



Preface

Read: Acts 17:22-23

“Any good teacher knows how important it is to connect with students and understand our culture.” – Adora Svitak

The words “pop-culture” and “Christian” are not phrases you would necessarily expect to hear together, but this book is my reflection on how these two forces do not have to be separate. Of course, God, the Creator and Author of the universe is higher than the culture that we humans create for ourselves, but that doesn’t mean that our movies, books, and music don’t have little glimpses of our Father in heaven, in whose image we are made.

I know some people will automatically disagree with me, shouting things like, “In the world, not of it!” and I agree...to a point. We certainly have to be careful of what we choose to put into our body. In Matthew 6:22, Jesus calls the eyes, “the lamp of the body,” and we certainly don’t want to extinguish the light or weaken the flame. Watching porn or listening to music where every other word is derogatory or foul is damaging to the mind and soul. However, that is not what I am suggesting we do in this book. I want us to use discernment and look at some of the most popular works of art in our culture and not reject them for being secular, but instead redeem them for the Creator and the church.

When I first became involved in leading a youth ministry, I quickly realized that I had no idea what I was doing. The kids I worked with had little knowledge of the Bible outside of the very, very basics and the idea of inviting Jesus into everyday life in ways such as prayer and serving seemed foreign. Simply talking about these things led to confusion on their part, because they could not relate the information to their lives in a practical way. Additionally, I was frustrated because I didn’t seem to have the tools to express something I was so passionate about to students.

Since then, I have been to trainings and seminars on how to work with teenagers and young adults, but no teacher has been more impactful on the way I do ministry with my youth group than the Apostle Paul. I found similarities between him and myself, especially when he went to Rome, a foreign city full of idols. How could he reach these people with a foreign

Gospel? Acts 17:20 even has people calling Paul's words "strange ideas". However, when I saw Paul's response I had an idea.

When you read that passage, it becomes clear that Paul didn't just pop into the city and start spouting about Jesus. He must have been familiar with, or at least made himself familiar with, the culture of the place. He had walked around and studied their gods and goddesses so that when he spoke with the people about their faith, he would have something he could relate it to.

That is what I realized I needed to do with my teens. I needed to find something that they loved and find a way to relate it to Christianity. I began turning to the culture of day. Some of it was easy as I was already into the big blockbuster movies of the year, but some of it was more difficult. I had to know what songs and singers were popular, when honestly, I didn't care. I had to know which sports teams were in the Superbowl, when usually I just watched for the commercials.

Part of this was finding a way to connect with the people I was trying to minister to by meeting them where they were. As I looked for analogies between a fictional series and the Bible, I found that the authors, the directors, and musicians were all using themes found in God's Word. Of course, they didn't mean to do it this way, but God's Word is eternal. The problems people faced 2,000 years ago are still problems that plague people to this day. So, I could use the culture of the day to point back to those parts of the Bible and teach those themes to students who were otherwise unfamiliar with them.

Being able to relate to other people, whether they were young teenagers or the slightly younger generation, made my message, the message of Jesus Christ, more powerful to them. But something else happened during my "research" too. I began to see God in everything I watched and heard. I began to draw comparisons, not just for my students, but also for myself. While I knew I was made in the image of God, I began to see that reflected back to me in the beautiful art and literature of the time.

Now, if you don't know anything about the films or books examined in this devotional, it probably won't be too helpful to you. But if you do like a good popcorn-crunching film or a book on the top 100 bestsellers list, then maybe you'll get something out of the comparisons I've drawn.

My suggestion is to use the thirty entries in this devotional in the way that it's most relatable to you. You could read a section each night and use it as a devotional, or you could do it as a family or church group in a Bible study or a series of movie nights. Maybe you want to read through the

whole thing now or perhaps you've read this preface and decided this isn't for you. Either way, I pray that you'll come to know the God of the Bible even more and His deep, intense love for you as His creation that He redeemed through the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Pop Culture Questions:

- How is the Bible like fiction books? How is it like non-fiction?
- Who are the people in your life that you relate to the most? Why?
- When have you tried something new or done something different for the sake of a friend or family member and not because you wanted to?
- Why does a Christian need to be willing to understand different cultures? Did Jesus do this? If so, how?

Day 1 – Iron Man

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:7-10, Galatians 6:8

Identity plays a huge role in 2008's *Iron Man*. For Tony Stark—the playboy, billionaire, and philanthropist—his identity is found in his company, which manufactures weapons, and in his wealth. Through a series of events, Stark develops the armor that makes him Iron Man and he decides to shut down the weapons divisions of his company, not wanting to be responsible for any more death. His partner, Obadiah Stane, questions this, saying that this will ruin not only the company, but the legacy of Stark's father, who founded the company.

That cuts deep, right? We all want to please our fathers. We all want to leave behind a legacy. We have a deep desire to do something that is worth being proud of. But for us, just like it did for Tony Stark, your pride has to be drawn from a source. Money, glamour, popularity, and all things that can be a source of pride, seem trustworthy. By letting his company fail in order to do what was right, Tony Stark took a leap of faith. Christians are called to do the same.

The things of this world may seem pleasing to us, and thus, we feel like they should be trusted, but it is our Father whom we should be working to please. We can put our confidence in His work and know that He is in control, then we are able to do good, free from our own pride.

Legacy is important. We want to leave behind something to pass down, and we want it to be something of worth and value. The Bible tells us that we reap what we sow. The only way to have a true legacy, to live forever and have eternal life, is not through our own work, but through the work of Jesus. It is His righteousness that we work towards.

If you watch Marvel movies, you know that Tony Stark always has this sort of cockiness to him. But that is what makes him so relatable. He is trying to do what is right, atone for his sins, and fight his own demons. Tony Stark found this in his suit of armor, but for Christians, we find it clothed in the righteousness of Jesus.

Pop Culture Questions:

- When someone asks you about yourself, what's the first thing that you tell them?
- Tony Stark drastically changes from the beginning to the end of the movie. How is this like a person who encounters Jesus?
- A legacy that you leave behind is like an inheritance. If God is our Father, what is our inheritance?
- Is this inheritance solely for us?

Day 2 – The Incredible Hulk

Read: Romans 7:14-25

In the scope of the Marvel cinematic universe, 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* is one people often gloss over, especially considering that the title role was recast later with Mark Ruffalo. However, the Hulk's story in this movie, and other forms of media is intriguing to the Christian. Here is a man named Bruce Banner, who is plagued because there is another being inside of him that he can't control. The Hulk, a product of an experiment gone wrong, comes out when Banner gets angry or stressed. Certain characters will tell you that Banner is not in control when he takes the form of the monster, but throughout the decades, authors of comic books and film directors have played on the fact that maybe the Hulk's actions are the deep desires of the man whose body he inhabits. So, is he guilty or innocent?

We can relate to this. If we were to compare the Hulk's actions to our own sin, we would all find things we do that we may feel like we can't control. For example, let's look at the Apostle Paul.

Paul, like Bruce Banner, was frustrated with his sin and the lack of control he seemed to have over it. He's not making an excuse for his actions, but he's expressing disappointment in himself. However, Paul then goes on to say that the sin inside of him is separate from Paul's identity, kind of like the Hulk and Bruce Banner. Paul praises God that Jesus Christ freed him from sin and each day is a battle to let that new, redeemed identity live out its purpose. Paul may live with sin in his life, but sin is on the side of a losing battle.

In the movie, Bruce Banner seems to think that, as long as the Hulk exists, he is not good for anything. It is only when Banner accepts what he can do as the Hulk that the main villain of the movie is defeated. Now, am I saying that we should embrace sin? No way! But we should not allow our sin to define what God can and cannot do with us. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15 that he is "chief of sinners". Even though Paul knows he doesn't deserve the grace God gives, Paul allows what God says is true—that he is free, forgiven, and sanctified—to shape his identity.

You may feel that you are battling demons and sins like the Hulk, but let me remind you that this evil in the world was not part of God's original plan in the Garden of Eden. God still loves us and has put a rescue plan into motion to redeem us from our sin. His love for you is not any less because of your past, and with the blood of Jesus, we receive His righteousness and become citizens of His kingdom.