

LOOK
BEFORE YOU
LEAD

How to Discern and Shape Your
Church Culture

AUBREY MALPHURS



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2013 by Aubrey Malphurs

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Malphurs, Aubrey.

Look before you lead : how to discern and shape your church culture / Aubrey Malphurs.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1507-6

1. Pastoral theology. 2. Church. 3. Christian leadership. 4. Corporate culture. I. Title.

BV4011.3.M35 2013

253—dc23

2012031876

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Contents

Introduction 7

Part 1 The Basics of Congregational Culture

- 1 Why Leaders Should Read This Book: The Importance of Culture 13
- 2 What Are We Talking About? The Definition of Culture 19
- 3 What We Do: The Church's Expression of Culture 25
- 4 Why We Do What We Do: The Church's Cultural Values 34
- 5 What We Believe: The Church's Beliefs 56
- 6 How We Respond: The Church's Relationship to Culture 68

Part 2 Reading Congregational Culture

- 7 Reading the Church: Understanding Its Culture Apple 83
- 8 Reading the Pastor: Discovering the Pastor's Culture 97

Part 3 Shaping Congregational Culture

- 9 The Church Planter as Culture Architect: Creating a New Church Culture 111
- 10 The Church Pastor as Culture Sculptor: Part 1 Preparation 129
- 11 The Church Pastor as Culture Sculptor: Part 2 Personnel 154
- 12 The Church Pastor as Culture Sculptor: Part 3 The Process 175

13 The Church Pastor as Culture Blender: Adopting Established Church Cultures 199

Appendixes

- A Behaviors Audit 209
- B Core Values Audit 220
- C Core Values Statements 222
- D Beliefs Audit 224
- E Faith Statement 231
- F The Culture Matrix: Beliefs, Values, Behavior 233
- G Spiritual Maturity Audit 234
- H Character Assessment for Leadership 239
- I Spiritual Gifts Inventory for Leaders 243
- J Temperament Indicator 1 248
- K The Personal Profile: The Persuader Pattern 249
- L Temperament Indicator 2 251
- M Temperament Indicator 2: Further Explanation 254
- N Implementation Team Worksheet 256

Notes 267

Index 269

Introduction

A primary responsibility of today's strategic church leaders is to create, implement, and re-implement an organizational culture that rewards and encourages movement toward the church's mission and vision. The church's culture falls under the category of organizational culture. But what is organizational culture? How does it affect a congregation? How might a leader discover his culture? And how might leaders shape or change a culture for the better? These are all questions that church leaders must be on top of if they are to have a chance of intentionally impacting their ministry communities for Christ. A leader's success will depend to a great extent on his or her understanding and shaping of the church's culture.

Have you noticed that everybody is talking about culture? I have tuned my ear to listen for the term, and almost everywhere I go, I hear it being used daily. In the ministry world hardly a conference goes by or a leadership book is published without someone making reference to or using the term *culture*. I suspect that it exceeds *vision*, *kingdom*, *disciple*, and *missional* in occurrence. But what is culture? When we make mention of culture, what are we talking about? It's a most elusive term, and I believe that anyone who uses the term is obligated to define it. Should we do so, we would find that we're all using *culture* differently, which means we aren't communicating with clarity. In fact, we're probably not even talking about the same thing.

If someone takes my advice and attempts to define *culture*, he or she will discover that it's not an easy concept to grasp. When people do try to define *culture*, it is often difficult to understand their definition. And I must admit that the most difficult task in writing this book has been defining what I mean by *culture*.

At the same time, I find it a critical concept that must be mentally digested and then applied if we're really to understand and lead our churches well. I argue that it's most important that every leader in general and pastors in particular be able to define *culture* and understand the culture in which they lead and minister. The way to understand culture is to read or exegete it. Just as we exegete the Scriptures to better understand the Bible, so we exegete a culture to better understand it, shape it, and move it toward accomplishing God's mission and vision for his church.

The primary purpose of this book is to help current and emerging leaders explore how to form spiritually healthy organizational cultures in the context of church planting, church revitalization, and church adoptions. We will focus specifically on how a church culture's shared beliefs and values interact to explain its behavior in general and display its uniqueness in particular.

My Unique Perspective

If you are under the age of forty, I want to warn you that this book takes a unique perspective. I've noticed that a number of younger pastors—church planters in particular—listen to and read only what's been written or taught by other, mostly younger, popular pastors. I suspect that they—like so many young people in America—are somewhat suspicious of those who are older and in or once were in authority. They assume that older leaders are out of touch with what it takes to reach today's unchurched generations.

While there may be some truth to this assumption, my perspective is to look to old and young alike. For example, we hear very little anymore from the proponents of the church growth movement. Whether you agree with them or not, we can learn much from these ministry pioneers who introduced the church to ministry research and shaped much of our early thinking on leadership. So you won't hear me putting down these people, as some authors do. If we listen only to what's new or consider only the latest ministry model or attend only the conferences put on by these people, then we severely limit our exposure to what God is doing in numerous different contexts in America and around the world.

What I Bring to This Table

While still in my twenties, I was involved in planting a church in Miami, Florida. Since then I've pastored two established churches, and over the last thirty years, I've had the wonderful privilege of training future pastors and

leaders at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas. Finally, I lead a consulting ministry called TMG or The Malphurs Group. Why do I mention this? Now that I look back on God's pathway for me, I see where he has prepared me to lead and minister in a unique way. I have one foot in academia (the seminary) and the other in practicality (the church). That's another way of saying that I live in and benefit from both worlds. On the one hand, I work regularly with pastors and their churches in seeking biblical and practical solutions to the issues they face daily. On the other, I work regularly with students and faculty who wrestle with theoretical issues. We seek to understand questions like: What is a leader? Can leadership be learned? What's the future for Christ's church? What does Scripture teach about Christ's church? Consequently, when I write or speak, my goal is to bring together the best of both worlds to glorify the Savior and provide you with practical tools that will make a difference.

This Book Is for You!

I wrote this book for any church leader whose heartbeat is for Christ's church. God has chosen to present his saving message of Christ through the church. Thus the church as a vehicle for the gospel is the hope of the world. However, leadership is the hope of Christ's church. This leadership includes senior pastors of large churches, pastors of small churches, other church staff, governing boards, congregants, consultants, professors, seminarians, and denominational executives and staff. I believe they all need to have a clear definition of congregational culture and know how to discover and shape that culture if they wish to understand and lead today's churches well. This is the essence and ultimate challenge of leadership. If leaders are to meet this challenge and lead, they must understand the dynamics of organizational or congregational culture.

Three Parts

I have divided this book into three parts. Part 1 prepares you for wrestling with your or another's congregational culture and prepares you for parts 2 and 3. Part 1 addresses the basics of congregational culture. Chapter 1 stresses the importance of this culture, and chapters 2 through 6 define it, using the Culture Apple.

Part 2 guides church leaders in reading or discovering congregational culture. Chapter 7 addresses how to discover a church's culture, and chapter 8 addresses how a church leader, such as a pastor, can discover the culture that he brings with him to the church he seeks to lead.

Part 3 moves the leader from reading to shaping culture. It isn't enough just to understand a congregation's culture; the leader needs to help a church change and shape or form a more robust, vibrant Christ-honoring culture. Chapter 9 addresses how to shape a new church's culture in the context of church planting. Chapters 10–12 speak to how to shape an established church's culture in the context of revitalization. I suspect that the majority of readers will work through the book quickly to get to these three chapters that will become three dog-eared chapters, because they speak to the situation of so many leaders. Finally, chapter 13 speaks to the issue of forming a new church culture through merging or adopting several church cultures.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

I have included discussion questions at the end of the chapters to help you as leaders grasp and apply the concepts in each chapter. I recommend that pastors and board members as well as church ministry staff read this book together and discuss the ideas as a group. Getting these issues out in the open and discussing them together could lead to a more open attitude toward change on the part of some change-resistant people. The same goes for seminarians, who may find themselves resistant to change. The questions will also help you wrestle with the tough issues that might otherwise be missed or even avoided. Finally, it is my desire that women in ministry read this book as well. I have used the masculine pronoun throughout this book not to exclude women but to avoid using “his or her” and variations, which can prove cumbersome.



PART
1

THE BASICS OF CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE

1

Why Leaders Should Read This Book

The Importance of Culture

Everyone lives in and thus has a culture, and none of us can separate ourselves from that culture. We are part of it, and it is part of us. So how does it affect us and we it? Most people aren't aware of the profound influence that culture has on us. We use culture to order our lives, interpret our experiences, validate our beliefs, and evaluate behavior—ours and that of those who share the culture. It's our resource for understanding our experiences and making sense of our lives as well as this world. Since this is largely a mental reflex—an unconscious process—we're hardly aware it's taking place. It simply happens.

Vital to Effective Ministry

To effectively minister to people in a culture, whether it's a church or parachurch organization, we must understand culture in general and organizational culture in particular. We will better reach people when we understand their culture and are aware of how it is similar to or vastly different from our own. One simple example is language. If we speak English and people we're attempting to reach only speak Spanish, we need not only to be aware of this but to make adjustments to our culture and learn Spanish. At issue here is how much

we're willing to change our culture to reach others with a different culture. In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 Paul challenges us to consider this important principle, which I'll address in chapter 6.

Affecting Our Conduct of Ministry

Our own cultural context—both past and present—has shaped much of our practice of the faith as well as our understanding of the faith. From a cultural perspective, many of our older, traditional churches across North America were “made in Europe,” whereas the new, emerging churches were “made in America.” For example, many of our European-influenced churches view the church as a building that “looks like a church.” This means that it has arches, possibly columns, and a steeple with a cross on top. Their organization is hierarchical, they emphasize the role and training of the clergy, they're more formal in dress and traditional in worship, they focus more on the past, and their music was written before the 1960s. None of this is wrong—just cultural. What is frightening is that some believe that Jesus and Paul worshiped in churches like this. And if it was good enough for them, it should be good enough for us.

Some churches that have been influenced primarily by American culture view the church more as people. Their organization is more horizontal, they emphasize the role and training of the laity, they are more casual in dress and contemporary in worship, their focus is on the future, and their music was written after 1960.

At the end of the twentieth century, many of the European-influenced churches were in decline, while some American-influenced churches were growing. In addition, a number of European-influenced churches have experienced a push by their younger people to transition to a more culturally current American-influenced format. This has been met with strong resistance, and in some instances, churches have split over it. The problem is that some of these people in the European-influenced churches believe they're defending the faith when in reality they're defending their cultural heritage. So they fight as if the entire future of orthodox Christianity depends on them. This is most unfortunate and very damaging to the cause of Christ.

A Multicultural America

We live at a time of growing cultural diversity. Consequently, we're reaching out and ministering the gospel to an increasingly multicultural America. This

diversity is seen both within and outside ethnic boundaries. For example, within ethnic boundaries, white younger generations live in and experience a different culture than do white Baby Boomers. And both embrace a culture that is totally different from that of their parents and grandparents. So we shouldn't be too surprised when the younger generation fails to embrace the cultural aspects of their parents' and grandparents' Christianity. The same holds true for African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and others.

America has become a global, multicultural nation. North America isn't a melting pot any longer; it's a salad bowl. Today we commonly speak of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans. And in some cities, one of these groups is the dominant racial group, not whites.

Whereas once many North American companies conducted their business only in America, now many have business interests in other countries. Along with improved communication technology, this has brought us into contact with people from all over the world. All this should press the church to ask, How can we best reach these people for Christ?

The Importance of Cultural Understanding

Established Churches

When pastors are hired to lead existing churches, they go into and have to adjust to an already established church culture. The better they read and understand that culture, as well as their own, the better their potential to shape or lead and minister well in that culture. If they fail to read the culture well, it will mean that the culture of the church will lead and manage them.

In my work with churches in general and pastors in particular, I have found that most don't realize this. One major purpose of this book is to help pastors understand their own culture preferences and an established church's culture before they accept a position to lead it. Thus early in the pastoral candidating phase, the pastor should read or exegete the church's culture. If he decides to accept a call to pastor the church, he will go in with his eyes wide open—he knows what he's getting into. He has the cultural navigational tools in place to ply the congregational waters that lie before him. He sees many of the cultural sandbars before he encounters them along the ministry journey. Every pastor must understand that to a great degree his job is to lead and manage the congregational culture, but if he doesn't understand that culture as well as his own, he won't be able to do the job.

Because of this dynamic, many leaders who have already taken and are pastoring established churches find themselves struggling. They don't realize

they are butting heads with the culture. Again, the answer is found in understanding their own preferences and their church's culture. The better a pastor knows his church's culture, the better he'll be able to lead his church. To a great degree, leadership decisions are based on the knowledge of one's culture as well as one's gifts and abilities as a leader. This knowledge will provide the leader with the information necessary to make the very best decisions regarding the ministry and outreach of the church.

Planted Churches

Church planters are involved in what I refer to as either a "cold start" or "hot start." A cold start involves gathering a core group to help plant a church. A hot start involves gathering and working with a group of people who have already begun to meet before the church planter arrives on the scene. In a cold start, church planters create their own congregational culture; thus the culture they bring with them affects and shapes the new congregation's culture. They should consider what culture they bring to their new church, because it will consciously or unconsciously dictate the culture of the newly planted church. Often this will be the culture of a church that has strongly influenced them in the past—the culture of the church where they came to faith or where they were powerfully challenged to serve Christ. I'll say more about this in chapter 7.

In a hot start the church planter will discover that a culture has already started to form around those who have begun to meet prior to his arrival. The longer they've been meeting, the more the culture will have formed. This is a lot like pouring concrete. When you first start pouring concrete, it's soft and very manageable. However, the longer it has had time to set up, the more difficult it is to change. And so it is with culture. Eventually over time the culture of the church plant will become set and, rightly or wrongly, define acceptable leadership.

Church planters should be aware of the development of culture when going into either situation. They may want to opt for a cold start over a hot start if they would rather not contend with a culture that has already formed significantly without their influence. In addition, they must realize that maintaining a certain degree of cultural adaptivity is the goal and challenge of their leadership. Can they accomplish this in a context where the concrete has already begun to harden significantly?

Culture and Strategic Planning

It's critical that church leaders do strategic envisioning (planning) if their churches are to meet all the challenges that are washing up on the ministry

beach. I lead a church-consulting organization called The Malphurs Group (TMG). Most of what we do is help churches with strategic envisioning and leader development. However, we've discovered that it's a waste of time and money to attempt to lead a culturally toxic church that clings to the traditions of men rather than the clear teaching of Scripture through the strategic-envisioning process. In the magazine *Executive Leadership*, Dick Clark explains, "The fact is, culture eats strategy for lunch. You can have a good strategy in place, but if you don't have the culture and the enabling systems, the culture of the organization will defeat the strategy."¹ And the church is no exception to the rule. Many leaders who attempt to implement strategic envisioning in a church discover that a toxic culture cannibalizes the strategic envisioning meat off its organizational bones.

Coping with Change

Churches are faced with problems from their external environment that affect their very survival as a culture. It's critical to the life and thus the future of a culture that it learn how to cope with a constantly changing external environment. The culture that is aware of and adapts well to these changes and challenges is more likely to survive. If it cannot adapt to change, it will die. Coping with the changes involves detecting the problems from without that affect a cultural shift, and then adapting or changing the church's culture accordingly. I will address this in chapter 12.

The Importance of Culture

- Culture shapes our lives and all our beliefs.
- Culture is vital to effective ministry.
- Our culture affects the way we conduct our ministries in the church.
- Culture helps us understand better the different people we seek to reach for Christ.
- Cultural understanding is essential to leaders if they are to lead their established churches well.
- Cultural understanding is essential to leaders if they are to lead their planted churches well.
- Culture may cannibalize strategic planning.
- Understanding culture helps the church cope with changes in its external environment.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In this chapter the author's purpose is to convince you that culture plays an important role in our lives and ministries. Did he convince you? Why or why not?

2. Of the eight reasons for the importance of culture in this chapter, which do you believe are the most important? Why? Which specifically address your church situation? Do any seem not so important? Why?
3. Do you want to know more about how culture affects the church? Why or why not?

2

What Are We Talking About?

The Definition of Culture

Now that we know how important congregational culture is and that it plays a critical role in leadership and the very survival of our churches, it's time to define what we're talking about. I refer to this as a "clarity moment." It's a time when we pause and make sure that we are all talking about the same thing. So we must define *culture*. What is our working definition? When defining a concept, I find that for maximum clarity it's often helpful to talk about what it isn't as well as what it is. We'll begin by focusing on what culture is and then move to what it isn't.

What Culture Is

What picture forms in your mind when you hear the term *culture*? Most likely, the answer is nothing. Because it's an abstract concept, you may struggle to come up with any picture at all. And that does not help us understand the concept. In fact, as I've researched the concept, I've found that people who write on organizational or church culture also struggle in their attempts simply to define the term. It has proved to be a difficult concept to wrap our minds around, and I suspect this is the reason there are so many different definitions. Indeed, a colleague argues there are more than two hundred definitions of

culture. However, for the sake of clarity, it's imperative that I provide a definition of *culture* as I use it in this book.

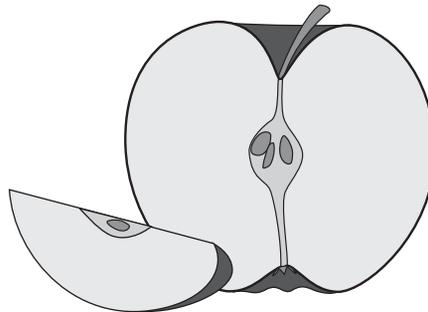
I define the church's *congregational culture* as the *unique expression of the interaction of the church's shared beliefs and its values, which explain its behavior in general and display its unique identity in particular*. This is what I refer to as my long definition. However, I have condensed it into a short definition. In short, a church's *congregational culture* is *its unique expression of its shared values and beliefs*.

I realize that initially you may not know what I mean by some of the terms. And this may cause you some concern. Thus I will explain them briefly in this chapter and more in depth in chapters 3–5. So stick with me. At this point, I want to acknowledge the influence of Edgar Schein (the Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus and senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management) on my thinking.¹

Congregational Culture

In this book my concern is with *congregational culture*, which is a type of organizational culture. I'm not writing about culture in general, but organizational culture in particular, and about a specific organization—the church. Thus I will refer to this culture throughout this work as both organizational and congregational culture.

The Culture Apple: Three Layers of Congregational Culture



My definition of congregational culture includes beliefs, values, and their expression (some form of outward behavior), which we can think of as three levels or layers. To truly analyze and understand a congregation's culture, we must differentiate between these three critical layers, while discerning how they relate and contribute to one another. In short, what does each contribute or bring to the culture as a whole that makes that culture unique?

I like to think of culture as an apple—the Culture Apple. When you hear the term *culture*, rather than go blank, picture an apple. The Culture Apple will help us picture and understand what a leader does as he seeks to discover a congregation's culture. Reading a congregation's culture is similar to peeling back and examining the layers of an apple. The Culture Apple consists of three layers or levels.

THE APPLE'S SKIN: THE CHURCH'S OUTWARD BEHAVIOR

The organization's beliefs and values intermingle and are seen in the church's behavior or outward expression of itself. This is the first layer that is represented by the apple's skin. Churches express themselves through their behaviors and outward appearance. We can say that they are behavior-expressed. The behaviors and outward expressions are what an observer, such as a visitor, would see, sense, and hear as he or she encounters a church's culture. Some examples are the church's physical presence (facilities), language (multi- or monolingual), clothing, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, ordinances, technology, and so forth. What is important here is that it's easy to observe the expression or behavior but more difficult to understand it. The pastor or leader who wishes to discover the church's culture must not only observe its expression but uncover its beliefs and values, which explain the behavior. I will say more about this aspect of culture in chapter 3.

THE APPLE'S FLESH: THE CHURCH'S VALUES

Congregational culture includes at the second level the church's shared values, which are represented by the apple's flesh. Churches are behavior-expressed but values-driven. The inward values drive and explain the church's outward behavior. These values explain why the church does what it does at the first behavioral level and why it doesn't do what it should do. When a church culture acts on its beliefs, they become its actual values. Until then they are aspirational in nature and inconsistent with the church's actual observed presence and expressed behavior. I'll say more about congregational values in chapter 4.

THE APPLE'S CORE: THE CHURCH'S BELIEFS

As you work your way into the apple's core, the third and most fundamental level, you find the shared beliefs on which the church's culture is based. Churches are behavior-expressed, values-driven, and beliefs-based. When Christians hear the term *beliefs*, they often think of the doctrines of the Christian faith that might be found in the church's doctrinal statement, creed, bylaws, and constitution. Certainly these beliefs or convictions are an important part

of the church's culture. However, the church's beliefs also include other fundamental aspects of the church's life, such as how it views time (is the church living in the past or the present?), how it views human nature (is man good or bad?), how it communicates internally and externally (the bulletin, announcements), how it handles power (who has the power and who doesn't?), what the role of tradition is, what the church believes is the proper role of women, what it believes about the use of technology (is it high-tech or low-tech?), what it believes about the use of musical instruments in worship, and other similar views.

I will also refer to these beliefs or convictions as *assumptions*, because they are taken for granted as well as shared by the majority of the congregation. If those who seek to understand or read a church's culture don't properly identify its basic beliefs, they will not know how to read its actual values nor interpret the congregation's outward expression of itself. They will have missed the true nature—the very essence—of that culture and what makes it unique. I'll say more about the church's beliefs in chapter 5.

THE CHURCH'S UNIQUENESS

These three elements of organizational culture—beliefs, values, and their expression—work together to display the church's unique identity. Thus they answer these questions: How is our church unique? What makes us different? Because no church has the exact same beliefs, values, and behavior, each church will have its own individual, unique nature or identity. (It's interesting that the same is true of apples—each type has its unique attributes.) And as we probe the culture, we will discover what that unique nature is.

What Culture Isn't

Now that we have a working definition of *culture* and an image (the apple) that will help us remember it, let's explore what culture isn't. The purpose is to further clarify the definition.

I'm aware of some misconceptions that Christians and church people hold about culture, which I believe have led to some unfair criticism of church models. Let's examine some.

Culture Isn't Evil

The most common misconception is that culture is inherently evil. I've noted that whenever Christian people—especially teachers and ministry leaders who are well-known on television and radio—mention culture, it's often

in a negative context. Far too many equate it with Satan's world system. When many critics hear someone say that the church needs to be culturally relevant, they interpret that to mean that the church is supposed to be like the world—to buy into and embrace Satan's world system. This represents a total misunderstanding of what the Scriptures teach about culture. Rather than jump to conclusions, it's imperative that we study carefully what God's Word says about these matters. (It's also important that we define our terms for better understanding. In this arena, teachers and leaders must define *culture* if we're to have an intelligent discussion. However, few do.)

Culture Isn't a Product of the Fall

We must realize that culture was not the result of the fall but an intrinsic part of the lives of Adam and Eve before the fall. You can find the Culture Apple in the Garden (and it's not the forbidden fruit). This was because God embedded in Adam a number of beliefs and values, as we see in Genesis 2. For example, God established the belief that a man shouldn't be alone but needs a helper (wife) to complete him and with whom to face life (v. 18). And as men act on this belief and seek that helper, they demonstrate that this is a value to them and an expression of that belief and value. Another embedded belief is God's creation of Eve (wife) and her role as man's helper (vv. 20–22). And as Adam and men who follow him seek such a helper (wife), they demonstrate that this is a value and an expression of that value. Since God accomplished all this and more, in effect, he created culture. In addition, Genesis 1:31 says that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." Thus God created culture, and it was very good.

Culture Isn't Independent of the Godhead

Not only did Adam and Eve operate in a cultural context, it's obvious that the Godhead does the same. In Genesis 1–2 it was the Godhead's creative acts that established the various beliefs and values that were the result of their creative thought and planning (Acts 4:24). If this is the case, and I think that it's obvious, then the Godhead relates and operates in a cultural context.

Culture Isn't Temporal

Furthermore, the evidence seems to indicate that culture will be an intrinsic part of our future state in heaven. It isn't limited to this world. For instance, Revelation 7:9–10 reveals that people's cultural distinctives or unique expression of their beliefs and values, such as their ethnicity and language, will be

preserved in heaven. We see much the same later in Revelation 20–22, specifically Revelation 21:26.

Culture Isn't Always Good

The points I have made about culture do not mean, however, that culture is always good. Culture can be good or bad. We see a very different culture after the fall. In essence, the culture was devastated by the fall. Sin pervaded everything, including culture (Gen. 3:14–19; 6:5). It wreaked havoc on people's beliefs and values.

Culture Isn't an End in Itself

It is a problem if we view culture as an end in itself. It's not an end but a means or vehicle to an end. Paul indicates this in Romans 14:14 when he refers to food, a vital aspect of culture, as not unclean in itself. However, if someone believes that a particular food is unclean, then for him or her it's unclean. Therefore, as a means to an end, it can be used for good or bad. Another example is language. In James 3:9–12 James distinguishes two usages of the tongue, which is a figure of speech for language (v. 10). On the one hand, people use it for good, such as praising God; on the other hand, people may use it to curse others who've been created in God's image (v. 9). A hunter can use a gun to provide food for his family, while a criminal may use it to rob a store. The same scalpel can correct a baby's malfunctioning heart valve or take the baby's life through an abortion.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the author's definition of culture? How well do you understand this definition? Does the apple metaphor help?
2. Does this definition make sense? Do you agree with it? If not, why not? How would you change the definition? How might the author's definition help you understand culture better?
3. Why is it helpful to know what culture isn't? Are you aware of certain misunderstandings of culture? Have you heard of any that the author addresses? Are you aware of any he didn't include? What are they?

3

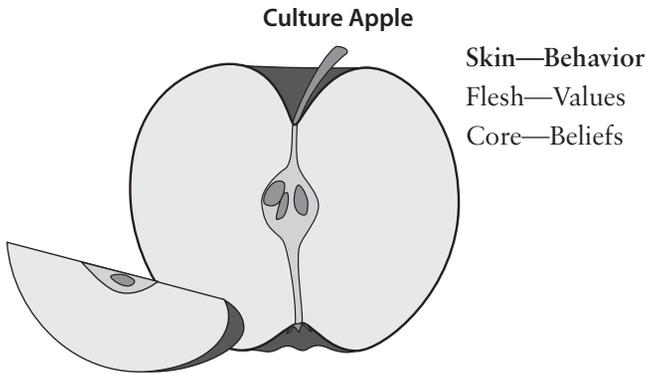
What We Do

The Church's Expression of Culture

In the last chapter, I defined congregational culture as a church's unique expression of its shared beliefs and values. This unique expression is the church's behavior that a visitor might observe on a typical Sunday. The church's culture is behavior-expressed. Next I suggested that when you hear the term *culture*, you picture an apple in your mind, and I briefly addressed the three vital concepts that make up the Culture Apple: expression (behavior), values, and beliefs. I hope you now have a much better idea of how I define *culture* and how I'm using this concept in this book. I doubt that the concept is now crystal clear, because it's such an abstract concept. So I want to extend and expand my "clarity moment" into this chapter and the next two.

I've set aside these three chapters to explain further and to expand my definition. The plan is to peel the Culture Apple, sample its flesh, and observe its core. I would compare the process to adjusting the lens on a microscope. Somewhere in your early education it's likely you took a biology class where you learned how to operate a microscope. When you first placed a bug or a piece of leaf on a slide under a microscope, you may have been able to see the object, but it was out of focus. You corrected this by adjusting the focus until it was clear. And that's the major purpose of these three chapters—to adjust the focus on culture until the definition is clear and workable.

Through these chapters, I'll begin to erect what I refer to as the *Culture Matrix*. It will appear at the end of chapters 3 and 4 and will make up appendix F. Don't let the term *matrix* concern you, because you will see an example of a matrix later in this chapter. It provides a way to capture and summarize the contents of the chapters as a visual comparison of what behavior, values, and beliefs contribute to the culture.



To better understand my definition of *culture* in chapter 2 and the impact of congregational culture, imagine that you're a candidating pastor or an unchurched lost person visiting a church for the first time. What would you experience? What are the cultural layers that lie before you? And what might you learn by peeling back the layers, much as a chef might peel an apple for one's favorite pie or strudel?

In this chapter our goal is to peel back the first layer and examine it. This first layer will help you think through your congregational first impression—how your congregational culture impacts “outsiders” as well as “insiders” as they attempt to understand what's taking place. We will peel the Culture Apple by identifying the skin or first layer, by providing a number of examples of what you might see at this layer, by addressing how people respond, by observing and understanding the layer (cultural exegesis), and by using the Culture Matrix to summarize the layer.

The Identity of the First Layer

The first layer of the church's culture is its expression or presentation of itself in terms of what it does. It consists of its overt behavior or actions and artifacts (the results of behavior). It's that aspect of the culture that is perceived by one's

senses, including all that you would see, hear, and feel as you first encounter the congregation. In defining culture, some have used the illustration of the old-timer who when asked for a definition of culture responded, “It’s the way we do things around here!” This is true, but true only of the first layer or the skin of the apple. It doesn’t reveal enough. For example, it doesn’t address why they do things the way they do—their values—or the beliefs or assumptions on which they’re based. Both are vital to discovering culture.

How might a culture sculptor identify the first layer? The answer is two-fold. First, I have found the following format to be helpful in discovering and identifying the apple’s skin. If it will fit in the sentence below, it’s most likely a first-layer feature of the culture:

Expressions Format: “We see, hear, feel, sense _____.”

Second, I have provided some general cultural practices or expressions early in chapter 7 where I address how to exegete a culture. They will help you identify your culture when you begin to study it. Should you desire a more exhaustive list, see the Behaviors Audit in appendix A.

It’s important to note that it is easy to observe expressions of a church’s culture but more difficult to understand them. You can’t tell much about an apple simply by observing its outer layer or skin. It’s like the tip of an iceberg. Anyone who knows anything about icebergs knows that the part you see above the water—only 10 percent of the iceberg—isn’t representative of the entire iceberg. Most of it (90 percent) lies below the surface. The church’s behavior or expression of itself is what you can observe. It’s the tip of the cultural iceberg. Remember that while the culture is behavior-expressed, it is values-driven and beliefs-based. For you to really understand the congregational culture, you must explore below the waterline at the values and beliefs levels. They will tell you much about the culture.

Some Examples of the First Layer

To better understand the first layer of a church’s culture, let’s visit a fictional church and see what we observe, hear, feel, and sense out in the parking lot, during the worship service, in a Bible study, and so forth. Following is a list of the more common cultural expressions or behavior that a visitor would experience at the first layer of a church’s Culture Apple. Should you peel off and examine the skin, here is what you might see (see appendix A for more examples).

Neighborhood or community. Is the neighborhood new, old, or in between? Does it consist of apartments, houses, businesses, or a combination? Are the people who live in the community Anglo, Hispanic, Black, Asian, other, or a combination? Are the people in the community of the same ethnicity as those who attend the church or are they different? Does the neighborhood seem to be declining or growing?

Demographics. Is the congregation made up of Anglos, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, other, or a combination (multiethnic)? Are the people poor, affluent, or somewhere between? Are people mostly young, middle-aged, or elderly? Are there young families with kids? How does the congregation's demographics align or not align with those you've observed in the neighborhood?

Language. What do you hear? What languages do people speak? Is the church mono- or multilingual? What languages are spoken in the service? Do you understand what's being said?

Facilities. Usually the facilities include educational space, the worship center/sanctuary, and offices. Do the buildings have drive-by appeal? Are the facilities clean and well maintained, especially the nursery, the bathrooms, and the kitchen? Are the facilities safe? During worship, do people sit in pews, chairs, or both?

Parking. Is adequate parking available? Does the church provide visitor and handicapped parking? Is there special parking for the elderly and for expectant moms? Are parking places reserved for the pastor, other staff, and their spouses? Are security or police vehicles present?

Grounds. Are the grounds clean and well kept? Is the grass mowed? Are the leaves raked? Are there adequate flowers and foliage?

Signage. Is there signage showing where to turn in to the church? Is there adequate signage so that visitors know where to park? Are there signs inside the building for the bathrooms and classrooms?

Attendants. Are there friendly, helpful attendants located in the parking lots to direct people where to park their cars? Are there people available to direct visitors to the nursery or Sunday school classes?

Vehicles. What types of vehicles are in the parking lots? Are they new, expensive cars or are they older and possibly not well kept? Are there trucks (in Texas they call pickup trucks Texas Cadillacs)? Are there church vehicles, such as a church van or bus?

Clothing. Is the dress casual, dressy, or business formal? Do the men wear suits? Are the people stylish—do they seem to care about or wear the

latest styles? Is there a particular style of clothing, such as Western wear, that many wear?

Friendliness. Are people friendly? For example, do they greet you, say hello, smile, answer questions, and offer to help visitors find their way around the church?

Emotions. Do people show their emotions? For example, are they emotionally expressive during worship time (do they wave their hands and/or shout amen)? Or are they unemotional (they keep their hands in their pockets)? Do they ever shout, speak out, fall over, stand, weep, dance, and so forth?

Security. Are there police or security people wandering the facilities? Are there security cameras? Are the facilities and grounds well lighted? Do people appear to feel safe when at this church?

Manner of address. Do people call one another by their first names? How do people address the senior pastor or other pastors and staff members?

Technology. Is the church technologically astute? Does it have front or rear screen projection? Is there a soundboard? Do you see people using computers or other electronic devices?

Communication. How does the church communicate with people? Does it use bulletins, make announcements, use U.S. Postal Service, or use email? Does it have a website?

Ordinances. Does the church practice the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper)? How often? Does it baptize by immersion or sprinkling? Does it use wine or grape juice, cracker or matzo in communion?

Symbols. Does the worship area or sanctuary contain symbols, such as a cross, a religious tapestry, stained-glass windows?

Worship. Is the church's worship style traditional or contemporary? Does it use a liturgy? What musical instruments, if any, are used in worship? Is there a choir? Are people free to express their emotions during worship? Does the church sing using hymnals, words on a screen, or both?

Disciple-making ministries. Does the church evidence a clear, simple pathway for making disciples? Does it offer Sunday school, small groups, men's and women's Bible studies, and other learning opportunities? Does the church appear to have the same or similar ministries for children and young people?

Outreach ministries. Does the church have and make known its community outreach ministries? Do they advertise them well? Does the church reach out to poor and oppressed people in or outside its community?

- Missions.* Does the church support in some way international missions? Does it support local missions? Does the church ever do a fund-raiser or capital campaign to raise funds for missions?
- The Scriptures.* Does the church teach and preach from the Bible? Do people carry their Bibles to church, classes, and small group meetings?
- Discipline.* Does the church practice church discipline? Have you ever observed someone being disciplined?
- Visible behavior.* Do people in general manifest the fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22–23 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control)? Do the majority of the people appear on the surface to be spiritually mature people?
- Vision.* Does the church appear to have and communicate a vision? Is it written down anywhere? Do you hear it regularly from the pastor or clergyperson when preaching?
- Values.* Has the church identified and does it communicate well its values? Has it done the same with its core values? Are they written down somewhere?
- Atmosphere.* Do you sense that the church is warm and welcoming or cold and aloof? Do you feel tension in the air?
- Ceremonies.* What does the church celebrate? Does it have baby dedications, infant baptisms, and ordination services?
- Women.* Does the church appear to have more women than men in the congregation? How do women express themselves in the church?
- Myths and stories.* Is there any particular person or persons that the church tells stories about—who are its heroes? Is this person the pastor or a past pastor, such as the founding pastor? Does the church make heroes of some of its missionaries or longtime members?
- Visitors.* Does the church seem prepared for visitors? Do they have parking reserved for visitors? Do they have greeters who look for visitors and direct them to where they want or need to go? Does the church follow up visitors with a phone call and/or letter?
- Pastor.* Is the senior pastor friendly? Is he a good preacher? Is he a good leader? What does he appear to value most? Do you like him?
- Staff.* Does the church have any staff people (paid ministry people other than the senior pastor) who lead ministries? What ministries do they lead?
- Doctrinal beliefs.* Does the church have and communicate its doctrinal beliefs as based on the Scriptures? Do the pastor and other teachers regularly teach and preach the church's doctrinal beliefs from the Bible?

Leadership development. Does the church have a process for developing leaders churchwide? Does the church have a process for developing its small group leaders? Does the church have a governing board and provide leadership training for it?

Finances. Do the pastor and others preach and teach on stewardship at least annually? Is the church struggling financially? Is the church doing well financially? Do leaders say little about the church's finances?

How People Respond to the First Layer

Those who are visiting the church for the first time (believers who are looking for a good church, unbelievers who have been invited to attend the church, or potential pastors or staff) experience the first layer as expressed above. Practically everything they see, hear, or feel is somewhat unique to the church and new to them. They will likely be comfortable with some of it and uncomfortable with other aspects of the first layer. They are there to check out the church to see if it's the kind of culture they want to be a part of. Often they're looking for a culture similar to one that has had a powerful impact on their lives in the past.

Those, however, who have been at the church for a while tend, with some exceptions, to have accepted the culture the way it is and hardly notice it until someone calls it into question or attempts to change it. They go through the motions that are part of the culture without thinking much about what they're doing or experiencing. For example, there was a time in my ministry when I did a lot of interim pastoring. I found that when I questioned the church about some aspect of their culture, such as the upkeep of their facilities or the lack thereof, people would be surprised by my observation. They were operating on automatic pilot and basically were unaware of what they were or were not doing.

Observing the First Layer

Wise leaders don't operate on automatic pilot or the status quo. We'll learn that regularly they observe the congregational culture of other churches as well as their own. The goal is for this observation to become second nature. I'll fully address this topic in chapters 7 and 8. As a culture detective, your job at this point is simply to observe and experience what a church does or what you see when you visit the church. Be a visitor. Make a list. Take copious notes of the congregation's behavior. Resist the urge to ask why they do what they do, trying to interpret their behavior. This is the values question that we'll ask at

the next level. Simply observe as much as possible. Early in chapter 7 there is a brief exercise to help you in your observation of your culture.

Summarizing the First Layer: The Culture Matrix

At the beginning of this chapter, I briefed you on the Culture Matrix. I want to make it clear what I mean by the term *matrix*. The matrix I have designed is a summary of what chapters 3, 4, and 5 contribute to our understanding of a church's culture. As we go through the chapters, the summaries will appear side by side for easy comparison. The first part of the matrix focuses on the expressions or actions of the culture.

Behaviors or Expressions

Definition	The results of acting on a value.
Action	The resulting behavior—what we do.
Number	Organizations have numerous actions, behaviors, or expressions.
Purpose	How a value affects life.
Change	Subject to change.
Synonyms	<i>Actions, presentation; what we do</i>

Expressions Format: “We see, hear, feel, sense _____.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you find that using a figure, such as an apple, helps you better grasp the definition of congregational culture? Why or why not? Is there another figure that would be more helpful? If so, what is it and how does it help?
2. The first layer of a congregation's culture—the apple peel—is its expression or presentation of itself. Would you agree that, much like the tip of an iceberg, it doesn't tell you enough about a particular congregation's culture? Why or why not?
3. In this chapter, the author supplies you with a number of examples of the first layer of a culture. Do you find these helpful? Why or why not? Are there any examples you feel the author might have missed or left out? If so, what are they?
4. If a guest were to visit your church, what do you believe he or she would observe, hear, feel, and sense? Use the Behaviors Audit in appendix A to help you answer this question.

5. Conduct your own tour of your church. Take several leaders in your church on a tour of what takes place on a typical Sunday or at other times when people meet. Ask what they see, hear, and feel.
6. Ask outsiders to visit and point out what they see, hear, and feel. Ask them for the unvarnished truth.
7. Do you believe that this chapter can help a pastor, a visitor, or some other person to begin exegeting or reading a congregation's culture? Why or why not?
8. Would you agree that many of the people who attend a particular church regularly over a period of time don't think much about what they are doing and why? Why is this the case? Could this be true of a church that you are a part of?