

# Distinctive

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 11 May 2022

Preacher: Sebastian Bjernegård

[ 0 : 0 6 ] Now, before we get started, I want to preface the lesson with just one consideration of engaging with our culture. You see, when we talk about engaging with our culture or engagement engaging with rather, people in the world, we're faced with the two extremes, on the one hand, of totally and utterly rejecting the culture, saying that it's all bad and it's all evil, or on the other side of adopting everything of saying this is good, we should follow with the majority view or what everyone else says. And as Christians have been called to live in the world but not to be of the world, we have to reject both of these. And we have to instead recognize that by God's common Grace there is good in the world, there's good in culture and society, but because of the fall and because of sin, there's the same time evil in it. And we must be steeped enough in the Bible and also know the culture well enough to know what to adopt and what to reject.

Now what are we going to talk about tonight? Well, the title of the lesson, which comes from Tim Keller's book, is a category defying social vision. And there are five areas that we're going to look at, where we see the impact of this Christian social vision on society and specifically as it comes to the Church. And that is that it creates a Church that is multiethnic, that is committed to the poor, that strives for peacemaking, that is strongly prolife and with a revolutionary sexual ethic. So I hope you don't have any plans for later tonight because we're going to be here now.

We should be here 2025 minutes, don't worry. And the first thing we're going to look at is to build this multiethnic Church. The first text we'll look at comes from Ephesians two, verses eleven through 22, which look at that. Thanks, Tom. Starting in Ephesians two, verse eleven.

And if you have one of these Bibles here, it's page 976.

Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hand. Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the Covenant of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of Commandments expressed and ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and he preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

[ 3 : 4 1 ] For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father, so that you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the Saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together, grows into a Holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Now you see in the Roman context, in the GrecoRoman context, in the first few centuries Ad, the way that you decided religion was you were born, in whatever context you were born, the country, the family, those became your gods, that's who you worshiped. And there was a clear divide between those of your own religion and those of all others. Now, at the heart of this passage in Ephesians, we have division and reconciliation, that first division, that because of sin, we are divided, we are alienated from God.

We see other texts that say that we are rebels, that we are enemies of God, a clear divide. But this division is not only vertical between us and God, it's also horizontal between us and our fellow man. And we see the division, even in the same family, in the chapter right following the fall in chapter four of Genesis, as a brother kills a brother. And we see this division throughout the Old Testament, Israel being enslaved and later coming into the land and filled with battles and being attacked by

various nations. And I could count to pointless examples in history, even in the history of the Church where we see this division clearly on display.

But the highlight of this passage is the reconciliation, the reconciliation that Jesus has brought about, of how he has reconciled us to God. But he's also reconciled us to our neighbor. We may meet someone who believes in Christ, who, while a stranger, is also a brother or a sister in Christ. And because our Union with Christ, because we're one with him, we're United to them as well. There's nothing more fundamental in this world than our relation to God, not our race, our ethnicity, our sex, our age.

We find in the Gospels that when Jesus went out preaching the Gospel, his mother, his brothers, once came looking for him. And Jesus said to the man who told him, who is my mother and who are my brothers? And it's that he stretched his hand out towards the disciples that were there and said, Here are my mothers and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my father in heaven, he is my brother, my sister and my mother. See, that which transcends really all earthly identities is our faith in Jesus.

It's following him as Lord and Savior. So even though important, your country, your family, your ethnicity, those things are not the most fundamental identifiers of who we are. But rather the faith in Jesus that we have. And so by virtue of being United to Him, having put our faith and our trust in Him alone for our Salvation, we're now United to other Christians as well. They are our brothers.

[ 7 : 47 ] They are our sisters. Now, how do we apply the situation today? Well, the Church, it should look like the community that surrounds it. Does the Church reflect its surroundings? Keller says that in a world divided by tribe and race, there's no greater witness to the power of the gospel.

And he is right. I remember growing up and I was part of a sports team, played American football in Sweden, and my football team consisted of guys from all over the place. We had Swedes, Kurds, Turks, Finns, Iranians, Tunzinians from various socioeconomic statuses, and we were all part of a team. We were all, in a sense, United because we loved the sport. And I think we can think of other examples of where sport or other things have brought people together from various backgrounds and demographics.

And what if the Church how does the Church reflect this Union between brothers and sisters in which Christ that transcends all differences? So the Church should reflect the community in which it finds ourselves. And it's not a matter of diversity for Diversity's sake. It is not that the primary goal is diversity. The goal is to worship God, to honor and glorify him, and to reach the lost with the gospel as he has commissioned us.

And the question we can think about over this coming week is this, should the local Church be multiethnic? And if the answer is yes, then what can we do as a Church, as individual Christians, to strive towards that? Again, not to make that the primary goal of the Church, but for it to be a consequence or a result of seeking to live faithfully as we follow our Lord's commands. Now, second, creating a Church committed to poor, to the poor, and to justice. The pagan Emperor Julian, as he writes to his high priests in the fourth century, he laments the fact that paganism is not growing.

It is not expanding. And the reason it doesn't, he says, is because of the pagans themselves. You see, their worship of the gods, he said, was splendid and magnificent. It could not be any better. However, that is all they do.

[ 10 : 27 ] They don't care for strangers, nor do their lives reflect their faith. So Julian tells the high priest to go persuade them to live righteously, shame the pagans to live this way. And what is one of the reasons he's saying this was because the Christians took care not just of the Christian poor, but even of the pagan ones. And everyone in the Empire saw that the pagans did not provide anything while the Christians cared for strangers and the needy. Why do the Christians do this?

They knew who their neighbor was. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus said that to fulfill the law we have to love God and to love our neighbor. And when asked, who is our neighbor, he gives this parable of a man who had been attacked and was lying nearly dead and had all these people passing by. The Holy people of the time, the priests, the Levite, those who were in charge of the worship of God. But then a Samaritan stops and takes him and cares for him and brings him back to health.

And the emphasis that we see in this story is that it's supposed to be shocking because Jews and Samaritans at this time they did not even speak to each other. You have this huge divide between the two. But we see how counterculturally was the answer to the question of who is my neighbor?

Well, it is anyone, even the one most unlike you. It's not just the person living physically next door. It's not those that are like you, who agree with you and hold the same views as you. So when we see someone in need, the first question should not be, I wonder what they did to end up in this situation.

Where are they from? Or who did they vote for? Or what is their opinion on X, Y or Z?

[ 12 : 31 ] Instead, we may learn from Christ and his response to the weak and the needy FBC over and over Scripture. And he had compassion on them. He had compassion. Now, how can you as an individual, employ this principle? It's an overwhelming task, isn't it?

The whole world is full of needy people. But remember that God has not called you to save the world, but he has given you opportunities to help. One principle commonly employed that is helpful, I think, is the principle of proximity. You ask yourself, who is closest to you? Who has God placed near you in your neighborhood, in your workplace, somewhere here in Edinburgh?

We are finite. We are limited beings. We cannot care for everyone, but we can care for some. So ask yourself how you may be able as a follower of Christ, to love and to serve him by loving and serving the needy. And then, third, we see striving for peacemaking.

And this is first Peter two. We'll look at a few verses, eleven to twelve, and then 21 through 23.

So it says, starting in verse eleven or chapter two, it's one Peter two, Oneone. Beloved, I urge you as Sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 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.

[ 14 : 44 ] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. And when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued and trusting himself to him who judges justly now, there's much hostility today as we're not in disagreements, definitely online, Twitter and other places, but sometimes also in person, where words are considered violence. Where to disagree means to hate one another. Even the algorithms of social media are made in such a way to cause a reaction. For you to feel like you have to respond, you have to reply.

You have to submit a tweet to show how you feel about this issue. Now what we see in this passage from one Peter is that we're called to follow Christ, but in what way? We are to conduct ourselves in such a way that unbelievers cannot speak against us. We may suffer, yes, but may we not suffer because we've done evil ourselves. So when we consider how we should conduct ourselves, Keller lays forward four characteristics of humility, of patience, of tolerance, and a lack of self righteousness, so that as we speak with someone with whom we disagree, we may be humble because we know that we are finite, we are limited, we are sinful, we do not know all things.

And then we may be patient, taking our time before we rush to judgments, trying to understand. We may be tolerant, so that even when deeply disagreeing, we treat them as someone made in God's image. And finally, we lack self righteousness because we know that we are not perfect, that we've only been accepted by God because of what Christ has done, because of his life and his death on our behalf. And then we see. Fourthly, that leads towards having a Church that is strongly prolife the late Larry Hertado, who used to teach right here at New College.

He highlights a practice that was common in the time of the Roman Empire called infant exposure, of throwing out unwanted babies left to die or to end up in slavery. At the time, it did not cause much of a moral outrage. And it gives an example of a letter that was found a letter that a man had sent who was in the Roman Army, and he was sending his wife this letter in one BC. And he tells his wife to take care of their child that they have. And then speaking about her being pregnant, he says, if it is a boy, let it be.

If it is a girl, cast it out. And then he just moves on, and he moves on to express his love for his wife, saying, how can I forget you? I beg you, don't be anxious. As he was away serving the army. So it was fine at this time in the culture that if you did not want a child who was born, you could throw it out.

[ 18 : 08 ] One study says that the Roman Empire needed about 5000 slaves a year and about 150,000 of those were made up by unwanted children that had been thrown out. A lot of early Christian writers like Justin Martyr spoke against this practice. Few pay against us well, but not really enough to change anything in that regard. Now, what is at the heart of the Christian concern for the life of the unborn, or indeed life from conception all the way to death? It's the image of God.

When God made Adam and Eve, he made them in his image. Because of that, all humans have value, worth and dignity. So we look at a Psalm here, Psalm 139, verses 13 through Psalm 139, starting in verse 13.

For you formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secrets intricately woven in the depths of the Earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance. In your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me when as yet there was none of them. Each human has been fearfully and wonderfully made by our amazing Creator. And because of this, Christians throughout history have cared for the unborn.

They've cared for those born, yet unwanted. Now the Christian prolife view extends beyond pregnancy of births, like I said earlier, from conception to death encounters to crucial issues in our times, that of abortion and euthanasia. The US abortion debate made international news last week as there's an ongoing court case that involves the 1973 Supreme Court case, Roe versus Wade. Now, much can be said, but we'll keep it brief as you consider the church's role and our individual role in the issue. See, we are bound by Scripture to uphold the sanctity and the dignity of life.

[ 20 : 55 ] Our position should not, however, merely be limited to the child, but we should also consider the mother. I've seen churches and I've seen Christians model the type of love that we want to see people that you not only vote to end abortion, but Christians and churches who actively love and support unwanted children, mothers who are sometimes in extremely difficult situations. And as we think of euthanasia, we must yet again go back to the image of God. These are men and women with worth and with dignity. Often, the ones who argue for euthanasia or assisted suicide point to their people their sufferings, to argue that they should deserve to die should they choose.

But even in great suffering, we have been fearfully and wonderfully made. James Eglinton, who is a lecturer at New College, wrote an op Ed in The Times where he argues, citing a Jewish sociologist, that Hitler was the one who normalized a doctrine of life, unworthy of life, where those who were terribly ill or handicapped were told their life was so bad that they should die before this principle was applied even more broadly. And this kind of thinking stems itself in a worldview that views death as natural, whereas the Christian view astonishingly holds that death is unnatural, that it is the enemy. A large part of my previous job at the Church that I came from was to visit the elderly. In our congregation, we had several that were in nursing homes for various reasons.

And I think they're called maybe care homes here. And as I went, they always loved when I visited it. It didn't take much. I mean, there are ones that I barely knew when I started visiting them who were so excited because generally they didn't see that many people that would come and visit. And I think it's easy when your physical strength is minimal and your mental capacity is diminished, especially when little thought or attention is given to you few visitations by others.

And you add on top of that a society that tells you that you should have the right to die because it is better for you to die than to live, then there's a danger to actually start believing it. See, if you read the Congregational Wednesday email that went out today, you saw that there's a bill considered by the Scottish government on the topic of assisted suicide, and the Free Church has responded to it. And I will read just a few sentences from that. I said, The Free Church of Scotland is fundamentally opposed to assisted suicide because it devalues human life, places undue pressures on the vulnerable, and is open to abuse and incremental extension. See, we believe life is a gift from God and those suffering deserve our compassion and care.

Accordingly, we are committed to more palliative care and proper emotional and spiritual support for those facing death and their loved ones. And you can see the entire response in the link that is in the email. Now, as a Church, as individuals, how may we think of being prolife? We're not antiwomen or anti elderly. Rather, it's an elevation of the value and the sanctity and significance of life.

[ 24 : 51 ] So in the week ahead, we may ask ourselves, how may I live a life that is prolife from conception to the grave? How may we love and support the unborn, the pregnant women and the elderly? And that moves us on to the fifth and the final point we'll consider, which is the revolutionary sexual ethic. Now, I remember when I was a teenager, before I became a Christian living in Sweden, and I thought this here, this view was probably the one of all the Christian views that seemed the most antiquated and the most oppressive. As I became a Christian, I remember telling some of my friends that I would not have sex until marriage.

And they were shocked. They could not fathom the reason behind that. And I think this is one of the areas that Christianity has so much wisdom and value to offer for our culture. Our culture is enamored with sex. You can read statistics of how earlier and earlier kids don't have sex, or even when they start watching pornography and the widespread use of this terrible practice, all of which showcases this enamoration of it.

And you can read the data on the harm that pornography causes and to see the danger that opposes to individuals, to families, to societies, and the consequences of the culture's view of sex, which is ultimately one of self expression self gratification. We also see, in light of the Me Too movement, where their stories of me and my desires come first and trumps all others in the Christian view clashes so strongly with culture's view of sex being truly antithetical. Seeing in the Christian view, sex only belongs within marriage. Contrary to the culture's view and how some have taught it in the Church, God is not anti sex. There's nothing intrinsically wrong or dirty about it. See, what the Bible does is it elevates the value and the value of it. See, the culture says sex is no big deal, but the Bible says no, it is. It is a big deal who you have sex with, and it's a big deal of how it's done that it is consensual. See consensual. Sex is also at the heart of the culture's view of sex, but ultimately it was introduced by Christianity in a time where there was no such concept. However, it doesn't stop at consent to. Keller puts it well, as he says, that the culture's view of sex ultimately departalizes and objectifies because it ultimately turns sex into a consumer good rather than as a means to nurture a bond of covenants. Sex outside of marriage is ultimately transactional, and it cannot finally be intimate. The Christian view requires sex to always be super consensual only for people ready to give their whole lives to each other. See, sex.

[ 28 : 16 ] And the Christian view, therefore, is centered on selfgiving, whereas the cultural view focuses on self gratification and self expression. See on taking the Christian view is one of giving. We see this in one Corinthians seven, as Paul says, that the husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife should give to her husband. It's a relationship of giving of oneself. So when we think about conversations that we will have that concern the issue of sex, our challenge, I think, is to get the attention that we need now.

Derek talked about attention is the step step one a couple of weeks ago. You can listen to that online, but how do we get the attention of the person we're talking to? Because they may have the preconceived notion that Christianity thinks sex is bad. So the way perhaps to get their attention is by affirming the goodness of it. But then to move beyond that and show that because of its significance, it only belongs in the stable Covenant Union of marriage.

And even beyond that, pointing it to the Union that we see between the bride and her husband, as we do between Christ and his Church. Now, in conclusion, as we end my prayer for myself and for all of us is what he prays in the high priestly prayer in John 17, as Jesus says, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They're not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth.

So may we seek to stay in the world, but not of the world, keeping away from the devil and sanctifying ourselves in God's truth. Maybe steep ourselves in God's word so that we may know his truth. I've heard and I can't necessarily say that this is true. But apparently when the US government trains people to detect counterfeit bills, fake currency, the bulk of their time is spent not on studying the counterfeits, but studying the real bills, the true bills, the right ones, so they may truly know what the correct ones look like. So may we likewise be so steep in the truth.

So we may know the truth. But at the same time, when we sit down and we talk to a friend or a stranger, a coworker, maybe we seek to listen and to get to know them. Not the preconceived image or notion that we may have of them, but of who they are, of what they believe and why they believe it. And share with them the truths of the gospel. With humility, with kindness, and with Grace.

[ 31 : 19 ] Let us pray.

Father, we thank you that you have given us your wisdom. For the Lord, we know that the so called wisdom that we have on our own is merely foolishness. We pray that you may make us wise. But at the same time, you pray that you make us humble. That you will make us eager to listen and to hear that we will be slow to speak.

But Lord, that when we do enter into these gospel conversations, Lord, we pray that we may rely on you and your spirit to give us the words to speak. Father, we know that there is nothing that we can say on our own that may bring them to life, but that it is only the words works of your gospel

empowered by your spirits. Father, we pray this prayer of dependence upon you in the name of Jesus. Amen.