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Shows that Shape Us: Asking the Right Questions

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Shows that Shape Us: Asking the Right Questions

Abstract

"God's word can be translated into every cultural situation, becoming intelligible for us even as it brings a critique of our cultural idolatries."

Posting about interpreting popular culture from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/shows-that-shape-us-asking-the-right-questions/>

Keywords

In All Things, television programs, critical thinking, habit

Disciplines

American Popular Culture | Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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January 21, 2020

Shows that Shape Us: Asking the Right Questions

Justin Bailey

I teach a class called Theology and Popular Culture in which I encourage students to think theologically about the media in which they are immersed. Early in the semester, I ask them to consider the following questions:

- What is one piece of popular culture that has been really meaningful to you?
- Can you think of a piece of pop culture that changed your attitude about something important?
- Can you think of a time when a piece of pop culture brought much needed relief?
- Is there a piece of pop culture that has led to something like a ritual behavior for you?

Many students are not prepared to think so seriously about their entertainment. Others express their conclusions cautiously, expecting to be judged for their entertainment choices. But once they feel that their favorite songs and shows will be treated charitably, many students speak glowingly of the ways that pop culture helps them cope, the way it creates connections with friends and family, and how it offers stories to make sense of the world.

It is this last part that is always striking to me. Even though the show *Friends* ended when most of my students were infants, they speak of Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Monica, and Phoebe as if they were, well, their friends. Students boast near encyclopedic knowledge of various cinematic universes. Popular music offers mantras by which they live. So, this is the next set of questions that I offer for consideration:

- What's the basic story (or stories)?

- What role does the medium (method of delivery) play in making the story work?
- Why does the larger culture resonate with this story?
- Why do I resonate with this story?

You will notice that none of these questions evaluate the stories of pop culture for their compatibility with the Christian vision of the world. That comes later. I should say that my students are quite adept at doing this, at least at a surface level. They can tell me countless ways that their beloved shows, songs, and video games miss the mark. At some level, that's what they think I want to hear. But I find that this ability to do worldview critique neither abates their love for the artifact they are criticizing, nor changes their ritual viewing habits.

This is because the roots of our habits go deeper than our critical intellect. They are rooted in our cultural imagination. Indeed, we consume culture in ways that fit our own narrative identities; we are drawn to cultural artifacts that resonate with who we imagine ourselves to be and our sense of where we fit. Pop cultural critique, of course, is essential. But the first movement in engagement has to be one of understanding. By this I mean not just understanding why others in our culture resonate with this piece of pop culture, but also why I resonate with it.

The reality is that culture is not something "out there" waiting for us to discern and then selectively appropriate in accordance with untainted tenets of faith. What we call our worldview is always already deeply enculturated, cast in terms of language, metaphors, and world-pictures that we can understand. This is not a bad thing; it is a human thing. The beautiful thing is that God's word can be translated into every cultural situation, becoming intelligible for us even as it brings a critique of our cultural idolatries. But since we are so deeply embedded in culture, it means that the work of discernment is a work that happens first of all in our own hearts, as we seek to understand the longings and loves that orient our quest for meaning.

This leads to a final set of questions for thinking about the shows that shape us:

- Where do we see glimmers of beauty, goodness, and truth? How does this cultural artifact powerfully express or embody a biblical truth (created goodness, fallenness, or redemption)?
- Where do we see a cultural idolatry—a good thing that has been made into an ultimate thing?
- What critique or what completion does the gospel bring?
- What will I make of this? How will this be integrated into my life?

To answer these questions, we have to be committed to understanding ourselves and the people around us. Ultimately, as I tell my students, our interpretation of popular culture is not what we think about it, but how we integrate it into our lives. Your interpretation is your life.

In the next post, I will re-visit these questions with respect to my own favorite piece of pop culture: *The Office*.