

Being Counter Cultural

A Vineyard Sermon

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Introduction - The concept of culture

It is good to see you all! We are glad that you are here! I hope you have enjoyed your coffee. My name is Ola Wingbrant, and I'm given the privilege to preach in this church every now and then.

If any of you have notepads, or if you for some other reason want a label for this sermon, you can write "Being Counter Cultural". I will talk about expectations, and what influence culture might have on our expectations in life. My hope is that this will help you realize one thing:

Our expectations determine our actions.

Therefore, in order to "do the right thing", we need to have the right expectations. However, expectations are in part a consequence of our culture.

Culture is a very broad and a bit vague concept. But I think a perfect illustration of it is this:



Figure 1: Photo: Christoffer A Rasmussen, [Wikipedia](#)

Have you seen these large flocks of birds, and how they behave collectively? All of them fly in one direction, but suddenly some birds start to fly in a different direction, and then the rest follows that way instead. The flock changes direction in a smooth wavelike manner.

People and culture are a bit like that. People follow culture, and culture is formed by people. It changes, often in smooth, wavelike manners. However, together with culture comes the concept of being counter culture. Being counter cultural would be like being a bird flying in a different direction in the middle of the flock. If we apply this image to expectations, it means to carry different expectations than what is present in the surrounding culture. It takes courage, determination, and perseverance to be counter cultural.

The question

Not surprisingly the Bible has a lot to say about culture and expectations. The text I wish to study today is from Luke's gospel. If you are old fashioned like me, and use paper, you can pick up your Bible and turn to Luke 7:18-23. Otherwise you just click on your favorite digital device. Or you can read the passage on the screen behind me :)

Ready? We jump right into the action. The first sentence says "John's disciples told him about all these things". Don't worry, we will soon get to who this John is. If we read this passage in context it's clear that "all these things" refer to Jesus ministry. He has just raised one child from the dead, and cured another from sickness. But lets read on:

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Great passage! But, why can't Jesus just give a straight answer? It's a simple yes or no question, isn't it? NO! John's question is not a simple one. To see and understand this we must know a little bit more about John and his historical context.

But first, why is John's question interesting to us? Well, for one thing it is a question about Jesus' identity, who he is. While the answer to that question is of most importance, this is not today's subject. I think many of you who have been with us for a while already know that we believe Jesus to be the Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, i.e. God incarnate in man. Instead, today's subject is the *reason* for John's question itself, and why Jesus answers the way he does, and not just simply yes or no. As we will see, the reason is one of expectations.

The man

But back to John. Who was he? We only need to read a bit further (Luke 7:24-28):

After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Much can be said about these verses, unfortunately we don't have the time to unpack all of it. But we learn that John the Baptist is a prophet. But not just any prophet. John the Baptist is the prophet who has been sent to prepare the way for God's Messiah. As a matter of fact, John and Jesus have a history together. John has proclaimed that (Luke 3:16)

"I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Later, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan river, and then Jesus began his ministry.

John was also the first prophet to appear in Israel in about 400 years. However, through the prophets before him, the people of Israel had received a lot of promises from God about the coming Messiah. One of the greatest of these prophets was Isaiah, who lived in the 6:th century BC.

The reason

Now, apparently, as we saw in the passage we read earlier, John has become hesitant about Jesus. Why? Because he didn't see all his expectations come true. This is where I think culture kicks in. We can't know for sure, the Bible doesn't say, but we can suspect that John carried expectations about "the one who is to come", e.i. the Messiah, that were formed by the surrounding culture.

Some of these expectations were simply inadequate for the time. So, for example, John had in his preaching warned about judgment for those who did not repent and turn to God. He did not see this coming true in Jesus' ministry. Jesus did not judge people. From our perspective we know that John's expectations were inadequate. Final judgment will come, but only when Jesus returns.

Other expectations of John, if he had them, were plain wrong. For example, by the time of John, some of the prophetic promises had partly turned into political expectations by the people. Many expected the Messiah to be a political figure, who was going to throw out the Roman occupants, liberate Israel, and restore the Davidic monarchy. John did not see this coming true in Jesus' ministry either.

The answer

Before we see how this text applies to our situation today, I just want to have a quick look at Jesus' answer. In his answer to John the Baptist, Jesus alludes to a number of passages in Isaiah (29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7; 61:1). As a prophet John would clearly know these passages. They describe what works the Messiah would do. These are promises of God. These are the things that we should expect to happen. And as we have read, they were happening. Jesus is answering in the way he does because he is reeducating both the people, and to some extent, John the Baptist in what they should expect, and what kind of Messiah God has promised to send.

He is basically saying "Yes, you were right, I am the Messiah. No, you were wrong about some of your expectations. The Messiah was never to do those things."

I also want to note that Jesus' expectations when he walked on earth were to perform the actions of Messiah, which he did.

His expectations determined his actions.

The challenge

I have been going on for some length here, but I think we are ready to learn a few things. I think we can learn what options we have when the expectations we carry are not fulfilled.

One option is to question God, and his promises. This can be fruitful because it will force us to reexamine them. Maybe we discover that we have misunderstood something, or that our expectations are inadequate for our time. Just as some of John's expectations were inadequate for his time.

Another option is to question our expectations. Are they really based on God's promises, or are they expectations distorted by our cultural context? In other words, are our expectations plain wrong, in the same way as some of John's expectations were plain wrong?

I said earlier that our expectations are in part a consequence of our culture. *If* our expectations are in line with culture but not in line with God's promises, we need to correct this. We need to be reeducated just as people in John's and Jesus' days. Put in another way, we need to become counter cultural. We need to become birds flying in a different direction.

In his day, John was counter cultural in many different ways. He lived in the desert. He ate locusts and honey. He never drank wine, and he criticized the Jewish religious leaders. He also criticized the current regents marriage. That's why he ended up in prison. The question is, was he counter cultural enough? Could he see beyond the cultural expectations of the Messiah in his time?

Moreover, are *we* counter cultural enough? Are we counter cultural in the right way? More specifically:

What expectations do we have?

Are our expectations aligned with God's promises? As people of the Kingdom of God, our expectations ought to match the culture of the Kingdom of God. Why? Because:

Our expectations will determine our actions.

If we want to do Kingdom actions, we have to embrace Kingdom expectations. If we weren't in Sweden I would ask you to turn to your neighbor and say "Our expectations will determine our actions". But since we are in Sweden, you would not do that anyway, so I am not going to ask you ;-)

But our expectations will determine our actions. We should not think that church is a protected area against false expectations, or actions, or inability to act for that matter.

An example

As an example we can consider prayer. What expectations we have will determine how we pray, and what we pray for. We should not underestimate the power of church culture in this context. Our expectations are very much determined by the teaching we receive. How we act, how we pray, what we say, i.e. our practices is very much determined by the behavior of others around us.

Jesus said "Heal the sick. Cast out demons. Raise the dead". Jesus did these things. He also said "whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these".

Do I expect this? Do I act like I expect this? Do you?

Do I pray like Jesus did? Or do I pray like people around me? These options does not necessarily need to contradict each other. But I think we really ought to ask ourselves that question. I have to confess that I have been in situations where my prayer have been more controlled by church culture than what is in my heart. That is *not* a good thing. Please, don't let that happen to you.

Our cultural expectations determines our actions, even in church.

If we want to do Kingdom actions, like Jesus, we have to embrace Kingdom expectations. Sometimes that means we have to be counter cultural, even in church.