

The Subtlety of Negative Influence

In my previous article from Daniel 1, we learned that Daniel and his three friends were in a position to potentially be drawn away from the covenant God by their capture at the hands of the Babylonians. We read that they were required to go through the “school of Babylon” as a way of drawing them toward the secular culture of that ancient city. The attempt to draw them away from God took place initially by means of separation and assimilation. The attempt to assimilate them is found in Verse 4, where we read: “to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.”

Scholars teach us that the “language” of the Chaldeans, who were in power at this time in history, is Aramaic. This was true particularly as it related to formal written documents, but it was also spoken by some. Nevertheless, the common Babylonian people spoke Akkadian, an ancient Semitic language, which had an “extremely complex” writing system. In addition to the “language,” the “literature of the Chaldeans” refers to a formal education designed to teach what could be called the “magic arts.” Biblical scholars note that this literature included “polytheistic writings — so teaching them that there are many gods, occult practices, astrology, divination, and magic.” These are teachings which would have been strictly forbidden in Israel.

When 21st century Christians think about the literature available to us and our children, we may be tempted to apply what we read in Daniel in ways that discourage our children from reading anything other than what could be termed “Christian” books, magazines or articles. But, I would suggest, that’s not a helpful way of applying the text. By God’s common grace, there’s lots of literature written by non-believers which we should encourage our children to read. But there are books and information available to our older children via the internet, etc., that Christians need to be aware of. Parents are responsible for the information that our children are taking in.

Along with language and literature, a third part of their assimilation goes even beyond the mind to include the body. Look with me in Verse 5: “The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank.”

Why was this necessary? Providing these choice foods and wine is a subtle way of introducing new pleasures which can have the effect of changing our desires and — in the case of these young men — making them more dependent on the ways and culture of the Babylonians.

How do we see cultural assimilation happening in the Church and in the lives of Christians in our day? Keep in mind that our focus, as always, is on the heart. Some American Christians have, at times, been drawn in by subtle attempts to marginalize the teaching of scripture, particularly as it

pertains to what it means to be made in the image of God as “male and female,” as well as attacks on marriage and the family (Genesis 1:26-28).

To help us consider some aspects of these issues, I want to reference a recent book written by PCA pastor and author Kevin DeYoung entitled “Men and Women in the Church.” A helpful review of DeYoung’s book comes from Reformed pastor and author William Boekestein. In his short review, Boekestein references DeYoung’s biblical assesment of the teaching on men and women in the Old Testament. DeYoung identifies five Old Testament patterns that are helpful to consider.

— ***Men lead.*** “From start to finish, the leaders among God’s Old Testament people were men” (MWC 36). The few exceptions like Deborah, Miriam, Esther and Athaliah were highly unusual, not always positive, and only prove the rule.

— ***Women can be heroic.*** Male leadership doesn’t demand passive women. The Bible gives many examples of “Proverbs 31 women” who were trustworthy, industrious, entrepreneurial, strong, shrewd, determined, generous, brave, dignified, wise, kind, selfless, and respected. Jael’s warrior-like behavior was exceptional, but not her integrity and courage.

— ***Women help men.*** The Bible’s excellent women are often praised for the “good influence they exercised in steering, advising, assisting and coming alongside men” (MWC 39; e.g. 1 Samuel 25; Esther 7). In no way is the term “helper” derogatory or demeaning; God is Israel’s helper (Heb. 13:6).

— ***People twist God-given gender roles.*** Some of the most notorious women in the Bible are known for their negative influences on their husbands — think Jezebel and Delilah. And God takes pains to publicize how women were abused by men — think Bathsheba and Lot’s daughters.

— ***Women nurture children.*** Women are more than mothers. But “caring for children will be one of the main things — and one of the most amazing things — many women will do with their lives” (MWC 42).

Although space won’t allow me to expand on this truth, the New Testament doesn’t go in a different direction from the Old Testament with its teaching on family and gender issues. Boekestein concludes his review of Kevin DeYoung’s book with these words:

“Gender differences aren’t arbitrary, they are God-given. And they are how men and women complement each other as co-image-bearers. Your gender proclaims God’s glory! In love he made you male or female. So, to be faithful to God’s design we must wholeheartedly affirm the

glory of both genders, retain the differences between the two, and practice what is specific to each.”

The Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton.