A Lesson From Ozymandias: On Christians and Culture **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 5 February 2019 - 20:38



Read time: 10 minutes
The poem [2] "Ozymandias" is about the remains of a statue of the pharaoh "Ozymandias" found in the desert. The inscription on the statue boasts of the pharoah's great achievements and his splendour. The irony is that this statue—which embodies his grandeur—is dug up from the desert sand, which had swallowed the memory of this great pharaoh as well as his legacy long ago. The lesson of this poem is that we should not boast or think too highly of our achievements, as they likely will not withstand the persistent wearing away by the forces of time and nature.

Many people today—including a significant number of Christians—worry about preserving the current culture. And so they naturally gravitate to conservative political ideologies1. When rubbing shoulders with other conservatives, one's viewpoints are reinforced, which further entrenches them, while at the same time makes one averse to other viewpoints. Being in this position, one could even dismiss the viewpoints of others as a reflex; that is, without seriously considering them, but simply because "they" (not us) said it, so it must be wrong.

But it is not just conservatives who can be this way; indeed, anyone who constantly has their views reinforced without entertaining challenges to those views can become like this.

This article is not one about politics, though. Instead, the topic is culture. I am not going to work with a strict definition of culture. Instead, we are going to consider an "intuitive" definition of culture, which is a shared identity between people through factors (all or some) such as language, religion, heritage, food, music, political affiliation, group affiliation (such as a sports team or educational institution), et cetera. There can be cultures-within-a-culture: for example, a student at a university (macro culture) may belong to a particular student organisation or faculty (micro culture). Cultures are rarely strict subsets, but have large areas of overlap due to human diversity.

After 1994, South Africa was dubbed the "rainbow nation", and rightly so: there are many different people groups within the country, many ethnic identities, eleven official languages, and so on. The Apartheid government was nationalist, and nationalist governments typically try to forge unity through a single strong cultural identity2. This has happened in places such as France (historically) and China (recently), where micro cultures were oppressed and obliterated in favour of a dictated macro culture, usually through language and education.

While South Africa has been largely spared the forceful eradication of smaller cultures, the flip side is that it remains deeply divided in certain respects. The segregation of the Apartheid era has, in some aspects, become self-perpetuating.

As such, there remains deep divisions about the country's past and the direction where it should go. Change in South Africa has been slow, but in things like the renaming of cities and streets, the changing of languages in institutes of education, and the removal of statues (to move away from celebrating a white/Afrikaner heritage to other heritages), these deep divisions have emerged. There

is, in a sense, not a "South African" identity.

I must confess to having felt anger and frustration in the past (and sometimes still), when hearing that change is going to be affected to the detriment of "my culture". I love my first language of Afrikaans, and despite grievous injustices of the past, I think that "my people" did good things worth celebrating and remembering. Many other South Africans would disagree with me. I might not care much what a particular street is (or was) called, but I do worry that my first language is being sidelined, which will accelerate its decline and extinction.

It is at this point that I, then, need to take into consideration what a Christian perspective on the matter would be. Again, there is no single, universally accepted "Christian" viewpoint, and many pastors in the past were vocal supporters of Apartheid for no better reason than a cultural desire. But I believe that there is one, higher, perspective that all Christians should share.

If we look back at the example of Ozymandias, we realise that all of this will pass away. The streets, over which we wage bitter wars of words over names, may one day be deserted and lie buried beneath the dirt. Our languages will change: some will die, others evolve into something completely different, while new languages may yet be born. Governments will change and fall, and borders will shift and change. We might say that the Internet will preserve the status quo, because it unites everyone (instantly). That might be true, but what about a future where humans lives on Mars or other planets? Instant communication will not be possible, and while we may live in a global village, there will never be a global solar system or galaxy. People will separate, and diversity will persist and grow.

The writer of Ecclesiastes knows very well how transient everything is:

> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." What does man gain from all his labour in which he labours under the sun? One generation goes, and another generation comes; but the earth remains forever.
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:2–4

And

> For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no memory forever, since in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. Indeed, the wise man must die just like the fool! So I hated life, because the work that is worked under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my labour in which I laboured under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who comes after me. Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have rule over all of my labour in which I have laboured, and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I began to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour in which I had laboured under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, with knowledge, and with skilfulness; yet he shall leave it for his portion to a man who has not laboured for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what does a man have of all his labour and of the striving of his heart, in which he labours under the sun?
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> Ecclesiastes 2:16–22

Few things have survived for two thousand years or more. Indeed, the language of the gospel message itself has changed drastically: from Aramaic, to Koine Greek, to Latin, to others. The *message* remains the same, however: it is only the *vessel*—the medium of transmission—which has changed. This message transcends cultures, and even changes cultures.

Christians need to have a bigger view of the world: an eternal one. One day we'll be united again:

the confusion introduced at the Tower of Babel will no longer reign. I don't believe that necessarily means that we'll speak only one language, but we'll no longer be constrained in our understanding and ignorant of what others say and mean (whether overtly or unintentionally).

It is in light of this "bigger picture" that we as Christians should think. Our primary concern should be the Kingdom of God, and the welfare and salvation of others. These will not be achieved by us causing other people to adopt our culture (whether that means language or worship or political ideology), but by us recognising their needs and possibly adapting ourselves (within what is permissible by the gospel, of course, which offers a surprisingly broad degree of freedom) or their sakes and to meet their needs.

I am not saying that one should not care about language or politics or other aspects of culture. However, whatever concerns we do have *cannot* be to the detriment of other people. "This is how it always have been" is not a good enough answer: that can only be said if it has a qualification which is applicable to the contemporary situation (in other words, if it is still actually relevant). We maintain what we know is just and good, but we must be open to change where a situation can be improved, not for ourselves, but for everyone.

At the end of the day, one needs to critically evaluate *every* aspect of one's life: one cannot have views which are compartmentalised. One needs to apply what one truly believes to every aspect of one's life. This is done through two things. The first is being open and honest with yourself what you truly believe. If you are a Christian, I sincerely hope that begins with the basics gospel truths. Secondly, one needs to talk with others and have dialogue with them. Understand a diverse set of views, what needs are out there, and what the possibilities are to address those needs. Then choose a course of action which applies the gospel truths. If that means being less vocal and militant over a language policy at a university because your constructive efforts are required elsewhere, then so be it.

Enjoy what is good about your culture. Savour it and relish in it. Don't try to preserve it for all eternity, because it too eventually pass away, despite the best efforts of yourself and millions of others. But, even more importantly, recognise what is not good about your culture, and try to change it to align it with the gospel truth, or allow yourself to step into other cultures if that will further God's Kingdom here on earth (or beyond).

- 1. Conservatism, though, should not prohibit any social change, but rather affect change slowly and cautiously.
- 2. The Apartheid government did this through the forceful promotion of Afrikaans and Afrikaner values (themselves products of a homogenisation of different values and people backgrounds). However, the Apartheid government was not interested in creating a true South African national identity, because they would never accept or welcome people of colour.
- . Photo credit: Vyacheslav Argenberg [3].

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