

Redeeming Culture

Heritage Day Sermon

1 Corinthians 9:19–23 ¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

This is a powerful picture of cultural agility. Many people adapt so that they can fit in and not feel like an outsider. Paul did it for the Gospel.

Central truth: The Gospel does not erase culture. It celebrates what reflects God, confronts what contradicts God, and redeems what can be redirected towards the glory of God.

Introduction: What Is Culture?

Heritage Day gives us an opportunity to celebrate where we come from. But it also gives us an opportunity to ask a deeper question: **What parts of our heritage should we preserve, what parts should we reject, and what parts can Christ redeem?**

Culture can be described as the shared **values, beliefs, norms, customs and practices** through which a group of people interprets life.

Culture influences:

- How we greet people.
- How we relate to elders.
- How we understand time.
- How we celebrate.
- How we grieve.
- How directly we communicate.
- How we view family, authority, marriage, money and community.
- What we consider respectful, rude, beautiful, important or normal.

Culture is like a pair of spectacles. We look through it without always realising that we are wearing it. This means that culture is deeper than clothing, food, music and language. Those are important expressions of culture, but they are only the visible parts.

The Levels of Culture

It is helpful to distinguish two established models. Hofstede's "onion" model identifies symbols, heroes, rituals and values, moving from the visible surface towards the cultural core. Edgar Schein's

three-level model distinguishes visible artefacts, stated values and largely unconscious underlying assumptions.

Level	What it includes	Examples
Surface expressions	Visible and audible features	Food, music, dance, clothing, language, hairstyles, greetings
Shared practices	Accepted ways of behaving	Rituals, ceremonies, hospitality, weddings, funerals, leadership customs
Espoused values and norms	What people say is important	Respect, loyalty, generosity, achievement, community, independence
Deep assumptions	Unspoken beliefs that feel “obvious”	Ideas about authority, time, gender, success, family, spirituality and truth

The problem is that we often judge the deepest parts of someone’s culture based only on what we see at the surface. Someone does not greet you in the way you expect, so you call them disrespectful. Someone speaks loudly, so you call them aggressive. Someone avoids eye contact, so you call them dishonest. Someone calls you by your first name, so you call them rude. But what looks disrespectful in one culture may be normal in another.

Cultural maturity requires humility, empathy, curiosity and the suspension of premature judgement.

1. God Created Diversity

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”
— Genesis 1:31

Diversity was not humanity’s idea. It was God’s idea. Look at creation. God did not create only one kind of tree, flower, animal, landscape or personality. He created mountains and valleys, deserts and forests, oceans and rivers. Creation displays both unity and extraordinary variety.

In Ephesians, Paul speaks about the **“manifold wisdom of God.”** The Greek word *polypoikilos* carries the idea of something many-sided, multifaceted or richly varied. Eph 3:10 *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,*

God’s wisdom is not monochrome. It is multicoloured. We see diversity even within the Godhead. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, yet there is distinction of person and function. **Biblical unity has never required sameness.**

God’s answer to division is unity, not uniformity. Uniformity says, “You must become like me before I can accept you.” Kingdom unity says, “We can belong to Christ together without becoming identical.”

Diversity Among Jesus' Disciples

Jesus deliberately chose disciples with different personalities, backgrounds and ways of seeing the world.

Peter was impulsive and outspoken. John was relational and affectionate. Thomas was analytical and questioning. Matthew had worked as a tax collector for Rome. Simon was known as the Zealot, associated with a movement that opposed Roman domination. Imagine Matthew and Simon sitting at the same table. One had collected money for Rome; the other represented fierce resistance to Roman influence.

Only Jesus could bring them into the same team. Jesus did not choose twelve identical men. He chose people whose differences would have to be submitted to a greater identity and a greater mission. They did not stop having different backgrounds. But following Jesus became more important than defending their backgrounds. E.g. of man who got offended when I spoke about the polygamy of his forefathers.

Diversity in the Church at Antioch

Acts 13:1-2 ¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Acts 13:1 introduces the leadership of Antioch:

- Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus.
- Simeon called Niger.
- Lucius of Cyrene in North Africa.
- Manaen, who had been raised with Herod.
- Saul, a highly educated former Pharisee.

They differed ethnically, geographically, socially and experientially. Yet they worshipped, fasted, listened to the Holy Spirit and led the church together. It was from this diverse church that Paul and Barnabas were sent into cross-cultural mission. Our church is diverse; Nigerian, Zimbabwean, South African, Congolese, Indian etc.

A diverse church is uniquely positioned for a diverse mission.

2. Every Culture Carries Something to Celebrate

We should never speak about cultural differences only as problems to solve. Every culture contains expressions of God's common grace. Different cultures often develop distinctive strengths.

We may observe generosity among Nigerians and Americans, enterprise among Zimbabweans, diligence among Malawians, extraordinary musicality among South Africans, hospitality across many

African and Middle Eastern communities, innovation and generosity among Americans, precision in Swiss watchmaking, or meticulous engineering in Germany and Japan. These are appreciative observations, not labels that define every individual. No nationality has a monopoly on any virtue, and every person is more than a cultural stereotype. Nevertheless, cultures can develop collective strengths. Instead of competing over them, we can receive them as gifts.

Imagine what becomes possible when we combine:

- African hospitality,
- Swiss precision,
- German planning,
- American optimism,
- Asian perseverance,
- Nigerian confidence,
- Zimbabwean enterprise,
- Malawian diligence,
- and South African creativity.

Diversity gives us access to strengths we do not possess by ourselves. In my book *A Biblical View of Diversity* I said that diversity should not merely be **managed**. It should be **leveraged**. When you have many people wanting to come to your country it is a sign of being a blessed nation. Almost 25% of the Canadian population is foreign born. Only 4% of the South African population is foreign born.

Ask yourself: **What has God placed in my heritage that can bless the world?** E.g. I love the way Venda people are passionate about education. There is what's called the mathematics miracle in Venda. They produce abnormally high pass rates in STEM subjects even in deep rural areas. There are strong cultural values around respecting teachers, literacy etc. They are only 1.5 million Venda people compared to 15 million Zulu people.

Perhaps it is:

- Respect for elders.
- Commitment to extended family.
- Generosity.
- Perseverance through adversity.
- Entrepreneurship.
- Storytelling.
- Musical expression.
- Hospitality.

- Community consciousness.
- Courage.
- Excellence.
- Care for children.
- Honour for ancestry—not worship of ancestors, but gratitude for those who sacrificed before us.

We must learn to celebrate God's fingerprints in cultures other than our own.

3. Every Culture Has Been Affected by Sin

While diversity comes from God, no human culture is sinless. Romans 3:23 says that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. That applies not only to individuals but also to the systems, customs and assumptions human beings develop. Therefore, we must avoid two opposite errors. The first is **cultural superiority**: "Everything about my culture is right, and everyone else should become like us." The second is **cultural romanticism**: "Because this practice is part of our heritage, nobody is allowed to challenge it."

Not everything ancient is righteous. Not everything modern is wise. Not everything African is ungodly, and not everything Western is Christian. Every culture must come under the authority of Christ. Our culture may teach generosity but also protect corruption. It may honour elders but silence young people who have been abused. It may value community but punish individuality. It may value independence but produce isolation. It may honour hard work but neglect rest and family. It may value spiritual awareness but direct that awareness towards practices that compete with trust in Christ. It may value respect for authority but discourage people from confronting ungodly leadership. It may promote excellence but base human worth on achievement. It may protect family loyalty while concealing destructive behaviour within the family.

Culture can explain behaviour, but it does not automatically excuse behaviour.

The Bible is not Western culture. The Bible is not African culture. The Bible is the authoritative Word through which God judges, corrects and renews every culture.

4. Babel Shows Us Culture Without God

Genesis 11 describes humanity gathering to build a city and a tower.

Their ambition was: "Let us make a name for ourselves."

Gen 11:1-9 *Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ²As people moved eastward,^[a] they found a plain in Shinar^[b] and settled there.³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."⁵ But*

the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”⁸ So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel^[c]—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Babel was not simply an architecture project. It was organised human pride—a civilisation seeking unity, significance and security independently of God. God confused their language and scattered them. Babel teaches us that cultural unity without submission to God can become rebellion. People can unite around pride, oppression, idolatry or self-glorification. But Babel is not the end of the story. In the same way, towns in South Africa like Orania are not biblical because they are exclusive. If you are praying “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” then you should never want to build mono-ethnic things because heaven is not like that.

Pentecost: Unity Without Uniformity

Acts 2:5–11 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[a] ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. People from many nations heard the wonders of God declared in their own languages. Notice what God did not do. He did not make everybody hear only one sacred language. The Spirit honoured their different languages while giving them one message. At Babel, language became associated with scattering. At Pentecost, different languages became vehicles of revelation. **Pentecost did not erase diversity; it redeemed it.**

That is a picture of the church:

- Different languages, one gospel.
- Different nations, one King.
- Different expressions, one Spirit.
- Different histories, one new humanity in Christ.

5. Learn to Interpret Cultural Differences Generously

One barrier to cross-cultural relationships is that we interpret other people’s behaviour through our own cultural assumptions.

Peach and Coconut Cultures

Erin Meyer uses the metaphor of “peach” and “coconut” cultures. In peach cultures, including the United States, people can appear warm, informal and personally open quite quickly, yet the boundary protecting their private lives may be harder to penetrate. In coconut cultures, including Russia, people can initially appear reserved or tough, but relationships may become extremely deep once trust is established.

I experienced this recently at a barber. A woman came in with her son. In a strong accent, she said to the barber: “Here is my son. Make sure you do not mess up his hair. If you mess up his hair, I will cut yours off.” I asked her, “Which country do you come from?” She replied, “The biggest country in the world—Russia.” There was a sharp contrast between how she spoke to the barbers and how she spoke to her son.

That was a wonderful picture of a coconut culture: very strong on the outside. If you judge only the initial presentation, you may conclude that the person is aggressive or unfriendly. But once trust develops, you may discover tremendous warmth, loyalty and depth. People from these cultures may “go through the fire” with you.

With some Americans, the experience can be more “peach-like.” People may be warm, socially confident and engaging. You can meet someone and feel as though you have been friends for years. But that warmth does not necessarily mean that a deep friendship has already been formed. Later, there can be an “out of sight, out of mind” experience.

Neither style is automatically more loving. One offers accessibility before intimacy. The other may offer intimacy after trust. Another example is high context vs low context cultures. This is crucial to understand when doing business. South Africans are good greeters (ranging from greeting in the public toilet to the referee greeting you).

Cultural intelligence teaches us not to confuse a different relational style with a defective character.

Take People with a Pinch of Salt e.g. my experience in Sweden running.

Do not conclude too quickly:

- Direct does not always mean rude.
- Quiet does not always mean disengaged.
- Warm does not always mean deeply committed.
- Reserved does not always mean unfriendly.
- Eye contact does not mean the same thing everywhere.
- Flexibility with time does not always mean disrespect.
- Punctuality does not always mean someone values relationships.
- Questioning authority does not always mean rebellion.
- Deferring to authority does not always mean agreement.

James 1:19 ... be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Cross-cultural relationships require us to become slower in judgement and quicker in curiosity.

Instead of saying, “These people are rude,” ask: “What might respect look like in their culture?”

Instead of saying, “They do not care,” ask: “How do they normally demonstrate care?”

Instead of saying, “They are dishonest,” ask: “Could they be communicating indirectly because direct disagreement is considered dishonouring?”

6. Culture Must Be Redeemed, Not Merely Repeated

Romans 12:2 says: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

We are all enculturated. We have absorbed assumptions from our upbringing, ethnicity, nationality, family, class, generation, profession and denomination. Some of those assumptions reflect God’s wisdom. Others must be renewed. **Redemption means that God takes something previously directed towards sin, idolatry or self-glory and redirects it towards His purposes.**

The Drum Can Be Redeemed

In some communities, African drums may once have been used in ancestral ceremonies or other forms of worship. But the drum itself does not belong to darkness.

The rhythm belongs to God. The wood belongs to God. The animal skin belongs to God. The creativity belongs to God. The human hands playing it belong to God. An instrument once used in another form of worship can now be used to praise Jesus. Psalm 150 calls upon God’s people to praise Him with instruments, movement and everything that has breath. The enemy is not the creator. He is a distorter. Satan cannot create music. He can only distort its purpose. He can only corrupt what God has placed within humanity.

Redemption says: “What was once directed towards darkness will now announce the glory of God.”

But we must recognise an important distinction: **some cultural things can be redirected, while others must be renounced.**

An African drum can be redirected to praise God. An occult covenant cannot be redirected; it must be renounced. Hospitality can be redeemed. Abuse cannot. Respect for elders can be redeemed. Silencing victims cannot. Community responsibility can be redeemed. Tribal hatred cannot. Honouring family history can be redeemed. Seeking spiritual mediation from the dead cannot.

This requires biblical discernment.

7. A Framework for Redeeming Culture

When examining any cultural belief, practice or tradition, ask three questions.

1. What Should We Celebrate?

Does this cultural practice reflect something of God's character?

Celebrate:

- Generosity.
- Hospitality.
- Courage.
- Creativity.
- Faithfulness.
- Community.
- Honour.
- Excellence.
- Perseverance.
- Respect.
- Care for the vulnerable.

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

This reminds us that every good and perfect gift comes from above. If it is genuinely good, we can recognise God as its ultimate source.

2. What Should We Confront?

Does the practice contradict Scripture or harm people?

Confront:

- Idolatry.
- Racism.
- Tribalism.
- Xenophobia.
- Abuse.
- Dehumanising initiation practices.
- Oppression of women.
- Corruption.
- Revenge.

- Dishonesty.
- Exploitation.
- Fear-based spiritual practices.
- Unquestioning loyalty to ungodly authority.

Jesus did not come merely to affirm us. He came to transform us.

3. What Can We Convert?

Can this cultural expression be redirected towards the glory of God?

Convert:

- Music into worship.
- Dance into celebration before God.
- Storytelling into communicating the gospel.
- Poetry into prophetic proclamation.
- Hospitality into Christian community.
- Respect for elders into honouring godly wisdom.
- Community responsibility into caring for the body of Christ.
- Entrepreneurial ability into creating Kingdom wealth and employment.
- Traditional craftsmanship into expressions of beauty and excellence.
- Ceremonies of transition into biblical blessing and discipleship.

The gospel is not interested only in removing bad things. It also restores created purpose.

Redemption is not merely subtraction; it is restoration and redirection.

8. Christ Must Be Greater Than Our Culture

Paul writes in Philippians 3 that although he had a strong ethnic, religious and cultural identity, he considered everything secondary compared with knowing Christ.

Phil 3:4-9 though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Christianity does not demand that we forget where we come from. It demands that we know who has the final word over where we come from. I can be proudly African, but I cannot make Africa my god. I can be grateful to be Zimbabwean, South African, Nigerian, Malawian, Russian, American or Swiss. But none of these identities can rival my identity in Christ. When my culture and Christ agree, I can celebrate my culture. When my culture and Christ disagree, I must choose Christ. **You do not prove your loyalty to your people by defending everything your people have ever done.**

Sometimes the most loving thing you can do for your culture is confront what is destroying it.

Jesus must be Lord over:

- Our family systems.
- Our marriage customs.
- Our initiation practices.
- Our relationship with ancestors.
- Our understanding of leadership.
- Our use of money.
- Our treatment of women and children.
- Our attitude towards other ethnic groups.
- Our way of handling conflict.
- Our definitions of success and honour.

Christ does not want a small Christian section inside your culture. He wants lordship over the whole culture.

9. The Gospel Is Transcultural and Cross-Cultural

Paul writes: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."
— 1 Corinthians 9:22

Paul was not changing the truth. He was changing his approach. He understood that methods could adapt while the message remained constant. Jesus demonstrated this cultural agility. He could speak plainly or use parables. He could engage a respected religious leader in John 3 (Nicodemus) and a marginalised Samaritan woman in John 4. He did not speak to every person in exactly the same manner.

The gospel is:

- **Above culture** because it judges every culture.
- **Within culture** because it must be communicated through human languages and practices.
- **Across cultures** because Jesus sends us to all nations.

- **Against culture** when culture contradicts God.
- **For culture** when it restores what sin has distorted.

To reach people cross-culturally, we need:

- **Humility:** My way is not the only way.
- **Curiosity:** Help me understand why this matters to you.
- **Empathy:** Let me see the world through your eyes.
- **Discernment:** Difference is not automatically sin.
- **Courage:** Cultural acceptance cannot replace biblical truth.
- **Adaptability:** I can change my style without compromising my convictions.

10. Heaven Will Be Diverse

Revelation 7:9–10 ⁹After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

John could still recognise nations, tribes, peoples and languages. Their identities had not been erased. But all those identities had been gathered around one throne and one Lamb. **Heaven is not culturally colourless. Revelation does not describe one tribe replacing every other tribe. It describes every tribe worshipping one King.**

Revelation 21 even pictures the nations bringing their splendour into the New Jerusalem. The glory and honour of the nations are brought into the city—but nothing impure enters.

Revelation 21:24–26 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

That is redemption: **The glory comes in. The impurity stays out.**

God is not destroying everything the nations developed. He is purifying and gathering what can reflect His glory.

Conclusion: Bring Your Heritage to the Cross

Heritage Day is not only a day for asking: “Where do I come from?” It is a day for asking: “What does Jesus want to do with where I come from?”

Bring your music—but bring it under Christ.

Bring your language—but use it to declare His wonders.

Bring your hospitality—but extend it beyond your tribe.

Bring your respect for elders—but do not protect ungodly authority.

Bring your enterprise—but do not worship wealth.

Bring your community spirit—but do not exclude the foreigner.

Bring your excellence—but do not build your identity on achievement.

Bring your courage—but surrender your aggression.

Bring your stories—but let them point towards the greatest story: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At Babel, humanity said, “Let us make a name for ourselves.” At Pentecost, the nations heard the wonders of God in their own languages. At the throne, every nation gives glory to the name above every name. That is the journey of redeemed culture: **From making our own name, to proclaiming His name, to gathering forever around His throne.**

The Central Challenge: We should never be so Christianised that we despise our heritage. But we should never be so enculturated that we cannot challenge our heritage. **We are not called to worship culture. We are called to redeem culture.**

Closing Declaration

We will celebrate what reflects God.

We will confront what contradicts God.

We will convert what can be redirected towards God.

We will not demand uniformity, but we will pursue unity.

We will honour our heritage, but Jesus Christ will remain our highest allegiance.

Every tribe, every nation, every people and every language belongs before His throne.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for the beauty, creativity and diversity You have placed within humanity. Thank You for the nations, languages, histories and communities represented among us. Forgive us for cultural pride, prejudice, tribalism and the ways we have judged people whose ways are different from ours.

Give us humility to recognise that our culture is not the Kingdom of God. Give us discernment to celebrate what is good, courage to confront what is destructive, and wisdom to redeem what can be redirected towards Your glory. Cleanse our heritage from everything that competes with the lordship of Jesus. Redeem our music, language, art, enterprise, relationships and traditions. Make Your church a living picture of people from different backgrounds reconciled through the cross.

Teach us to listen before judging, to ask before assuming and to love beyond the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity and tribe. May every gift You have placed within our cultures become an offering of worship to Jesus.

May Your Kingdom come in every culture, and may every tribe and tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In Jesus' name, amen.

