

Make Culture

Two young fish are swimming along and happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, friends. How's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a bit, then one of them looks over at the other and says, "What is water?"

That's an apt way to describe culture—it's the water and we're the fish. The most familiar, obvious, ubiquitous, and important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. This is probably why multiple scholars have called "culture" one of the most complicated words in the English language.

"What is time?" Augustine once wrote, "I know when nobody asks me. But when asked to explain it, I no longer know."

Well, I know what culture is when nobody asks me. But when asked to explain it

Yet, even if we can't fully explain culture here, we can provide a toolbox you can use to start exploring it yourself.

So what is time? What is water?

What is culture?

When I say "culture" I mean something bigger than the idea of "high culture"—though art, music, museums, and orchestras are part of it.

I mean something bigger than "pop culture"—though celebrity, technology, movies, and influencers are part of it.

I mean something bigger than "ethnic culture"—though the practices, beliefs, communities, and stories that give people their distinct identities are part of it.

And I mean something bigger than "political culture"—although ideas, values, laws, media, and the public square are part of it.

Culture is the meaning dimension of social life—everything learned and shared by members of a particular society—what we say, do, have, make, and think.

It's language, it's relationship, it's everything we do voluntarily. It's religion, family, education, media, government, the arts, and business. It's the inherited, historically

transmitted pattern of meanings by which we communicate, perpetuate, and develop our knowledge about and attitude toward life.

Maybe that makes culture sound like an ethereal cluster of ideas, but the reality is that tangible goods are actually the main way these meanings are expressed, communicated, and received. We make sense by making things.

With all that in mind, we'll define culture this way: Nature is what God gives; culture is what we do with it...and the meaning we find in that doing.

Now, precisely because culture *is* complex, subtle, inescapable, and made of meaning, if we are not intentional about our relationship to it, the culture around us will determine our meaning for us without us even noticing it's happening.

So with intentional relationship to culture as our goal, let's look at three things. We'll start by clearing up a few common misunderstandings.

1. The first misunderstanding is that we are separate from culture. That culture is something *out there*, something we can autonomously “engage” or “observe” or “change” from the outside. But our very concept of what it might mean to “change” culture is itself an expression of our particular culture, with all its inherent assumptions and understandings.

The truth is each of us is more cultural artifact than cultural agent—culture acts on us more than we act on it.

Culture not being “out there” also means it's not something we can merely combat, consume, or dismiss, since we can't do those things to something we belong to and are part of.

2. The second misunderstanding is that culture is static. That it's this stable, consistent thing, so we can determine what our “position” on culture is and be set.

The truth is we reinterpret culture more than we interpret it.

Nowhere does Scripture give us a clear answer to what our relationship to culture should look like. How could it, considering the vast variety of cultures God's people have lived in over the millennia?

Instead, we're given principles that must be applied to our specific circumstances through wisdom, conscience, the development of character, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That application will look different for each of us over time.

3. The third misunderstanding is that culture is monolithic. Especially in today's globally connected world, we're never discussing a single culture.

The truth is culture is really cultures.

Plural, not singular, with all the diversity, variety, and history that involves. Families of origin, nations, workplaces, churches, arts and entertainment, cities, neighborhoods, political parties—these are all cultures.

Now I'm going to continue to use the term in a singular manner because it makes what's already a complicated conversation a *tad* bit simpler, but know that every time I use the word culture, I'm referring to the complex, interwoven web of different cultures we live within, a web that will have a slightly different composition from family to family and city to city.

Reflect

How have you been influenced by the culture around you? Choose something specific to reflect on like music, movies, or the normative behaviors in your circle of friends.

Postures toward Culture

What should our the posture of our heart be toward culture? Let's look at four possibilities.

1. The first heart posture Christians can take toward culture is that of dual citizenship. The earth was created good, but not complete; it had potential built into it, and, as his image-bearers, God called humans to responsible stewardship of that potential, entrusting them with the responsibility of cultivating and caring for his good creation.

Every cultural activity, even the simplest ones, even when not done out of a discernibly Christian worldview, is an expression of this image-bearing call and a good in and of itself.

This perspective of universal image-bearing makes a powerful case for pluralism, the idea that multiple cultures and sources of authority can be valid. Scripture provides the ultimate expression of pluralism when it describes Christians from all cultures as citizens of heaven who also live as both exiles from and members of whatever earthly culture they find themselves in.

So, as Christians, we belong both to the culture around us, ruled by common grace and natural revelation, but also, and most importantly, to the kingdom of God, ruled by specific grace through the Holy Spirit and the special revelation of God's word.

2. The second heart posture Christians can take toward culture is that of counterculture. Death and sin limit the potential of culture, sin infects the way all culture-making is done, and idols are the core of every culture. The image-bearers have become image-breakers.

The story of the fall tells us that every culture takes some good of creation such as individual freedom, beauty, sexual autonomy, wealth, or national pride and absolutizes it to godlike status, becoming enslaved to it at the price of injustice and damage to the dignity of the image-bearers within it.

And because sin is not just "out there," but "in here," in our very hearts, direct attempts to "change culture" are prone to infect and entangle the church in cultural idols. Instead, the church exists as a contrast community to the world. It should be a counterculture, an alternate human society that is a sign of the future kingdom.

3. The third heart posture Christians can take toward culture is that of transformation. Because image-bearing is inseparable from culture, God first revealed his plan for redeemed image-bearing through the nation of Israel—a people who embodied a cultural tradition extended through time. This calling of Israel, and the fulfillment of that calling by Israel’s Messiah, Jesus, is the key to history. Between the cross and new creation, we can expect to see some healing, but complete healing and removal of sin await the conclusion of that history.

Since culture is a product of the human heart, and only the gospel can transform the heart, Christians operating out of a distinctly Christian worldview and bringing the lordship of Christ to bear on every sphere of life is what has the power to transform culture and change the world, it is only through the revelation of Jesus that human culture can to some degree be repaired from sinful brokenness.

4. Finally, the fourth heart posture Christians can take toward culture is that of restoration. It is not enough for Christians to be simply good culture-makers; we also have a mission that extends especially to the lost and least to confront the makers of idols and the perpetuators of injustice.

As God draws creation toward complete renewal, it is possible now to actively restore the kingdom of God in the world through sacrificial service for the common good and changing social structures toward greater inclusion and justice.

So which of these postures is the right one?

Well, all of them. Is God three or one? He’s both. Is Jesus man or God? He’s both. Does the life-changing power of the gospel make us dual citizens, counterculturists, transformers, or restorers? How about all of them.

Each of these postures, by itself, tends to overemphasize one chapter of the story of God’s work in the world, but to have a healthy relationship with culture means seeing that the legacies of God’s good creation and humanity’s sinful fall, God’s redemption of humanity climaxing in the person of Jesus Christ, and the coming new creation are all at work in both Christianity and culture.

Ironically, it’s your cultural background that will make one of these postures more appealing or more natural to you than the others. That background includes your unique strengths, callings, spiritual gifts, salvation, history, religious background, the problems in the world you are most sensitive to, and the human needs you most resonate with.

But we must stay mindful that, while each of us will naturally resonate with one of these postures over the others, all four postures must be present for a robust, healthy relationship with culture and culture-making.

Reflect

In what ways do you find yourself already making culture? In what way do you want to grow in offering a redemptive culture?

How We Make Culture

Speaking of culture-making, how, exactly, do we make culture? Well, there are three main ways.

1. We make culture through creation. As mentioned earlier, culture is making sense by making things. But when we say “things,” what kind of cultural artifacts are we talking about?

All of them. Anything we make. A song, a plate, a social media post, a paved road, a movie, a speech, a bedtime routine, a career, a family, an apartment building—they’re all culture. Consider this: what do you naturally create in the course of your everyday life?

2. We also make culture through cultivation. To cultivate is to steward and care well for the resources God has entrusted to our care.

Cultivation is *generative*, meaning fruitful. It’s caring for existing culture in a way that makes it good soil for the birth of new ideas, actions, artifacts, and relationships.

Cultivation is *generous*. It reminds us that all of life overflows with the abundance of God; is, itself, a gift, not a commodity or transaction; and that God is not characterized by utility but by abundant love.

Finally, cultivation is *generational*. It’s done in conversation with our cultural predecessors and nurturers the values of future generations.

Gardening and parenting are the templates for cultivation that God first gave humans in Genesis 1 and 2. But there are so many different ways to cultivate God’s creation. What do you naturally cultivate in the course of your everyday life?

3. Thirdly, we make culture through conversation. We seem to have lost the ability to have meaningful conversations with those who might not see the world exactly the same way we do—but some truths only ever come about relationally, in dialogue.

And we can think of culture as the most comprehensive, most expansive conversation of all time, one made of thousands of smaller conversations, one to which everyone and everything around us contributes. Every cultural element or artifact proposes or assumes something about what’s meaningful, what’s desirable, what’s good, what’s important, what’s funny, what’s tragic, what’s right, what’s wrong.

Finally, as we make culture, there are three major kinds we can make:

1. We can make exploitative culture. This is taking what we want or feel like we need from the world, using other people, leveraging culture for profit and opportunity, and living for ourselves. Very few people aspire to exploitation, but a lot of us slip into it. We aim to be ethical, but under pressure, even and especially without knowing it, we end up participating in systems of exploitation.

2. We can also make ethical culture. This is how most people try to live. We try to improve ourselves, improve the world, respect others, and do the right thing.

3. Or we can make redemptive culture. The gospel calls—and enables!—us to go beyond ethical and be redemptive. The core of redemptive culture is sacrificially offering something freely to the world that does not just respect people, but blesses and unlocks something in them. It's not just being good people, but dying to ourselves in a way that restores possibility to the world around us where things are broken.

Reflect

What do you find challenging about favoring “the least” in our society?

Faithful Presence

All these things taken together—avoiding common misunderstandings, a posture toward culture drawing from the entire story of Scripture; and making redemptive culture through creation, cultivation, and conversation can be summarized as **faithful presence**.

You may have heard faithful presence described as being “in the world, not of it,” which is a concise encapsulation of some of the major ideas in John 17. If you’ve been in the church for a while, perhaps you’ve heard that phrase so often it’s lost any real meaning for you. It’s certainly not wrong, but a better way of saying the same thing might be “not of the world, but sent into it.”

For Jesus, being “not of the world” wasn’t the destination, but the starting point. Jesus sends us into the world as the Father sent him. We have been crucified to the world, raised to new life, and sent back to rescue others through redemptive lives, disciplemaking, and the gospel.

We are in Christ, who is beyond this world, but the same God who has given us a home beyond this world sends us into it to fulfill his purposes. *Jeremiah 29:4-7* paints a beautiful picture of what being sent to live as a faithful presence looks like:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:...

...Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce...

...Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease...

...But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,...

...and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So you see this beautiful, beautiful picture is talking a lot about creating families. Families have been called the building blocks of culture, which makes sense, since

God's creation command to humanity in Genesis 1 was to make families and make culture.

Whatever the context or circumstances of your family of origin, the environment in which you learned language and first observed human relationships will shape your understanding of culture more than anything else because language and relationship are the foundations of culture.

Of course, even the best family of origin is made of flawed, fallen, and broken people like us who fall short of the goodness of God.

But Jesus makes us a new person with a new family all on a new mission. He adopts us into *his* family, redefining love and language and giving us an entirely new foundation for understanding and once again making culture. So because we know the story we belong to we make culture informed by every part of that story.

- Because we know God, we make culture informed by his character.
- Because our identity no longer rests on our own shoulders, we no longer make culture as a way to construct our identity or create a name for ourselves.
- Because we're intentional about character formation, we seek new, healthier habits and patterns for making and consuming culture.
- Because we pursue healthy relationships, we make intentional, conversational culture.
- Because we're on a journey of healing from our own wounds, we make culture that laughs and laments, that rejoices with those who rejoice and mourns with those who mourn.
- Because we're known by our community, we make culture that will not accept shallow substitutions for genuine human relationship.
- Because we belong to a church, we make culture that challenges the prevailing conventions of our city for the common good.
- Because we witness to Christ, we make culture that expresses truth, beauty, and goodness, which find their ultimate expression in the gospel.
- Because we do justice, we make culture that favors the least and the lowest.
- Because we work with God, we make culture defined by service and excellence.

Incredibly, by grace, we are given, in Christ, a role in God's total healing of culture and reality as part of his making all things new.

New person. New family. New mission.

Because Jesus changes everything.