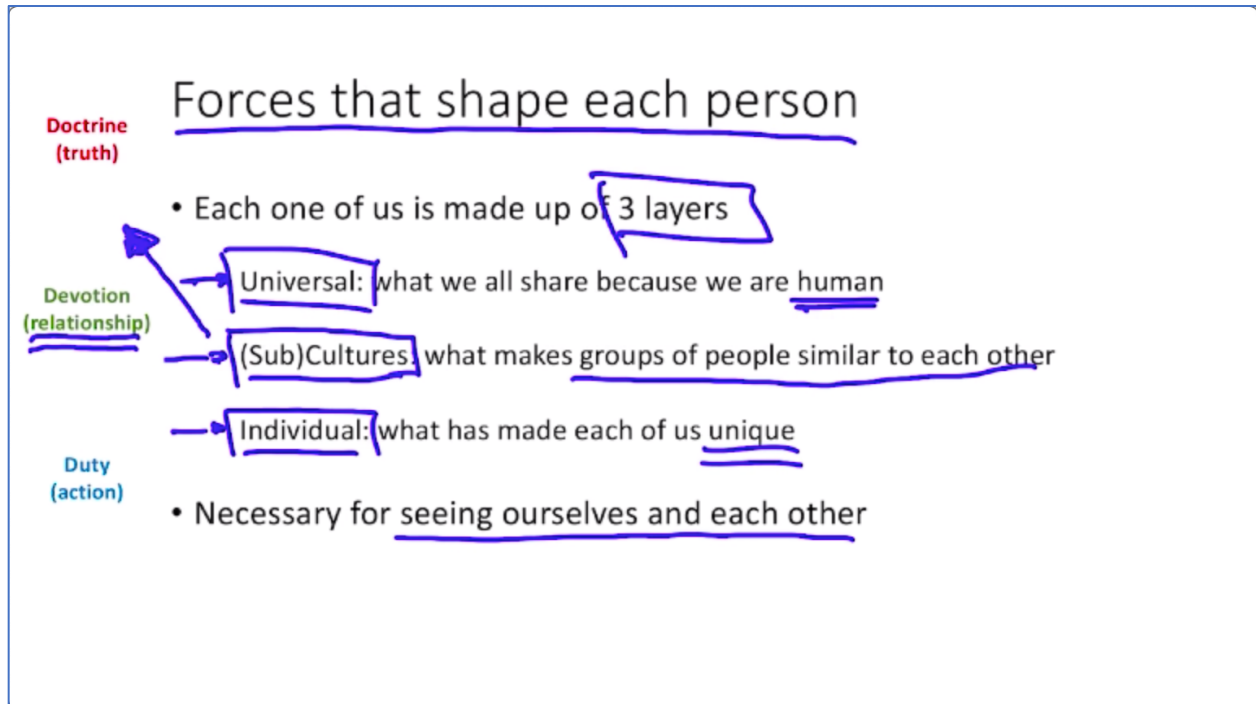


The Forces that Shape Each Person

Something that has been helpful to us as we think about what it means to be a church that is "for, of, and by the peoples of many nations" is that there are multiple forces that shape each person. And these forces can be thought about in three layers.



So for each one of us, there are kinds of forces that are at work at three layers: the universal, the subcultures, and the individual level.

So at the universal level, this is what we all share because we're human. All of us are made in the image of God. And this is something we share as humans. God has given us a soul. He has given us abilities that we share, of thinking, of our basic ways of interacting with the world. He has put in us a desire to know Him. He has put in us a desire for what is good, and a way to recognize that.

We also recognize something we all share, being human, is our brokenness, that every one of us is broken by sin. We are born distant from God, separated from God because of sin. And we are born inclined to go our own way. All of us know we should love people, and all of us are inclined first to love ourselves. This is something that we all share. In all of us, there is a drive to stay alive. There is a drive in us to connect with people. These are things that we share simply because we are human. It makes us all alike in that.

At the other end is this idea that we are individuals, that each one of us has a bunch of things that make us unique. For each one of us, there's nobody else just like us, in who we are and

how we engage in the world. And so even identical twins, who have the same DNA, there are differences in experience in life that lead to ways in which they are different from each other.

And so, in this sense, there is no instance of a Chinese person. There are individuals who are Chinese. And so, each person who is from a particular country is an individual, in this sense. So to know what it is like for someone to be Japanese, doesn't mean I now know someone who is an individual who is Japanese. I need to know the individuals, and what makes them unique is all sorts of experiences, and in ways in which we are made, that make us different from everybody else. And it's not enough to know that, "You're a part of a group; therefore I know you." No, you don't know an individual just by knowing about their group.

On the other hand there are all sorts of things that shape groups of people, in cultures and in subcultures. These are the things that make groups of people similar to each other. So what it means to have grown up in a country, say in the United States, leads to a way in which the people who have grown up in the United States share an awful lot. There are things about how this group of people looks at the world, engages the world, experiences the world, that are shared.

This is true for subgroups as well. And so a group of people who have experienced something like an economic depression, or living under the oppression of another group of people, what it is like to live as a minority, what it is like to live in a small community versus living in a large city, living in a place where essentially everybody looks and thinks much alike versus living in a place where there are just so many differences it's hard to keep track.

The subcultures are the things that make groups of people similar to each other, and we all have experienced many different kinds of groups that have shaped our way of looking at the world. So sometimes it's shared experience, like an economic depression, or a war, or a time of abundance; sometimes it's a way of thinking about the world, whether it's being shaped by the constitution of a country or the teaching of a great philosopher. There are many different forces that similar to each other.

So we have found it to be very helpful to recognize that there are some things that everybody has in common, and sometimes we want to emphasize that we're all alike. There are also ways in which we're all different. And sometimes we want to emphasize that you don't know me just because you know people around me. There are things that make me an individual, that make you an individual. And then we also recognize that there are things that make groups of people to share an awful lot about how they engage in the world.

We believe that these three layers are necessary for seeing ourselves and each other. It's been very powerful for me to recognize the ways in which, not only am I like every other human being in the universal sense, and not only am I a unique individual in that sense, I also share an awful lot with people that I hadn't realized before, ways in which our common experiences, our common perspectives, our common history have led us to see the world in ways that I just thought were "normal." And now I've come to see that they are unique to a group of

people that I've been a part of.

And so a key part of looking at these three things is that this leads to a richer relationship. That it is in getting to know people on all three levels that I really get to know people. Just to say they're an individual, I've missed a big part of who they are. And to say that you're an individual and I'm an individual, but not realize what we share, is to miss important things. So this is an important part of our devotion, of our understanding of each other.

A key part for doctrine is that how we view the Bible, how we read the Bible, is very often deeply affected by our culture; to recognize that people from different cultures are going to see different parts of the Bible differently. A very simple, obvious way in which this is true, is that a culture that has grain, and thus bread, reads the statement in the Bible, when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" differently from a culture where bread is not a part of normal eating. It's not something that they have. And so we'll read that differently.

When a group of people sees the world very much oriented around honor and shame, they're going to read the story of the Prodigal Son very differently from a culture that has a big emphasis on individual responsibility. And so when we look to truth, we discover it's really important to talk to people from different groups from our own group, in order to see how they see it, and together to try to make sense of what the Bible is saying, what God has shown about himself.

And this is especially interesting when we say, "How do we understand the cultures of the people who were experiencing the Bible in the first place?"

And so then, we have a duty to pay attention to this, when we get to know people, when we care for people, to recognize all three of these layers. To deny any of the layers is to misunderstand people. And so we want to work together to understand what's universal, what's individual, and then, what are the forces that are affecting people, because of the groups of people they've been a part of and identified with.

Reflection Questions

- What are examples of...
 - the universals we all share because we are human?
 - the things that make us unique individuals?
 - the things that make groups of people be similar to each other?
- What are the (sub)cultures that have helped shape you?
- Why is necessary to see and differentiate these layers in ourselves and each other?