning in 1895 and culminating with their invasion of China in 1936 and progressive movement into Southeast Asia. This and their pact with the Nazis in Europe led to their involvement in World War II. This war wreaked destruction upon Japan and led directly to the immigration of the Japanese farmers.

All nations, to some degree, hold to destructive, false beliefs, even nations where the church is active and prosperous. Churches abound in the United States, and a Christian subculture of books, television, and movies is prevalent. Nine out of ten adult Americans profess belief in God and own at least one Bible.¹ Yet between 1973 and 2001, thirty-eight million babies were killed through abortion² and the rate of divorce among Christians and non-Christians is essentially the same.³

How can such things happen in a “Christian” nation? A poll taken by the Barna Research Group in January 2000 suggests an answer. It revealed that less than half of all “born-again” Christians

¹ George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2001) pp. 189, 192.

² Based on numbers and estimates reported by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (www.agi-usa.org).

³ Barna Research Group Online (www.barna.org) © 1995-2002 Barna Research Ltd. (Page updated 8-17-2001.)

in the United States (approximately 44 percent) believed that “absolute moral truth” exists.⁴ The majority of American Christians are far from certain about the existence of absolute standards for right and wrong. For most Americans, truth—if it exists at all—is unknowable. Therefore people are left with little or no moral constraints.

These three beliefs—fatalism, racial superiority, and relativism—are rooted in lies. As with all lies, their consequences prove terrible and damaging. Behind all lies stands Satan, the father of lies himself. In John 8:44 Jesus says, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” When individuals and cultures believe satanic distortions, they become enslaved. But because this is God’s world, there is hope for those bound by Satan’s counterfeits. The truth is more powerful than lies, and God’s word is true. Satan is powerful, but God is more powerful still.

Enslaving People and Nations

As the apostle Paul described in Romans 1:18-32, when fallen men and women exchange the truth of God for lies, terrible consequences are the inevitable result. These consequences affect more than individuals as satanic lies penetrate into a nation’s culture, corrupting customs, practices, social institutions, structures, and laws. Truth is the foundation for a nation’s and a community’s healthy development, but lies ensure their destruction.

E. Stanley Jones, a great missionary statesman to India in the past century, once said, “We do not break God’s laws, but rather we break ourselves against God’s laws.”⁵ The Bible explains that Satan uses his lies to enslave us. But Satan does not lie just to individuals. His lies enslave entire nations (Rv 20:3). In this effort, he uses two primary weapons. The first weapon is described in Colossians 2:8 as human-centered philosophy. In this verse, Paul does not attack the study of philosophy. In fact, the word *philosophy* means “lover of wisdom,” and as Proverbs 3:13 says, “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom.” Rather, Paul means that one of Satan’s primary tools of enslavement is “philosophy which depends on . . . the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8).

In the same verse, Paul describes such philosophy as “hollow and deceptive,” and “based on human tradition.” It passes down from father to son, from one generation to the next. The apostle Peter wrote in a similar vein, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from *the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers*, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pt 1:18-19, author’s italics).

What are the “basic principles of the world” that the apostle Paul refers to in Colossians 2:8? In Galatians 4:9 he asks, “How is it that you are turning back to those *weak and miserable principles*? Do you wish to be *enslaved* by them all over again?” (author’s italics). Paul describes

⁴ George Barna, p. 80.

⁵ E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 174.

these principles as “weak and miserable.” The Greek word for “principles” in this passage’s verse is *stoicheia*, which literally means basic, fundamental, or elementary principles.

We encounter basic or elementary principles in our everyday lives. If we want to learn another language, we begin with the fundamental principles of that language--its alphabet and basic rules of word order and perhaps a little grammar--along with a few basic words. If we want to learn mathematics, we first must learn about numbers and what they represent. If we want to draw or paint satisfactory pictures of things, we first must learn a few basics about proportion, perspective, shading, and, if using color, how basic colors combine to create the hues we want. If we want to be able to read music, we need to start with the elementary principles of music notation--what symbols represent what tones and time values.

In the same way, basic principles build the foundation of human cultures. They are the ABCs of culture. Paul refers to these elementary principles when he uses the word *stoicheia*. Satan targets these elementary principles for his deceptive work. He uses false “first principles” to enslave nations.

Gailyn Van Rhee, a missionary to Kenya in the 1970s, wrote this in his examination of spiritual warfare:

[T]he *systemic view* [of spiritual warfare] sees the powers as personal spiritual beings who are actively impacting the socioeconomic and political structures of societies. These powers have established their own rules and regulations that pull cultures away from God. The elementary principles [*stoicheia*] spoken of in Pauline writings (Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8, 20 NASB) are an example of this... [*Stoicheia*] are illustrated by legalistic observances of the law, worship of angels, and returning to pre-Christian animistic practices. *Stoicheia* within these contexts are the demonic contortions of human society. The powers, although personal spiritual beings, have invaded the very fabric of society. Thus even Christian institutions reflect these demonic influences when the powers invade human institutions.⁶

The Building Blocks

We can think of elementary principles (*stoicheia*) as cultural building blocks. In most—if not all—cultures in the world, some building blocks align with biblical truth. These “kingdom” building blocks support what is moral and beautiful within a society. We find kingdom building blocks in music, art, science, law, technology, and education. It is probable that every culture embraces at least some aspects of biblical truth. Any bit of this truth found within a culture can be nurtured, affirmed, and encouraged.

Also, in all cultures of the world, Satan introduces counterfeit building blocks founded on lies. They are the immoral and profane features in any culture. For example, slavery in the United States was based on the lie that people with white skin are superior to those with black skin. The abuse and subjugation of women in many Latin cultures is based on the lie that men are superior

⁶ Gailyn VanRhee, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1991), p. 101.

to women. The caste system in India is based on the lie that people from one group are more valuable than those from another group.

These lies, or counterfeit building blocks, exist in every culture. They represent what the apostle Paul refers to as hollow, deceptive, weak, and miserable elementary principles. They are to be exposed, opposed, rooted out, and replaced with kingdom building blocks based on God's eternal, revealed truth.

Although each culture contains both truth and lies, the cultures that have more truth, goodness, and beauty create societies with greater freedom, justice, prosperity, and compassion. The cultures with more falsehood, evil, and ugliness produce societies that prove more callous, enslaved, and corrupt.

Examples of Satanic Counterfeits

Though Satan plants many lies within cultures, these counterfeit beliefs are prevalent.

Truth does not exist and, therefore, man is not accountable. This lie flourishes in many Western nations influenced by the naturalistic worldview. If there is no God, hedonism and rampant consumerism become the logical approach to life. If we can do whatever we please without fear of ultimate, divine judgment or accountability, then we should “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Thus, self-gratification has become one of the highest values of many Western nations.

If truth exists at all, is it unknowable. Naturalism and animism both have distorted understandings about truth. Naturalism allows no room for the notion of transcendent, absolute truth. All that exists is matter and energy in a closed, cause-and-effect universe. Truth is whatever we want it to be. Many animistic cultures also consider truth to be unknowable. Even in one of the world's major religions, Hinduism, the principle of *aviya* means “to worship the gods in ignorance.” In this sense, Hindu society actually values ignorance. Imagine that you are a missionary who wants to teach illiterate Hindu people in India how to read, so they can access the Bible in their own language. When you begin to understand Hindu culture, it slowly dawns on you that, in many parts of the Hindu world, if you encourage the poor to learn to read, you are asking them to in!

Human life is of little value. As a consequence, abortion has become a common practice—and is even cherished as a right—in cultures where naturalism thrives. Few people speak out for the millions of unborn children sacrificed on the altar of “choice.” Animism also accords little value to human life. Hinduism, for example, has no rationale for why people in need should be helped. The poor are destined to poverty because of what they did in their past lives. Unlike Christianity, Hinduism does not value individual people or see them as “fearfully and wonderfully made” in the image of God (Ps 139:14).

Such lies are terrible and destructive. Oh, how the world needs to hear the transforming story that conveys the biblical worldview! For only the biblical worldview reflects the truth—truth that holds transformational power for people and nations trapped in a satanic web of lies.

Breaking Free from Deception

Except for such catastrophic events as war, drought, or flood, physical poverty doesn't "just happen." Rather, counterfeit cultural building blocks such as fatalism play an important role in determining whether people suffer from poverty, corruption, or other forms of brokenness. When these satanic lies become part a culture's foundation, they eventually seep into a society's laws and structures. They end in corruption, injustice, lack of respect for human life, and many other cultural ailments.

Ultimately, brokenness traces back to sin and rebellion against the Creator. When we recognize this in our lives, we cry out with the apostle Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:24-25). How thankful we can be that God's power is stronger than evil, and that he provides a means of rescue from our bondage to sin and satanic deception. His powerful Word of truth makes this possible.

"Therefore...through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1-4). And "if the Son sets you free," says Jesus, "you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:36).

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