Christianity and Culture

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Lecture I: What is Culture?

First I want to thank McIlwain Church and the conference organizers for inviting me here. Thanks especially to Chuck DeBardeleben and Joe Grider. It's good to be a colleague of Peter Jones again and to renew the fellowship we enjoyed in California between our two families. Good also to be with Harry Reeder, whose preaching I've admired from afar for many years. Thanks also to all of you for coming!

My general topic is "Christianity and Culture." I have five sessions with you. In the first, this morning, I'll ask, "What is Culture?" Tomorrow we will discuss "Christ and Culture," asking how the Bible describes the relation of Christ to all the cultures of the world. In the third lecture, "Christ and *our* Culture," I will get more specific, applying what we've learned to the culture we live in, that of the present-day Western world. The fourth lecture, "Christians in our Culture" will discuss ourselves: how should *we* respond? How should Christians relate to present-day culture: do we flee, fight, set up an alternative, or what? The last lecture, "Culture in the Church," will discuss what use the church can make of culture in its ministry: in its evangelism, its nurture of believers, and its worship.

So today, we begin by asking, "What is Culture?" Scripture does not contain a *definition* of culture. Indeed it does not contain definitions of any English words. So we have to understand how the English word is typically used among us, and then ask if that concept matches anything in the Bible, and what the Bible says about it. So we need to start with the use of the *term culture* in the English language. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin verb *colere*, which refers literally to *agriculture*, tilling the ground in order to grow things. By a slight extension, it applies also to growing or raising things that don't begin in the ground. So equiculture is the growing of horses, aviculture the growing of birds.

Beyond these more literal uses, we use the term *culture* to describe anything that human beings work to achieve. So culture is not only what we grow, but also what we make, both with our hands and with our minds. It includes our houses, our barns, our tools, our cities and towns, our arts and crafts. It also includes the systems of ideas that we build up: science, philosophy, economics, politics, theology, history, and the means of teaching them, education: schools, universities, seminaries. Indeed, it includes all our corporate bodies and

institutions: families, churches, governments. And culture also includes our customs, our games, sports, entertainment, music, literature, cuisine.

So definitions of culture tend to be fairly comprehensive. The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelism defined *culture* as "an integrated system of beliefs, values, customs, and institutions which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity." Ken Myers, in *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, writes that culture is "a dynamic pattern, an ever-changing matrix of objects, artifacts, sounds, institutions, philosophies, fashions, enthusiasms, myths, prejudices, relationships, attitudes, tastes, rituals, habits, colors and loves, all embodied in individual people, in groups and collectives and associations of people (many of whom do not know they are associated), in books, in buildings, in the use of time and space, in wars, in jokes, and in food."[1]

From definitions and descriptions of this sort, you might come away thinking that culture is everything. But that would be a mistake. We should make an important distinction between creation, which is one thing, and culture, which is something else. Creation is what God makes; culture is what we make. Now of course God is sovereign, so everything we make is also his in one sense. Or, somewhat better: creation is what God makes by himself, and culture is what he makes through us. The sun, moon and stars are not culture. The light and darkness are not culture. The basic chemistry of the earth, and the original genetic structure of life forms are not culture; they are God's creation.

So our discussion leads us, of course, back to Genesis. Although we get our basic definition of culture from our understanding of the English language, we must as Christians go to Scripture if we are to understand what is most important about culture, namely what God thinks about it. In Genesis, we learn that God made the heavens and the earth and everything in them, including man and woman, in six days, however long those days may have been.

At the end of those six days, culture begins. Scripture doesn't say that God makes or creates culture. Rather, he commands Adam and Eve to make it. Culture is not a creation, but a command, or, as it is often called, a "mandate."

> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground," Gen. 1:28.

I will refer to that command from time to time, as many other Reformed theologians have, as the "Cultural Mandate." It is very important. The first human experience recorded in Scripture is the experience of hearing this command. This command governs everything Adam and Eve would do thereafter. It defines the very purpose of human life.

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[1] Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 34.

There are two elements to it: filling and rule. First, filling: Adam and Eve are to have children, grandchildren, and so on. They are not to stay in Eden. Gen. 2:24 says that a man will leave his father and mother and live with his wife, so there is to be a multiplication of homes, ultimately throughout the world.

As they fill the world, they are to rule it. They are not to be terrified by the natural world, like Dorothy and her friends, who cried about the lions and tigers and bears. Nor are they to be fearful of electrical storms, or earthquakes, or desert heat. Rather, they are to march through the world as kings and queens, taking possession of everything. They are to harness the animals, the heat and cold, the electricity and seismic energy, to serve their own purposes. That means development. Adam and Eve are not to leave the world untouched, as some radical environmentalists would prefer. Rather, they are to *use* the resources of God's creation, to bring out the potential of the heavens and the earth, to facilitate their rule under God. They are to turn the creation into a culture, into a home for human society.

Of course, use is one thing, exploitation something else. Adam's family had to remember that they were made of dust. They were not God; they were finite, not infinite. To live, they needed to eat. So although God gave them the right to rule the earth, in one sense they were subordinate to the earth. They *needed* the earth for their food and shelter. That's another difference between creation and culture. God creates the world, but does not depend on the world at all. The world depends entirely on him. But in human life, there is mutual dependence between ourselves and the world. The world depends on us to fill and rule it, but we depend on the world for our very existence.

So, just as God told Adam to "take care" of the Garden (Gen. 2:15), Adam's family was to "take care" of the earth. God wanted them both to use and to preserve. To use, but not to use up. So God later told Israel to rest the land after six years of cultivation. Man is to rule the earth, but also to serve it. He is to be a servant-king. That is the basis of *biblical* environmentalism.

So culture is what we make, and it begins right after creation, in response to God's command. But once we see that, we must expand our definition of culture a bit. Culture is not only a fact, but a value. It is not only something that happens; it is something God desires, something God values.

Why did God give this command to Adam and Eve? Well, for the same reason, ultimately, that he does everything else: for his own glory. God's glory is that beautiful, intense light that shines out from him when he makes himself visible to human beings. In the beginning, God created us as his "image and glory" (1 Cor. 11:7).[2] So he wanted Adam's family to spread that glory through the whole world. Adam was not to rule merely for himself, but for God, glorifying

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[2] See also the correlations between *image* and *glory* in Rom. 1:23, 2 Cor. 3:18, Heb. 1:3.

God in all he did. So culture is based on a divine command. Adam must develop culture because that is God's desire. Culture is for God's sake. So it is subject to God's commands, God's desires, God's norms, God's values.

So as we go back to look again at the various definitions of culture people have offered, we can see that there is almost always a *value* element, a *normative* element. In the Lausanne statement, for example, culture is not only crops, farms, and artifacts, but "an integrated system of beliefs, values, customs, and institutions." Note especially the term "values." And Lausanne goes on to say that this system is one "which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity." My own feeling is that the Lausanne statement supposes more unity than there usually is. You might well ask whether our own culture is an "integrated system." Is it integrated, or is it a collection of many systems, often battling one another for supremacy? Is there any system of values that "binds our society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity?" Perhaps at one time Christianity provided that unity; perhaps at another time, the ideas of the Founding Fathers, such as those of the *Declaration of Independence* and the US Constitution, provided that sense of unity in the United States.

But surely cultures always involve values. If we no longer have unified values, perhaps the conclusion to draw is that we no longer have a single culture. But culture always includes evaluation, a common understanding, not only of what is, but also of what is good and right. So Matthew Arnold, for example, defines culture as "the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world."[3] And T. S. Eliot understood culture "simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other people and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was worth while for that civilisation to have existed."[4]

Are you a "cultured" person? In a descriptive sense, we are all cultured, for no human being exists outside of culture. But in a normative sense, sad to say, not all of us are cultured, or at least not all of us are equally cultured. As my high school buddies used to say, there is a difference between "culture" and "culcha." To be "culcha'd" is to be refined, educated, to have good taste, to be among the elite. If you are culcha'd, you prefer opera to rock and roll, filet of sole to Whoppers, Van Gogh to Norman Rockwell. It's sometimes hard to draw the line between a respect for cultural norms and mere snobbery. But the word *culture* traditionally refers to something that's good, something that's better. So William Herridge wrote that "A thoroughly cultured person is one who is

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[3] Arnold, "An Essay on Political and Social Culture," in *Culture and Anarchy* (NY: 1897), xi.
[4] Eliot, "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 100.

thoroughly matured in every part of his life, so that he is able to fulfill the purpose of his creation."[5]

The definitions of Arnold, Eliot, and Herridge are perhaps unbalanced on the normative side, to the neglect of the descriptive. A better definition will say that culture is both what human society is and what it ought to be, both real and ideal. Culture is what a society has made of God's creation, together with its ideals of what it *ought* to make.

Or maybe we should put the ideal first. People make things, because they already have a plan in view, a purpose, a goal, an ideal. The ideal comes first, then making things. First the norm, then the cultivation, the culture.

So now we can see how culture is related to religion. When we talk values and ideals, we are talking religion. In the broad sense, a person's religion is what grips his heart most strongly, what motivates him most deeply. It is the value that transcends all other values. So Henry Van Til says that "culture is simply the service of God in our lives; it is religion externalized."[6] It is interesting that that Latin term *colere* I mentioned earlier, from which we get the word *culture* also refers to religious service, and comes into English as *cult, cultic*, and so on. Culture and cult go together.

If a society worships idols, false gods, that worship will govern the culture of that society. If a society worships the true God, that worship will deeply influence, even pervade its culture. If, like ours, a society is religiously divided, then it will reveal a mixture of religious influences.

Religions are totalitarian, you know. They govern everything. That's certainly true of biblical Christianity. Scripture says, "whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Rom. 14:23 says, "everything that does not come from faith is sin." Col. 3:17, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." So everything we do in culture will reflect our faith in some way. The same is true if you're a Muslim: you will seek to express your Islamic faith in everything you think, say, or do. Same for Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, philosophical skeptics, rationalists, modernists, postmodernists, neo-pagan monists. (For these purposes, I'll use *religion*, *philosophy*, and *worldview* synonymously.) Every worldview, every philosophy, even if it professes to be nonreligious, has this totalitarian influence on human life, and, followed consistently, will dictate a certain kind of culture. Culture, therefore, is never religiously neutral. Everything in culture expresses and communicates a religious conviction: either faith in the true God, or denial of him.

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[5] Herridge, "Culture," in *The Presbyterian Review* IX, 389.
[6] Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959, 1972), 200.

When we think about cultures, or elements of culture, that deny the true God, we must go beyond Gen. 1 and 2, to Gen. 3. For Scripture teaches that we have fallen into sin and that our cultures reflect that Fall. God's original purpose is to fill the world with human culture that glorifies him. But today, we see people filling and ruling the earth, to be sure, but in human cultures that often express hatred for the creator.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve, then Adam, had a clear-cut choice: whether to obey Satan or God. Did she really imagine that Satan knew something God didn't know, or that Satan had a higher level of authority? Or did she imagine that she herself had a higher level of authority than either of them, the "right to choose?" Perhaps these boil down the same thing. For when you claim authority for yourself, *autonomy*, you are playing Satan's game. That's exactly what Satan wants you to believe. Certainly, believing in our own autonomy is very foolish. But Adam accepted that foolishness, and it spread throughout their family.

Sin is when we pretend to be our own boss, when we claim to be the final authority in place of God. In our sinful condition, we claim to be the supreme judges of what is true and what is right. As sinners, we seek our own glory, rather than the glory of God. It's not that sinners don't know God. Paul in Rom. 1 tells us that sinners know God very well. But they don't like the knowledge of God. They suppress it; they exchange it for a lie. Then they think and behave as if God didn't exist. So Paul emphasizes that God-denying cultures are full of idols and every kind of wickedness. At one point, God destroyed mankind with a flood, showing mercy only to Noah and his family. Gen. 6:5 tells us,

> The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.

But the flood didn't do away with sin. In Gen. 8:21, after the flood, God says it is still the case that "every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."

So we might be led to think that there is nothing good in human culture after the Fall. Certainly the stories of Babel, Sodom, and Gomorrah, don't give us much hope. But other parts of Scripture point to elements of goodness even in fallen culture. Genesis 4 narrates how Adam and Eve's first son, Cain, murdered his brother Abel. But later in the chapter, we learn that Cain's family developed a culture. They built a city. Some descendants lived in tents and raised livestock. Others made musical instruments and metal tools. In Scripture, these are all good things.

Moses was 'educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," according to Stephen in Acts 7:22. Stephen does not condemn this pagan education as evil, but, as Dennis Johnson puts it, "concurs with the Jewish tradition's *positive*

assessment of Moses' intellectual engagement with pagan wisdom."[7] Compare the positive estimate of pagan wisdom in the time of Solomon: Solomon's wisdom is greater than that of any of the pagan sages (1 Kings 4:29-34), but that assessment assumes that the wisdom of the pagan sages is worth something.

In Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, we read about Hiram, king of Tyre (called "Huram" in Chronicles). Tyre and Sidon in Scripture are usually examples of wicked cities. But some citizens of these places were expert carpenters and stone masons. David accepted their help in building his palace, and Solomon accepted their help in building the temple of the Lord. 1 Kings 5:6 says that nobody in Israel could fell timber like the Sidonians. Now that's good. That's a good skill, and God used it in producing his temple.

Remember, of course, that a person can be skilled and wicked at the same time. You may know a car repairman who's great at fixing cars, but who overcharges and cheats and lies. Being a good plumber or a good writer or a good pianist doesn't make you a good person. The word "good" can be confusing here. It can mean ethically good, or merely useful or skilled.

Nevertheless, there are some kinds of goodness even in pagan culture: good products, good skills, real wisdom. The reason is the grace of God. God shows his mercy and kindness to us by bringing us blessings even in wicked cultures. There are two forms of God's grace that we need to distinguish at this point: common grace and special grace. The basic difference between these is that special grace brings salvation, and common grace does not. But let us look at these a bit more closely.

Common grace, non-saving grace, is a difficult concept to get hold of. The phrase is not biblical; indeed, I don't know of any passage of Scripture that uses the term "grace" this way. But Scripture does speak of certain blessings of God that fall short of salvation:

(1) God restrains human sin. He keeps people from doing all the wickedness they otherwise would do. So he confused the languages of people at the Tower of Babel, to keep them from accomplishing their wicked purposes (Gen. 11:7). He even keeps Satan on a short leash. God allowed Satan, for instance to harm Job up to a point, but no further (Job 1:12, 2:6).

(2) He gives some blessings to everybody without exception: the rain and sunshine (Matt. 5:43-48, Acts 14:17). He gives food to all living things (Psm. 65:5-13, 145:15-16). He gives civil government "for good" (Rom. 13:4), "so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all goodness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

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[7] Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis, Common Grace, and Practical Theology," inaugural address, photocopied, accepted for publication in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 12.

(3) God gives skills and knowledge to unbelievers, so that they can do good in society. An unbeliever can do no good in the highest sense of *good*. Paul says that "those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God," Rom. 8:8. To please God, our works must be done to the glory of God, obedient to the Word of God, motivated by faith and love of God. Unbelievers never do good works in this sense; indeed, even believers' works always fall short according to this standard. But unbelievers are able to do things that *look* good to us. They don't look good to God, for God knows the heart. But they look good to us, and they often bring benefits to society. So non-Christians often improve society through their skills and ideas. They make scientific discoveries, produce labor-saving inventions, develop businesses that supply jobs, produce works of art and entertainment.

That's common grace; and you can see how God's common grace leads to many good things even in unbelieving culture.

The other source of goodness, of course, is God's special grace, his work of saving the world through Christ. This work of God goes far beyond common grace. For God sent Jesus, not just to keep us from being as bad as we could be, but to make us as good as creatures can be, to transform us into the glorious image of Christ himself. Jesus died for his people and rose again, so that they might be raised with him, dead to sin, alive to righteousness in Jesus. The Gospel calls people of all nations to turn from their sins, believe in Jesus, and receive God's saving grace, his free gift of eternal life.

Does God's saving grace make an impact on culture? Certainly it does. When you believe in Jesus, your whole life changes direction: your thoughts, words, and deeds. Whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, you seek to do it to God's glory. So whether you are a car repairman, a homemaker, a poet, a plumber, a pianist, a civil magistrate, or a pastor, you try to do your work to the glory of God. You'll fail, because you won't be perfect until glory. But you'll try. And sometimes trying can make a huge difference. You can influence your culture, as many Christians have.

If you read a book like D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born*,[8] you should be impressed at the great influence of the Christian gospel, and specifically Calvinism, upon western culture. I don't want to minimize the wickedness of modern culture, and both Peter and I will say much about that this week. But for now I'm making the point that there is good as well. Kennedy and Newcombe emphasize that Christians, for distinctively Christian motives, have vastly influenced western culture in such areas as help for the poor, teaching of literacy, education for all, political freedom, economic freedom, science, medicine, the family, the arts, the sanctity of life. Without

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[8] Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994.

Jesus, without his Gospel, without the influence of his people, all these areas of culture would be vastly different and very much worse.

The Gospel, you see, is not only a message for individuals, telling them how to avoid God's wrath. It is also a message about a Kingdom, a society, a new community, a new covenant, a new family, a new nation, a new way of life, and, therefore, a new culture. God calls us to build a city of God, a New Jerusalem.

Remember the cultural mandate. Sin does not abrogate it. God repeated it to Noah's family in Gen. 9:1-7. Nor does Jesus abrogate it. Indeed, he restates it for his church in the Great Commission, Matt. 29:19-20. Theologians have often debated how the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission fit together. For now, just remember that both of these call for a renewed culture.

> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

You see how comprehensive that is? The Great Commission tells us not only to tell people the Gospel and get them baptized, but also to teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. Everything. The Gospel creates new people, people radically committed to Christ in every area of their lives. People like these will change the world. They will fill and rule the earth to the glory of Jesus. They will plant churches, establish godly families, and will also plant godly hospitals, schools, arts, and sciences. That's what has happened, by God's grace. And that is what will continue to happen until Jesus comes.

Does that mean that culture is OK, after all? That we don't need to worry about it? Certainly not. What it means, is that the relation of Christ and Culture is more complicated than you may have thought. It's certainly not warfare, pure and simple. There is a war, but the war is between Christ and Satan, Christ and unbelief, not Christ and culture. Nor is it a mutual embrace. Culture is an ambiguity, a mixture, of sin and righteousness, of good and bad, of love of Christ and hatred of Christ. That picture leaves us much to explore in remaining sessions.

Lecture 2: Christ and Culture

In the last lecture, I defined culture as what we make of God's creation, or rather what God makes through us. Culture is the human response, in obedience or disobedience, to the cultural mandate, God's command to Adam and Eve to replenish the earth and subdue it. As such, culture expresses our religion, our

service to God or to an idol. Since the Fall into sin, described in Gen. 3, culture expresses unbelief, rebellion against God. But there is also good in culture, because of God's common grace and his special grace. By his common grace, God restrains human sin. By his special grace, he sends Christ to save us. And Jesus' saved people spread over the earth, preaching the Gospel, winning others to Christ, and bringing the influence of Jesus into the cultures of the world. So in any human culture, we can expect to find both good and bad.

Today I want to look more closely at the relationship between Christ and human culture as Scripture presents it. I will be looking at five different historical models of this relationship, five ways in which Christians have understood the relation of Christ to culture. These are not my models. Everybody who discusses Christianity and culture discusses these. The first one to formulate them was H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *Christ and Culture*, probably the most influential twentieth-century work on the subject.

But I will try to evaluate these models biblically. When we're thinking about culture, of course we must think about a lot of things outside the Bible. But the Bible is our ultimate norm, and our only ultimate norm, *sola* Scriptura. As Christians, we should not seek to be autonomous as Eve did in Gen. 3, to make our own wisdom supreme. To God, the best of human wisdom is foolishness. We must listen to him first, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of true wisdom.

I say that at this point, first, because it's always good to be reminded of it, and second, because it seems to me to be especially important to discussions of Christ and culture. When Christians evaluate culture, they often give a great deal of weight to various theories of historical development, of sociology and psychology, of aesthetic excellence, and so on. While knowledge in these fields and others can help us to *apply* Scriptural principles, extra-biblical theories are never the final criterion, the final standard. Only Scripture has the final word. And we must always be open to let Scripture criticize our theories. We must never force Scripture to say what our theories demand; rather we must continually revise and even abandon our theories as we interact over and over again with God's Word.

Niebuhr's five models are these: (1) Christ against culture, (2) the Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, (4) Christ and culture in paradox, and (5) Christ the transformer of culture. Let's look at these individually. Hardly anybody is a pure example of just one of these. Most of us mix up these models in our thinking. But they are guideposts by which we can compare our views to those of others and identify emphases in the great thinkers of the church over history.

(1) *Christ Against Culture*

In the early days of Christianity, there were many conflicts between the Christians, the Jews, and the pagans, often rising to the level of persecution.

Christians often saw themselves at war with the surrounding culture. A number of the Church Fathers, the earliest Christian writers after the New Testament period, described the Christians as a "third race," distinct from both the Jews and Gentiles. The Christians worshipped a different God, lived by a different law, had a different inward character. The world was simply wicked. Tertullian (approx. 160-220 A. D.) argued that Christians could not participate in the military, in politics, in trade with the world. After we become Christians, Tertullian said, we have no need of Greek philosophy. Jerusalem and Athens have nothing to do with one another.

You can see the main outlines of this picture: Christianity and culture are opposites, opposed to one another, at war with one another. This view became less common after the Roman Empire became officially Christian under Constantine. But this sort of language emerged often later, in Anabaptist groups, among the Amish, among some varieties of American evangelicals.

These groups have been able to appeal to some themes of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God wanted Israel to be strictly separate from the pagan nations. God's people were to be different from the pagan world, not only in their worship, but also in their diet, their clothing, their calendar, their patterns of work and rest, their planting and resting the land, their laws. They were to be God's special people, his "peculiar" people, a holy nation, different from all the other nations on earth (Ex. 19:5-6).

In the New Testament, we read of another holy nation, another special people of God, distinct from all the nations, but also different from the Jews. These are the people of Christ. In the NT, there is much emphasis on the conflict between Christians and the *world*.

Now the Bible uses the term *world* in different ways. Sometimes, the world is simply the whole creation of God, the inhabited earth, without reference to sin or salvation. But Scripture often reminds us that the human world has fallen into sin. So it often uses the term "world," either the spatial term *kosmos* or the temporal term *aion*, to designate everything opposed to God. The world hates Jesus (John 7:7), because he testifies that its works are evil. Jesus' Jewish opponents are "of this world" (John 8:23), but he is not. Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, 2 Cor. 4:4, 1 John 5:19). The world cannot receive the Holy Spirit, John 14:17. The world will rejoice when Jesus is killed (16:20). In the world, the disciples will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; Christ has overcome the world (16:33). Jesus has chosen his disciples out of the world (John 17:5-6). He prays for them, but not for the world (17:9). The disciples are not of the world, even as he is not of the world (17:14).

Paul picks up the theme: don't be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God (1 Cor. 1:20-21, 2:6-8, many references). Remember that the saints will judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2). Paul

says the world is crucified to him and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). James says that true religion is to visit widows and orphans and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (1:27). But the most arresting antithesis is in First John:

> Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world-- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (2:15-17)

So there is an antithesis, an opposition, between Christ and the world, and therefore between the believer and the world. Significantly, however, Scripture never tells Christians to leave the world. Obviously we can never leave the world in the sense of God's creation. But should we try to stay away from other human beings, from human society contaminated by sin? Perhaps a little surprisingly, the Bible's answer is no. Jesus prays, not that the Father will take the disciples out of the world, but that he will keep them from the evil one, John 17:15. They are not of the world, but as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so he sends his disciples into the world (17:11-18). Paul did not forbid the Corinthians to associate with people who are immoral, greedy, swindlers, or even idolaters, for, he says, "in that case you would have to leave this world" (1 Cor. 5:10). Like Jesus, we are to shine as lights of the world (Matt. 5:14; Cf. Phil. 2:15). So we are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world, a very difficult balance to maintain, to be sure.

So there is a biblical basis for thinking in terms of conflict, antithesis. Should we, then, adopt the model of "Christ against culture?" Well, for one thing, *culture* and *world* are not synonymous. As I argued yesterday, culture is a mixture of good and bad. It includes the effects of sin as well as the effects of God's grace. But *world*, used in that negative ethical sense, is entirely bad. The *world* is the kingdom of the evil one, and the Christian should not be conformed to it even a little bit. We should have no love for it. Our only concern should be to rescue people out of it. The world is a great snare and delusion.

Culture is a broader term than *world*. *World* is the bad part of culture. It is the culture of unbelief, taken in its essence, without the effects of common grace and special grace. The early church, looking out on a world untouched by the Gospel, often saw worldliness as something pervasive, inescapable. It was a systematic kind of unbelief that tried to bring everything under its sway. So the Christians didn't always make fine distinctions between the evils of the world and the mixed good and evil of culture.

But sometimes they did. In 1 Cor. 9, for example, Paul says that to the Jews he becomes as a Jew, to the Greeks as a Greek. To the weak (to people with special religious scruples) he becomes weak, in order to gain the weak. Paul accommodates his behavior to the customs of different groups, to their culture,

so that he can win them to Christ. He doesn't commit sin, but he conforms his behavior to their cultural expectations in non-sinful ways. This assumes that not everything in Jewish and Gentile cultures is evil. And as I mentioned yesterday, every culture contains some good products, customs, and institutions: crops, marriage, government, language. The Greek language is a product of Greek culture, for example. But it's not wrong for Paul to use it in his preaching and teaching. The Greek language is cultural, but it is not *worldly*.

So: Christ against the world, yes; Christ against culture, no. There is, of course, much for us to oppose in culture, but God doesn't call us to oppose culture as such.

(2) *The Christ of Culture*

As we've seen, the Church Fathers tended to see Christ and culture in conflict, antithesis. But they were not entirely consistent about that. When they defended Christians against the attacks of the pagans, they tended to seek common ground. They pointed out how Christians were a vital part of the larger society and brought many benefits to the general culture. So even Tertullian says to the pagans,

> we sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce… We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your traffickings—even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit.[9]

Niebuhr, however, quotes this section and adds,

> This, however, is said in defense. When he admonishes believers his counsel is to withdraw from many meetings and many occupations, not only because they are corrupted by their relation to pagan faith but because they require a mode of life contrary to the spirit and the law of Christ.[10]

But Tertullian's attempt to seek common ground with paganism was not isolated. Justin Martyr, for example, and later Clement of Alexandria recommended Christianity to the pagans as the fulfillment of Greek philosophy. Plato, they thought, lived according to the *logos*, according to rational speech; and of course the *logos* in John 1:1-14 is Jesus Christ. So, said Justin, Socrates and Plato were Christians. Just as the Old Testament prepared the Jews for Christ, so Greek philosophy prepared the Greeks for Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that is highest and best in the philosophies of men. The Greeks should have no problem in accepting Christ, because, in effect, they are Christians already.

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[9] Apology, xlii.
[10] H. R.Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (NY: Harper, 1951), 55-56.

Niebuhr also mentions the Medieval thinker Peter Abelard and the liberal Protestants who followed Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century as examples of this tendency. They presented Jesus exclusively as a moral teacher. To them, Jesus doesn't oppose human culture, but he teaches all that is noblest and best in the cultural traditions of mankind.[11]

Certainly these thinkers are not wrong in saying that Christ affirms what is right and good in all human culture. But it is unbiblical to *limit* Jesus to those things he shares with human culture. Jesus' wisdom is far more vast than any Greek philosopher or modern moralist ever dreamed. And indeed he is far more than a philosopher or moralist. No moral teacher can save us from sin, for we have in ourselves no power to act morally. But Jesus died to satisfy the wrath of God, so that we might live eternally and so that we might be able to please God. And the preaching of this good news makes foolish the wisdom of the world.

Further, the "Christ of culture" position tends to neglect the biblical doctrine of sin. It identifies Christ with culture, because it doesn't see how bad culture can get under the influence of the fall and the curse.

Nevertheless, Christians have often had a hard time distinguishing between Christ and culture. One common criticism of western missionaries over the last two centuries has been that they have tried to impose western culture on other countries in the name of Christ. They have brought not only the Gospel, but also western clothing, western hymns, western politics. But drawing these lines is not always easy. When a missionary counsels a tribe about clothing, where does he draw the line between a biblical concern for modesty and western aesthetic standards? When he recommends music for their worship, how much of his thinking is governed by biblical standards, and to what extent is he merely homesick for the music he grew up with? When you grow up in a Christian society, or in a culture deeply influenced by the Gospel, it's tempting to want all other societies to be like that.

The problem even enters into our understanding of Scripture. When Paul says that women praying or prophesying should have a particular hair style or head covering, is this command limited to a particular culture, or is it a universal norm? It's easy for us to criticize Abelard and Ritschl for their easy equation of Christ and culture, but we face the same problem.

(3) *Christ Above Culture*

Niebuhr has special names for views three through five. Those who hold the third view are "synthesists;" those who hold the fourth are "dualists," and those who hold the fifth are "transformationalists."

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[11] Ibid., 89-101.

The third view recognizes that Christ and culture are different, and, unlike the first view, recognizes that there is good in both. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is the chief representative of this view, and the Roman Catholic Church adopted his position in a somewhat official way. The heart of Roman Catholic theology is the distinction between nature and grace. Nature is the world as God made it. Grace is the name for special gifts God gives to human beings beyond nature.

Natural reason, for example, is part of our nature, as God created us. It enables us to understand the world around us, and even to prove the existence of God. But by natural reason, we can never understand the Trinity, or understand how to be saved from sin. For that we need a higher means of knowledge, divine revelation and faith. Natural reason belongs to nature; faith belongs to grace.

By our natural abilities we plow the soil, marry and raise families, achieve various kinds of earthly happiness. But to reach our highest purpose, a supernatural purpose, we need God's grace.

We must make the same distinction among authorities: the state administers nature; the church administers grace.

So how does Christ relate to culture? Generally speaking, culture is man's development of nature. Christ supplements nature with something higher. The higher then mingles easily with the lower, in a "synthesis."

This doesn't sound so bad when you first hear of it; in fact it seems to make good sense. The trouble is, that the way it is sometimes put, is that you really don't need Christ at the lower level, only at the higher level. Natural reason, for example, works perfectly well without the help of divine revelation. Aristotle learned many valuable things through his natural reason. His problem was not so much that he was wrong, though sometimes he was. His problem was that he needed to know more than his reason could tell him. He needed a supplement.

And you can do just fine at making your living and raising your family without Christ. But if you're interested in eternal life, then you need something more. Indeed, if you're *really* interested in eternal life, you'll quit your job, promise never to marry, and become a monk, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The problem, however, is that it is unbiblical to separate nature and grace in this sort of way. Remember that God intends us to live our natural lives to his glory. When we eat and drink, do our jobs, raise our families, we should be doing that to the glory of God. But apart from grace we are sinners. "Every imagination of the thoughts of (our) hearts is *only* evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). So without grace we cannot live our natural lives as God intended. We need far more than a supplement. We need a complete change of direction.

The same is true for "natural reason." Yes, it's true that we can know God through the world around us. But without faith, we hate that truth and suppress it. We cannot rightly understand the world, then, apart from God's grace, his revelation.

The state can maintain order through force. But it has no sense of its true powers and limits apart from God's Word. Without that, its force becomes tyranny.

So in Scripture, nature and grace are quite inseparable. Grace is not just a higher level, a supplement to nature. Rather, nature is worthless, apart from grace. And so we must understand culture. Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, the degenerates of Rom. 1, these are examples of what culture is like without Christ.

(4) *Christ and Culture in Paradox*

Each view that we've discussed recognizes something important about the relation of Christ and culture. The first view recognizes the reality of spiritual warfare. The second recognizes that there is good in culture. The third recognizes that Christ is different from even what's best in culture. The fourth view, now, what Niebuhr calls "dualism," recognizes far more than the third the intense sinfulness of culture. This view is usually associated with the Lutheran tradition, but it has been held by many Reformed people too, especially in recent years. I confess I find it harder to understand and to describe than the other views, but I will do my best.

The heart of this view is that, as Gene Veith puts it, God exercises a "double sovereignty."[12] He has "two Kingdoms." He rules one way in the church, a different way in the world in general:

> In the church, God reigns through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, expressing his love and grace through the forgiveness of sins and the life of faith.[13]

In the world in general, God "exercises his authority and providential control" through "natural laws" (of physics, chemistry, etc.).

> Similarly, God rules the nations—even those who do not acknowledge him—making human beings to be social creatures, in need of governments, laws, and cultures to mitigate the self-destructive tendencies of sin and to enable human beings to survive.[14]

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[12] Veith, "Christianity and Culture: God's Double Sovereignty," from *The Whirlpool* (Jan.-Feb., 1997), available at www.alliancenet.org.
[13] Ibid., 5-6.
[14] Ibid., 6.

Veith also describes these two sovereignties or two kingdoms as Gospel vs. Law and spiritual vs. secular. Luther used the metaphor of the spiritual as God's "right hand," and the secular as God's "left hand."

So far, I can agree with most all of this. Certainly God does rule the church somewhat differently from the way he rules the secular world. I do miss something, though. Of Veith's two divine sovereignties, neither one is what we usually call "divine sovereignty" in Reformed theology. In Reformed theology, God's sovereignty is comprehensive, over everything. All things come to pass according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph. 1:11). And God's general sovereignty is not primarily through natural laws, though those may play a role, but primarily by his own direct involvement in history, by Christ, in whom all things hold together, and the Spirit, who makes life abound on the earth. Scripture never speaks of natural laws in the sense of impersonal forces through which God works. It may be useful in science to speak of such things, but that can only be a way of speaking in shorthand of God's direct, personal action. So I think there is a unity in God's sovereignty that the two-kingdom doctrine somewhat obscures.

A more serious problem is that the two-kingdom doctrine claims a duality, not only in God's providence, but also in God's standards, his norms. There are secular values and religious values, secular norms and religious norms. Secular society is responsible only to natural laws, the morality found in nature. So, he says, "morality is not a matter of religion."[15] The church is, according to some Lutherans, not subject to any law at all,[16] or, according to others, subject to the whole Word of God. Therefore, although the Christian can participate in the general culture, he should not seek to Christianize it, to turn it into a Christian culture. There is no such thing as a Christian culture; there is only secular culture, and a Christian church. Nor, of course, should he try to bring secular standards into the church: secular music, for instance.

Secular society is governed by the principle of justice, and therefore by the sword. The church is governed, not by the sword, but by God's Word and Spirit. Veith argues that we should not ask civil governments to show forgiveness to criminals, but to punish them according to justice. Justice is the natural morality; forgiveness is only in the church. So there is some inconsistency between the secular ethic and the ethic of the church.

Now, I have all sorts of problems with the idea that there are two different sets of divine norms:

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[15] Ibid.

[16] This idea is very wrong, "antinomian," as it is sometimes called. Christians are saved by grace, but people saved by grace will love God's law. Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

(1) To be sure, non-Christians have what might be called a "natural knowledge of morality," and, to be sure, that knowledge consists of Law rather than Gospel. But there is no inconsistency between what God commands through this natural knowledge and what he commands us in Scripture. God's moral standards are one, even though they come through two media.

(2) Contrary to Veith, morality certainly is a matter of religion. The moral law is binding because the true God requires it of us. If God did not exist, there would be no right or wrong. That includes natural morality. In Rom. 1, people know right and wrong, because they know that the true God exists, however much they try to repress that knowledge. So even in the non-Christian's conscience, morality is a matter of religion. And insofar as they do repress that knowledge, they fall into idolatry and unnatural lust, says Paul. Errors in religion lead to errors in morality. Nevertheless enough of that natural knowledge shines through that nonbelievers often do lip-service to it even when they are violating it (Rom. 1:32).

(3) Through the Scriptures and through their regenerate insight, Christians have available to them a fuller understanding of God's Law than non-Christians have. They ought to bring that Christian understanding and insight to bear upon culture and government as best they can. But when we do that, aren't we in one sense working to "Christianize culture?"

(4) It is true that the state has the power of the sword and the church does not. But that is not because there are two different moralities, one secular and one Christian. Rather, that distinction comes out of the Word of God. God tells us in Scripture that the state has the power of the sword and the church does not. This doctrine is sometimes called "sphere sovereignty," and although people sometimes try to make more out of this principle than it deserves, it certainly is the case that God gives to church and state different areas of authority and different means of enforcing that authority. There is no inconsistency here, no paradox. It is simply a distinction God in his Word has asked us to make.

(5) So the use of the sword by the state is not an alternative to Christian morality, but part of Christian morality. It is not an impediment to a Christian state, but the very essence of a Christian state. A Christian state would not be a state where love and forgiveness replace justice. It would be a state that expresses the justice of God.

(6) This does not mean that the state may force people to become Christians, even though some Christians in the past have mistakenly

drawn this implication. That is not a proper role for the state in a biblical understanding.

(7) Similarly, the Christian should seek to bring biblical standards to bear in all areas of society and culture. Our motive is not to try to make non-Christians live the Christian life, but simply that God wants us to work out the implications of our faith in all areas of life.

(8) The conventional criticism of the two-kingdom theory is that it is too conservative. According to this criticism, the two-kingdom view avoids any kind of Christian activism, because it wants to just let the secular be the secular. So some have blamed the two-kingdom view for the passivity of the German church in the Nazi era. Veith defends the two-kingdom view against this criticism by saying that it does permit Christians actively to promote justice in society, if that justice is seen in a properly secular way. Here I tend to agree with Veith rather than with the critics. But I wonder what standard the two-kingdom Christians are to use for their activism. May they use the Scriptures to define the nature of justice in society? Or are they somehow limited to natural revelation? And how do we distinguish between what is scriptural and what is merely natural? The two-kingdom doctrine leaves it unclear. And perhaps that very unclarity has kept Christians in some situations from being as active as they should have been.

(9) Veith says that just as we should not bring the standards of the church to bear on culture, so we shouldn't let secular standards, for example of art, music, etc., invade the church. On the other hand, this theory also says that there are no distinctively Christian standards of art and music, only secular standards. Veith says, "there is no need for a distinctively Christian approach to music, plumbing, computer science, physics, or wood-carving…,"[17] so we have no choice but to employ the standards used in secular art and music schools. Most who write in this way advocate a kind of artistic conservatism, holding to classical standards in church music and so on. But the secular world is very confused about what constitutes "good" music, for example. If we must listen to them, who should we listen to, and why should we listen only to the conservative voices, rather than the radical ones? This whole position is very confusing. I shall have more to say about standards for church music in a later lecture.

(5) *Christ, the Transformer of Culture*

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[17] Veith, op. cit., 8.

So, by process of elimination, but not only that, I find myself supporting the fifth view, that Christians should be seeking to transform culture according to the standards of God's Word. This simply means that if you are a Christian artist, car repairman, government official, or whatever, you should be seeking to do this work as a Christian, to apply God's standards to your work. As Paul says, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Christians have always sought to do this, and in seeking to do this, they have had a huge impact on culture. They haven't turned earth into heaven, or the world into the church. And sometimes they have made tragic mistakes. But they have also done a great deal of good, as a book like the Kennedy-Newcombe volume indicates. Just a few responses to common criticisms:

(1) Seeking to transform culture in this way does not mean trying save the world apart from God's grace. It simply means obeying God as our thankful response to his grace.

(2) A transformational approach does not assume an unrealistic optimism about what is possible in fallen society. We know, just as much as the dualists do, that the world is fallen, deeply sinful, totally depraved. But we also have confidence in God's common grace and his special grace that I mentioned yesterday. Real change for the better can occur, and history shows that it does. Not perfection, but real change for the better.

(3) To apply Christian standards to art, for example, does not mean that we must turn our artistic works into salvation tracts. The Bible doesn't require that. I do believe that the gospel of salvation is a fit subject, indeed a glorious subject for artistic treatment. But art should deal with all aspects of God's creation.

(4) A transformational approach does not mean that every human activity practiced by a Christian (e.g. plumbing, car repair) must be obviously, externally different from the same activities practiced by non-Christians. There is always a difference, but often the difference is that of motive, goal, and standard, rather than anything external. The Christian seeks to change his tires to the glory of God, and the non-Christian does not. But that's a difference that couldn't be captured in a photograph. When changing tires, Christian and non-Christian may look very much alike.

(5) Critics have often bemoaned the lack of high standards in Christian art, music, and other cultural activity. To some extent, anyway, these critics are right. But the answer to this problem is not to accept secular standards uncritically. (Again, even if we did, which ones should we accept?) The answer is rather to be more faithful to God, both in his special and in his general revelation. We ought to be humble enough

to learn what we can from the knowledge in these areas that God has given to unbelievers. But we should always be challenging it on the basis of our knowledge of the true God.

Lecture 3: Christ and *Our* Culture

So far, we've been talking about culture generally, and somewhat theoretically. In the first lecture, we asked "What is Culture?" and in the second we discussed the general relationship between Christ and any culture at all. Now we must focus in on culture as it actually is and has been, culture as we actually experience it.

(1) *God, the Critic of Culture*

Analysis and evaluation of culture has been going on a long time. God himself is the first critic of culture. As he looked at the culture of Noah's day,

> The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. (Gen. 6:5-6)

So God sent the flood in judgment. But the flood didn't make everything right. Shortly thereafter, some of Noah's descendants built a tower in the plain of Shinar, an attempt to make a name for themselves and a headquarters that would keep the human race from scattering over the earth as God commanded. God disapproved the project and confounded their languages to prevent them from finishing it. Then in the time of Abraham we read of God's destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We might reason that because of the Fall, all human culture stands equally under God's judgment. But that would not be true. Three chapters before the destruction of Sodom, God says to Abraham that his descendents will possess the promised land, but not until several generations have passed. Why must they wait? The answer God gives is that "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:16). In Genesis, God makes distinctions. Sodom and Gomorrah are ready for judgment. But the Amorites are not, not yet. The Amorite culture is not yet depraved to the extent that the Sodomite culture is. There is still some good there. Even in Sodom, God makes distinctions. He tells Abraham that he will save the city if he finds ten good men there. He doesn't find them, but there is righteous Lot, and God rescues him from the fire and brimstone.

But several hundred years later, the iniquity of the Amorite is full. God gives the land to his people, because of his promise, but also because of the

wickedness of the nations that are there. Israel conquers, not because of her own righteousness, but because of the wickedness of the other nations (Deut. 9:4-5). Moses says to Israel in Deut. 18:12,

> When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.

Notice the extent to which God's critique of this ancient culture is based on their religion. We recall the quote from Henry Van Til that "culture is religion externalized." And when Israel herself forsakes the true and living God, her own culture deteriorates so that it becomes even worse than the pagan nations, and thus ripe for God's judgment. God sends to them prophet after prophet, but there is no real and lasting change. Finally, he sends his own beloved Son Jesus. But still the cities of Israel will not hear. Jesus says in Matt. 10:20-24 that if the mighty works done in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum had been done in Tyre, Sidon, or Sodom, the latter cities would have repented. But the Israelite cities had become even more ripe for judgment than those pagan cities that have been proverbial for their wickedness.

Paul also brings out the religious basis of cultural depravity in Rom. 1. It is when people exchange the truth of God for a lie that they begin worshiping idols. Worshiping idols leads to other sins especially sexual, but, Paul adds, "every kind of wickedness" (verse 29) as well.

Still, for Paul, the depravity of culture does not mean that you can never use its products or follow its customs. He advises the Corinthians to freely buy what is sold in the meat markets, even if it may have been offered to idols. They are to pay good money to the idolaters, even though that means that the merchant may take that money and use it to support the idol's temple. Paul is also willing to be like the Jews sometimes, to win the Jews, and like the Greeks, sometimes, to win the Greeks. So he shows that not everything in culture is bad, not everything in culture is forbidden to the Christian. How could it be? We can no more escape from culture than we can escape from our own skins. Even the Amish reflect a culture, though it is the culture of some years in the past.

So Scripture gives us God's point of view on human culture. In general, it is a depressing picture. People rebel against God, and they end up practicing every kind of wickedness. Nevertheless, God makes distinctions, between what is good and what is bad, and between what is less bad and what is more bad.

(2) *Christian Culture Criticism*

Outside the Bible, too, many have made evaluations of human culture in general and of specific cultures. We can find culture criticism among ancient pagan writers, both historians and philosophers, and among the early Church Fathers, as we saw in our earlier discussion. Augustine had much to say about the culture of Ancient Rome in his *City of God*, in which he compared the heavenly city to the earthly city. Not much of this took place in the Medieval and Reformation periods, however, and it wasn't until the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries that sociology and cultural anthropology became academic disciplines.

Roman Catholics and Anglicans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed critiques of culture that are still valuable today. One thinks of G. K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, J. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Malcolm Muggeridge. Many liberal theologians such as Paul Tillich also wrote on the theme of Christianity and Culture. In the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper and others had important things to say about culture, but their contributions tended to focus on the theology of culture (the subjects of my first two lectures) or the Christian's participation in culture (the subject of my lecture tomorrow). They had relatively little to say about our current subject, the nature and value of present-day culture.

Among evangelical Christians in America, the analysis of culture was slow to develop. However, more recently a lot of work has been done in this area. Let me mention some important names.

Francis Schaeffer

In our own Reformed evangelical circles, certainly we must give a lot of credit to Francis Schaeffer. In his personal witnessing to intellectual skeptics, and later in his writings, especially *The God Who Is There*[18] and *How Shall We Then Live?*[19] Schaeffer drew a picture of the history of western thought and culture from the ancient world to our own time, drawing especially on his knowledge of philosophy, theology, and art. Schaeffer was not a professional scholar, but he gained a lot of knowledge in many fields, both from friendly scholars like the art historian, Hans Rookmaaker, and just from talking to the brilliant people who visited him in Switzerland. Thus he became a rather remarkable intellectual generalist. Not specialized in a single field, he developed a remarkable ability to draw connections between developments in philosophy, art, science, theology, and literature. And he won people to his viewpoint, and, more importantly, to Jesus Christ, through open dialogue and through the radical hospitality of his home in which his wife Edith played the crucial role.

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[18] Downers Grove: IVP, 1968.
[19] Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976.

Schaeffer's overall analysis of culture went like this: In ancient Greece, there was respect for objective truth and for the power of human reason to discover truth. The Greeks understood truth straighforwardly as the opposite of error. Therefore, they respected logic: if A was true, A could not be false.

In the modern period, however, that confidence waned. Philosophers of the eighteenth century moved from rationalism to skepticism, Schaeffer believed that the early nineteenth century philosopher Hegel played an important role. Unlike the Greeks, who taught a clear-cut antithesis between truth and falsehood, Hegel, in Schaeffer's account, believed that truth and falsehood somehow had to be synthesized, brought together. Traditional logic lost its importance. Then in later thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, there is a rejection of the whole idea of objective truth. For them, the ultimate is not truth as opposed to falsehood, that can be stated in clear language. Rather, the truth is something ineffable, undescribable, a final experience. To reach what is ultimate, you must escape from reason, get beyond it and above it.

At this point, Schaeffer liked to say, there was a large historical transition. Human thought passed over what Schaeffer called "the line of despair." On one side of that line was a real confidence that objective truth was obtainable. On the other side, that hope was lost. Thus, twentieth century thought was significantly different from any thought in the past, and radically different from the thought of ancient Greece. When someone passes over the line of despair, Schaeffer taught, the usual forms of evangelism are meaningless to him. Before a modern person will even listen to the gospel, you need to convince him that there is such a thing as objective truth. This is pre-evangelism. You must show him that the Biblical God offers himself, not as an irrational "final experience," but as someone who is really there, who exists as opposed to not-existing.

Schaeffer, then, saw a movement of history, from confidence in reason in the ancient world to irrationalism in the present day. And he was able to link these philosophical developments to the twentieth-century trends in art and music, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy in theology, the novels of Camus. All human intellectual life in the twentieth century, thought Schaeffer, was dominated by a sense of despair, of meaninglessness, to which only biblical Christianity could provide an answer.

Os Guinness

Schaeffer inspired quite a number of younger intellectuals to do this kind of cultural analysis and evangelism. Os Guinness in 1973 published a very brilliant book called *The Dust of Death*,[20] which presented a history of the 1960s counter-culture and its continuing effects on western culture. Guinness agreed with Schaeffer that the twentieth century was essentially post-Christian, but that western culture continued to flourish for a while on the residual moral principles

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[20] Downers Grove: IVP.

taught by Christianity (what Van Til called "borrowed capital"). So many in the culture were optimistic about the future, without any good reason for being optimistic. Now in the sixties, there was a great disruption to this optimistic confidence. The intellectual elite and the counter-culture came to reject this optimism and the Christian values, even the borrowed Christian values, that that optimism represented. So pessimistic humanism replaced optimistic humanism as the most influential cultural movement.

Guinness speaks of the surprise of these intellectuals at finding that a world without God "is a hell, rather than a paradise."[21] Nevertheless, the pessimists saw this disenchantment as irreversible, because they had accepted "the death of God as a cultural fact."[22]This disenchantment attached to technology: people no longer thought that technology was the road to comfort and ease, but they began to see it as a monster that could destroy the human environment and community. The pessimists saw violence becoming increasingly prominent in society. Granting the death of God, they sought some measure of relief in sexual liberation, eastern religions, drugs, the occult. In the end, the counter-culture influenced the larger culture to accept many of these things as legitimate.

Like Schaeffer, Guinness sees this as a post-Christian society, and the endpoint of a movement from rationalism to irrationalism. Others who wrote in the Schaeffer tradition include Donald Drew, Udo Middelmann, Ranald Macaulay, and others.

David Wells

In more recent years, however, the most prominent evangelical critics of culture have been historians: Mark Noll, George Marsden, Thomas Oden, Alister McGrath, and many others.[23] Most important of these, in my estimation, is Prof. David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Wenham, Mass.

Wells' approach is somewhat similar to that of Schaeffer and Guinness. Wells was not pleased when I said that in print,[24] but I stick by my guns; I think the parallels are significant. Like Guinness and Schaeffer, Wells sees the present time as being vastly different from any other time in history. His book *No Place for Truth* begins with a very long discussion of his home town of Wenham, Massachusetts: how it changed over two hundred years. He titles the chapter,

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[21] Ibid., 20-21.
[22] Ibid., 21, compare 72.
[23] For some background to the developing prominence of church historians among Evangelical scholars, see my paper, "Traditionalism," available at www.thirdmill.org.
[24] Frame, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 269-318, with replies by David Wells and Richard Muller and a further reply by me. Also published (without the replies) as an appendix to my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997).

nostalgically, "A Delicious Paradise Lost."[25] In his judgment, the history of Wenham, and the history of the United States, since that time, is a story of decline into that culture we call "modern." Wells characterizes modern culture, first, as *subjectivist* or irrationalist: basing one's life on human experience rather than upon objective truth. Here he echoes the theme of Schaeffer's analysis: modern culture as an escape from reason and truth.

Modern culture also, he says, is *psychologistic*, believing in psychotherapy as the best way to deal with human problems. It is preoccupied with *professionalism*: business management and marketing techniques as the model for achieving any kind of common enterprise. It is *consumerist*, believing that we must always be willing to provide for people what they want, or what they can be induced to buy. It is *pragmatist*, holding that results are the ultimate justification for any idea or decision.

Wells' main interest is not so much to analyze culture as to indict the church for its capitulation to culture. In my last lecture I will focus on that issue.

Kenneth A. Myers

Another Reformed Christian who seeks to accuse the evangelical church of capitulation to the worst in modern culture is Ken Myers, once a producer and editor for National Public Radio, more recently host of the Mars Hill tape ministry and author of a brilliant and highly influential volume called *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture*.[26] Myers bases his analysis on a distinction between three kinds of culture: high, folk and popular. He captures the differences between these in some catchy illustrations. In food, high culture would be a gourmet restaurant. Folk culture would be good home cooking. Popular culture would be Burger King. You can see how this distinction would apply to music: Beethoven is high art, African-American spirituals are folk art, Metallica is pop art.

Popular culture, Myers thinks, began during the industrial revolution, when there were mass movements from farms to cities. Folk culture didn't fit the city, lacking the supportive community necessary to sustain it. The new urbanites felt that something else was needed, to offset the monotony of work, and to fill the new leisure hours they were gaining. That something else must be exciting and diverting. Indeed, Myers thinks it fair to describe popular culture as "a culture of diversion."[27] But in this situation many became obsessive about diversion, compulsive about excitement, passionate about instant gratification. This meant, of course, liberation from traditional values, restraints.

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[25] Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 17-52.
[26] *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989).
[27] Ibid., 56.

The key to Myers' analysis is the value judgments he makes about these. High culture, he says, has the ability to provide a transcendent perspective. It has, he says,

> its roots in antiquity, in an age of convictions about absolutes, about truth, about virtue. However corrupted it has become over the centuries (and it has become quite corrupted in our own century), its essential features make it capable of maintaining and transmitting more about human experience in creation, and about God's redemptive intervention in history, than its alternatives.

Then he adds,

> Folk culture, while simpler in manner and less communicable from one folk to another, has the virtues of honesty, integrity, commitment to tradition, and perseverance in the face of opposition.[28]

Myers, however, has almost nothing positive to say about popular culture. He does say that not everything about popular culture is bad, and that it can provide "innocent pleasures. And at one point he admits that within the scope of popular art, "there are numerous films, television programs, rock songs, or detective novels that are splendid productions as entertainment and as art."[29] But," he adds, "its principal attributes are… obstacles to enjoying the best of American experience."[30]

As Myers sees it, popular culture is governed largely by marketing considerations, not artistic ones. It is not concerned to communicate truth, or insight, or great values. It tries to discover successful *formulas*, formulas that people will buy into again and again. And Myers quotes Abraham Kaplan as saying "popular art uses formulas, not for analysis, but for the experience itself."[31] Its values are those of entertainment, not of art. As with entertainment, pop artists never want their audience to feel they must *work* to enjoy it; everything must be immediately accessible. And pop art "cannot bear the sustained attention that high art can."[32]

So, Myers tells us, it's not wrong to occasionally enjoy popular art, but it would be wrong for us to get addicted to it or to spend large amounts of time in it. And we certainly should not adopt the values of popular culture which, as Myers sees it, are essentially the same values Wells attaches to modern culture in general.

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[28] Ibid., 59.
[29] Ibid., 86.
[30] Ibid., xiii.
[31] Ibid., 80.
[32] Ibid., 83.

Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern

Many recent analyses of culture have employed the above threefold distinction.[33] The modern period has roots in the Renaissance, but most people date its beginning in the "Enlightenment" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, leading thinkers abandon religion and tradition, seeking to build up the whole edifice of human knowledge on a foundation of human reason. So during the modern period, science and technology have flourished and have been models for all other knowledge to follow. Modernism has encouraged skepticism about religion and about the supernatural in general.

Postmodernism, however, has rejected many of the assumptions of modernism. Anticipated by earlier thinkers like Pascal, Kant, and Nietzsche, postmodernists have developed a certain critical or skeptical attitude toward human reason itself and a greater openness to other avenues toward knowledge. Richard Pratt summarizes the three movements as follows:

"I. Standard of Truth
   A. Premodern: Truth is discerned primarily through religious institutions and mythology under the guidance of religious leaders.
   B. Modern: Truth is discerned primarily through rational and scientific investigation under the guidance of rationalistic philosophers and scientists.
   C. Postmodern: Truth is discerned both through mythology and rational-scientific means.

II. Ultimate Reality
   A. Premodern: Ultimate reality is spiritual and deeply influences events in the ephemeral physical world.
   B. Modern: Ultimate reality is the physical world. If a spiritual world exists at all, it is ephemeral and uninvolved in the events of the physical would.
   C. Ultimate reality is both physical and spiritual (personal and impersonal); these dimensions of reality interact in countless ways.

III. Seeker of Truth
   A. Premodern: Individuality is discouraged and conformity to community traditions is highly prized.
   B. Modern: Individuality of the independent objective scholar (transcendent subject) is prized over conformity to received traditions.
   C. Postmodern: Individuality is disdained as self-deceptive, but individuals are encouraged to defy oppressive traditions.

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[33] See titles in Bibliography on postmodernism. One useful summary is Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

IV. Modes of Communication
- A. Premodern: Heavy reliance on oral, ritualized and iconographic communication due to widespread illiteracy and primitive publishing techniques.
- B. Modern: Heavy reliance on written communication, especially paper, due to rising literacy and publishing technologies (printing press).
- C. Postmodern: Written communication is lowered to the level of other formats, especially the iconographic, due to widespread electronic technologies.

V. Historical Progress
- A. Widespread mythic meta-narratives depict history in never-ending cycles.
- B. Widespread rational and scientific meta-narrative depict history as progressing toward utopia.
- C. Fragmented, heteromorphic multi-narratives depict history as cycles and counter-cycles of cacaphony and harmony."[34] [Meta-narratives suspected as attempts to oppress victim groups.]

Many have felt that the problems of modern culture are due to the effects of modernism and postmodernism, so understood. Indeed, we can see in architecture and art, music, philosophy, and entertainment, a struggle between the values of modernism (systematic rationality) and those of postmodernism (holistic acceptance of experience, criticism of reason and world-views). Postmodernism tends to be very skeptical and very open at the same time: open to experience, skeptical of dogmatic accounts of experience. Open to many interpretations of literature from many points of view, but dogmatically critical of ideas that are deemed oppressive, not politically correct. As such, many see postmodernism as the dominant ideology today on university campuses and among the elite opinion-making class of our society.

Cornelius Van Til

Cornelius Van Til was Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia from 1929 to 1975. So his writings take us back to an earlier part of the twentieth century. He was one of Schaeffer's teachers, and he died in 1987, before the books of Wells and Myers were published. He never wrote about culture as his nephew Henry did, but he did write much about philosophy, about world views, and about ways of determining ethical value. That is all, of course, quite relevant to the analysis and evaluation of culture. In these areas, I believe, he had unparalleled biblical insight and presents a very helpful perspective for our consideration, one rather different from the other thinkers we have considered.

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[34] Pratt, *Postmoderns: Opponents or Opportunities?* Photocopied Lecture Outline, 1.3-1.8.

Van Til knew a great deal about the history of human thought, but he made very little of historical turning points. This is one very noticeable difference between him and the thinkers we have so far considered. Schaeffer, Guinness, Wells, Myers, and the chroniclers of postmodernism, all make a case against present-day culture, based on historical developments. For Schaeffer, the turning point was the "line of despair;" for Guinness, the counter-culture of the 1960s; with Wells, modernism; for Myers, the industrial revolution; for many others, postmodernism. So for these thinkers it is some relatively recent historical development that is responsible for most of the ills of present-day culture.

Van Til knew only one turning point: the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. History since that time, in his view, has been replay after replay. Eve was rationalist and irrationalist, modernist and postmodernist, oppressive establishment and counter-cultural rebel, an idolater of value and a destroyer of it, all at the same time. Picture the scene. Eve knows what God has said, but she has also heard a Word from Satan that claims God is a liar. How shall she make up her mind? It should have been obvious, of course. God is the creator; he has perfect knowledge and understanding; he has the right to speak with absolute authority. Eve should have trusted God, too, because he loved her.

But something had happened in her consciousness. Somehow, she no longer accepted God's Word as the final Word. As Van Til explains, Eve was shut up to two remaining alternatives: either there is no final authority, or *she* was the final authority. As a Rationalist, she believed that she had the authority to decide what was true or false, right or wrong. But if she were the final authority, then there was no God, nobody who could speak a Word more authoritative than hers. And if there was no God, there was no meaning, no rationality, no structure, no ground any other Word, including Eve's, to be authoritative. So Eve was both a rationalist and an irrationalist. She thought she was the supreme authority, but she also believed there was no supreme authority. These two beliefs were inconsistent, of course. But both are necessary to the unbelieving mindset.

So Van Til analyzed the history of philosophy to show that all non-Christian thinkers, from ancient Greece to the present, were both rationalists and irrationalists at the same time. Van Til did not agree with Schaeffer that the ancient Greeks had an adequate view of truth. The Greeks believed with Eve that truth could be known through the autonomous human intellect; and that was no better than subjectivism or irrationalism. Nor did he take the position of Wells, and others that the ills of culture come from modernism, or the industrial revolution, or the sixties' counter-culture, or postmodernism. Eve was both a traditionalist and a modernist, a modernist and a postmodernist. History is not a movement from rationalism to irrationalism, but a dialogue, a dance, among these. When rationalism gets out of hand, irrationalism jumps in, and vice versa.

So the problem is not history; the problem is sin. Culture is bad today, but Sodom and Gomorrah were probably not any better, nor were Tyre, Sidon, Ninevah, Babylon, Rome, Capernaum, Chorazin, or Bethsaida.

Popular culture is bad, but high culture is too. Beethoven was a devotee of the secularism of the French Revolution, Wagner of German mythology, and their music makes a powerful case for these false world-views. The problems of high culture go back a long way. It is not that high culture has been infected by popular culture; if anything, the reverse is true. And folk culture has always had alongside its humble virtues a lot of bawdy tales, class warfare, ignorant populism, and disrespect for the holy.

It is always wrong to try to single out one element of culture as pure, even relatively pure, and blame all society's ills on some other element. That is almost always self-serving: we like what we like, and we want to blame the evils of life on the culture we dislike. But perhaps we need to have a more biblical view of sin. Sin is not limited to some segment of society or some segment of culture. It prevades everything. And whatever good there is comes from God's common and special grace.

Lecture 4: Christians In Our Culture

In the first three lectures, I've been arguing that culture, and our culture in particular, is both good and bad. Bad because of human depravity, good because of God's common grace and special grace. Now we need to get more personal. How should we as Christians interact with the culture in which God has placed us?

The general biblical formula is that we are to be "in" the world (John 17:11, 15, Tit. 2:12), but not "of" the world (John 15:9, 17:14, 16). As we saw earlier, it is wrong to identify "world" with "culture." "World" is the negative side of culture. But that negative side is inescapable, and this biblical principle is crucial for Christians who are trying to live godly lives. Yet to say that we should be "in the world" but not "of the world" is obvious in a way. Of course we are in the world: we are ourselves part of the world, and the world constitutes our whole environment. Escaping the world is inconceivable. Similarly, it is obvious that we should not be "of" the world; for to be of the world is to accept the world's values and its opposition to God.

Can we be more specific? Let's just take one form of culture and look at it more closely. We could look at science, business, advertising, politics, economics, music, the fine arts, or many other elements of culture. I prefer to look at film, since I've done some thinking about that in the past, and since I think it may be a live issue for many of us. Like rock music and other entertainments,

film is a form of culture that our children know a great deal about, and it poses great temptations to them and to us. As we think about film, perhaps we will develop some biblical criteria that we can apply to other forms of culture as well.

Should Christians Go to Movies?

Some Christians may wonder how a fellow believer can give any support to the film industry, notorious as it is for anti-Christian bias and moral relativism. I would note that there is also a view on the opposite extreme: some Christian critics of culture insist that all Christians have a responsibility to become culturally aware, to become knowledgeable about cultural trends in art, music, literature, film, drama and so on.

I reject both of these extremes. If we are to be "in" the world, but not "of" the world, that means that we not only may, but should, be willing to live amid secular (=anti-Christian) influence without ourselves compromising the faith. In this respect, it doesn't matter whether that secular influence comes from film, or from involvement in business, labor, neighborhood, politics, or whatever. Nor, within the general realm of media entertainment, does it matter whether we are talking about Beethoven or modern rock, Jane Austen or William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway or Jackie Collins, news or business magazines, TV or film, Disney films or films by Martin Scorsese. To avoid non-Christian influence altogether, we would have to live as hermits (assuming that we could even find some place in the world beyond the reach of modern communications and government). In all modern experience there is a heavy component of anti-Biblical teaching and influence. But complete isolation is not a live option for biblical Christians. Even the Christian hermits of the ancient and medieval periods justified their existence as a life of prayer, and thus a life which was, after all, in and for the world. How can we pray for a world we know nothing about? We must not seek to isolate ourselves from the world, but rather to be "salt" and "light" in our fallen culture, to carry out our Lord's Great Commission.

That balance, of being "in" but not "of" the world, is sometimes difficult to maintain. One's choices in this area should be based in part upon his or her own moral and spiritual maturity. Some people, especially children, or those young in the faith, or those with special problems like alcohol addiction or unusual susceptibility to sexual temptation, should limit their exposure to secular culture in appropriate ways. But at the same time they should be trained in Christian maturity, so that eventually they can enter more fully the secular arena, not fearing that they will be compromised by the culture, but expecting to influence the culture positively for Christ.

These decisions should also be based on one's gifts, calling, station in life. I do not believe, with the Christian "culturalists," that every Christian, or even every mature Christian, has an *obligation* to attend art exhibits, concerts, films,

etc. Christians should seek to influence the world for Christ in *some* way: that is the Great Commission. But the precise way in which they reach out to the world may differ greatly from one believer to another. My brother-in-law is pastor of a church in the inner city of Philadelphia. He does not normally go to films, dramas, or art exhibits. But he is definitely "in" the world, the real world, and he ministers to it with all the strength God provides him. A knowledge of entertainment media would be of little use to him in his ministry, and I would be the last person to urge him to become "culturally aware."

Yet there are others (such as myself, I believe) who are called of God to devote some of their energy to Christian culture-criticism. Many pastors, as well as youth workers, scholars, teachers, writers, parents and others are in this category. For them it is not wrong, I believe, within sensible limits, to expose themselves to modern film or other media. The apostle Paul said that he was not ignorant of Satan's devices (2 Cor. 2:11). For that purpose, if for no other, we may be called to learn what filmmakers have to say to us.

Some arguments used by Christians opposed to moderate attendance at films are as follows:

(1) "Graphic acts of violence debase those who watch them, making the viewers more prone to violence." On this proposition there is mixed statistical evidence. Some people, especially children, do seem to resort more quickly to violence, or imitation-violent play, as the result of viewing simulated violence on TV or film. I do advocate that parents limit and monitor the use of these media by their children. But I find it hard to believe that everybody should for this reason drastically curtail their film attendance. I have never myself (even in childhood, as best I can recall) felt the least bit inclined toward violence as the result of watching it on film. For the most part, viewing such violence increases my resolve toward finding non-violent solutions to problems. I think that many other people are similar to me in this respect.

Further, if we maintain a proper critical distance from the films we watch (a distance which is necessary for many other reasons), we can see that film violence is essentially choreography. No one really gets hurt. And for the most part in films, even today, unjustly violent people are not rewarded or glorified.

It is important to maintain perspective: lack of perspective is one of the most prevalent defects in Christian thought today, in my view. And the larger perspective is that violence is all around us, unavoidable. To avoid it entirely is to depart from the world. Indeed, Scripture itself contains descriptions of terrifying, even gory violence; just read the Book of Judges. Since Scripture includes such descriptions, we must assume that there are good reasons for it-- reasons conducive to edification (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). It is not hard to imagine what those reasons might be. The violence of the wicked shows us what the Fall has done to us; and the violence of divine judgment summons us to repentance. On

this basis we cannot deny that some exposure to depictions of violence can be edifying.

(2) "Sexual scenes in movies excite impure lusts." Again, I think this is true of some viewers, but not others. If sex scenes in films have that effect on you, then don't go to films until God gives you a greater mastery over temptation. But I don't think this is a problem for every Christian.

But some might go further and insist that, even for those who are not tempted toward sin by screen sex, it is wrong to view actors in the process of doing things which are sinful in themselves. (The same point has been made with regard to the use of unwholesome or blasphemous language in movie scripts.) I grant that some scenes in the movies cross over that line of being "sinful in themselves." True, screen sex is usually, for the actors and actresses involved, not very "sexy." The filming of such scenes is done bit by bit, with all sorts of technical intrusions, and usually without actual genital contact. Still, if I were married to an actress who chose to engage publicly in deep kissing and simulated intercourse with a third party, I would consider myself to have been violated. In my view that is a scriptural view of the matter.

So some movie sex is certainly sinful in itself. And one cannot, certainly, justify watching sin for its own sake. I would not go to a film for the purpose of watching an actor and actress in a nude sex scene (thus I avoid "XXX" flicks), any more than I would take a walk in the park to spy on kids making love behind the bushes. On the other hand, I would not stay away from the park out of fear that I might happen to observe some illicit sex. Similarly, if film actors wish to commit sin before the camera, that is their responsibility. I don't believe I commit sin when I, in the normal course of my cultural pursuits, observe what they, without consulting me, have chosen to do in public.

(3) "Modern films promote, very effectively, a non-Christian philosophy of life." This is true, and it is the most profound of all arguments against Christian attendance at films. Sex, foul language, and violence are incidental elements in film, but the non-Christian world- and life-view is often at its core. That world-view does more damage in society than any cinematic portrayals of sex, violence, and ungodly speech. Indeed, that world-view is what makes the sex, violence, and language in movies unwholesome, in contrast with biblical depictions of such things.

But again, perspective is in order. Non-Christian philosophy has dominated the arts and general culture for the last three centuries. To avoid exposure to non-Christian world-views and values, we would have to avoid exposure to Mozart and Beethoven, Emerson and Thoreau, Hume and Kant, Paine and Jefferson, D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, and so on, not to mention Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, Cicero, and other ancients. We tend to discount older exponents of non-Christian values, viewing them with the

halo that comes with long cultural acceptance. For that reason, these older thinkers are often more dangerous than those which are more contemporary and more obviously anti-Christian. Indeed, for similar reasons, we must beware of G-rated films as much as of R- and X-rated films. Yes, let us limit our exposure to all of these influences; but not to the extent of leaving the world, or to the extent of becoming ignorant of Satan's devices.

(4) "We should not give our money to an industry that encourages immorality and unbelief." Scripture does not require believers to support only industries and institutions that are morally and religiously pure. Jesus taught his disciples to pay taxes to Caesar, taxes which supported the emperor cult, among other things. Paul taught the Corinthians to buy food in the market place without asking whether or not it had been offered to idols. Scripture is realistic enough to know that if we had to inquire about the religion or morals of every merchant before doing business with him, we could not buy at all.

I do not think it is wrong for Christians to boycott industries which they believe are doing social and/or religious harm in the world. They are certainly free to withhold their economic support from those industries. On the other hand, I do not believe that Scripture *requires* us to boycott such organizations. We really could not do that in every case without completely isolating ourselves from the world.

I would conclude, therefore, that a moderate amount of movie-going is legitimate for most Christians. I don't think we should be ashamed of that or even ashamed of enjoying it. Moderation, of course, requires careful thought about priorities. Even activities which are good in themselves can become wrong if they crowd out of our lives things which are more important. Each of us needs to do some self-examination in this area. Choices about exposure to entertainment and culture are not religiously neutral. But those who are conscientious about pleasing God and keeping his commandments need not feel guilty about moderate movie attendance.

Film and Culture

Harvie Conn has described film as a "cultural mirror," a valuable reflection of contemporary attitudes, philosophies, values, lifestyles. Others, such as Michael Medved, have placed more emphasis on the idea of film as a *former* of culture.

As I see it, both emphases are true. The relation between film and culture is a chicken-and-egg relationship. Film is of course a product of culture, for the makers of films are people of their own time. On the other hand, within their own culture, filmmakers are often atypical. They tend to be more liberal politically, less inclined to practice religion, more open to radical social attitudes and movements, than the general population. Thus their films tend more often than

not to support radicalism and to subvert traditional, especially Christian, values. When those filmmakers answer criticisms of the content of their films by saying "we are only reflecting the broader culture," they are either being naive or dishonest. In the broader culture, there is far more interest in religion, far more family integrity, far more clean language and honest work than one would ever guess from films.

In any case, it is important when we go to the movies to take with us some understanding of what is happening in the general culture: both what is considered "traditional" and what is considered "avant-garde."

One cannot adequately summarize the current cultural situation in a brief essay, but I will offer a summary here simply to show the reader where I am coming from in my reviews. As I see it, western culture has moved in the last three hundred years from a time of Christian dominance to a time of anti-Christian secular dominance. Even today, however, there is in western culture quite a bit of "borrowed Christian capital," and, every now and then, Christian teaching is heard with respect.

It is possible to overestimate the role of secular liberalism in contemporary society. From the portrayals of the 1960s in popular media, especially film, one would get the impression that everybody in the United States was "dropping out," taking drugs, protesting the war, supporting radical leftist causes. Perhaps that is what most filmmakers and their friends were doing. But most Americans were fed up with all the protests, drugs, and pompous young moralizers. They elected Richard Nixon president in 1968, and they overwhelmingly re-elected him in 1972, against George McGovern, who was the voice of the radical left. Arguably, the populace continued to move rightward through the 1970s, resulting in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984. During the last thirty years, the only Democrats elected president were men who persuaded the electorate of their moderation. Overt liberals, McGovern, Mondale, and Dukakis were soundly defeated.

Liberal ideas, therefore, are not nearly as pervasive within the general culture as they are in the press, educational and entertainment media. Still, they do leave their mark in important ways, largely because these media-- together with the influence of government-- have so much power.

Today the focus of the liberal movement can be summarized by the term *equality*. That movement especially emphasizes, in a quasi-Marxist way, equality between men and women, between races, cultures, religions, between rich and poor.

Christianity also endorses equality of all persons before divine and human law. God is no respecter of persons, and human law must not give preference to people based on wealth, gender or race. But the liberal consensus endorses

unbiblical forms of equality: identical roles for men and women, abolishment of any "gaps" between rich and poor, elimination of any moral sanction against homosexuality. Ultimately, liberal equality amounts to moral relativism. But it is a moral relativism that becomes very dogmatic, very non-relativist, in asserting its own egalitarianism. Anyone who disagrees, who is not "politically correct," must be smeared and ostracized from polite society.

The God of the Bible treats people equally in some respects, but, in other ways, he is the great divider. He separates the righteous from the wicked in his terrible judgments. He sets the non-relative moral boundaries for creatures by revealing forth his law. He has no interest in abolishing economic differences between people in this world. He establishes institutions of family, state and church, and gives different people different roles within these institutions: husband/wife/child, magistrate/citizen, elder/member.

The biblical God is able to make choices among people, because he is a *person*. One distinctive of personhood is rational choice. The problem with secular liberalism is that it has abandoned belief in the personal God of the Bible. In the secular view, the most ultimate features of the universe are impersonal, not personal. But an impersonal force cannot make choices. It must act on all other realities equally. An electrical current will shock anyone or anything that comes up against it. But a person can choose how he will respond to other persons and objects in its environment.

Rejection of the personal God of Scripture inevitably brings universalism: either all are saved or all are lost. And it brings egalitarianism.

The moral relativist side of secular liberalism stems from the fact that, as Dostoyevsky noted, if God doesn't exist, anything is permitted. But such universal permissiveness is a recipe for chaos, one which even secularists cannot easily accept. Thus they seek to replace God with another supposed absolute. (Scripture calls this process "idolatry.") That absolute is, in most cases, their own autonomous moral judgment. Hence the "dogmatic" side of secularism. But when that dogmatism fails, when the secularists' own judgment proves untrustworthy, then they revert to relativism: "Oh, well; nobody really knows." Relativism and dogmatism: these are the Scylla and Charybdis of secular liberalism. Strictly these are inconsistent with one another. But they supplement and need one another. The secularist bounces back and forth from one to the other as on a pendulum.

Cornelius Van Til calls relativism and dogmatism by the terms "irrationalism" and "rationalism" respectively, thereby relating these themes to the traditional concerns of philosophical epistemology, theory of knowledge. Os Guinness in *The Dust of Death* describes them as "pessimism" and "optimism," thus relating these motifs to practical attitudes. It is important, especially in the context of film, that we do not see these themes only as elements of a theoretical

world-view or ethical system, but that we see them as attitudes which affect all areas of human life. For if someone has adopted a relativist ethic, that person will likely be in despair, "pessimism," when it comes to making choices in any area of life. He has rejected God, the source of all meaning. What ground can he possibly have for optimism? On the other hand, he can become a dogmatic secularist instead of a relativist, even though these are two sides of the same coin. Then he may well be optimistic; but it will be a false hope.

In films, then, we must reckon with the presence both of moral relativism and of secular dogmatism. But we may also find in films traces, sometimes more than traces, of Christian ideas which, in spite of the present resistance both of the general culture and of the film industry, have managed to assert themselves. One will find large elements of Christian teaching and values in older stories set to modern films: Shakespeare plays, medieval legends, etc. And one will also find films of recent conception where Christian values are prominent. "Chariots of Fire," "Tender Mercies," and "A Trip to Bountiful" are recent films which, if not distinctively Christian in every way, nevertheless present distinctively Christian ideas in a favorable light. Sometimes, one finds Christian themes and symbolism in films, even films which are not in themselves supportive of Christian values. Christians should be ready to be surprised when they attend films, and not only negatively.

Sometimes it is easy to explain these authentically Christian elements of films, by the Christian convictions of a writer, director, or other member(s) of the filmmaking team. Other times it is not easy to explain. Sometimes it just seems as though the non-Christian filmmakers were unable to overcome the dramatic, intellectual, and moral force of the Christian revelation, and so, for once, they let it have its way.

In my reviews, as I try to bring out the "messages" of the filmmakers, I will be focusing on the themes of equality, relativism, and dogmatic idolatry. And I shall also bring out those elements in which I think God's word has overcome cultural resistance to speak its cinematic piece.

Questions to Ask of Films

In my discussion of film and culture, I identified the general thrust of modern secular liberalism and its antithesis with Christianity. My reviews will deal with those themes in general. Here I wish to be a bit more specific. What follows are certain questions that are always in my mind when I go to films. I would recommend that other Christian viewers ask the same questions. I will not go through this whole list in each review; I will only discuss the ones I think most important to the particular film.

1. Who wrote the film? Who produced it? Who directed it? Do we know through the writings and previous work of these people anything about their

philosophy of life? The previous works of actors are also important. Actors contribute much to the quality of a film, little to its fundamental conception. But actors do tend to sign on to projects with which they have some ideological affinity (assuming financial rewards are not otherwise determinative). Mel Gibson almost never takes on films with a heavy sexual element; Mickey Rourke almost always does. The presence of certain actors, granting that they sometimes go "against type," can tell you something about the message of a film.

2. Is it well-made, aesthetically? Are the production and acting values of high quality? These factors may have little to do with the "message." But they do tend to determine the extent of the film's cultural impact, and that is important for our purposes. If a film is well-made, it can have a large impact upon the culture for good or ill. (Of course some bad films also have a major impact!)

3. Is it honest, true to its own position? This is another mark of "quality." Generally speaking, an honest film, regardless of its point of view, will have a larger cultural impact than one which blunts its points.

4. What kind of film is it? Fantasy? Biography? Realistic drama? Comedy? Obviously each film must be judged according to its purpose and genre. We don't demand of a fantasy the kind of historical accuracy we demand of a supposedly literal biography.

5. What is the world view of the film? Is it theistic or atheistic? Christian or non-Christian? If non-Christian, is its main thrust relativistic or dogmatic? How does it employ the theme of "equality?" Is there any role for providence, for God? Is the film pessimistic or optimistic? Does the action move in deterministic fashion, or is there a significant role for human choice?

6. What is the plot? What problems do the characters face? Can these problems be correlated in some way with the Fall of mankind in Adam? Does the film in effect deny the Fall, or does it affirm it in some way?

7. Are the problems soluble? If so, how? What methods are available to the characters so that they can find the answers they need?

8. What is the moral stance of the film? Is the film relativistic, dogmatic, or both in some combination? What are its attitudes toward sex, family, human life, property, truth, heart-attitudes? What is the source of moral norms, if any? Does justice prevail?

9. In comedy, what is it that is funny? What are the typical incongruities? Who is the butt of the jokes? (Christians? traditional values? the wicked? the righteous? God? Satan?) Is the humor anarchic? Is it rationality gone awry? Is it bitter or gentle? Does it rely on caricatures? If so, of whom?

10. Are there allusions to historical events, literary works, other films, famous people, Scripture, etc. that would give us some idea where the filmmakers are coming from? We should remember, of course, that allusions may be negative, positive, ironic, or merely decorative. A biblical allusion does not necessarily indicate acceptance of biblical values.

11. What are the chief images of the film? Is there anything interesting about the lighting, the camera angles, the sound, the timing which would reinforce a particular theme? Are there significant symbols?

12. Are there any explicit religious themes? Christ-figures?[35] Does the film express significant attitudes toward Christ, the clergy, or the church? Does it distort Christianity or present it at its worst? Or does it present it with some insight and/or sympathy? Does it recognize the element of personal piety in people's lives?[36] There are exceptions. If so, does it approve or disapprove of it? What about Satan, the demons, the occult? Does the film recognize their activity in some way? Is the devil taken seriously? If so, how is he dealt with?

Lecture 5: Culture in the Church

For our final session together, I would like to address some questions about the effects of culture upon the Christian church itself, its evangelism, nurture, and particularly its worship. I'll be focusing on issues surrounding the use of contemporary popular music in worship.

I.   Basic concerns about worship
    A. Scriptural
    B. God-centered
       1. "Reverence and Awe," Heb. 12:28.
       2. God in Christ, the object of our worship, and our worship leader (Psm. 22)
    C. Edifying (1 Cor. 14:26, cf. 5, 12, 17, 19)
       1. Thinking about oneself? Psm. 18: 73 forms of 1st person pronoun.
       2. Thinking about one another: "horizontal." 1 Cor. 11:17-34, James 2:1-7).
          a. Love as the mark of the church (John 13:35).

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[35] Steven Spielberg's "E. T." is, I think, a genuine Christ figure: recall the themes of pre-existence, growth, teaching, miracle, healing, death, resurrection, ascension. Spielberg denied this parallel, but in my view it is objectively there, even if Spielberg was unconscious of it. The reason is that the human mind has a need for a gospel like that of the New Testament. Those who don't accept that gospel often instinctively give to their idolatrous inventions powers parallel to those of Christ.

[36] The character of Frank Burns in the original M*A*S*H was a pious fellow who kneeled to pray at his bedside, to the scorn of his fellow soldiers. Eventually, it turned out that he was an adulterer and hypocrite. That is fairly typical of the way Hollywood portrays Christian piety.

        b. The Great Commission as the defining task of the church (Matt. 28:18-20).

    3. Communication should be clear (1 Cor. 14), therefore contemporary.

        a. The Reformers: vernacular languages, not Latin.

        b. Applies also to music.

II.   The Argument against CWM

A. "Draw me closer, dear Lord"—Gnostic? Theology of glory?

    1. But Psm. 73:28, 69:18, 119:151, 148:14, etc.

    2. God is both transcendent and immanent.

B. CWM "too repetitious."

    1. In the abstract, repetition is not necessarily good or bad. We must speak of degrees and contexts.

    2. Expressions of love and allegiance are almost necessarily repetitious, as opposed to academic lectures.

        a. What would your spouse think if you only said "I love you" once?

        b. Schoolgirl to teacher, "I pledged allegiance yesterday."

    3. Repetitiousness of biblical praise.

        a. Similar themes through the Psalms.

        b. Parallelism, often synonymous.

        c. "Holy, holy, holy."

    4. Repetitiousness of traditional liturgy.

C. Concerns about Musical quality

    1. Quality in the abstract ("bringing to God our best") is not the criterion. Are we limited only to the best hymn ever written?

    2. Quality of communication is important.

    3. Quality of music: a legitimate concern, but hard to determine. This question gets mixed up with questions of taste, and it's very difficult to disentangle it.

D. The Argument From Culture

    1. A general analysis of modern culture (Wells, Myers, Horton, Guinness, Hart, Postman).

        a. Subjectivism: basing one's life on human experience, rather than on objective truth.

            i. Many exceptions in CWM.

            ii.   And there is a legitimate scriptural emphasis on the subjective.

        b. Humanism: man-centered life-and-world view.

        c. Anti-intellectualism: appeal to feelings, rather than to intellectual understanding. "Dumbing down."

      d. Psychologism: using psychological therapy as the chief way to deal with deep human needs.

      e. Professionalism: preoccupation with business management and marketing techniques as the model for achieving any kind of common enterprise.

      f. Consumerism: the notion that in all fields of endeavor we must have the goal of giving people what they want or what they can be induced to buy.

      g. Pragmatism: the idea that results are the ultimate justification for any idea or action.

      h. Temporal chauvinism: belief that the present time is superior to all past times.

      i. Focus on entertainment.

2. Rejection of anything perceived to come out of that culture.
   a. Contemporary worship (CW)
      (i) seeker sensitivity
      (ii) dance, drama, etc.
   b. CWM

3. JF: too simplistic.
   a. Genetic fallacy.
   b. Does this analysis apply to everything influenced by contemporary culture (Amish argument)?
   c. Can any form of Christian music or worship be completely independent of cultural influence?
      (i) Certainly not, especially when we consider that language and communication are part of culture.
      (ii) Historically, such independence has never existed. But Christian music and art have often transcended their cultural forms, raising them to a higher level of content and profundity.
      (iii) Scripture doesn't call us to flee from culture, but to take dominion over it in the name of Christ. That involves rejecting some things, placing others into a new framework.
   d. This analysis isn't sufficiently precise.
      (i) When, for example, does a focus on the subjective become *subjectivistic*? There is a legitimate biblical concern for the emotions and other aspects of the inner life.
      (ii) Is there not in our society also a tendency toward the opposite error? A lack of empathy for others?
      (iii) Where do we draw the line? Shouldn't there be much more interaction with Scripture to determine this?
      (iv) Are there not legitimate analogies between, say, marketing and evangelism? These are not the same; but mustn't we take more care in distinguishing them, lest any appeal to the community be dismissed as marketing?
      (v) Similarly with entertainment and worship.

    (A) Scripture presents worship as a delight (Psm. 37:4, 40:8, 119:16, 24, 47).

    (B) Preachers and singers are to be skillful, to cultivate the gifts God has given them.

    (C) Good communication is common to entertainment and worship.

    (D) The goals, of course, are different.

    (E) Dangers: the praise band plays, but nobody sings. This approaches entertainment.

    (F) But it would be wrong to try to purge worship of anything that anybody might call "entertaining." We need a more careful approach.

    (G) And we should note that traditional worship also frequently presses the boundary between worship and entertainment.

     (1) Virtuoso organists, professional choirs.

     (2) Orators.

     (3) Traditional music has entertainment value. Hit records of Gregorian chants.

     (4) Nostalgia for the old, the spell of the ancient.

  (vi) We should distinguish between "pragmatism" and a legitimate biblical setting of goals.

    (A) Much of God's work is done through human means: preaching, teaching, witness, prayer (Rom. 10:17). Do not oppose divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

    (B) In Scripture, these are goal-directed.

    (C) We cannot accomplish the goals (repentance, faith, sanctification) on our own; but they must be the goals of our communication of the gospel. Paul becomes all things to all men "that by all possible means I might save some." Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

e. CWM should not be put in the same boat with CW.

  (i) You can have CWM without CW.

  (ii) CWM emerged independently of CW: the Jesus people revivals.

f. There are other factors as well in the genealogy of CWM: spirituals, folk music (American, African-American, Jewish).

g. It cannot be established that all CWM reflects and/or promotes these cultural trends.

h. As a potent means of Christian edification, CWM is profoundly counter-cultural.

i. The argument ignores the biblical emphasis on being *like* the culture in some ways.

    (i) Gentiles need not become Jews.

    (ii) The Great Commission; communication in human languages.

> > > (iii)   The evangelist should "become all things to all men."
> > > (iv)   So we should not assume that likeness to culture in itself invalidates forms of Christian life or worship.
> > 4. So the argument needs to focus on particular songs in particular contexts, rather than the CWM movement in general.
> > > a. I fear that most CWM critics don't know the music very well, so I don't trust their judgments.
> > > b. Hard to identify "cultural origins" of music. "Hallelujah bananas."
> > > c. Many individual songs, in my judgment, unambiguously convey the values of Scripture, rather than those of sinful culture. "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High," "How Majestic is Your Name."
> D. Conclusion: Note the connection in Psalms 96 and 98 between praise and communication, vertical and horizontal.

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