

Paul's Pattern of Handling the Pop Culture Based on 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Pan Djun Tjhong¹
pandjuntjhong@gmail.com¹
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Baptis Kalvari, Indonesia¹

To cite this document:

Tjhong,D.P. (2022). Paul's Pattern of Handling the Pop Culture Based on 1 Corinthians 9:19-27.

Conference Series, 4(2), 224-231 <https://doi.org/10.34306/conferenceseries.v4i2.927>

Abstract

The emergence of pop culture is inevitable and irresistible. Society in general will find it difficult to accept something new and tend to reject it until there are positives to be found. Despite the absence of any positive aspects, popular culture will continue to exist and evolve as long as a sufficient number of people in society have embraced it through the advanced information technology available on the internet today. After a particular notion or conviction has been acknowledged by specific segments of society, it becomes difficult for even the more established members of the community to question or disprove it. Refusing to accept the new culture, such as pop culture, could lead to social unrest and possibly even trigger conflicts. To ensure that the culture continues to exist and evolve in a regulated manner, it must be handled with appropriate and intelligent methods. Communication channels must be kept open to allow the Gospel to guide the development of the new culture in a constructive direction.

Keywords: Pop Culture, Society, Culture, Worldview.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an open and pluralistic society, the development of pop culture today is rapid through the process of acculturation. Globalization, technological development, and human interest in other cultures give birth to a wide variety of new cultures commonly called subculture and pop culture. New cultures resulting from acculturation can be positive but can also be less positive or negative. How negative or how positive the mixed culture is must be addressed wisely by every member of society once the culture has been adopted by some people, for instance from punk culture to K-pop culture. Assimilation can occur if the new culture is perceived positively, otherwise, it does not have to be attacked and cornered and even antagonized if it is perceived less positively or even seems negative. Antipathy will tear down the bridge of communication for believers to win over the less positive or negative for the Gospel of the kingdom.

Anything in the universe can be viewed and addressed as reality in accordance with human cognitive mechanisms derived from several influential factors in their lives. Culture, philosophy, religion, beliefs, community values, and others are the factors referred to above factors that influence humans and can

determine the breadth of human views. The factors mentioned above unwittingly enter the human being through his interaction with the surrounding nature, the culture in which he lives, the books he reads, the science he learns, the religion he embraces, the values he adheres to, and so on with a process that is internalized externalities, namely the process of internalizing all things or external factors into the system that exists within the human being. The perspective that comes from one of these factors such as culture, has limitations. The perspective that comes from religion and belief will only cover the area of discussion, such as the concept of religious belief. The development of external factors that are internalized into humans creates limitations, such as limitations of relevance and limitations of physical reality that cannot reach metaphysical reality. It is considered as something supernatural.

1.1 Culture

The Sanskrit word “buddayah” which is the plural of “budhi” gave birth to the Indonesian word culture which means mind. Anything that has to do with the mind can be classified as culture. Culture comes from “*budi* and *daya*” or the power of the mind. Anything related to the power of the mind, namely creation, sensation and emotion (Gunawan, 2000:16). Knowledge, religion, art, ethics, norms, reason and conventions prevailing in a group of communities are the scope of the cultural complex (Soekanto, 2009:150-151).

1.2 Cultural Elements

Melville J. Herskovits divides the main elements of culture into four parts, namely: political power, family order, economic system, and scientific products (Soemardjan:78). Meanwhile Bronislaw Malinowski, divides the elements of culture into four parts with different emphases, among others: (a) Coordination system between community members in terms of control and management of natural resources around them. (b) Trade organization. (c) Official and unofficial educational apparatus and institutions or activists such as the family, which is also a basic educational forum. (d) Superstructure organization. There are seven elements of culture that can be referred to as universal culture, namely: (a) The means of human life (clothing, food, shelter, household furniture, security defense equipment, mechanization of production, transportation systems and so on. (b) Economic activities and coordination (planning, organizing, leading, coordinating, and controlling). (c) Social system (internal and inter-community relations, territorial management, principles of society, marriage system). (d) Language of communication. (e) Arts (painting and visual arts, vocal arts, movement arts, etc.). (f) Knowledge management system. (g) Religion (belief system) (Soekanto:154).

Other elements of culture are: (a) Material, the embodiment of culture in the form of something that can be seen and touched by the five senses and real, for example, house temples, modes of transportation such as two-wheeled vehicles, four and so on, television, radio, communication tools, technological objects such as computers and so on. (b) Non-material (spiritual), cultural products that are intangible and cannot be touched by the five senses, for example, philosophy and science, pure and applied theories that are useful for humans in society (pure sciences and applied sciences); also values and various kinds of social norms created to serve as a reference for the regulation of general and broad social issues that are an expression of the human spirit as part of society including religion (religion, not revelation), ideology, mysticism, and so on (Gunawan:17-18).

1.3 Culture Traits

The characteristics of culture or culture include: (a) culture is a process of internalization rather than natural. (b) Culture can be expressed inter-personally, inter-society and from between generations. (c) Culture can exist in symbols. (d) Culture has dynamic characteristics that are constantly evolving. (e) Culture tends to be selective and expose traces of individual behavior as a limited number of parts of society. (f) Culture has elements that are interrelated. (g) Ethnocentric (the opinion that one's own culture is superior and used as a reference to judge other cultures) (Mulyana, 2005:122).

1.4 Essential Nature of Culture

Culture tends to have similarities between communities without discriminating against factors such as skin color, nature, or education. The obvious characteristics of culture include: (a) Culture is born and radiated from human behavior. (b) Culture has been born from previous generations and will not pass even though the generation in question has passed. (c) Culture is fundamental to humans and is manifested in their behavior (Setiadi, 2007:27).

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to invite readers to see how biblical figures, especially the apostle Paul, can position themselves so well that they can be accepted and enter all groups of people of different cultural backgrounds. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, Paul the apostle explains that he does not bind himself to any specific laws, but still identifies himself as a follower of Christ's teachings. He strives to relate to people of different backgrounds by adapting to their ways, all while maintaining his beliefs and spreading the Gospel of salvation. The phenomenon of awkwardness in facing and handling the new popular culture among society in general and church activists in particular motivated the author to conduct a literature study with a theologically descriptive expositional approach. Some literature on culture, especially popular culture, will add to our descriptive insight into the culture and its dynamics.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Popular Culture

Popular culture consists of the words culture and popular. The word "culture" has been defined above and the word "pop" follows. Meanwhile, the word pop is taken from the word popular. Something is said to be popular because: (1) it has many fans; (2) it is mass with not too high quality; (3) its existence is to please people; (4) it is anti-mainstream (Williams, 1983:237). The combination of the two terms culture and popular results in the understanding that pop culture is a culture that is fun and widely recognized by people and has many fans. Mass media and social media contribute significantly to the development of pop culture. Through existing media, works and activities in one place can be easily seen by people in different places. K-pop from South Korea has now dominated Indonesian society. Starting from the food, the way of dressing and even the language have become popular in Indonesia. People everywhere are addicted to watching Korean drama movies on television. In the eighties, punks, and skinheads were popular among the British and American public, which was initiated by young people in the era of economic recession which led to high unemployment and crime. Observing these

things will provide a lot of information for us. Along with the advancement of communication technology or the internet that makes all kinds of information accessible easily and cheaply, the development of pop culture will be even more prevalent. Many opinions about pop culture are considered substandard superficial, consumerism, sensationalism, and even corrupted.

J. Grenz, in an article, urges evangelical theologians to not only engage popular culture critically but also engage its concerns and assumptions as a way to explain evangelical theology (Grenz, 2000:303-314). Grenz argues that we must understand popular culture because it is the world we are trying to reach with the Gospel (Grenz, 2000:303-313). The definition of culture should include people who do not like classical music or the chaucer, yet deserve to be called culture makers, receivers, and participants.

William Romanowski (borrowing the idea of the late Raymond Williams) provides a much more comprehensive and inclusive definition: culture refers to the network or system of shared meanings in a society, the conceptual collection of ideals, beliefs and values, ideas and knowledge, attitudes and assumptions about life that are woven together over time and shared widely among people. It is a kind of invisible blueprint - a map of reality that people use as a reference point to interpret their experiences and guide their behavior. The term culture refers directly to the fabric of meaning that constitutes people's way of life, and in common usage also describes the texts of everyday life and material works that are manifestations of cultural systems (Romanowski, 1996:306).

This definition emphasizes culture as a method to interpret the world or worldview that culture is more than just its own dynamics and structure. It is our interpretation of reality or our place in the world. Furthermore, it is an interpretive activity that involves everyone.

3.2 Worldview

James W. Sire provides a definition of worldview as a set of presuppositions (assumptions that may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold and embrace (consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic structure of our world (Sire, 1997).

Worldview in German *weltanschauung* means view of life or worldview. Worldview can be likened to a window owned by a private individual through which he or she sees the same reality but arrives at a conclusion of meaning that is different from one another. It is like five blind men having to describe an elephant. The description they come up with will depend entirely on the part of the elephant's body they touch. Everything is true but nothing is completely true. Each individual as part of a society must have their own worldview which is influenced by the culture in which they grew up, education, religion, and so on. Through the existing worldview, the meaning of reality is obtained to determine one's attitude and actions toward the existing reality. The nature, value, meaning, and purpose of the world and human life are seen as an inseparable whole. In other words, a worldview is a system of principles, views, and beliefs that can give direction to the activities of individuals, social groups, classes, or communities.

Worldview refers to a comprehensive concept of the world from a particular point of view. This includes a Christian worldview, which means a comprehensive concept of the world from a Christian perspective. The way a person builds his own worldview, including his Christian worldview, will determine how he assesses the reality he faces, including the reality of popular culture. For

example, a Christian on the one hand can judge tattoos as something disgusting and should be avoided even by expertly quoting Bible verses to justify his attitude but on the other hand, the eyebrow tattoo made by his wife is suddenly categorized as something acceptable. Tattoos can be categorized into something that is acceptable and something that is unacceptable or something that is 'haram' and something that is 'halal'.

3.3 Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

The book of 1 Corinthians 9 can be broadly divided into two main topics. First, verses 1-18 contain matters relating to apostleship strategies and rights as well as examples of their personal use. Secondly, verses 19-27 are about solidarity with those who are different for the sake of the Gospel (Thiselton, 2000:69). In discussing the importance of understanding popular culture in order to reach out to it with the Gospel, we can learn from the apostle Paul in the book of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where Paul said that he made himself a servant to everyone, to win as many people as possible (verse 19), how to become a servant (verses 20-22), the purpose of everything is to get a share in it (verse 23).

In this passage the apostle Paul was dealing with two different cultures that were not easy to reconcile. Before Paul, there were religious Jews who adhered to the law of Moses and there were Christian Greeks who were not bound by the law of Moses. In order to serve effectively Paul wanted to liberate from both so that he could be a blessing to all people (Kistemaker, 1993:304).

The word *Ἐλεύθερος* (transliteration: Eleuteros) at the beginning of the sentence in verse 19 means free. At that time the word *Ἐλεύθερος* was significant in the Corinthian region from a sociopolitical and religious point of view describing one's social status. Paul used free to mean freedom from God's law which was considered restrictive. The word free is also interpreted as independence from financial and other influences from any party. Paul considered that financial compensation from the Corinthians for his ministry could affect his freedom and would limit his movement in preaching (Kistemaker:305).

The emphasis on the word free means more than just independence but also another meaning behind the freedom itself. Paul made himself a servant to everyone (*ἑμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα*: emauton edoulosa). This paradox speaks of Paul who, even though he was free, became the servant of everyone. Even in the condition of freedom, apostle Paul positioned himself as a servant who served anyone even in different social settings. Paul underlines the importance of how believers should live by imitating Christ who made Himself a servant and served people (Thiselton:701).

At the end of verse 19 *ἵνα τοὺς πλείονας κερδήσω* (ina tous pleionas kerdeso), the word *κερδήσω* (kerdeso) means to win following the word *ἵνα* (ina) can mean to win souls for Christ which is the ultimate goal of Paul's grand strategy of becoming like (Arndt, 1979:429).

The same pattern is in verses 20-22 where Paul describes how he will achieve his goal of winning as many as possible, to the Jews Paul makes himself like a Jew, to those who live under the law he makes himself like them, likewise to those who live not under the law, and to those who are weak. The Greek word *ἐγενόμην* (egenomen) in verses 20-22 has the root word *γίνομαι* (ginomai) which means to be. The use of the word *ἐγενόμην* in the context of verse 20, can have the meaning of changing the nature into. In the context of Colossians 1:23 *ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ Παῦλος διάκονος* (egenomen ego Paulos diakonos)...I became a minister.

Paul did this not in order to compromise because of his inconsistency but as an attempt to understand the people he served in the integrity of the Gospel. What Paul did was focused on the truth of the Gospel, not on the view of the hearers. In order to preach the Gospel, he formed connections and spent time with people, adopting some of their traits but not completely assimilating into their culture.

“and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;” (1 Corinthians 9:20 NKJV).

Paul who was born a Jew became like a Jew, for the Jews. Even though he was born a Jew, Paul freed himself from his Jewishness when he met Jesus and decided to become His follower. Paul’s Jewishness was renewed when the light of Christ took hold of his life and freed him from the laws that he felt constrained by. Paul classified the Greeks into two groups. The first group was those who kept the law called proselytes and the second group was those who did not keep the law. In order to win them over, Paul became like them. Paul’s main purpose in becoming like the Jews, Greeks, and the weak was to have an entry point for preaching the Gospel. The weak here is not about the physical but refers to those unbelievers whose social status is low. Freedom from human entanglement was evident in Paul which enabled him to minister to them.

Paul’s attachment to the law of Christ remained evident in his life even though he called himself a free man (verse 21). Paul made this statement to mean that he did not live under the law. The word *ἀνόμοις* (anomois) used by Paul, which literally means outside the law, does not mean living with unclear moral standards but rather he lived under the light of the law of Christ. Here Paul was not against the law of God because he maintained holiness and goodness in his personal life, but he strongly disapproved of the misuse of the law in order to prevent someone from believing in the Lord. Paul’s flexibility did not refer to moral standards because when he mingled with the Greeks there was no compromise with sin.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above description, we can draw lessons from the apostle Paul on how to build a bridge of communication to foster a relationship with those with different cultural backgrounds who need service in the word of God. Firstly, glorifying God comes first. Everything he did with his attitude adjustment was in order to contextualize and build bridges of communication with those who were culturally different from himself for the ultimate purpose of winning them for the Gospel. It was not fame or endorsement in ministry that Paul sought, but souls through the relationships he built for Christ. There was no reason to center on personal interests but purely on goals of eternal value.

Secondly, there must be boundaries in socializing. The wrong or immoral way of interacting can corrupt and dishonor a noble cause. Paul made adjustments to be able to interact and communicate with those of different cultural backgrounds not by blindly and carelessly but by limiting himself to the law of Christ. Paul did not violate God’s word in making adjustments just for pragmatism and personal gain.

Finally, the attitude of being like in the interaction with those who are different can reduce the tension that arises due to mistrust and distrust arising from differences. Paul’s example in preaching the Gospel to those of different cultures was to be open and non-exclusive but not rashly without any rules for the process of interaction. The apostle Paul’s pattern of being like teaches people to be flexible and not focus on themselves or their own groups and be selfish. Paul’s pattern

emphasizes tolerance for differences that exist. From the foregoing, it can be said that social interaction is important for evangelization, especially for those from different cultural backgrounds. The ability of believers to be like-minded can help avoid being extreme in social interactions. A well-developed Christian worldview can help believers to become more like Christ who can interact with a Samaritan woman who has a very different background. The pattern of being similar is basically an attitude that is not too exclusive and isolative on the one hand and too liberal and open on the other so that it opens itself up to the point that it tends to start selling the truth for the sake of adjustment in a compromising society.

Recognizing and accepting differences does not imply agreement with values that deviate from one's own. It is important to be able to embrace individuals who are different while staying true to one's own values, especially for believers who are sent as "sheep among wolves" (Matthew 10:16-33). They must be able to coexist with others and help transform them into gentle "sheep-like" beings rather than being deceived by "wolves in sheep's clothing." At the same time, those who are sent out as "sheep" must remain true to their own nature and not become "wolves in sheep's clothing."

REFERENCES

- Arndt, William F. and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (BDAG)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Department of National Education, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), 3rd Edition*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 2000.
- Grenz, Stanley J. "What Does Hollywood Have to do With Wheaton? The Place of (pop) Culture in Theological Reflection". *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2. June 2000. Accessed on November 20, 2022.
- Gunawan, Ary H. *Sociology of Education A Sociological Analysis of Various Educational Problems*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta, 2000.
- Kistemaker, Simon J. *1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.
- Mulyana, Deddy. *Effective Communication: A Cross-Cultural Approach*. Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2005.
- Romanowski, William D. *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Setiadi, Elly M. *Ilmu Sosial dan Budaya Dasar*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2007.
- Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door 3rd Edition*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Soekanto, Soerjono. *Sociology An Introduction*. Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 2009.
- Soemardjan, Selo and Soelaeman Soemardi. *A Flower of Sociology*. Jakarta: UI Faculty of Economics Publishing Agency Foundation, 1964.
- Storey, John. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. United States: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*. London: Fontana, 1983.