

Individual or community – how we interact with our culture

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(for Allen Thomas)

Eastside Church of Christ

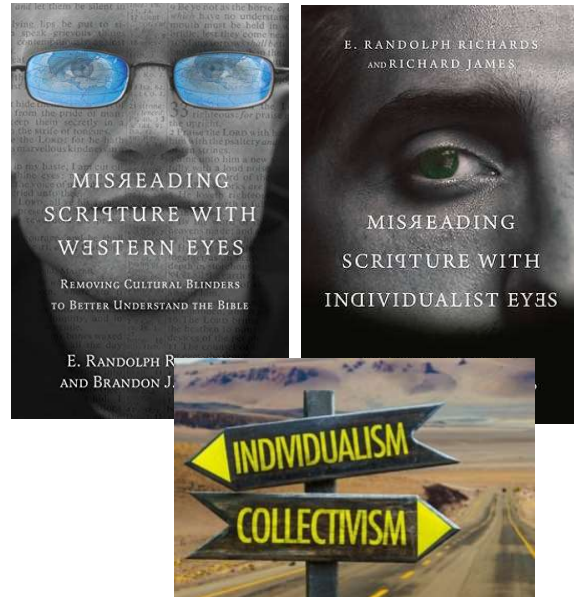
Words of the Day:

contronym, cacoethes, epicaricacy

wabbit, mountweazel

pulchritude or steatopygia

What has Allen been discussing so far?
What are some points you remember?



1

One of the key concepts in this class is that there are differences in cultures (both now and in Biblical times)

We all live in a culture, which is neither better/worse or right/wrong compared to other cultures.

We live in a Western, individualistic, Greek-based culture.

The Bible originated in an Eastern, collectivist, Jewish culture.

The challenge is to be aware of these differences.

2

Our Scripture is Jewish and the culture of the Bible is different than ours

We all live in a cultural river and that influences how we interpret the actions/words around us.

Ours is a literary culture, based on what is written.

The Bible originated in an oral culture, based on stories passed down.

Ours is an individualist culture – rights of the individual are valued.

The Bible originated in a communal culture – rights of the group are valued.

Does not mean our culture is selfish and theirs is not

3

What picture comes to mind when we think of devotional time?



or



Note: We do have examples of Jesus wanting to be alone.

Mark 1:35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Luke 5:16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

4

Guatemalan visiting an American

It is so good to finally meet you. I am looking forward to staying with you and your family!



Please make yourself at home. Your room is upstairs, the TV and refrigerator are behind me. I am sure you are tired so I will leave you alone.



I am not welcome here...



I am such a good and caring host!



5

American visiting a Filipino

It is so good to finally meet you. I am looking forward to staying with you and your family!



Come sit with in the sala with me! I invited a lot of friends and neighbors to celebrate. Until then, lets have some merienda and I will show you our family photos.



I hope it won't be like this the whole time...



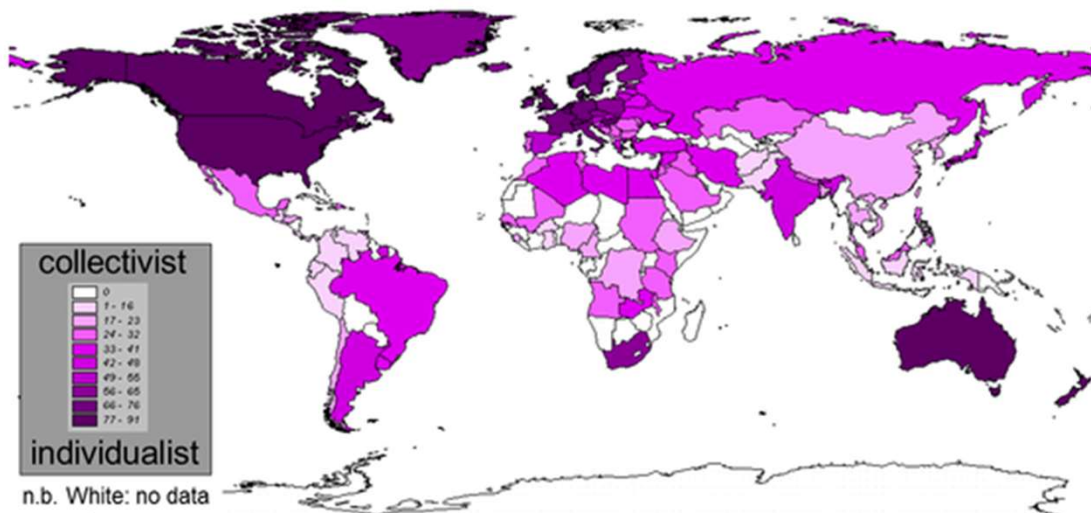
I am such a good and caring host!



6

A majority of the world's population lives in primarily collectivist cultures

Collectivism – Individualism World map



7

Let's look at some differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures (these are generalizations)

Individualism versus Collectivism		
http://foxhugh.com/multicultural/hofstede-index/hofstede-individualism-exercise/		
1) Care Giving	Everyone is supposed to take care of him - or herself and his or her immediate family only	People are born into extended families or clans which protect them in exchange for loyalty

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Individualism has some general characteristics

Does not imply selfish or prideful, not right or wrong, better or worse

Most important entity is the individual – protecting rights

Identity from distinguishing oneself from those around you

Avoid peer pressure and think independently

Decisions made regardless of others, even parents, for career, spouse...

It is a virtue to be true to oneself

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Collectivism also has some general characteristics

Most important entity is the family, community, tribe, country...

Goal is to preserve the harmony of the community

Identity is from knowing and fulfilling one's place in the group

No goal to get ahead of others or move beyond the community

Decisions are made based on counsel of elders, parents, aunts, uncles...

Highest goal is supporting the community

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A modern example is school uniforms

Research shows:

- Reduced bullying
- Improved academic performance
- Safer schools (easier to identify intruders)

Individualistic culture:

- They inhibit individuality
- They violate my 1st amendment free expression
- They are contrary to American value of self-determination

Collectivist cultures:

- The community is most important



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Another example is arranged marriages (which is much more common in collectivist cultures)

The rationale (I'm not saying this is right, but it is another way of thinking about it):

- A marriage is not just the joining of two people, but also of two families.
- The community should decide what is best for the couple and if their families make a good match.

Story of "grievous sin"



12

We do have subcultures in the West that are primarily collectivist

**Sports
teams**



Military



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So why does this matter, what does it mean, how does it relate to our class?

It impacts greatly how we read and interpret the Bible.

It impacts how we share the gospel.

The Bible was written in a collectivist culture; we are reading from an individualistic culture.

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Let's think about conversion a bit

Individualistic culture:	Collectivist culture:
The decision to become a Christian is a personal and individual decision. Look at some of our songs – “I have decided to follow Jesus.”	This is not strictly an individual decision (for major decisions, you should always seek the advice of your family).

Note: Jesus makes it clear that the decision to follow him may at some point put a believer in conflict with his or her family.

Luke 14:26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

} This would have been truly radical!

15

This helps us understand some of the conversions we read about in the NT

Acts 16:13-15 ¹³On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵When **she and the members of her household were baptized**, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

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Example 2

Acts 16:29-34 ²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Example from the book (the conversion of one of the author’s friends):

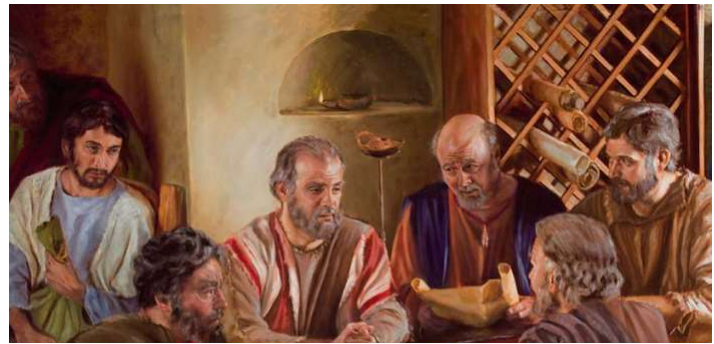
“My father is wiser than I am. If he says Jesus is better, then I know Jesus is better.”

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Our individualistic tendencies can give us the wrong idea about how some of the Biblical texts were composed



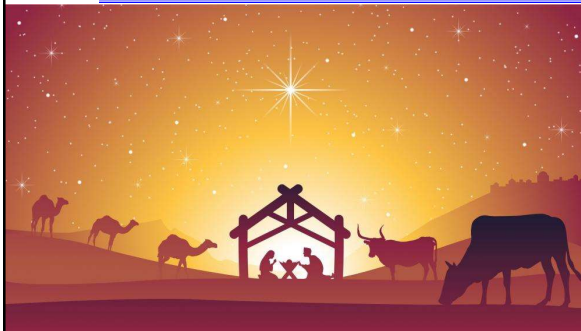
- They had no writing desks.
- Authors commonly stood and dictated to a scribe.
- He probably wrote in places with others around who would have stopped by to listen (ancients read out loud) and to offer advice (it shows you care).



- Six of Paul’s letters indicate a coauthor, yet we traditionally ignore the coauthors.
- Teamwork and cooperation was the norm. Paul always had a team.
- Scholars have debated for centuries whether all the letters attributed to Paul were actually written by him (they don’t “sound” like him), but this is easily explained by Paul’s regularly working with coauthors and scribes.

18

Allen already discussed the birth of Jesus



- **Why would Joseph drag his pregnant wife across the country? (Yes, Rome was doing a census, but they allowed a large window of time to register.)**
- **Mary and Joseph probably went to Bethlehem when they did because everybody else in their family was going.**
- **It was likely a noisy, bustling event attended by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.**

19

Allen wanted to affirm two very positive beliefs about Scripture

The Bible applies to us. We acknowledge that the Bible has applications for today even though it records events written in another culture and in a distant past.

God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Because his character does not change, we believe he will deal with us as he has dealt with others. He was trustworthy then, and he is trustworthy now.

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But, our individualistic tendencies affect how we read Scripture

Dangers can occur when we view Scripture through the lens of “ME.”

It was an oral culture, so Scripture was read in community and interpreted in community. This started to change during the Reformation (Gutenberg).

Reading the Word (individual) versus hearing the Word (communal)

We often ask, “What does this mean to me?” versus “What does this mean to us?”

Danger of misprioritizing passages, that is, if there is no application for “me” then it is not as important versus applications for “us” are critically important

We can confuse application with meaning. We should not say, “What does this mean to me?” but rather “How does this apply to me (or us)?”

Tend to read “you” as singular and not plural

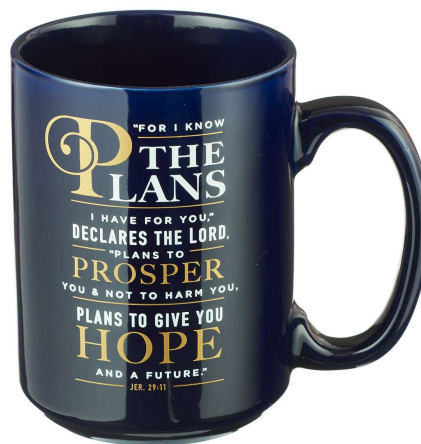
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Unfortunately, this means we sometimes misinterpret some of our favorite Scriptures

Jer 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”



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Let's look at the context of Jeremiah 29

¹ This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

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Jeremiah 29

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." ⁸ Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. ^[b] I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

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The “you” in Jeremiah 29 is referring to Israel, so what if it read ...

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to **Israel** and fulfill my good promise to bring **Israel** back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for **Israel**,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper **Israel** and not to harm **Israel**, plans to give **Israel** hope and a future. ¹² Then **Israel** will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to **Israel**. ¹³ **Israel** will seek me and find me when **Israel** seeks me with all **Israel’s** heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by **Israel**,” declares the LORD, “and will bring **Israel** back from captivity.^[b] I will gather **Israel** from all the nations and places where I have banished **Israel**,” declares the LORD, “and will bring **Israel** back to the place from which I carried **Israel** into exile.”

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This reading of Jer 29:11 doesn’t look as inspiring on a coffee mug

¹¹ “For I know the plans I have for **Israel**,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper **Israel** and not to harm **Israel**, plans to give **Israel** hope and a future.”

So, how does this verse apply to us?

God has a plan for his church, as we are called exiles, foreigners, awaiting the coming Lord.

This verse is a corporate verse, not an individual promise; the danger is if we take it as an individual promise and then when things fall apart, we accuse God of breaking his promise.

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Another example is the “temple of God” verses

1 Cor 3:16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

New Living Translation

Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?

So, what difference does this make?

You singular: Take care of your body, don't smoke, etc.

You plural: Paul is worried about bad behavior contaminating the entire congregation. We all together make up the temple of God. The church community is critical.

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Let's look at Ephesians 1 and “You have been chosen”

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In the context of Ephesians, the “us” in this verse refers to Israel.

It is the corporate “you,” not an individual “you.”

Paul's readers would have naturally understood this; there is no way they would have even thought it applied individually.

This verse is used by Calvinists as a proof text for “individual election” (which is not a concept at the time of Paul).

28

The Jews of the first century lived in a collectivist culture

To be a Jew means first and foremost to belong to a group, the Jewish people, and the religious beliefs are secondary, in a sense, to this corporate allegiance. (Nicholas DeLange)

This deeply rooted Biblical emphasis upon the group is underscored by the fact that most Jewish prayers employ the plural “we” not the singular “I”. (Marvin Wilson) “Our Father...”

The community encompasses past, present and future members.

Duet 29:15 I am making this covenant both with you who stand here today in the presence of the LORD our God, and also with the future generations who are not standing here today.

They took very seriously the notion that they were their brother’s keeper.

29

The image of the church as a family has significant implications

Matt 12:49-50 ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

} Again, this would have been truly radical!

The way the Bible portrays the church as the “family” – specifically the expectations and obligations placed on families in collectivist societies – challenges the way Westerners understand our identities and duties at the church.

30

The Christian community of the early church was collectivist

Look at the terms that describe us in the NT – family, body, temple...

When they finished a book of Torah, the community would recite

“Be strong. Be strong and let us strengthen one another.”

As Christians, we are not meant to live as individuals but as part of a community.

There is no concept of “just me and Jesus” or a “lone Christian” in the NT.

31

Anne Rice (not to pick on her, but as an example of a particular attitude)

In 2010, novelist Anne Rice (author of “Interview with a Vampire”) decided that she had had enough of being a Christian. Ten years earlier she had converted to the faith and started writing a series of books about the life of Jesus. Eventually, she couldn’t take it anymore:

“Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to belong to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years I’ve tried. I’m an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.”

How would you respond to somebody who feels this way?

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Here are some final thoughts about today's lesson

Recognize the importance of community within the Church

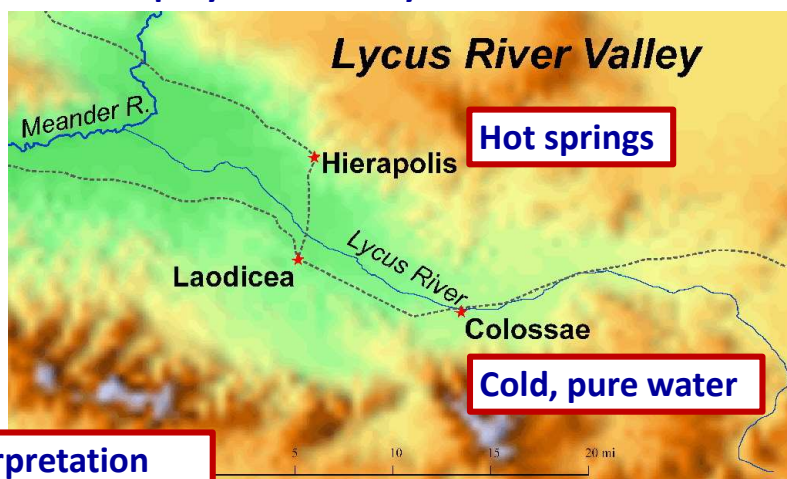
Slow down when you see “you” and ask is this corporate (y'all) or singular – err on the side of corporate

33

As usual, Allen asked me to close with something to think about

Rev 3:15-16 ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

What does this mean?
Would Jesus really
prefer if we were
spiritually cold?



This is just a possible interpretation

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